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Hungary, Poland, Italy: How National Populists Govern

EXPLAINER - APRIL 2026




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Hungary, Poland, Italy: How National Populists Govern



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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.

Marie-Pierre de Bailliencourt,
Institut Montaigne's Managing Director

Executive Summary

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: Implication 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 sovereigntist 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.

Foreword	5
-----------------------	---

Executive Summary	6
--------------------------------	---

Introduction	15
---------------------------	----

1	2010, 2015, 2022: An Analysis of Three Victories	20
----------	---	----

1.1.	The Victory of Viktor Orbán's Fidesz in 2010	20
-------------	--	----

1.2.	The PiS's victory in 2015	23
-------------	---------------------------------	----

1.3.	Giorgia Meloni's Victory in 2022	30
-------------	--	----

2	Economic and Social Policies Supported by European Funds	36
----------	---	----

2.1.	Economies Benefiting from European Integration	36
-------------	--	----

2.2.	Governments Inheriting Contrasting Economic Situations	38
-------------	--	----

2.3.	"Orbánomics," "The Meloni Method," "The Dignity of Polish Households": The Doctrines and Their Effects	47
-------------	--	----

3	Migration Policy: Hostile Rhetoric, a More Nuanced Reality	54
	3.1. Countries with Significant Labor Needs	54
	3.2. Anxiety-Inducing Rhetoric Surrounding Immigration, Exacerbated by the “Crisis” of 2015	64
	3.3. A Facade of Firmness Contradicted by the Figures	71
4	Environmental Policy: Superficial Opposition, Pragmatic Action	87
	4.1. A Shared Rhetoric: The Green Transition Characterized as Something Imposed by Brussels	88
	4.2. The Energy Transition: A Lever for Growth Rather Than an Ideological Imperative	91
5	Foreign Policy: Atlanticism and Relations with Russia	103
	5.1. In Poland and Italy, a Strong Atlanticism, Reignited by the War in Ukraine but Complicated by the Return of Donald Trump	103
	5.2. The Relationship with Russia and Support for Ukraine: A Deep-Seated Antagonism Between PiS, Brothers of Italy, and Fidesz	111
	5.3. Reforming Europe from Within: A Shared Ambition, Limited Results	116

6

The Rule of Law and Values: A Shared Aim, Differing Applications	123
6.1. The Rule of Law: The First Target of National Populists in Power	123
6.2. A Pattern That Is Being Repeated in Hungary and Poland: Courts, the Constitutional Court, the Media, Universities...	125
6.3. Cultural Battles in Increasingly Polarized Countries: Media, Education, Culture, and Social Norms	136
Conclusion	150
Acknowledgements	153

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Given the rise of national-populist parties in Europe over the past decade and their accession to and retention of power in several countries, it is necessary to update our analytical frameworks for understanding them. A purely theoretical approach, viewed through the lens of national-populism as a threat or “danger,” will no longer suffice. Extensive research has already been conducted on the issues of how to define national-populism, the conditions under which these movements thrive, the forms they take, and the rhetoric that drives them. Beyond this extremely fruitful theoretical approach, **we must now 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 work.

After a first release that focused on national populists in the EU, their affinities, differences, and potential impact on EU dynamics—published in April 2024, ahead of the European elections—**this new edition focuses exclusively on three countries where these political forces have come to power: Viktor Orbán’s Hungary** (in power since 2010), **Poland under the Law and Justice party** (PiS, in power between 2015 and 2023), **and Italy under Giorgia Meloni** (in power since October 2022). The Polish case is particularly instructive in this context, in that it allows **for the analysis of a complete national-populist cycle**, and—even more interestingly—a consideration of **the challenges of breaking out of such a cycle.**

With this in mind, our paper examines five areas of public policy: Economic and social policy, migration policy, environmental policy, foreign policy, and, finally, the issue—central to these three countries—of the rule of law and values.

Our approach then examines the following policy questions in terms of three different timeframes:

- What policies do these parties put forward during election campaigns?
- What concrete public policies do they actually implement once they come to power? And, underlying this, what potential discrepancies can be identified between rhetoric and action?
- Finally, what consequences do their policies have for their countries, and how does public opinion perceive them?

For each of the three countries, we now have sufficient hindsight to examine, in a concrete and well-documented manner, the public policies implemented and their effects—in terms not just of effectiveness but also of their acceptability and reception by the public. This note also examines how these countries are adapting to the European framework and benefiting from it. **Behind a discourse that is often hostile to European integration, more nuanced positions are emerging—a sign of a degree of pragmatism in countries where trust in the EU is often high and European funds are a key factor in economic prosperity.**

The aim of this study is not to produce three static case studies but to compare the public policies implemented in each of the three countries across the five areas examined. Is there, from Budapest to Rome via Warsaw, a national-populist “choreography” that is repeated everywhere, with slight or more marked national variations? If so, what are its set moves, what timetable does it follow, and what are its effects? Could such a choreography—if it turns out to exist—be repeated in France, and in what ways? To answer these questions, we prioritize an empirical approach based on a meticulous and documented analysis of the public policies implemented and their outcomes rather than of ideology alone.

A comparative analysis of the three countries reveals a number of similarities, particularly regarding **the disconnect between official rhetoric and actual actions taken**. This is particularly true in **the case of migration and climate policies**, where the hostility of the rhetoric and promises clashes with the pragmatism of the actions. **On foreign policy, there are profound differences, particularly regarding the Russian question**, which creates a clear dividing line between Hungary on the one side and Italy and Poland on the other—these two countries being staunchly Atlanticist and hostile to Moscow. **On values and the rule of law, agendas often converge, but the degree of implementation varies greatly**. Although the rule of law has been virtually dismantled in Hungary, Poland's PiS has failed to see through its proclaimed "Budapest to Warsaw" project due to the country's institutional structure and the strength of certain checks and balances. Nevertheless, the current government, formed following the 2023 elections and led by Prime Minister Donald Tusk, is struggling to return to the pre-2015 status quo. Furthermore, since the 2025 presidential election, it has had to manage a highly contentious coexistence with a president, Karol Nawrocki, who is supported by the PiS, which is determined to regain power in the Sejm in 2027. Finally, in Italy, although representative democracy remains vibrant, tensions are mounting over a number of measures implemented by the current government. **As for economic and social policies, their implementation and effectiveness depend largely on the budgetary leeway of the various states—which is heavily influenced by European funding**. Poland has been the largest net recipient of European funds since its accession to the EU in 2004,¹ and the Polish "miracle" would not have been achieved without this financial windfall. Italy, which has achieved some economic successes under Meloni, is also heavily dependent on *NextGenerationEU* (NGEU) funds released following the COVID-19 pandemic, of which Rome was the primary beneficiary.² Hungary, which, in the aftermath of the Soviet era, was considered to be the country best suited to

¹ *Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, "Présentation de la Pologne [Profile of Poland], France Diplomatie, 2025.*

² *Council of the European Union, "Timeline – Recovery and Resilience Facility," 2025.*

the transition to liberalism and to a market economy, suffers from a clientelist policy, dominated by corruption and the misuse of European funds—which nevertheless remain indispensable to the country’s economy. **These economic issues are key to understanding the relationship between Budapest, Rome, and Warsaw, on the one hand, and Brussels, on the other—caught between superficial hostility and necessary cooperation.**

Our initial selection (Hungary, Poland, and Italy) could have been expanded to include other examples where national-populist parties are (or have been) in power, such as Slovakia or the Nordic countries. We chose to focus our analysis on these three states for reasons of scope and depth of analysis; for each of them, we have sufficient hindsight and material to inform our analysis. For the Scandinavian countries, as well as the Netherlands, both were ruled out due to their belonging to often unstable coalitions, which would have made the exercise more delicate and less meaningful in its conclusions.

Definitional Elements

National populism refers to the fusion of a protest-oriented political style with a nation-centered identity-based ideology. In order to fully understand it, these two dimensions must be broken down.

1. Populism: A “Soft Ideology”

According to political scientist Cas Mudde, populism is not a structured ideology like liberalism but a “soft ideology” based on an antagonistic vision of society that pits two homogeneous groups against each other: “the people,” who are considered pure, and “the elites,” who are considered corrupt (the political, media,

and economic elites). It is also a political style that contrasts sharply with that of the traditional parties and a disruptive strategy for seizing power and eventually exercising it.

Populism rejects intermediary bodies (institutions, bureaucracy, and parties), which it regards as filters that distort the general will. Populism thus advocates direct democracy (referenda) to reestablish a “genuine” link between the leader and the citizens. Often used as a pejorative label, the term struggles to stand on its own due to its lack of doctrinal substance.

2. The Need for a “Host Ideology”: Nativism

To become a fully fledged political project, populism must align itself with a “host ideology.” In the case of national-populism—a concept coined by Gino Germani and later theorized in France by Pierre-André Taguieff—this anchor is identity-based nationalism, at least for populism on the right (there is also left-wing populism, as in the case of parties such as Syriza in Greece or Podemos in Spain, which employ a similar rhetoric of criticizing the elites).

The core of the project thus becomes “nativism.” This doctrine maintains that the state must be inhabited exclusively by members of the “native” group and that any exogenous element (immigrants or the presence of a non-majority religion) threatens the nation’s homogeneity.

In Hungary, Italy, and Poland, national-populism manifests itself in this way—with variations across the three countries—through virulent anti-elite rhetoric, nativism defending the preeminence of nationals, and, finally, a more or less pronounced Euroscepticism, the European Union being perceived as the embodiment of a foreign technocratic drift hostile to popular sovereignty.

1 2010, 2015, 2022: An Analysis of Three Victories

Before examining the content of their programs and the public policies implemented in their countries, let us first focus **on the conditions under which Fidesz, PiS, and Fratelli d'Italia came to power**. This examination of their respective victories allows us to introduce the parties, their origins, and their evolution. We shall see that in each of the three countries, beyond the effectiveness of populist rhetoric, the national-populist parties **thrived on the failings of the liberal governments that preceded them**.

1.1. THE VICTORY OF VIKTOR ORBÁN'S FIDESZ IN 2010

The political history of contemporary Hungary is inextricably linked to the trajectory of Viktor Orbán and his party, Fidesz. Few European political movements have undergone such a metamorphosis, **shifting from progressive, anti-clerical liberalism to identity-based and nationalist conservatism**.

a. The Origins: The Spring of the Young Liberals

Fidesz (Alliance of Young Democrats) was founded in 1988 amid the end of the socialist regime. It began as an intellectual, Western-oriented youth movement, open only to young people aged between fourteen and thirty-five, with a strict exclusion clause for members of the Communist Youth League.

At that time, Fidesz represented a radical opposition to the single-party system. It advocated a market economy, private property, and a multiparty system. Viktor Orbán, then a young law student, quickly emerged as the face of that generation. Ironically, Orbán's education was partly funded by those he now describes as his greatest enemies: In 1989, he received a scholarship from the George Soros Foundation to study political science and British liberal philosophy at Pembroke College, Oxford.

In Hungary's first free elections of 1990, Fidesz, then perceived as liberal and progressive, entered Parliament with 21 MPs.³ By 1993, a first split had taken place: Viktor Orbán was elected party president and imposed a shift in policy toward what was termed a "national-liberal" stance.

b. Transformation and First Taste of Power

From 1995 onwards, Viktor Orbán realized that the liberal niche was too narrow to secure a stable majority in Hungary. **Under his leadership, Fidesz began a profound transformation to become a governing party capable of uniting right-wing forces disillusioned by the economic transition.**

Viktor Orbán strove to transform the youth movement into a solid conservative force modeled on the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU). He abandoned the anti-clericalism of his early days to champion traditional values and formed a coalition with the conservative and Christian-oriented Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF). This strategic repositioning bore fruit: **In 1998, Fidesz won the general election, and at just thirty-five years old, Viktor Orbán became Europe's youngest prime minister.**

³ Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Hungary: Parliamentary Elections Országgyűlés, 1990," PARLINE database, 1990.

This first experience of power (1998–2002) laid the foundations for Orbán’s political vision but ended in electoral defeat in 2002. For him, this defeat justified further political shifts, both in form and substance. During the following eight years spent in opposition, he refined his populist rhetoric, targeting the elites—intellectual, political, and economic (and in particular the financial sector, especially the banks).

From 2004 onwards, Orbán denounced what he called “the network” (*hálózat*), a term referring to the financial and media “establishment” that emerged from the post-communist era. He positioned himself as a defender of the “common people” against a government of bankers, declaring: “The work of farmers, teachers, and employees is never recognized; the work of honest people is never rewarded.”⁴

c. 2010: The Return to Power and the Conservative “Revolution”

Viktor Orbán’s return to power in 2010 was facilitated by the collapse of his socialist opponents—Hungary had undergone an unprecedented political crisis from 2006 to 2010.

The decline of the left began in 2006 with the “Őszöd speech.” **Ferenc Gyurcsány, the then socialist prime minister, admitted during a private meeting that his government had lied to the Hungarian people about the true state of the economy in order to win the elections.** The leak of this recording sparked riots in Budapest and discredited a whole section of the Hungarian political class. Added to this political context was the 2008 financial crisis. Severely affected, Hungary was forced to accept an IMF bailout package accompanied by severe austerity measures. Viktor Orbán **then presented himself as the sole bulwark capable of restoring order and national sovereignty in light of the dictates of international finance.**

⁴ Quoted in Amélie Poinssot, *Dans la tête de Viktor Orbán: essai [Inside the mind of Viktor Orbán]* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2019), 73.

The 2010 elections were a landslide: Fidesz and its Christian Democrat ally (KDNP) secured two-thirds of the seats in parliament.⁵ This qualified majority enabled Viktor Orbán to launch a total overhaul of the state despite opposition resistance, as we shall see later in our section on the rule of law. He has remained in power since 2010.

1.2. THE PIS VICTORY IN 2015

The Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) came to power in Poland in 2015, driven by three underlying trends: the rise of social issues, the migration crisis, and the growing polarization of the political landscape around issues of memory, history, and culture. By developing an alarmist narrative about the state of the country and the threats it faced (unemployment, rising prices, immigration, and insecurity), coupled with the identification of enemies both within and without, the party succeeded in setting the terms of the political debate for the long term while establishing itself as the only force capable of restoring the Polish people's "dignity" and "greatness."

a. In 2005, a Fragile First Victory

The Kaczyński brothers, founders of the Law and Justice (PiS) party, were by no means political novices when they secured their first victory in 2005. Associated with the Solidarność trade union movement (Solidarity), they had already taken part in the 1989 Round Table talks. Their 2005 victory in the presidential and parliamentary elections⁶

⁵ Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Hungary (Országgyűlés): Elections in 2010," PARLINE database, 2010.

⁶ A narrow victory for the latter, who secured a relative majority in the Sejm: 27 percent for PiS, 24 percent for the Civic Platform. The Democratic Left Alliance (SLD)—a social-democratic party founded by former communists—slumped to 11 percent; it had won 41 percent of the vote and 216 seats out of 460 in the previous general election of 2001.

came during a period marked by the shortcomings of the liberal transition and corruption scandals involving a large number of former members of the communist nomenklatura. The twilight of the post-communist left thus paved the way for a lasting reshaping of the Polish political landscape that is still unfolding today, **divided between a liberal right wing embodied by Donald Tusk’s Civic Platform (PO) and a nationalist-Catholic wing embodied by the Law and Justice (PiS) party.** It is important to note that in 2005, the two parties were not as antagonistic as they are today: During the campaign, the prospect of a PO–PiS coalition, which would have given them a comfortable majority, was raised. Ultimately, however, it proved impossible to implement.

The PiS campaign, steeped in Catholicism and capitalizing on the emotion stirred by the death of Pope John Paul II, was then centered on law and order. Its program, “A Catholic Poland in a Christian Europe,”⁷ warned against “the anti-Christian hostility encountered in liberal Europe.”⁸ PiS advocated for a new constitution rooted in Catholic values and pushed for the rejection of Western values while stigmatizing homosexuality.⁹ The party secured a relative majority in the Sejm and decided to form a minority government supported by smaller parties in parliament.¹⁰ The 2005 victory was precarious. A reshuffle in 2006 established a fragile coalition, which collapsed in August 2007. Early general elections were agreed upon for October, resulting in a victory for Donald Tusk’s PO (42 percent). Although PiS was defeated, it made gains at the polls, ultimately winning 32 percent of the vote.¹¹

⁷ *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, Polska katolicka w chrześcijańskiej Europie [Catholic Poland in Christian Europe]* (Warsaw: Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, 2005), official PiS party manifesto.

⁸ *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, Polska katolicka w chrześcijańskiej Europie.*

⁹ Pierre Buhler, *Pologne, histoire d'une ambition. Comprendre le “moment polonais” [Poland, the history of an ambition: Understanding the “Polish moment”]* (Paris: Tallandier, 2025), 5.

¹⁰ *The Self-Defence of the Republic of Poland (SRP), a left-wing populist party, the League of Polish Families (LPR), a far-right party, and the Polish Peasants' Party (PSL), a Christian-democratic party, supported the PiS minority government between 2005 and 2007.*

¹¹ *Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza, “Wybory 2007” [2007 elections], election results for the Sejm of the Republic of Poland, 21 October 2007*

b. The 2015 Victory

In October 2015, PiS secured a decisive victory, winning an absolute majority of seats in the Sejm and the Senate, having already won the presidential election in May. This was the first time in the history of post-communist Poland any party had secured an absolute majority in the Sejm.

This double victory can first and foremost be attributed to the prominence of social issues. In 2015, Poland had been a member of the European Union for ten years, and the “Polish miracle” is often held up as an example of a successful democratic and liberal transition. Although macroeconomic indicators support this view, the benefits of this success are not felt equally across the entire population and have led to various inequalities—particularly regional and generational (rising poverty rates among the elderly, divides between urban and rural areas, etc.). According to several commentators,¹² the **liberal camp appeared to have underestimated the importance of social issues, relying solely on economic prosperity to secure victory.** Against this backdrop, the PiS decided to place redistribution and social justice at the heart of its campaign. By relying heavily on alarmist rhetoric about the state of the country (“Poland is in ruins”),¹³ the party promised Poles it would restore their dignity while also pledging to restore Poland’s lost sovereignty. **The program, which included lowering the retirement age, providing free medicines for the elderly, and a child benefit for families from the second child onwards, appealed to a large section of the electorate, particularly in rural and working-class areas.** The party, inspired by the heterodox policies implemented in Hungary by

¹² See in particular: Corinne Deloy, “The Conservative Opposition Running Favourite in the Upcoming Parliamentary Elections in Poland,” *European Election Monitor, Fondation Robert Schuman*, 29 September 2015 and Polly Toynbee, “Poland’s Steady Economic Progress Matched by Growth in Social Inequality,” *The Guardian*, 6 April 2011.

¹³ Corinne Deloy, “The Law and Justice Party Win the Parliamentary Elections and the Absolute Majority,” *European Election Monitor, Fondation Robert Schuman*, 27 October 2015.

Viktor Orbán, also promised reindustrialization and a “re-Polonization” of the economy.¹⁴

The second key to understanding the PiS’s victory lies in its exploitation of the 2015 migration crisis. At a moment when Germany decided to open its borders and the Commission introduced a system of migrant distribution quotas at European level (with a quota of just over six thousand migrants for Poland,¹⁵ compared to the nearly one million migrants Germany was taking in at the same time), PiS developed a fear-mongering narrative about migrants and the threat they posed to Poland. To the party, migrants posed a security, cultural, and health threat: Jarosław Kaczyński stated at a rally in October 2015 that “there are already signs of very dangerous diseases that have long been absent from Europe: cholera on the Greek islands, dysentery in Vienna. Various parasites and protozoa, harmless in the bodies of migrants, but potentially dangerous here. This does not mean we should discriminate against anyone, but we must check.”¹⁶ While the country had very little experience of immigration from outside Europe at the time, **the PiS managed to turn public opinion on this issue: In May 2015, 72 percent of Poles were in favor of taking in refugees from conflict zones;¹⁷ by December of the same year, the majority (64 percent) were opposed to it.**¹⁸ This anti-migrant rhetoric is inextricably linked to anti-European rhetoric, with the Brussels institutions being accused of interference and of imposing migrant quotas on the country.

¹⁴ Jakub Iwaniuk, “Pologne: la droite conservatrice remporte les élections législatives” [Poland: The conservative right wins the general election], *Le Monde*, 25 October 2015.

¹⁵ European Commission, “Refugee Crisis: Q&A on Emergency Relocation” (MEMO/15/5698), press memo, 9 September 2015; and Council of the European Union, “Conclusions of the Representatives of the Governments of the Member States Meeting within the Council on Resettling Through Multilateral and National Schemes 20 000 Persons in Clear Need of International Protection” (Council document 11130/15, 20 July 2015).

¹⁶ Exact quotation in Polish: “Są już przecież objawy pojawienia się chorób bardzo niebezpiecznych i dawno niewidzianych w Europie. Cholera na wyspach greckich, dezenteria w Wiedniu. Różnego rodzaju pasożyty, pierwotniaki, które nie są groźne w organizmach tych ludzi, a mogą tutaj być groźne. To nie oznacza, żeby kogoś dyskryminować, ale sprawdzić trzeba.” Uttered during a meeting on October 13, 2015.

¹⁷ CBOS, “Opinions About Refugee Crisis,” *Polish Public Opinion*, no. 6/2015 (June 2015).

¹⁸ CBOS, “Terrorism Threat After Paris Attacks,” *Polish Public Opinion*, no. 12/2015 (December 2015).

A third factor explaining the PiS's victory at the time was its historical narrative, which drew on the theme of "Polish martyrdom."

The early 2000s had indeed been marked by a critical reexamination of Polish history by the liberal camp, which was convinced that a nation's strength lay in its ability to view its past with clarity and critical insight. The publication in 2000 of the book *Neighbors* by the Polish American historian Jan Gross, highlighting the responsibility of Poles in the massacre of 1,600 Jews in the town of Jedwabne—a massacre previously attributed to the Nazis—caused a sensation. It formed part of a broader context for new interpretations of Polish responsibility for crimes committed during the Second World War and the Holocaust. **The PiS is resolutely opposed to this narrative and wishes to return to an official history centered on Poland's martyrs and heroes.** This is the case with the Smolensk tragedy. In April 2010, the Polish presidential plane crashed while attempting to land at Smolensk North Airport, leaving none of the ninety-six people on board alive. The Head of State, Lech Kaczyński, the chief of the general staff, the commanders of the various branches of the Polish armed forces, the governor of the National Bank of Poland, the deputy minister of foreign affairs, and members of both Houses of Parliament died in this disaster. Despite official investigations attributing the crash to pilot error, PiS supporters propagated a different narrative, implicating Russia and the government of Donald Tusk in a conspiracy allegedly aimed at dismantling the Polish state. This version fueled a renewal of the Polish pantheon, which now included the late President Lech Kaczyński, who was elevated to the status of a martyr to a Russian-liberal plot. A section of the electorate was highly receptive to this version of the story.

The PiS had thus established itself as the only credible alternative to represent a people who had been neglected and humiliated by their leaders. It promised to restore the people's dignity—both moral and economic—while saving them from enemies from without (the Germans or the Russians) and from within (the liberals, who were alleged to have instigated the Smolensk tragedy and to have colluded with former

communists). All of this was framed within a rhetoric of post-traumatic sovereignty that shaped the national imagination, as demonstrated by the researcher and essayist Jarosław Kuisz.¹⁹

But the party also demonstrated a certain degree of skill in its communication and approach, choosing a woman—Beata Szydło—to lead the campaign. As the newspaper *Le Monde* noted in 2015: “This party (PiS), which was seen as the party of a single man (or two brothers), is now represented by a woman who is effective and rather moderate in her rhetoric. She ran a grassroots campaign and appeared to be listening to people and their concerns.”²⁰

c. A Victory Aided by a Conservative Media Environment and a Strong Digital Strategy

Finally, PiS benefited from a highly influential conservative media ecosystem alongside an effective digital strategy, which played a major role in cementing its identity-based and security-focused discourse during the campaign.

The party thus enjoyed the support of several influential ultra-conservative media outlets in the Polish landscape. Among them, the daily newspaper *Gazeta Polska*, its discussion “clubs,” and the weekly *Sieci*—both of which were highly active during the 2015 migration crisis—played a leading role in disseminating identity-based and security-focused messages, often through sensational front-page headlines that helped polarize public opinion. Among the most famous was a photomontage produced by *Sieci* depicting the former liberal Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz²¹ wearing a burqa and holding explosives, with the

¹⁹ Jarosław Kuisz, *The New Politics of Poland: A Case of Post-traumatic Sovereignty* (Manchester University Press, 2023).

²⁰ Aline Salles, “La droite conservatrice est prête à revenir au pouvoir en Pologne” [The conservative right is ready to return to power in Poland], *Le Monde*, 24 October 2015.

²¹ Ewa Kopacz was prime minister from 2014 to 2015, when Tusk was appointed President of the European Council.

headline: “[She] is preparing hell for us on Berlin’s orders.”²² The media empire owned by Father Tadeusz Rydzyk (centered on Radio Maryja but also including the daily newspaper *Nasz Dziennik*, the TV channel TV Trwam, and a school of journalism) had also established itself as a decisive source of support for PiS—all the more so as it helped mobilize the traditionalist and conservative clergy for electoral purposes in support of the party.

Finally, and despite an electoral base considered older and not particularly active on social media—which, it should be remembered, did not have the same impact at that time as it does now—**PiS ran a remarkably effective digital campaign in 2015, outperforming opposition parties considered more modern but less organized online.**²³ The campaign team deployed viral videos, simplified the narrative around new faces, and centered the message on anxiety-inducing themes, security issues, and “anti-elite” rhetoric, fostering widespread mobilization on mainstream social media platforms (such as Facebook and YouTube).²⁴

Thus, PiS’s victory in 2015 can be attributed both to the failings of the liberal camp and to the deployment of a fear-mongering and divisive narrative aimed at identifying enemies and scapegoats while exploiting fears and fantasies surrounding the migration crisis and the crisis of memory.

²² Jakub Iwaniuk, “En Pologne, une galaxie de médias ultraconservateurs au service de l’extrême droite” [In Poland, a galaxy of ultra-conservative media outlets serving the far right], *Le Monde*, 10 June 2025.

²³ Frédéric Zalewski, “Pologne, la victoire des perdants de la transition démocratique” [Poland: The victory of the losers of the democratic transition], *Le Monde*, 13 January 2016.

²⁴ Artur Lipiński, “Information Sources Shared on Facebook and Networking by Populist Leaders and Populist Parties in Poland,” *Studia Politica Slovaca* 14, nos. 2–3 (2021): 66–83.

1.3. GIORGIA MELONI'S VICTORY IN 2022

Giorgia Meloni's victory in the general election of September 25, 2022, was part of a classic hard right to center right coalition. The break, however, lay in the fact that, for the first time since 1994, the dominant party in this coalition was neither Forza Italia nor the League but Brothers of Italy (Fratelli d'Italia). **This internal realignment, combined with a climate of political weariness and a coherent electoral platform, largely explains the outcome of the vote.**

Since 2011, Italian political life had been marked by a succession of technocratic governments or heterogeneous coalitions that only partially reflected the popular vote. This decade exacerbated a deep mistrust of representative institutions, illustrated by a record abstention rate of 36 percent in 2022.²⁵ **Against this backdrop, a section of the electorate was less interested in an ideologically homogeneous program than in the emergence of a stable executive that could be identified with carefully chosen campaign themes.** In this respect, the right-wing coalition enjoyed a decisive advantage: It was united, whereas the opposition was fragmented—which proved the decisive factor due to the electoral system.

a. From 2011 to 2022, the Succession
of Seven Prime Ministers Plunged Italy
back into Chronic Instability

The fall of the Berlusconi government in November 2011 marked the start of a prolonged period of instability. The technocratic government led by Mario Monti (2011–13), which was characterized by severe austerity, fueled public mistrust. The 2013 elections failed to

²⁵ *Inter-Parliamentary Union, "Italy — Chamber of Deputies Elections (25 September 2022)," IPU Parline: Global Data on National Parliaments, 2022.*

produce a clear majority and marked the emergence of the Five Star Movement (M5S), a populist party that became the country's largest. **The Italian party system thus shifted from a two-party to a three-party system.**

The successive center-left governments of Enrico Letta, Matteo Renzi, and Paolo Gentiloni (2013–18) relied on fragile parliamentary majorities. In 2018, the M5S won over 32 percent of the vote²⁶ and, to everyone's surprise, formed a government with Matteo Salvini's League, breaking with its traditional right-wing allies. This first Conte government, described as populist, lasted only a year. It was replaced by a second Conte government based on a precarious alliance between the M5S and the Democratic Party (PD).

The 2021 government crisis, against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, led the president of the republic to entrust the leadership of the country to Mario Draghi. **This government of national unity, supported by all parties except Brothers of Italy, marked an absolutely pivotal moment: It allowed Giorgia Meloni to emerge as the sole coherent figure of opposition to the system.** It is worth recalling that **she was the only political leader to refuse to participate in the Draghi government.**

Mario Draghi's resignation in July 2022 and the dissolution of parliament brought this technocratic interlude to a close.

²⁶ *Senato della Repubblica, "Elezioni politiche 2018—Riepilogo nazionale (risultati per il Senato, XVIII legislatura)" [2018 general elections—national summary (results for the Senate, 18th legislature)], 2018.*

b. The 2022 Elections

The right-wing coalition that came to power in 2022 brought together Brothers of Italy, the League, Forza Italia, and a small centrist party, Noi moderati (We Moderates). **Brothers of Italy secured 26 percent of the vote, compared with 8.3 percent for Forza Italia and 8.8 percent for the League.**²⁷ **With nearly 44 percent of the vote, the coalition won around 60 percent of the seats**, thanks to a mixed electoral system combining proportional representation and a single-member, first-past-the-post system.

Electoral discipline on the right played a central role in this victory. Despite differences in policy and leadership rivalries, the coalition fielded a single candidate in each single-member constituency. In contrast, the PD, the M5S, and the centrist forces ran in a fragmented manner. In this way, the right won nearly 80 percent of the seats allocated under the first-past-the-post system, transforming a relative advantage into parliamentary dominance.

The coalition's joint program was based on a broad compromise. It affirmed Italy's Western alignment and its commitment to NATO and the EU while calling for a strengthened national role—summed up by the slogan "More Italy in Europe, more Europe in the world." It proposed an ambitious institutional reform (election of the president of the republic by universal suffrage, greater regional autonomy), a reform of the judiciary based on the separation of careers, a revision of the Stability Pact, and the updating of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR).

²⁷ *Senato della Repubblica, "Elezioni del 25 settembre 2022—Riepilogo nazionale (risultati convalidati per il Senato)" [Elections of 25 September 2022—national summary (validated results for the Senate)], 2022.*

On the economic and social front, **the program combined tax cuts, aid for businesses, and support for families, notably through a strong pro-birth policy.** It emphasized security, the fight against illegal immigration, the development of community health care, the promotion of “Made in Italy,” and the importance of energy issues.²⁸

However, the dominance of Brothers of Italy is explained less by this shared program than by Giorgia Meloni’s ability to capture the electorate’s key priorities. Polls show that her stance on purchasing power and energy prices carried more weight than her traditional themes of immigration or abortion, which were deliberately pushed into the background during the campaign but are well known to the electorate. The personalization of the election ultimately played a decisive role: As the only woman among the party leaders, Giorgia Meloni established herself as the central figure of the Italian right, succeeding Silvio Berlusconi and then Matteo Salvini as the natural leader of her camp—despite it being rather notorious for a certain machismo or even virility and misogyny.²⁹

c. Giorgia Meloni and Brothers of Italy Before Coming to Power

Presenting Giorgia Meloni as a new political figure in 2022 conceals a much longer record of activism. Born in 1977, she became involved as a teenager with the Fronte della Gioventù, the youth organization of the Italian Social Movement (MSI), a neofascist party. She then witnessed the transformation of the MSI into the National Alliance (AN), a party that claimed to be postfascist. However, her ideological evolution remained slow and ambiguous. In 1996, aged nineteen, she was

²⁸ *Fratelli d’Italia, Programma Centrodestra 2022 [Centre-right programme 2022], 2022.*

²⁹ Agnieszka Cianciara, “Italy: Fratelli d’Italia and Its Framing of Populist Female Leadership,” in *Women in Populist Rhetoric*, ed. Agnieszka Kasińska-Metryka and Karolina Palka-Suchojad (Routledge, 2025), 108–116.

still expressing her admiration for Mussolini in a television interview in France.³⁰ Her political evolution mirrored that of these parties.³¹

Her political career progressed rapidly: After becoming deputy speaker of the Chamber of Deputies (2006–08) and then minister for youth in the Berlusconi government (2008–2011), **she cofounded Brothers of Italy, a party calling for a return to certain fundamental identity-based principles of the radical right following the failure of the single right-wing party, in 2013.** Since coming to power, Meloni has distanced herself from historical fascism, notably condemning the anti-semitic laws of 1938, without, however, adopting the symbolic break made by Gianfranco Fini when he described fascism as the “absolute evil.”³² She still refuses to acknowledge the founding role of anti-fascism in Italian democracy but has adopted an “anti-anti-fascist” stance, denouncing the left’s use of this reference, which, in her view, attempts to delegitimize the right.

In terms of ideology and identity, Giorgia Meloni and Brothers of Italy combine defensive nationalism, nativism, and populism. The slogan featured on the front page of the Brothers of Italy website—“First and foremost, always and everywhere, Italians”—illustrates this stance.³³ Long-standing Eurosceptics, having even considered leaving the euro and the EU following Brexit, they shifted their stance before 2022, influenced by the pragmatism of Italian public opinion. They now advocate a “Europe of peoples and homelands” while calling for greater national sovereignty.

³⁰ Institut national de l’audiovisuel (INA), “Giorgia Meloni, jeune militante pour le parti d’extrême droite italien” [Giorgia Meloni, young activist for the Italian far-right party], *Soir 3* (France 3), 20 April 1996.

³¹ Giorgia Meloni, *Mon itinéraire. Autobiographie d’une leader politique* [My journey: autobiography of a political leader] (Paris: Cora, 2022). This is the French translation of *Io sono Giorgia. Le mie radici, le mie idee* [I am Giorgia: my roots, my ideas] (Milan: Rizzoli, 2021). See also Alessandro Sallusti and Giorgia Meloni, *La versione di Giorgia* [Giorgia’s version] (Milan: Rizzoli, 2023).

³² Jean-Jacques Bozonnet, “En Israël, Gianfranco Fini scelle sa rupture avec le fascisme” [In Israel, Gianfranco Fini seals his break with fascism], *Le Monde*, 28 November 2003.

³³ Globalisation “didn’t work,” explains Giorgia Meloni in Massimo Calabresi, “Where Giorgia Meloni Is Leading Europe,” *Time*, 24 July 2025.

Brothers of Italy's electoral rise accelerated from 2018 onwards, capitalizing on the collapse of the League—which was weakened by Matteo Salvini's inconsistency—and the decline of Forza Italia following the Berlusconi era. By bringing together voters from both the far right and the center right, Giorgia Meloni established herself as the arbiter of a heterogeneous coalition, forced, once in power, to maintain a sustainable internal balance.

2 Economic and Social Policies Supported by European Funds

2.1. ECONOMIES BENEFITING FROM EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

The anti-European rhetoric regularly invoked by PiS, Fidesz, or Meloni's party is in spite of a reality that is hard to dispute: **the EU's contribution—at times colossal—to the development and economic health of these three countries.** This is particularly the case in Poland and Hungary, which joined more recently (2004) and where the benefits are particularly evident in macroeconomic indicators such as the rise in GDP per capita, economic growth, and the fall in unemployment rates. Budapest, Warsaw, and Rome have nevertheless not followed similar trajectories, and Italy must be treated separately as not just a founding member of the European Community but also the only one of the three countries to be a member of the eurozone.

Poland, the EU's largest net beneficiary and a model student in the use of funds, has experienced—and is still, to some extent, experiencing—a period that some describe as the Polish “miracle.” This “miracle” enabled the PiS, between 2015 and 2023, to implement a generous social policy in favor of Polish families and pensioners without increasing a public deficit that had long been under control. **Hungary's trajectory has been very different:** Particularly affected by the 2008 economic crisis and placed under the excessive deficit procedure upon its accession to the EU in 2004, **the country faces a far more precarious economic situation,** the most damaging effects of which have been mitigated by European funds. The public finances inherited by Viktor Orbán in 2010 were in far worse shape than those of neighboring Poland, and the room for maneuver was not of the same nature.

The policies implemented by Fidesz and PiS nevertheless pursue often similar objectives (nationalization of the economy, protection of families and the middle classes, boosting the birth rate, etc.), but **the “Orbán method” is different: far more clientelist and centralized, far more prone to corruption, and with results that are often deceptive.** Its poorer management of European funds, its electioneering fiscal policy, and the Commission’s suspension of European payments due to failure to respect the rule of law are undermining the Hungarian economy in the medium and long term. **Finally, Italy**—which is difficult to compare economically with the two countries mentioned above—is **renowned for its chronic instability and economic stagnation, which the current laudatory discourse surrounding the “Meloni miracle” is attempting to reverse.** This recent stabilization is due less to the efforts of the new prime minister than to the reforms initiated since Mario Monti’s government (2011–13) and then, following the emergence from the COVID crisis, by the governments of Giuseppe Conte and Mario Draghi, which benefited from the NGEU funds, of which Italy was one of the main recipients.

As purchasing power lies at the heart of the populist electorate’s concerns, this first section seeks to identify the capacity—real or claimed—of these governments to respond effectively to these demands. It attempts to identify the existence (or absence) of a “populist-style economic doctrine,” its fundamentals, and its results.

2.2. GOVERNMENTS INHERITING CONTRASTING ECONOMIC SITUATIONS

a. The Polish “Miracle” and Its Ambivalences

Since joining the European Union, Poland has followed an extremely dynamic economic trajectory. EU accession in 2004 enabled the country to emerge from decades of a centralized economy (1945–89) that was inefficient and uncompetitive, marked by heavy dependence on the Soviet bloc, chronic shortages, and low productivity. The transition period, from the early 1990s to 2004, then enabled Warsaw to undertake market-oriented reforms (liberalization, privatization) and a gradual modernization of its economy with a view to European integration. At the end of the Soviet era, a consensus emerged between the heirs of Solidarność and the communists regarding the adoption of a liberal-inspired economic policy, which would soon prove its worth.

Since 2004, the Polish economy has thus experienced an almost uninterrupted period of economic catching-up, with growth rates exceeding the EU average (4.2 percent per year on average, compared with the EU average of 1.5 percent)³⁴ and a per capita GDP that has continued to rise. According to the *Polish Economic Institute*, **GDP per capita in purchasing power parity (PPP) was, in 2022, around 40 percent higher than it would have been without EU membership.**³⁵ In absolute terms, GDP per capita (PPP) rose from \$17,708 in 2004 to \$35,151 in 2022, almost doubling.³⁶ In 2004, Poland’s GDP per capita stood at

³⁴ World Bank, “GDP growth (annual %) – Poland,” World Development Indicators (database), accessed 27 March 2024. Data cited in Dominik Kopyński et al., *The Big Bang Enlargement: 20 Years of Central Europe’s Membership in the EU* (Warsaw: Polish Economic Institute, 2024).

³⁵ Kopyński et al., *The Big Bang Enlargement: 20 Years of Central Europe’s Membership in the EU*. According to the report, Poland’s GDP per capita in 2022 was 39.6% higher than that projected in the alternative scenario without EU accession. This means that the average annual growth in GDP per capita in PPP terms between 2004 and 2022 stood at 4.2% and was 1.7 percentage points higher than it would have been had Poland sought to develop outside the EU. Had it remained outside the EU, the Polish standard of living, measured by GDP per capita, would be between the 2014 and 2015 levels.

³⁶ Kopyński et al., *The Big Bang Enlargement: 20 years of Central Europe’s membership in the EU*.

around 49 percent of the EU average. By 2024, it had risen to around 82 percent of the European average. These results were achieved without a reckless increase in public debt, the level of which, at around 50 percent of GDP, leaves governments with a comfortable margin.

Poland also has one of the lowest unemployment rates in Europe: at 2.9 percent in 2024, compared to the EU average of 6 percent.³⁷ **In 2025, Eurostat ranks Poland among the five countries with the highest growth rates in Europe,** well above average.³⁸

The only EU country to have been completely spared by the 2008 financial crisis (thanks to its sound banking system, which earned it the nickname of the “green island” of the European economy),³⁹ Poland has not experienced a single recession since joining the EU—except briefly at the height of the COVID-19 crisis in 2020. This is a major difference from Hungary, which experienced a severe recession in 2008—indeed, it was by standing up to the troika (the IMF, the ECB, and the European Commission) that Viktor Orbán regained power in 2010, subsequently promoting unorthodox economic policies, a point to which we shall return.

In addition to robust domestic consumption and significant private investment, Poland’s performance is also attributable to the European funding it has received over the past two decades and to the effective use of those funds—a factor it is important not to underestimate. Over the past twenty years, Poland has received, in net terms, **€170 billion under the Cohesion Policy and the Common Agricultural Policy,**⁴⁰ contributing to the modernization of infrastructure

³⁷ Eurostat, “Euro Area Unemployment at 6.4%,” Euroindicators news release 3/02102024-AP, 2 October 2024.

³⁸ Hélène Bienvenu, “La croissance polonaise est portée par la consommation et les fonds européens” [Polish growth is driven by consumption and EU funds], *Le Monde*, 2 September 2025.

³⁹ Arkadiusz Modrzejewski, “A ‘Green Island’ or a ‘Never-Land’? Poles in the Face of the Contemporary Economic Crisis,” *Journal of Geography, Politics and Society* 1, no. 2 (2011): 5–18.

⁴⁰ Jakub Iwaniuk, “En Pologne, vingt ans après l’entrée réussie au sein de l’UE, le rapport à l’Europe a changé” [In Poland, twenty years after successful entry into the EU, the relationship with Europe has changed], *Le Monde*, 29 April 2024.

and the reduction of regional inequalities. These figures make Poland the main net beneficiary of European funds since its accession. Under the European Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028–34, currently under negotiation, which provides for a record total budget of €2 trillion, Poland is likely to remain the leading net recipient of European funds, with €123 billion in funds received.⁴¹ European funds were frozen during the PiS government for failure to respect the rule of law, then partially released⁴² to the tune of €137 billion when Donald Tusk returned to power in 2023.⁴³ Thus, as the former French Ambassador to Warsaw, Pierre Buhler, writes, “EU accession in 2004, access to European funds, and integration into the globalized economy have profoundly transformed both the economy and society. Thirty-five years after the fall of communism, Poland can boast a skilled and industrious workforce, an unemployment rate of less than 3 percent, a modernized agricultural sector, a competitive service sector, and strong appeal to foreign investment.”⁴⁴

This momentum is also reflected in the trend in purchasing power. Over the last twenty years, purchasing power has risen by around **91 percent in Poland**, compared **with 21 percent in France** and **4 percent in Italy**, illustrating a gradual shift in Europe’s economic center of gravity toward the East.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Katarzyna-Maria Skiba, “Budget historique de l’UE: la Pologne pressentie pour la plus grosse part” [Historic EU budget: Poland tipped to receive the largest share], Euronews, 17 July 2025.

⁴² The funds have been unblocked politically, allowing part of them to be released, but their full release remains conditional on Poland bringing the rule of law into line with the Commission’s expectations (a difficult condition to meet given the polarization between the governing majority and the president). As for the cohesion funds, their release is subject to technical conditions, including the completion of investments, to name but one.

⁴³ Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów [Prime Minister’s Office, Poland], “137 mld euro dla Polski z UE” [137 billion euros for Poland from the EU], press release, 23 February 2024.

⁴⁴ Buhler, Pologne, histoire d’une ambition (the passage has been translated).

⁴⁵ Paul Lewis, “INFOGRAPHIE. +134% en Roumanie, +91% en Pologne mais seulement +21% en France et -4% en Italie: dans quels pays le pouvoir d’achat a-t-il le plus augmenté depuis 20 ans ? (L’Europe de l’Est en feu)” [Infographic: +134% in Romania, +91% in Poland but only +21% in France and -4% in Italy: in which countries has purchasing power increased the most over the last 20 years? (Eastern Europe on fire)], BFM TV, 30 November 2025.

This success also serves, by contrast, **as an implicit indictment of the more erratic trajectories taken by other Central European states**, foremost among them Hungary. Whereas Warsaw has managed to combine macroeconomic discipline, attractiveness to foreign investment, and effective use of European funds, Budapest appears more entrenched in a fragile growth model, dependent on opportunistic fiscal policies and a clientelist redistribution of European resources.⁴⁶

Behind this extremely positive picture, the Polish economy nevertheless faces several challenges. First, it should be noted that, despite very dynamic growth over the last two decades, it remains below European averages on certain key indicators. Admittedly, GDP per capita has more than doubled in a few years, but it remains below the EU average (€37,600).⁴⁷ **The country has not joined the eurozone and retains its own currency, the zloty.** It is worth noting that twenty out of the twenty-seven Member States are members of the eurozone. It should also be noted that there has been a significant increase in the public deficit over the last three years, which is linked to rising defense spending (a deficit of 1.8 percent in 2021, before the war in Ukraine, compared with 6.6 percent in 2024).⁴⁸ The debt remains sustainable, however, and is much lower than that of France, which stands at 55 percent of GDP. The country's low level of R&D spending also remains a handicap, as it is heavily reliant on imported technologies and innovations. As Pierre Buhler writes again in his book, "its future trajectory will largely depend on the ability of its leaders, in a persistently polarized domestic context, to implement appropriate public policies and make the right trade-offs to move beyond the catch-up model and avert the risk of the 'middle-income trap.'⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Laurent Berbon, "Le succès de la Pologne ? Une gifle pour Orbán, une leçon pour l'Europe : l'analyse implacable de Dalibor Roháč" [Poland's success: a slap in the face for Orbán, a lesson for Europe: The relentless analysis of Dalibor Roháč], *L'Express*, 26 October 2025.

⁴⁷ Eurostat, "Purchasing power adjusted GDP per capita (sdg_10_10)," 2025, *EU Sustainable Development Indicators (SDG database)*, Eurostat.

⁴⁸ Statistics Poland (Główny Urząd Statystyczny), "General Government Deficit and Debt in 2024," 22 April 2025.

⁴⁹ Buhler, *Pologne, histoire d'une ambition* (translated).

b. In Hungary, a Bumpier Economic Trajectory

Unlike the “Polish miracle,” Hungary has experienced a bumpier trajectory since its accession to the EU. Before the period of liberalization and opening up after 1989, **Hungary nevertheless had a reputation for “being the People’s Democracy that was faring the best economically”⁵⁰ and, for many observers at the time, it was seen as one of the countries best prepared for integration into the market economy** and among the most compatible with closer ties to the European Community.⁵¹ The early years following the fall of communism were thus marked by far-reaching reforms: privatization, reform of public finances, an overhaul of the pension and health insurance systems, and, above all, the opening up of the economy to competition. A policy encouraging foreign investment was implemented, enabling Hungary to become the leading recipient of foreign direct investment in Central and Eastern Europe by the late 1990s. While the consolidation of the economic fabric was facilitated by a dynamic privatization program and strict enforcement of bankruptcy law, high inflation, unemployment, and external debt remained weak points for the country’s economy.⁵²

Having joined the EU in the same year as Poland, Hungary was subject to an excessive deficit procedure from 2004 that it would not emerge from until 2013. In the meantime, the country was hit hard by the economic crisis of 2008–10. In 2009, real GDP fell by 6.7 percent, according to figures from the Hungarian National Statistical Office (KSH)

⁵⁰ Sylvain Kahn, “1989–2019 vu de la ‘Mitteleuropa’: Hongrie, Pologne, Tchécoslovaquie, République tchèque, Slovaquie [1989–2019 as seen from ‘Mitteleuropa’: Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia],” *La revue géopolitique (Diploweb)*, October 13, 2019.

⁵¹ József Böröcz, “Hongrie en ‘rattrapage’ indéterminé [Hungary in an indefinite ‘catch-up’ phase],” *Outre-Terre* 32, no. 2 (February 2012): 327–37.

⁵² Sénat, *La Hongrie dans l’Union européenne (déplacement du 20 au 22 septembre 1999) [Hungary in the European Union (visit from 20 to 22 September 1999)]*, Rapport de groupe interparlementaire d’amitié n° 30 (Paris: Sénat, March 1, 2000).

and IMF reports.⁵³ Faced with the crisis, the ruling Socialist Party (MSZP) negotiated a bailout plan with the IMF and the European Union, which imposed austerity measures—budget cuts, tax increases, and structural reforms—aimed at stabilizing public finances. Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány’s legitimacy was severely undermined by the release, in autumn 2006, of a recording in which he admitted, as mentioned above, to having “lied day and night” to the Hungarian people. This scandal sparked major public protests. Under political pressure, Gyurcsány resigned from his post in March 2009. His successor, Gordon Bajnai, took the helm of a technocratic government from April 2009. He continued and intensified the austerity policies demanded by international lenders with a view to stabilizing the economy ahead of the 2010 elections. It was against this backdrop that Viktor Orbán came to power in the country for the second time.

According to the report by the *Polish Economic Institute* cited above, **in 2022, GDP per capita in purchasing power parity (PPP) in Hungary was around 13 percent higher than it would have been without EU membership** (compared with 40 percent higher in the case of Poland). According to the same report, GDP per capita in Hungary rose from \$22,622 in 2004 to \$34,196 in 2022, an increase less dramatic than in Poland but nonetheless substantial.

c. Italy: Chronic Stagnation Under the Weight of Debt

Giorgia Meloni and her allies came to power at a time when Italy’s economy had been shaken by the 2008 global financial crisis, two severe recessions in 2008–09 and 2011–13, political uncertainty, and the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit the peninsula hard. In 2011, Mario

⁵³ *International Monetary Fund. (2009). Hungary: Second review under the Stand-By Arrangement, request for waiver of non-observance of performance criterion, and request for modification of performance criteria: Staff report; and press release on the Executive Board discussion (IMF Staff Country Reports).*

Monti's government, composed of technocrats, implemented **an austerity program** worth nearly €63 billion over three years.⁵⁴ This resulted in a **drastic reduction in public spending, a reform of the pension system** (raising the retirement age to sixty-seven and extending the contribution period), a determined crackdown on tax evasion, the introduction of a property tax on primary residences, and a labor market reform promoting flexibility. Subsequently, **the country's economic growth largely stagnated, averaging 0 percent between 2012 and 2019**,⁵⁵ before falling sharply during the pandemic and then rebounding afterward. Paradoxically, unemployment fell steadily, except during the COVID crisis, as many jobs were created in low-productivity sectors (retail, construction, the public sector).⁵⁶ **The already high public debt soared during the pandemic: It rose from 126 percent of GDP in 2012⁵⁷ to over 155 percent eight years later,⁵⁸ thus setting a historic record.** Italy has maintained its position as the EU's second-largest industrial power—but with significant disparities depending on the type of production. The Italian economy is characterized by a sharp regional divide: a North that ranks among the most dynamic and prosperous regions in Europe and a South marked by lower productivity, a less dense industrial base, and very weak development indicators. Since 2013, Italy's trade balance has been in surplus, except in 2022 due to very high energy costs.⁵⁹

Mario Draghi's government marked a new turning point. Over seventeen months, from February 2021 to July 2022, the former ECB president took action on several fronts. Thanks to his background and personality,

⁵⁴ Céline Antonin, "Italie: le défi de Mario Monti" [Italy: Mario Monti's challenge], *Blog de l'OFCE*, May 10, 2012.

⁵⁵ World Bank, "GDP Growth (Annual %)—Italy."

⁵⁶ Osservatorio Conti Pubblici Italiani, "Perché l'occupazione in Italia è cresciuta molto nonostante la bassa crescita del Pil? [Why has employment in Italy grown significantly despite low GDP growth?]," *Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore*, April 11, 2024.

⁵⁷ Eurostat, "Euro Area Government Debt Up to 90.0% of GDP" (Press Release 150/2012, October 24, 2012).

⁵⁸ Trading Economics, "Italy Government Debt to GDP," based on data from the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT).

⁵⁹ Trading Economics, "Italy Balance of Trade," based on data from the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT).

he not only reassured the markets but also restored Italy’s credibility within Europe, a cause he championed among Italians. With the support of France in particular, he secured funding from NGEU worth nearly €200 billion (€191.5 billion from the EU in the form of grants and, above all, loans, plus over €30.6 billion from national resources). **Italy is the main beneficiary of NGEU funding.**⁶⁰ These funds are intended not only to repair the economic and social damage caused by the pandemic but also to tackle the peninsula’s structural problems. **Italy emerged from the COVID crisis in relatively good shape, with growth of 7 percent in 2021 and 3.9 percent the following year.**⁶¹ It weathered the energy crisis thanks in particular to state aid to families amounting to nearly €50 billion, or 2.8 percent of GDP.⁶² However, household energy costs rose—and one of the reasons voters turned to Giorgia Meloni was in protest against higher energy bills.

On the eve of Giorgia Meloni’s accession to power, Italy presented a mixed picture. Since the eurozone crisis, the country had undertaken several major structural reforms. **First, the 2011 pension reform (*Fornero*),** adopted as an emergency measure under the Monti government due to mounting financial pressure, raised the statutory retirement age to sixty-seven and introduced a contributory calculation system across the board at the cost of significant social repercussions (the emergence of the “*esodati*,” or “exodus workers,” and longer working hours). These reforms were subsequently partially adjusted through early retirement schemes such as Quota 100/102/103. The Meloni government has, moreover, tightened this framework by restricting the conditions for early retirement: The Finance Act adopted on December 30, 2025, notably abolished the *Opzione Donna* scheme, reserved for women, and Quota 103, which allowed retirement from the age of sixty-two after forty-one years

⁶⁰ *Italy Next Generation*, “*Italia Domani, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan*.”

⁶¹ Lucas Barette, “*Italie: plus de croissance mais des déséquilibres budgétaires toujours importants*” [*Italy: Higher growth but still significant fiscal imbalances*], *EcoFlash* (BNP Paribas), July 18, 2024.

⁶² Marie Charrel, “*À la veille des législatives, l’économie italienne à l’épreuve de la crise énergétique* [On the eve of the general election, the Italian economy faces the test of the energy crisis],” *Le Monde*, September 24, 2022.

of contributions. **Then came the *Jobs Act*.** Adopted against the backdrop of high unemployment following the 2008 crisis and difficulties in integrating young people and older workers into the labor market, the Jobs Act (2014-15) introduced a permanent contract with “increasing protection” (*contratti a tutele crescenti*), in which safeguards against dismissal increase with length of service. The reform facilitates redundancies on economic grounds, abolishes Article 18 for new hires, and creates a unified unemployment insurance scheme (NASpl), while being supplemented by employment support measures, particularly for young people and women (Garanzia Giovani, subsidized contracts). While it aims to revitalize the labor market, it is accompanied by significant social consequences, in particular increased job insecurity and a persistent divide between protected and precarious workers. These reforms have helped modernize the Italian economy but at the cost of increased job insecurity for certain workers and a sense of social injustice. Poverty has risen, affecting more than 5.6 million Italians, or 9.4 percent of the population, in 2020.⁶³ **Mario Draghi’s policies, supported by European funding, put the country back on track.** However, growth remained weak, industrial production was falling, and productivity was low. Furthermore, Italy’s structural weaknesses persisted: the absence of major global-level companies, low investment by small businesses in research and development, the contrast between the highly dynamic North and Center on the one hand and the struggling South on the other, the demographic collapse—negative natural growth, a decline in the number of Italians, an aging population—the persistence of a cumbersome, bloated public administration despite real changes, and the delay in modernizing infrastructure.

These contrasting economic legacies directly determine the nature and scope of the policies implemented by national-populist governments whose professed doctrines come up against highly uneven structural constraints.

⁶³ According to Istat data in: *Ambassade de France en Italie, Service économique, “Regards sur l’économie italienne” [Insights into the Italian economy], La lettre économique et financière (Direction générale du Trésor), March 16, 2021.*

2.3. “ORBÁNOMICS;” “THE MELONI METHOD;” “THE DIGNITY OF POLISH HOUSEHOLDS”: THE DOCTRINES AND THEIR EFFECTS

a. State-Led and Pro-Social Policies Implemented by PiS and Fidesz—to Varying Degrees and with Contrasting Effects

*In Poland, a Highly State-Controlled
Economy and a Conservative Welfare State
with Genuine Fiscal Leeway*

The relatively favorable contextual factors detailed above are important for a proper understanding of the economic and social policies implemented by PiS during its eight years in power from 2015 to 2023. PiS, benefiting from positive economic indicators but also capitalizing on the flaws of a form of liberalism introduced, in its view, “at a forced pace,” was able to pursue expansionary policies to support Polish household consumption. Promising to restore Poles’ “dignity”—both economic and symbolic—PiS won by promoting strong statism and social interventionism, which were criticized at the time by Donald Tusk’s camp. This policy is still in place today, and few Poles question it.

PiS’s economic policy is based on two pillars: **strong statism and redistribution** in favor of Polish families, on the one hand, and retired Polish workers—who played a part in the country’s recovery and transition to a market economy—on the other. In this respect, PiS is at odds with the Hungarian approach, which rejects and condemns “welfare dependency.” This ambition resulted in the introduction of flagship measures such as the “**Family 500 zloty +**” program, which provides a monthly allowance of 500 zlotys (approximately 115 euros) per child from the second child onwards, with no means test (the allowance for the first

child is means-tested).⁶⁴ Launched in 2016, this program aims to support household purchasing power and to encourage the birth rate. Since January 1, 2024, the amount of the allowance has been increased to 800 zlotys.⁶⁵ **Donald Tusk's PO has therefore continued this flagship measure of the PiS government, adjusting it for inflation.** Some claim that he did so out of populism, others out of pragmatism. The reality likely lies somewhere in between. **The measure's impact on reducing child poverty is undeniable and supported by several studies.**⁶⁶ However, more ambivalent or even perverse effects have also been highlighted. Regarding the recovery in the birth rate, the effects have not been as significant as expected; the birth rate has continued to fall in the country, despite these benefits. Although the fertility rate rose in the first year of the scheme, rising from 1.39 children per woman in 2016 to 1.48 in 2017,⁶⁷ it has continued to decline since then, falling below 1.1 in 2024.⁶⁸

Other social measures in Poland included **the introduction of a minimum hourly wage, the lowering of the retirement age from sixty-seven to sixty-five, and tax cuts.** This policy was aimed at all those “disappointed” by the liberal transition and shifted the focus back to social policies following an initial period of reform in Poland that had centered on the transition to a market economy. Nevertheless, these measures were not accompanied by a sufficient investment policy.

Can this policy be described as “populist,” or is it simply responding to the real problems of a given society? It must be noted that **it was certainly not on the basis of its economic and social record that PiS was defeated in 2023** (it should also be borne in mind that, following the 2023 election, PiS remains the largest party in the Sejm). The Tusk

⁶⁴ Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, “Family 500+ Programme,” Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, Republic of Poland, September 14, 2017.

⁶⁵ Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, “Family 800 plus programme,” Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, Republic of Poland, accessed April 9, 2026.

⁶⁶ Karolina Gorauš-Tańska and Gabriela Inchauste, “The Family 500+: Battling child poverty in Poland,” World Bank Blogs, December 22, 2017.

⁶⁷ CountryEconomy, “Poland - Fertility Rate.”

⁶⁸ “Poland's Fertility Rate Fell to New Low in 2024,” Notes from Poland, June 2, 2025.

government's adoption of a number of policies introduced by PiS thus illustrates a certain national consensus on these issues. It must be said that many of these measures were politically difficult to challenge. They essentially involved redistributing part of the fruits of a Polish economy in the midst of a catch-up phase driven by solid fundamentals: sustained growth, industrialization, and integration into European value chains. In this context, schemes such as child benefits and certain social policies quickly became the subject of broad consensus. This aspect is all the more striking given that the Polish economy retains a relatively high degree of public intervention: Public spending accounts for around 49 percent of GDP, a level comparable to the European average and significantly higher than what one might instinctively associate with a Central European economy.

*In Hungary, the Contrasting Effects
of "Orbánomics": Illiberal Capitalism Controlled
by a Clientelist State, with Much Less Room for Maneuver*

Viktor Orbán's economic policy in Hungary offers a prime example of crony capitalism and clan-based corruption. **In 2024, for the third consecutive year, Transparency International ranked Hungary 82nd out of 180 countries in its *Corruption Perceptions Index*, making it the lowest-ranked EU Member State.**⁶⁹ This ranking is primarily due to **the lack of transparency surrounding public procurement, which, according to Hungarian experts, has contributed to the enrichment of those close to Viktor Orbán,** such as his childhood friend Lorinc Meszaros, who had not won a single state tender prior to 2010 and who, two years later, was in charge of eight major public works projects.⁷⁰ He is now the richest man in Hungary and makes no secret of the fact that he owes this position to Viktor Orbán.⁷¹ Within Viktor Orbán's own

⁶⁹ Transparency International Hungary, "Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2024."

⁷⁰ Sebastian Shehadi, "How Hungary's Elite Made a Fortune from the EU," *New Statesman*, March 23, 2021.

⁷¹ "Lőrinc Mészáros," *Forbes*.

family, his son-in-law, István Tiborcz, has enjoyed a meteoric rise in the business world⁷² which, according to Brussels, is marred by irregularities and the misappropriation of European funds.⁷³

The nature of part of the Hungarian economy—described by some as “mafia-like”—from which a limited number of businessmen benefit⁷⁴ goes hand in hand with a **stark indifference to inequality. These inequalities have widened, notably as a result of the income tax reform introduced by Viktor Orbán in 2011, with the introduction of a flat rate of 16 percent.**⁷⁵ This has penalized the wealthiest households less and has been to the detriment of the poorest. Unlike Poland’s PiS, Viktor Orbán has not developed a social policy benefiting the majority but has targeted certain groups in the name of combating dependency. Fidesz claims to have a preference for “workfare” over “welfare.”⁷⁶ The result is that couples in employment with children have seen the state support they receive increase, while single people who are unemployed and/or without children have seen it decrease.⁷⁷ **Cuts to health and education budgets have also penalized the most vulnerable.** Social benefits, though already low, were all reduced, and the duration of unemployment benefits was cut from nine to a maximum of three months. Meanwhile, Viktor Orbán’s supply-side policy has resulted in measures favoring businesses: In 2012, a reform made it easier to make redundancies, raised the annual cap on overtime, and regionalized the minimum wage. Four years later, the flat tax was reduced to 15 percent, and the following year corporate tax was cut from 17 percent to 9 percent⁷⁸—the lowest rate in the entire EU.

⁷² Katherine Love, “World of Forbes: Stories of Entrepreneurial Capitalism Across Our 43 International Editions,” *Forbes*, February 13, 2025.

⁷³ Lili Bayer, “EU Pursues Orbán Son-in-Law Case Despite Hungary Ending Probe,” *Político*, April 19, 2019.

⁷⁴ See Bálint Magyar, *Post-Communist Mafia State: The Case of Hungary* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2016).

⁷⁵ Ministry for National Economy, *Hungary’s Flat-Rate Personal Income Tax* (Budapest: Hungarian Government, November 16, 2010).

⁷⁶ István Benczes and Judit Orzechowska-Waclawska, “Governing the Economy Under Populist Rule: The Cases of Hungary and Poland,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 71, no. 4 (January 31, 2024): 341–55.

⁷⁷ Dorotya Szikra, “Ideology or Pragmatism,” in *Brave New Hungary: Mapping the “System of National Cooperation”*, ed. János Mátyás Kovács and Balázs Trencsényi (Lexington Books, 2020), 225–40.

⁷⁸ “Hungary to Cut Corporate Tax to EU-Low of 9 per cent in 2017,” *Financial Express*, November 17, 2016.

This policy has not weakened Viktor Orbán: There is, in fact, an inverse linear relationship between changes in living standards in Hungary and his level of popular support. According to a highly reputable opinion poll, the poorer voters were at the start of the 2020s, the more supportive they were of the government.⁷⁹ This paradox can be explained by the power of Orbán's identity politics, which defends Hungarians against threats he has turned into bogeymen—from the migrant issue to the questioning of the legitimacy of Brussels, via George Soros. But identity politics certainly cannot explain everything: A socioeconomic dimension of Viktor Orbán's policy deserves to be highlighted here in the form of a paradox: **He has won the vote of the poorest while widening inequalities.** How? First, by creating public sector jobs for them, albeit very low-skilled and poorly paid employment; second, by providing subsidies that also saved them when they were struggling financially, whether in the form of free hot meals for schoolchildren or tax exemptions for single mothers raising four children, all in the name of family policy.⁸⁰

**b. Giorgia Meloni's Economic Policy:
Behind the Shift in Tone, an Economy
Still Under Strain**

Giorgia Meloni's rise to power in autumn 2022 fueled, in parts of the European press—particularly the French press—the narrative of a “Meloni miracle” based on rapid macroeconomic stabilization and a thaw in relations with the markets. **While indicators have indeed improved, this development must be put into perspective: In reality, it reflects a deliberate continuation of the reforms initiated since the eurozone crisis and, above all, of Mario Draghi's agenda.**

⁷⁹ Dániel Róna, Eszter Galgóczy, Judit Pétervári, Blanka Szeidl, and Márton Túry, *The Fidesz Party's Secret to Success: Investigating Economic Voting in Hungary* (Budapest: 21 Research Center, July 2020).

⁸⁰ Péter Krekó and Zsolt Enyedi, “Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán's Laboratory of Illiberalism,” *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (July 2018): 48.

Several indicators point to a positive outcome: **Italy recorded growth above the eurozone average in 2022 and 2023, but this slowed to 0.7 percent in 2024, is estimated at 0.5 percent for 2025, and forecast at 0.8 percent for this year.**⁸¹ Unemployment has continued to fall, and the public deficit has been reduced to 3 percent of GDP, although debt remains high (at 135 percent of GDP).⁸² Italy, the EU's second-largest industrial power behind Germany, has a significant trade surplus thanks to its strong industrial base in the north.⁸³ The markets have factored in and welcomed this stabilization trajectory, as evidenced by the narrowing of the yield spread between Italian and German government bonds to below the symbolic threshold of eighty basis points, and Italy now frequently finances its debt at a lower cost than France.⁸⁴ **Contrary to initial concerns, the Meloni government has not engaged in a budgetary standoff with Brussels and has adopted a stance consistent with European frameworks.**

The key to this stabilization, however, lies in a major external factor: as mentioned earlier, Italy is the main beneficiary of the NGEU plan, with nearly €200 billion mobilized through its National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), due to the scale of the economic shock the country suffered during the pandemic and long-standing structural weaknesses that weigh on its growth. The Meloni government's choice is pragmatic. Far from calling into question the architecture of the plan devised under Mario Draghi, it has adopted its main priorities while seeking to make marginal adjustments to the timetable and certain implementation

⁸¹ Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (ISTAT), "Le prospettive per l'economia italiana nel 2025–2026" [The outlook for the Italian economy in 2025–2026] (Rome: ISTAT, December 5, 2025).

⁸² Paul Wenger, "En Italie, Giorgia Meloni est parvenue à redresser les finances publiques" [In Italy, Giorgia Meloni has managed to restore public finances], *Investir - Les Échos*, January 14, 2026, and Franceinfo, "Déficit: comment l'Italie a redressé ses finances publiques depuis l'arrivée de Giorgia Meloni" [Deficit: How Italy has restored its public finances since Giorgia Meloni took office], August 26, 2025.

⁸³ Trading Economics, "Italy Balance of Trade."

⁸⁴ Stefano Rebaudo, "Why Italy's Bond Spread Over Germany Has Dropped Below 100 Basis Points," *Reuters*, March 5, 2025, and Gaëlle Ménage, "La France emprunte plus cher que l'Italie: un signal d'alerte pour les finances publiques" [France borrows at higher rates than Italy: A warning sign for public finances], *Forbes France*, July 7, 2025.

arrangements.⁸⁵ This continuity largely explains the relative goodwill shown by the European institutions and the markets toward a government that nevertheless hails from such a political camp.

The “break” championed by Giorgia Meloni thus appears, above all, to be symbolic. It manifests itself in the promotion of work, the defense of the middle class, and criticism of the “welfare state”—but without leading to a substantial overhaul of economic policy. **Unlike Poland’s PiS, Meloni does not have sufficient budgetary leeway to implement an expansive social policy; unlike Viktor Orbán, she cannot sustainably exploit economic institutions or divert public resources for clientelistic purposes.** While she has achieved undeniable financial and economic successes, this is essentially due to the major reforms initiated as early as 2011 by the Monti government, as noted previously, to the €200 billion from the NGEU fund received during her term of office, and to the credibility of Mario Draghi, who was able to reassure the financial markets. These factors highlight the gap between previous difficult decisions that bear fruit and are credited to the succeeding government. Undeniably, the Meloni government’s foremost merit is its stability.

⁸⁵ European Commission, “Italy’s Recovery and Resilience Plan.”

3 Migration Policy: Hostile Rhetoric, a More Nuanced Reality

The issue of migration emerged as a central element of national-populist discourse in the wake of the 2015 crisis, combining political opportunism with the exploitation of fear among populations that were, at the time, scarcely affected by immigration—in Poland and Hungary. Italy, once again, deserves special consideration, as the country, due to its geography, has a different relationship with the phenomenon. But where Italy is aligned with its Polish and Hungarian partners is in the demographic challenges it faces. Indeed, **the hostility toward immigration in Italy, Hungary, and Poland is expressed in countries that have historically faced the opposite phenomenon:** the emigration of their populations. These three countries are also undergoing a **profound demographic shift**, characterized **by a falling birth rate and accelerated aging**. These two concurrent phenomena are accelerating their need for labor and making some of their stances difficult to sustain. This **disconnect between hostility and actual needs** has, in practice, led to the **implementation of pragmatic migration policies**, focusing, in public discourse, on reducing illegal immigration from the African continent while developing, in a much less visible but nonetheless significant way, selective policies for the admission and regularization of “guest” workers. **Finally, immigration in these three countries is a central element of anti-European rhetoric.**

3.1. COUNTRIES WITH SIGNIFICANT LABOR NEEDS

a. Countries of Emigration

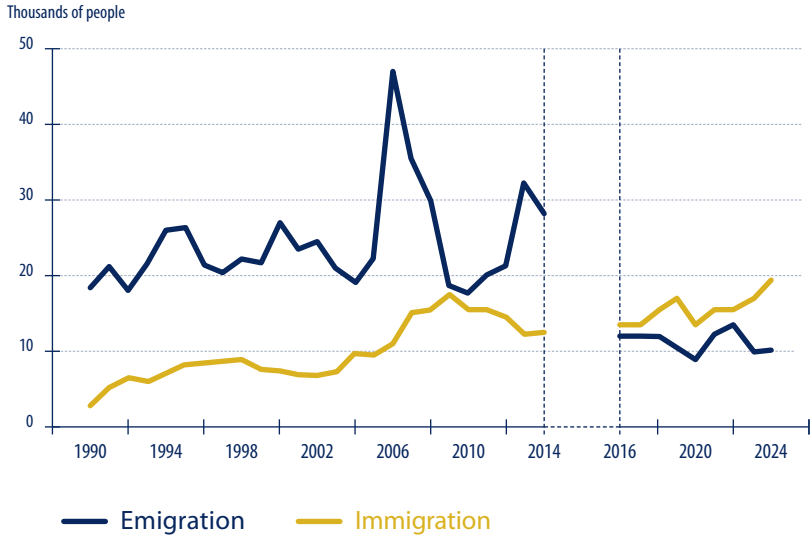
Before being confronted with the phenomenon of migration through incoming flows, Poland, Italy, and, to a lesser extent, Hungary, were for a long time countries of emigration. This phenomenon has been extensively documented for Italy and Poland, which experienced waves of mass emigration from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. In Italy, nearly 29 million people left the country between 1861 and 2023, with more than 11.5 million returning home during the same period.⁸⁶ In Poland, the phenomenon is just as widespread but more difficult to gauge over the long term.⁸⁷ The Polish diaspora is now estimated at around 20 million people (born in Poland or of Polish descent) living all over the world⁸⁸ (compared to a national population of 36.5 million). While emigration from the country has long outstripped immigration, the trends have reversed in recent years, largely due to the massive influx of Ukrainian migrants since 2015, which has accelerated since 2022.

⁸⁶ Lorenzo Prencipe and Marco Sanfilippo, “Breve storia statistica dell’emigrazione italiana (1861–2024) [A brief statistical history of Italian emigration (1861–2024)]” (Rome: Fondazione Centro Studi Emigrazione, March 2, 2025), 13.

⁸⁷ Since the Third Partition of Poland in 1795, the territory was divided into three parts and subject to the triple control of the Russian, German and Austro-Hungarian empires, until 1918.

⁸⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, “Polish Diaspora and Poles Abroad Day,” Website of the Republic of Poland, May 2, 2019.

Figure #1 • Emigration and legal immigration in Poland⁸⁹
(Foreign migration for permanent residence)



Since joining the EU and thanks to freedom of movement, Hungary, like Poland, has been facing emigration, particularly of its young people and skilled workforce, often to other EU countries.⁹⁰ **Hungary's population, for example, has fallen by around 5 percent since 1990** (from 10.37 million in 1990 to around 9.6 million in 2024), a structural trend due to a low negative natural increase and massive emigration of young people to Western Europe after 2004. This decline has accelerated, particularly in recent years, with a loss of 273,000 inhabitants between 2008 and 2019 alone, despite the demographic incentives introduced by the Orbán government. Consequently, **Hungary**

⁸⁹ U wa g a. Brak danych dla 2015r.

⁹⁰ Direction générale du Trésor, "La Hongrie confrontée au défi de l'émigration" [Hungary faces the challenge of emigration], Ministère de l'Économie, des Finances et de la Souveraineté industrielle et numérique, September 27, 2019.

is experiencing significant emigration of a section of its elite who are fleeing the Orbán government. According to data from the Central Statistical Office (KSH) and *Eurostat*, **the country is estimated to have lost nearly 273,000 inhabitants between 2008 and 2019**.⁹¹ In 2024, the number of emigrants reached one of its highest levels, rivaling that of 1998 (with those aged 20–29 accounting for over 40 percent of emigrants between 2011 and 2020, compared to 22.5 percent during the first decade of the twenty-first century).⁹²

Italy, for its part, is facing a brain drain—a phenomenon that began well before Giorgia Meloni came to power. According to ISTAT, the official statistics agency (the equivalent of Insee in France), between 2013 and 2022, 352,000 Italians aged between twenty-five and thirty-four—a third of this age group—moved abroad, nearly 38 percent of whom held a master’s degree. This trend has continued unabated for the past three years.

b. Countries Facing Falling Birth Rates and an Aging Population

Beyond emigration, the three countries considered in this study are facing a decline in birth rates that is weighing heavily on their demographic balance and which the pro-birth policies of the three governments have failed to stem.

⁹¹ Direction générale du Trésor, “La Hongrie confrontée au défi de l’émigration.”

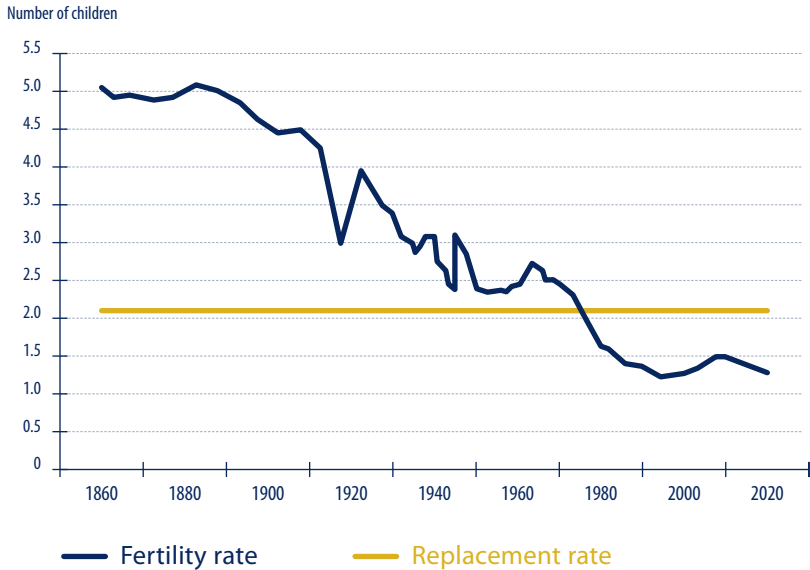
⁹² “En Hongrie, l’émigration est à son niveau le plus élevé depuis au moins 25 ans” [In Hungary, emigration is at its highest level in at least 25 years], *Le Grand Continent*, April 9, 2024.

In **Italy**, in 2024, the birth rate stood at 6.3 per thousand and the total fertility rate at 1.18 children per woman,⁹³ far below the population replacement threshold (2.05) and far below the European average (1.38). Within the EU-27, Italy ranks twenty-third, ahead of Malta, Spain, Lithuania, and Poland (it should be noted that France, despite its recent declines and the fact that, for the first time since the end of the Second World War, deaths outnumbered births in 2025, remains in the top three for fertility in Europe). With 370,000 births in 2024, Italy recorded a historic low, representing a reduction in births of more than a third compared to 2008. The natural increase has been negative in this country since 2000. The Italian population has been declining since 2014 and, as of January 1, 2025, ISTAT reported that it stood at 58,934,000 people, representing a further decrease of 37,000 compared to the previous year. These figures have tangible implications for the education system: the number of pupils in nursery schools has fallen by 21.4 percent over the past ten years. The working-age population, meanwhile, has fallen from 66.4 percent in 2005 to 62.6 percent in August 2025, according to ISTAT, and a quarter of the population is now over sixty-five, with significant repercussions for the pension system. In 2025, according to data published by the *National Institute of Social Security*, the associated public expenditure is expected to amount to 15.3 percent of gross domestic product. In the longer term, by 2050, a ratio of one pensioner to every three people of working age is forecast, posing a serious threat to the sustainability of the current system.⁹⁴

⁹³ Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (ISTAT), Commissione parlamentare di inchiesta sugli effetti economici e sociali derivanti dalla transizione demografica in atto: Audizione del Presidente dell'Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, Professore Francesco Maria Chelli [Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry into the economic and social effects of the ongoing demographic transition: Hearing of the President of the National Institute of Statistics, Professor Francesco Maria Chelli] (Rome: Chamber of Deputies, April 1, 2025), 8.

⁹⁴ Eurostat, "Taux de fécondité par âge" [Fertility rates by age], Eurostat Data Browser.

Figure #2 • Trends in the fertility rate in Italy⁹⁵
(from 1860 to 2020)



In **Poland**, the fertility rate, at 1.20,⁹⁶ is, like Italy's, among the lowest in Europe. Although it rose slightly in 2016, notably following the introduction of the "500 zlotys+" scheme by the PiS government, it has been falling steadily since 2017, reaching historically low levels.⁹⁷

The age pyramid has thus shifted in favor of the economically inactive over-sixties, who will account for 23.8 percent of the Polish population in 2024, compared with 12.8 percent in 1990. The proportion of 0–17-year-olds has fallen from 29 percent in 1990 to 18 percent in 2024.⁹⁸

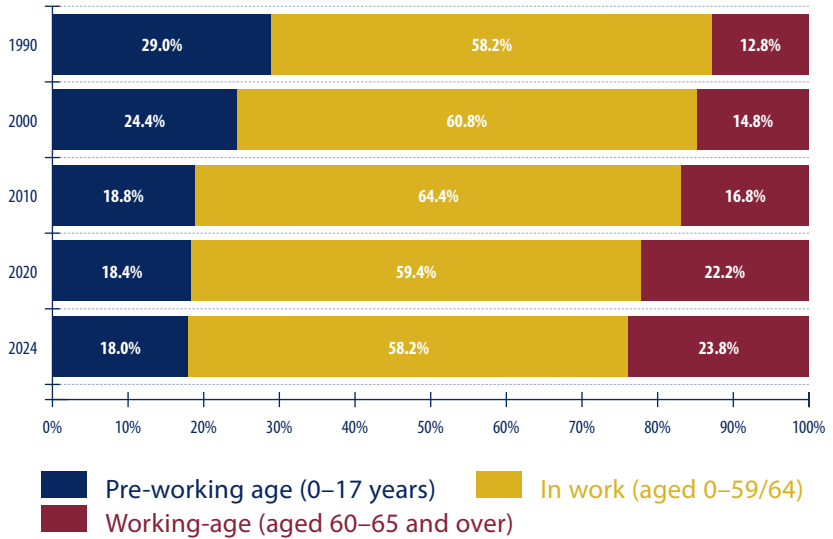
⁹⁵ *Op. cit. ISTAT. (2025, 1 avril). Istituto Nazionale di Statistica.*

⁹⁶ Eurostat, "Taux de fécondité par âge."

⁹⁷ Główny Urząd Statystyczny (GUS), *Polska w liczbach 2025 [Poland in figures 2025]* (Warsaw: Central Statistical Office, May 29, 2025).

⁹⁸ Daniel Tilles, "Poland's Fertility Rate Fell to New Low in 2024," *Notes from Poland*, June 2, 2025.

Figure #3 • Polish population by age group⁹⁹
 (of working age / not working or no longer working)

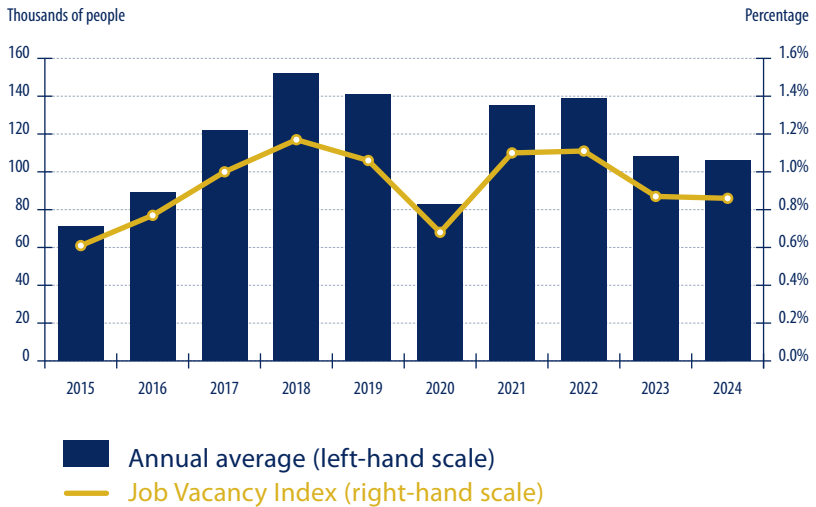


Projections for 2060 predict that this gap will widen, with the proportion of older non-working people far exceeding that of those under 17.

⁹⁹ GUS, *Polska w liczbach 2025*.

Years of mass emigration, compounded by demographic decline, **have led to a significant number of job vacancies in the country** and thus a need for labor to keep the Polish economy running, against the backdrop of very low unemployment (at 3.1 percent).¹⁰⁰

Figure #4 • Job vacancies in Poland¹⁰¹



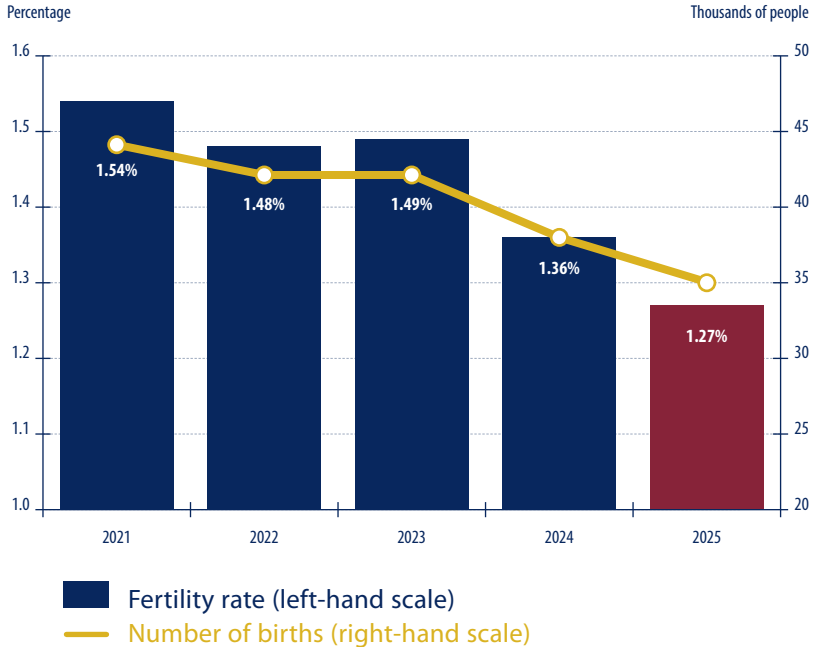
In **Hungary**, the birth rate is higher, at 1.55 in 2023,¹⁰² and above the European average, but also below the population replacement threshold and has been on a downward trend for several years.

¹⁰⁰ Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, "Poland in February with the Lowest Unemployment in the EU!" Website of the Republic of Poland, April 1, 2024.

¹⁰¹ Główny Urząd Statystyczny (GUS). (2025) . Polska w liczbach 2025. Zakład Wydawnictw Statystycznych.

¹⁰² Eurostat, "Taux de fécondité par âge."

Figure #5 • Fertility and births in Hungary¹⁰³
(January–June 2025)



Between Viktor Orbán’s rise to power in 2010 and 2023, the country lost more than 300,000 inhabitants due to both a decline in the fertility rate and a resurgence in emigration.¹⁰⁴ The demographic crisis continued to worsen thereafter. In 2024 and 2025, the country lost 4,424 and 4,354 inhabitants, respectively, due to a 10 percent decline in the birth rate, bringing the country’s population below 9.5 million for the first time since 1952. If the trend continues, Hungary’s population is

¹⁰³ Csaba G. Tóth, *Fertility and Births in Hungary*, August 3, 2025.

¹⁰⁴ Jean-Baptiste Chastand, “En Hongrie, derrière la propagande hostile, la réalité de l’immigration [In Hungary, behind the hostile propaganda, the reality of immigration],” *Le Monde*, May 19, 2023.

expected to fall to just 8.5 million by 2040. For most demographers, this is a fundamental trend that Viktor Orbán's pro-birth policies have failed to reverse. Although the fertility rate rose from 1.2 in the 2010s to 1.6 in the early 2020s, this was due not to these programs but to a generational factor, namely the number of women of childbearing age, which has since been decreasing.¹⁰⁵ The demographic decline translates into a significant aging of the Hungarian population, whose average age has risen from 40.9 in 2010 to 43.4 in 2025 according to official statistics.¹⁰⁶ As a result, the aging index—which measures the ratio of Hungarians aged sixty-five and over out of every one hundred people to young people under fourteen—has jumped over the same period, from 112.6 to 145.5. In 2019, the *Action Plan for Family Protection* introduced by Viktor Orbán, estimated to cost \$2.5 billion (5 percent of Hungary's GDP), was based on a lifetime tax exemption for mothers of four or more children, interest-free loans of \$35,000 for women under forty marrying for the first time (which they would not have to repay if they gave birth to three children), and various subsidies (for the purchase of a family car, for example). In 2025, given the figures mentioned above, a new package of measures was agreed upon, aimed at tax exemptions for mothers of three (or even two) children and subsidized mortgage loans.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ "Hungary's Demographic Decline Deepens in 2025," *BNE IntelliNews*, November 28, 2025.

¹⁰⁶ Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH), "22.1.1.1. Main Indicators of Population and Vital Events (1941–2026)," STADAT Database.

¹⁰⁷ John Westbury, "Is Hungary's Strategy Helping Counter Demographic Decline?," *News Weekly*, April 10, 2025.

3.2. ANXIETY-INDUCING RHETORIC SURROUNDING IMMIGRATION, EXACERBATED BY THE “CRISIS” OF 2015

It is therefore in three countries facing both a declining and aging population and significant emigration that the migration issue has come to the fore in political discourse. The mass arrival of non-European migrants on the Continent in 2015, particularly from Syria, has largely fueled the radical nature of the discourse. Prior to this, the issue was not a central concern for Hungarian or Polish national-populist leaders nor for their electorates.

Italy stands out as an exception here. The Northern League, founded by Umberto Bossi in 1991, was already launching virulent attacks on immigrants and Islam, a line of discourse that Fratelli d’Italia would adopt upon its creation. Even though it had entered a “demographic winter,” **Italy did indeed experience a migration shock in the mid-1990s.** Legal immigration accelerated sharply at the turn of the 2000s: **The country had 1.5 million legal immigrants in December 2002 (2.7 percent of the population),¹⁰⁸ compared with over 5.4 million today (9.2 percent of the population).**¹⁰⁹ In 2011, more than 60,000 migrants arrived from Tunisia, which was then in crisis; subsequently, between 2014 and 2017, more than 140,000 migrants arrived annually from Libya, peaking at over 181,436 people in 2016. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, which reduced the flow of migrants, it resumed from 2020, reaching a new peak in 2023 with 148,824 people.¹¹⁰ Giorgia Meloni made headlines in August 2022, in the midst of the

¹⁰⁸ Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (ISTAT), “La popolazione straniera residente in Italia al 1° gennaio 2006” [The foreign population residing in Italy as at 1 January 2006] (Rome: ISTAT, October 17, 2006); and S. Arduini, “In Italia vivono oltre 57 milioni di persone” [Over 57 million people live in Italy], *Vita*. October 28, 2003.

¹⁰⁹ Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (ISTAT), “Demographic Indicators: Year 2024” (Rome: ISTAT, March 31, 2025).

¹¹⁰ Matteo Villa, “Migrazioni nel Mediterraneo: tutti i numeri” [Migration in the Mediterranean: all the figures], Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI), January 21, 2020; and Ministero del l’Interno, “Sbarchi e accoglienza dei migranti: tutti i dati” [Migrant arrivals and reception: all the data], accessed April 9, 2026

election campaign, with a controversial proposal she put forward as several boats full of migrants were arriving on the island of Lampedusa. **She spoke of the need to impose a “naval blockade” to put an end to illegal immigration**, an expression already present in the official texts of her party as well as those of the League, but which at that moment took on particular significance and sparked fierce controversy. Giorgia Meloni clarified, however, that she envisaged this blockade as “a European mission in agreement with the North African authorities” which would enable a distinction to be made between refugees and illegal immigrants and then allow for the distribution of the former among EU Member States.¹¹¹

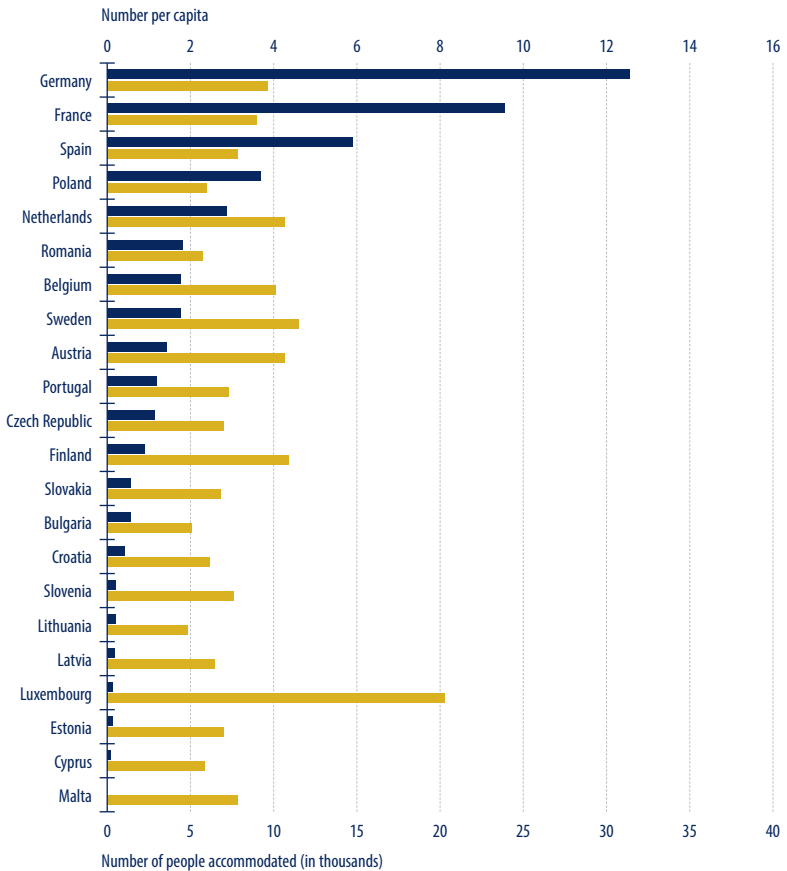
In Poland, the shift in attitudes toward migration issues took place during the 2015 general election campaign, at a time when Germany decided to open its borders widely to welcome people fleeing the war in Syria. The European Commission then proposed the introduction of a quota system for the distribution of migrants among Member States. After initially expressing a principled opposition to refugee quotas in early September 2015,¹¹² Poland finally accepted the quota of just over 6,000 migrants decided on September 22 by the EU’s JHA Council. This acceptance served as political fuel for PiS’s election campaign; following its victory in October, and more specifically after the November 2015 attacks in Paris, the party made this acceptance conditional before announcing, in March 2016, its refusal to implement the decision, thereby drawing reprisals from the Commission and the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU).¹¹³

¹¹¹ “Sbarchi immigrati, cos’è il blocco navale proposto da Giorgia Meloni” [Migrant arrivals: What is the naval blockade proposed by Giorgia Meloni?], *Sky TG24*, August 30, 2022.

¹¹² Georgi Gotev, “Le groupe de Visegrád rejette les quotas de migrants” [The Visegrád Group rejects migrant quotas], *Euractiv.fr*, September 4, 2015.

¹¹³ *Association pour la surveillance de l’asile et des étrangers (ASILE)*, “CJUE | Relocalisation: La Pologne, la Hongrie et la République tchèque ont manqué à leurs obligations” [CJEU | Relocation: Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic have failed to fulfil their obligations], *Asile.ch*, April 6, 2020.

Figure #6 • Migrants: quotas proposed by the European Commission¹¹⁴
 (Number of refugees to be hosted, in absolute terms and per capita)



■ Number of refugees ■ Per 10,000 inhabitants

¹¹⁴ "La Commission européenne détaille les quotas de réfugiés par pays" [The European Commission details refugee quotas by country], *Le Monde*, September 9, 2015.

In the midst of the election campaign, this decision was heavily criticized by PiS, which accused the liberal government of opening Poland's borders in an uncontrolled manner at the expense of the country's security. At that time, the party developed a fear-mongering narrative about migrants and the threat they posed to Poland. Prior to that date, immigration was not an issue in the country, which had very little experience of non-European migration. As Dorota Dakowska and Kaja Skowrońska explain,¹¹⁵ **this apocalyptic narrative surrounding the “migration crisis” allowed PiS to present itself as a bulwark defending European civilization against what it then described as an “overwhelming” wave of migration, even though it did not reflect a statistically significant influx into the country** (the number of asylum applications and residence permits remained low in Poland at that time). The 2015 terrorist attacks in France were also exploited by PiS and shaped a narrative built entirely around the security threat. As Dakowska and Skowrońska point out: “The issue of migration has thus become a means for right-wing political forces to distinguish themselves from their opponents and to accentuate this divide in the electoral context.”¹¹⁶

In Hungary, the “migration crisis” of 2015 marked a pivotal turning point in the consolidation of the national-populist project championed by Viktor Orbán and his party, Fidesz. Unlike Italy, the country of first entry, or Poland, which was relatively unaffected by the flows, Hungary lay on the main Balkan migration route at the time. In 2015, more than **400,000 migrants and refugees**—mainly from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan—passed through Hungarian territory on their way to Germany and Northern Europe.¹¹⁷ This phenomenon of temporary transit was quickly transformed by the government into **a national and civilizational crisis**. From spring 2015 onward, a vast political and

¹¹⁵ Dorota Dakowska and Kaja Skowrońska, “De l’émigration à l’asile: l’accueil sélectif des exilés en Pologne” [From emigration to asylum: The selective reception of exiles in Poland], *Mondes & migrations*, no. 1,348 (January 2025): 34–44.

¹¹⁶ Dakowska and Skowrońska, “De l’émigration à l’asile: l’accueil sélectif des exilés en Pologne.”

¹¹⁷ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2015* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2016); and Eurostat, “Record Number of Over 1.2 Million First Time Asylum Seekers Registered in 2015” (Press Release 44/2016, March 4, 2016).

media campaign explicitly linked immigration, insecurity, and terrorism. Government posters, written in Hungarian and aimed at the domestic public, denounced immigration as a threat to jobs, security, and the country's identity, while accusing Brussels of impotence. This communication strategy contributed to the construction of a narrative of "invasion" and a dichotomy between a protective Hungary and a European Union portrayed as failing.¹¹⁸

This narrative was accompanied by highly symbolic political decisions. **In the summer of 2015, the government began the construction of a barbed-wire fence along the Serbian and then Croatian borders, militarizing the management of the EU's external borders.** At the same time, asylum law was significantly tightened: The concept of "safe third countries" was expanded, irregular entry was criminalized, and effective access to international protection was restricted.¹¹⁹

The rejection of the European asylum-seeker relocation mechanism proposed by the European Commission was another central pillar of the government's stance. This rejection triggered a deep crisis with the EU, which had called on Member States to share the burden of asylum seekers following the influx of migrants from Syria in particular. For refusing to show solidarity, Viktor Orbán was fined a lump sum of €200 million and a daily penalty payment of €1 million by the Court of Justice of the EU in June 2024. As Budapest refused to pay, the Commission withheld European funds that were due to Hungary.

Viktor Orbán has always considered the quotas a direct attack on sovereignty and national identity. In 2016, this opposition was staged through the organization of a national referendum on the EU's migration policy. Although legally invalidated due to insufficient turnout, the

¹¹⁸ Adam Grydehøj, "Navigating the Binaries of Island Independence and Dependence in Greenland: Decolonisation, Political Culture, and Strategic Services," *Political Geography* 55 (September 2016): 102–12; and Carl-Ulrik Schierup, Aleksandra Ålund, and Anders Neergaard, "'Race' and the Upsurge of Antagonistic Popular Movements in Sweden," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41, no. 10 (August 21, 2017): 1837–54.

¹¹⁹ Human Rights Watch, "Hungary: Migrants Abused at the Border," July 13, 2016.

vote was exploited politically to bolster the legitimacy of the government.¹²⁰ Viktor Orbán campaigned on the rejection of immigration—and of European policy—ahead of the 2018 elections, which slogans such as “Stop Brussels” helped him win.

The migration issue has thus become a defining feature of the Hungarian regime. It goes far beyond the practical management of migration flows and forms part of an ideological vision pitting an “illiberal” Hungary against a European Union portrayed as decadent, multiculturalist, and incapable of protecting its borders. This framing serves to justify an authoritarian tightening of power and to sustainably rally the electorate around a sense of permanent threat, even though the actual presence of migrants on Hungarian territory has remained extremely limited since border access was tightened.

Islam, Immigration, and Public Policy: A Differentiated Politicization

In all three countries, the dominant political discourse surrounding Islam tends to view the religion as a marker of cultural otherness and a threat to security, fueling a widespread hostility that extends far beyond the mere fight against radical Islamism. The issue of Islam is closely linked to that of immigration and is used as a central issue of sovereignty and identity.

In Italy, the Meloni government has not yet established a unified legislative framework but is relying on a bill put forward by Fratelli d'Italia targeting “Islamic separatism.” This bill notably provides for a ban on the full-face veil in public spaces, tougher penalties for forced marriages, the criminalization of certain

¹²⁰ Kerekó and Enyedi, “Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán’s Laboratory of Illiberalism.”

practices (such as “virginity tests”), and increased regulation of the funding of places of worship. This framework is part of a strategy to combat “community enclaves,” explicitly linking Islam, security, and integration.

In Hungary, the approach relies less on laws specifically targeting Islam than on a general restrictive framework. The 2011 law on religions reserves full recognition for a limited number of faiths approved by parliament (of which Islam is not one), which has the effect of severely restricting the organizational capacity of Muslim communities. Added to this is a constant political discourse on the protection of “Christian culture,” which is enshrined in the Constitution. Local attempts to ban the veil or restrict mosques have been made but have sometimes been overturned by constitutional courts, illustrating the legal limits of this approach.

In Poland, there is no specific legislation targeting Islam. PiS has often used fears of Sharia law and “Islamic neighborhoods” to justify its opposition to immigration, particularly Muslim immigration, even though Muslims remain a tiny minority in the country. Consequently, government policy has focused on rejecting the European refugee relocation mechanisms of 2015 and maintaining a consistent stance of closing the borders to migration from predominantly Muslim countries.

The three countries thus converge in their growing hostility toward Islam, which is frequently associated with immigration and portrayed as a symbol of the foreign and the breakdown of national order; this convergence is embodied in distinct modes of action. Behind a common framework—Islam viewed as a threat to civilization rather than as a religion—the manifestation of this ideological convergence varies.

3.3 A FACADE OF FIRMNESS CONTRADICTED BY THE FIGURES

These antagonistic discourses find a favorable response in these countries, where a significant proportion of public opinion supports tough policies on irregular immigration. In all three cases studied, this approach has resulted in concrete measures aimed at combating illegal immigration, representing a relative continuity with the policies pursued over the last decade. **However, an analysis of migration policies in the three countries reveals a recurring disconnect between rhetoric and action: A discourse of closure, sovereignty, and rejection of European mechanisms is, in practice, countered by more pragmatic choices driven by economic, security, or diplomatic imperatives.** Immigration thus emerges as a central tool for political mobilization while giving rise to discreet adjustments that relativize, or even contradict, its stated scope.

a. Meloni's Migration Policy: What Has She Actually Done?

Giorgia Meloni has implemented a two-pronged immigration policy, with, on the one hand, a series of firm measures to combat illegal immigration, which are highlighted in the government's communications and, on the other hand, a policy—which has been communicated more discreetly—in favor of legal immigration to meet the expectations of the employers' organization, the *Confindustria*.

On November 4, 2022, a few days after the government took office, a decree signed by the Ministers of the Interior, Defense, and Infrastructure ordered the NGO Humanity, which was transporting rescued shipwrecked people, to remain in Italian waters for only a strictly limited time to carry out its rescue and assistance operations for vulnerable people only. On November 5 and 6, in Catania, Sicily, the

government carried out a selective disembarkation of women, children, and the most vulnerable men taken in by two of the NGO's ships, ordering the ships to leave. This operation sparked fierce controversy among humanitarian organizations and the opposition, while several legal actions were brought against the decree.¹²¹ **A few days later, the government refused to allow the NGO SOS Méditerranée's vessel *Ocean Viking* to dock.**¹²² On December 28, 2022, a "di Piantedosi" decree, named after Interior Minister Matteo Piantedosi, was adopted, restricting the operations of NGO vessels rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean. Once a rescue operation is launched, the decree requires them to proceed to a port chosen by the Italian authorities where they can disembark the people they have rescued. However, these ports are not the closest to the areas where these vessels operate. Furthermore, NGOs must inform their passengers that they may seek protection in other European countries and not simply in the country where they will disembark—in this case Italy. Finally, in the event of noncompliance with these decisions, heavy financial penalties are envisaged, along with the possibility of the seizure of NGO vessels.¹²³

In April 2023, as large numbers of migrants arrived on the island of Lampedusa, the government declared a state of emergency across the whole country for six months, appointed a special commissioner to manage these mass arrivals, and released funds to accommodate them by setting up new reception centers and so-called holding and repatriation centers.¹²⁴ A month later, the government issued a new

¹²¹ "Débarquements sélectifs de migrants : le bras de fer entre les ONG et Rome se poursuit" ["Selective disembarkations" of migrants: the standoff between NGOs and Rome continues], *Courrier International*, November 7, 2022.

¹²² This was not the first time this had happened, as in 2019, Salvini, then Minister of the Interior, had refused to allow the ship of the Spanish NGO Open Arms to dock with its migrants on board on the island of Lampedusa. But this time, the controversy with France was particularly heated and turned into a standoff between the two governments.

¹²³ Domenico Mirarchi, "Decreto Piantedosi: cosa prevede per le ONG" [Piantedosi Decree: What it means for NGOs], *deQuo*, September 9, 2025; and Francesco Grignetti, "Un salvataggio, un porto": ecco la stretta del governo sulle Ong. Le navi rischiano il sequestro" ["A rescue, a port": Here is the government's crackdown on NGOs. Ships risk seizure], *La Stampa*, December 28, 2022.

¹²⁴ "L'Italia ha dichiarato lo stato d'emergenza per sei mesi" [Italy has declared a state of emergency for six months], *Le Grand Continent*, April 14, 2023.

decree, known as the *Cutro Decree* (named after the Calabrian beach off which, three months earlier, a shipwreck had occurred involving makeshift boats carrying migrants from Turkey). It drastically reduced the “special protection” introduced in 2018, which protected migrants present on Italian territory but in a situation of humanitarian peril (for various reasons such as health, age, or political risks), removed the possibility for migrants to convert a residence permit obtained in their home countries on medical grounds or following natural disasters into a work permit, and extended the maximum detention period for migrants who had not obtained legal status from 120 to 135 days.¹²⁵ At the end of the year, a new decree, known as the *Cutro 2 Decree*, introduced numerous measures targeting foreign minors arriving in Italy: an extension of the duration of accommodation for those under sixteen and also for unaccompanied minors over sixteen, bone tests to determine their age, and the possibility of deporting a minor who has lied about their age. Furthermore, it is now impossible for a foreign national convicted of a violent offense to be admitted to Italy, while the time limit for appealing against the expulsion of a foreign national holding a residence permit has been reduced from thirty to fifteen days.¹²⁶

At the same time, Giorgia Meloni has embarked on a major diplomatic initiative targeting the African continent. The “Mattei Plan” for Africa aims to invest €55 billion to promote growth in African countries in order to limit the exodus of local populations.¹²⁷ Giorgia Meloni had the support of the President of the European Commission to seal, in the

¹²⁵ Republic of Italy, “Decreto-legge n. 20: Disposizioni urgenti in materia di flussi d’ingresso legale dei lavoratori stranieri e di prevenzione e lotta contro l’immigrazione irregolare” [Decree-Law No. 20: Urgent provisions concerning the legal entry of foreign workers and the prevention and combating of irregular immigration], *Gazzetta Ufficiale, Serie Generale* n. 59, March 10, 2023; and Openpolis, “Il decreto Cutro colpisce i diritti dei richiedenti asilo” [The Cutro decree undermines the rights of asylum seekers], March 31, 2023.

¹²⁶ Marco Panara, “Italie: les députés valident le décret Cutro 2, qui durcit les conditions d’accueil des migrants” [Italy: MPs approve the Cutro 2 decree, which tightens conditions for the reception of migrants], *InfoMigrants*, November 30, 2023.

¹²⁷ Jean-Pierre Darnis, “Italie: le plan Mattei, nouvelle politique africaine du gouvernement Meloni” [Italy: The Mattei plan, the Meloni government’s new Africa policy], *The Conversation*, March 4, 2024.

summer of 2023, a “strategic partnership” with Tunisia, which included €900 million in financial aid and €150 million in immediate aid for economic development and to combat illegal immigration.¹²⁸ A few months later, on March 17, 2024, another cooperation agreement was signed with Egypt by Giorgia Meloni, Ursula von der Leyen, and the heads of government of Austria, Belgium, Greece, and Cyprus. It provided for investments of €7.4 billion over four years, with €200 million earmarked for securing borders, limiting migrant departures, and facilitating the repatriation of those whose asylum claims had been rejected.¹²⁹ At the end of 2025, the government was preparing to renew the *Memo-randum of Understanding* between Italy and Libya, launched in 2017 by a center-left government, which provided resources and aid to the Libyan coastguard and detention centers, which have been condemned for human rights violations taking place there by both NGOs and international organizations.¹³⁰

Finally, Giorgia Meloni signed an agreement at the end of 2023 with the Albanian prime minister to establish two detention camps in Albania under Italian control, where migrants’ cases will be assessed. The cost of the operation is estimated at €160 million.¹³¹ **This initiative, which involves outsourcing the screening of migrants, has sparked controversy both in Italy and across Europe.** Italian judges partially blocked it, and then the European Court of Justice, on August 1, 2025, ruled that the return of migrants transferred to Albania must be subject to judicial review and that the list of countries considered safe for hosting these refugees must comply with European standards, provoking the ire of the Italian government, which has redoubled its attacks on

¹²⁸ “Von der Leyen, Meloni et Rutte en Tunisie, pays qui inquiète les Européens” [Von der Leyen, Meloni and Rutte in Tunisia, a country causing concern for Europeans], *Le Figaro*, June 11, 2023.

¹²⁹ Manon Quentin, “L’Union européenne et l’Égypte signent un accord de partenariat de 7,4 milliards d’euros” [The European Union and Egypt sign a €7.4 billion partnership agreement], *Toute l’Europe*, March 18, 2025.

¹³⁰ Roberta Renzi, “Il Memorandum Italia-Libia tra diritti umani, sicurezza migratoria e strategie energetiche: rischi e scenari mediterranei” [The Italy–Libya Memorandum: human rights, migration security and energy strategies – risks and Mediterranean scenarios], *Il Giornale d’Italia*, October 28, 2025.

¹³¹ Allan Kaval and Jean-Baptiste Chastand, “L’Italie envoie vers l’Albanie un premier groupe de demandeurs d’asile” [Italy sends first group of asylum seekers to Albania], *Le Monde*, October 15, 2024.

the judiciary. **For the time being, only a tiny number of foreigners have been sent to Albania.** From a political perspective, the Italian opposition has criticized the government, while outside Italy, many EU Member States are showing great interest in this operation, extending beyond the sphere of the nationalist right.¹³²

The Italian government has highlighted the very clear decrease in irregular arrivals to demonstrate the effectiveness of its tough stance. Following a historic peak in 2023—more than 148,000 arrivals via the Mediterranean, according to data from the Ministry of the Interior—the flow declined in 2024, with around 55,000 arrivals, before rising again in 2025 (more than 59,000 arrivals recorded by mid-October).¹³³ Giorgia Meloni emphasizes this decline and regards it as one of her greatest achievements three years after taking office at Palazzo Chigi, a view shared by many political leaders, including the British Labour Prime Minister Keir Starmer.¹³⁴

This narrative of firmness, however, masks a second key aspect of migration policy, one that is much less prominent in political discourse but decisive in practice: the organization of large-scale legal immigration, explicitly justified by the needs of the Italian labor market. Faced with a structural labor shortage—particularly in agriculture, tourism, construction, and personal care services—the **Meloni government has significantly expanded legal entry quotas, breaking with the idea of halting or freezing immigration.** Over the past decade, Italy has recorded several hundred thousand new foreign residents arriving each year, a large proportion of whom are from outside Europe. OECD data indicate, in particular, that Italy welcomed around

¹³² Stanislas Gros and Thomas de Kerros, “Accord avec l’Italie: l’Albanie sert de laboratoire de politique migratoire pour l’Europe” [Agreement with Italy: Albania serves as a testing ground for European migration policy], *Challenges*, October 24, 2024.

¹³³ Ministero dell’Interno, “Cruscotto statistico giornaliero 31-10-2025” [Daily statistical dashboard 31-10-2025], Dipartimento per le Libertà Civili e l’Immigrazione, October 31, 2025.

¹³⁴ Olivier Tosseri and Nicolas Madelaine, “Crise migratoire: pragmatique, Keir Starmer veut s’inspirer des solutions de Giorgia Meloni” [Migration crisis: Keir Starmer takes a pragmatic approach, seeking inspiration from Giorgia Meloni’s solutions], *Les Échos*, September 16, 2024.

235,000 new long-term or permanent immigrants in 2022, a 15 percent increase compared to 2021, with family members accounting for around 52 percent of admissions, compared to 24 percent for work and 21 percent for free movement.¹³⁵

Furthermore, an initial immigration quota decree (*decreto flussi*) adopted on September 27, 2023, **authorized the entry of 452,000 foreign workers over the period 2023–25**, including 186,850 seasonal workers, mainly in agriculture and tourism, according to official figures from the Ministry of the Interior.¹³⁶ **Far from being a temporary measure, this policy was reinforced by a second decree adopted on October 2, 2025, which provided for the admission of a further 497,550 workers, including 267,000 seasonal workers, confirming a massive and planned reliance on foreign labor.**¹³⁷

The countries of origin of these workers were not chosen at random: They correspond to the states with which Italy has concluded bilateral migration cooperation agreements, often presented as instruments for “combating illegal immigration,” but which also function as **channels for regulated legal immigration** (Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Bangladesh, and Albania, among others). **This framework allows the government to maintain a stance of strict border control while meeting the expectations of Italian employers, who are very active in lobbying for expanded quotas.**

Far from being contradictory in the eyes of the executive, this combination lies at the heart of Italy’s dual discourse on migration: on the one hand, hardline rhetoric regarding irregular immigration, coupled with symbolically powerful measures (blockades at sea, agreements

¹³⁵ OECD, *Perspectives des migrations internationales 2024: Italie* [International Migration Outlook 2024: Italy] (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2024)

¹³⁶ Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale [Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation], “Emanazione nuovo decreto flussi per il triennio 2023–2025” [Issuance of new immigration quota decree for the three-year period 2023–2025], *Ambasciata d’Italia*, October 24, 2023.

¹³⁷ “Entry Flows Italy: Three-Year Planning for 2023–2025,” Arletti Partners.

with third countries, outsourced centers); on the other hand, an implicit acceptance of mass economic immigration, presented as “useful,” “selected,” and “temporary.”

b. Poland: A Variable-Geometry Migration Policy
—Particularly Regarding Ukrainian Refugees

In **Poland**, PiS promised, during the 2015 campaign and again in 2019, **to reject the European quotas** proposed by the Commission, **to strengthen border controls**—particularly on the Belarusian border—and to pursue a **firm policy against illegal immigration**.

The first pledge—to reject the quotas—has been kept: Poland, along with Hungary and the Czech Republic, has refused to implement the temporary and exceptional mechanism for relocating 160,000 asylum seekers from Italy and Greece to other EU Member States. On April 2, 2020, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) ruled against these three countries for their refusal—a decision deemed necessary, yet belated and of limited scope. Poland did not have to pay any fine, as the Court’s ruling was a judgment for failure to fulfill obligations. As the relocation program ended in 2017, no further action was taken regarding these rulings, which had no consequences for the three countries in question.

PiS’s second promise was to strengthen border controls. This promise was mainly fulfilled during PiS’s second term, after 2019. A shift did indeed take place in 2021 during the border crisis between Poland and Belarus. Poland, along with Lithuania and Latvia, then accused Lukashenko’s regime of organizing the transport of thousands of migrants (mainly from the Middle East and Africa) to the EU border. The EU described this tactic as a “hybrid attack” aimed at destabilizing the bloc. In response to this situation, **Poland declared a state of emergency in the border zone and deployed thousands of soldiers and border guards.** It also legalized the controversial practice of direct pushbacks.

PiS then amended Polish legislation to legalize this practice, a decision heavily criticized by human rights organizations as it contravenes the fundamental principle of non-refoulement and international asylum law. Finally, the Polish Parliament approved the construction of a massive physical barrier along the border.¹³⁸ The construction of the wall, a 5.5-meter-high steel structure stretching over 180 kilometers, began in December 2021 and was completed in the first half of 2022.

During the October 2023 elections, PiS also put four questions to a referendum, two of which were related to the country's migration policy: the dismantling of the fence on the border between Belarus and Poland and the European Union's recent refugee reception mechanism. The explicit aim was to have these mechanisms—attributed to PiS's opponents—rejected by voters and to galvanize the electorate ahead of the general election due to be held at the same time. The referendum, in turn, was the subject of a call to boycott by the opposition. Although the four questions received a large majority of votes against, the 50 percent turnout threshold was not met; the results were therefore not legally binding.¹³⁹

This firm stance was maintained and extended following the change of government in 2023. In its first annual report on asylum and migration published on November 11, 2025, the European Commission classified Italy (along with Spain, Greece, and Cyprus) as a state “under migratory pressure,” paving the way for the activation of the solidarity mechanism provided for in the *Asylum and Migration Pact* (relocations, a financial contribution of €20,000 per non-relocated person, or operational support).¹⁴⁰ This Pact,¹⁴¹ adopted in spring 2024, is a set of regulations and

¹³⁸ “La construction d’un mur contre les migrants validée par le Parlement polonaise” [Construction of a wall against migrants approved by the Polish Parliament], *Le Monde*, October 29, 2021

¹³⁹ While an absolute majority of votes cast is required to approve a proposal, the referendum is only legally binding if turnout exceeds the 50 percent quorum of the total number of registered voters, as stipulated by Article 125 of the Constitution.

¹⁴⁰ Vincenzo Genovese, “Madrid, Rome, Athènes et Nicosie sous ‘pression migratoire’, selon l’UE” [Madrid, Rome, Athens and Nicosia under ‘migration pressure’, according to the EU], *Euronews*, November 15, 2025.

¹⁴¹ European Commission, “Pacte sur la migration et l’asile” [Pact on Migration and Asylum], May 21, 2024

directives aimed at reforming the EU's common migration policy. It introduces accelerated border procedures (screening within seven days, rapid returns), a mandatory solidarity mechanism (relocation or financial/operational contributions), and crisis protocols. **Budapest categorically rejects the Pact**, with Viktor Orbán denouncing it as a “surrender to mass immigration” and an infringement of national sovereignty. As for Warsaw, Donald Tusk¹⁴² warns that “Poland will not accept migrants under the Pact” (Tusk justifies this decision by citing the exceptional nature of the situation regarding the reception of Ukrainian refugees) and that it will not pay either.¹⁴³ This sequence confirms that in Hungary, and to a certain extent in Poland, opposition to European mechanisms of migration solidarity remains a recurring theme, transcending partisan shifts.

Despite its ostensible hostility toward immigration, PiS has distinguished itself through a welcoming policy toward Ukrainian refugees since February 2022. Over the last ten years, Poland has seen the mass arrival of migrants from Ukraine and Belarus. It is thus the second-largest host country for Ukrainian refugees, after Germany. Nearly one million Ukrainian refugees have been welcomed, mainly women (40 percent of working age, 40 percent minors). A few weeks after the Russian invasion, a law “on assistance to citizens of Ukraine in connection with an armed conflict on the territory of that state” was adopted, under an accelerated procedure and against the backdrop of rare political consensus. It provides for more favorable deadlines for regularization and allows refugees to benefit from various public services (healthcare, social assistance) and access to the labor market.

¹⁴² *The Polish government has officially requested a one-year exemption from the solidarity mechanism of the new Pact on Migration and Asylum from the Commission, citing migratory pressure linked to the war in Ukraine and hybrid attacks from Belarus. The European Commission has accepted this (see Jorge Liboreiro, “Brussels Green-Lights Poland’s Plan to Temporarily Suspend Right to Asylum,” Euronews, December 11, 2024.*

¹⁴³ *Genovese, “Madrid, Rome, Athènes et Nicosie sous ‘pression migratoire’, selon l’UE; and Philippe Jacqué, “Pacte sur la migration et l’asile: Chypre, l’Espagne, la Grèce et l’Italie bénéficieront du soutien des Vingt-Sept” [Migration and Asylum Pact: Cyprus, Spain, Greece and Italy to receive support from the EU-27], Le Monde, November 11, 2025.*

The law also provides for the potential (and easily accessible) extension of their stay on Polish soil (the possibility of obtaining a three-year residence permit after nine months on Polish territory with a residence permit, without the need for a work permit). **The economic integration of these refugees is, moreover, welcomed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which estimates that their contribution to the Polish economy is close to 1 percent of GDP and is beneficial to the state budget.** It should be noted that Ukrainian immigration into the country predates February 2022: Since the 2010s, there has been an increase in labor migration against the backdrop of a structural decline in the Polish working-age population: Of the 725,000 foreign workers in Poland recorded in 2021, 627,000 are of Ukrainian origin.¹⁴⁴ However, it must be noted that this surge of solidarity has now been replaced by growing hostility toward Ukrainians, who became convenient scapegoats during Karol Nawrocki's latest campaign. The Polish president has also tightened the rules¹⁴⁵ regarding the payment of the Family 800+ child benefit to Ukrainian citizens (to come into force in Poland in February 2026).

Simultaneously, in 2022, **Poland extended the validity of the short-term work permits it issues to certain eastern European nationals and is increasingly turning to Asian workers** to meet its labor needs:¹⁴⁶ 46,000 work permits issued to Indian nationals, 35,000 to Nepalese nationals, 29,000 to Filipino nationals, and 28,000 to Bangladeshi nationals. **Immigrant workers now account for around 7 percent of the workforce, compared with less than 1 percent in 2013.**

¹⁴⁴ *Direction générale du Trésor, Note thématique: Réfugiés ukrainiens et immigration de travail en Pologne [Thematic note: Ukrainian refugees and labour migration in Poland]* (Paris: Ministère de l'Économie, des Finances et de la Souveraineté industrielle et numérique, March 2024).

¹⁴⁵ "Nouvelles règles concernant le versement de l'allocation familiale 800+ aux citoyens ukrainiens: entrée en vigueur en Pologne en février 2026 [New rules regarding the payment of the 800+ child benefit to Ukrainian citizens: to come into force in Poland in February 2026]," *E-News*, January 29, 2026.

¹⁴⁶ "Nouvelles règles concernant le versement de l'allocation familiale 800+ aux citoyens ukrainiens," *E-News*.

In June 2023, PiS sought **to facilitate the granting of work visas to nationals of many countries outside the EU, such as India, Pakistan, and Nigeria, particularly for major projects such as the Płock refinery.** The official line is that this allows the government to directly control entry into the country—thus justifying its opposition to the European Migration Pact, which it believes would impose constraints on the country and undermine its sovereignty. Ukrainian refugees, mainly women and children, are not sufficient to meet the demand for labor, particularly in the construction sector.

Poland is, in fact, among the EU countries that issue the most residence permits. **In 2021, under the PiS government, the country issued 967,000 such permits, accounting for more than a third of those issued across the EU (3.3 million),** followed by Germany (504,000), Spain (372,000), and France (285,000). After Ukraine (700,000 permits issued), the main countries of origin are Belarus (130,000), Russia (23,000), Turkey (10,000), India (7,700), Moldova (6,000), the Philippines (4,600), and Indonesia (2,500).¹⁴⁷ This reflects the policy pursued by Donald Tusk’s liberal government.

¹⁴⁷ Eurostat, “First Permits by Reason, Duration of Validity, and Citizenship,” 2021, quoted in Olivier Lenoir, “L’immigration, sujet sensible des législatives polonaises [Immigration: A sensitive issue in the Polish General Election],” *Le Grand Continent*, September 20, 2023.

The PiS Visa Scandal

In September 2023, Poland was rocked by a corruption scandal that weakened the Law and Justice (PiS) government. According to an investigation by the Polish press reported by *Le Monde*,¹⁴⁸ thousands of visas—up to around 250,000 according to some estimates—were allegedly issued irregularly to nationals of India, Nigeria, the Philippines, and other countries in Asia and Africa. These visas, mainly work visas, are said to have been obtained through payments made to private intermediaries linked to several Polish consulates, notably in India, Kenya, and the United Arab Emirates.

The affair led to the **resignation of Deputy Foreign Minister Piotr Wawrzyk**, a close associate of Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, and prompted the Polish public prosecutor's office to launch an investigation. The Foreign Ministry acknowledged "irregularities" in procedures, while the opposition denounced an organized system, indicative of a loss of control over the consular administration.

This scandal caused a major stir both in Poland and abroad. In the middle of an election campaign, it tarnished the image of a government whose policy was based on a hard line on migration and the defense of national sovereignty. The European Union and several Member States, including Germany, demanded explanations, fearing that these visas had allowed migrants to enter the Schengen Area. The episode thus highlighted the administrative failings of a state that had made border control a cornerstone of its political identity while revealing the vulnerability of a diplomatic apparatus subject to partisan loyalties.

¹⁴⁸ H el ene Bienvenu, "Visa Corruption Scandal Rocks Poland," *Le Monde*, September 21, 2023.

c. Viktor Orbán's "Guest Workers": Proclaimed
Firmness and Selective Openness

Viktor Orbán's migration policy also appears to be a contradiction: While he has constantly denounced the waves of migration that, in his view, were overwhelming Europe, the number of foreigners residing in Hungary has risen steadily since he took office.

This contradiction points first and foremost to one of the cornerstones of his ideology: The defense of the cultural purity of the Hungarian nation, which cannot tolerate the slightest mixing, especially when the external influx comes from Muslim societies. To deviate from this rule would be tantamount to hastening the decline of the Magyar people. Viktor Orbán has partly built his popularity on this existential theme. The concept of the **"guest worker"** is specifically designed to reconcile, at the level of discourse, this rhetoric of closure with **growing economic needs**. By drawing a strict distinction between permanent immigration—which is inherently rejected—and the temporary importation of labor—which is tolerated and regulated—the Hungarian government presents its policy as being at once **sovereign, selective, and reversible**. This distinction, at the heart of the official discourse, nevertheless masks a more ambivalent reality: the constant increase in the number of foreign residents in the country, which persists despite public statements rejecting immigration.

The number of foreigners living in Hungary has indeed risen steadily under Viktor Orbán. Between 1990 and 2010, the net migration figure, while positive, never exceeded 20,000 people per year. Between 2010 and 2024, this figure was exceeded on six occasions, with the trend gaining even greater momentum in the 2020s, reaching +41,871 in 2022 and +49,213 in 2023.¹⁴⁹ In total, Hungary had 407,364 foreign residents in 2024, representing nearly 7 percent of its population.¹⁵⁰ Could it be

¹⁴⁹ *Macrotrends*, "Hungary: Net migration."

¹⁵⁰ *European Commission*, "Hungary: 2024 Immigration Statistics," *Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs*, March 15, 2025.

that Mr. Orbán made typically nationalist-populist promises that he was unable to keep? Is his rejection of immigration merely a facade and the work of a demagogue? One is tempted to think so **when comparing the resolution passed on May 3, 2023 by the Hungarian Parliament, stating that “we do not want to become a country of immigration,” with the law passed on the same day “on the employment of guest workers.”**¹⁵¹ This law allows for the admission of a significant number of migrants, who are needed for the economy, as admitted by Viktor Orbán himself, who acknowledged in March 2023 that “within a year or two, Hungary [will] need 500,000 new workers.”¹⁵²

Does this mean that Viktor Orbán’s immigration policy is no different from what was practiced before? The very name of the 2023 law reflects a desire for change: **The aim is no longer to accept migrants who are likely to settle and bring their families but only to welcome temporary workers who are expected to come alone and return home after two years.** Furthermore, in 2023, only migrants from nine countries were eligible to enter Hungary. Among them were none from the Middle East or Africa, but many from Asian and European countries: Vietnam, Mongolia, the Philippines, Indonesia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, North Macedonia, Bosnia, and Montenegro.

How can this approach be reconciled with Orbán’s loudly proclaimed refusal to see Hungary “become a country of mixed races like the Western countries, which are no longer nations”?¹⁵³ To avoid appearing to contradict his ideology, **Orbán explains that these workers from Asia are not immigrants but “guest workers”**—except that these men (and sometimes women) are beginning to put down roots, a situation that can be explained in several ways. First, the recruitment agencies responsible for bringing in this workforce “lead them to believe that family

¹⁵¹ Chastand, “En Hongrie, derrière la propagande hostile, la réalité de l’immigration.”

¹⁵² Chastand, “En Hongrie, derrière la propagande hostile, la réalité de l’immigration.”

¹⁵³ Jean-Baptiste Chastand, “La Hongrie s’ouvre discrètement à l’immigration de travail pour faire face au manque de main-d’œuvre [Hungary is quietly opening up to labour migration to tackle labour shortages],” *Le Monde*, August 4, 2022.

reunification is a fundamental right within the European Union...¹⁵⁴ These agencies are highly organized and close to the seat of power, which enhances their credibility. The transport company Waberer (with 2,000 lorries and 6,000 employees), which makes extensive use of “guest workers,” is owned by Viktor Orbán’s son-in-law, István Tiborcz. Recruitment agents working in this sector—where the labor shortage is estimated at between 8,000 and 10,000 drivers—travel throughout Vietnam, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, India, and elsewhere to attract “guest workers.”

Second, throughout history, “guest workers” have never returned home en masse, as evidenced by Germany’s experience when it attempted to rotate foreign workers out of the country after a short period in the 1960s. **Those arriving in Hungary today settle there to stay and find ways to keep their jobs**—either by marrying Hungarian women or by going underground. This is because the conditions offered to them are very favorable: They receive at least the minimum wage (around EUR 620 a month) and do not work more hours than Hungarian employees. In sectors facing labor shortages, working hours may differ, but pay increases accordingly: Lorry drivers earn up to EUR 2,200 a month.¹⁵⁵

The mass influx of “guest workers” continues to make immigration a major issue in the Hungarian public arena. On the one hand, trade unions condemn the unfair competition these workers create in the labor market.¹⁵⁶ On the other hand, parties even further to the right than Fidesz are exploiting this situation: In October 2025, Mi Hazánk¹⁵⁷ launched a national petition under the slogan “STOP immigrant workers! Respect for Hungarian employees!”¹⁵⁸ In 2025, in response to this

¹⁵⁴ Chastand, “En Hongrie, derrière la propagande hostile, la réalité de l’immigration.”

¹⁵⁵ ear-Baptiste Chastand, “La Hongrie de Viktor Orbán, eldorado des chauffeurs de poids lourds indiens” [Viktor Orbán’s Hungary: a paradise for Indian lorry drivers], *Le Monde*, April 17, 2023.

¹⁵⁶ ear-Baptiste Chastand, “Dans une Hongrie dépourvue d’immigrés, l’arrivée nouvelle de travailleurs étrangers suscite des tensions” [In a Hungary devoid of immigrants, the new arrival of foreign workers is causing tensions], *Le Monde*, November 26, 2023.

¹⁵⁷ Mi Hazánk Mozgalom literally translates as “Our Homeland Movement.”

¹⁵⁸ Mercédesz Hetzmann, “More and More Industries in Hungary Dependent on Guest Workers: New Reality of the Labour Market?,” *Daily News Hungary*, October 12, 2025.

criticism, Viktor Orbán tightened the rules applying to “guest workers”: Only two countries (Georgia and Armenia) may now send migrant workers, and the number of new arrivals is capped at 35,000. Furthermore, labor-exporting countries are required to commit to taking migrants back at the end of their contracts, and the migrants themselves must commit to returning home.¹⁵⁹

This tightening of the rules is likely intended to prepare for the 2026 election campaign, given the way in which parties to the right of Fidesz are already exploiting the migration issue. It is possible that the system will be relaxed once this election has passed.

¹⁵⁹ Martin Németh, “Breaking News: Hungarian Government Drastically Tightens Guest Worker Rules from 2025!,” *Daily News Hungary*, December 24, 2024.

4 Environmental Policy: Superficial Opposition, Pragmatic Action

For the three countries studied here—Poland, Hungary, and Italy—attitudes toward environmental policies, rather than overt climate skepticism, are characterized by a disconnect between reality and practice, a tension already observed in the previous section. On the one hand, they readily employ **critical rhetoric** targeting European climate policies, which are deemed too costly, hasty, or disconnected from “national interests.” This discursive distancing allows them to relegate environmental issues to the background in favor of other urgent matters—relating to identity, the economy, or social issues—which they seek to place at the heart of the political agenda. On the other hand, the exercise of power, confronted with the realities of energy and industrial systems, compels them to adopt **a form of pragmatism**. This is dictated by a threefold requirement: to guarantee energy security in an unstable geopolitical context, to preserve key industrial sectors, and to meet the expectations of their electorates, who are particularly sensitive to energy prices and economic stability. It is within this tension between protest rhetoric and pragmatic adaptation that the environmental policies of the national-populist governments under study unfold in all three cases.

4.1. A SHARED RHETORIC: THE GREEN TRANSITION CHARACTERIZED AS SOMETHING IMPOSED BY BRUSSELS

a. A Shared Sentiment: Brussels Imposes

This disconnect is clearly evident in the way in which major European climate policies are handled. The European Green Deal,¹⁶⁰ launched in 2019, sets a target of climate neutrality by 2050 and a reduction of at least 55 percent in emissions by 2030 via a set of legislative proposals—the “Fit for 55” package—which revise the main existing instruments: strengthening the *Emissions Trading Scheme* (ETS), new performance standards for buildings, increased taxation on fossil fuels, and stricter standards for the automotive sector.

In Italy, Rome is focusing its criticism primarily on this last aspect. Giorgia Meloni describes the Green Deal as “ideological madness.”¹⁶¹ The Green Deal does indeed have a significant impact on Italy’s manufacturing sector, foremost among which is the ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel cars in 2035. This measure is presented as “unreasonable” and “deeply damaging” to the automotive industry and employment, particularly in the North, where some of the right wing’s electoral strongholds are located. The criticism does not amount to a comprehensive challenge to the European trajectory—Italy remains committed to the goal of carbon neutrality and relies heavily on the National Recovery and Resilience Plan to fund decarbonization—but it draws a clear dividing line: The transition is acceptable, provided it is compatible with growth and does not sacrifice the automotive and manufacturing industries. In early December 2025, Italy and Poland called for the dossier to be reopened, despite it having been closed for

¹⁶⁰ European Commission, “The European Green Deal.”

¹⁶¹ Antonio Peretti, “Meloni’s Mission in 2025: From Trump to the Green Deal,” Euractiv, December 25, 2024.

two years; this prompted the European Union to relax¹⁶² the initial ban (car manufacturers will be able to continue selling internal combustion engines after 2035, subject to certain conditions).

In Poland, the narrative is more subtle but just as persistent. Since the mid-2010s, PiS governments have regularly blamed rising electricity prices on the operation of the ETS system, where the increase in the price per ton of CO₂ significantly raises the cost of coal-based production. In 2021–22, poster campaigns funded by state-owned energy companies—and tolerated, or even encouraged, by the government—explicitly linked rising bills to the European “climate tax,” going so far as to claim that up to 60 percent of production costs were linked to obligations imposed by Brussels.¹⁶³ Aside from the exaggerated nature of these figures, the focus on the *EU Emissions Trading System* (ETS) allows for a simple justification to be maintained: If energy prices are rising, it is because of European climate mechanisms, not because of the choice to maintain a highly carbon-intensive energy mix or the delay in improving energy efficiency.

In Hungary, this rhetoric is more pronounced. For several years, Viktor Orbán has presented the EU’s climate policies as an extension of what he describes elsewhere as the “Brussels ideology”: a drive toward deep integration that encroaches on national sovereignty and the state’s ability to protect households. In the discourse of Fidesz and its media outlets, measures linked to the Green Deal—higher carbon prices, building standards, and restrictions on combustion-engine cars—are sometimes grouped under the banner of a “green dictatorship,” supposedly imposing a more expensive way of life in the name of objectives far removed from the electorate. Péter Krekó’s recent work on the European authoritarian right highlights how the “Orbán camp” associates “Green Europe” with a coercive, even punitive, project, which it claims adds to the

¹⁶² Emma Confrère, “L’UE renonce au tout-électrique en 2035 et autorise la vente d’une part limitée de voitures thermiques” [The EU abandons the all-electric target for 2035 and authorises the sale of a limited number of combustion-engine cars], *Le Figaro*, December 16, 2025/

¹⁶³ Joe Lo, “Misleading Polish Billboards Blame EU Climate Policy for Electricity Costs,” *Climate Home News*, February 10, 2022.

economic sanctions against Russia to explain the rise in energy prices.¹⁶⁴ The criticism is not merely ideological; it directly fuels the legitimization of administered electricity and gas pricing policies, presented as the main bulwark against the effects of this European framework.

This way of framing the transition is not without an effect on how European instruments are perceived as a whole. The Green Deal, in all three countries, is rarely presented as a project for industrial and energy transformation funded by tools such as the *Just Transition Fund* or infrastructure programs; rather, it is seen much more as a set of constraints that must be resisted or “corrected” to adapt it to national realities.¹⁶⁵ This applies in Poland and Italy to the automotive sector and mining regions and in Hungary to the maintenance of a system of regulated prices and a heavy reliance on nuclear power and gas.

b. Countries That Are Major Beneficiaries of the Green Deal Despite a Rhetoric of Protest

The paradox is that this constant criticism coexists with a structural dependence on European funding earmarked precisely for the transition. Poland remains one of the main beneficiaries of cohesion funds and instruments dedicated to climate policy; these fund programs such as *Mój Prąd* (My Electricity), which subsidizes residential solar panels, or *Czyste Powietrze* (Clean Air), dedicated to thermal renovation and the replacement of old coal-fired boilers, as well as the modernization of electricity grids. Hungary, despite the Commission’s partial freeze on certain funding allocations, continues to seek to tap into resources from the recovery plan and structural funds to renovate its energy infrastructure and support the rollout of solar power while maintaining a highly

¹⁶⁴ Péter Krekó, “The Rise of the Authoritarian Populist Right: The Illiberal Defenders of Freedom?,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 31, no. 2 (November 3, 2025).

¹⁶⁵ Diana Mangalagiu, “Comment le pacte vert est instrumentalisé par les populistes en Europe centrale et de l’Est” [How the Green Deal is being exploited by populists in Central and Eastern Europe], *The Conversation*, September 23, 2025.

critical stance on the general direction of the Green Deal. As for Italy, it has a vital interest in remaining within the European framework: A significant portion of its National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) is dedicated to the energy transition, the decarbonization of transport, and the energy efficiency of buildings, which places the Meloni government in a balancing act between sectoral opposition (automotive, agriculture) and overall compliance with the climate commitments necessary to maintain this funding.

Overall, this dialectic of the “imposed transition” serves several purposes. First, it allows Brussels to be held responsible for the costs of the transformation, whether these relate to industrial adjustments or rising bills. Second, it provides a common framework for defending legacy sectors—coal mines in Poland, car manufacturers in Italy, and the regulated pricing system in Hungary—which European climate targets are helping to undermine. Finally, it opens up the possibility of tapping into the financial resources linked to the Green Deal while domestically fueling a useful divide between national governments and European institutions.

4.2. THE ENERGY TRANSITION: A LEVER FOR GROWTH RATHER THAN AN IDEOLOGICAL IMPERATIVE

a. Legacy Industries That Underpin Resistance to the Transition

In all three countries, the hostility displayed toward the European energy transition stems primarily from the structure of their national economies. Criticism of the Green Deal, the *European Emissions Trading System* (ETS), or sectoral standards is not merely ideological in nature; it is inextricably linked to the protection of long-established industrial sectors and of regions that are socially and electorally strategic.

In Poland, coal occupies a unique place, both in the country’s economy and in the national consciousness. It remains the cornerstone of electricity generation—accounting for around 63 percent in the final years of the PiS government¹⁶⁶—and forms the heart of the economic and social life of entire regions, particularly in Silesia. The figure of the miner (*górnik*), the landscapes of spoil heaps, the power of the trade unions, and the memory of the role of the mining basins in the protests at the end of the communist era make this a group that is both symbolic and electorally decisive. Between 2015 and 2019, the PiS government clearly chose to protect this status quo. It has shown consistent support for miners, increased the number of official visits to coalfields, and committed, in a formal agreement with the trade unions, to maintaining mining activity until 2049,¹⁶⁷ despite significant economic losses and growing constraints linked to the ETS. At the same time, it is stifling the growth of alternatives that might be seen as a direct threat to coal-mining regions. The so-called 10H rule, adopted in 2016, which stipulates that a wind turbine must be sited at a distance of at least ten times its height from residential properties, has the practical effect of making the majority of onshore wind projects near inhabited areas virtually impossible and of permanently freezing the energy landscape in favor of coal.

In Italy, it is not extractive industry that needs to be preserved but the automotive sector and, more broadly, the manufacturing base of the North. The regions of Piedmont, Lombardy, and Veneto account for a decisive share of Italy’s productive capacity, which is heavily exposed to European environmental standards and highly sensitive to fluctuations in energy costs. The automotive sector, which supports hundreds of thousands of direct and indirect jobs, remains largely organized around the internal combustion engine and associated subcontracting. Italian reluctance toward the ban on the sale of new

¹⁶⁶ Bartomiej Derski, “The Share of Coal in the Energy Sector Has Decreased to 63%,” *WysokieNapiecie.pl*, January 3, 2024.

¹⁶⁷ Ministerstwo Aktywów Państwowych [Ministry of State Assets], “Umowa społeczna dla górnictwa podpisana” [Social agreement for the mining industry signed], *Gov.pl*, May 28, 2021.

internal combustion-engine vehicles by 2035 stems from this industrial and electoral reality. Criticism of “environmental fundamentalism,” a recurring theme in Giorgia Meloni’s rhetoric, targets primarily those aspects of the Green Deal perceived as likely to accelerate the deindustrialization of the productive North.

Hungary, meanwhile, presents a specific case, where energy constitutes a central pillar of the social contract. Since the early 2010s, the Orbán government has gradually renationalized part of the energy sector in order to be able to impose administered prices for electricity and gas. This policy of reducing and capping bills has become one of the most visible tools for securing the electoral loyalty of the middle and working classes. The Hungarian economy also relies on its appeal to foreign investors, particularly in the automotive and electrical industries, an appeal itself dependent on access to abundant and inexpensive energy.

In these three contexts, criticism of European climate policies thus functions as a discursive extension of the protection of existing productive structures. It serves to justify a slower pace of transformation and to maintain a politically mobilizable divide, without necessarily implying complete stagnation.

**b. Committed Environmental Policies,
Based on an Instrumental and Selective Approach**

In practice, all three governments have implemented energy transition policies but according to an instrumental, gradual approach that is rarely acknowledged as such. Renewable energy is growing, while nuclear power is reaffirmed as a long-term pillar.

The development of renewable energy is the primary focus of this discreet transition. In Poland, the rise of residential solar power is particularly significant. Between 2019 and 2023, installed solar capacity rose from less than 1.5 GW to over 17 GW, making solar power the fastest-growing source of electricity in the Polish energy mix.¹⁶⁸ This momentum is closely linked to the **Mój Prąd** program, launched in 2019 by the *National Fund for Environmental Protection and Water Management* (NFOŚiGW), which subsidizes the installation of solar panels for households and has gradually incorporated electricity and heat storage. This program alone supported more than 500,000 residential photovoltaic installations between 2019 and 2023, with a cumulative value exceeding €2 billion, largely supplemented by European funds.¹⁶⁹ The **Czyste Powietrze program**,¹⁷⁰ launched in 2018, funds energy-efficient housing renovations and the replacement of old coal-fired boilers; by the end of 2023, more than five million applications had been submitted, mainly in the regions most exposed to energy poverty. These schemes help reduce households' energy bills while making progress in less contentious areas of the transition, without directly undermining the social balance of mining regions.

¹⁶⁸ International Energy Agency, "Countries & Regions: Poland."

¹⁶⁹ Ministerstwo Klimatu i Środowiska [Ministry of Climate and Environment], "Program Mój Prąd" [My Electricity Programme].

¹⁷⁰ Ministerstwo Klimatu i Środowiska, "Program Czyste Powietrze" [Clean Air Programme]; and European Commission, "Poland's Recovery and Resilience Plan."

In Hungary, solar energy is also experiencing rapid growth. Installed photovoltaic capacity rose from around 1 GW in 2018 to over 6 GW in 2023, placing the country among those where the share of solar power in electricity generation has grown most significantly in Central Europe.¹⁷¹ This expansion is driven by falling installation costs, targeted support mechanisms, and relatively smooth territorial integration, particularly through small and medium-sized residential and industrial installations. Conversely, onshore wind power has been virtually at a standstill for nearly a decade: Regulations adopted in 2016 imposed a minimum distance of 12 kilometers between wind turbines and inhabited areas, effectively making any new projects impossible. This framework was only relaxed from 2023 onwards,¹⁷² under combined pressure from the growing needs of the electricity system and European requirements linked to the release of recovery funds.¹⁷³ Here too, the choice of technologies is not neutral: Preference is given to those that minimize local conflicts and do not lead to a visible rise in electricity prices.

In Italy, solar and wind power continue to grow, although their development regularly faces tensions over land use, opposition from local authorities, and persistent administrative delays. In 2023, however, renewable capacity increased by more than 5 GW, mainly in solar power, driven by the combined effect of European targets and the need to reduce dependence on gas.¹⁷⁴ The impetus given to renewables stems from a desire (in line with European commitments) to rebalance the national energy mix, combining renewables, gas, and, in the longer term, a return to nuclear power in order to stabilize costs for the national productive sector.

¹⁷¹ International Energy Agency, “Countries & Regions: Hungary,”

¹⁷² Tamas Csonka, “Hungary Bows to Pressure from EU to Relax Tight Rules on Wind Farms,” BNE IntelliNews, November 23, 2023.

¹⁷³ Hungarian Energy and Public Utility Regulatory Authority (MEKH), “Energy Statistics,”; and European Commission, “Hungary’s Recovery and Resilience Plan.”

¹⁷⁴ Directorate-General for Energy, European Commission, “Country Profile: Italy” in *EU Energy in Figures, 2023*; and Terna, “Statistical Data and Forecast,”

c. Nuclear Power as a Point of Convergence

Nuclear power is the main explicit point of convergence between the three countries. Everywhere, it is presented not as a priority climate choice but as a controllable energy source, capable of stabilizing prices and securing long-term supply.

Poland reached a decisive milestone in 2022 with the signing of an agreement to build its first nuclear power station.¹⁷⁵ The first reactor is expected by 2033, and Warsaw plans, in the long term, a fleet of three power stations supplying around 30 percent of the country's electricity. This decision addresses a dual challenge: reducing dependence on coal, which has become economically and regulatory costly, and securing controllable carbon-free generation to support industrial development.

In Hungary, nuclear power has long been at the heart of the energy strategy. The Paks power station already supplies a substantial proportion of the country's electricity, and the Paks II project, entrusted to the Russian company Rosatom, is set to strengthen this position. Presented as the key to a largely carbon-free electricity mix, this project above all ensures abundant generation at a relatively stable cost, an essential condition for maintaining regulated prices.

In Italy, nuclear power is back in the public debate following two referenda, in 1987 and 2011, that had led to its abandonment. The Meloni government is emphasizing next-generation technologies, particularly small modular reactors (SMRs), which are presented as more flexible and potentially more socially acceptable. The prospects remain distant, but the logic is clear: not to remain permanently trapped in an energy mix dominated by gas and vulnerable to price shocks.

¹⁷⁵ Polish Nuclear and Radiation Safety Centre (PAA), "Resolution on the Construction of a Nuclear Power Plant Approved by the Government," Gov.pl, November 3, 2022.

Electricity and Energy Mix: Poland, Italy, Hungary

In **Poland**, the electricity mix remains overwhelmingly based on coal. In 2022, solid fuels (hard coal and lignite) still accounted for around 63 percent of national electricity production, according to official Eurostat data.¹⁷⁶ This structural dependence is part of a long-standing industrial and regional legacy, concentrated particularly in Silesia, where mining continues to shape employment and social dynamics. While renewable energy is growing—particularly onshore wind and solar photovoltaic—its share remains lower than that observed in most Western European Member States. Furthermore, in 2021, the Polish authorities formalized a social agreement with the mining unions providing for the continuation of coal mining until 2049, confirming the sector’s political centrality despite its rising economic costs.¹⁷⁷

Italy presents a markedly different picture. Its energy mix relies primarily on natural gas, which accounted for nearly 50 percent of electricity generation in 2022, with renewables accounting for around 35–38 percent and coal for a residual share of less than 5 percent. This configuration stems from both the phasing out of nuclear power following the referenda of 1987 and 2011 and the massive reliance on gas as a transition fuel. Prior to the invasion of Ukraine, around 40 percent of the gas consumed in Italy came from Russia, exposing the country to significant vulnerability in the event of a supply disruption.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ Eurostat, “Gross and net production of electricity and derived heat by type of plant and operator,” Eurostat Data Browser.

¹⁷⁷ Ministerstwo Aktywów Państwowych [Ministry of State Assets], “Umowa społeczna dla górnictwa podpisana.”

¹⁷⁸ European Commission, *Energy Statistical Pocketbook 2023* (Brussels: Directorate-General for Energy, 2023).

This dependence largely explains the rapid reorientation of Italian energy policy from 2022 onwards (initially driven by Draghi), notably toward Algeria and liquefied natural gas (LNG), as well as the return of nuclear power to the public debate as a long-term option.

Hungary, meanwhile, stands out for the central role of nuclear power in its electricity mix. Around 45–50 percent of the electricity generated in the country comes from the Paks power station,¹⁷⁹ whose lifespan has been extended, and whose expansion (Paks II) forms the cornerstone of the national energy strategy. Renewables, particularly solar photovoltaics, are growing significantly but remain complementary to a system dominated by nuclear and gas. Hungary's energy mix remains heavily dependent on Russia: In 2023–2024, between 80 percent and 90 percent of imported gas still came from Russian suppliers, according to European Commission statistics.¹⁸⁰ The government accepts this dependence as a necessary condition for maintaining administered energy prices, which have been at the heart of its social policy since 2013.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ “Paks Provided Nearly Half of Domestic Electricity Production Again in 2024,” *Paks II*, January 20, 2025.

¹⁸⁰ Directorate-General for Energy, European Commission, “Country Profile: Hungary” in *EU Energy in Figures*, 2023.

¹⁸¹ European Commission, *2023 Country Report – Hungary* (Brussels: European Commission, June 14, 2023)

d. Energy Production in the Context of Geopolitical Upheaval

Since 2022, these developments have taken place against a backdrop profoundly transformed by the war in Ukraine. The Russian invasion highlighted Europe’s structural vulnerability—prior to the conflict, nearly 40 percent of its gas came from Russia—and caused unprecedented volatility in wholesale prices. Energy has become a matter of national security, pushing strictly climate-related considerations into the background.¹⁸²

The war in Ukraine has propelled the issue of energy interdependence to the forefront of the Continent’s political priorities. Before the invasion, the Commission noted that in 2021, Russia supplied around 45 percent of the European Union’s gas imports, a proportion that fell to 19 percent in 2022 due to supply disruptions and accelerated substitution by LNG (liquefied natural gas) and other suppliers.¹⁸³ This shift took place under price pressures: ACER, in its monitoring of wholesale markets, documented the extreme levels reached on the TTF (*Title Transfer Facility*) in 2022, with an unprecedented summer surge. In response, Brussels announced *RePowerEU*,¹⁸⁴ a €300 billion investment plan launched in May 2022 to ensure the EU’s energy independence from Russian fossil fuels and accelerate the transition to renewable energy.

In all three countries, the energy decisions taken after 2022 were primarily driven by the urgent need to secure available supplies. The constraint is structural: None of them has sufficient energy self-sufficiency to absorb an external shock without restructuring. **Faced with this disruption, their trajectories have diverged.** Poland and Italy have chosen to gradually free themselves from Russian dependence

¹⁸² European Commission, “*REPowerEU 3 Years On: Commission Takes Stock of Progress to Phase Out Russian Fossil Fuels*” (Press Release, May 16, 2025).

¹⁸³ European Commission, “*REPowerEU 3 Years On.*”

¹⁸⁴ European Commission, “*REPowerEU: Affordable, Secure and Sustainable Energy for Europe.*”

by accelerating processes already underway: diversification toward Norway and LNG for Warsaw and a Mediterranean pivot and gas diplomacy toward Algeria and North Africa for Rome. Hungary, by contrast, has chosen to maintain its long-term contracts with Moscow in order to preserve price stability, even at the cost of further isolating itself within the European Union.

In Poland, the abrupt cut-off by Gazprom in spring 2022 immediately highlighted the fragility of a system still dependent on Russian supplies on the eve of the war. The response centered on a strategy that had already been partly prepared: substitution through LNG and Norwegian supplies and a shift in infrastructure. The opening in autumn 2022 of the Baltic Pipe, designed to transport Norwegian gas to Denmark and then Poland, plays a pivotal role here: The infrastructure is designed to transport up to 10 billion m³ of gas per year to Poland, which, on a national scale, represents a significant leap in supply security and thus a major political lever in the face of the vulnerability of 2022. At the same time, Warsaw has stepped up the use of its Świnoujście LNG terminal, whose capacity is being gradually increased, in order to consolidate an “LNG route” that has become indispensable to the resilience of the Polish gas system. This gas sector reconfiguration is not solely aimed at “replacing Russia”: It also serves to secure the energy transition, given that Poland must simultaneously manage the phased phase-out of coal, integrate more intermittent renewables, and maintain the stability of the system—hence, in parallel, the ramp-up of the nuclear gamble and grid investments.

In Italy, dependence on Russian gas (around 40 percent of imports in 2021,¹⁸⁵ according to commonly accepted estimates) has been drastically reduced from 2022 onwards through a combination of gas diplomacy, LNG, and redeployment of capacity. The Draghi and then Meloni governments have prioritized a South–North strategy. Sicily plays a key

¹⁸⁵ International Energy Agency (IEA), “Italy 2023: Executive Summary,” May 3, 2023.

role thanks to its major internal pipelines and strategic connections at Gela, with the Gela terminal serving as a hub for natural gas arriving from Libya via the Greenstream pipeline (520 km of subsea pipeline, operated by Eni and the Libyan NOC) and from Algeria via the Trans-Mediterranean network (mainland–Sicily connection). The Algerian route has indeed been strengthened, and more broadly, the Mediterranean route, to increase inflows via existing infrastructure and add regasification capacity to absorb more LNG. This latter aspect is particularly tangible: Italy has deployed floating storage and regasification units (FSRUs), including the one at Piombino, operated by Snam, with a regasification capacity of around 5 billion m³ per year, which equates to a significant “building block” of substitution in a system dominated by gas. The challenge, however, is not merely arithmetic. Meloni is attempting to use energy as an asset for foreign policy and European positioning,¹⁸⁶ transforming the reconfiguration of flows into an opportunity by presenting herself as the preferred gateway to continental Europe for African resources. Italy aims to establish itself as a southern energy hub, capable of balancing security of supply, cost stability for the manufacturing sector, and geopolitical influence in the Mediterranean.

In Hungary, the logic is the opposite. The government has chosen to maintain its long-term contracts with Russia and to secure additional volumes via southern routes at the cost of a growing divergence from European policy. In 2025, a high proportion of Hungary’s gas still comes from Russia—figures commonly reported as between 80 and 90 percent¹⁸⁷—and Budapest defends this continuity in the name of price stability. This approach follows a simple logic: In the context of tight markets, long-term contracts are politically transparent, and they underpin a central feature of the “Orbán model”—administered prices—which transforms gas and electricity into instruments of social

¹⁸⁶ Francesco Sassi, “L’énergie de Meloni: comment l’Italie veut exploiter le nouvel ordre énergétique Mondial” [Meloni’s energy policy: How Italy intends to capitalise on the new global energy order], *Le Grand Continent*, October 26, 2023.

¹⁸⁷ Global Trade Algorithmic Intelligence Center (GTAIC), “Hungary’s Russia Import Profile: Energy-Led Rebound with Narrow but Visible Diversification,” September 29, 2025.

stability. Diversification does exist (the development of solar power and retention of nuclear power as the backbone), but it does not aim, to the same extent as in Italy or Poland, for a strategic break with Moscow; its primary aim is to preserve a domestic balance in which cheap energy serves as a key pillar of legitimacy.

Despite these differences, a common logic prevails: adjusting the supply structure to secure available volumes above all other considerations. The energy transition is part of this movement, but it does not drive it.

e. A Transition Serving Industrial Objectives

Overall, in all three countries, the transition is progressing where it can be linked to clear industrial objectives. In Hungary, the growth of solar and nuclear power supports a strategy to attract investment in batteries and electric vehicles. In Poland, offshore wind, residential solar, and nuclear power are supporting the modernization of the productive apparatus and development of industrial expertise. In Italy, energy diversification and gas diplomacy are strengthening the position of the major national players and aim to stabilize costs for the manufacturing sector.

All three governments denounce Brussels' "green dictatorship," without, however, refraining from action or shirking the implementation of the relevant policies. In practice, therefore, the transition is neither rejected nor embraced as an ecological project in its own right. It is redefined as an instrument of industrial and energy policy, subordinated to the protection of electorates, the socio-industrial fabric, and security of supply. It is in this disconnect between rhetoric and practice that the essence of the environmental policies pursued by these three governments lies.

5 Foreign Policy: Atlanticism and Relations with Russia

If there is one area where the differences between Hungary, Poland, and Italy are profound and complex, it is foreign policy. The main point of contention centers on the Russian question, which was less contentious until 2022 but which the war in Ukraine has considerably reignited. The three countries share a strong Atlanticist stance: Italy was one of NATO's founding members in 1949, while Poland and Hungary joined even before entering the EU in 1999. However, Budapest, Warsaw, and Rome do not maintain the same relations with the US administration today. Nor do the three countries share the same vision of Europe—whether regarding the strategy to adopt toward the Commission or enlargement policies. Finally, despite repeated but consistently unsuccessful attempts at unity, Poland's PiS and Fratelli d'Italia do not belong to the same group as Viktor Orbán's Fidesz in the European Parliament. Here too, questions of history and geography are essential to fully understanding both the similarities and differences between these three countries.

5.1. IN POLAND AND ITALY, A STRONG ATLANTICISM, REIGNITED BY THE WAR IN UKRAINE BUT COMPLICATED BY THE RETURN OF DONALD TRUMP

Poland, Italy, and, to a lesser extent, Hungary regard European security as remaining fundamentally reliant on the United States and that believe that the Atlantic Alliance remains, despite internal tensions, the central architecture of the Continent's defense. This Atlanticism is also cultivated bilaterally with Washington. While the war in Ukraine, by reemphasizing the centrality of deterrence and military protection, has strengthened this shared orientation, Donald Trump's return to the

White House, on the other hand, has made relations with the United States more complex: Ideologically close, the three heads of state must nevertheless contend with the unpredictability that characterizes the forty-seventh president of the United States.

a. A Shared Commitment to the Atlantic Alliance, Three Ways of Expressing It

In Poland, Atlanticism is an existential imperative. It is inseparable from the historical perception of Russia as a structural threat and from the conviction, widely shared among political elites and the public alike, that the European Union alone cannot serve as a credible guarantor of national security. Donald Trump's election in 2016 was thus greeted with particular enthusiasm by the PiS, which saw it as both conservative ideological convergence and as a strategic opportunity. Trump's visit to Warsaw in July 2017, punctuated by a speech extolling the Polish nation and a call to "fight, like Poles, for family, freedom, country, and God,"¹⁸⁸ was interpreted as a strong political recognition of Poland's role on NATO's eastern flank.

This closeness quickly translated into concrete initiatives. **From 2018 onwards, President Andrzej Duda championed the so-called Fort Trump project, aimed at securing a permanent US military presence on Polish soil.** Although the agreement signed in 2020 is less ambitious than the initial announcements—no new division is being created—it nevertheless confirms a significant strengthening of the US presence, with over 5,000 additional troops.¹⁸⁹ Following the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, while Democrat Joe Biden was president of the United States, this collaboration took on a new scale: Poland became both a

¹⁸⁸ Donald J. Trump, "Remarks in Warsaw, Poland," July 6, 2017, in *Administration of Donald J. Trump, 2017* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2017).

¹⁸⁹ Ministry of National Defence, "New U.S.-Poland Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement Signed," Gov. pl, August 15, 2020.

major logistic hub for Western aid to Kyiv and the principal US military foothold in Central Europe. In September 2025, President Karol Nawrocki (who benefited greatly from MAGA support during his campaign),¹⁹⁰ backed by the PiS, secured assurances from Washington that US troops would remain and began discussions on new bases, while some 10,000 US soldiers were now stationed in the country. Since Trump's return, Warsaw has sought to position itself as an indispensable ally, ready to invest heavily in its defense (notably through massive arms orders from the United States).

Italy shares this Atlanticist foundation but for very different reasons. Here, alignment with the United States stems less from an immediate security imperative than from long-term diplomatic continuity. Italy has historically been part of the Western camp while seeking to preserve a certain degree of autonomy and a capacity for mediation. Under Giorgia Meloni, this orientation has not been abandoned; indeed, it has been consolidated since the war in Ukraine. **The Italian specificity, however, lies in the dual constraint facing Meloni.** On the one hand, she shares with Trump a set of ideological references—sovereignty, social conservatism, criticism of “wokeness,” and hostility to illegal immigration—which facilitate political and symbolic closeness. The meeting with Trump even before his inauguration, followed by Meloni's highly publicized invitation to the ceremony on January 20, 2025,¹⁹¹ bear witness to this affinity. Meloni also explicitly advocates a civilizational vision of the West (“When I speak of the West, I am not speaking of a geographical space: I am speaking of civilization. I want to make this civilization stronger”),¹⁹² going beyond a mere geographical alliance

¹⁹⁰ H el ene Bienvenu, “Pr esidentielle en Pologne: l'administration Trump affiche son soutien au candidat nationaliste” [Polish presidential election: The Trump administration shows its support for the nationalist candidate], *Le Monde*, May 28, 2025.

¹⁹¹ “Giorgia Meloni Stati Uniti incontro Trump Mar a Lago [Giorgia Meloni meets Trump in Mar-a-Lago],” *RaiNews*, January 5, 2025; and Italian Government, “Il Presidente Meloni alla cerimonia di insediamento del Presidente degli Stati Uniti Trump [President Meloni attends the inauguration ceremony of US President Trump],” *Governo.it*, January 20, 2025.

¹⁹² “Com' e andato l'incontro tra Meloni e Trump” [How the meeting between Meloni and Trump went], *Pagella Politica*, April 18, 2025

(particularly vis-à-vis China) when she asserts her desire to “Make the West great again.” On the other hand, this closeness cannot translate into unreserved alignment. Italy remains structurally dependent on the European Union—particularly on NGEU funds—and cannot afford to support an American project aimed at weakening or fragmenting the EU. This tension is clearly evident on several issues: Ukraine, where Meloni supports Kyiv but rejects any escalation outside the NATO framework; tariffs,¹⁹³ where she is attempting to act as an intermediary between Washington and Brussels; and Gaza—regarding which she is gradually adjusting her position under pressure from Italian public opinion,¹⁹⁴ Pope Leo XIV, and European leaders. More recently, the same has been true of Greenland. On January 6, Giorgia Meloni signed a joint declaration with six other European heads of government and state affirming that Greenland belongs to its people. On January 18, she telephoned President Trump to tell him that he was making “mistakes” by imposing additional tariffs on countries that had sent a few soldiers to the island he coveted. At the same time, she referred to misunderstandings between these countries and the US administration, with her foreign minister explaining that he could act as an intermediary. The idea is to minimize disagreements and avoid an irreparable rift between the EU and the United States, as Rome would only consider sending troops to the island within the NATO framework. Italian Atlanticism thus becomes a balancing act: preserving a privileged relationship with Washington without breaking with its European roots.

Hungary, finally, occupies a unique position. A NATO member since 1999, it formally shares the Atlanticist framework, but its relationship with the United States is now largely shaped by the Russia–Hungary dynamic and by the personal relationship between Viktor Orbán and Donald

¹⁹³ Jean-Yves Dormagen, “Face à la guerre et Trump, mesurer l’opinion publique européenne : 10 points sur notre sondage exclusif Eurobazooka” [*Europeans on war and Trump: 10 points from our exclusive Eurobazooka poll*], *Le Grand Continent*, March 20, 2025.

¹⁹⁴ *Governo Italiano Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, “Dichiarazione del Presidente del Consiglio, Giorgia Meloni, sulla situazione nella Striscia di Gaza e in Cisgiordania”* [Statement by the Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, on the situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank], August 21, 2025.

Trump. The two men have maintained a personal relationship for a long time, with the US president readily presenting Orbán as his model in Europe. The Hungarian Prime Minister supported Donald Trump's candidacy in 2016 and declared in 2017 that they both shared "a spiritual community."¹⁹⁵ Their closeness is evidenced by the number of their bilateral meetings. Viktor Orbán has visited Donald Trump at his Florida residence on three occasions, notably in March 2024, when the latter was not even yet the Republican Party's official candidate for the presidential election. In the past, they have supported one another, with Donald Trump backing Viktor Orbán—whom he readily describes as a "great leader"—in his second reelection campaign. The political ties between Hungarian and American national populists go beyond the personal rapport between Donald Trump and Viktor Orbán. Steve Bannon, Ron DeSantis and J. D. Vance present Viktor Orbán's Hungary as a proven model of governance in the fight against the left. Viktor Orbán embodies a model of governance that appeals to Trump supporters because it combines a siege-like nationalism, embodied in anti-immigration policy and coupled with a glorification of Christian civilization, with an electoral authoritarianism that seeks to weaken all democratic checks and balances. Like Giorgia Meloni, and as noted in the analysis of Viktor Orbán's anti-immigration policy, Orbán seeks to defend Christian civilization in Europe, which brings him closer to both Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin.

The ideological affinities mentioned here stem from a network of institutions funded by the Batthyány Lajos Foundation (BLF)—which has received EUR 25 million from the Orbán government. Among these is the Centre for Fundamental Rights (CFR), which annually hosts CPAC, an organization of American conservatives designed to facilitate dialogue with their counterparts worldwide. CPAC has thus held an annual conference in Budapest since 2022, with Viktor Orbán serving as the keynote speaker on each occasion—this is CPAC's sole European branch. In addition to the CFR, there is *The European Conservative* magazine,

¹⁹⁵ Cited in Ville Suuronen, "Antiliberalism and Counter-Enlightenment for the 21st Century: Viktor Orbán's Illiberal Political Ideology," *Government and Opposition* 60, no. 4 (2025): 1136–56.

which supports Donald Trump through highly laudatory articles, and the Danube Institute, also funded by the BLF, which works to strengthen ties between conservative intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic.

Although the Hungarian Prime Minister was not invited to President Trump's inauguration ceremony, the latter nevertheless continued to show goodwill toward Viktor Orbán. Thus, following Orbán's visit to Washington in November 2025, he ceased pressing Hungary to reduce its gas and oil imports from Russia, a measure aimed at making sanctions against Russia more effective.¹⁹⁶ Viktor Orbán argued that diversifying his sources of hydrocarbon supplies would amount to increasing the energy bill for Hungarian citizens at a time when he was already trailing significantly in the polls behind his main rival, Péter Magyar, in the run-up to the 2026 general election. Donald Trump, ever quick to assist Viktor Orbán, therefore exempted Hungary from any sanctions should it continue to import Russian hydrocarbons. However, he did not grant his request for a loan, even as Hungary was facing a worrying financial crisis just months before the elections.¹⁹⁷

Thus, Viktor Orbán continues to go rogue in Europe, bolstered by his relationship with Donald Trump. He was one of the first heads of state and government to accept the US president's invitation to join the Board of Peace, initially conceived by Washington to address the situation in Gaza, without waiting for any potential concerted efforts at the European level. **Whereas Warsaw seeks to consolidate the American presence to contain Russia, and Rome attempts to use Atlanticism as a lever for strategic positioning without breaking with the EU, Budapest is leveraging its relationship with Donald Trump to justify a policy of distancing itself from Westphalian priorities, particularly regarding sanctions and support for Ukraine.**

¹⁹⁶ This exemption is expected to be valid for one year. In exchange, Hungary has committed to purchasing EUR 600 million worth of American liquefied natural gas.

¹⁹⁷ Joël Le Pavous, "Donald Trump réfute tout prêt pour la Hongrie, un camouflet pour Viktor Orbán" [Donald Trump denies any loan to Hungary, a snub for Viktor Orbán], *Courrier International*, December 10, 2025.

Defense: Same NATO Framework, Three Capability Trajectories

The three countries' Atlanticist orientation is also evident, in very concrete terms, in the increase in defense budgets and reconfiguration of military capabilities since 2022. According to NATO estimates published in 2025, Poland appears to be leading the way, with defense spending set to rise from 3.79 percent of GDP in 2024 to 4.48 percent in 2025, with expenditure estimated at 175.7 billion zlotys in 2025.¹⁹⁸ Hungary is now consistently above the 2 percent threshold (2.13 percent in 2024; 2.06 percent in 2025), with expenditure estimated at 1.77 trillion forints in 2025.¹⁹⁹ Finally, Italy remains hampered by its budgetary constraints, but NATO estimates its spending at 1.50 percent of GDP in 2024 and 2.01 percent in 2025, with expenditure estimated at €45.315 billion in 2025.²⁰⁰ This convergence toward the NATO target now forms part of a more ambitious framework: At the 2025 Hague Summit, the allies committed to a target of 5 percent of GDP by 2035.²⁰¹

Behind these figures, priorities diverge significantly. Poland has made defense a cornerstone of its sovereignty policy, a commitment stemming both from its proximity to the Ukrainian front and from its desire to establish itself as a NATO pivot on the eastern flank. This trajectory is reflected in an acceleration of procurement and a drive toward industrialization and technology transfer: In the summer of 2022, the Polish Ministry of Defence highlighted major contracts (K2 and K9 tanks, FA-50

¹⁹⁸ NATO, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2025)," August 28, 2025.

¹⁹⁹ NATO, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2025)."

²⁰⁰ NATO, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2025)."

²⁰¹ NATO, "Defence Expenditures and NATO's 5% Commitment," December 18, 2025; and NATO, "The Hague Summit Declaration," June 25, 2025.

fighter aircraft), explicitly emphasizing the scale of the effort and the expected “boost” for the national industry.²⁰² In other words, the military apparatus is conceived not only as a deterrent but also as an industrial policy and as a lever for strategic centrality within the alliance.

Hungary, for its part, is modernizing rapidly but adopting a more ambivalent stance: It is increasing its capabilities while pursuing a policy of partial political “decoupling” from the Euro-Atlantic line on Ukraine. Modernization is nevertheless real and visible in land-based programs: The scale of this is illustrated by the order for 218 Lynx KF41 vehicles²⁰³ (a contract announced at over €2 billion), extended by the establishment of production in Hungary and the delivery of the first Lynx produced there in the summer of 2024.²⁰⁴ This upgrade in capabilities strengthens Budapest’s military credibility within NATO but coexists with a political strategy that, given its ties with Russia, tends to limit effective alignment.

Italy, finally, is pursuing a different kind of power strategy: less focused on the urgency of the Eastern flank than on the stature of a major Mediterranean country and on structuring programs with high technological value. Its trajectory of budgetary growth is evident in NATO accounts,²⁰⁵ but its distinctive “marker” is also industrial and technological: Rome is a key player in the Global Combat Air Program (GCAP), alongside London and Tokyo,

²⁰² Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Poland, “K2 Tanks, K9 Howitzers and FA-50 Aircrafts - The Polish Army Will Receive Powerful Weapons, and the Polish defence Industry Will Receive a Strong Impulse for Development,” Gov.pl, July 27, 2022.

²⁰³ Rheinmetall, “Press Release: NATO Member Hungary Orders 218 Lynx Infantry Fighting Vehicles,” September 10, 2020.

²⁰⁴ Rheinmetall, “Press Release: Rheinmetall Hands Over the First Lynx from Hungarian Production,” July 26, 2024.

²⁰⁵ NATO, “Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014–2025).”

formalized by a treaty signed in December 2023²⁰⁶ following the program's initial political announcement in late 2022.²⁰⁷ This direction reinforces the idea of an Italy that is Atlanticist but keen to anchor its strategic credibility in capability-based coalitions and industrial chains rather than in a massive short-term militarization comparable to that of Poland.

5.2. THE RELATIONSHIP WITH RUSSIA AND SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE: A DEEP-SEATED ANTAGONISM BETWEEN PIS, BROTHERS OF ITALY, AND FIDESZ

While we previously highlighted the common ground between the three countries, notably their Atlanticism, there are nevertheless differences. The clearest dividing line between Poland, Italy, and Hungary lies in the east, concerning relations with Russia and support for Ukraine. While Warsaw and Rome are united in their unambiguous defense of Kyiv in the face of Russian aggression, this convergence is based on profoundly different motivations. Conversely, Viktor Orbán's Hungary has adopted a position of lasting strategic dissociation, which is gradually isolating it both within the European Union and among its Central European partners.

²⁰⁶ Ministry of Defence and The Rt Hon Grant Shapps, "Press Release: UK, Japan, and Italy Sign International Stealth Fighter Jet Programme Treaty," Gov.uk, December 14, 2023.

²⁰⁷ Prime Minister's Office, "Joint Leaders' Statement: UK-Italy-Japan," Gov.uk, December 9, 2022.

a. Russia: A Centuries-Old and Enduring Hostility in Poland

In Poland, hostility toward Russia is primarily rooted in history.

From the Third Partition of 1795 until the restoration of independence in 1918, the country lived under the joint rule of Russia, Prussia, and Austria. This interlude of sovereignty was brutally brought to an end by the Second World War, followed by Poland's almost automatic integration into the Soviet bloc, joining what Milan Kundera described as the "kidnapped" West. These more than 160 years of foreign rule—to which must be added the Polish–Russian wars of the seventeenth century—have shaped a national memory in which Russia appears as a power that poses a structural threat to the very existence of the Polish state.

The Katyn massacre, perpetrated by the NKVD (the Soviet secret police) in the spring of 1940, occupies a central place in this regard: The methodical elimination of the Polish intelligentsia and army was explicitly aimed at making any sustained national resistance impossible. This traumatic memory, prolonged by the Warsaw Uprising of 1944,²⁰⁸ forms one of the cornerstones of contemporary Polish foreign policy.

For the Law and Justice party (PiS), however, this hostility took on a new tone following the Smolensk crash in 2010, which claimed the lives of President Lech Kaczyński and ninety-five members of the Polish delegation. By contesting the official findings of the investigation and implicating both Moscow and Donald Tusk's government, the PiS transformed the event into a narrative framework: The late president became a national martyr, the victim of "an assassination plot hatched by the Kremlin with the collusion of Prime Minister Donald Tusk," and the government's cover-up of evidence. As Pierre Buhler notes, this tragedy opens up for

²⁰⁸ *The armed uprising led by the Polish resistance (Armia Krajowa) against the German occupation, which began on August 1 and lasted for sixty-three days. The uprising was brutally suppressed by German forces without the hoped-for assistance from the Soviet Red Army and resulted in the near-total destruction of the city of Warsaw.*

the party “a new space for the construction of history,”²⁰⁹ in which Russia once again becomes the existential enemy par excellence. This reinterpretation of the Smolensk crash directly serves PiS’s political agenda by structuring a narrative that legitimizes its power. It allows a threatened national “us” to be pitted against enemies that are both external (Russia) and internal (the liberal elites) while establishing the party as the guarantor of sovereignty. Finally, it provides a lasting narrative framework for discrediting its opponents and justifying a tougher political line on security and state affairs.

The war in Ukraine only serves to radicalize this framework. Sharing a border of over 500 kilometers with Ukraine gives the conflict an immediate national security dimension. It explains not only the scale of Poland’s defense effort but also the new central role acquired by Warsaw within the EU: As the largest relative contributor of military aid and the main host country for Ukrainian refugees, Poland is becoming a pillar of Europe’s eastern front. While Poland supports the fight for Ukrainian sovereignty, this does not prevent some internal differences. A form of hostility toward Ukraine has gradually developed, fueled by tensions arising from the influx of Ukrainian grain into the markets of neighboring countries, which is accused of weighing on local agricultural prices and undermining producers’ incomes—an issue that has quickly become a focus of domestic political debate.

Furthermore, as historian Timothy Snyder points out, Polish nationalism also needs, at times, to identify enemies “other than the Russians,” which explains the persistence of anti-Ukrainian sentiments in public opinion. This stance is nevertheless shared beyond PiS. Since his return to power, Donald Tusk has toughened his rhetoric toward Moscow, going so far as to denounce “Russian state terrorism”²¹⁰ following acts of sabotage

²⁰⁹ Buhler, *Pologne, Histoire d'une ambition*, 194.

²¹⁰ “Pologne : le premier ministre Donald Tusk dénonce le ‘terrorisme d’État’ russe après le sabotage d’une voie ferrée vers l’Ukraine” [Poland: Prime Minister Donald Tusk condemns Russian “state terrorism” following the sabotage of a railway line to Ukraine], *Le Figaro*, November 21, 2025.

targeting infrastructure linked to Ukraine. **The Polish–Russian rivalry thus appears to be a national strategic consensus rather than a mere partisan divide.**

**b. An Italian Convergence with Warsaw,
Driven by Different Factors**

Italy is clearly on the side of supporting Ukraine but for reasons that differ significantly from those of Poland. From the outset of the invasion, Giorgia Meloni, then in opposition, backed the Draghi government’s decisions: sanctions against Russia, military aid to Kyiv, and alignment with Western partners. Having become prime minister, she has maintained this line despite strong internal resistance—from her ally in Matteo Salvini’s League, her opponents in the Five Star Movement, and a section of the Democratic Party (center left), from a largely pacifist Italian public and from many business leaders keen to resume trade with the two warring countries as soon as possible and therefore in favor of peace on virtually any terms.

Unlike Warsaw, Italy’s commitment is not based on a history of antagonism toward Russia, but on a strategic assessment: the defense of the international order, Atlantic credibility, and European coherence. This approach explains the recurring tensions with Donald Trump, whose U-turns on Ukraine are destabilizing Rome. Thus, on the eve of the August 15 meeting in Alaska between Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, Giorgia Meloni signed a statement with Macron, Merz, Starmer, and Finland’s Stubb calling on the US president to “exert pressure” on the Russian Federation.²¹¹ Meloni supports Kyiv but rejects any uncontrolled escalation: She opposes the deployment of European troops outside the UN framework and is cautious about the European rearmament project, which she wishes to keep strictly within the NATO framework.

²¹¹ “En direct, guerre en Ukraine : les Européens demandent d’exercer une ‘pression’ sur Moscou avant le sommet Trump-Poutine” [Live coverage, war in Ukraine: Europeans call for ‘pressure’ to be exerted on Moscow ahead of the Trump-Putin summit], *Le Monde*, January 26, 2025.

c. A Hungarian Stance That Is Becoming
Increasingly Costly Diplomatically

Hungary offers a striking contrast. Although it too was marked by Soviet domination, the bloody suppression of the 1956 Budapest uprising, and the uprisings of the late 1980s, Budapest takes a radically different view of the Russia–Ukraine conflict. This position is expressed across several coherent strands.

Rhetorically, Viktor Orbán explicitly echoes the Kremlin’s talking points, attributing responsibility for the war to the West, which he accuses of threatening Russia by seeking to integrate Ukraine into NATO. Orbán first put this argument forward in mid-July 2022 during his speech at Băile Tușnad and has never since repudiated it.

Politically, Hungary is reluctant to impose sanctions on Russia. It refuses to implement energy sanctions against Moscow and, in 2025, remained nearly 90 percent dependent on Russian hydrocarbons. This stance is also reflected in isolated positions within the EU: abstention on punitive tariffs targeting Russian and Belarusian agricultural products, repeated refusals to provide financial and military support to Ukraine, and opposition to the transit of arms through its territory.

The treatment of Ukrainian refugees illustrates this peculiarity. While initial humanitarian aid was provided, the Hungarian government quickly withdrew from the scheme, going so far as to cut housing benefits for several thousand refugees in 2024, in breach of the European directive on temporary protection.

Beyond Ukraine, Budapest stands out further for its refusal to strongly condemn Moscow in other areas: a lack of support for resolutions on **Alexei Navalny** and a refusal to sign the European declaration backing the ICC’s arrest warrant against **Vladimir Putin**.

This stance has tangible political consequences for intra-European relations. Thus, by the end of 2025, the climate between Warsaw and Budapest had deteriorated further following a diplomatic incident that led the Polish presidency to cancel a meeting with Viktor Orbán.²¹²

Thus, Warsaw and Rome do indeed converge on the essentials—support for Ukraine and condemnation of Moscow—but via distinct paths: For Poland, this is an existential struggle rooted in a long history; for Italy, it is a strategic choice aimed at preserving the coherence of the West and European stability. Hungary, by persistently diverging from this approach, is transforming what might have remained a tactical difference into a structural political rift.

If there is one common thread between the three countries, it lies in a persistent gap between rhetoric and reality; foreign policy, however, differs from other public policies in that the trajectories of the three countries diverge markedly, with Hungary standing out for a line that breaks with the more convergent approaches of Poland and Italy.

5.3. REFORMING EUROPE FROM WITHIN: A SHARED AMBITION, LIMITED RESULTS

Criticism of the European Union is an explicit common denominator between Hungary, Poland, and Italy. All three reject federalism, denounce the Commission’s ever-expanding powers, and call for a “Europe of sovereign nations.” Yet behind this slogan, the three countries’ behavior toward Brussels differs in nature, ranging from Viktor Orbán’s systematic opposition to Giorgia Meloni’s pragmatism.

²¹² Weronika Wakulska, “Le président polonais annule sa rencontre avec Viktor Orbán après la visite de ce dernier à Moscou” [Polish president cancels meeting with Viktor Orbán following the latter’s visit to Moscow], *Euronews*, November 30, 2025.

a. The Great Enemy:
“Brussels”

In all three cases, the EU is described as a regulatory framework deemed excessively restrictive (with respect to rule of law, migration, the environment, and social rights), imposed by technocratic institutions. The political mechanism is a recurring one: **singling out Brussels as the culprit** in order to externalize internal conflicts and create a “people versus elites” polarization.

This mechanism, however, involves varying degrees of ideological intensity. Hungary offers the most explicitly civilizational version: Viktor Orbán contrasts a Central Europe committed to nation, faith, and family with a Western Europe engaged in a “cultural war” against its Christian roots, as articulated in 2018 by his now-iconic phrase: “Today the western half of Europe is waging a cultural war...”²¹³ PiS’s Poland also constructs its critique within a Christian and identity-based dialectic but anchors it more firmly in a logic of the country’s legal sovereignty and an intra-European balance of power, particularly with Germany, inherited from history (see below). Meloni’s Italy also adopts the rhetoric of “nations” and “patriots” and the necessary defense of Christian and traditional values but more often frames this within a critique of the European method (excessive subsidiarity, cumbersome unanimity, and regulatory overload) and a strategy of building coalitions within the institutions themselves.

²¹³ Viktor Orbán, “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Address at an Event Marking the Reopening of the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest,” Hungarian Government, October 30, 2018.

b. Transforming Without Leaving: A Euroscepticism of Internal Conquest, not of Rupture (Anti-Brexit)

This opposition does not, however, translate into a credible plan to leave the Union. Unlike the Brexit in the UK, the populist national strategy here consists of **“reforming the EU from within”** by shifting its institutional and ideological balances.

This approach is championed by Viktor Orbán, who declared as early as 2017 in Bálványos/Tusványos: “Twenty-seven years ago... we thought Europe was our future; today, we feel that we are the future of Europe,”²¹⁴ a phrase that encapsulates the idea of reconquest by Central Europe rather than withdrawal. It is also collectively championed in attempts at transnational coordination. In July 2021, Fidesz announced that it had signed (at Kaczyński’s instigation) a joint declaration by conservative parties on “the future of Europe,” denouncing the drift toward a “nationless” project. But unity stops at the principle, as what is meant by “reform” encompasses a variety of practices. **Italy, for its part, favors a coalition approach.** Giorgia Meloni makes no secret of this: She intends to detach the EPP from the agreement reached with the Socialists and Liberals that had enabled Ursula von der Leyen to retain the presidency of the European Commission in order to forge a more right-wing alliance and completely reorient EU policy. The vote on November 13, 2025 on the “simplification” of CSRD/CSDDD obligations,²¹⁵ backed by a coalition including the EPP and the national-populist right-wing parties (Patriots and ECR), shows how the European agenda can be shifted.²¹⁶ By offering an alternative to the historic cooperation in parliament between

²¹⁴ Viktor Orbán, “Viktor Orbán’s Speech at the 28th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp,” *Hungarian Government*, July 22, 2017.

²¹⁵ The CSRD (Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive) harmonizes nonfinancial reporting by requiring companies to publish standardized data on their environmental and social impacts. It is complemented by the CSDDD (Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive), which establishes a legal duty of care aimed at preventing human rights and environmental abuses throughout their value chain.

²¹⁶ Paola Tamma and Andy Bounds, “Far Right and Centre Right Unite in EU Parliament to Undermine Green Rules,” *Financial Times*, November 13, 2025.

center-right and center-left parties, this pragmatic approach weakens the negotiating power of the Socialists and Democrats. As the EPP often has an alternative alliance to push through legislation, the shift to the right in European policies goes beyond the texts formally voted on with the ECR. The techniques of exercising power within the EU therefore differ across the three countries.

c. Same Vocabulary, Different Parliamentary Groups: ECR vs. “Patriots”

Institutional fragmentation gives concrete form to these differences. PiS and Brothers of Italy sit within the **ECR** group, which is more “acceptable” and claims the ability to influence parliamentary majorities; in July 2024, the group put forward a co-leadership comprising **Nicola Procaccini** (Brothers of Italy) and **Joachim Brudziński** (PiS).²¹⁷ Conversely, Viktor Orbán favors a more disruptive realignment strategy within the sovereignist ecosystem: Reuters notes that the **Patriots for Europe** bloc, formed in the aftermath of the 2024 elections, comprises **86 MEPs from fourteen countries**, while pointing out that major forces—such as Meloni’s party—remain outside.²¹⁸

In other words, the slogan “Europe of Nations” does not translate into a common strategy; it coexists with choices of alliances that reflect different objectives (respectability and influence for some, polarization and breaking the “cordon sanitaire” for others).

²¹⁷ ECR Group, “ECR Co-Chairmen Congratulate Committee Chairs and Vice Chairs,” July 23, 2024.

²¹⁸ David Latona, “Orbán, Le Pen Hail Trump at Far-Right ‘Patriots’ Summit in Madrid,” Reuters, February 8, 2025.

Allies and Networks: The Same “West,” but Differentiated Regional and Ideological Architectures

While Hungary, Poland, and Italy all claim to share the same Western and Atlanticist roots, their alliances are structured along distinct lines. The common foundation remains NATO, but its role differs: In Warsaw, this Atlanticism underpins an existential security strategy, rooted in the geography of the front line. In Rome, it extends a long-standing tradition of Atlantic bilateralism, linked to a clear sense of European identity. In Budapest, finally, it takes on a more personal and ideological dimension, closely tied to the political affinities between Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump—though subordinate to the Russian–Hungarian dynamic.

At the **regional** level, Poland and Hungary are part of two key frameworks. **The Visegrád Group (V4)** has long functioned as a forum for Central European political coordination, but since 2022, it has been severely weakened by the rift over Russia, to the point of losing its capacity for collective action. At the same time, **the Three Seas Initiative** (Baltic–Adriatic–Black Sea)²¹⁹ offers Warsaw a far more strategic framework: energy corridors, North–South infrastructure, and an explicit transatlantic anchorage, backed by Washington. Budapest participates—but cautiously and selectively, seeking to avoid a direct confrontation with Moscow.

²¹⁹ Michel Chevillé, “L’initiative des Trois Mers: la nouvelle barrière de l’Est” [*The Three Seas Initiative: The new barrier of the East*], *Revue Conflits*, August 16, 2024.

Finally, **transnational ideological networks** complement these alliances. Hungary is establishing itself as a European conservative hub through CPAC Hungary, while Meloni's Italy is engaging with American conservative circles (CPAC and NatCon in the US) to position itself as a "respectable" European intermediary between Washington and the continental right.

d. Divergent European Priorities: The Question of Enlargement

A final indicator is the hierarchy of priorities, particularly regarding enlargement. Hungary stands out for its firm opposition to Ukraine's accession, justified by the argument that it risks "importing war" into the EU.²²⁰ Viktor Orbán seeks to legitimize this position through domestic measures: In June 2025, he claimed that **95 percent** of voters in the "Vote 2025 / Voks 2025" referendum rejected Ukrainian accession, even citing the figures (2,284,732 votes, of which 2,168,431 were "no").²²¹ The sequence of events in December 2023 illustrates the tactical handling of this divergence: The newspaper *Le Monde* reports that Viktor Orbán left the room just as the other twenty-six leaders formally agreed to open accession negotiations with Ukraine, thereby avoiding a formal veto while maintaining his stance of opposition.²²² Conversely, Italy and Poland are more aligned with the logic of political support for Ukraine (even if their motivations differ profoundly, as highlighted above), which makes the unification of a "sovereignist European project" all the more difficult. At the same time, the Meloni government is in favor

²²⁰ Sandor Zsiros, "Ukraine Does Not Defend Hungary, Orbán Says in Zelenskyy rebuff," *Euronews*, November 5, 2025.

²²¹ Viktor Orbán, "PM Orbán: 95% of Voters Who Took Part in Vote 2025 Referendum Rejected Ukraine's EU Accession," *About Hungary*, June 27, 2025.

²²² Philippe Jacqué, "Accession talks with Ukraine: How the EU managed to avoid a Hungarian veto," *Le Monde*, December 15, 2023.

of the European Union's enlargement to include Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, but also, in the long term, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Hungary, for its part, supports the candidacies of the Western Balkans, Moldova, and Georgia—a stance that allows it to present itself as supportive of enlargement in general, without ever actually being so with regard to Kyiv.

Thus, behind a widely shared rhetoric of sovereignty and EU reform, Hungary, Poland, and Italy are engaging with the European space according to differing logics. Reform “from within” is not a homogeneous project but a repertoire of variable actions, tailored to specific national contexts and shifting power dynamics within the EU. This heterogeneity does not negate the rhetorical convergence but limits its political translation. Thus, we see once again that, in practice, and despite recurring criticism of the EU, the three governments struggle to substantially alter its direction, revealing a persistent gap between their stated opposition and their actual capacity to transform the European framework.

6 The Rule of Law and Values: A Shared Aim, Differing Applications

6.1. THE RULE OF LAW: THE FIRST TARGET OF NATIONAL POPULISTS IN POWER

In the three countries under consideration, the rise to power of national populists is accompanied by the same authoritarian reflex: to secure the executive by attacking the checks and balances that limit its action. The “rule of law”²²³ thus appears as **a set of constraints to be loosened**. Courts, constitutional courts, the media, universities, and NGOs are identified as **bastions of counter-power** forming a “deep state”—an expression originating in the United States, which Giorgia Meloni adopted before coming to power. As such, these institutions become battlegrounds—and, therefore, priority targets for the reforms undertaken.

a. Hungary, the State of Lawlessness

Of all the EU countries, Hungary is the one that, under Viktor Orbán’s iron-fisted rule, has seen the most severe deterioration in terms of the rule of law.²²⁴ “Today, Hungary would not be able to join the European Union if it were a candidate,” explains Fabienne Keller.²²⁵ Hungary ranks fifty-fourth in *The Economist’s* “Democracy Index,” between Mongolia and the Dominican Republic. Since Orbán’s second term, Freedom

²²³ *The rule of law refers to a system in which all public authorities are subject to the law, guaranteed by higher-level norms, and held accountable by independent institutions.*

²²⁴ Krekó and Enyedi, “Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán’s Laboratory of Illiberalism,” 39.

²²⁵ Alexandre Poussart, “Etat de droit en Europe: la Hongrie, l’Italie et la Slovaquie pointées du doigt par la Commission européenne [Rule of law in Europe: Hungary, Italy and Slovakia singled out by the European Commission],” *Public Sénat*, July 27, 2024.

House has classified it as a “partly free” nation (alongside India, Pakistan, Morocco, and Serbia).²²⁶ In 2022, the European Parliament voted (by 433 votes in favor) to adopt a motion describing the country as an “electoral autocracy.”²²⁷ In 2024, Hungary came last in the Bertelsmann Foundation’s (SGI) European ranking,²²⁸ which assesses the quality of governance and various dimensions of sustainability.

These rankings are consistent with the way in which Viktor Orbán himself has declared himself hostile to liberal democracy as codified by most Western nations; in his own words, it is a matter of “moving away” from liberal methods of social organization and undertaking the construction of an “illiberal” state. In 2014, at the 25th Bálványos Summer University, Viktor Orbán stated: “The new state we are building is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state.”²²⁹

b. Poland and Italy: Two Distinct Approaches

Unlike in Viktor Orbán’s Hungary, there is no overt rhetoric against liberalism and the rule of law in Italy and Poland. The practices of PiS, when it was in power, resemble those in Hungary in terms of their targets (the judiciary, the Supreme Court/judicial discipline, public media, and the culture war) but differ in their lesser ability to constitutionally entrench this erosion of checks and balances.

Italy, for its part, finds itself in a different situation: The national-conservative camp is extremely powerful there (culture war, constant references to the “God-family-country” triad, denunciation of the “government

²²⁶ *Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2025* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2025).

²²⁷ *European Parliament, “Press Release: MEPs – Hungary Can No Longer Be Considered a Full Democracy,” September 15, 2022.*

²²⁸ *Jürgen Dieringer, Bálint Mikola, and Petra Guasti, “Hungary Report: Sustainable Governance Indicators 2024,” Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024.*

²²⁹ *Orbán, “Viktor Orbán’s Speech at the 28th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp.”*

of judges”) but without any comparable overhaul of the Constitution or the rules of the game. The rule of law is being undermined more through attacks on judges and the politicization of parts of the state apparatus (in public broadcasting, RAI, and appointments to public cultural institutions), which we detail below.

6.2. A PATTERN THAT IS BEING REPEATED IN HUNGARY AND POLAND: COURTS, THE CONSTITUTIONAL COURT, THE MEDIA, UNIVERSITIES...

a. Changing the Rules of the Political Game

In Hungary, Viktor Orbán set about changing the political system the very day after his 2010 victory, when Fidesz, allied with the KDNP, secured a majority of more than two-thirds in parliament with just 53 percent of the vote²³⁰—a distortion of the electoral system—**which enabled him to reform the Constitution immediately.**

In the eighty-page government program submitted to parliament following the 2010 victory, Orbán stated that parliament “is in fact a constituent National Assembly...”—a dimension that had not been explicitly mentioned during the campaign. The aim, he explained, was to bring about a “revolution” and establish a “system of national cooperation.”²³¹ **The country is even changing its name: From Magyar Köztársaság (the Hungarian Republic), it is becoming Magyarország (Hungary).**

²³⁰ “Hongrie: Assemblée nationale Résultats des élections 2010” [Hungary: National Assembly of Hungary, election results 2010], IPU PARLINE database.

²³¹ Poinssot, *Dans la tête de Viktor Orban*, 42.

Between May 2010 and November 2011, the Hungarian Constitution was amended twelve times prior to the adoption of a new *Fundamental Law*, which came into force on January 1, 2012. This sequence was characterized by an unprecedented acceleration of the legislative process. On average, none of the constitutional amendments were debated for more than three hours in parliament.²³² The new Constitution itself was drafted by a group of forty-five MPs, officially intended to represent the five political groups in the National Assembly; however, two opposition parties (the MSZP and the LMP) quickly withdrew from the process, as they were unable to have their views heard. At the same time, a twelve-question public consultation questionnaire was indeed circulated, but it played no effective role in the constitutional deliberations—the parliamentary debates concluded before the responses were even received. Adopted by 262 votes to 44 (with the far-right party, Jobbik, which emerged from a split in Fidesz in 2002, voting against),²³³ the Fundamental Law was subsequently amended twelve times between 2012 and 2023, affecting 88 of its 166 articles, which demonstrates the instrumental use of the Constitution as a tool of government, modifiable according to the political needs of the Orbán government.

These amendments are not merely cosmetic but fundamentally redefine the institutional balance. The new Fundamental Law restricts the powers of the Constitutional Court, particularly in budgetary matters: As long as public debt exceeds 50 percent of GDP, the Court may only strike down finance laws on the grounds of infringement of a limited number of fundamental rights (life, human dignity, and freedom of conscience). It abolishes the *actio popularis*,²³⁴ which until now allowed any citizen to bring a case before the Constitutional Court, henceforth reserving this right to a restricted circle of political or

²³² Zoltán Szente, “Constitution,” in *From the Rule of Law to the Law of Rule – Dismantling the Rule of Law in Hungary (2010–2024)*, ed. Gábor Gabo, Zoltán Kerekes, and Bálint Magyar (Budapest: CEU Democracy Institute, 2024), 1.

²³³ Jobbik has since become more centrist—which may explain the 19 percent of the vote it won in 2018, thereby becoming the country’s second-largest political force.

²³⁴ Such a referral is now only permitted for citizens who have personally suffered harm.

institutional actors (for example, a group of MPs representing at least 25 percent of the members). In the case of constitutional amendments, the Court can no longer rule on the substance; only procedural flaws can lead to invalidation. Finally, this law constitutionalizes previously ordinary policies (family policy, recognition of churches, and taxation), making any subsequent challenge to them dependent on a two-thirds majority, even in the event of a change in government.

Viktor Orbán has also changed the rules of the political game by redrawing constituencies to his advantage (gerrymandering)²³⁵ by amending the electoral law in 2011 and again in 2013. The new electoral system further amplified the first-past-the-post nature of the elections so that in 2014, Fidesz/KDNP won 133 out of 199 seats, with 45 percent of the vote. Four years later, the coalition increased its tally to 134 out of 199 seats,²³⁶ with 49 percent of the vote.

In Poland, PiS has been unable to achieve such a complete constitutional stranglehold—lacking a qualified majority, it cannot rewrite the Constitution. But it is attempting, through organic and ordinary laws, to achieve a similar effect: to secure its grip on the judiciary (notably through the disciplining of judges).

²³⁵ As cities, starting with Budapest, are less favorable to Fidesz, the Orbán government has artificially inflated the electoral weight of rural areas.

²³⁶ Corinne Deloy, “Unsurprisingly Outgoing Prime Minister Viktor Orbán Wins the General Election in Hungary,” Robert Schuman Foundation, April 6, 2014.

b. The Judiciary as a Priority Target

In Hungary, the judiciary is the priority target:²³⁷ **first through constitutional control**, as we have just demonstrated.

Viktor Orbán then proceeds with appointments and purges. Article 26, concerning the appointment of judges, has been amended three times, always in an authoritarian direction. From July 2010, the procedure for appointing members of the Constitutional Court changed: The parliamentary committee was no longer composed of equal numbers of representatives from both sides but was proportional to the number of elected members; appointments had to be decided by a two-thirds majority—a majority held solely by Fidesz/KDNP²³⁸ (still in power in 2025). Four new judges were thus appointed. The appointment of the president (Kuria) no longer falls to the Court but to the National Assembly. In July 2020, eight members of the Constitutional Court with close ties to the government were appointed to the Kuria via a law allowing the previous selection process to be bypassed. One of them, Varga, became president thanks to a regulation exempting him from the five-year requirement of service as a judge. In 2012, a close associate of Viktor Orbán, Tünde Handó,²³⁹ was appointed president of the National Judicial Office (ONJ), which can refer cases between courts and appoint or transfer judicial administration officials. Dismissed in 2019 following scandals, she was subsequently appointed to the Constitutional Court; her successors remain under the thumb of the government.

²³⁷ Kriszta Kovács and Kim Lane Scheppelle, “The Fragility of an Independent Judiciary: Lessons from Hungary and Poland—and the European Union,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 51, no. 3 (September 2018): 189–200.

²³⁸ Szente, “Constitution,” 6—this procedure was barely amended in 2022.

²³⁹ Handó was the wife of a Member of the European Parliament who helped draft the new Constitution; this couple and Orbán had known each other since their days at Bibo College.

In 2011, President András Baka was dismissed, even though his term was due to end only three and a half years later; the ECHR condemned the decision. Viktor Orbán pressed on: The retirement age for judges was lowered from seventy to sixty-three, enabling 247 judges to be removed;²⁴⁰ the ECHR viewed this as a discriminatory measure.

Parliament, Fast-Track Procedures, and Emergency Governance

In Hungary, parliament has become a rubber-stamp chamber, owing to the overwhelming majority secured in 2010 and maintained ever since. Controversial bills are introduced at the last minute, often at night. Opponents who are too vocal risk heavy fines, increased to six months' salary from 2010; in 2023, 102 elected representatives were sanctioned.²⁴¹ Viktor Orbán has also equipped himself with the means to govern by decree: a state of emergency in 2015 and then in 2016 (migration crisis), enabling, in particular, the creation of special economic zones or the merger of state-owned enterprises.

The Constitutional Court can now only block laws that infringe upon human life or dignity or certain specific rights.²⁴² Having become a rubber-stamp chamber, it validates laws contrary to the Constitution, such as the one criminalizing homelessness or the one facilitating the formation of media groups close to the government.

²⁴⁰ Zoltán Fleck and Zsuzsa Sándor, "Courts and the Justice System," in *From the Rule of Law to the Law of Rule – Dismantling the Rule of Law in Hungary (2010–2024)*, ed. Gábor Gabo, Zoltán Kerekes, and Bálint Magyar (Budapest: CEU Democracy Institute, 2024), 23.

²⁴¹ Zoltán Kerekes, "Parliament," in *From the Rule of Law to the Law of Rule – Dismantling the Rule of Law in Hungary (2010–2024)*, 12.

²⁴² Gabriel Gómez and Sven Leunig, "Fidesz, Liberal Democracy and the Fundamental Law in Hungary," *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* 32, no. 3 (June 22, 2022): 655–82.

To avoid sanctions, in December 2023, parliament passed a law establishing an independent National Judicial Council responsible for the promotion of judges; the Commission approved it, but the European Parliament ruled that the Kuria remained under influence. The appointment of the President of the National Judicial Council is still decided by parliament by a two-thirds majority on the proposal of the prime minister—and the National Judicial Council remains decisive in the appointment of Court officials.

In Poland, PiS has never had the political means to replicate a Hungarian-style constitutional deadlock. Lacking a qualified majority, it abandoned plans to rewrite the 1997 Constitution but not its project to transform the political system. It has therefore favored a strategy of circumvention based on ordinary law. In this context, the neutralization of the Constitutional Tribunal constituted a decisive and early step: changes to procedural rules, challenges to judges appointed by the previous majority, and the gradual replacement of judges with loyalists. By depriving the system of its main mechanism of control, PiS equipped itself with the means to take control of the judiciary and weaken the checks and balances through an accumulation of ordinary and organic laws, without explicitly altering the constitutional architecture. In other words, the absence of constitutional revision has not prevented a process of institutional capture; it has simply channeled it through a more indirect, yet no less transformative, route.

This strategy centers on two key instruments. The first is the **disciplining of judges**, implemented through the creation of disciplinary chambers within the Supreme Court, empowered to sanction magistrates who challenge the legitimacy of the reforms. The second is the **reshaping of the High Court** through controversial appointments made with the support of a National Council of the Judiciary that is itself politicized. The aim is not so much to abolish judicial independence as to make it costly by creating a climate of uncertainty and constant intimidation.

This illiberal framework, however, has a structural weakness. As it is based not on a constitutional overhaul but on a series of legislative measures, it remains highly vulnerable to European legal challenges. In 2021, the CJEU imposed interim measures, followed by a penalty payment—of up to EUR 1 million per day—to compel Warsaw to suspend certain provisions of its disciplinary regime. Disputes are also mounting before the ECHR: In the judgment in *Xero Flor v. Poland*,²⁴³ the Court concluded that there were serious irregularities affecting the composition of the Constitutional Tribunal in relation to the requirement for a “court established by law.” More recently, the conflict has remained active: A decision issued in late 2025 emphasizes that, from the CJEU’s perspective, there are irregularities in appointments affecting the independence and impartiality of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal.²⁴⁴

This legal vulnerability largely explains the paradoxical situation that has persisted since the political changeover in 2023.

The government led by Donald Tusk has embarked on an attempt to restore the rule of law, notably under the impetus of Justice Minister, Adam Bodnar, in order to meet European requirements and secure the release of frozen structural funds. Unlike in Hungary, where illiberalism is enshrined in the Constitution and protected by qualified majorities, dismantling the Polish system does not require constitutional amendments but rather targeted legal rectification of the measures adopted since 2015.

This endeavor, however, faces a major dilemma. On the one hand, restoring the rule of law entails revisiting judicial appointments, disciplinary chambers, and decisions handed down by bodies whose independence and legality have been called into question by the Court of Justice of the European Union and the European Court of Human Rights. On the

²⁴³ *European Court of Human Rights, Case of Xero Flor w Polsce sp. z o.o. v. Poland, Application No. 4907/18 (Judgment, May 7, 2021).*

²⁴⁴ “Polish Constitutional Tribunal Violated Principles of EU Law, European Court Rules,” *Reuters*, December 18, 2025.

other, too abrupt a challenge to these acts would expose the government to violating the very principles it claims to be restoring, foremost among which are legal certainty, the protection of acquired rights, and procedural safeguards.

The Polish paradox stems precisely from the tension inherent in dismantling an illiberal system while respecting the rule of law.

European courts have recognized the extent of the breaches of judicial independence, going so far as to impose unprecedented coercive measures which we have just detailed. However, they do not show how to reverse these changes without undermining the rule of law.

Added to this legal difficulty is a persistent institutional constraint. Even after the change of government, certain levers remain beyond the executive's reach, notably due to the role of the presidency of the republic and the still-contested composition of the Constitutional Tribunal. Polish illiberalism thus appears to be a construct that is both less entrenched than that of Hungary and more politically unstable. It is not based on an overt overhaul of the constitutional order but on the mobilization of institutions whose dismantling is politically and procedurally perilous.

In Italy, we are far from such radicalism: The judiciary retains strong structural independence, firmly anchored in the 1948 Republican Constitution. Articles 101 to 104 stipulate that judges exercise their functions *"in the name of the people"* and are subject **only to the law**, and that the judiciary is autonomous from the other branches of government. This autonomy encompasses the irremovability of judges, the irrevocability of their tenure, and the functioning of **the High Council of the Judiciary (CSM)**, composed mainly of judges elected by their peers and responsible for the appointment, promotion, and disciplining of judges. Thus, the Italian case stands in stark contrast to those of Hungary and Poland: Judicial independence has not been dismantled there, although it is the subject of recurring political challenges.

Since Giorgia Meloni came to power in October 2022, the executive has engaged in a targeted political challenge to the “power of the judges.” It is continuing the confrontation between the political and judicial branches that began in the era of Silvio Berlusconi. This dynamic is not based on a legal challenge to institutional independence but on public accusations of bias leveled by the government and certain parliamentarians, often made in relation to judicial decisions that halt or restrict the implementation of government policies, particularly in the field of migration.²⁴⁵

A recurring example concerns detention centers for asylum seekers in Albania, a scheme that several Italian courts have ruled illegal in the absence of individual assessments in accordance with European Union law. Domestic courts have thus blocked aspects of the plan, referring in particular to the requirement for personalized assessments of applications for international protection.²⁴⁶ These decisions have prompted public reactions from politicians, who have described certain magistrates as “*ideological judges*” or who oppose the democratic will expressed by parliament.²⁴⁷ The government has also criticized the European Court of Human Rights, which has condemned the living conditions of migrants in these detention centers. Similarly, the ruling of the Court of Justice of the European Union on August 1, 2025, stating that the decision to return migrants transferred to Albania must be subject to judicial review and that the list of countries considered safe for the reception of deportees must comply with European standards, has provoked the ire of the President of the Council and the government. On this issue, Giorgia Meloni has received the support of the Danish Social Democratic government and seven other heads of government who accuse the Court of preventing political authorities

²⁴⁵ Allan Kaval, “L’immigration toujours au cœur du conflit entre Giorgia Meloni et la magistrature italienne” [Immigration remains at the heart of the conflict between Giorgia Meloni and the Italian judiciary], *Le Monde*, February 3, 2025.

²⁴⁶ Rebecca Arneri, “Italy and the New EU Migration Regulation: Convergence, Power, and the Limits of Control,” *Fondazione Giangiacomo Feltrinelli*, January 12, 2026.

²⁴⁷ Kaval, “L’immigration toujours au cœur du conflit entre Giorgia Meloni et la magistrature italienne.”

from combating illegal immigration and of undermining their sovereignty.²⁴⁸

The criticism of the judiciary has also led to a major reform project. On October 30, 2025, the Italian Senate approved a constitutional reform of the judiciary, a major piece of legislation that alters the organization of the judiciary, which was put to a referendum on March 22 and 23, 2026, to come into force, having failed to secure the required two-thirds majority in both chambers.²⁴⁹ The reform provides, in particular, for the **separation of careers between judges and prosecutors**—that is to say, the obligation for magistrates to choose upon entering the profession whether they wish to become a judge or a prosecutor, with no possibility of switching later—as well as the creation of **two separate High Councils of the Judiciary** for these two categories, a fundamental change from the current model where a single CSM oversees the entire judiciary, and the establishment of a new High Disciplinary Court; however, according to Patrice Spinosi, this type of system has been implemented in Poland and Hungary.²⁵⁰ The members of the two councils will be appointed by lot (rather than elected, with the trade unions exerting significant influence). One-third of them will be legal professionals selected from a list drawn up by parliament, with the remaining two-thirds being magistrates.

The Meloni government justifies this reform as a means of reducing conflicts of interest, depoliticizing the representation of the judiciary, and increasing the efficiency of the judicial system, including in matters of immigration and public security. Criticism, including from magistrates' associations and legal observers, comes from the opposition: They believe that the reform could introduce new forms of indirect

²⁴⁸ Jean-Baptiste Chastand, Allan Kaval, and Anne-Françoise Hivert, "Cour européenne des droits de l'homme: les dessous de l'offensive de neuf pays européens contre la CEDH" [European Court of Human Rights: the background to the offensive by nine European countries against the ECHR], *Le Monde*, June 12, 2025.

²⁴⁹ "Italy to Hold Referendum on Judicial Reform March 22-23," *Reuters*, January 12, 2026.

²⁵⁰ Patrice Spinosi, *Menaces sur l'État de droit* [Threats to the rule of law] (Paris: Allary Éditions, 2025), 76.

political influence over the internal organization of the judiciary by altering the procedures for the appointment and disciplining of magistrates. It should be noted, however, that left-wing figures such as Enzo Bianco (founder of the PD)²⁵¹ and Marco Minniti (former PD minister),²⁵² as well as politicians, academics, and some magistrates, are calling for a vote in favor of this reform.

This constitutional referendum on judicial reform marked a pivotal moment in Meloni's term of office, being both technical in its scope—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 by the opposition and by Giorgia Meloni herself into a vote of confidence in the prime minister, it crystallized a sharp polarization around the issue of judicial independence. The rejection of the bill by voters (around 54 percent “no” votes, with a high turnout)²⁵³ represented a significant setback for the head of government, undermining her political momentum without, however, calling into question her hold on power.

²⁵¹ “Referendum Giustizia, Enzo Bianco: ‘Ecco perché io, di sinistra, voto Sì!’ [Justice referendum, Enzo Bianco: “This is why I, as a left-winger, am voting yes”], *Libero Quotidiano*, March 9, 2026.

²⁵² Ruggiero Montenegro, “Minniti: ‘Voto sì. La riforma della giustizia rende l’Italia più moderna e rompe il potere delle correnti’ [Minniti: “I am voting yes. Justice reform makes Italy more modern and breaks the power of the factions”],” *Il Foglio* (republished by *Ristretti Orizzonti*), January 18, 2026.

²⁵³ “Référéndum en Italie : le ‘non’ à la réforme judiciaire voulue par Giorgia Meloni arrive en tête, selon les premiers résultats [Referendum in Italy: The ‘no’ vote on the judicial reform sought by Giorgia Meloni is leading, according to initial results],” *Le Monde*, March 23, 2026.

6.3. CULTURAL BATTLES IN INCREASINGLY POLARIZED COUNTRIES: MEDIA, EDUCATION, CULTURE, AND SOCIAL NORMS

Beyond the transformation of institutional rules, these national-populist governments in power have launched a cultural battle, aiming to permanently reshape collective representations, moral hierarchies, and national narratives.

While the ideological framework is largely shared—nation, family, religion, rejection of progressivism and cultural liberalism—the methods of action differ significantly across the three countries.

a. Media and the Information Sphere

Control of the information space constitutes the first pillar of these **cultural battles**. In all three countries, national-populist leaders share the conviction that the media are not neutral actors but producers of norms and legitimacy and must therefore be disciplined, reoriented, or neutralized.

Hungary: From Media Plurality to Information Autocracy

In Hungary, this logic has led to a profound restructuring of the media landscape. Upon returning to power in 2010, Viktor Orbán's government began putting pressure on civil society and the media.

A media law passed in the summer of 2011 restricted the role of the ombudsman;²⁵⁴ the Court of Justice of the EU declared it unlawful in 2014, but this decision came after a *National Authority for Data Protection and Freedom of Information*, established in 2012, had already replaced the ombudsman.²⁵⁵ Its president is appointed by the president of the republic on the recommendation of the prime minister, thereby stripping the office of its autonomy.

The Hungarian government then stepped up its efforts to control the press. Viktor Orbán explicitly attributed his electoral defeat in 2002 to media “dominated by socialist elites,”²⁵⁶ which he subsequently designated as a priority target. Between 2011 and 2014, Hungary fell forty-five places in the *Reporters Without Borders* ranking, now standing at around sixty-fourth place worldwide.²⁵⁷ **In 2014, an advertising tax was introduced, hitting independent and foreign media particularly hard,** notably the RTL group. At the same time, **Fidesz took control of the Media Council,** which appoints the heads of public radio and television; dozens of journalists were sacked, transforming public broadcasting into a government mouthpiece. **At the same time, a massive consolidation of the private sector is taking place, benefiting groups aligned with the government.** Since 2017, the “media empire” close to Fidesz has encompassed almost the entire national and regional print media, the second-largest commercial television channel, the country’s second-largest news website, the sole commercial radio network, the only sports daily, and the national press agency. During the 2018 election campaign, 61 percent of news coverage concerned the Orbán government, 96 percent of which was positive, while 82 percent of stories relating to the opposition were negative.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁴ *The Ombudsman is both a person and an independent institution that handles citizens’ complaints regarding injustices or cases of maladministration.*

²⁵⁵ Zoltán Kerekes, “Freedom of Information,” in *From the Rule of Law to the Law of Rule—Dismantling the Rule of Law in Hungary (2010–2024)*, 23.

²⁵⁶ Poinssot, *Dans la tête de Viktor Orbán*, 38.

²⁵⁷ *Reporters Without Borders*, “Government Throttles Media with New Tax on Advertising,” June 11, 2014.

²⁵⁸ Bálint Magyar, “Elections,” in *From the Rule of Law to the Law of Rule – Dismantling the Rule of Law in Hungary (2010–2024)*, 77.

The state also exerts decisive economic pressure through public advertising, which is disproportionately directed toward favorable media outlets. The case of the weekly *Figyelő* is emblematic: Owned by a government consultant, it derives around 70 percent of its advertising revenue from the state and publishes lists of so-called Soros mercenaries,²⁵⁹ targeting academics and human rights activists. This dominance is reinforced by the expansion of digital control: The acquisition of Vodafone Hungary in 2023 increased Fidesz’s capacity for influence in telecoms and the internet, while structures such as *MegaFon*, funded by public money, saturate social media. Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman describe the country as an “informational autocracy,”²⁶⁰ combining modern targeted advertising technologies with single-message propaganda (“Stop Soros,” “Stop Brussels”). In 2017, nearly \$250 million was spent on these government campaigns, including around \$50 million on anti-immigration and anti-EU messages.

According to the Hungarian Digital Media Observatory, Hungary is now the country in Central and Eastern Europe most affected by disinformation: Nearly two-thirds of the population doubt the facts reported by the media and subscribe to conspiracy theories.²⁶¹

*Poland: Media Polarization
and Divisive Propaganda*

In Poland, the strategy differs in its intensity and effects. PiS governments have deeply politicized public broadcasting, though without managing to neutralize the entire media ecosystem. As early as January 2016, the “small media law” (*Mała ustawa medialna*) transferred to the Minister of the Treasury the power to appoint and dismiss the heads of

²⁵⁹ Krekó and Enyedi, “Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán’s Laboratory of Illiberalism,” 46.

²⁶⁰ Sergei Guriev and Daniel Treisman, “A Theory of Informational Autocracy,” *Journal of Public Economics* 186 (2020): 1–26.

²⁶¹ Hungarian Digital Media Observatory—HDMO is the EDMO hub in Hungary, established as a national platform aimed at becoming the reference point for all anti-disinformation stakeholders in the country.

Telewizja Polska (TVP), Polskie Radio, and the PAP news agency, breaking with previous guarantees of independence.²⁶² The creation in July 2016 of the National Media Council (*Rada Mediów Narodowych*), dominated by figures close to PiS, subsequently made it possible to bypass the National Broadcasting Council (KRRiT), despite the fact that the latter is constitutionally mandated to guarantee media pluralism (Articles 213–214).²⁶³ TVP’s news programs, in particular *Wiadomości*, have gradually adopted an editorial line that is explicitly pro-government.

However, unlike in Hungary, this takeover of public broadcasting has not led to the erosion of media pluralism in the private sector. Critical media outlets with a large audience—*Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Newsweek Polska*, *Onet*, and *TVN*—have retained a significant capacity for investigation and mobilization, including on matters involving PiS.²⁶⁴ **This coexistence has produced a polarized news landscape, structured by a lasting opposition between aligned public media and critical private media rather than a homogeneous control of information.**

Added to this is the media empire of Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, centered on Radio Maryja, *Nasz Dziennik*, and *TV Trwam*. Closely linked to conservative Catholic circles, this group has enjoyed privileged access to PiS officials and indirect public support, notably via foundations and state-owned enterprises.²⁶⁵ (Supreme Audit Office of Poland—NIK, reports 2018–21). Between 2015 and 2023, it established itself as a key ideological vehicle, particularly on issues of morality, abortion, and national sovereignty.²⁶⁶

²⁶² Alain Salles, “Bruxelles menace de mettre la Pologne ‘sous surveillance’” [Brussels threatens to place Poland “under surveillance”], *Le Monde*, January 4, 2016.

²⁶³ Maria Holubowicz, “Des médias publics aux médias nationaux. Le pluralisme des médias publics polonais en proie à des intérêts politiques” [From public media to national media. The pluralism of Polish public media under the influence of political interests], *Les Enjeux de l’information et de la communication* 22, no. 2 (2022): 90.

²⁶⁴ Nic Newman, Richard Fletcher, Craig T. Robertson, Amy Ross Arguedas, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, “Poland,” in *Digital News Report 2024* (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, June 17, 2024).

²⁶⁵ Supreme Audit Office of Poland (NIK), various audit reports, 2018–2021.

²⁶⁶ Freedom House, “Poland,” in *Nations in Transit 2024* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2024).

Donald Tusk’s return to power in December 2023 ushered in a phase of restructuring of the public broadcasting sector. The new government replaced the management of TVP, Polskie Radio, and PAP, citing the constitutional illegality of previous reforms and the need to restore pluralism.²⁶⁷ The temporary suspension of TVP Info during the transition highlighted the extent of the inherited politicization while sparking heated debates over the legal means employed to return to a system operating in accordance with the rule of law.²⁶⁸ This encapsulates the Polish paradox we have just highlighted in the previous section.

*Italy: Political Pressure
and Resilient Pluralism*

In Italy, the media battle is part of a long-standing tradition of politicization of public broadcasting but has intensified under Giorgia Meloni’s government. The appointment of executives close to the government to head RAI²⁶⁹—who steer the control of information in a clearly one-sided direction—is sometimes carried out abruptly, while the government benefits from the political proximity of private groups such as Mediaset, which belongs to the Berlusconi family and is historically linked to Forza Italia.

Critical journalists have been subjected to legal pressure, in a context marked by a rise in gagging lawsuits.²⁷⁰ The case won by Giorgia Meloni against a journalist who had mocked her height on social media and was ordered to pay €5,000 in damages, illustrates this judicialization of relations between the government and the press.²⁷¹

²⁶⁷ Wojciech Kość, “Poland’s Revolution Gets Real as Government Reclaims Control of Public Media,” *Politico Europe*, December 20, 2023.

²⁶⁸ Barbara Erling and Raphael Minder, “Tusk takes Polish state TV news channel off air,” *Financial Times*, December 20, 2023.

²⁶⁹ Allan Kaval, “Giorgia Meloni à l’offensive sur l’audiovisuel public italien” [Giorgia Meloni on the offensive against Italian public broadcasting], *M, le magazine du Monde*, July 11, 2024.

²⁷⁰ “En Italie, Giorgia Meloni s’en prend à nouveau à la presse” [In Italy, Giorgia Meloni attacks the press once again], *L’info de France Inter*, Radio France, July 10, 2024.

²⁷¹ “Une journaliste italienne condamnée pour avoir moqué la taille de Giorgia Meloni” [Italian journalist convicted for mocking Giorgia Meloni’s height], *Le Figaro*, July 19, 2024.

Nevertheless, the relative diversity of the Italian media landscape, competition between players, and the existence of judicial checks and balances currently prevent any saturation comparable to the Hungarian model.

**b. Education, Universities, and Civil Society:
Shaping Minds, Neutralizing Criticism**

Cultural battles then extend to education, higher education, and civil society, which are perceived as venues for ideological socialization and the production of critical discourse.

*Hungary: NGOs Under Control, Schools Turned
into Religious Institutions, Universities Locked Down*

In Hungary, two pillars of civil society are targeted in particular: NGOs and universities. In 2017, a law modeled on Russian legislation imposed strict state control on NGOs receiving foreign funding, effectively denying them access to such funds. Following objections from the EU on the grounds of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the government circumvented the issue by expanding the powers of the National Audit Office (Számvevőszék), which is authorized to audit all NGOs with a turnover exceeding 20 million forints.²⁷² A 2021 law prohibits blacklisted NGOs from taking legal action.²⁷³

The education system is undergoing a major overhaul. In primary and secondary education, local authorities are losing control of schools, with many being transferred to the Church, leading in some areas to

²⁷² Gábor Gado, "Central Oversight Agencies," in *From the Rule of Law to the Law of Rule—Dismantling the Rule of Law in Hungary (2010–2024)*, 40.

²⁷³ András Kadar, "Freedom of Association," in *From the Rule of Law to the Law of Rule—Dismantling the Rule of Law in Hungary (2010–2024)*, 68.

an exclusively religious education provision. Headteachers are now appointed by the minister,²⁷⁴ reducing educational autonomy. In higher education, university presidents are appointed by the prime minister, and vice-chancellors by the minister. The ousting of the Central European University, founded in 1991 by George Soros and forced to leave Budapest for Vienna, is a major sign of the times. The 2021 reform, transforming universities into private foundations dominated by those close to the government, aims to make this control permanent, even in the event of a change in government.²⁷⁵

*Poland: Financial and Ideological Pressure,
Open Conflict, Ongoing Disputes*

In Poland, universities and civil society organizations have also been subject to sustained political and financial pressure under PiS governments, though without reaching the level of institutional restructuring and lock-in observed in Hungary. The Polish strategy relies less on systemic capture than on confrontational politicization, combining ideological stigmatization, budgetary pressure, and judicialization.

As for NGOs, the PiS government has pursued an openly selective funding policy. From 2017 onwards, the creation of the National Institute for Freedom – Centre for Civil Society Development (NIW-CRSO), placed under the direct authority of the government, profoundly altered public funding channels.²⁷⁶ Many organizations active in defending the rights of women, LGBTQ+ people, or the rule of law—such as the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights or the Women’s Rights Center—have seen their grants reduced or withdrawn, while conservative associations, those close to the Church or ideologically aligned with PiS, have

²⁷⁴ Péter Rado, “Education and Research,” in *From the Rule of Law to the Law of Rule—Dismantling the Rule of Law in Hungary (2010–2024)*, 82–84.

²⁷⁵ Sally Gimson, “Uniting in Budapest to Cleanse the Image of Hungarian Universities,” *Index on Censorship*, May 7, 2025.

²⁷⁶ Jonathan Day, “Poland Seizes Control of Civil Society Funding,” *Liberties.eu*, December 13, 2017.

enjoyed privileged access to public funds.²⁷⁷ This policy did not formally ban the activities of critical NGOs, but it contributed to undermining their operational capacity, making them more dependent on foreign funding, which was then denounced by the government as a tool for interference.

At the same time, several NGOs were targeted rhetorically by PiS politicians, accused of promoting a “foreign ideology,” particularly in the areas of reproductive rights and LGBTQ+ rights. This symbolic delegitimization fueled a climate of mistrust and hostility, without, however, leading to legal measures to bring them into line comparable to Hungary’s legislation on NGOs.

LGBTQ+ Rights

In the three countries studied, anti-LGBTQ+ movements share a common political and ideological framework: They bring together political power, religious authorities, and transnational “pro-family” networks and are underpinned by a convergent rhetoric—the defense of the “natural family,” the protection of children, and the denunciation of a “gender ideology” presented as an external threat. This convergence, however, masks significant differences in the tools employed and degree of institutionalization. In Hungary, the approach is systemic: Exclusion is enshrined at the constitutional level and reinforced by a legislative arsenal that regulates public expression and classifies certain LGBTQ+ themes as prohibited content. In Poland, the dynamic is more diffuse and localized: Since 2019, around a hundred local authorities have adopted “anti-LGBT ideology” resolutions or “family

²⁷⁷ Day, “Poland Seizes Control of Civil Society Funding.”

rights charters,” creating “LGBT ideology-free zones” covering a significant part of the country, although some have been withdrawn under pressure from the EU. The conservative camp relies on Catholic foundations and movements—particularly in campaigns against Warsaw’s “LGBT charter”—to anchor this dynamic in rhetoric about protecting children and the family and to present these rights as a foreign ideology imposed by Brussels and urban elites. In Italy, centered around Brothers of Italy and a pro-life and pro-family ecosystem, government action focuses on parenthood. Circulars and judicial initiatives have led to the name of the nonbiological parent being contested, or even removed, from the birth certificates of children of female couples, particularly when conception took place abroad. This approach fits within a restrictive legal framework—assisted reproductive technology (ART) and surrogacy are banned—and a stated political line that, here too, promotes the “natural family” and denounces what is perceived as the “LGBT lobby.”

Universities, for their part, have been caught up in a simmering culture war, particularly evident in the fields of history, law, and the social sciences. The political establishment has sought to influence academic output by promoting nationalist interpretations of Polish history, notably through the reform and expansion of the powers of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), which has been given increased resources to promote an official interpretation of the past, particularly regarding the Second World War and the communist era. Researchers critical of this line have been the target of public smear campaigns, and even legal proceedings, contributing to a climate of pressure on the academic world.

However, unlike in Hungary, the institutional autonomy of universities has not been dismantled: Procedures for appointing rectors, internal governance, and formal academic freedom have been maintained. The absence of structural reform has allowed for the emergence of significant university-led protests, particularly against breaches of the rule of law and restrictions on abortion rights, and has encouraged the systematic use of national and European courts. The Polish law adopted in 2018, initially accompanied by criminal penalties of up to three years' imprisonment for anyone attributing responsibility or co-responsibility for Nazi crimes committed between 1939 and 1945 "to the Polish nation or the Polish state," a law that had to be swiftly amended following the outcry in academic circles.²⁷⁸

It is precisely this configuration—strong political pressure but an institutional framework that is not locked down—that explains the high level of conflict in the Polish case. NGOs, academics, and judges have retained sufficient room for maneuver to challenge the reforms before the Court of Justice of the European Union and the European Court of Human Rights, transforming the cultural battle into a permanent arena of litigation. Whereas Hungary has sought to permanently neutralize criticism by reintegrating it into a controlled system, Poland has produced a deeply polarized public sphere, marked by recurring protests and ongoing legal battles.

*Italy: Targeted NGOs, Autonomous
Universities, Symbolic Pressure*

In Italy, civil society organizations and the academic world have not been subject to **institutional restructuring comparable to that carried out in Hungary**, but they are nonetheless exposed to **diffuse and persistent political pressure**, embedded in the cultural battle championed by Giorgia Meloni's government.

²⁷⁸ Buhler, *Pologne, Histoire d'une ambition*, 206.

As for NGOs, tensions are particularly evident in the fields of migration and fundamental rights. Several organizations active in sea rescue, migrant reception, or the defense of human rights—notably those involved in operations in the Mediterranean—have been explicitly designated by government officials as problematic actors or even as facilitators of irregular migration. Sea rescue NGOs have faced legal restrictions that limit their operations, notably the requirement for vessels to proceed immediately to a designated port following a rescue, prompting serious criticism from international organizations.²⁷⁹ More generally, **several NGOs have alerted European institutions** to a “new security decree” enacted into law by Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni’s government in 2025, which, they claim, directly threatens democratic freedoms and freedom of expression; they denounce a growing criminalization of civil society, particularly during street demonstrations and occupations of public spaces.²⁸⁰

Without formally banning these NGOs, the government has helped create a hostile environment in which civil society action is made more costly, both legally and politically. The aim is less to suppress critical civil society than to isolate it politically and expose it to constant conflict.

The academic world, for its part, remains institutionally autonomous but is gradually being drawn into the culture war through repeated rhetorical attacks against what the government and its supporters describe as the “cultural hegemony of the left.” Universities, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, are accused of producing knowledge **that is disconnected from “common sense” and hostile to national identity and of being the scene of pro-Palestinian demonstrations that have at times descended into antisemitism.** Observers note that this type of discourse tends to **publicly delegitimize certain academic disciplines or courses**, thereby reinforcing polarization around

²⁷⁹ Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2024: Italy* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2024).

²⁸⁰ Ben Goodwin, “NGOs Sound Alarm over Italian Security Decree, Urge Action from EU Commission,” *Civic Forum for Internet Policy in Europe*, February 11, 2025.

the university's place in society and its critical role vis-à-vis political power. Although this criticism **has not led to the structural reform of university governance**, it has contributed to **the politicization of the academic sphere** and undermined the public legitimacy of certain disciplines, particularly those perceived as traditionally associated with critical or progressive approaches to the social sciences.²⁸¹

The desire to break the “cultural hegemony of the left” has led Giorgia Meloni to propose a new national narrative based, here too, on a foundation of traditional values. According to her, this involves defending the West, its culture, and its civilization. To this end, the fight against progressivism and in favor of conservatism has taken the form of various initiatives. The Ministry of Culture has made numerous appointments of individuals with ideologically aligned views to head public institutions, a practice that is not in itself unprecedented. Some are widely regarded as lacking competence, and the cultural offering is particularly insipid, as highlighted by a historian, renowned columnist, and right-wing writer for *Corriere della Sera*.²⁸² But what sets these appointments apart is the scale and systematic nature of these choices, as well as their place within a more explicit strategy of cultural reorientation. The reorganization of the ministry has been accompanied by a drive toward greater centralization and a stated desire to steer cultural production toward content that promotes a certain vision of national identity. It intervenes in film production, notably at Cinecittà, and is reorganizing its governance—comparable to that of the USSR, according to Minister Alessandro Giuli—in order to encourage the “production of stories linked to our tradition,” which has implications for film funding.²⁸³ A similar intervention is taking place in public theaters. The ministry supports the organization of exhibitions that have sparked fierce controversy

²⁸¹ Leonardo Bianchi, “Italian Society Remains ‘Untamed’ Despite the Most Right-Wing Government in a Decade,” *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, April 30, 2024.

²⁸² Ernesto Galli della Loggia, “Cultura, lo scatto della destra non c’è” [Culture: the right-wing surge has not materialised], *Corriere della Sera*, July 11, 2025.

²⁸³ “Alessandro Giuli: Cinecittà, il cinema come Unione Sovietica, burocrazia, fondi e governo” [Alessandro Giuli: Cinecittà, cinema as the Soviet Union: bureaucracy, funding and government], *Il Tempo*, July 5, 2025.

due to their bias, such as the one on Tolkien, a favorite author of the international far right and notably of Giorgia Meloni, or the one on Futurism, which avoided mentioning the movement's links to fascism but extolled "Made in Italy"²⁸⁴—yet another of Giorgia Meloni's favorite themes. While public intervention in cultural funding is a constant in many European countries, the overtly identity-based nature of this approach marks a shift.

Nationalism represents one of Giorgia Meloni's core values and also forms one of the foundations of the education minister's school reform, which, alongside various measures to modernize education, promotes a change to history curricula and thus to textbooks, which should be more focused on the history of the Italian nation. On another note, while Giorgia Meloni has not repealed the abortion law as she had pledged to, she has nevertheless allowed "pro-life" organizations to be present in consultation rooms in an attempt to dissuade women from terminating their pregnancies. She enacted a law stipulating that seeking surrogacy abroad—which is banned in Italy—constitutes a universal crime, and is therefore subject to prosecution.²⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the Constitutional Court has restored legal recognition for lesbian couples regarding the legal status of both mothers in relation to their children, overturning the circular issued two years earlier by the Minister of the Interior, which had excluded one of the two mothers. In the European Parliament, MEPs from Brothers of Italy and the League oppose all sanctions against Poland and Hungary, as well as the protection of rights for LGBTQ+ minorities and the inclusion of the right to abortion in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.²⁸⁶ As the fight for values is essential to Giorgia Meloni, she never misses an opportunity

²⁸⁴ Marie-Anne Matard-Bonucci, "Futurisme, où est le fascisme?" [*Futurism: Where is the fascism?*], *L'Histoire*, August 27, 2025.

²⁸⁵ "L'Italie fait du recours à la GPA à l'étranger, un crime universel" [*Italy makes the use of surrogacy abroad a universal crime*], *Lepetitjournal Milan*, October 16, 2024; and "En Italie, recourir à une GPA à l'étranger est désormais passible de poursuites judiciaires [In Italy, using surrogacy abroad is now a criminal offence]," *Le Monde*, October 17, 2024.

²⁸⁶ Edoardo Bressanelli and Matteo de Candia, "Italy: Allies or Competitors? Far-Right Parties Between Rome and Brussels," in *The Far Right in EU Coalition Politics*, ed. Salvatore Vassallo (forthcoming).

to hold the left responsible for all the ills of Italian society, accusing it of being violent, sectarian, irresponsible, and anti-national. This is notably what she did in the aftermath of the assassination in the United States of the conservative influencer Charlie Kirk on September 10, 2025. Following his murder, Giorgia Meloni hailed him as a “martyr for freedom of thought” and a symbol of the violence attributed to a “radical left,” while praising him as a “fearless voice” and defender of free debate.²⁸⁷ She uses the event to harden her rhetoric, accusing the Italian and international left of fueling a “culture of hate” and trivializing violence against conservative figures. This sequence marks an escalation in the intensity of her rhetoric, which becomes more polarized and is mobilized as a political resource in internal confrontations.

²⁸⁷ Audrey Senecal, “Meloni comme Kirk: la présidente du Conseil italien visée par des menaces de mort” [Meloni like Kirk: Italian Prime Minister targeted by death threats], *Le Journal du Dimanche*, December 7, 2022.

By examining certain public policies implemented by national populists when they come to power, this note seeks to objectively assess a political reality now established in several Member States of the European Union and to gauge the gap between the conquest and the exercise of power. The comparative analysis of Hungary, Poland, and Italy thus shows that national-populism, far from being a uniform or monolithic phenomenon, unfolds according to distinct national configurations, shaped by institutional legacies, differentiated economic structures, and unique political trade-offs.

One of the central lessons of this work lies precisely in the recurring gap between the radical nature of the discourse and the reality—or, at the very least, the pragmatism—of public policies. On migration and environmental policies, national-populist governments must contend with economic interdependencies, European constraints, and societal expectations that limit their ability to fully deliver on their electoral promises. This gap does not imply the absence of shifts, sometimes profound (particularly in the case of Hungary), but it calls for moving beyond a purely ideological reading to grasp the adjustments, compromises, and concessions that shape the exercise of power.

The analysis highlights a fundamental tension between proclaimed sovereignty and material dependence on the European Union. Whether in Poland, Italy, or Hungary, economic and social policies are inseparable from European transfers, which impose a form of budgetary and institutional pragmatism on national-populist governments. This ambivalence fuels a paradoxical relationship with Brussels, characterized by rhetorical conflict (with the exception of Hungary's stance toward Kyiv) and strategic adaptation, revealing less of an absolute rejection of the Union than a political use of European confrontation for domestic purposes.

Conversely, certain areas appear to be far more decisive markers. Foreign policy, and particularly relations with Russia since 2022, constitutes a clear dividing line between the three countries studied. Similarly, the issue of values and the rule of law reveals a significantly distinct gradation: While Hungary has embarked on a systemic and lasting transformation of its institutions, Poland and Italy in particular illustrate more constrained, less complete trajectories, the effects of which nevertheless remain profound and are sometimes difficult to reverse.

Ultimately, a comparison of the three cases studied suggests the existence of a common populist national discourse, combining anti-elite rhetoric, nativism, and Euroscepticism, the manifestations of which vary greatly according to national contexts. The convergence is clear: In all three cases studied, we observe a structuring of political discourse around a systematic opposition between an essentialized “will of the people” and discredited elites—political, media, and judicial—accused of hindering the expression of sovereignty. This framework accords a central place to a set of values—the nation, the family, Christianity, and the moral order—mobilized as guiding principles for public action, while so-called woke references are explicitly rejected and held up as a counter-model in the political debate. This is coupled with a recurring externalization of internal lines of conflict, shifted toward exogenous figures of hostility—European institutions, transnational actors, politicized philanthropies, immigration. Finally, in all three countries, this orientation leads to a tightening of the executive’s control over the state and the public sphere, particularly through appointments, the curtailment of the autonomy of countervailing powers, and a stranglehold on the media.

This observable convergence must not, however, obscure the existence of a very clear hierarchy among national trajectories: While the instruments deployed are comparable, their degree of consolidation, their depth, and, more broadly, the political agenda they underpin differ significantly from one case to another. Understanding these variations

is essential to grasping the sustainability of these political experiments, their concrete effects on European societies, and the conditions—which remain uncertain—under which they might be challenged. **In this sense, the analysis of public policies appears to be an indispensable tool for moving beyond the abstract categories of the discourse on the conquest of power and for understanding, in very concrete terms, the actual exercise of power by national populists.**

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*Institut Montaigne welcomes thoughts and ideas
on how to address these issues collectively
and put forward recommendations which serve
the public interest.*





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The steady rise of national-populist parties across Europe over the past decade, together with their accession to—and consolidation of—power in several countries, calls for a renewal of the analytical frameworks applied to them. What is now required are more operational, empirically grounded studies, focused on the concrete public policies these parties implement once in office. This is the aim of this work.

Following an initial paper devoted to national-populist forces within the European Union, this new study focuses exclusively on three countries where such parties have governed: Viktor Orbán's Hungary (in power from 2010 to 2026), Poland under the Law and Justice party (in office from 2015 to 2023), and Giorgia Meloni's Italy (in power since October 2022).

Against this backdrop, the paper examines five core areas of public policy: economic and social policy, migration, environmental policy, foreign policy, and—centrally for all three cases—the rule of law and fundamental values. The analysis examines each policy area across three time horizons: what do these parties promise during election campaigns?; the policies they actually implement once in power; and, underlying this, the extent of any gap between rhetoric and action. It also assesses the consequences of these policies for each country and how they are perceived by public opinion.

Behind the radicalism of the rhetoric, a form of pragmatism tends to assert itself once in office—save for the notable exception of challenges to the rule of law.



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