

Democracy in question: contesting and defending democracy in Europe in an illiberal era

I. Proposal's context, positioning and objectives

Context: European organizations were founded in the aftermath of the Second World War to promote peace based upon political freedom, human rights protection and international cooperation. Over time, the Council of Europe (CoE) has actively protected the three core European values of individual freedom, political liberty and the rule of law, which according to its Statute “form the basis of all genuine democracy”. The Preamble of the Treaty on the European Union (EU), as well as the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, also state that European integration cannot be achieved without respecting common values related to liberal democracy, the rule of law and the judicial protection of human rights. However, since the 2010s, European organizations have become arenas where a lively dissensus is expressed on “rule of law protection” (Coman 2022), the relationship between democracy and human rights (Graziadei, 2016) and the aspiration of legitimately elected majorities to eliminate checks and balances in order to consolidate their power (Zakaria, 1997). Attacks to constitutional safeguards, judicial independence and minority rights point to an erosion of key components of political liberalism that leads to a “rule of law crisis” (Carpano 2019, Södersten & Hercock 2023). Several factors account for this recent development. Far-right parties have been normalized and integrated into democratic institutions in several member states, radical right parties have entered government across Europe, while some countries (Hungary since 2010, Poland between 2015-2023) experienced democratic backsliding and broke with the liberal political-institutional framework established in the 1990s. The parameters of action of the political and social forces which challenge the liberal political and legal order have also changed at the European level. In the EU, the June 2024 elections increased the polarization in the European Parliament (EP) while strengthening the anti-establishment and Eurosceptic Right. Three political groups that question the EU’s consensual, compromise-based politics represent more than 25% of the total number of seats, while the “firewall” that has excluded them from legislative work and power positions is put in question by the mainstream Right (Ripoll Servent 2019, Roa Bastos 2024). Radical right representatives hold important positions in the Council, where they influence the general direction of the EU and its ordinary policymaking (Leconte & Coman 2019). At the Council of Europe, some member states criticize the norms and standards of liberal democracy in the name of their constitutional identity, while conservative civil society actors carry out elaborate litigation strategies at the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) to challenge liberal norms related

to *i.a.* religious matters, reproductive issues and minority rights (Ducoulombier 2011, Blokker 2024, Cliquennois et al 2024). The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe also experiences challenges in carrying out its mission, which was redefined in the 1990s to include the democratization of its member states. It sees political and legal struggles over some of its core actions such as election monitoring and faces competition from regional organizations, such as the Community of Independent States, which question or openly reject liberal democracy (Marin 2021).

Research question: This research project seeks to explore the paradox whereby European organizations, founded for the promotion of political liberalism and the protection of human rights, have become arenas for the critique of liberal democracy by a variety of political and social actors. No single concept perfectly encompasses these actors, who belong to several ideological currents – the far right, the radical right, national conservatism – but share a common rejection of the liberal democracy embodied by European organizations. We have chosen to refer to them as “illiberal actors”, with several caveats. First, illiberalism is a disputed notion that circulates intensively between the academic and the political spheres. As it is often used in a derogatory way, it carries a normative dimension. Second, illiberalism has been conceptualized either through a maximalist lens, as a broad social phenomenon (Sajó, Uitz & Holmes 2022) or more minimally, as an ideological construct produced in a fragmented organizational universe that borrows from both the New Right and national-conservative currents (Buzogány & Varga 2023). Bearing in mind its internal diversity, we use Laruelle’s definition of illiberalism as “a challenge that emerges from the liberal framework, a product of the evolution of liberalism” which “blends diverse intellectual traditions and policy norms and practices that promote majoritarianism, sovereignism, and traditional hierarchies (social, sexual, gender, cultural)” (Laruelle 2023, p.3). The important point here is that illiberalism is not only seen as an opposition to liberalism, an “anti-liberalism”, but as an ideology that rises in a close relationship to the liberal script and is in permanent interaction with it. **It is these intersecting dynamics of contesting and defending liberal democracy that the project seeks to study in European organizations, which were built to enact a liberal script but have become venues where a variety of political and social groups fight liberalism in its political, economic and cultural dimensions.** Our research will contribute to the conceptual elaboration of the notion of illiberalism by looking at the concrete ways in which a plurality of actor hostile to liberal democracy have inserted themselves into various components of the European institutional system. Its broad timeline and geographical perspective will also shed new light on contemporary European-level responses to the “illiberal challenge” which pits different conceptions of the rule of law and of European values against each other (Canihac & Baldani 2023).

a. Objectives and research hypotheses

Rather than studying the promotion of liberalism and its rejection in parallel, this project will develop **a relational micro-sociological approach** that focuses on the interactions between these opposing forces in multiple institutional arenas where liberal democracy has become an object of contention. In order to gain a comprehensive and precise overview of European policies to protect liberal democracy and of their contestation, our research will cover the three main European organizations – the European Union (EU), the Council of Europe (CoE) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Our overarching hypothesis is the following: **the integration into European institutional arenas of a plurality of actor hostile to liberal democracy has enabled them to capture political, symbolic and financial resources that give them the opportunity to subvert from within the liberal project promoted by these institutions**. Liberalism and illiberalism are closely entangled within European organizations and are best studied as opposing forces that fuel each other. The project will carry out this task through **four interconnected research objectives**.

1. The project will shed light on **the specificity of the European political space** in the current rise of illiberalism. **a)** It will bring a European angle to the vast scholarship on the **recomposition of the Right in an illiberal way**. The growing questioning of liberalism, liberal democracy and the rule of law is part of a broader movement known as the “fourth wave” in the history of the far-right, characterised by the mainstreaming of far-right parties and/or the radicalisation of former centre-right parties (Mudde 2019). This transformation is linked to greater transnational linkages between far-right parties, organizations and intellectual circles (Abrahamsen et al. 2024). Illiberal forces take part in this global movement through the alliances they form with far-right movements and conservative forces (Plattner 2019). Against this background, the project will focus on the concrete modalities of insertion of illiberal actors in the European institutional system. It will analyze their mobilization practices, their ideological production and the arguments they use against their liberal adversaries. Our empirically grounded analyses of the involvement of illiberal forces in European organizations will test the hypothesis that **the European level of government provides them with resources which enhance their legitimacy and scope of action**. We will also join an emerging scholarship that analyzes the “grey zones”, as the interplay between strategies of subversion and validation of liberal norms by conservative and illiberal actors (Blokke, 2024). **b)** The scaling up at the European level is not restricted to political actors but also concerns **illiberal civil society organizations** such as think tanks, lobbies and advocacy NGOs. More specifically, we will investigate the encounters between state and non-state actors within European organizations and at their margins, through litigation and lobbying activities. A major challenge for transnational activism is to develop a common grammar that encompasses nationally rooted,

idiosyncratic movements. This is where European politics, through transnational political parties, NGOs and institutional arenas, plays a crucial role. Our hypothesis is that European institutions act as a **“coral reef”** around which a variety of illiberal actors align interests and reinforce each other through a composite transnational coalition in which the CoE and the EU play a structuring role of “brokerage”, “certification” and “modelling” (Tarrow, 2000).

2. The project will position contemporary illiberalism within a **longer history of criticism of European integration** seen as the product of a liberal script and of institutional responses to protect liberal democracy. **a)** We will contribute to a vast scholarship on the critique of European integration since the 1990s and the end of the “permissive consensus” that previously underpinned the European project. Our team will investigate how the current illiberal wave fits into a longer history of election to the EP of right-wing politicians hostile to European cooperation. In the 1990s-2000s, the literature referred to this hostility to the EU under several disputed notions, such as Euroscepticism and Eurorealism (Szczerbiak & Taggart 2005, **Neumayer 2010**) or the GAL/TAN cleavage (Hooghes, Marks & Wilson 2002). Since the 2010s, the labels “illiberalism” and “populism” have become predominant categories in the context of Central European democratic backsliding and increased challenges to liberal democracy (Zalewski 2016, Blokker 2019, Styczyńska & Meijer 2023). The project will extend existing work on these political movements by **systematically retracing, with quantitative tools, their ideological and organizational structuring** in the EP and in pan-European political parties from 1979 until the post-2024 period. **b)** The project will also **revisit the genealogy** of current European-level policies aimed at protecting democracy and the rule of law. Our hypothesis is that in order to react to the heightened contestation of liberal democracy since the 2010s, European organizations such as the EP have redefined the political and legal safeguard mechanisms they had put in place after the election of the first far-right MEPs in the 1980s. We will reexamine the institutional responses to prior situations interpreted as a threat to the EU’s political and legal order (firewall policy, investigation committee on the rise of fascism and racism, lifting of parliamentary immunity and investigations for espionage) to show that the current policies of rule of law protection are part of a longer process of (re)defining criteria for assessing, and addressing, threats to democracy.

3. The illiberal challenge will be **re-embedded in the EU’s ordinary institutional routines** to achieve a more complex vision of the current rule of law crisis in Europe. **a)** The illiberal challenge, which pits different conceptions of the rule of law and of European values against each other, will be studied in the context of ordinary institutional games. To test the hypothesis that illiberal actors not only wage ideological wars in abstract debates but may also weaken the rule of law through their **increasing**

involvement in daily European policymaking, we will study their participation in EP committee work in two policy areas that question the boundaries of the rule of law: migration policy; sexual and reproductive issues. **b)** Over the last decade, the EU's rule of law policy has become increasingly supranational thanks to the momentum provided by the EP and by the European Commission (Priebus & Anders 2024). This project will build on a large body of scholarly work that mostly focused on these two institutions. In order to test the hypothesis of an increasingly cross-cutting dimension of rule of law protection in the EU, we will look at understudied institutions which have also put it on their agendas in the context of monitoring EU action (the European Ombudsman and the European Court of Auditors) and of the enlargement policy (the Task Force "Western Balkans" of the European External Action Service (EEAS)).

4. Breaking with EU-centrism, the project will **examine the synergies between the CoE, the UE and the OSCE** regarding both illiberal mobilizations and policies aiming at safeguarding the rule of law.

a) To test our hypothesis that illiberal actors **pursue coordinated lobbying and litigation strategies in the CoE and the EU**, the project will study actor networks which cut across institutional boundaries and mobilize on a continental playing field. We will thus focus on "wider Europe", which includes the CoE, and especially the Venice Commission and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), where pan-European legal standards and case law are being fought over (Giannopoulos 2023, Lécuyer 2023); the OSCE, whose promotion of democratic norms is increasingly counteracted by illiberal political forces; the EEAS in the candidate countries of the Western Balkans, where powerful illiberal forces weaken the rule of law and complexify the enlargement policy (Bieber 2020). **b)** The project will also analyze the **normative and political synergies** in response to threats on rule of law and democratic backsliding between the EU, the CoE and the OSCE. A particular analysis will be dedicated to the judicial dialogue between the ECtHR and the European Court of Justice (ECJ) (Lenaerts 2019) and to the «Article 7 TEU proceedings » (Tinière 2019) aimed at assessing the risk of a breach of EU values by EU Member States. We will also study the cooperation and mutual reinforcement between the EU and the OSCE in the fields of democratic promotion and election monitoring (Boonstra 2010).

By analyzing how illiberal actors engage in European organizations in order to undermine their liberal script and how European institutions respond to illiberal challenges, we will contribute to scientific discussions on these organizations as embodiments of "**militant democracy**" focused on protecting liberal democracy against subversive political organizations and authoritarian states (Müller 2013).

b. Position of the project as it relates to the state of the art

This project differs from the existing literature on **the illiberal challenge in Europe** in three respects.

1. The existing scholarship rarely goes back in time before 2010 and has **a presentist bias**. By contrast, our sociohistorical approach will inscribe the study of contemporary illiberalism, which in large part stems from Cold War anti-communism (**Neumayer 2019, Behr 2021**) and neoliberal Euroscepticism (Slobodian & Plehwe, 2020), within a broader history of the global Right since the 1980s. We will also build on studies that highlight how illiberalism thrives on the increased ideological and sociological porosity between moderate conservatives and the far-right (Robin 2017, Dahani et al 2023). Second, the project will historicize the policy labelled “rule of law protection in Europe” by showing how European institutions such as the EP have assessed and counteracted threats to democracy since the 1980s.

2. The project will break with a well-established **division in the scholarly literature between analyses of illiberalism and studies of rule of law protection**. The latter has mainly been analyzed through the European Union's policy over the last fifteen years, through a twofold angle. First, an extended body of work has focused on several “rule of law crises”, starting with the Hungarian Constitutional reforms and the Romanian political crisis of 2012, and on the subsequent design of political, legal and financial tools aimed at protecting EU values and principles (Closa & Kochenov 2016, Coman 2022, Antonioli & Ruzza 2024). Second, insightful studies of how distinct European institutions responded to these crises based on their legal and political resources have highlighted the EP's leading role, the European Commission's caution and the Council's reluctance to sanction national governments (Peter & Stefanelli 2016, Closa Montero 2019, Wunsch & Chiru 2025). This project diverts from this institutional lens to focus on the insertion of illiberal actors within ordinary political games, through daily policymaking and political group structuring at the EP. Recent scholarship has shown how the integration, into various European arenas, of actors hostile to liberal democracy has enabled them to capture crucial political, symbolic and financial resources (Bonnard et al. 2021, **Delaine 2023**). We will pursue this line of enquiry and look at how illiberal forces contest the liberal script from within European organizations.

3. The project will adopt a **broad perspective on the European political space**. First, the existing scholarship is **lopsided in terms of institutional focus** and some institutions such as the OSCE are under-researched. The links between European organizations have received little attention overall, even though they engage in competitive cooperation in the protection of fundamental rights and their parliamentary work is structured around largely identical national delegations and political groups. By contrast, the project will highlight the synergies between the three main European organizations. Second, illiberalism has been the subject of studies that are mainly **national in scope** and, as far as the

European continent is concerned, often **restricted to post-communist states**. Analyses of illiberalism in Central Eastern Europe have shown that the circulation of illiberal and conservative ideas and discourses has been facilitated by transnational networks bringing together civil society and intellectual actors, some of which are organised around, and even subsidised, by EU funds. Yet, a comprehensive study of **the development and the influence of these networks on European organizations** remains to be done. To this end, the project will focus on the interstitial spaces that connect political-intellectual networks to European institutions. Breaking with a perspective that emphasizes the weak democratic roots of Central Europe compared to Western Europe, we will investigate the coproduction, mutual influences and joint mobilizations between Central and Western Europe.

c. Methodology and risk management

Methodology

The team, which has already met several times thanks to funding from the coordinator's university, has defined a methodology combining quantitative and qualitative aspects.

The **quantitative survey** will involve the creation of **4 databases**, to be completed by the end of Year 2 in order to support our qualitative analyses.

a) Two databases of the most active members of the **“Illiberal International”** will be set up under the supervision of **Valentin Behr in WP 4** to map the circulation of illiberal actors, of their discourses and of their practices, at the margins of European organizations since the mid-2000s. These prosopographical databases will shed light on political-intellectual illiberal networks identified by crossing two populations: “foreign” fellows hosted by think tanks and universities sponsored by illiberal governments in Hungary and Poland since 2010 (N=160); participants in conferences organized in Europe and in the USA by transnational conservative and illiberal networks (NatCon, New Direction, Center for European Renewal) (N=200). No specific technical support is required to build up the databases as Valentin Behr has used prosopography in his previous work and is familiar with two statistical processing methods: network analysis, which he will use to map the relationships between players; multiple correspondence analysis, which will help identify the relationships between the actors’ social properties and their ideological positions. The two databases will provide a completely new insight into illiberal networks and into the profiles of their members, as no other work of this nature and scope has been undertaken to date.

This prosopographical work will be closely connected to **semi-structured interviews** with individuals present in the databases to be conducted by **Valentin Behr, Laura Wolters and Contract Researcher B**. These interviews will seek to understand, in a comprehensive approach, the logics of transnational

conservative/illiberal activism, the history and constitution of this International, its internal polarities and its interactions with the European political-bureaucratic space. A study of transnational publications (the magazine *The European Conservative*, edited volumes and transnational manifestos) will assess these networks' ideological coherence. Both databases will be exploited in a biographical dictionary produced as part of **WP 7** on the *Politika* portal (*see below*). At the end of the project, the databases will be accessible for the research community in accordance with an ethical protocol drawn up with the coordinator's university data protection officer.

b) The other two databases, created under the supervision of **Francisco Roa Bastos in WP 3**, will cover **the EP** over a fifty-year period (from the first direct election of 1979 to the end of the current legislature in June 2029). The first database, focused on individuals, will record all the party affiliations (national parties and EP political groups) held by each MEP (N=4,582). It will provide a comprehensive overview of the partisan and ideological structuring of the Assembly and of its evolutions over time, building on existing work that covers earlier and shorter time periods (Hoyland, Sircar & Hix 2009; Michon & Wiest 2021). In addition to integrating the results of the 2024 European elections, we will correct the gaps and errors in party affiliation due to the automated nature of the data collection in the existing databases. The second database, focused on party organizations, will trace the affiliations of each EP national party to a Europarty since 1979 (N=345). This will shed new light on European-level politics, which is not restricted to the EP but includes these under-researched transnational parties. Cross-referencing both databases will improve our understanding of the recomposition of the Right seen through the lens of alliances inside the EP. This complete historical record of the competition and cooperation between right-wing political parties in this Assembly since 1979 will put into perspective the current strengthening of competitors to the European People's Party that openly contest liberal democracy. It will help us show that the EP plays an increasingly important role in the mainstreaming of the far right – through political groups but also through Europarties, which have been much less studied even though these EU-funded bodies provide financial and logistical resources that consolidate alliances between illiberal forces.

The project team has secured the support of the **ENSO Unit** (Expertise numérique et science ouverte) located at University Paris 1 for the creation of a relational database and an ontology respecting the FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable) principles. ENSO will also help us convert this data into an open-access website with a view to Science-Society dialogue. In this project involving the re-use of so-called “public” personal data, made available by a public authority for the purposes of institutional transparency, particular attention will be paid to the processing of personal data and to the RGDP during the inception of both the databases and the data publication website. This quantitative work will support a qualitative survey of the insertion, into Europarties and EP political groups, of illiberal forces from four countries: France and Germany, analyzed by **Francisco Roa Bastos**,

and Italy and Spain, analyzed by **Postdoctoral Researcher A**. This qualitative analysis will involve documentary analysis (archives of parliamentary groups, Europarties and national parties; online data gathering on official EP and Europarty websites) and in-depth interviews (with MEPs, parliamentary assistants, EP officials, permanent staff and leaders of Europarties and national parties) in the EP and in the four countries under study.

Qualitative methods combining direct observation, document analysis and semi-structured interviews will be used by other team members: with MEPs, European civil servants and interest group representatives in **WP 3** (Delaine, Postdoctoral Researcher A); officials from the European Commission, the EP and the Council (Delaine, Beulay, Avril, Contract Researcher C), the European Ombudsman (Avril), the European Court of Auditors (Vargovčíková), the European Court of Justice (Vauchez) in **WP 5**; representatives and experts from the OSCE (Desrumaux), the CoE (Giannopoulos, Ducoulombier and Neumayer) and the EEAS (Postdoctoral Researcher D) in **WP 6**.

Description of Work Packages (WP) and their associated impacts

The project will be structured around **2 cross-cutting WPs dedicated to project management** (WP 1- Research Coordination; WP 2- Collaborative Scientific Steering). Its two lines of research will be broken into **4 Thematic WPs**: the (re)structuring of illiberal forces in European institutional arenas and at their margins (WP 3 and 4); the making and subversion of a composite policy of democratic protection (WP 5 and 6). To guarantee an efficient access to fieldwork, each Thematic WP will be implemented by a sub-team: **WP 3- Strategic uses of the European Parliament by illiberal political actors**: Estelle Delaine (coordination), Francisco Roa Bastos and Postdoctoral Researcher A ; **WP 4 - European Dynamics in the Structuring of Transnational Illiberal Networks**: Valentin Behr (coordination), Laura Wolters, Contract Researcher B ; **WP 5 - Controversies over the protection of democracy in the EU**: Jana Vargovčíková (coordination), Lola Avril, Antoine Vauchez, Marjorie Beulay, Contract Researcher C ; **WP 6 - Circulation and contestation of democratic knowledge in the wider European space**: Laure Neumayer (coordination), Clément Desrumaux, Christos Giannopoulos, Peggy Ducoulombier, Postdoctoral Researcher D. These sub-groups will work in close cooperation and some of their members will conduct joint surveys in the EU (WP 5) and the CoE (WP 6). The project will also include **2 cross-cutting Research Transfer WPs** dedicated to Science-Society Dialogue (WP 7) and to Dissemination of Results (WP 8).

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