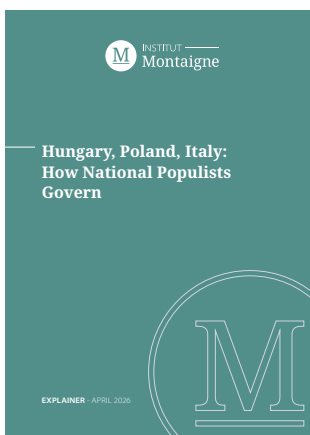


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# Hungary, Poland, Italy: How National Populists Govern



National-populist movements have established themselves in Europe as a new political reality. In April 2024, Institut Montaigne analyzed the rise of these movements within European institutions while highlighting their many divergences. This second study seeks to understand how national-populist parties exercise power by examining Viktor Orbán’s Hungary from 2010, Poland under the Law and Justice Party (PiS) between 2015 and 2023, and Giorgia Meloni’s Italy from 2022. The aim of the study is twofold: to test the hypothesis that all three countries shared a national-populist “choreography” in terms of how these parties acceded to and remained in power and to compare campaign rhetoric with the realities of governing. Does the former survive in the face of the latter?

The study reveals the disconnect between promises on the campaign trail and actual practice once in government. Although the principles of the national-populist parties broadly converge on criticism of Europe, opposition to immigration, and rejection of environmental measures, careful examination of the public policies they actually implement once in power reveals that these principles are not always put into practice. In fact, the economic development of these three countries relies largely on their partnerships with Europe (which have resulted in significant increases in GDP per capita). On migration, against the backdrop of declining populations and a growing need for labor, pragmatism is the order of the day. On the environmental front and in a tense geopolitical context, the diversification of energy supplies takes precedence. One area that is not subject to the contradiction between rhetoric and reality, however, is the rule of law. Under these governments, judicial systems, constitutional courts, public broadcasting, and universities are all undergoing structural alterations.

This study sheds light on the contrasts between promises and feasibility, democratic access to power and institutional challenges, partisan communication and economic constraints. At a pivotal moment in our democratic trajectories, it is above all a study of practice rather than ideology.

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**Institut Montaigne’s Managing Director**

Over the past decade, the so-called national-populist parties have moved from the periphery of European politics to its heart. Bolstered by continued electoral gains, they have come to power—either by themselves or in coalition—in a growing number of Member States, from Hungary to Italy, Poland, Slovakia, and Romania. Their ongoing presence in the institutional landscape fuels regular debate about the rule of law and raises questions about the future of the European project—issues we analyzed previously in our first report, published in April 2024: *National-Populist Surge in Europe: Implications for European Decision-Making*.

However, to understand the mechanisms of power exercised by national populists and their institutional longevity, it is necessary to move beyond the frameworks traditionally associated with the study of national-populism. A purely theoretical approach, framed around national-populism as a threat or “danger,” will no longer suffice. In other words, we need to conduct more operational and empirical studies, based not on definitions, discourse, or ideology but on the public policies actually implemented by these parties when they come to power. This is precisely the aim of this study.

Our study focuses exclusively on three countries where national-populist political forces acceded to power and remained in control for long enough for there to be a well-documented record of the public policies they implemented and their effects: **Hungary under Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz party** (in power from 2010 to 2026), **Poland under the Law and Justice (PiS) party** (in power from 2015 to 2023), and **Italy under Giorgia Meloni’s Fratelli d’Italia (Brothers of Italy) party** (in power since October 2022). The Polish case is particularly instructive in that it allows for the analysis of a complete national-populist cycle and above all the difficulties in breaking free from it. This study analyses five areas of public policy: economic and social, migration, environmental, foreign policy, and, finally, the rule of law and values.

Our empirical research on public policies in these three countries demonstrates that however tempting it may be to see a common national-populist model emerging in the exercise of power, this intuition does not stand up to analysis across all the areas examined. **Instead, our work reveals the existence of a shared “grammar” inflected by varying degrees of heterogeneity and the specificities of national contexts.**

### THE TRIAL OF POWER, BETWEEN RHETORICAL RADICALISM AND POLITICAL PRAGMATISM: A CONSTANT ACROSS THESE THREE COUNTRIES

**On the migration front, the tough stance displayed against migrants masks a more pragmatic and utilitarian approach characterized by selective openings to immigration.** Faced with falling birth rates, aging populations, and labor shortages, these governments are responding strategically with a dual approach. Meloni’s Italy embodies this contradiction. On the one hand, her government launched high-profile communication campaigns against illegal immigration and took measures to implement a restrictive approach to immigration. On the other hand, legal entry quotas were increased to address the needs of the national labor market, with the first immigration quota decree (*decreto flussi*), adopted in 2023, authorizing 452,000 foreign workers to enter Italy over the 2023–25 period. Similarly, both Poland’s PiS and Hungary’s Fidesz practice selective immigration, albeit on a large scale, in contradiction to their leaders’ public statements. Since 2022, Poland has become the second-largest host country for Ukrainian refugees, while Hungary has, since 2010, exceeded its positive net migration figure of 20,000 people per year on six occasions, a phenomenon that seems set to continue following the influx of “guest workers.” There is an ongoing tension between the exclusionary rhetoric that became institutionalized during the 2015 migration crisis and the demographic and economic imperatives for these countries, which have historically been shaped by the opposite trend: emigration.

**This same dialectic between sovereignist rhetoric and pragmatic action shapes the approach to environmental policy.** Even as these governments publicly denounce “the European agenda” as a burden imposed by Brussels, their actions comply with EU directives due to the need to achieve energy security, safeguard key industrial sectors, and protect voters’ purchasing power. The invasion of Ukraine and the drastic fall in European imports of Russian gas (from 45 percent in 2021 to 19 percent in 2022) forced this pragmatic shift. Whether it be Poland’s target of achieving 30 percent nuclear electricity by 2033, the expansion of the Paks power station in Hungary to supply the battery industry, or Italy’s renewed interest in small modular reactors (SMRs), environmental policy is neither completely rejected nor embraced as a sustainable transition project. Instead, it is reconfigured as an industrial policy tool. The much-maligned green transition is transformed into a pragmatic obligation that is accelerated only when it can be linked to economic growth targets and/or political projects.

**Although this anti-European rhetoric serves domestic political objectives, its scope remains limited by strong economic interdependencies.** Alignment with Europe, therefore, no longer stems solely from political pragmatism but from budgetary necessity. **The EU provides financial benefits to all three countries.** Since joining the EU in 2004, Poland has experienced a sustained period of economic catch-up, with growth rates exceeding the EU average. As the main net beneficiary of European funds, it has received, over twenty years, around €170 billion under the Cohesion Policy and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Per capita GDP at purchasing power parity (PPP) is now 40 percent higher than it would have been without the EU—purchasing power has surged by 91 percent over the last two decades. Although its trajectory has been marked by greater difficulties, Hungary nevertheless has a GDP per capita in PPP that is 13 percent higher than it would have been without its integration into the single market. Italy, which has faced sluggish growth since 2012 and took on historic levels of public debt in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (exceeding 155 percent of GDP), has stabilized thanks to Mario Draghi’s policies and European funding. Italy is notably

the primary beneficiary of the *NextGenerationEU* recovery plan, with a contribution of over €191 billion to revitalize its economy. Dependence on EU funds is therefore forcing these governments to compromise with a system they once rejected but now aspire to “change from within.”

### **THE LIMITS OF THE NATIONAL-POPULIST “CHOREOGRAPHY”: DIVERGENCES IN FOREIGN POLICY AND THE RULE OF LAW**

**Foreign policy highlights stark divisions between Rome, Warsaw, and Budapest.** Despite the deep roots of Atlanticism in all three countries, priorities among them diverge, particularly in the case of Hungary. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the unpredictability of the Trump administration have acted as catalysts, accentuating the differences between the three countries regarding their international policies. Whereas Rome and Warsaw support Kyiv, albeit for different reasons, Budapest has adopted a wholly antagonistic stance toward Ukraine, echoing the Kremlin’s official narrative, showing reluctance to impose sanctions on or condemn Russia, vetoing support for Ukraine, and taking a restrictive approach to refugees. This heterogeneity extends to these countries’ relationships with the EU. While the national populists are united by anti-federalist rhetoric, a long-standing criticism of the Commission’s powers, and a desire for internal reform, the governments employ opposing tactics to achieve their ends. Meloni’s Italy, for example, favors a constructive relationship with the European Commission. Rome, Warsaw, and Budapest also advocate divergent visions for the Union regarding enlargement, each with its own set of priorities—Ukraine remains a divisive issue. These divergences in action and vision partly explain their repeated institutional failure to present a united front within the European Parliament.

**Domestically, the exercise of power by national-populist parties in these three countries has led to a rapid and structural undermining of the rule of law, although with varying effects.** The common objective is clear: to consolidate executive power by neutralizing

checks and balances while waging a cultural battle centered on conservative values. While Hungary succeeded in imposing a systemic and lasting transformation of its model, resulting in an almost total closing down of its institutional and informational space, Poland and Italy show more constrained trajectories. The case of the broadcasting sector illustrates this dynamic clearly. Unlike in Hungary, the takeover of public broadcasting in Poland did not lead to the erosion of private media pluralism, preventing uniform control. In Italy, the historical diversity of media actors and the resilience of judicial countervailing powers similarly obstructed any total media takeover. The constitutional referendum

on judicial reform championed by Giorgia Meloni marked a pivotal moment in her tenure, being both technical in its subject matter—the separation of the careers of judges and prosecutors and the overhaul of the High Council of the Judiciary—and highly political in its implications. Quickly transformed into a vote of confidence in her leadership, it crystallized a sharp polarization around the issue of judicial independence. The rejection of the text by voters (with high turnout and around 54 percent voting “no”) constituted a significant setback for the prime minister, weakening her political momentum without, however, calling into question her hold on power.