

The Domestic Politics of EU Action against Democratic Backsliding

Wider research context/theoretical framework: After years of hesitation, the European Union (EU) has finally recognized democratic backsliding as one of its biggest challenges and has become more assertive. Research on (countering) democratic backsliding is growing quickly, but mostly focused on either domestic causes of backsliding or EU-level accounts of counter-measures. What is systematically neglected is the link between both levels: the domestic politics before and after the EU takes action. The domestic politics of EU action against democratic backsliding, as understood in this project, consist of domestic party positions and arguments on EU action and their effects on citizens' attitudes.

Hypotheses/research question/objectives: Our basic assumption is that the EU's ability to act and to have an impact against member state backsliding crucially depends on domestic political support. Consequently, our project addresses the following research questions: Which political parties support and oppose EU action against backsliding and why? Which effects do these party-political arguments have on citizens' attitudes regarding EU action against backsliding?

Approach / Methods: The project will be realized in two steps. First, we will rely on primary text sources (newspaper articles, parliamentary protocols) to identify party positions and frames regarding EU action and we will conduct semi-structured interviews with party officials to investigate the underlying motives for (not) taking specific positions on EU actions. Secondly, to collect information on citizens' attitudes towards EU actions, we will rely on survey experiments in six countries (Austria, Germany, Hungary, Netherlands, Poland, Slovakia). On this basis, we will estimate the causal effects of party cues and frames on citizens attitudes.

Level of originality / innovation: Existing research mostly focuses on EU-level institutional barriers to explain EU (in)action against democratic backsliding, while neglecting the underlying domestic politics of EU action and its domestic impact. Apart from its novel focus on precisely this link between EU action and domestic politics, this projects also goes beyond existing research regarding its empirical scope. In addition to the "usual suspects" of backsliding EU member states, the project will also cover domestic politics in selected EU member states that are democratically stable ("non-backsliding states"), threatened by democratic backsliding ("potential backsliding states"), and seeking to re-establish democratic principles ("potential recovering states").

Primary researchers involved: The project team will consist of three principal investigators with complementary research expertise and a long trajectory of cooperation – Michael Blauburger (Salzburg), Aleksandra Maatsch (Wroclaw), and Arndt Wonka (Bremen) – as well as three postdoc researchers to be hired one by each project partner.