DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN A TURBULENT AGE? LESSONS FROM THE NORFACE GOVERNANCE RESEARCH PROGRAMME

GOVERNANCE

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WELCOME MESSAGE

In this booklet, we present the most significant research findings of the NORFACE GOVERNANCE programme. Spanning over three years, amidst a pandemic and various global crises, the dedicated researchers in this program have not only demonstrated professionalism and resilience, but have also illuminated the vital relevance of research on democratic governance for the future of Europe and beyond.

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to each participant for their invaluable work, as their perspectives and knowledge have profoundly enriched our understanding of democratic systems and the creation of resilient societies in the years ahead. As you immerse yourself in the pages that follow, consider this booklet as a catalyst for new research and future debates about democracy.

The NORFACE Governance programme, as it concludes, prompts a sincere thank you to those who have facilitated our dissemination efforts.

We express gratitude to our funding agencies and the NORFACE Network for their belief in our research and support. Special appreciation goes to the Scientific Programme Coordination team, comprising Jana, Ming, Faime, Selma, Nikolaus, and Dana, for their invaluable assistance in planning and executing all dissemination activities of the programme.

As we bid farewell to this chapter, let's anticipate many more future collaborations and endeavors in the pursuit of advancing our understanding of democratic governance.

INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

Democratic politics and governance in Europe are facing turbulent times. Party systems have crumbled or been substantially changed and so have citizen attachments to government, political parties and democratic procedures. This sixth NORFACE (New Opportunities for Research Funding Agency Cooperation in Europe) transnational programme on *Democratic governance in a turbulent age* offers a timely investigation of the precise nature of this recent agitation, looking at how European states can navigate turbulence and develop strategies to enhance the quality of democratic politics and governance.

The programme is structured around five of the most important challenges to democratic governance and politics:

• *Theme 1: Inequality and redistribution*

• *Theme 2: The evolving politics of threat*

• *Theme 3: Democratisation of information and expertise*

• *Theme 4: Shifting identities and representation*

• *Theme 5: Changing authority of institutions*

INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

Impact

The research projects will provide a new assessment of how the major challenges to democratic politics and governance have had an impact on social and political relationships in different countries, what accounts for the variation, how these challenges have been met, and with what success.

The academic impact of the research will be the generation of new knowledge, insights, and theoretical perspectives on relations between the state, political, social, and economic institutions, and citizens, as well as on relations among different groups of citizens. The practical and policy impacts of the programme arise from the examination of the key variables and influence shaping the intensity and outcomes of these challenges, thus providing a basis for understanding the range of positive interventions and policies that might lead to greater democratic innovation.
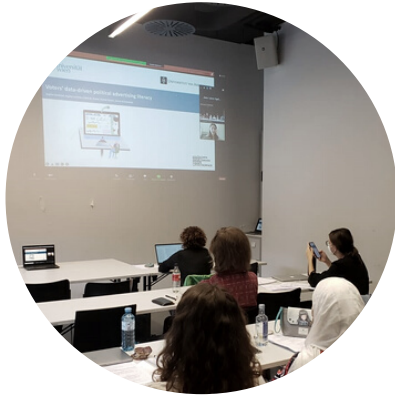
Purpose

The programme has three major objectives:

- To develop innovative and excellent research proposals addressing important challenges to democratic governance and politics;
- To produce added value through the development of European cross-national research collaborations, exploring the impacts of variations in social, economic, cultural, and political contexts on changes in how democracies work;
- To identify promising forms of policy innovation and institutional design, and explore the conditions for their application in different jurisdictions.

OUR
ACTIVITIES

EARLY-CAREER WORKSHOP

The early-career workshop took place in Vienna in June 2022. Early-career participants presented their work and received valuable feedback from senior members of the GOVERNANCE programme. The workshop featured three skill sessions on Theory Development, Publication Strategies as well as Grant Writing.

MID-TERM CONFERENCE

We held our mid-term conference in Vienna in September 2022. It was the first time all 14 NORFACE research consortiums got together to discuss their research progress. The projects had the opportunity to present preliminary findings, offer each other feedback for the remainder of their projects, and connect with colleagues from other consortia. The event featured engaging activities, such as a stakeholder workshop, roundtable discussion, and keynote speeches.

STAKEHOLDER WORKSHOP

We connected with stakeholders working at and beyond the European Union institutions at our stakeholder workshop in Brussels in June 2023. Scholars from across Europe provided insights on the future of democratic governance. The workshop provided space for conversation between academics and practitioners, facilitating the integration of insights and knowledge into practice.

OUR
ACTIVITIES

UNDPOLAR & POPBACK: JOINT WORKSHOP

POPBACK and UNDPOLAR organized a joint workshop titled "A Multilevel Understanding of Populist Polarization and Its Impact on Democracy" in October 2022 in Brussels. The event brought together presenters from 12 countries, spanning various disciplines, to explore the challenges democracy faces due to populism and polarization on both macro and micro levels. The workshop featured a keynote speech by Sam van der Staak, Head of International IDEA's Europe Programme.

QUEST & CRIMSCAPES: JOINT WORKSHOP

This joint workshop was held in October 2022 in Cordoba, Spain. It was organized by the QUEST and CRIMSCAPES projects in collaboration with Casa Arabe. It brought together academic and civil society audiences to discuss the role of Muslims/minorities in the politics of threat across EU contexts. The event featured research presentations, discussions, and a keynote by Claire de Galembert, that emphasized a multi-disciplinary approach to address political threats in Europe.

DATADRIVEN & THREATPIE: JOINT WORKSHOP

DATADRIVEN and THREATPIE organized a joint workshop titled "Beyond the threats: New opportunities for democratic governance in the digital age", held in March 2023 in Split, Croatia. The primary objective of this workshop was to explore shared research interests, providing a platform for networking that was particularly beneficial for Early Career Researchers. The event fostered meaningful connections and opportunities for future collaboration.

RESEARCH
PROJECTS

Fourteen transnational and multi-disciplinary social science research consortia have received funding from the European NORFACE network. They focus on subjects such as disruptive changes in the political landscape, polarisation and populism, (European) identities, and the legitimacy of the administrative state. In the following sections, you will find a brief introduction to the projects and their key findings.

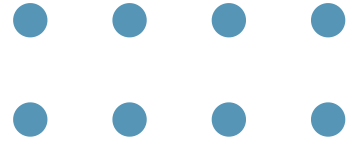EUINACTION team members

POPBACK team members

THREATPIE & DATADRIVEN joined conference in Split, March 2024

UNDPOLAR team members

RESEARCH
PROJECTS

THREATPIE team members at the ECREA Political Communication Section Conference, Berlin, August 31, 2023
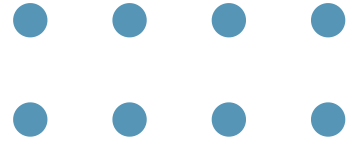

DATADRIVEN team members

DATADRIVEN team members

QUEST international workshop with the Norwegian cooperation partner in Oslo, June 2023

RESEARCH
PROJECTS

THREATPIE team meeting at the ICA conference in Paris, May 30, 2021

RUDE team members at the Grenoble Institute of Political Studies

THREATPIE members at the conference Digital Media, Democracy and Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe, Katowice. © Tomek Grząślewicz

TECHNO group members
© IBEI

NAVIGATING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH EUROPEAN LANDSCAPES OF CRIMINALISATION

crimscapes.de
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ABOUT

The CrimScapes project explores the expanding application of criminal law, crime control measures, and imaginaries of (il)legality as response to the growing politics of threat across the European region. Given the inherent tensions between democratic processes and ever-expanding legal regulations, the project investigates this reliance on criminalization as a challenge to the participatory nature of democratic societies, and as possible symptoms and causes of the general sense of turbulence dominating much of economic, social, and political life today. It analyses the motivations behind and implications of criminalization for the varied actors affected by and (re)producing landscapes of criminalization (i.e., crimscapes).

KEY FINDINGS

- Based on the observation that politics of criminalization have grown in importance globally, CrimScapes ethnographically investigates **specific manifestations across a variety of fields** such as hate speech, women's imprisonment, abortion, drug use, the spread of HIV/AIDS, search and rescue activities and sex work while looking at a specific European region for each.
- In general, politics of criminalisation can be employed in two distinct ways: On the one hand it aims at **supporting citizen rights and protecting vulnerable groups** (e.g. when intensifying anti-hate speech laws to protect victims of hate). On the other hand, it **targets people,** who are conceived as thread to public security and/or moral orders (e.g. when drug use, abortion or sex work is restricted or fully banned).
- Understood broadly as the application of, and increasing reliance on, c**riminal law, crime control measures and imaginaries of (il)legality,** politics of criminalisation comes at the expense of, or entanglement with, other forms of democratic governance such as social justice, welfare and humanitarianism.
- Politics of criminalization usually don't go unquestioned. They play out, becoming enacted and negotiated locally in specific **"landscapes of criminalisation."** In view of developments across European regions, it becomes obvious that these ever-changing "crimscapes" are often characterized by a legal ambiguity, creating "hostile environments" for those who have to navigate them as addressees of these politics.
- Politics of criminalisation have effects on and contribute to a wide range of **social phenomena,** such as the creation of individual and group subjectivities, the ways in which social movements organise today, as shaping state-citizen relations and informing transnational regimes of participation, mobility, emotions and notions of "in/justice".
- Hence, politics of criminalisation present **dilemmas** to democratic governance. For example, criminalisation and juridification may hinder processes of collectivisation and solidarization. As criminalization "expands", it might also involve the proliferation of non-state, and thus not-elected, actors. It unfolds threatening effects on everyday lifeworlds through subtle and manifold mechanisms beyond criminalisation, and is key to understanding the social order in Europe today.

DATA-DRIVEN CAMPAIGNS: INTENDED AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES FOR DEMOCRACY

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ABOUT

The project DATADRIVEN studies if data-driven campaigns using online micro-targeting techniques threaten democracy. The consortium will focus on the intended and unintended consequences of data-driven targeting and digital persuasion. In light of ongoing political and societal turmoil, investigating how citizens may be persuaded in a turbulent age and a changing media landscape has never been more important. The studies focus on a micro (consequences for citizens), meso (consequences for political elites), and macro-level effects (consequences for democracy).

KEY FINDINGS

- **Usage**: Data-driven campaign practices seen to threaten democracy are not often manifested in party campaigns of political elites in Europe. Instead, we see a set of practices that build on pre-existing techniques, and which are far less sophisticated than is often assumed.
- **Perceptions**: People are generally more negative towards data-driven campaigning, but when asked in more detail, people tend to be more nuanced.
- **Effects**: Data-driven campaigning can impact political outcomes, such as voting, but effects are often small and they mainly reinforce existing party preferences.

DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE OF FUNDED PENSION SCHEMES

DEEPEN

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ABOUT

DEEPEN explores the democratic governance of capital-funded occupational pension schemes. They investigate how governments, regulators, and labor market actors govern funded pensions (input legitimacy) and whether participants are satisfied with pension fund performance (output legitimacy). The project focuses on Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Ireland, and Spain, because the structure of funded pension provision varies along key dimensions relevant to input and output legitimacy. The project combines quantitative analysis of survey data with comparative case studies based on elite and expert interviews and primary and secondary documents analysis.

KEY FINDINGS

Input Legitimacy
- Developed a conceptual framework for measuring input legitimacy - the extent to which collectively binding decisions are in line with citizens' democratically expressed preferences - in funded pension schemes. We find that democratic input legitimacy is higher in countries with quasi-mandatory funded occupational pensionsthan in countries with voluntary schemes.
- Compared decision-making in occupational pension schemes and the pension fund's degree of control over investments. Employer and employee representatives play important roles in pension scheme management in some countries (DE, DK, IE, NL), either as board members or on advisory boards. Decision-making power typically lies with the pension scheme's board, so the structure of representation is particularly important for input legitimacy.
- Pension scheme size influences whether investment decisions are either decided by the boards or by separate investment committees.

Output Legitimacy
- Designed and analysed data from an online survey in six countries (AT, DK, DE, IE, NL, SP) examining individual experiences and attitudes towards occupational pension plans (OPP).
- Found moderate satisfaction with input and output legitimacy with limited cross-national variation. Input and output legitimacy are significantly lower among women than among men. The most robust predictors of legitimacy are behavioural: respondents who have gathered information about their OPP or engaged in OPP decision-making are significantly more satisfied with scheme inputs and outputs than those who have not.
- Examined the determinants of individual willingness to increase individual savings through OPPs, finding that there is a gap in knowledge regarding how pension fund characteristics affect pension savings.
- In a conjoint analysis, we find respondents wereparticularly more willing to save through the OPP, if it flags high past returns and has a board that includes participants' representatives and makes decisions taking preferences of participants into account. These effects are, furthermore, are rather uniform across socio-economic groups and the six countries.

WILLINGNESS AND CAPACITY FOR EU POLICY ACTION IN TIMES OF CRISES: CONFLICTS, POSITIONS AND OUTCOMES

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ABOUT

Global financial, migration, security, and pandemic crises demand coordination between national governments, which the European Union (EU) historically facilitates. Yet, the surge of Eurosceptic, nationalist and populist political parties and movements across Europe hinder discussions about EU cooperation on various issues. This raises the question of how these competing pressures affect EU policy integration. The project aims to inform responsive and effective policy reforms with findings of the willingness and capacity for European integration in specific policy areas.

KEY FINDINGS

- EUINACTION delivers three novel datasets with unique measurements, covering:
  1. **Public preferences** over EU action across 22 policy domains between 2009–2019;
  2. **Legislative text data**, including informal EU negotiations ('trilogues'), with measurements of the EU authority expansion in the proposals, institutional positions, and adopted acts using semi-supervised machine learning.
  3. **Speech data from 29 European parliaments** (incl. the European Parliament) during 2009–2019 with validated positions of individual MPs and parties (ParlEE).
- Innovative theory and analysis of the responsiveness of EU institutions to public opinion over EU authority (across member states) in the formulation, legislative negotiation, outcomes, and implementation of EU policies, explaining the **role of politicization**.
- The most comprehensive analysis of the drivers of parliamentary speech in Europe and a **novel theory** linking the politics within political parties to the positions expressed by MPs in Parliament.

EXTREME IDENTITIES: A LINGUISTIC AND VISUAL ANALYSIS OF EUROPEAN FAR-RIGHT ONLINE COMMUNITIES' POLITICS OF IDENTITY

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ABOUT

The ExId project offers an analysis of the European far-right online landscape, combining computational methods with in-depth qualitative analysis; it provides a dynamic analysis of both the evolution of the European far-right online landscape and its linguistic and visual content, exploring phenomena such as the impact of real-world events on websites' content or circulation of linguistic/visual tropes across groups.

KEY FINDINGS

- The past two decades have witnessed a significant increase in far-right digital activity, resulting in a vast **"far-right online ecosystem"** contaminating every single digital format (blogs, forums, social media, dating sites, wiki architectures, etc.). This far-right online ecosystem is now so vast that it is impossible to map, even when using computational methods.
- The online far-right ecosystem is not hermetically sealed from "mainstream" digital milieux, nor is it disconnected from other extremist ecosystems (for example the incel one): there are multiple connections between them, which facilitate the **flow and cross-pollination of extremist ideas** across ideological, linguistic, and national boundaries.
- The move towards more stringent terms of use on mainstream social media (YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, etc.) has pushed more extreme users to welcoming **alternative platforms** (Gab, Telegram, BitChute, etc.) which now constitute a large digital ecosystem in itself where extremism has condensed.
- The development of evermore **powerful AI models** aggravates the problem: AI models of different kinds already help turbocharge extremist propaganda operations and practical projects.

INFORMATION IN THE EU'S DIGITALISED GOVERNANCE

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ABOUT

The project INDIGO addresses pressing issues affecting the future of democratic governance in Europe given advanced machine learning–based algorithms in public decision making. The project builds on an interdisciplinary team of experts in Luxembourg, Barcelona, Freiburg, Helsinki, and Karlsruhe organized in working groups composed of legal scholars, social scientists, and computer science experts on artificial intelligence and machine learning. The project teams study the interactions of new technologies and their impact on concepts of democratic accountability, the rule of law, fundamental rights and principles, and the use of expert knowledge in public decision–making.

KEY FINDINGS

- INDIGO sets the stage for **informed decision–making, regulatory improvements, and preserving democratic values** in the face of advancing automation and AI technologies in the exercise of public functions under EU law.
- The project highlights the need for a **harmonious alignment** between the guiding principles of accountability and the feasible parameters and constraints imposed by technology. It emphasises the importance of design choices within law and technology to ensure a fair and accountable system.
- INDIGO also underscores the significance of **ongoing interdisciplinary dialogue,** regular checks, impact assessments, and accountability mechanisms to address concerns and challenges associated with technology implementation.

POPULIST BACKLASH, DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING, AND THE CRISIS OF THE RULE OF LAW IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

POPBACK

Populist Backlash, Democratic Backsliding, and
the Crisis of the Rule of Law in the European Union

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ABOUT

The project POPBACK studies the mechanisms 'exclusionary populist' movements use to increase their power by undermining the Rule of Law (RoL) and eroding the divide between the public and private domains in law, the economy, and the media. The project investigates the factors that make states vulnerable or resilient to such strategies and how societal actors seek to cope with them. It compares Austria, Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, the United Kingdom, and Turkey, all of which have experienced populist success but differ regarding their institutional structures, permitting comparison.

KEY FINDINGS

- Work Package 1 (WP1) reveals that populist governments **favour individual worker rights over collective labor protections,** and change shareholder rights to enhance their control over the economy.
- WP2 finds that right-wing populists show an **opportunistic approach towards foreign Multinational Corporations (MNCs),** relying on them economically while opposing them on nationalist grounds. WP2 identifies the factors, including host country authoritarianism and sectoral importance, that determine the level of political risk that MNCs face in populist host countries.
- WP3 uncovers **core-periphery media ownership structures** in populist countries that supports populists strategy to control public discourse while allowing limited oppositional voices. It also notes a gendered pattern in media ownership that aligns with authoritarian right-wing strategies and identifies journalists' coping strategies in these settings
- WP4 highlights the **performative nature of populism,** emphasizing the ongoing construction of the populist subject in response to public perception, and notes that audience reactions to populism are more influenced by delivery style than content.

QUALIFY UNIFICATION IN EUROPE FOR SHIFTING TRUST: A COMPARATIVE RESEARCH ON MUSLIMS RESPONSES TO THE POLITICS OF THREAT IN FRANCE, UK, SPAIN AND NORWAY

norface.net/project/quest

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ABOUT

QUEST is a cross-national three-year project focused on the shifting nature of identities and representations of Muslims in four European contexts: France, Norway, Spain, and the United Kingdom. Two phases of empirical research shape the deployment of the project focusing on the scale of cities. In a period of growing anxiety and mistrust, the project involves tracing the discourses and mechanisms through which Muslims are folded into 'the politics of threat.' The second phase of the project highlights and deepens based on an original ethnographic data collection the representations and experience of Muslims to identify individual and collective discourses, practices, and strategies in the re-elaboration process of what it means to 'be Muslim' in the context of a polarised Europe.

KEY FINDINGS

- Muslims in Europe have come to be framed in terms of a politics of threat following a number of 'critical events' that make them **hyper-visible** in public and political discourse.
- Critical events are accompanied by **media and policy attention** that focuses on the material and cultural presence of Muslims to help create 'atmospheres' through which a certain affect is given off. This helps make the politics of threat a normal feature of politics in EU countries (see the current situation in the Netherlands, for example)
- By focusing on the city level and the ordinary, everyday ways Muslims use the city and relate to other inhabitants, we gain an understanding of the **shifting nature of identities** and ways of representing Muslims and Islam in the public sphere that can help challenge the politics of threat.

RECONNECTING CITIZENS TO THE ADMINISTRATIVE STATE?

lse.ac.uk/accounting/carr/research/Reconnect

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ABOUT

The current age of political turbulence – expressed through citizen dissatisfaction and populist politics – represents a fundamental challenge to the authority of the institutions of the administrative state. Public administration connects citizens to the state and is therefore central to democratic governance. It is imperative to explore the sources of citizen disconnection and administrative-led efforts to reconnect citizens. ReConnect investigates how calls for more 'responsive' administrative state institutions have developed both among citizens and politicians, and how the administrative state has sought to become more responsive, especially when simultaneously faced with expectations of neutrality and impartiality.

KEY FINDINGS

The ReConnect project explored ways in which different parts of the European administrative state seek to engage with citizens. Team members found:

- A widespread shift to the use of digital technologies that promise **'bespoke' support**, yet however is often coupled with particular conditionalities and pre-requisites that reduce the potential for connectivity.
- Some countries seek to enhance connection with citizen by exploring the **impact of administrative initiatives** on distinct parts of the populations, while others less so.
- Attempts at citizen re-connection were challenged by **austerity**, as cut-backs to management placed the focus on 'case load efficiency' rather than on responsiveness to citizens. This represents a critical issue for legitimacy and long-term management of public services.
- Economic regulators have developed **novel ways of consumer engagement** to deal with concerns about legitimacy and challenging regulators and regulated industries to advance online and 'in room' engagement and communication strategies represents a critical part of citizen re-connection.

THE RURAL-URBAN DIVIDE IN EUROPE

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ABOUT

The project RUDE examines whether and how urban-rural residency is related to divides in legitimacy beliefs, social identities, perceptions of injustice and threat, political and social attitudes, and political behavior of European citizens. First, it deals with shifting identities and their consequences for democratic governance and political representation. Second, it examines the role played by globalization: increasing rural–urban economic divides create social status threats that exacerbate rural–urban political divides. In this way, the project will combine a broad comparative study of all European countries with an in-depth analysis of five established European democracies.

KEY FINDINGS

Development of measure for place-based identities and resentments
- Extensive (5 items for identity, 11 for resentment) battery of items
- Tested in five Western European countries and five languages (English, German, French, Spanish, Italian)
- Rural-urban consciousness has pronounced patterns of association with indicators of "left behind" status such as low income and lack of a university education

Rural-urban differences in political attitudes and behaviour often small
- Differences can be explained by place-based identity and resentment

Place-based identity and resentment often works counter to each other
- While place-based identity increases voting, place-based resentment reduces voting
- Place-based identity does not increase conspiracy mentality, place-based resentment does
- Place-based identity is a buffer against populism, place-based resentment is positively associated with populist attitudes

SEPARATION OF POWERS FOR 21ST CENTURY EUROPE

Separope

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ABOUT

SepaRope is the first empirically-grounded and comparative project rethinking the theory and practices of separation of powers in the present-day European Union. SepaRope demonstrates through combined horizontal and vertical inquiries how recent economic and political developments affect the EU's institutional framework and the anchoring of EU decision-making in national legitimacy. It combines conceptual constitutional analysis with empirical research in three fields (Economic and Monetary Union, migration, trade) in which the EU decision-making is controversial, rights-sensitive, and illustrative of recent power shifts.

KEY FINDINGS

- First, while the EU has always been executive-driven, its executive branch has been further strengthened. It appears sometimes fair to ask whether the legislature and the judiciary are able to factually exercise the autonomous influence and control functions that fall to them under a system of separated powers.
- Second, what adds to this pattern is, in practice, a lack of judicial control by the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in all three policy areas we have examined. While in classic accounts of the evolution of EU law the ECJ has been widely seen as disproportionately powerful, today it seems to fail to properly control the other EU branches for issues characterised as constitutional or going beyond mere technicalities. This results in an overly consensual mode of decision-making between the EU institutions, which is applied in particular in crisis contexts, and which also affects the European Parliament's (EP) preparedness to defend its own prerogatives.
- Third, the multilevel interaction within the EU legal order adds not only complexity, but also may affect separation of powers. The EU institutions and actors expand their powers at the expense of the national legislatures. This additionally dilutes competence divisions between the EU and Member States, further hindering clarity and visibility of who exercises power and how that exercise can be scrutinised and balanced by other actors.

HOW TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE RESHAPES POLITICS: TECHNOLOGY, ELECTIONS, AND POLICIES

TECHNO
Research Project

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ABOUT

Technological change disrupts labor markets in advanced democracies and creates fears about unemployment and the future of work. While it is well-established that rapid technological progress has significant economic effects, its political consequences remain largely unexplored. This project aims to study how technological change in the workplace contributes to political transformations, the adoption of policies to address change and the political consequences of such policies. The project is organized into four complementary work packages (WP). The project will contribute to understanding how the grievances generated by technological change manifest themselves politically.

KEY FINDINGS

- Team members have produced the most comprehensive studies of the **relationships between objective measures of automation risk, concern about automation, and preferences for policies to respond to technological change** in the workplace. One study, published in Comparative Political Studies (Gallego et al. 2022), finds that such objective measures and perceptions are correlated, but that neither explains support for redistribution.
- While much research studies the loser of technological change, which tends to turn to the populist right, the TECHNO project shows that winners of technological change tend to turn to the **mainstream right-wing parties** (Gallego and Kurer 2022, published in Journal of Politics).

THE THREATS AND POTENTIALS OF A CHANGING POLITICAL INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

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ABOUT

The THREATPIE project examines how current changes in political information affect the conditions for a healthy democracy. Based on the concept of 'political information environment' (PIE), it considers the supply and demand of political information. Supply refers to the quantity and quality of news and public affairs content provided by traditional and new media; request captures the amount and type of information the public consumes. The project aims at achieving these goals through a series of comparative, innovatively designed studies including web-tracking, comparative surveys, focus groups, and survey-embedded experiments in 10+ countries across Europe and the US.

KEY FINDINGS

Perceptions:
- Citizens, politicians, educators, and journalists share concerns about today's information environments
- Mis- and disinformation are highlighted as a threats to information environments
- News avoidance and selective exposure are not perceived as major threats

Facts:
- Concerns regarding mis- and disinformation are justified, with variance across countries
- Selective exposure does not appear to be a major threat in European information environments

Solutions:
- The quality of information environments is key to strengthening citizens' knowledge base
- Citizens are receptive to a) quality content, b) corrections of misinformation, c) news media literacy messages

THREAT, IDENTITY, AND DISSENT: UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN EUROPEAN DEMOCRACIES

UNDPOLAR

undpolar.org
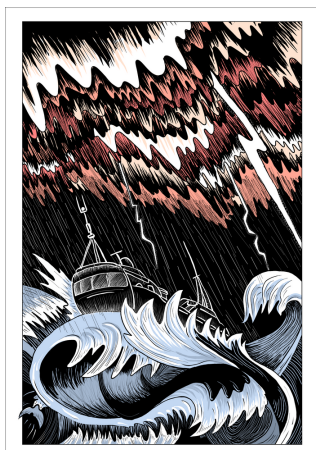**Lead PI**: t.kuppens@rug.nl

ABOUT

UNDPOLAR project has three main objectives. First, to determine how identities and threats combine to generate multiple polarized attitudes. They identify subpopulations with unique belief systems or threat networks, and investigate how these are related to identities, polarization, and political behavior. Second, to use experimental research to test causal effects of identities and threats on polarization. They focus on economic inequality, meritocracy, collective narcissism, and collective threats. Third, democratic innovations such as citizen fora have been developed to overcome polarization. They will test whether using our insights on threats and identity can make such fora more effective.

KEY FINDINGS

- People differ in the political beliefs they hold, but they also differ in how these beliefs relate to each other. The relations between all beliefs is called a **'belief system'.** Investigating belief systems increases our understanding of politics and political polarization across Europe. Belief systems are related to our level of education, which party we vote for, and which party supporters we like.
- Distrust in politics is rooted in **social inequalities.** For example, the extent to which people feel that they are not represented in politics and that their voice is not being heard, is related to distrust. This also feeds into support for violence against the government, or can change the relation between polarization and violence at the country level. Furthermore, feelings of economic insecurity in a context of inequality are related to feelings of relative deprivation, and political distrust.
- Citizens' assemblies can be a conditional way of **depolarizing citizens.** When citizens are allowed to discuss salient political issues, with very diverse others in a face-to-face discussion, their interaction could lessen polarization. Effective deliberative settings therefore have the potential to foster other-regarding attitudes.

RESEARCH IMPACT INITIATIVES

Our research projects aspire to extend the reach of their work beyond academia. Here are three examples:

© By Sylvain Adam from the Story "Not Welcome!" by Jérémy Geeraert and Sylvain Adam

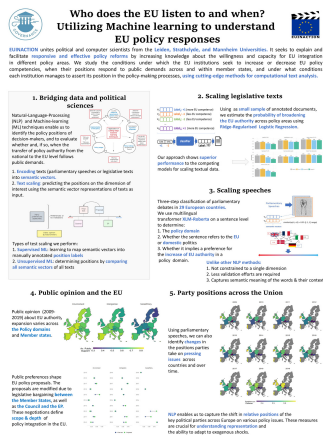## ETHNOGRAPHIC NOVEL BY CRIMSCAPES

The near-total ban on abortion in Poland, new hate speech laws across Europe and a de facto criminalisation of sea rescue in the Mediterranean: a trend towards harsher politics of criminalisation, securitisation and threat is expanding across the European region. However, those criminalised don't stay put. They adapt, they navigate and create their own stories – eight of which are captured in this book, translating findings from ethnographic fieldwork into an episodic EthnoGraphic Novel. The result is a collection of researchers' observations and the personal stories of those whose lives have been shaped by criminalisation, full of alarming insights into current political changes – and the hope, agility and creativity with which they are met.

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ART PERFORMANCE BY POPBACK

'The Conservatory of Populism' art performance is part of the POPACK project's impact and dissemination, which seeks to bring the attention of a broader non-academic audience to the subject of populism, and all its demagogic and rhetoric strategies. It addresses the theatricality of politics and questions the way theatrical devices can be deployed to construct reality. 'The Conservatory of Populism' is conceived and performed by PhD student Helena Botto in collaboration with sound designer Rob Hart, visual artist Sonia Roshal and associate producer Lorenza Peragine.

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