



democratic efficacy and the
varieties of populism in europe

ANNUAL REPORT

D1.2: periodic report for partners and stakeholders



2021/2022

MESSAGE FROM THE PROJECT LEADER

Zsolt Boda



DEMOS studied the populist phenomenon from a multitude of perspectives and disciplines, combining insights from psychology, sociology, political science, legal studies, media studies, and policy studies using experimental research, deliberative polling, qualitative methods, survey research, interpretive legal analysis, theoretical research, and more.

The results of the project have been edited in about 125 publications, such as peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, reports, and a popular series of working papers. These outputs covered under-researched topics about the populist phenomenon, the roots of populism, the impacts of populism, and the reactions to it. This set of studies is available for free on the DEMOS website. Between December 2018, when the project kicked off, and May 2022, the project last month, researchers from DEMOS conducted or participated at over 150 events, such as workshops, scientific conferences, policy round-tables, both online and offline, to develop research, network with stakeholders, and disseminate results. Project scholars discussed their work on populism with media outlets in Europe and beyond, multiplying the reach of project findings.

Data from an online platform suggest that DEMOS has reached over a million users on Facebook and Twitter alone. Many hundreds more people have engaged with DEMOS in offline activities or other online channels. The DEMOS website, revamped to make it easier for the reader to find information and access results, counted 70 000 page views until May 2022. The DEMOS online channels will continue to bring the latest remaining project outputs to you, including a series of briefs to inform policymaking on populist challenges and pathways to address it. Sign up to the project newsletter below to keep updated about what is coming out next, including news about #DEPOPULARISE, a group comprising DEMOS and its sister projects POPREBEL and PaCE, all of which have aimed to understanding populism better. Find a link to a new video about

DEMOS, comprising 15 reputable and dedicated partners across Europe, thanks the scientific community, the media, policy advisors, and citizens for following our research since December 2018.

#DEPOPULARISE in this last edition of the DEMOS annual report.

This collection also features the key newest

research released by DEMOS since October 2021. These results uncovered the impacts of populism on citizens. It also revealed how school environment and curricula can boost democratic efficacy, a DEMOS idea comprising a set of skills and values that protect citizens against exclusionary populist ideas. Another study assessed the influence of populism over the media and journalism in Europe. DEMOS also created tools, a game and educational materials. Tested scientifically, these tools should help youth detect fake news, often a part of populist discourse, and overall resist the populist appeal. We also present here a collection of policy recommendations based on key research areas explored by DEMOS in the past years.

Finally, the DEMOS team, comprising 15 reputable and dedicated partners across Europe, thanks the scientific community, the media, policy advisors, and citizens for following our research and providing us with insights since we kicked off in December 2018. We are grateful to the project experts who reviewed and validated our work, including the distinguished scholars of the project's Advisory Board. DEMOS wouldn't have achieved its results without them and you, readers. ♦

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CIVIC EDUCATION: A VACCINE AGAINST POPULISM

DEMOS looked at practices at schools that can decrease the likelihood that a young student will develop populist attitudes. Examining the links between school curricula and civic engagement in 14 European countries, the research found that courses on citizenship increase students' civic participation.

School environment, sense of belonging, and anti-bullying actions in schools can decrease support for populism among youth.

Data suggest that this type of engagement protects students from developing populist ideas. Civic participation – known as knowledge, skills, and attitudes that citizens are expected to learn and practice to become productive citizens – is associated with an increase in democratic efficacy. Democratic efficacious citizens support values such as equality, tolerance, and autonomy. They are not only more interested in politics than the average citizen, they also get informed about and engage with politics more often. As previous DEMOS research found, higher levels of democratic efficacy work as a vaccine against populist attitudes. Scientific knowledge had already pointed to a decline in civic participation in Europe, but many still debated ways of increasing it. The finding that civic education courses turn youth into active citizens helps fill an important knowledge gap and points to ideas that can be acted upon today.

Furthermore, DEMOS research in Germany found that students engage more with civic activities, inside and outside schools, when they see schools as places for solving problems together

with their teachers, like in a community. DEMOS also proved an important assumption true: there is a positive correlation between attitudes about bullying and populist policy choices, as both populism and bullying take a firm stance against marginalised others. Because of that, anti-bullying actions in schools can decrease support for populism among youth.

The studies cast light on the role of teachers, school environment, and education policy in preventing polarising ideas associated with populist policy and discourse. ♦

More information

- ▶ Democratic Efficacy and Schools: Curricula, Institutions, and Attitudes (2022). By Zsolt Boda et al. [Download here.](#)
- ▶ Group Norms and Policy Preferences: From Bullying to Populist Attitudes (2022). By Tamás Keller et al. [Download here.](#)
- ▶ Schools' We-mentality and Students' Civic Engagement: A Text-based Approach (2022). By Hendrik Hüning. [Download here.](#)
- ▶ **Video:** Crossing the divide: How can schools protect students from populism? [Watch here.](#)



A GAME TO BUILD STUDENTS' DEMOCRATIC SKILLS

DEMOS created an online comic style game and educational materials so that students can practice democratic skills, a foundation against exclusionary populist views, and detect fake news, often associated with populist discourse.

In *Wing*, a game about populism and social change, free to play on the DEMOS website, students follow the struggles of characters living in a fictitious planetary system under the rule of a repressive populist regime.

Identifying with Maori (pictured above), the protagonist living in Planet Tusor, and go through a series of democratic challenges.

“The goal is to have students collect information, exercise critical thinking, and learn about democratic skills and values,” Zsolt Boda, the DEMOS project leader, explains.

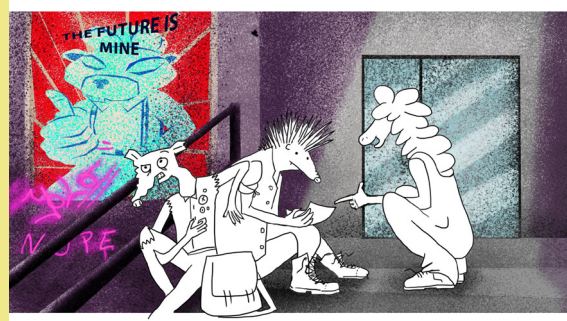
The game, which students can play within about 30 minutes, was designed in partnership with the Budapest-based Foundation for Democratic Youth. It targets the age group 14-20 and includes educational materials for students to discuss game topics with

In the game Wing, students identify with Maori (pictured above), as he goes through a series of democratic challenges in a planetary system ruled by populism.

their teachers in the classroom. Both are available in English and Hungarian language.

Tested with students and teachers in Budapest in the first quarter of 2022, the game builds on project research about democratic efficacy and how to increase it among students and younger citizens. ♦

More about the game



- ▶ Play the game in [English here](#).
- ▶ Download the [educational materials and background document here](#).



FAKE NEWS DETECTION: AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL

DEMOS released an educational material for teachers and university professors to build students' information literacy to detect and overcome the impacts of fake news, often associated with populist communication. A novelty, the tool teaches youth how to face disinformation circulated online and motivate young adults to read news critically while they develop information discernment skills.

An outcome of an experiment design in schools and universities in Budapest with 2000 students, the educational tool builds upon DEMOS research showing that citizens with high levels of democratic skills, habits, and values are more likely to resist the negative impacts posed by populist politics, views, and attitudes.

Developed as a questionnaire, the experiment assigns students the role of experts in digital practices who need to advise elderly family members on online behaviour – such as reading and sharing news – a persuasive strategy to nudge students to reflect on news consumption online. Part of the experiment involved having students rate the accuracy of real and fake news.

“The main goal is to motivate students to use their intellectual capacities”, Peter Kreko, director of the Budapest-based think tank Political Capital, who led the development of the tool for DEMOS with other researchers in Hungary, says.

“We prepared indirect persuasion strategies to achieve long-term effects and framed digital literacy a competence that everyone can improve with effort, good strategy choice, and advice.”

According to the research results, the intervention had a positive impact on students' capacities to spot and react to fake news. College students exposed to the tool showed both immediate and long-term capacity to detect and react to fake news circulated online. Results were even more impressive among students belonging to minority groups.

‘We framed digital literacy a competence that everyone can develop with effort, good strategy choice, and advice in the intervention tool’, Peter Kreko, who developed the tool, explains.

The DEMOS intervention tool on countering fake news online can be adapted to different social contexts and languages. The study and tool design can be downloaded for free on the DEMOS website. ♦

Download the study

- ▶ Building an Immune System Against Fake News: Intervention Toolkit to Spot Disinformation (DEMOS Report, 2022). By Peter Kreko et al. [Download here.](#)



THE POPULIST INFLUENCE OVER THE MEDIA SYSTEM

Social media platforms have helped spread populists' dividing narratives. Journalism, picking up on the phenomenon and being influenced by it, helped normalise it, DEMOS research finds. That suggests that populist views, which remain powerful in European politics, have influenced contemporary political journalism, struggling to find new audiences in the digital era.

Journalism bases itself in the interests of society. Investigative or watchdog journalism takes that as well as government accountability further, so that citizens are not only informed about governmental actions but also decide about it. The Internet and the media market crisis forced media outlets to reinvent themselves to find new audiences and keep them. As a result, political journalism has become more spectacular, faster, and more reliant on politicians' day-to-day activities and messages.

This process has conditioned journalism not only to cover populists more, but also to use populists' discursive features more directly, sometimes neglecting objectivity and investigation which are features of political journalism.

Populist communication divides society between "us" and "them", attacks elites as bad actors, exalts the people's virtues, and offers seemingly easy fixes to complex societal problems. All these traits allow for a stronger dramatisation of politics, which journalism had already been pursuing. Populism pushed this trend further.

The research stems from expert surveys in 34 countries and interviews with 64 journalists across Europe, with case studies focusing on Czechia, France, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, and Spain. Western

media outlets' political coverage has been more influenced by the idea that the people's interests are neglected by political parties. Eastern and Central European countries' outlets have instead taken a stronger stance against the established

The populist communication style allows for a stronger dramatisation of politics, which political journalism in Europe had already been pursuing. As a result, populism makes the news more often.

elites, described usually in negative tones, in line with right-wing populist discourse that is prominent in the region.

Populism has also widened a divide between media outlets. Some political coverage, particularly of right-wing political orientation, support and promote populists' discourse against migrants and vulnerable groups. Other outlets have worked hard to counter these narratives. The study found the widest journalistic divide in Poland, governed by the right-wing populist Law & Justice party. ♦

Download the study

- ▶ Between Normalisation and Polarisation: Media Populism in Comparative Perspective (2022). By Giuliano Bobba (University of Turin) et al. [Download here.](#)



THE IMPACTS OF POPULISM ON CITIZENS' ATTITUDES

Supporters of populist parties are more likely to copy populist language – which includes attacks on other political groups and minorities – in comments to populists' posts online and have largely been influenced by populist ideas in general, DEMOS research revealed.

The study was conducted in three phases. The first, which interviewed 81 people in Turkey, Spain, France, United Kingdom, and Poland, found that men are more likely than women and citizens of other genders to believe that an achievement for a migrant living in their country represents a loss for them. In general, results show that European citizens distrust politicians – no matter if their votes go to mainstream politicians or populists. They also have strong opinions about politics, signalling a political divide.

Zero-sum beliefs – a gain for "them" is a loss for "us" – emerged as key predictors of populist attitudes.

To find out more about citizens reactions to populism online, scholars also performed a statistical analysis on 30 000 Facebook posts shared by political actors, mainstream or populists, as well as users' comments. They considered posts published between March and July 2021 in France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Spain, Turkey, and the UK. Results show that populists have exerted greater influence on users' behaviour than other politicians. When populist politicians use populist language in their posts, citizens are more likely to copy that type of

language in their social media reactions. These insights confirmed preliminary findings of a previous DEMOS research, which suggested that populists' tendency to voice controversial opinions about minorities on Facebook helps hate speech go viral.

Finally, DEMOS looked into how citizens react to populist ideas. For that, researchers surveyed 2 105 people in the United Kingdom, France, Spain, Italy, and Poland as part of an online experiment. Despite differences between countries, zero-sum beliefs – a gain for "them" is a loss for "us" – emerged as key predictors of populist attitudes, agreement with populist politicians, and intention to vote for a populist party. The conclusions advance our understanding of how populism influences citizens' behaviour and appeal to society. ♦

More on this topic

- ▶ **Study:** Why do People Agree with Populists? A Comparative Study on Attitudes and Social Media Use (2022). By Osman Sahin (Glasgow Caledonian University) et al. [Download here.](#)
- ▶ **Video:** In the minority: coping with populist challenge. [Watch the video here.](#)



DELIBERATION: BRINGING CITIZENS TO THE POLICY TABLE

Literature showed that the rise of populist movements can be linked to the frustration citizens feel when they are not being listened to by politicians. Experts suggest that, to respond to this trend, citizens should be provided with opportunities to engage with policymaking. DEMOS investigated whether citizens' deliberation in democratic practices changes populist attitudes. It organised citizens' deliberations in Brussels and Budapest earlier in 2022 with a representative sample of about 40 citizens in both cities. While the Brussels event was a deliberative exercise, in Budapest it was co-organised with the local city council as a part of the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Surveys were run so as to test assumptions. Among these, researchers investigated if the deliberations would change citizens' populist attitudes. For example, their perceptions of the elites and the people, their attitudes concerning the EU, and how they feel about politics. Although the samples were small, it allowed DEMOS scientists to garner preliminary inputs in a country led by a populist regime and another that is not.

Data suggest that deliberative practices seem to increase anti-elitist attitudes in the Belgian context, while in Hungary it decreased these feelings. It also seemed to reduce Hungarian participants' conflicting attitudes towards others with a different political view. Trust in the EU seemed to decrease slightly both in Brussels and in Budapest. Interestingly, participants in Brussels felt that they understood the EU better after the

exercise, but in Budapest they grew more perplexed. A small sample might tell little about broader implications and seem to justify the contrasting results. Yet, scientific inquiry may assume that this could represent a pattern: Hungarian citizens without prior experience of deliberation may feel that politics is more complicated after all than they thought before.

Data also pointed to a lack of attitude change in Budapest: citizens' internal and external political efficacy remained steady. That is, participants' beliefs that they have competences to understand and effectively participate in politics and their perceptions of the responsiveness of the government, respectively, was not impacted. In Brussels, participants reported an increase in internal political efficacy but a slight decrease in external efficacy. This seems logical, as the Brussels setting was a stand-alone deliberative exercise. ♦

More on this topic

- ▶ **Study:** Does Deliberative Democracy Wane Populist Sentiments? Measuring democratic efficacy at citizens' assemblies (2022). By Dániel Oross et al. [Download here.](#)
- ▶ **Video:** Forging consensus: deliberative democracy in Budapest. [Watch here.](#)



AN EFFORT TO RESPOND TO POPULIST CHALLENGES

With sister projects POPREBEL and PaCE as well as the European Commission, DEMOS organised the event *Unmasking populism: Modalities, scenarios, and responses to a persistent threat* on 19 May 2022. The goal was to present policy relevant research that might support actions against the negative manifestations of populism across Europe.

The major policy event, which attracted over 100 participants including policy experts from the Commission, resulted in a research-to-policy report. Covering key areas explored in the event, the report gives the reader an account of the populist ascension, its manifestations and impacts, as well as policy ideas that might mitigate the effects of populism on society and institutions.

Irene Norstedt, Director of the People Directorate of the European Commission, opened the event by stating that democracy depends on the continuous participation of citizens in public life and shaping policies. The projects' scientific conclusions presented at the event build upon research showing the need to include citizens in politics and policymaking.

DEMOS also released six policy briefs based on key research areas it explored since it kicked off in 2018. The recommendations on strengthening civil society, school environment and education, professional journalism and media freedom, social media, constitutional law, and democratic efficacy should support current and future policy efforts aiming to counter exclusionary populist manifestations and support liberal democracy. ♦

More information

- ▶ **Report:** Unmasking populism – modalities, scenarios, and responses to a persistent threat (2022). By Teodora Dinova et al. [Download here.](#)
- ▶ **Policy brief:** How to Develop Democratic Efficacy? (2022). By Zsolt Boda. [Download here.](#)
- ▶ **Policy brief:** Journalism, Populism, and Democratic Efficacy (2022). By Gabriella Szabó. [Download here.](#)
- ▶ **Policy brief:** Civic Strategies Addressing Populism (2022). By Assya Kavrakova. [Download here.](#)
- ▶ **Policy brief:** Findings from a Social Media Analysis (2022). By Artur Lipinski. [Download here.](#)
- ▶ **Policy brief:** Populist Constitutionalism (2022). By Fruzsina Gárdos-Orosz et al. [Download here.](#)
- ▶ **Policy brief:** Summary of Key Findings and Recommendations from DEMOS (2022). By Dimitri Sotiropoulos and Zsolt Boda. [Download here.](#)

ABOUT THE PROJECT

DEMOS (Democratic Efficacy and the Varieties of Populism in Europe), a research and innovation project, studied populism and its impacts on democracy between December 2018 and May 2022. Funded by the EU Horizon 2020 Framework Programme, the project had been carried out by 15 partner institutions in Europe and involved 10 scientific disciplines. DEMOS investigated the phenomenon of populism through the lenses of democratic efficacy, an idea that combines attitudinal features (political efficacy), political skills, knowledge, and democratic opportunity structures. A novelty, democratic efficacy is understood as a condition of political engagement needed to address the challenges associated with populism.

Specifically, DEMOS addressed under-researched aspects of populism at micro-, meso-, and macro-levels: its socio-psychological roots, social actors' responses to the populist challenge, and populism's effects on governance. DEMOS focused not only on the polity, but equally on citizens' perspectives: how they are affected by, and how they react to populism. Politically under-represented groups and those targeted by populist politics were of particular concern in the project research, including youth, women and migrants.

As populism has varying socially embedded manifestations, DEMOS aimed at contextualising it through comparative analysis on the variety of populisms across Europe, including their historical, cultural, and socio-economic roots, manifestations, and impacts. DEMOS elaborated on the interactions of populism with social actors and institutions both at the national and the EU levels.

DEMOS combined in-depth research on populism and democratic efficacy with action research and pilot projects in order to develop tools and policy recommendations. Project methods included experiments, deliberative polling, text mining, surveys, and legal analysis. DEMOS placed strong emphasis on communication and productive interactions with a variety of stakeholders throughout the project, including policymakers, journalists, students, and the general public. ♦

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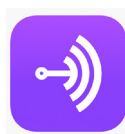
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ABOUT THE CONSORTIUM

COORDINATOR



DEMOS was led by the Centre for Social Sciences, an Excellence Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, in Budapest, in partnership with other 14 institutions in Europe. Principal Investigator: Prof Dr Zsolt Boda.

PARTNERS



University of Hamburg
Co-investigator:
Prof Dr Lydia Mechtenberg

European Citizen Action Service
Co-investigator:
Assya Kavrakova



Adam Mickiewicz University
Co-investigator:
Prof Dr Artur Lipiński

university of turin
Co-investigator:
Prof Dr Giuliano Bobba



Kaunas University of Technology
Co-investigator:
Prof Dr Eglė Butkevičienė

Glasgow Caledonian University
Co-investigator:
Prof Dr Umut Korkut



Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy
Co-investigator:
Prof Dr Dimitri Sotiropoulos

University of Amsterdam
Co-investigator:
Prof Dr Agneta Fischer



School of Communication and Media
Co-investigator:
Dr Andrej Školka

University of Copenhagen
Co-Investigator:
Prof Dr Helle Krunke



Charles University
Co-investigator:
Prof Dr Martin Mejstřík

University of Barcelona
Co-investigator:
Prof Dr Josep Maria Castellà Andreu



University for Business Engineering and Management
Co-investigator:
Prof Dr Dragan Mitrović

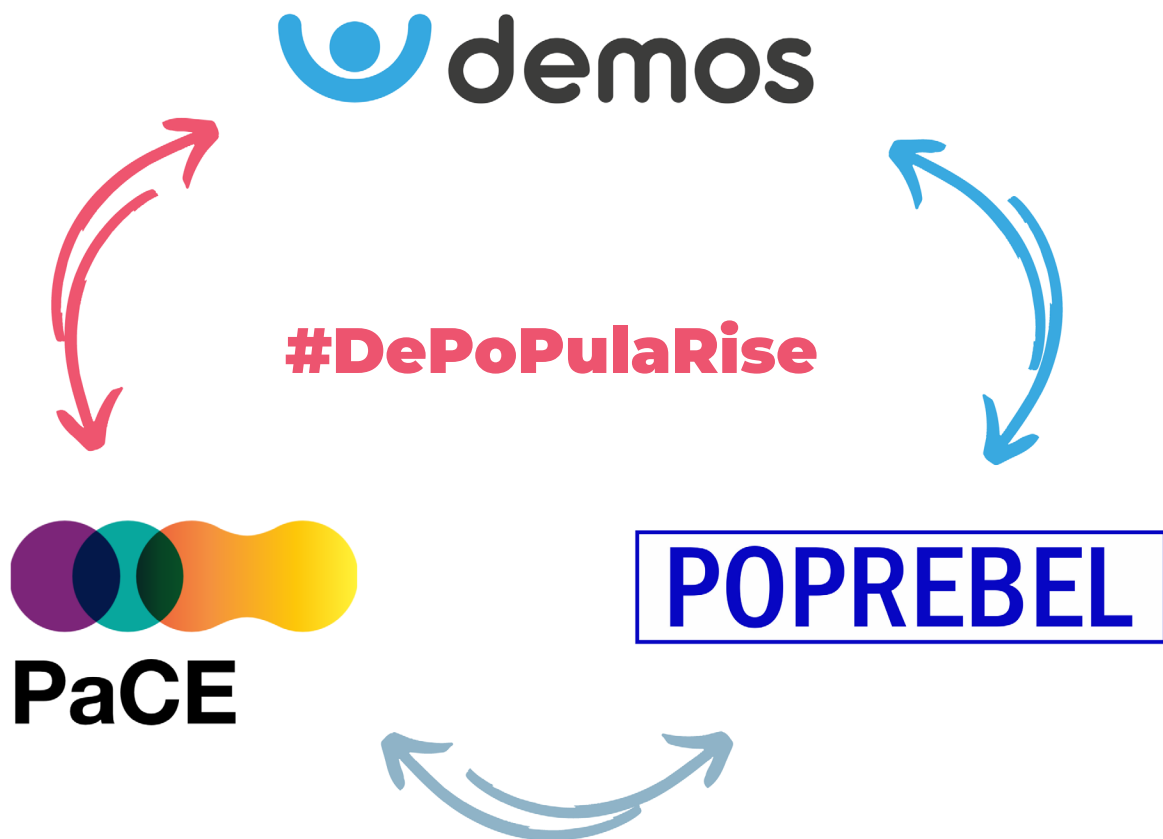
University of Lorraine
Co-investigator:
Prof Dr Nicolas Hubé



INTRODUCING #DEPOPULARISE

DEMOS might be officially over, but with POPREBEL and PaCE, also funded by the Horizon 2020 framework programme, it launched #DEPOPULARISE. Its goal is to maximise the visibility of the projects' findings on causes of populism and its impacts on liberal democracy. ♦

Learn more about #DEPOPULARISE [here](#).



PaCE (Populism and Civic Engagement), comprised of nine institutions in Europe, aims to combat the negative tendencies of populist movements, to build upon the lessons of positive examples, and play a part in constructing a firmer democratic and institutional foundation for European citizens. PaCE analyses the type, growth, and consequences of these movements, looking at both their characteristics and context to propose responses to challenges associated with populism. More information about [PaCE here](#).

POPREBEL (Populist Rebellion Against Modernity), comprised of seven institutions in Europe, aims at taking stock of the recent rise of populism – in its various forms – in Central and Eastern Europe, including the Western Balkans. POPREBEL describes the phenomenon, creates a typology of its various manifestations, reconstructs trajectories of its growth and decline, investigates its causes and consequences, and proposes policy solutions. More about [POPREBEL here](#).

ADVISORY BOARD

The DEMOS H2020 Advisory Board (AB) was comprised of invited external scientific experts and representatives of governmental and civil society organisations with an interest in populism and democratic efficacy. The AB worked with the project management team to ensure quality assurance. The Board, which has validated all DEMOS research, included the following experts:

PROF TANIA GROPPi

Chair of the Advisory Board

Professor of Public Law at the University of Siena (Italy). Groppi is a former legal advisor at the Italian Constitutional Court and a member of the Group of Independent Experts on the European Charter of Local Self-Government of the Council of Europe. She has expertise in comparative law, constitutional justice, federalism, local government, and constitution building.



DR ITIR ERHART

Associate Professor, Erhart completed her M.Phil. at the University of Cambridge and PhD at Bogaziçi University in philosophy. She is the author of the book “What Am I?” and several articles and book chapters on gender, sports, human rights, social movements and media. Itir Erhart is also long-distance runner, a social entrepreneur and an Ashoka Fellow. She is the co-founder of Adim Adim, Turkey’s first charity running group.



DR THOMAS MARKERT

Markert was Secretary of the Venice Commission (Council of Europe) between 2010 and 2020. He obtained a Doctorate of Law at Tübingen University in 1989. Following his work as a practising lawyer in Germany, he joined the Council of Europe in 1989 and worked for the Venice Commission as from 1992. The main focus of his work was on issues of the rule of law and state organisation in Central and Eastern Europe and Turkey.



DR KESI MAHENDRAN

Senior Lecturer in Social Psychology at the Open University, UK. Founding member of the Public Dialogue Psychology Collaboratory (PDPC) and Chair of the British Psychological Society, Political Psychology Section. She is section editor on the Journal of Social and Political Psychology and is on the board of the IMISCOE Standing Committee on Reflexive Migration Studies. Her work topics include migration-mobility, non-mobility, integration citizenship, and public narratives. ►

ADVISORY BOARD



PROF GIANPIETRO MAZZOLENI

Professor of Sociology of Communication and Political Communication at the University of Milan. Fellow of the International Communication Association (ICA). Member of the editorial board of the European Journal of Communication and other international journals. Founder of the Italian scholarly journal *Comunicazione Politica*. Editor-in-Chief of the International Encyclopedia of Political Communication (Wiley 2016). His research focuses on political communication, especially on the relations between media and populism, and between pop culture and politics.

PROF MIROSLAW GRANAT

Full professor of Public Law at the Uniwersytet Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego w Warszawie. Professor Granat is a head of the Department of Constitutional Law. His main research topics are constitutional law (among others, theory of constitutional law, principles of law, constitutional values, constitutional change, constitutional identity, the origins of the constitutional judiciary), human rights, budget balance. He has published around 200 scientific works. Granat is a former judge of the local Constitutional Court (2007 – 2016).



PROF VLADIMÍRA DVOŘÁKOVÁ

Professor of Political Science. Director of Masaryk Institute of Advanced Studies, Czech Technical University. She is a former member of Executive Committee of IPSA and president of the Czech Political Science Association (2000-2006). Her fields of interest are comparative transitions to democracy, civil society, populist and radical right wing parties and movements, corruption. In November 2003, Professor Dvořáková became the first woman among the professors of political science appointed in the Czech Republic.

DR ROSARIO AGUILAR

Associate Professor in the Political Studies Division at the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE). Currently she is a Research Excellence Fellow at the Central European University (CEU) and a Visiting Researcher at the Institute for Political Science at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Her main research interests are the effect of different social contexts on political behaviour, authoritarian and populist predispositions in comparative perspective, and the improvement of measurement and meaning of partisanship in new democracies. ♦