

Report



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## Transatlantic Foundation

## Against the Odds

*Lessons From Liberal-Progressive Successes in  
Central and Eastern Europe*

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## Summary

Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is seen as a region where authoritarian-populist leaders dominate, but its political landscape has become much more varied since 2020. After a clear authoritarian surge, pro-democracy forces have bounced back, unseating authoritarian incumbents in five countries. There is an ebb-and-flow of democratic gains and setbacks, shaped by electoral systems, coalition permutations, the resilience of society and institutions, and strategic political agency. Recently formed liberal-progressive parties were typically at the forefront of defending democracy and achieved considerable anti-authoritarian successes. They have been in government amid stable conditions in Czechia, Slovenia, and Poland. They have also been in government in Bulgaria and Romania for shorter times and amid greater political volatility. Such parties have not been in government in Croatia, Hungary, and Slovakia yet. In government, liberal-progressive parties have pursued democracy-enhancing reforms and cracked down on corruption. In parliamentary opposition, they have acted as key democratic watchdogs and defended fundamental rights. They have also spearheaded or contributed to some of the most significant anti-authoritarian campaigns and efforts even when not represented in parliament. Liberal-progressive parties did all of this in a difficult political, social and institutional environment.

Analysis of liberal-progressive campaigns across Central and Eastern Europe identifies four lessons for pro-democracy actors in the region and the rest of Europe. First, successful actors own the issue, catch the wave, and create the narrative. Campaigns were most effective when they were on topics where these actors had authentic credibility—such as corruption, the rule of law, and human rights—and when they seized critical moments of political opportunity. They did not only mobilize emotions but translated them into concrete outcomes: protests, legislative proposals, referendums, and policy reversals. Clear objectives turned diffuse frustration into actionable demands, while well-timed interventions ensured that issues remained at the center of public debate.

Second, broad, issue-based coordination is decisive. The most impactful campaigns brought together political parties, civil society, activists, and professional communities in complementary roles. In low-trust environments, no actor commands sufficient legitimacy alone; the combination of institutional capacity and grassroots authenticity sustains pressure and forces accountability. A unified chorus proved far more effective than fragmented efforts, keeping issues in the spotlight and extending their political lifespan.

Third, successful campaigns translated complex policy issues into clear, emotionally resonant narratives grounded in everyday experiences. While authoritarian-populists have often dominated through fear and outrage, liberal-progressive actors achieved breakthroughs when they offered credible, hopeful, and relatable alternatives, using creativity, humor, and authenticity to broaden their appeal beyond their core electorate.

Fourth, social media is the central arena of political contestation. Issue salience today depends as much on visibility as on substance, and digital platforms are key to agenda-setting and mobilization. The most effective campaigns treated social media not merely as a communication channel but as an organizing infrastructure—using it for mobilizing supporters, amplifying messages, and sustaining engagement over time. In an attention economy, where visibility shapes perceived importance, liberal-progressive actors succeeded when they actively competed for narrative dominance across platforms.

## Introduction

Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is a contested political landscape in flux. It is often portrayed as a region defined by democratic backsliding and the electoral dominance of authoritarian-populist forces. While this picture captures important realities, it is incomplete. Alongside the rise and entrenchment of authoritarian-populists, pro-democracy liberal-progressive parties and movements have also emerged, expanded their voter base, entered government in several countries, and—crucially—mobilized citizens to defend democratic norms. Central and Eastern Europe is thus not simply a laboratory of democratic decline, but a region undergoing political realignment shaped by cultural polarization, evolving digital media dynamics, and institutional stress. Authoritarian-populists continue to enjoy structural advantages there, particularly where they have captured state institutions and media ecosystems and operate under a favorable electoral system. Yet liberal-progressive actors have demonstrated in many cases that electoral and civic resistance is possible and effective.

Underlying this comparative analysis is the fact that dismissing voters who support authoritarian-populists as irrational or uninformed is neither accurate nor productive for defending and renewing democracy. Nor does it help when liberal-progressives fall into familiar traps such as reacting to populist framings, offering technocratic answers, or ignoring issues that matter for people’s everyday lives. Pro-democracy actors must learn not only from one another but also from the communication and mobilization techniques that made authoritarian-populists successful. The experiences of the liberal-progressive actors in eight CEE countries looked at in this paper—Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia—offer important lessons in terms of strategy and communications for other pro-democracy actors in Europe.

This paper first reviews the overall evolution of the electoral competition in the region between authoritarian-populists and liberal-progressives. It then looks at the performance of liberal-progressive parties and movements in recent years: in elections, in government, in the opposition, and outside parliaments. The paper then presents cases of successful liberal-progressive campaigns in the eight countries and identifies lessons that can be drawn from them.

## Methodology

Comparable quantitative data regarding the electoral performance of “ideological families” over time is scarce as parties emerge, change, dissolve, or run on joint platforms of varying types. The analysis of electoral performance presented for the years 2001–2023 is based on electoral data from the Timbro Authoritarian Populism Index, which calculates vote shares for parties of different ideological backgrounds, such as conservatism, social democracy, and green politics.<sup>1</sup> Timbro further categorizes parties as authoritarian-populist as an overarching category on top of these ideological families; for the purpose of mapping the overall vote trend in the region, a corresponding overarching category of liberal-progressive parties was created by grouping liberal (but not liberal-conservative), green, and regionalist parties. Main liberal-progressive parties in the eight selected countries were identified, with 11 as the core focus of analysis. (See Table 1.) In each country, successful liberal-progressive campaigns were also identified, in which these parties played a key or supportive role.

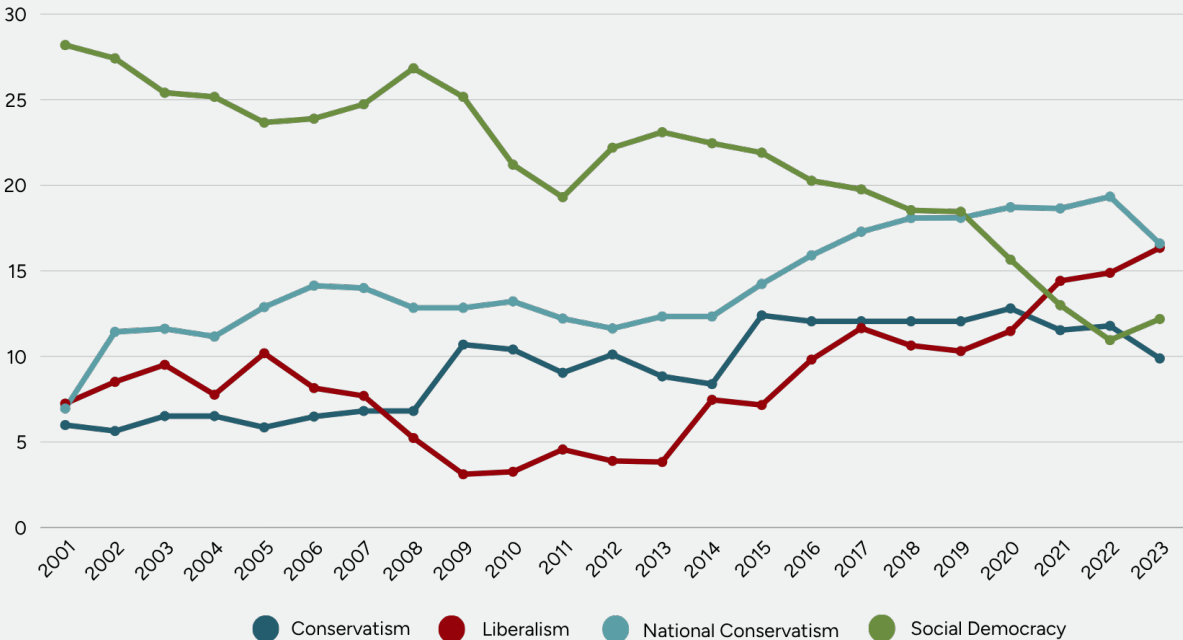
Table 1. Main Liberal-Progressive Parties in Central and Eastern Europe.

	Party (established)	Origin in Movement	Main Issues	Ideology
<b>Bulgaria</b>	Da, Bulgaria! (2017)	In anti-oligarchy protests	Corruption, EU, judicial reform, rule of law	Economically center-right, socially liberal, pro-EU
<b>Bulgaria</b>	We Continue The Change (2021)	No (Out With The Mafia protests bolstered launch)	Corruption, economic competitiveness, energy independence, EU, judicial reform	Economically center-left, socially progressive, pro-EU
<b>Croatia</b>	Možemo! (2019)	In local green and leftist movements	Corruption, civil liberties, environmental sustainability, transparency	Economically center-left, socially progressive, pro-EU
<b>Croatia</b>	Centar (2020)	In citizen's initiative for Split local elections	Democracy, decentralization, economic liberalization, transparency	Economically center-right, socially liberal, pro-EU
<b>Czechia</b>	Mayors and Independents (STAN) (2004)	No	Corruption, decentralization, education, localism, reducing bureaucracy	Economically center-right, socially liberal, pro-EU
<b>Czechia</b>	Pirate Party (2009)	In student-driven grassroots movement	Civil liberties, corruption, political transparency, direct democracy, digitalization,	Economically center-left, socially progressive, pro-EU
<b>Hungary</b>	Momentum (2017)	Grassroots movement against Olympics bid	Civil liberties, corruption, democratic institutions, education, EU	Economically centrist, socially progressive, pro-EU
<b>Poland</b>	Nowoczesna (2015, merged with others 2025)	No	Civil liberties, economic liberalization, rule of law	Economically center-right, socially liberal, pro-EU
<b>Romania</b>	Save Romania Union (USR) (2016)	Created after success of the Save Bucharest Union	Corruption, economic liberalization, EU, justice system, rule of law, state efficiency	Economically center-right, socially liberal, pro-EU
<b>Slovakia</b>	Progressive Slovakia (2017)	No	Civil liberties, corruption, democratic institutions, EU, rule of law	Economically centrist, socially progressive, pro-EU
<b>Slovenia</b>	Freedom Movement (2022)	No (Friday protests bolstered launch)	Corruption, digitalization, environment, healthcare reform, transparency	Economically center-left, socially progressive, pro-EU

# The Evolution of the Electoral Competition

Developments in Central and Eastern Europe support the general theory of an ongoing political realignment in which the main divide is between national traditionalists and cosmopolitan liberals. According to the Timbro Authoritarian Populism Index, between 2000 and 2023, the largest movement of voters was away from parties in the social-democratic ideological family while parties in the national conservative family overtook those in the conservative one. In 2023, parties with national conservative and liberal ideologies held the largest vote shares in the region, with 16.3% and 16.6% respectively. (See Figure 1.) Such political alignments tend to shift in response to major long-term social, political, or economic developments, which usually weaken established parties. Voters often perceive these parties' positions as fixed and, as a result, turn to new actors that put a stronger emphasis and take clearer positions on emerging issues.<sup>2</sup> From the 1970s to the 2010s, Europe's dominant political fault line was economic: left versus right, social-democrats versus free-market conservatives, largely reflecting the class divide.<sup>3</sup> Over time, issues such as migration, gender equality, and European integration rose in salience, exposing new social divisions.<sup>4</sup> The eurozone and migration crises of the 2010s, notably, particularly reshaped the landscape. Cultural and identity-based concerns now play a more decisive role for voters than traditional economic policy debates.<sup>5</sup> A new primary cleavage is thus forming between national collectivist traditionalists and cosmopolitan progressive liberals, reflecting a broader cultural conflict between open versus closed societies. The former advocate stronger sovereignty, more interventionist economic policy, and conservative or traditional positions on identity. The latter generally favor globalization and open markets and take progressive stances on social issues such as gender

Figure 1. Ideological Families CEE Vote Share, 2001–2023 (%).



Source: Timbro Authoritarian Populism Index.

equality or LGBTQ+ rights. The impact of this ideological realignment can be seen across Europe, including in CEE countries, and the divide between authoritarian-populist and progressive-liberal parties is mapped over it.

Central and Eastern Europe has the reputation of being a region where authoritarian-populist leaders dominate, but its political landscape has become much more varied over the past decade with liberal-progressive wins in some countries. Given the personalization of politics, the logic of the attention economy, and the way social media rewards outrage and simplicity, authoritarian-populist parties have gained more attention. But, in parallel, liberal-progressive ones have been expanding their base considerably in parts of the region, such as in Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Slovenia.<sup>6</sup> Between 2017 and 2021, six of the eight CEE countries had authoritarian-populists in government. (See Table 2.) Between 2021 and 2026, liberal-progressive parties entered government in five countries: Bulgaria, Czechia, Poland, Romania, and Slovenia. While the authoritarian-populist parties have typically evolved from conservative or center-right parties, the liberal-progressive ones often emerged as new grassroots movements in the mid-2010s. The latter are culturally liberal or progressive, strongly democratic, and pro-EU. Their key issues include the rule of law, human rights, democracy, and corruption. Economically their positions vary from center-left to center-right. Their campaigns have typically centered on corruption, human rights, institutional reform, and a “new kind of leadership” in politics. Many became dominant in urban centers, especially capital cities, and some have since become national frontrunners.

### **Between 2021 and 2026, liberal-progressive parties entered government in five countries.**

After a clear authoritarian surge, pro-democracy forces have bounced back in recent years, with authoritarian incumbents unseated in five countries, as noted. The gap in vote share between authoritarian-populist and liberal-progressive parties had risen to almost 27 percentage points in 2019 before declining to slightly below 16 percentage points in 2023, the lowest since 2005. (See Figure 2.) If Hungary and Poland, the countries with the least proportional electoral systems and where authoritarian incumbents were most able to entrench their power, are excluded, the gap in the other six is less than 5 percentage points. In the countries with the most proportional electoral systems in the region—Slovenia, Slovakia, and to some extent Bulgaria—the main political competition is between an authoritarian-populist party and a liberal-progressive one. Croatia, Czechia, and Romania are somewhere in-between these two groups, with the largest liberal-progressive party ranking third or fourth position with around 10% of the votes and having tended to join pro-democracy government coalitions.

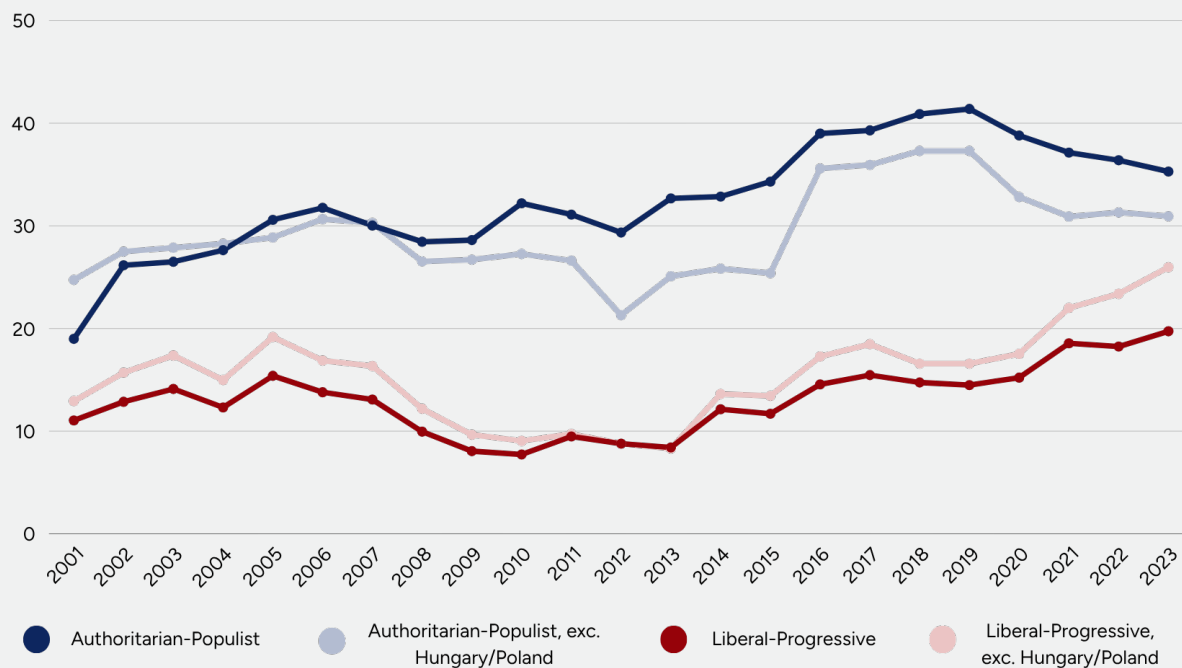
In countries with more proportional electoral systems, there are clear signs of the political realignment pitting authoritarian-populist parties against liberal-progressive ones, and one of the latter was able to emerge as the main pro-democracy party. In the countries with more majoritarian systems, Hungary and Poland, Fidesz and Law and Justice (PiS) held large majorities in parliament for extended periods, with liberal-progressive parties struggling to build up significant vote shares. There has been greater backsliding in these two countries and broad center-right or cross-ideological coalitions have been required to challenge them as the main opposing force. In Poland, it was the mainly center-right Civic Coalition and in Hungary the Everyone’s Hungary Movement in 2022 and the Tisza party in 2026. The degree to which the electoral system has a first-past-the-post constituency component alongside a proportional representation element is an important factor. In Hungary, 106 of the

Table 2. Main Authoritarian-Populist and Liberal-Progressive Parties in Government in Central and Eastern Europe.

	Bulgaria	Croatia	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Romania	Slovakia	Slovenia
2010				AP			AP	
2011				AP				
2012				AP		AP	AP	AP
2013				AP		AP	AP	AP
2014			AP	AP		AP	AP	
2015			AP	AP	AP	AP	AP	
2016			AP	AP	AP		AP	AP
2017	AP		AP	AP	AP	AP	AP	
2018	AP		AP	AP	AP	AP	AP	
2019	AP		AP	AP	AP	AP	LP	AP
2020	AP		AP	AP	AP	LP	AP	AP
2021	AP	LP	AP	LP	AP	AP	LP	AP
2022	LP		LP	AP	AP		AP	AP
2023	LP		LP	AP	AP	LP	AP	LP
2024	LP		LP	AP	LP	AP	AP	LP
2025	LP		LP	AP	LP	AP	AP+LP	AP

Dark green: Authoritarian-populist supermajority or majority government  
 Medium green: Authoritarian-populist senior partner in minority or coalition government  
 Light green: Authoritarian-populist junior partner in coalition government  
 Medium blue: Liberal-progressive senior partner in minority or coalition government  
 Light blue: Liberal-progressive junior partner in coalition government  
 Yellow: Authoritarian-populist senior partner and liberal-progressive junior partner in coalition government  
 Authoritarian-populist parties from Timbro categorization; liberal-progressive parties from author's categorization.

Figure 2: Authoritarian-Populist and Liberal-Progressive Parties CEE Vote Share, 2001–2023 (%).



Source: Based on data from Timbro Authoritarian Populism Index.

Note: The liberal-progressive category in this figure is not restricted to the parties selected for the wider analysis in this paper.

199 seats are decided in this majoritarian way with the rest on a proportional basis through national party lists—a system shaped by Fidesz that is extremely conducive to one party winning a parliamentary majority or supermajority even with less than 50% of the vote. In Poland seats are allocated proportionally but through party lists in 41 constituencies rather than national lists. Such designs incentivize parties to run in two opposing large coalitions. In Central and Europe, this usually results in a match between authoritarian-populist right and center-right blocs, to the detriment of liberal-progressive parties and their agenda.

Overall, therefore, the recent period is characterized by an ebb-and-flow of democratic gains and setbacks, shaped by electoral systems, coalition permutations, and the resilience of society and institutions. In Czechia, Prime Minister Andrej Babiš's populist ANO party lost the parliamentary elections in 2021 but came back to power in 2025. In Slovenia, Prime Minister Janez Janša's authoritarian-populist Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) was defeated by a new liberal party in 2022. Poland's PiS government was ousted by a pro-democracy opposition alliance in 2023. In 2025, however, the candidate it supported, Karol Nawrocki, was elected president. Thus, rather than an example of democratic regression, Central and Eastern Europe can be viewed as one of political realignment in an environment of platformed media, fragmented trust, and institutional stress.<sup>7</sup>

# The Electoral and Governance Performance of Liberal-Progressive Parties

Liberal-progressive parties have already been in government amid stable conditions in Czechia, Slovenia, and Poland. In **Czechia**, the Pirate Party and the Mayors and Independents (STAN) party ran on a joint list in the 2021 parliamentary elections, won 15.6% of the vote, and entered government as junior partners in the coalition that ousted ANO. After its foundation in 2009, the Czech Pirate Party had won no seats in 2010 and 2013 but gained 22 with 10.8% of the vote in 2017. It left the coalition government in 2024. STAN, a liberal party rooted in localism and subsidiarity, had been gradually strengthening since 2010, receiving 2–4% of the vote prior to 2021 making that year a breakthrough for them. The two parties ran on separate lists in 2025 but their combined vote share of 20.2% demonstrated rising support for liberal-progressive forces overall. They are now back in opposition. In **Slovenia**, the social-liberal Freedom Movement party led a coalition government after the 2022 parliamentary elections, in which it came first with 34.5% of the vote. It very narrowly came first again in the elections in March with 28.7% of the votes and a one-seat lead. The elections were widely seen as a referendum on democracy and Janša and his SDS party, which had tried to push the country toward the model of Hungary's "illiberal democracy". Soon after the 2022 elections, two small social-liberal forces merged with Freedom Movement, consolidating the previously fragmented liberal-progressive camp. In earlier elections, their combined vote share had ranged between 5% and 13%, so their 2022 victory was a striking breakthrough. The party's very narrow win in March 2026 can be considered a good result given the global trend of incumbents performing poorly. In **Poland**, Nowoczesna (Modern), a center-right liberal party was founded in 2015 and won 7.6% of the vote in that year's parliamentary elections. It joined forces with other pro-democracy actors to form the Civic Coalition alliance that eventually unseated the PiS government in 2023 (with the help of two smaller coalition partners), although it lost parliamentary seats and its individual branding as a result of running in the coalition. Nowoczesna's strong stance on abortion and LGBTQ+ rights helped mobilize younger and female voters, which was an essential factor in PiS losing office. In 2025, Nowoczesna merged with Civic Platform and Polish Initiative to turn Civic Coalition into a party.

Liberal-progressive parties have also been in government in Bulgaria and Romania for shorter times and amid greater political volatility. Between 2021 and 2025, **Bulgaria** held seven parliamentary elections as repeated deadlocks prevented the formation of stable coalition governments (and another will be held in April 2026). Amid this cycle of breakdowns and resets, Da, Bulgaria! (Yes, Bulgaria!) and We Continue The Change (PP) managed to lead a coalition government in 2021–2022 and, as part of a power-sharing arrangement with the populist Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB) party, in 2023–2024. Da, Bulgaria! is a center-right liberal party founded in 2017 by former justice minister Hristo Ivanov and it focuses on the fight against corruption and on judicial reform. In 2017, it gained under 3% of the vote, and in the three elections held in 2021 it was part of the Democratic Bulgaria electoral alliance that won between 6% and 12.5%. PP is a liberal-progressive party founded in 2021 by two reformist ministers from an interim government. With a clear anti-corruption platform and promising to transcend old political divides, PP immediately became the country's largest party, winning 25.7% of the vote in the November 2021 parliamentary elections. In 2023, PP and Democratic Bulgaria joined forces and won 24.6% of the vote, which allowed them to make the power-sharing deal with GERB. Their alliance lost some of its support over the two elections held in 2024 but it remained the second-largest political force with around 14% on both

occasions. PP-DB has been polling between 10% and 15% in the campaign for the coming April 2026 elections. In **Romania**, Bucharest Mayor Nicusor Dan founded the Save Romania Union (USR) in 2016. It positioned itself as an anti-corruption, pro-EU alternative to the political establishment and bringing a new type of political leadership. It won 9% in the parliamentary elections in 2016, 15% in 2020, and 12.4% in 2024. The USR was part of a coalition government with two other parties in 2020–2021 but left it over disagreements on the transparency of a local development program. In 2025, it re-entered government as part of a new pro-EU coalition, with four ministerial positions, while Dan won the presidential election running as an independent candidate.

Liberal-progressive parties have not been in government in Croatia, Hungary, and Slovakia yet. In **Croatia**, Možemo! (We Can!), established in 2019 by green and leftist movements in Zagreb, is a left-leaning progressive party emphasizing environmental sustainability, transparency, and social inclusion. It entered parliament in 2020 after receiving 7% of the vote, and it increased its share to 9% in 2024. Another such party is Centar (originally called Pametno), founded in 2020, which originated in a citizens' initiative in Split. Its coalition with the Focus party won 4% of the vote in 2020 and it joined the center-left Rivers of Justice coalition in 2024, which won 25.4% and came in second place. Although Centar holds only two out of the parliament's 151 seats, it sustains a liberal presence in the fragmented Croatian political landscape. In **Hungary**, the Momentum Movement party established in 2017 is a culturally progressive party with strong anti-corruption and anti-authoritarian positions, promoting a new generation of political leadership. It failed to enter parliament in 2018 with 3.1% of the vote but joined the United for Hungary opposition alliance in 2022, winning nine out of the parliament's 199 seats. It decided not to run in the 2026 elections in order to facilitate an opposition victory over Fidesz. In **Slovakia**, Progressive Slovakia was founded in 2017 as a centrist, social-liberal party focused on the fight against corruption, democratic renewal, and the rule of law. In the 2020 parliamentary elections, it ran on a joint list with Spolu (Together-Civic Democracy) that narrowly missed the 7% threshold for entering parliament. The party was revitalized under Michal Šimečka, formerly vice-president of the European Parliament, who became its leader in 2022. A year later, it came second in the elections with 18%.

### **In government, liberal-progressive parties have pursued democracy-enhancing reforms and cracked down on corruption.**

In government, liberal-progressive parties have pursued democracy-enhancing reforms and cracked down on corruption. In **Bulgaria**, the PP–Democratic Bulgaria coalition government launched an ambitious reform drive to confront entrenched corruption and foreign influence. It introduced constitutional amendments and an anti-corruption bill to create new oversight bodies with extended investigative powers. It also pushed for independent judicial investigations into high-level cases, although challenges in the Constitutional Court limited some of these reforms.<sup>8</sup> The government improved public procurement transparency and enacted a national whistleblower protection law implementing the related EU directive.<sup>9</sup> It effected a foreign-policy turn as well to mitigate Russian influence and oligarchic pro-Russia dependency for example by terminating Russia's concession to run a Lukoil terminal on the Black Sea coast<sup>10</sup> or expelling Russian diplomats and spies.<sup>11</sup> In **Czechia**, the Pirate Party and STAN pushed forward a reform agenda centered on digital freedom, open governance, and human rights during their time in government from 2021 to 2025.<sup>12</sup> The Pirate Party has prominently campaigned for checks on oligarchic power, and it spearheaded enforcement and strengthening amendments to the Conflict of Interest Act—dubbed

“Lex Babiš”—that tightened rules on media ownership and wealth declarations for public officials to curb the intertwining of business and political interests. It also promoted and passed the whistleblower protection law strengthening protection for civil servants and individuals. In **Slovenia**, the governing coalition led by the Freedom Movement party after 2022 introduced many pro-democracy and liberal reforms. The government legalized same-sex marriage, strengthened hate-crime penalties and minority protections, and took steps to bolster media independence.<sup>13</sup> It also implemented the EU’s whistleblower directive, enhanced integrity standards in public administration, and amended anti-corruption laws to expand the powers of the Commission for the Prevention of Corruption, solidifying Slovenia’s reputation as one of the region’s most progressive democracies.<sup>14</sup>

### In parliamentary opposition, liberal-progressive parties have acted as key democratic watchdogs and defended fundamental rights.

In parliamentary opposition, liberal-progressive parties have acted as key democratic watchdogs and defended fundamental rights. They mobilized citizens, blocked regressive laws, and defended the rule of law in fragile institutional environments. In **Croatia**, Možemo! led calls for reproductive-health reform after a high-profile case of denied abortion in 2022. As a result, abortion pills became more widely available. In **Czechia** in 2015, the Pirate Party was at the forefront of mobilizing people and fighting the Babiš government’s proposed bill expanding the surveillance powers of the police and intelligence agencies, granting them access to private communications. The “snooping law” was ultimately passed, but in a modified form with its most invasive provisions removed. After entering parliament in 2017, the party became a key institutional actor on this issue by challenging aspects of the law. In **Hungary**, Momentum Movement organized weekly bridge blockades in Budapest over the spring of 2025 to protest the Fidesz government’s proposed constitutional restrictions on freedom of assembly and a related ban on the Budapest Pride parade. By drawing attention to the issue, mobilizing people and hosting high-profile European politicians, the party contributed to a symbolic victory against Orbán’s rule as, despite being banned, the parade went ahead and was the largest protest or march in the country’s history. In **Poland**, Nowoczesna played supporting role in parliament in stopping the near-total abortion ban proposed by the PiS government in 2016. The proposed law ignited the largest women’s strike, known as the Black Monday protests, and a combined effort led to it being abandoned. In **Slovakia**, Progressive Slovakia used parliamentary pressure and street mobilization to prevent the government led by Prime Minister Robert Fico’s Smer party from passing a controversial law changing the Criminal Code in 2023 that would have undermined judicial independence and freedom of speech, and weakened anti-corruption laws, including by abolishing the Special Prosecutor’s Office and reducing sentences. Protests were organized regularly until some parts of the law were revised or dropped.

Liberal-progressive parties have spearheaded or contributed to some of the most significant anti-authoritarian efforts in the region even before their parliamentary presence. Their actions have demonstrated that democratic resistance does not depend on office but on organization, courage, and the ability to connect with civic energy. Their presence on the streets, political stunts, and use of democratic tools such as referendums have forced governments to backtrack on legislation and triggered the resignation of officials. In **Bulgaria**, the Out With The Mafia! campaign triggered by Yes, Bulgaria!’s political stunt in 2020 was a defining moment.<sup>15</sup> It began after party leader Ivanov staged a public stunt exposing ties between senior officials and oligarchic interests. This ignited one of the largest anti-corruption protests in the country’s history, leading to the resignation of key figures and the

eventual fall of the government in 2021. In **Hungary**, Momentum's 2017 NOLimpia campaign gathered 266,000 signatures to force a referendum on Budapest's bid to host the 2024 Olympic Games, far above the needed threshold. Confronted with overwhelming public opposition, the government withdrew the bid, which handed Momentum a symbolic victory and established it as a new political force as it then registered as a party. Liberal-progressive parties have also amplified and sustained wider civic uprisings. In 2017, a proposed emergency decree that intended to weaken anti-corruption laws sparked **Romania's** biggest protests since 1989. At their peak, half a million citizens rallied across the country, which forced the government to withdraw the decree. The Resist! demonstrations were principally civic in nature, with the USR strongly supporting the protesters' demands and gaining traction as a result. There were more protests in 2018 against proposed changes to the penal code and the laws governing the justice system, which the USR again supported. In **Slovenia**, mass and sustained protests erupted in 2021 over corruption and attacks on press freedom during the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, compelling it to roll back emergency powers. The Friday protests were primarily driven by civil society,

### Box: Authoritarian-Populist Success Through Communications

Over the past two decades, authoritarian-populist leaders have achieved success less through one coherent ideology than through a highly effective communication strategy. Populism operates as a flexible political style built on simple, emotionally resonant conflict narratives that pit "the people" against a corrupt elite. Populists present themselves as the embodiment of the "will of the people," while portraying politics as an existential struggle of "us vs. them".<sup>a</sup> They amplify or manufacture crises, mobilize emotions such as fear and anger, and position themselves as the only credible solution. Their rhetoric is consistently anti-elite and anti-establishment, often combined with nationalist and exclusionary narratives toward certain groups that channel grievances and reinforce in-group identity. They use conspiracy theories and disinformation to undermine trust in institutions and expertise, replacing factual debate with symbolic, identity-driven politics. Populist movements are typically leader-centric and rely on a communication style that is direct, provocative, and intentionally norm-breaking. By speaking in simple, accessible language and tapping into people's desire for belonging and security, they build broad appeal across traditional ideological divides.<sup>b</sup>

Meanwhile, there is increasing evidence that authoritarian-populist governance tends to undermine institutional quality and policy performance over time. By weakening checks and balances, politicizing public administration, and prioritizing loyalty over competence, it often reduces government effectiveness, erodes regulatory quality, and increases corruption risks, leading to poorer policy outcomes and reduced public trust. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, excess mortality in authoritarian populist governed countries exceeded that of democratic countries by 8 percentage points.<sup>c</sup>

a. Marlene Laruelle, "Illiberalism: a conceptual introduction", *East European Politics*, 38:2, 2022.

b. Ruth Wodak, "Entering the 'post-shame era': the rise of illiberal democracy, populism and neo-authoritarianism in Europe", *Global Discourse*, 9:1, 2019.

c. Michael Bayerlein et al, "Populism and COVID-19: How Populist Governments (Mis)Handle the Pandemic", *Journal of Political Institutions and Political Economy*, 2:3, 2021.

artists, and activists, with opposition forces that later coalesced into the Freedom Movement party supporting their aims. The protests intensified in 2022 before the parliamentary elections.

Liberal-progressive parties made these advances and achievements in a difficult political, social and institutional environment. Due to historical reasons, the region is more accommodative of paternalistic strongman leadership than Western European countries. On top of this, periods of instability and complexity such as the previous decades of globalization and social change tend to heighten demand for such leadership.<sup>16</sup> Culturally, most CEE societies remain socially conservative, making policies drawn from Christian identity politics, traditional gender roles, and paternalistic welfare—typical traits of authoritarian populists—appealing to large segments of the electorate.<sup>17</sup> Technologically, the architecture of social media gives authoritarian-populists an advantage as their divisive and emotionally charged narratives spread faster and farther online than nuanced or less outrageous messages.<sup>18</sup> Many authoritarian-populists exploit this by spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories through networks of seemingly independent actors.<sup>19</sup> By flooding the digital space with multiple parallel narratives, they create a climate in which facts lose meaning and trust in institutions erodes.<sup>20</sup> This has been reinforced in the region by Russia's long-term hybrid warfare and soft-power strategies.<sup>21</sup> Institutionally, authoritarian-populists have used their time in office to create uneven playing fields to entrench their dominance. They changed electoral rules, increased the powers of the executive, weakened checks and balances branch and systematically eroded media pluralism and civil society, most notably in Hungary and Poland.<sup>22</sup> These structural factors help explain why liberal-progressive parties remain weakest where authoritarian-populists have most deeply embedded themselves in public institutions, society, and the economy.

## Successful Liberal-Progressive Campaigns

A comparison of recent successful liberal-progressive issue-based campaigns in the eight CEE countries is necessary to draw lessons about how such actors can challenge authoritarian-populist ones. This helps uncover common strategies through which liberal-progressive movements managed to promote their agenda—and to defend democracy. For the analysis, up to three campaigns were selected from the past decade for each country, based on the salience of the issue and the involvement of parties. (See Table 3.) The issues ranged from broad concepts like rule of law and European integration to more specific law changes in areas such as abortion rights and fighting corruption. The success of a campaign was defined primarily in terms of how effectively the issue was elevated in national public discourse (issue salience) through traditional and social media, civic mobilization (large protests), or political outcomes (resignations or legislation).<sup>23</sup> Issue salience considers prominence—for example, through protest size or media coverage—while party involvement gauges the role of liberal-progressive parties—from initiating or organizing a campaign to simply supporting it. Issue salience matters as according to agenda-setting theory, the more attention an issue receives, the more important the public perceives it to be, therefore shaping people's voting decisions.<sup>24</sup> Each campaign was analyzed for its triggers, objectives, tactics, actors, and results.

Table 3: Successful Liberal-Progressive Campaigns, 2015–2025.

	Campaign	Issue	Issue Salience	Campaign Type	Party Involvement
<b>Bulgaria</b>	Out With The Mafia! (2020-21)	State capture, corruption, justice system	Very high	Anti-establishment	High/Medium (Da, Bugaria!)
<b>Bulgaria</b>	Kapitan Andreevo (2022)	Corruption, government efficiency, privatization	Medium	Legislative (+)	Very high (We Continue The Change)
<b>Croatia</b>	Zagreb Is Ours (2017)	Corruption, government efficiency	Medium	Anti-establishment	Very high (Možemo)
<b>Croatia</b>	Access to abortion (2022)	Abortion, women's rights	High	Legislative (+)	High/medium (Možemo)
<b>Czechia</b>	"Lex Babiš" (2016-17)	Corruption, state capture	High	Legislative (+)	High (Pirate Party)
<b>Czechia</b>	"Snooping law" (2015-16)	Privacy	Medium	Legislative (-)	High (Pirate Party)
<b>Hungary</b>	NOlimpia (2017)	Corruption, government efficiency	High	Legislative (+)	Very high (Momentum)
<b>Hungary</b>	Spring protests (2025)	Authoritarianism, LGBTQ+ rights	High	Legislative (-)	High (Momentum)
<b>Hungary</b>	Fudan University (2021)	Foreign influence, government efficiency	High	Anti-establishment	High (Momentum, other opposition parties)
<b>Poland</b>	Black Monday (2016)	Abortion, women's rights	Very high	Legislative (-)	Medium (Nowoczesna)
<b>Poland</b>	LGBTQ+ rights (2020)	LGBTQ+ rights	High	Legislative (-)	Medium (Nowoczesna, other opposition parties)
<b>Poland</b>	"Lex Tusk" (2023)	Democratic backsliding, electoral fairness	High	Legislative (-)	High (Nowoczesna)
<b>Romania</b>	Resist! (2017)	Corruption, justice system	Very high	Legislative (-)	Medium (Save Romania Union-USR)
<b>Romania</b>	No Criminals! (2018)	Corruption, justice system	Very high	Legislative (-)	Very high (Save Romania Union-USR)
<b>Slovakia</b>	Criminal Code protests (2023-24)	Corruption, justice system	High	Legislative (+)	High (Progressive Slovakia)
<b>Slovakia</b>	We Are For Europe/anti-Fico (2023-25)	Authoritarianism, justice system, Russian influence	High	Anti-establishment	High (Progressive Slovakia, other opposition parties)
<b>Slovakia</b>	For a Decent Slovakia (2018)	Corruption, justice system, state capture	Very high	Anti-establishment	Low (Progressive Slovakia)
<b>Slovenia</b>	Clean water referendum (2021)	Access to water, privatization	High	Legislative (-)	Low/medium (Green Actions Party, List of Marjan Šarec)
<b>Slovenia</b>	Euthanasia referendum (2024)	End-of-life choice	High	Legislative (+)	Very high (Freedom Movement)
<b>Slovenia</b>	Friday protests (2021-22)	Corruption, democracy, government efficiency	Very high	Anti-establishment	Medium (Green Actions Party, List of Marjan Šarec, other opposition parties)

Note: Legislative (+) and Legislative (-) refer to whether the campaign was in support of a liberal-progressive policy or against an authoritarian policy.

Many of the campaigns with high issue salience in the region were organized around opposing legislative change proposed by an authoritarian-populist government. In these campaigns, liberal-progressive parties played a key role in raising the alarm and coordinating legislative efforts, sometimes even organizing protests. In **Czechia**, when protests were held across the country against the proposed “snooping law” in 2015, the Pirate Party was an important political ally to civic society and privacy rights groups in agenda-setting. The campaign relied on online petitions, digital activism, and social media to mobilize people. After entering parliament, the party became the main institutional actor on this issue; for example, by filing a constitutional complaint to abolish sections enabling mass monitoring of communication networks. In **Hungary**, the spring protests of 2025 were organized against legislative measures affecting freedom of assembly and LGBTQ+ rights. Momentum responded quickly with parliamentary actions, organizing protests and weeks of bridge blockades. In **Poland**, the PiS government in 2023 introduced reforms aimed at undermining democracy; for example, by creating an extra-judicial body that would investigate Russian influence and could accordingly ban individuals from holding public office for up to ten years. The law, dubbed “Lex Tusk”, was seen as one that could be used against political opponents and intended to prevent Donald Tusk from running in that year’s parliamentary elections. The protests—the Marches for Democracy and the March of a Million Hearts—were initiated principally by Tusk and Civic Platform, but they quickly evolved into a broad-based mobilization of multiple opposition parties including Nowoczesna, civil society, and ordinary citizens. Nationwide marches erupted, which increased international attention to the state of democracy in the country, with the EU condemning the plans. On one occasion, up to 500,000 people marched in Warsaw, waving EU flags and chanting against authoritarianism. As a result, President Andrzej Duda put forward amendments that softened its most controversial sections. The protests likely contributed to the victory of the opposition forces in the parliamentary elections later in the year, as did the above-mentioned Black Monday protests. In **Romania**, a proposed emergency decree that intended to weaken anti-corruption laws sparked the Resist! demonstrations in 2017. In **Slovakia**, when thousands rallied in Bratislava and smaller cities in 2023 after the Fico government tried to amend the Criminal Code, Progressive Slovakia was at the forefront, raising awareness, leading the opposition amendments, and coordinating legislative efforts.

**Many of the campaigns with high issue salience in the region were organized around opposing legislative change proposed by an authoritarian-populist government.**

In some cases, campaigns aimed to further the liberal-progressive agenda through legislative mechanisms. In **Bulgaria**, in 2022, We Continue the Change, which led the government, raised the salience of corruption at Kapitan Andreevo, the largest border checkpoint with Türkiye, by shedding light on private entities managing critical control functions, and it put forward legislative and administrative proposals to curb corruption, which the parliament adopted. The campaign reinforced the party’s anti-corruption stance, bolstered its position and became a reference point in the party’s subsequent political communication. In **Croatia**, in 2022, a high-profile case in which a woman was denied timely access to abortion care despite a severe fetal diagnosis triggered the large Dosta! (Enough!) protests across the country. Možemo! took the political lead by calling for legislative changes and publicly pushing for better reproductive healthcare and easier access to abortion. The protests were largely driven by feminist groups and civil society, but the party helped organize them. The following year, as a

result, abortion pills were made more available. In **Czechia**, the Pirate Party campaigned from outside parliament for the “Lex Babiš” that was adopted in 2017 to prevent government member from having ownership in media outlets and companies receiving public subsidies or state contracts. This targeted the conflicts of interest of the ANO leader, who was then finance minister and was a landmark victory for transparency advocates. After entering parliament and later government, as noted, the party pushed for the strengthening and enforcement of the law. In **Hungary**, as noted, Momentum’s 2017 petition drive to hold a referendum on the 2024 Budapest Olympics bid forced the government to withdraw it. Its framing of the issue as one of misused funds that could go to meeting public needs resonated nationally. In **Romania**, the USR launched and led the No Criminals in Public Office! campaign for a constitutional ban on convicted individuals holding public office. With the help of a wide volunteer network, it collected over 1 million signatures calling for a referendum on this—twice the required number to oblige the parliament to debate the proposal. The parliament did so in 2019, but the proposal has since been stalled in upper chamber. In **Slovenia**, the governing Freedom Movement organized in 2024 a successful referendum on legalizing assisted dying, which it framed as a human-rights issue.

### Some of the most impactful campaigns channeled public outrage into broad anti-authoritarian and anti-establishment protests.

Some of the most impactful campaigns channeled public outrage into broad anti-authoritarian and anti-establishment protests. The Out With The Mafia! campaign in **Bulgaria** led to one of the country’s largest anti-corruption protests, which triggered the resignation of ministers and led to the GERB party losing power in the 2021 elections. In **Croatia**, the Zagreb Is Ours campaign in 2017 was a grassroots progressive movement against corruption, mismanagement, and urban development policies under the long-time mayor. It evolved into a municipal electoral movement and won several seats in that year’s local elections, eventually taking over Zagreb in 2021 as part of the Green-Left coalition. In **Hungary**, the government’s plans to build a campus for China’s Fudan University on the location of a previously planned student city with \$1.8 billion in public funds sparked an outcry in 2021. Over 10,000 protesters marched, demonstrating a wide opposition unity against Orbán’s pro-China policies. Momentum joined the Budapest mayor and student groups in organizing the demonstration. The government delayed the project due to backlash. In **Poland**, the resolutions by PiS-controlled local authorities for LGBTQ+-free zones, alongside Duda’s anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric during his presidential reelection campaign in 2020, sparked widespread protests, which intensified when police detained an activist. The aim of the protests was to end discriminatory policies and gain recognition of LGBTQ+ rights in Poland. Nowoczesna voiced solidarity and joined Pride demonstrations, though the momentum came primarily from LGBTQ+ activists and youth networks. **Slovakia** experienced two highly salient liberal anti-establishment campaigns over the past decade. The murder of journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová in 2018 sparked outrage over corruption, organized crime, and the lack of accountability in the investigation and in the country’s political system. The For A decent Slovakia mass protests—led by civic and nonpartisan actors with wide support from civil society, activists, journalists, and political parties—mobilized over 100,000 people and played a crucial role in forcing the resignation of several high-ranking political figures including Fico. In late 2023, the Anti-Fico and We Are For Europe demonstrations broke out over fears of the country turning back on its pro-EU, anti-corruption path, drawing many young, pro-democracy citizens. Progressive Slovakia mobilized the protesters with other opposition parties, civil society groups and progressive movements in an effort to counter the nationalist, pro-Russia policies

of Fico's new government. The protests intensified in 2024–2025 over judicial reforms and corruption scandals, with massive and regular demonstrations held in Bratislava. This shifted the political conversation toward issues of EU relations and democracy, strengthening pro-EU parties. In **Slovenia**, in 2021, the largest environmental protests in the country's history broke out in response to the Janša government's plan to allow construction and commercial activity on protected water areas and coastal land while weakening environmental safeguards. The Movement for Drinkable Water led the campaign that culminated in a referendum that blocked the plan. Opposition parties, including the predecessors of Freedom Movement, supported the campaign and urged a "no" vote. The referendum saw an unusually high turnout (around 46%), with 86.6% voting against the plan, effectively blocking its implementation. That same year, Friday demonstrations sprang up against what protesters called the degradation of democracy, accusing the government of mishandling the COVID-19 pandemic and of corruption in vaccine procurement. The authorities violently dispersed protesters, imposed stricter lockdowns, and intimidated journalists. Many people took to the streets of Ljubljana each week, often on bicycles, creatively respecting health rules, to demand Janša's resignation. The government was eventually forced to reduce its emergency powers. The gatherings were primarily driven by civil society, artists, and activists rather than political parties.

One major impact of the different campaigns is that prominent liberal-progressive parties emerged during or in the aftermath of broad anti-establishment mobilizations or successful citizen's movements. **Czechia's** Pirate Party, founded in 2009, was a precursor in this as it originated in student and grassroots activism and campaigns for transparency, digital rights, and direct democracy. In **Bulgaria**, the early members of Yes Bulgaria! had been part of the widespread protests against state capture and oligarchic influence in 2013–2014, and the Out With The Mafia! Campaign in 2020–2021 led to the foundation of We Continue The Change. In **Croatia**, the 2017 Zagreb Is Ours campaign evolved into an electoral movement that later turned into the Možemo! party, while Centar originated in a citizens' initiative in Split advocating democracy, transparency, and human rights. **Hungary's** Momentum Movement became a party out the grassroots movement against the Budapest Olympics bid. In **Romania**, the USR was launched in 2016 following the success of the Save Bucharest Union in local government elections, which itself originated from a civic association focusing on municipal issues. Freedom Movement in **Slovenia** was founded just before the 2022 parliamentary elections as different opposition actors coalesced to channel the Friday protests movement's frustration over corruption and mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Lessons From Liberal-Progressive Campaigns

### Own the issue, catch the wave, create the narrative

Successful liberal-progressive campaigns were entirely about topics where these parties enjoyed authentic credibility and issue ownership—typically, corruption, the justice system, government efficiency, democracy, and human rights. By contrast, the populist right "owns" nationalism and immigration and centrist conservatives economic management. Success also came from, when key moments arose, liberal-progressive actors "catching the wave" and riding it well, keeping the issue at hand on the agenda and the pressure on consistently. Whether it was a scandal, a tragedy, or a controversial law, these events created political openings that liberal-progressive

actors amplified rather than simply reacted to. Campaigns like For a Decent Slovakia after the murder of journalist Ján Kuciak or the Enough! protests in the case of a woman in Croatia being denied timely abortion care despite a severe fetal diagnosis demonstrated how tragedies can catalyze collective energy and redefine the political conversation. In other cases, outrage was sparked by overreach by authoritarian-populist incumbents, such as the Fico government's attempt to change the Criminal Code in Slovakia, the government's aim to expand surveillance powers in Czechia, or a proposed near-total abortion ban by PiS in Poland. In a few cases, the trigger points were creatively manufactured by political actors, such as Out with the Mafia! protests in Bulgaria, where Ivanov landed with a boat on Rosenets Beach to contest restricted public access and expose links between political elites and oligarchic power, or Momentum's lighting of smoke flairs and playing the Russian national anthem in Hungary's parliament to begin the Spring 2025 protests. Police repression, detention, or injuries to politicians and activists sometimes further fueled mobilization, as in the cases of Romania's No Criminals! and Slovenia's Friday protests.

Successful campaigns did not only mobilize emotions; they also channeled them into pressure on the streets or clear outcomes such as referendums, legislative proposals, or policy reversals. Out of the 20 campaigns analyzed, 15 were accompanied by protests, five by legislative proposals, and four by referendums. Concrete objectives gave citizens something clear to rally around, transformed diffuse anger into action, and turned symbolic victories into measurable wins. Campaigns like NOlimpia in Hungary, No Criminals! in Romania, or the referendum on clean drinking water in Slovenia showed how such a legislative or procedural focus can help structure public participation and maintain a movement's momentum over time. Apart from such tangible goals, keeping the issue on the agenda through persistent communication was also key. Successful campaigns did not repeat or counter their opponent's points but rather put forward their own narrative, combining clarity, repetition, and creativity. They framed the issue broadly, proposing hopeful and relatable narratives about integrity, community, and a fairer future, as in the cases of Out With The Mafia! in Bulgaria and of For A Decent Slovakia! and We Are For Europe in Slovakia. In many of the successful cases, liberal-progressive forces took an anti-establishment position, challenging authoritarian-populist leaders or captured elites, rather than portraying themselves as part of a technocratic mainstream.

## Broad issue-based coordination brings wins

Successful campaigns typically had support from various actors complementing each other, including political parties. Coordinated action was essential for sustaining pressure and forcing accountability. Black Monday in Poland, Out With The Mafia! in Bulgaria, For A Decent Slovakia, and the Resist! anti-corruption protests in Romania were campaigns that brought together civic society, activists, student groups, journalists, artists, and political parties in a shared purpose. In contexts where cynicism toward politics runs deep, stakeholders built issue-based alliances that cut through political lines, while emphasizing common values and vision. Such alliances had the largest impact: they were able to trigger resignations, place authoritarian governments on the defensive, and prolong public attention to key issues well beyond a single news cycle. As these cases show, liberal-progressives secure wins when civic, cultural, and pro-democracy political forces stand shoulder to shoulder, and they fail when they stay apart. In successful campaigns, stakeholders managed to gain the upper hand against their opponents by applying pressure on multiple fronts: in the streets, in parliament, and online. In Czechia, during the campaign against the "snooping law" privacy-rights civic groups used media appearances and online content to help maintain the pressure on the government while the Pirate Party attacked the law and filed a constitutional

complaint when they entered parliament. Možemo! took the lead by advocating legislative change and helped organize demonstrations regarding reproductive rights (Enough! campaign), but the protests were largely driven by feminist organizations and other civil society actors. In Poland, the protests against the “Lex Tusk”, including the Marches for Democracy and the March of a Million Hearts, were initiated by opposition actors, but they evolved into broad coalition events with civil society.

Identifying relevant allies—whether women’s rights organizations, LGBTQ+ rights groups, journalists, students, or environmentalists—on the campaign’s issue is key. In an era when attention is the scarcest resource, a unified chorus resonates longer than a series of isolated voices. Coordinated action between relevant actors kept issues in the spotlight and extended their political lifespan. In Romania, USR representatives facilitated the access to parliament of several activists supporting the No Criminals! campaign to protest in the hallway of the plenary hall. In Poland, liberal parties joined Pride demonstrations, but momentum for the protests came primarily from LGBTQ+ activists and youth networks, while influencers and activists amplified the messages. Parties typically contributed organizational capacity, media visibility, and legislative tools, while civic actors provided authenticity, grassroots reach, and creativity. And when issues were ethically complex, campaigns leaned on trusted voices to argue with empathy, facts, and stories, as in Slovenia’s referendum on assisted dying with doctors, patients, and families.

### **Communicate the narrative with clarity, creativity, and authenticity**

The most successful liberal-progressive campaigns mastered the art of clear, emotionally resonant storytelling. In a crowded public sphere with intense competition for attention, this is not superficial—it is strategy. The best campaigns translated complexity into stories about people’s lives: clean water, decent livelihoods, no criminals. The campaign for Slovenia’s referendum framed access to clean drinking water as a basic right, while For A Decent Slovakia! made dignity and integrity tangible through the faces of the murdered journalist and his fiancée. These campaigns shared traits: a single, memorable slogan or image, repeated with discipline. Hungary’s NOLimpia campaign distilled a sprawling argument about wasteful public spending into one word, while We Are For Europe in Slovakia, No Criminals! in Romania or Out With The Mafia! in Bulgaria channeled diffuse popular frustration into clarity and unity. Successful campaigns often named a clear enemy—oligarchs, captured elites, authoritarian leaders—and presented themselves as a larger “us”—a decent, fair community people would want to join. Calling proposed laws “Lex Babiš” and “Lex Tusk” made clear, respectively, the target, the injustice and what was at stake. Emotions played a key role in successful campaigns as they enhanced connection and amplified the message. While authoritarian-populists have thrived on outrage and anxiety, liberal-progressives succeeded when they evoked confidence in a better future. Progressive Slovakia’s “hope” message on hoodies since 2023 or Slovenia’s joyful, inclusive mobilization around environmental justice created a sense of unity and possibility instead of anger and division.

Balancing passion with credibility was key, however: tangible hope tied to real action sustained the public’s trust (while empty optimism erodes it). Issue-based messages and emotions, when used sincerely, created unity, helping even voters of rival parties find common ground. Humor, art, and creativity further amplified the campaigns’ messages. People nowadays want to be entertained and pull away from dry technocratic or boring content. In Hungary, the renaming of streets as Fudan Town in Budapest mocked power with wit that helped

translate a complex geopolitical and financial issue into a highly visible public controversy, while the Rosenets Beach stand-off turned corruption in Bulgaria into a vivid drama, making oligarchic capture concrete and human. Visual creativity broadened reach: women in black during Poland's Black Monday, smoke flares during Momentum's 2025 spring protests in Hungary, or EU flags during the We Are For Europe marches in Slovakia turned abstract principles into symbols. Last, authentic, courageous, consistent leadership mattered. When liberal-progressives communicated not just about integrity but through it, they reached beyond their base and changed the temperature of national debates. In the cases above, not shying away from controversy and demonstrating courage and conviction made thousands more people stand up. In a region fatigued by cynicism, such authenticity remains one of the most powerful tools democratic forces have.

## Social media is the new public square

A strong digital presence was a consistent success factor in many liberal-progressive campaigns. If communication is the heart of politics, then digital media is now its bloodstream. Issue salience depends as much on visibility as on validity. In an attention economy where what trends online is often treated as true, liberal-progressives had to "get in the game" on every major social-media platform and to use digital content to keep issues in the public eye. This was key to putting persistent pressure on opponents and to keeping issues on the agenda. The Kapitan Andreevo campaign in Bulgaria gained traction online with numerous discussions, shares, and comments dominating the conversation and setting the national agenda. The We Continue The Change party framed the issue so effectively that it dominated Facebook discussions and turned the issue into a national symbol of corruption. Successful campaigns also used social media extensively to build and organize movements, not just to push messages. In Poland, the main communication channel for organizing the Black Monday protests was online, with grassroots activists using social media for coordination and mobilization. Other examples include the campaign against the "snooping law" in Czechia, the We Are For Europe protests in Slovakia, the For A decent Slovakia protests, or the protests against "Lex Tusk" in Poland.

Decentralized networks are key to amplifying messages on social media as they increase visibility and credibility. From Romania's Resist! to Hungary's #NOlimpia, social platforms turned supporters into amplifiers, creating momentum that often led to action. Online influencers shape narratives more than mainstream media and can raise the salience of issues considerably, as celebrities did for Poland's LGBTQ+ rights campaign, while Czech privacy advocates helped to build up the digital campaign against the "snooping law". Meanwhile, supporters of different campaigns were themselves part of the distribution system and amplified their messages. The consistent use of creative hashtags such as #Rezist, #WeAreForEurope, #ForADecentSlovakia, #AllForJan, #LexBabis, #ZagreblsOurs, #Resist, and #NOlimpia helped to spread messages and to build visible movements around issues. Successful campaigns also used platform-native, entertaining formats such as short videos, memes, infographics, or livestreams that increased engagement and enabled the spreading of the content. The Zagreb Is Ours campaign in Croatia used infographics and videos explaining corruption and urban issues combining policy depth with creative and relatable messaging that went viral. This youth-driven movement used memes, satire, and direct online engagement with citizens. Emotions also get more amplification and response on social media. The Enough! campaign meanwhile was a digital-first approach, with social-media videos showcasing government inefficiency while infographics, memes and personal storytelling made complex issues relatable to voters. The For

A Decent Slovakia campaign used strong visual communication on social media to organize protests, including images of the murdered journalist and his fiancée. In Slovenia, the Friday protests used livestreams and viral videos exposing police repression to increase the pressure on the government and mobilization. Livestreams also kept the momentum going for the Resist! anti-corruption protests in Romania and during the spring 2025 protests in Hungary. Taken together, these campaigns showed that online contention is not peripheral to the defense of democracy but rather a battlefield where legitimacy is won.

## Conclusion

Central and Eastern Europe today is not so much a case of democratic decline than one of political flux and contested realignment. It is in a far more dynamic, open-ended state than a decade ago. While authoritarian-populist actors have achieved significant institutional entrenchment in some countries, electoral outcomes of the past decade demonstrate that their dominance is neither linear nor irreversible. This does not mean that democratic renewal will be quick or easy, but it does suggest that the region is entering a new phase—one that offers important lessons not only for itself but also for Western democracies facing similar pressures. As a former laboratory of authoritarian populist leaders, Russian interference, and illiberal democracy, Central and Eastern Europe is increasingly becoming a testing ground for democratic resistance and renewal.

Institutional design and electoral systems shape the political competition in the region. Under more proportional systems, as in Slovakia and Slovenia, authoritarian-populist parties have faced greater constraints and have been less able to consolidate their hold on power, and liberal-progressive ones have often emerged as the main pro-democracy parties. Under more majoritarian systems, as in Hungary and Poland, there has been deeper backsliding under authoritarian-populist governance, and broad center-right or cross-ideological coalitions have been required to challenge them. Understanding such structural conditions is essential for explaining the limits and the possibilities of democratic contestation in the region.

The analysis of liberal-progressive campaigns across the region highlights key overarching lessons, namely that such actors must own the issue, catch the wave and create the narrative; that broad issue-based coordination brings wins; that they must communicate the narrative with clarity, creativity, and authenticity; and that social media is the new public square.

These findings suggest that democratic resilience in Central and Eastern Europe depends not only on institutional safeguards but also on strategic political agency. Liberal-progressive actors have demonstrated that it is possible to challenge authoritarian incumbents when credible issues, broad alliances, compelling narratives, and effective use of digital tools are aligned. The region's experience shows that democratic backsliding can be resisted and, at times, reversed, but only through sustained, coordinated, and strategically sophisticated efforts. Defending democracy requires more than rules; it requires strategy, organization, and the ability to connect with society.

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