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Cultural policies of populist governments in central and Eastern Europe: a comparative review

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ABSTRACT

The recent rise of populist and illiberal actors in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the concomitant democratic backsliding has generated notable scholarly interest; however, the implications of populism for cultural policy remain understudied. Since culture defines popular tastes and shapes interpretations of national identity and history, we adopt a comparative perspective to evaluate what impact these actors had on cultural policies between 2010 and 2023, using a combination of qualitative analysis of discursive and legislative changes, and quantitative text analysis. The findings indicate that the instrumentalization of cultural policies has been a function of ideology: while the 'thick ideological', radical right populist governing parties of Hungary and Poland abused culture as a vehicle for transmitting their nationalist narratives, their 'thin populist', technocratic Czech and Slovak counterparts took a more pragmatic approach to cultural policy. These findings highlight the impact of populist ideology with thick, cultural features on cultural policy.

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Introduction

Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has frequently been identified as one of the regions where illiberalism tends to develop and flourish (Buštíková and Guasti 2017), yet most of the corresponding research has focused on its consequences for democratic backsliding and the rule of law (Drinóczi and Bień-Kacała 2020; Krygier 2021; Pech and Scheppele 2017; Sajó and Tuovinen 2019). In comparison, relatively little attention has been paid to the impact of populist illiberal actors in government on specific policies (Enyedi et al. 2024), and the focus of such studies has been dominated by issues around immigration (Bocskor 2018; Okólski and Wach 2020) and gender policies (Fodor 2022; Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Guasti and Buštíková 2023). We argue that for constructing and solidifying the ideological foundations of such regimes (Enyedi 2024a), the importance of cultural policies stands out, and therefore, more systematic attention should be devoted to them.

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The extant literature on cultural policies in the region focuses on single case studies of Hungary (Bozóki 2016; Kristóf 2017, 2021a) and Poland (Kopeć 2019; Kurz 2019) or pairwise comparisons of these two countries (Bonet and Martín Zamorano 2021), without fully exploring the varieties of cultural policy in CEE under populist and illiberal governments. Our paper addresses this gap by adding the more technocratic or 'thin populist' Czechia to the equation, as well as Slovakia, which has seen a recent illiberal turn.

We therefore contrast the cultural policies of PiS and Fidesz with those of ANO in Czechia and SMER in Slovakia. The latter cases represent populist governments that we expect engage less in the 'thick' rhetoric of cultural policy – i.e. nationalist, civilizationalist, or religious rhetoric. Rather, the cases of Czechia and Slovakia represent 'thin' populism. By treating these countries as examples of different varieties of populism, our contribution goes beyond comparing cultural policies and related discourse in the CEE region through building a typology whose implications may travel to other policy areas.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we describe the varieties of populist parties in government in CEE. Then, we review the literature on cultural policies in the region and provide historical background for these policies in our four cases. Subsequently, we offer the hypotheses and describe the research design. Finally, we present a qualitative, descriptive analysis of changes populist governments in our country cases introduced in the field of cultural policies, and a quantitative analysis of party leaders' discourse on culture to corroborate our typology, followed by our conclusions.

Varieties of populist parties in government in CEE

Existing theory defines populism as an ideology drawing on anti-elite and people-centric appeals. As such, populist parties present themselves in opposition to existing political elites (Roberts 2020; Stanley 2008). As a part of their rhetoric, the elite is labelled as corrupt and alienated from ordinary citizens (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013, 2017). Conversely, populist actors strive to present themselves as representing the will of ordinary citizens in crises created by the elites (Aalberg et al. 2017). Therefore, Mudde (2004) and Stanley (2008) refer to populism as a thin ideology, because of the shallow ideological profile it entails. Other scholars noted that the thin conception of populism becomes thick when the party combines it with another host ideology that is seen as thicker, e.g. anti-immigration or anti-globalization (Neuner and Wratil 2022). In Mudde's (2007) influential definition of the populist radical right, these parties are characterized by nativism, authoritarianism, and populism.

Although usually the thick ideological components are located at the extremes of the political spectrum, so-called centrist populism (Stanley 2008) also exists in the context of the post-communist countries of CEE (Učeň 2004, 2007). Such parties combine anti-elitism with people-centric appeals, technocratically suggesting replacing the establishment with 'competence' and ultimately lacking a stable host ideology (Havlík 2019). Accordingly, the technocratic or valence populist variant (Zulianello and Larsen 2021) merges anti-elite appeals with the centrist ideological position of managing the state efficiently. Technocratic populism delegitimizes political opponents by creating an image of bringing long-awaited and previously denied technical expertise directly to the people, often promising to run the state as a private business firm (Buštíková and Guasti 2019).

On the other hand, in many European countries, notably in Western Europe, such a combination is rare. There, populism is much more frequently associated with political extremes, be it the radical left (March and Keith 2016), or more often the radical right that incorporates thick ideological components (Mudde 2004, 2007, 2010; Norris 2005; Van Kessel et al. 2020). Beyond a strong anti-elite salience (Polk et al. 2017), western European populist parties are usually on the right-side of the political spectrum, and utilize nationalism, nativism, and xenophobia in their rhetoric (Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Minkenberg 2015; Rooduijn and Pauwels 2011; Zaslove 2011).

In the CEE context, thick variants of populism have often been combined with illiberal appeals, by which we understand 'the promotion of power concentration, partisan state, and closed society' (Enyedi 2024b, 1). In fact, 'populist illiberalism' may be understood as one type of illiberalism that is characterized by 'assertions of the absolute authority of the ordinary people's will' (ibid., p. 10). In sum, we postulate that one may distinguish between thin and thick ideological variants of populist parties, the latter of which appear conjointly with illiberal ideological features, while the former incorporate technocratic elements.

Considering specific actors in each of our countries, Fidesz has been unquestionably the dominant and most impactful illiberal populist actor in Hungary. Viktor Orbán, the leader of the Fidesz party and Hungary's Prime Minister since 2010 has been one of the chief proponents of illiberal democracy, which he enshrined as a positive vision for Hungary in his famous 2014 speech in which he claimed that '... the new state that we are constructing in Hungary is an illiberal state'.¹ Even though Orbán's vision of an illiberal state has never been fully elaborated, its relevance may be justified by its impact on European political debates as well as academic research referring to Fidesz as an illiberal party (Buštíková and Guasti 2017; Buzogány 2020; Enyedi 2024a; Enyedi and Whitefield 2020; Pirro and Stanley 2022). Other scholarly works have categorized Fidesz as a right-wing populist party (Bartha, Boda, and Szikra 2020; Bátory 2016; Ilonszki and Vajda 2021) due to its ideological orientation and its communication built on dichotomous, antagonizing narratives (Tóth 2020).

Concerning the most impactful actors in the Polish party arena, Law and Justice (PiS) stands out as the populist and illiberal one. In terms of its ideological evolution, following a brief period in government between 2005 and 2007, PiS shifted from mainstream right-wing positions to more radical ones, mainly due to the 'swallowing' of the radical right League of Polish Families (LPR) and the populist self-defense parties (Stanley and Czesnik 2018). PiS returned to power in 2015 on the promise of 'making another Budapest out of Warsaw' in the words of its leader Jarosław Kaczyński. What followed was rapid democratic backsliding with constant defiance of the rule of law, which resembled Viktor Orbán's and Fidesz's path in Hungary. As a country, Poland has won the ignominious record of being the country that backslids into authoritarianism more quickly than any other (Hellmeier et al. 2021): the populist, radical right PiS enacted a clearly illiberal playbook (Pirro and Stanley 2022), both in terms of democratic procedures and ideology. PiS captured nearly all judicial institutions (Pech, Wachowiec, and Mazur 2021; Sadurski 2019) and combined nativism with nationalism, homophobia, and traditionalism (Guasti and Buštíková 2023).

In the case of Czechia, two main actors have been repeatedly characterized as populist: ANO 2011 (ANO) and Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD). While the radical right SPD represents the main illiberal force within Czech politics, it has never been part of the government (Suchánek and Hasman 2024). ANO is a party founded in 2011 by businessman Andrej Babiš, which, due to its unclear and shifting position on the left–right axis, has been described in numerous ways by scholars of populism (see Naxera, Kaše, and Stulík 2023), often as centrist (Havlík and Voda 2018) or valence populist (Zulianello and Larsen 2021). While Babiš has repeatedly tapped into nativist sentiments (Suchánek and Michal 2024), we argue that ANO is best described as a representative of technocratic populism. Consistent with ANO's technocratic ideological profile, Babiš has emphasized that only experienced managers can run the state effectively (Havlík 2019). ANO's discourse stems from Babiš's appeal to run the state like a firm, combined with fierce anti-establishment and anti-elite rhetoric (Buštíková and Guasti 2019; Cirhan 2021, 2023).

In the Slovak context, the most relevant party to our analysis is the Slovak Social Democracy (SMER) party of Robert Fico. SMER has undergone several ideological changes that have influenced its perception. When it was founded, its representatives tried to define SMER as a 'third way' party. However, after some time, it shifted ideologically to a left-wing social democratic party. After 2017, there was another shift in the party toward populist politics (Cirner 2012; Marušiak 2005, 2021) which has continued since SMER's re-election in 2023.

Cultural policies in CEE

State of the art

Within the broader set of the literature that has focused on comparing illiberal developments in Hungary under the rule of Fidesz (2010) and Poland governed by PiS (2015–2023), some empirical work has specifically addressed changes in the cultural field (Bonet and Martín Zamorano 2021). However, most empirical papers published to date focus on single-country case studies. The works of (Kristóf 2017; Krygier 2021; Bozóki 2016) have been concerned with the cultural policies of Fidesz in Hungary. Kristóf (2017) argued that Hungarian illiberal cultural policy had its roots in 'post-communist traditionalism', a blend of moral conservatism combined with paternalist attitudes (Csillag and Szelényi 2015). Using Vestheim's (2012) concept of a 'hidden ideology', Kristóf (2017, 2021a) argues that the Orbán cabinets have been more concerned with consolidating their institutional and financial dominance in the field of culture than they were in creating a new, traditionalist cultural canon. Bozóki (2016) argued that beyond the pursuit of elite replacement, the Orbán cabinets adopted several far-right cultural practices and demands into their program, mainstreaming far-right ideas in cultural policy. Nagy and Szarvas (2021) demonstrated how the increasing dominance of the conservative institutional network created a new hegemony that led to the co-optation of autonomous artists.

Similarly, country case studies on Poland have focused on accounting for the institutional changes caused by cultural policies adopted after 2015 (Kurz 2019), highlighting the centralizing aspects of these policies (Kopeć 2019). Under the PiS party rule, cultural policy became increasingly politicized as public management of culture was seen as a way of creating and reproducing the ideology of those in power, restoring an idealized vision of the past, and imposing the axiological dimension of the nation (Młyczyk 2019). Some studies have also focused on specific policy changes mostly affecting media regulation that had an especially salient role in the cultural policy agenda of PiS (Surowiec, Kania-Lundholm, and Winiarska-Brodowska 2020).

Country-level case studies on Slovak and Czech cultural policy have been scarce, and rather than focusing on cultural policy per se, they scrutinized the technocratic elements of populist governance in general (Buštíková and Guasti 2019; Havlík 2019).

Finally, there is an emerging line of the literature that tries to define cultural policy changes in Eastern Europe in conceptual terms, arguing that they embody a mix of authoritarian tendencies fused with neoliberal management principles; nevertheless, they retain a certain degree of diversity in terms of cultural policy agendas and institutional legacies that also inform more recent policy changes (Rindzevičiūtė 2021).

This paper focuses on the governmental periods after the electoral breakthrough of populist parties in the Visegrad 4 countries, which occurred during the 2010s. To understand the political context in which cultural policy changes unfold, we first provide a historical overview of their development following the democratic transition period.

Shared post-communist legacy

During the two decades following the democratic transition in 1989–1990, three of our four cases (Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) followed a pluralist cultural policy agenda with limited state intervention, which adhered to the 'architect' ideal type of cultural policy (Hillman-Chartrand and McCaughey 1989) where state intervention is not negligible but is primarily aimed at alleviating market pressures and does not prescribe specific values, tastes, or normative ideals. Nevertheless, the limited application of the 'arm's length principle' according to which culture is funded through 'agencies that are kept at an arm's length distance from the politicians in a ministry to prevent political censoring of individual decisions' (Vestheim 2009, 33) has already paved the way for further centralization and politicization of cultural policies in these countries.

In Hungary, cultural tensions intensified due to the perceived dominance of left-liberal intellectuals in the cultural sphere, which made conservative intellectuals feel marginalized (Kristóf 2021b). This has led to the long-term accumulation of grievances and the formation of an alternative 'counterhegemonic' coalition with the political support of Fidesz. When Fidesz gained power in 2010, it shifted the country's cultural policy model toward one in which the state instrumentalizes culture to serve specific ideological purposes reinforced through funding decisions and the composition of boards that make them. Even though it is still far from an 'engineer' model where culture is centrally supervised and serves direct political goals (Hillman-Chartrand and McCaughey 1989), it has moved in that direction throughout the past decade.

Similarly to Hungary, Poland fits well into the 'architect' model of cultural policies. At the national level, the key player in this field is the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, which supervises the National Cultural Institutions, National Cultural Institutes, public media and TV, and distributes funds to hundreds of cultural institutions and enterprises. However, given the high level of decentralization of the cultural system after 1989, it is the local governments which dispose of up to 70% of the public expenditure on culture (Kopańska 2018). Big cities are responsible for operating local cultural institutions such as theatres, museums, and operas. Finally, cultural policies are also shaped by other actors, with the Culture and Media Commissions in both houses of the Parliament, the National Broadcasting Council, and by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs through a worldwide network of Polish Institutes. From the legal point of view, the 1991 'Law on organization and conducting cultural activities' still provides basis for cultural endeavors in Poland.

Slovak cultural policy has also relied on the active role of the state in funding cultural activities and is still dominated by post-communist heritage (Révészová, Tóthová, and Šebová 2021). Throughout the whole post-communist period, funding for culture has been significantly lower than the average funding for culture in Western countries (Révészová, Tóthová, and Šebová 2021). Cultural policy until 1998 was characterized by the fact that Vladimír Mečiar's government used it to support nationalist institutions. Also, the financing of culture was purely in the hands of the government (Šmatlák 2016). After Mikuláš Dzurinda's government took office, multi-source funding for culture was introduced and the media were less influenced by the government. Also, the first consistent cultural policy document was agreed in 2004, helped by Slovakia's accession to the European Union (Révészová, Tóthová, and Šebová 2021). With this promising situation in the field of cultural policy, the first government of Robert Fico came to power in 2006.

While three of our four cases clearly represent the 'architect type' in terms of the role of the state in cultural policy, in Czechia, the past three decades have been dominated by intense discussions on the role of the market vs. the state in cultural financing. Since the collapse of the communist regime in 1989, the Czech cultural sector no longer had to function in the official culture modus operandi under the dominant ideology of the state, fully funded by state subsidies (Mockovčiaková et al. 2006). Because culture had significant influence on Czech society, largely due to its role in the interwar period, as well as the prominence of cultural elites among the dissident circles active during the Velvet Revolution (Šmejkalová 2001), its revival was expected to happen quickly within the newly democratized conditions.

However, the challenge has been to find a way to finance culture in the context of the transition from a formerly centrally managed economy to a new open market capitalist system. A new cultural policy had to be adopted to reflect this major socioeconomic change to secure existence for those institutions that could not rely on profit-making (Kopecek 2011). A balance between the formerly state-run public cultural institutions and complete privatization was achieved through so-called autonomization (Vojtíšková and Lorencová 2015), a process in which state-funded institutions sought greater budgetary independence. The prevailing issue in the 1990s, however, was that the neoliberal-conservative governments led by the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) focused primarily on the economic reforms, and culture never gained priority. In the case of the film industry, e.g. this

Table 1. Party ideological profiles and cultural policy agendas.

Country	Party	Period in government	Type of populism	Ideological profile	Cultural policy agenda
Czechia	ANO	2017–2021	Thin populist	Technocratic	Overall, not much focus on culture; it's seen as a soft ministry, led by the Social Democrats in Babiš's government
Hungary	Fidesz	1998–2002, 2010-	Thick ideological	Nationalist, illiberal	Creating a new, traditionalist, conservative cultural canon based on the revision of memory politics and Christian values
Poland	PiS	2005–2007, 2015–2023	Thick ideological	Nationalist, illiberal	Centralization; 'Nationalization' of cultural entities or creation of new institutions doubling the existing ones; Capture of public media; Building and promotion of ethnic and national identity closely tied to the Catholic religion; Fostering narrowly defined patriotism through culture; Historical revisionism
Slovakia	SMER	2006–2010, 2012–2020, 2023-	Thin populist	Originally social democratic, increasingly nationalist and illiberal	Overall, not much focus on culture; however, increasing emphasis since 2023 Main issue is the financing of culture

neoliberal economic principle is considered filmmaking solely as commercial activity (Bilík 2020, 292). A decentralized model to fund cultural institutions was adopted, where municipalities play a crucial role as funders (Bečica 2017). An attempt to move from subsidies to competitive grants was only partially successful (Prouzová and Tůmová 2013). Overall, most of the funding for culture still comes from the state, which has led to some friction between artists and politicians regarding the management of cultural institutions (Vojtíšková and Lorencová 2015, 542).

Hypotheses

We argue that our cases cluster into two main types. We can define these types in terms of 'thin vs. thick' varieties of populist parties, in which Fidesz and PiS represent the thick, value-laden variants, whereas their Czech and Slovak sister parties fall into the ideologically thin category, with potential variation across time. In case we conceive of this distinction along an ideological vs. technocratic or valence axis, then similarly, we would see an identical distribution of our cases, with ANO and SMER (until its recent illiberal turn) being closer to the technocratic pole of this dimension.

Table 1 below summarizes our main expectations regarding the ideological clustering of relevant parties in these four countries, from a theoretical perspective, together with the key aspects of their cultural policy agenda.

Since these distinctions do not only determine the main narratives of parties but also the extent to which they see culture as an instrument of pursuing their ideological goals, we expect that these types would correspond with differences in the presence of ideological components in cultural policy and the salience of culture in their overall discourse. These expectations are formulated in our two hypotheses below:

- **H1.** Cultural policies will have athicker radical right ideological component (nationalism and illiberalism) in Hungary under Fidesz rule and in Poland under PiS, compared to Czechia under ANO and Slovakia under SMER in which we expect to find thin populist and technocratic features.
- **H2.** Culture will be more salient in Hungary under Fidesz rule and in Poland under PiS, compared to Czechia under ANO, while in Slovakia, it will be increasingly salient to the process of ideological thickening of SMER.



Research design and methods

Our paper tests the implications of different varieties of populism on cultural policy in the four countries of the Visegrad region: Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. This set of cases brings several analytical advantages. First, these cases share similar political-historical contexts regarding their socialist legacy, the timing of their democratic transitions, as well as their simultaneous integration into the European Union. At the same time, as shown in Table 1 above, in the past one and a half decades, they have experienced different varieties of populist leaders which cluster into two main categories: thin populist vs. thick ideological, with the latter exemplifying nationalist and illiberal currents.

We test the above hypotheses across two sections using two different methodological approaches. First, we will use a thick qualitative analysis of legislative and discursive changes in the field of cultural policy during the governing periods of populist parties in our country cases, using party manifestos, as well as legislative documents to trace what implications the variety of populist governments had on cultural policy. This will allow us to have a nuanced understanding on whether the parties fit into our typology of populist actors based on their discursive practices, and if these lead to different outcomes in terms of cultural policy.

Second, we will complement this by using quantitative text analysis to identify culture's salience and meaning for heads of state in each of the four countries analyzed. Our corpus is all public speeches available from government websites – scraped by us – as well as all speeches recorded in parliament, using the ParlaMint dataset (Kuzman et al. 2023), and supplemented by speeches from Wagner and Enyedi (2024). Our corpus includes 3,790 speeches: 1,559 for Babiš, 484 for Fico, 172 for Kaczyński, and 1,575 for Orbán (see Supplementary Material for the full list of primary sources).²

We measure how frequently each leader invokes the topic of culture and – when they do – we identify the different types of populist rhetoric each leader uses. This analysis of how leaders talk about culture relies on Wittgenstein's (1973) use theory of meaning, which can be summarized as 'we can know the meaning of a word by the company it keeps' (Firth 1957). We learn about each individual's understanding of culture by the other words they most often use when discussing the topic (see Supplementary Material for more detailed explanation of text-analysis methods). This way we can identify each actor's affinity with different types of populism and test our initial classification. Further methodological details regarding the sources of text data and quantitative analysis techniques used are offered in the online Supplementary Material.

Qualitative analysis of cultural policies under populist governments

Culture war combined with institutional takeover under fidesz

Ever since it gained a supermajority in the Hungarian parliament in 2010, Fidesz has waged a 'culture war' to challenge the existing cultural hegemony and implemented a revanchist agenda aimed at cultural elite replacement. However, such pursuits intensified from 2018 when, in one of his speeches, PM Viktor Orbán explained that:

An era is determined by cultural trends, collective beliefs, and social customs. This is now the task we are faced with: we must embed the political system in a cultural era. (. . .) after the third two-thirds victory, we really need to adopt a spiritual and cultural approach.⁴

The extent to which Fidesz intervened in institutional structures and funding decisions has varied widely between cultural sectors. Fidesz prioritized fine arts after their first two-thirds majority in 2010 and in 2011, it granted the status of a public entity to the Hungarian Academy of Arts (MMA), a conglomerate of conservative artists (Kristóf 2017). Leadership positions of the most emblematic exhibition spaces and collections, including the National Museum of Fine Arts and the Hungarian National Gallery, were also granted to Fidesz loyalists.

Likewise, the nomination of theatre directors became heavily politicized and served institutional capture in an ideological disguise. The progressive former director of the National Theatre was replaced in 2013 by an ultraconservative successor, while the government has shown increasing reluctance to fund-independent theatres. Ideological debates surfaced again after the adoption of the 'Child Protection Law' of 2021 (Linnamäki 2022) which conflated pedophilia with LGTBQ identities and prescribed unrealistic requirements on theatres.5

The film industry has for long been an exception from Fidesz's culture war narrative since it remained largely intact from ideological considerations until 2019. Public funds for film production were restructured under the leadership of Andrew G. Vaina (2011–2019), a Hungarian-born Hollywood movie producer, with a focus on commercial success and international marketability. This approach brought numerous festival nominations and two Oscar-awards (in 2016 and 2017), plus the rapid extension of the international film production sector in Hungary (Valocikova 2017). The achievements of the Vaina era seem even more significant in retrospect; following his death in 2019, Hungarian film financing has been influenced by political pressures to an unprecedented extent, leading to yet another restructuring of funding institutions and the production of a series of revisionist 'historical films' (Virginás 2023).

Concerning literature, the government has sought to reshape the canon by integrating previously ostracized conservative (and, in several cases, anti-Semitic) authors into the national curriculum (Pető 2017). In 2018, an Orbán loyalist was appointed as the leader of Petőfi Literary Museum, a landmark institution of Hungarian literature which later acquired control over other fields and became a cultural agency with a vast public budget. The centralization of cultural management proceeded in 2024 with the creation of the Hungarian National Museum's Public Collections Centre which oversees six museums, while the government's influence on the literature and book distribution was further strengthened through the acquisition of the largest book distribution network in the country by a pro-government think-tank (BBJ 2023).

While most of these shifts were not explicitly justified by the governing party, in his public speeches, the prime minister has often referred to a sort of Hungarian cultural exceptionalism whose essence could only be captured in nationalist terms, and which needed protection. In a 2023 speech celebrating Hungary's national anthem, he suggested that:

When we listen to it [the national anthem] or sing it, we are addressing God, he is not in our mind's eye, it is not the image of the poet or of god that emerges from the swirl of history but that mysterious elusive and ineffable something that we can call Hungarianness, or more precisely Hungarian destiny and the Hungarian genius. It is the form and quality of invention, of creation, of existence of which only we Hungarians are capable. (Kuzman et al. 2023)

In his rhetoric, references to national exceptionalism have been coupled with external threats posed by 'self-appointed rootless liberal censors' who aim to 'rewrite the history of the Hungarians' (ibid.). Through essentializing culture and positioning his party as the sole representative of the people, Orbán managed to establish himself as the guardian of a unique Hungarian culture and fend off criticisms regarding cultural clientelism.

Unlike during the transformation of other cultural spheres, Orbán has been rather upfront turning the media into an archetype of an illiberal media system (Polyák 2019). As he claimed in a 2022 speech, 'We must have our own media. We can only pinpoint the insane ideas of the progressive left if we have media that helps us to do this.' (Wagner and Enyedi 2024). In such spirit, starting in 2010, Fidesz adopted a new Media Act that curtailed the autonomy of the media authority and ensured that its composition was controlled by the governing party. Public broadcasting channels were turned into a vehicle of pro-government electoral mobilization, while more than 400 local and regional newspapers were centralized under a progovernment publisher (Bátorfy and Urbán 2020), even though online media has remained more balanced (Mikola 2023).



While ideological motives undoubtedly played a role in shaping the cultural policies of Fidesz, creating highly centralized institutions directly controlled by the government, and 'the suppression of autonomous intellectuals, as well as their replacement by intellectuals loyal to the regime' (Bajomi et al. 2020, 17) have been even more important cornerstones of their policies.

Culture as patriotism and historical revisionism under PiS in Poland

Ideological underpinnings of cultural policies carried out in Poland since 2015 are coherent with the broader ideological narrative of PiS government. In this sense, a key ideological element of its culture policy discourse is nationalism, ethnocentrism, and narrowly defined 'patriotism'. The PiS government treats culture instrumentally to construct ethnic and national identities, increase patriotic feelings, and a sense of belonging to the nation (Kopeć 2019). Piotr Gliński, the former Minister of Culture (and also Deputy Prime Minister – a sign of the relevance of culture for PiS) said at a PiS convention in May 2023 that 'culture is patriotism' and that 'Polish patriotism is born from Polish culture'. Thus, only patriotic culture, i.e. the one that glorifies the nation, is valuable to the eyes of PiS government. Moreover, as Polish national identity is characterized by its historical fusion with Catholic religion (Grzymała-Busse 2015), the values that serve for national identity building are, according to PiS, of a clearly religious nature. In this vision, cultural policies should aim at promoting traditional Catholic values and morals and defend national identity from existing threats. As Jarosław Kaczyński stated in his speech at the PiS electoral convention in 2019:

Poles want freedom. They want equality and they want freedom. These are values deeply rooted in our culture founded on Christianity. These are values fundamental to civilization. A civilization that grew out of Christianity. A civilization that is the most humane of all civilizations in the history of the world. If I may describe the meaning of the policy of the 'good change' in the shortest possible terms that meaning is the defense of all that is our right. All that stems from Polish culture, Polish tradition but also from this civilization. (Wagner and Enyedi 2024)

This brings us not only to a clearly conservative agenda that characterizes PiS policies but also to a politics of exclusion characteristic of illiberal policies. An exclusive conception of who pertains to the community of Poles prevailed, together with the narrative of besieged fortress traces clear frontiers between 'us' and 'them', discriminating immigrants, the LGBTQI+ community, those with non-traditional gender identities, altogether stigmatizing minorities' cultures. Populism is also present in the ideological narrative of PiS cultural policies, in the sense of anti-elitism of the call for 'replacement of elites' and support for popular culture as opposed to elite culture.

One of the fundamental battlefields of the culture wars in the Polish case is the past and collective memories of it. PiS's cultural policies are characterized by historical revisionism and martyrologic vision of the country's history invoking 'a specific albeit totalizing mythology of the national past to gain control over the present, including its political aspect' (Kotwas and Kubik 2019, 458). A substantial part of its discourse refers to how Poles were unilateral victims during World War II and the Holocaust and cancelling claims on collaboration. PiS's cultural policies aim to create a positive nostalgia for a guilt-free past. All those who think differently (especially dissident artists) are labelled as enemies, 'Poles of second sort', or directly anti-Polish elements. Therefore, PiS is a perfect example of what Kubik and Bernhard (2014, 4) call 'mnemonic warriors' when referring to political actors that treat history instrumentally to construct a vision of the past by drawing 'a sharp line between themselves (the proprietors of the «true» version of the past) and other actors who cultivate «wrong» or «false» versions of history' (Kubik and Bernhard 2014, 17). In a 2022 speech, Kaczyński framed the upcoming elections as a choice between the following options:

On the one hand, there is the Polish camp. The patriotic camp which has been able to lay the foundations for some kind of democracy and democratic action in Poland and which has somehow been able to consolidate the community around social policy around sustainable development policy around historical policy and cultural policy. On the other hand, we have an essentially German camp which is fiercely dividing Poland and conducting its polemics. (Wagner and Enyedi 2024)

In line with a clear effort of centralization, control, and censorship exercised by the government, support for independent cultural enterprises was reduced, particularly for civil society organizations and community activities not aligned with the vision promoted by PiS. In PiS's vision, the community is strictly dependent on the state, with government policies leading to state clientele networks. Culture in such position 'is deprived of the elementary freedom of expression and is subordinated to the goals of historical policy: image-creating (outside) and patriotic upbringing (inside)' Kurz (2019, 29). Already in the 2014 electoral manifesto of PiS, a clear statement that 'Culture needs support from the state' was followed immediately by an important disambiguation 'the scope of this support must go hand in hand with the sphere of values that are promoted by the state' (PiS 2014, 139). In other words, only those artists and institutions who promote such understood 'values of the state' (i.e. patriotism and nationalism) in their work can count on support. Therefore, contemporary arts began being marginalized, while national heritage, folk, and popular culture and religious values-based cultural enterprises, 'national', 'patriotic', and 'classic' repertoire emphasized.

Different strategies were employed to implement changes in line with the ideological underpinnings of illiberal cultural policies of PiS: from indirect pressure and prioritization of certain fields/actors, through staff appointment according to fidelity criteria and creation of alternative institutions, to cutting or increasing levels of public subventions and expenditure, censorship, and persecution of dissident artists. After reaching power, PiS started to financially strangle certain cultural enterprises, for instance, by cutting all subventions to ideologically distant magazines. The most striking example of instrumentalization of culture, however, is the case of public broadcasting services, an area to which a vast amount of funds was transferred to secure not only politically aligned editorial offices but also incorporate blunt propaganda into the daily news offer. The amendment to the Broadcasting Act was one of the first laws to be introduced by the newly appointed government in 2015 which gave the minister responsible for the state treasury unprecedented power over the composition of public media management and supervisory boards. The funds transferred to public broadcasting make for most of the increase in cultural expenditures in Poland after 2015 (Kopeć 2019).

Can technocrats be indifferent to culture? - the case of ANO in Czechia

Although much has already been written on ANO's relationship to populism and illiberalism in general (e.g. Hanley and Vachudova 2018; Havlík and Voda 2016; Suchánek and Michal 2024), very little direct evidence related specifically to cultural proposals, nor concrete policies can be found. One of the reasons for this might be the fact the ANO's approach to politics is not ideology-driven, but more interest-driven (Cirhan and Kopecký 2019). The investment in culture thus serves as a component of ANO's marketing to support the public image of the party, rather than its ideological stance.

The Ministry of Culture never gained political priority under ANO's rule. Apart from a six-month period when a non-partisan minister for ANO was appointed, the ministry was led by the coalition Social Democrats. The relative insignificance of the Ministry of Culture is also reflected in its small budget in comparison to other ministries.⁷

ANO's program claims that culture is a fundamental part of the Czech statehood. ⁸ Other than that, the program of ANO is very vague and only states the culture is generally underfunded, stressing the need to support artists and cultural institutions facing precarity. There is emphasis on preserving cultural heritage in general, and traditional regional folklore culture specifically. Although ANO frames culture as part of its national identity, these claims are relatively sporadic and often vague. Consequently, culture is presented rather as an investment.

There can be no national identity without art and culture. I am therefore convinced that we must give due attention and support to arts and culture in our National Investment Plan. For example, without our support, the



National Museum would not have been renovated nor would the State Opera House. And we must continue to support such important projects. (Babiš 2020)

Additionally, culture and investments related to it are perceived by ANO as means for generating income in other segments of the economy, particularly in tourism, as the following Babiš quote from 2022 illustrates:

Our government allocated millions to rebuild the castle. We advocated for this because the restoration of our cultural monuments is, of course, extremely important for tourism. (Kuzman et al. 2023)

Ultimately, there are no defining ideological elements present in ANO's program concerning culture. The program is a marketing parade of phrases that the party would support any positive-sounding project related to culture and increase salaries and funding for cultural institutions. When looking for sources other than party programs, Andrej Babiš's book repeatedly emphasizes that culture is the core of national identity that makes Czechs unique among other nations (Babiš 2017, 162). The book lists an array of all famous Czech pieces of art, architecture, and literature, especially mentioning the need to promote regional culture and tourism. These cultural 'visions for the future', however, have not been translated into concrete policies under Babiš's government.

Nationalism without adjectives as a cultural policy direction under SMER in Slovakia

SMER has not addressed the issue of culture in great detail in its pre-election programs. Still, the party sees culture not only as the basis of the identity and spiritual life of Slovak society but also as an area with potential for the development of Slovakia (SMER 2012). In its manifestos, the party offers new ways of financing culture, wants to reconstruct cultural buildings and monuments or addresses the public media's organizational, legislative, and financial issues (SMER (2010); 2012, 2023). Initially, SMER did not have illiberal or populist tendencies in the field of culture; however, in its 2023 program, the party proposed modifying the management system of public media to make it more resistant to political and economic influences (SMER 2023). This may lead to greater government control of the public service media as seen in Poland or Hungary.

However, except for the second Fico government between 2012 and 2016, SMER have always governed together with the Slovak National Party (SNS). The mainstreaming of more radical stances and ideological thickening of positions on the culture of SMER and Fico can thus be traced to the SNS approach to culture. The entire cultural ideology of SNS is based on nativism. In their program, they write that 'Culture is always national in its essence' (SNS 2012). The party also declares that Slovak culture is built on Christian values and the legacy of St Cyril and Methodius (SNS (2012); 2016). Only Slovak culture is essential for the SNS party: 'We will advocate that the funds earmarked for national culture be used primarily for original Slovak works and to promote authentic Slovak national culture in all its forms and diversity' (SNS 2016). In doing so, the party imagines protecting Slovak culture in various ways. For example, by constitutionally protecting the Slovak language (SNS 2012), by introducing strict legislation preventing the export of cultural monuments abroad (SNS 2016), or by ensuring that 50% of the airtime in the media is made up of Slovak productions (SNS 2020). SNS calls for strict control of the media (SNS 2016) and prioritizes responsibility over media freedom (SNS 2012).

The process of mainstreaming of radical right ideology can thus be traced in the programs of the successive Slovak governments. In 2006, the government's manifesto stated that political and ideological influences on culture was unacceptable. That also applied to the government's 2012 manifesto, which primarily focused on the issue of cultural funding. In contrast, the 2016 program statement primarily emphasized Slovak culture in nationalist terms. This shift toward culture was confirmed by the 2023 manifesto, which proposed quotas for Slovak's work in the

media and support for cultural projects that highlight important Slovak personalities and historical events.

This ideological thickening culminated in 2023, when the SNS-nominated Martina Šimkovičová became the Minister of Culture of the fourth Fico government. The most recent enemy, which, according to the SNS, threatens Slovak culture, is the LGBTI community and their agenda. That is why the party (successfully) demanded a halt to state funding of events associated with this minority (SNS 2023). Prime Minister Fico also supports this effort as the following quote illustrates:

Minister of Culture Šimkovičová is not a person who creates a third toilet for people who do not know whether they are this or that, she is a person who is aware of what Slovakia needs in terms of culture, and I want to assure you all that the Minister has my full personal support. (Wagner and Enyedi 2024)

Further, the Ministry of Culture succeeded in enforcing greater control over the public media, and there are also indications that private media face pressure to be less critical toward the government. In addition, there is a change of elites in positions managed by the Ministry of Culture, where people close to the government are newly appointed. All these changes in culture are being made with the approval of the SMER party and Prime Minister Fico, so this suggests that the cultural policy of SMER is being strongly radicalized and nationalized.

Table 2 summarizes the main findings of our analysis of the cultural policies carried out by these parties in a simplified, dichotomous framework, across our main analytical dimensions. As the table shows, the findings of our qualitative analysis are in line with our hypotheses since we find various policy initiatives in Hungary and Poland, which implement thick ideological components, whereas these are mostly absent in Czechia, and to a lesser extent in Slovakia, too. The following section uses quantitative text analysis to test whether such differences can also be traced in party leaders' discourse, and if the salience of ideological components has changed over time.

Text analysis: what populist leaders' discourse tells us about their approach toward culture

The salience of culture is reflected in the speeches of party leaders. In each country, Babiš, Fico, Kaczynski, and Orbán dedicate rhetorical space to the topic of culture in proportion to cultural policy's importance for their political agenda. To measure this, we look at how frequently they use the word 'culture' or its variants ('cultural', 'cultures', etc.). Figure 1 below shows how frequently each party leader invokes the topic of culture in their public speeches.⁹

Orbán and Kaczynski place greater emphasis on culture. The topic initially increased in importance for both leaders as they established their hold on political power. That said, Orbán has come to emphasize culture less in the past 2 years. ¹⁰ On the other hand, culture does not appear to have ever

	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
Changes introduced/advocated for				
increase in political relevance of culture	no	yes	yes	yes
legal changes	no	yes	no	no
elite replacement	no	yes	yes	yes
creation of new institutions aligned with government/party interest; creation of state-dependent clientele networks	no	yes	yes	no
censorship	no	yes	yes	no
capture of public media	no*	yes	yes	yes
increased financial support to public media		yes	yes	no
limits to freedom of speech	no	no	yes	no
limits to media freedom	yes	yes	yes	yes
reduced financial support to non-aligned institutions	no	yes	yes	yes

Table 2. Summary of changes in cultural policies in CEE under populist governments.

Notes: In bold: most important/far-reaching changes; * Although there have been attempts by ANO to gain more control within the Council of Czech Television – the public broadcaster that Babiš repeatedly criticizes (A2larm 2020; Echo24 2024).

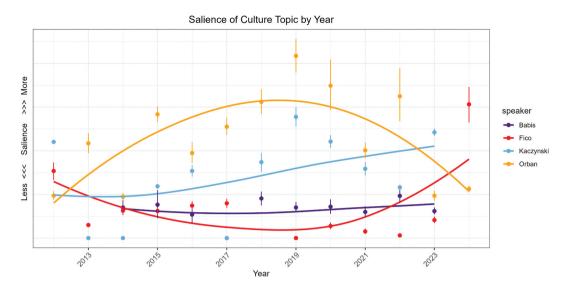


Figure 1. Salience of culture topic by party leader and year.

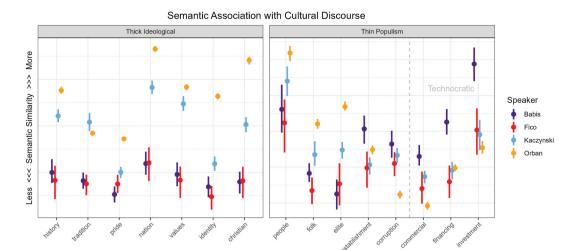
Table 3. Top 10 nearest culture terms for each head of state.							
Orbán	Kaczynski	Babiš	Fico				
traditions christianity values civilization roots identity religion christian	dimension sphere consciousness tradition polish countryside traditions spiritual	monuments restoration infrastructure reconstruction buildings promotion sport educational	represented trip absent affairs deputy questions minister science				
spiritual origins	equality dignity	sports digitization	interior environment				

been a salient topic for Babiš. He rarely invokes the topic in public speeches. As we will see, this salience is also reflected in the kinds of topics that are associated with culture in Babiš's speeches. Culture was not a salient topic for Fico until he became prime minister for the third time at the end of 2023, when his emphasis on culture increased dramatically. After Fico formed a coalition with the right-wing nationalist SNP, he promptly changed his rhetorical style.

There is not only a difference in salience. Culture carries a different *meaning* for each leader. When each leader talks about culture, the associated topics vary considerably. Table 3 shows the 10 words that are most closely related to culture for each leader - because they are most likely to use these words when giving speeches on the topic.

Orbán and Kaczynski both associate culture with the 'thick' characteristics of religion, nationalism, and traditional values. They are more likely to use terms such as 'roots', 'Christianity', 'countryside', 'spiritual', and 'civilization.' This right-wing populist framing contrasts starkly with Babis and Fico, who use much more technical, managerial language. The terms they tend to use with culture include 'monuments', 'buildings', 'affairs', 'minister', and 'digitization'. The last term represents a more entrepreneurial logic. For Babiš and Fico, culture is the concern of the government minister, and not a battleground for values.

Further, it is possible to focus specifically on terms that define the two types of populist actors in government discussed in this paper. While 'thick ideological' terms are characteristic of Orbán and Kaczyński, they are not relevant for Fico or Babiš. The semantic association of nation, Christian values,



Key Terms

Figure 2. Semantic association with cultural discourse by type.

and history is strongest in the discourses of the former politicians (left panel of Figure 2), the latter, unsurprisingly, score low on the thick ideological terms. When it comes to thin populist terms, in which we combine purely populist anti-elitism and people-centrism with technocratic terms (acknowledging the differences between these two categories), Babiš stands out as the most technocratic in his approach to culture, in which anti-elitism is also present to a higher degree compared to the other leaders. Although all leaders incorporate people-centric messages into their discourses on culture, it is more relevant for Orbán and Kaczynski, with the former scoring higher also on anti-elitism. Finally, regarding Fico, it seems that a combination of people-centric and technocratic features characterize his discourse on culture.

Conclusions

Since 2010, cultural policies in CEE have responded to a great degree to the variety of populist or illiberal actors that came to power in the region. In this article, we explored how the thick ideological actors of the populist radical right – Fidesz and Orbán in Hungary, and PiS and Kaczyński in Poland – differ in their discourse on culture and cultural policies from the more thin, purely populist and technocratic ANO and Babiš in Czechia, and traced the process of radicalization and ideological thickening of SMER and Fico in Slovakia. Combining qualitative analysis of the most important changes in cultural policies introduced by these parties in government with a quantitative analysis of the discourses of their leaders, we show that the thin-thick distinction affects both the saliency and the content of cultural policies. Culture is more salient for the ideologically thick populist radical right parties than for the thin populist or technocratic ones. While the latter put more emphasis on efficiency, the former underline the thick ideological components (nativism, nationalism, and traditionalism) in their discourse on culture. Consequently, the changes introduced to cultural policies by these populists in power go from the minimal intervention by Babiš and ANO, through the increasingly illiberal efforts of Fico and SMER, to the practical capture of all cultural institutions or creation of alternative ones aligned with the radical right ideology in case of Orbán and Fidesz, and Kaczynski and PiS.

With the increasing number of populist and illiberal actors gaining power in Western Europe, it is to be seen whether these dynamics of cultural policies under populist rule are transferable to contexts other than CEE, although there are already signs indicating that the strengthening of



populist parties in Scandinavia has also led to an incorporation of thick ideological components into their cultural policies (Bjerkem 2016; Borén, Grzyś, and Young 2021). An interesting development took place after the EP elections in June 2024, when ANO co-established a new EP group named Patriots for Europe together with Fidesz and FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria). It yet remains unclear how the participation in this national conservative group will influence ANO's ideological profile. However, some impact on its perspective on cultural policies may indeed be anticipated in the near future.

Notes

- 1. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp; 30 July 2014. https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/primeminister-viktor-Orbán-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp.
- 2. While there are fewer speeches by Kaczyński, his are the longest on average. Average word count for each leader's speeches is 1.479 for Kaczyński, 1.225 or Orbán, 871 for Fico, and 695 for Babiš.
- 3. Analysis was conducted using the conText package in R, developed by Rodriguez, Spirling, and Stewart (2023).
- 4. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's speech at the 29th Bálványos Summer Open University and Student Camp; https:// 2015-2022.miniszterelnok.hu/prime-minister-viktor-Orbáns-speech-at-the-29th-balvanyos-summer-openuniversity-and-student-camp/.
- 5. The director of the Opera, Szilveszter Ókovács, almost fell prey to the government's anti-LGBTQ campaign in 2018 after Erkel, a theatre he also supervised put Billy Elliot on its program, which a pro-government newspaper accused of including 'several hints to homosexuality'.
- 6. https://dzieje.pl/kultura-i-sztuka/wicepremier-glinski-rozwoj-polski-nie-moze-sie-dokonywac-w-pustcekulturowej [online access 21.01.2025]
- 7. As evidenced by the Executive Summary of the 2024 State Budget published by the Ministry of Finance of the Czech Republic, available online at the following address: https://www.mfcr.cz/en/about-ministry/media-room/ news-and-press-releases/2024/the-2024-state-budget-executive-summary-54598.
- 8. See ANO 2011's electoral manifesto from 2021 titled "Až do roztrhání těla! Ten Jediný program, který potřebujete. Jako vždycky." [in English: "To the point of tearing up! The only program you need. As always."], available online at the following address: https://www.anobudelip.cz/file/edee/2021/ano-volebni-program.pdf.
- 9. Speeches used for this analysis were given by each leader in a variety of venues, including parliament, public ceremonies, and party events.
- 10. The salience of culture in Orbán's discourse peaked in 2018 and 2019, following his 2018 speech at the Baile Tusnad Free University in Romania where he declared 'culture war' to be a priority for the coming years. However, this emphasis has recently been overshadowed by a series of crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis, and record-high inflation in 2023, which shifted the focus of his discourse toward health, security, and economy-related issues. That said, Orbán has not entirely abandoned cultural issues, but rather has changed his emphasis. He still frequently invokes concerns about language and heritage but now more commonly talks about the economy, Russia, the EU, and foreign policy.

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