

Authoritarian Demand in East-Central Europe Post-Pandemic and Amid Neighbouring War

Mihai Alexandrescu¹  and Mihnea S. Stoica² 

¹ Faculty of History and Philosophy, Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania

² Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University, Romania

Correspondence: Mihnea S. Stoica (mihnea.stoica@ubbcluj.ro)

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Abstract

Recent years have witnessed a noticeable democratic decline worldwide, revealing a tendency of voters to elect leaders with authoritarian tendencies. In East-Central European countries, authoritarian attitudes reached unprecedented heights since their accession to the EU. Existing academic literature highlights key drivers of support for authoritarianism in this region of the continent, including anti-elite sentiments, political anxiety, economic threat, and perceived injustice. However, there is little scientific evidence related to the strength of these variables in a post-pandemic context and amid a neighbouring war. Drawing on original public opinion data collected in Poland, Hungary, and Romania, the current study identifies the main driving forces behind public demand for authoritarianism in these countries. The article develops a comparative perspective and thus contributes to a nuanced comprehension of the resurgence of authoritarianism in this part of the world.

Keywords

authoritarianism; East-Central Europe; political compass; populism; war

1. Introduction

A steep democratic decline has been evident everywhere around the world in the past few decades, with an increasing transition to non-democratic regimes since 2006. These regimes often come to power through free and fair elections, indicating a tendency among voters to elect and accept authoritarian leaders. Countries in East-Central Europe make no exception to this global trend, as they showed signs of democratic deconsolidation even before the outbreak of the Covid-19 health crisis (Bochsler & Juon, 2020; Greskovits,

2015). According to the 2023 V-Dem Report, the global level of democracy has regressed to the levels of 1986, with 72% of the world's population now living in autocracies. The report highlights an increase in the number of closed autocracies and a decrease in liberal democracies, indicating significant “autocratization” in many regions, including East-Central Europe (Papada et al., 2023).

However, the pandemic has elevated authoritarian propensity to unprecedented heights in the region since these countries joined the EU. In Hungary, the multiple crises the country has faced have allowed Viktor Orbán to consolidate his control over the political system through a radicalized public discourse supporting illiberalism and populism (Lendvai-Bainton & Szelewa, 2021). In Romania, the 2024 elections appear poised to bring victory to the country's first radical anti-EU and authoritarian party, and the most recent elections in Poland have revealed the difficulty of breaking away from authoritarianism.

Existing academic literature emphasizes that the main drivers of authoritarian demand in this part of the world are anti-elite sentiments, economic uncertainty, insecurity, and the perception of injustice (Bochsler & Juon, 2020; Enyedi, 2020; Mudde, 2007). However, there is little scientific evidence related to how demand for authoritarianism looks like after the pandemic and during the ongoing war in Ukraine. Our study utilizes an original set of public opinion data ($N = 4,974$) collected in 2023 in Hungary, Poland, and Romania—all of which border Ukraine. The data collected post-pandemic and amid a neighbouring war reveals insights into the main driving forces behind public demand for authoritarianism in this region. While we cannot isolate the effects of the pandemic and the war on the attitudes measured, our comparative analysis contributes to a nuanced understanding of the resurgence of this trend in East-Central Europe.

Our study provides a snapshot of the current context framed by the post-Covid-19 pandemic and by the war in Ukraine, which have amplified public fears and insecurity. Understanding the trajectory towards authoritarianism in East-Central European nations, which have faced decades of totalitarian regimes, requires a deep analysis of the complex network of social, economic, and political perceptions shaped by post-1989 democratization processes. Although the initial wave of democratization was a triumph within the third wave, a sense of democratic fatigue began to infiltrate after these nations joined the EU. Years of one-party rule left citizens unprepared for the rigours of repeated electoral contests, fostering a tolerance for autocratic governance and scepticism towards rapid democratization, often perceived as chaotic and destabilizing (Pop-Eleches, 2007).

In this article, we have chosen to observe how trends towards authoritarianism emerge from citizens towards leaders. The concept of “authoritarian demand” refers to the active support of citizens for authoritarian leaders and their behaviour. This approach is essential to understanding that authoritarian regimes arise and consolidate through popular support. Unlike perspectives that view authoritarianism exclusively as a result of elite actions (top-down), this approach emphasizes the role of citizens in supporting and legitimizing such regimes (bottom-up; Mudde, 2007).

We consider authoritarian demand to be an expression of democratic erosion that unfolds as a narrative process by which democratic norms and institutions are gradually undermined, often with popular support. This can result from a sense of dissatisfaction with democratic performance, economic instability, or perceived threats to national and cultural identity (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Stanley, 2017). This erosion is evident in East-Central Europe, where after 2010, illiberal-leaning parties in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria,

Slovakia, and the Czech Republic have exploited weaknesses in the judicial system and media to gain power (Bochsler & Juon, 2020). Moreover, the economic crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine have contributed to the eroding of trust in democracy in these countries, but also in Romania.

However, it is important to note that the direct link between various factors (as mentioned above) and authoritarianism or democratic erosion is complex and cannot be reduced to a mere causal relationship. The identified factors interact with each other and with other context-specific factors in each country. For example, the alternation of power, as seen in Poland, demonstrates that support for democracy does not vary significantly between government and opposition supporters, but democratic erosion can occur both through abuses of power by elected actors (Chiopris et al., 2021) and through a narrative that promotes distrust and insecurity.

The primary goal of political parties is electoral mobilization and a powerful tool for increasing citizens' political engagement is moralizing action (Ditto & Rodriguez, 2021). In this context, populism constructs a narrative based on emotions and identity to fuel people's resentment towards elites. Many populists articulate an electoral-authoritarian vision of the state (Paget, 2023, p. 1), often describing elites as either incompetent or corrupt. A key feature of populist appeals is exploiting gaps created by mainstream parties between electoral promises and the reality they deliver (Stoica, 2018). In East-Central Europe, post-communist economic transformation has been marked by a new social stratification, where only a limited segment of society benefited from rapid privatization. At the same time, large sections faced chronic unemployment and pauperization (Szelényi & Wilk, 2013). Simultaneously, internal political instability and major corruption scandals in these countries have eroded public trust in democratic institutions (Greskovits, 2015). In this landscape, populist leaders present their opponents as "enemies of the people" (Mudde, 2007). This narrative resonates in societies characterized by widespread disillusionment with the political class (Kriesi et al., 2008). This rhetoric, imbued with fear and distrust, provides fertile ground for consolidating authoritarianism in the region. This complexity underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of authoritarianism and democratic erosion.

2. Conceptualizing "Authoritarian Demand"

In most cases, recent academic literature identifies a series of trigger factors related to the demand for authoritarianism in East-Central Europe, which can be grouped into four main clusters: anti-elitism (Staykova et al., 2016), political anxiety (Kates & Tucker, 2019), economic threat (Bochsler & Juon, 2020), and the perception of injustice (Enyedi, 2020). Therefore, our analysis focuses on the four triggers mentioned above to provide a clear and focused perspective on the demand for authoritarianism in East-Central Europe. We hereby describe each of them.

Anti-elitism represents a resentment towards political, economic, and intellectual elites fuelled by perceptions of their corruption, incompetence, or partisan goals hidden under the mask of expertise. The erosion of democratic norms is often facilitated by hostility towards elites, perceived as being disconnected from the needs of ordinary citizens (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Populist movements exploit these feelings of distrust, building a narrative based on emotions and identity to fuel people's resentment towards elites (Ditto & Rodriguez, 2021; Hochschild, 2016). Many populists articulate an electoral-authoritarian vision of the state (Paget, 2023), describing elites as either incompetent or corrupt (Magyar, 2019). In our article, anti-elitism

refers to the prevailing sentiment that those in positions of power often attain their status through dubious means. It reflects the sentiment that there is a handful of self-serving interest groups which neglect the needs of the citizens. It also includes perceived EU attempts to enforce regulations upon member states, seen as infringing upon the sovereignty of one's country. Furthermore, anti-elitism also refers to the perception that specialists exhibit the tendency to over-complicate issues, obscuring straightforward solutions with unnecessary complexity.

Political anxiety refers to a sense of insecurity and fear regarding internal and external political instability. Economic and cultural insecurity can drive citizens to embrace authoritarian solutions, seeking stability and protection in the face of uncertainty (Norris, 2017). In consolidated democracies, cynicism about the value of democracy and openness to authoritarian alternatives become more pronounced when citizens feel threatened (Foa & Mounk, 2016). In East-Central Europe, the post-communist economic transformation has been marked by a new social stratification, where only a limited segment of society benefited from rapid privatization, while large sections faced chronic unemployment and pauperization (Szelényi & Wilk, 2013).

Economic threat refers to citizens' perceptions of job insecurity, living standards, and national economic policies. Economic insecurity can fuel support for authoritarian leaders who promise to protect the national economy (Hochschild, 2016). Economic crises deepen democratic vulnerabilities and facilitate the rise of authoritarian leaders (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Economic threat engulfs one's need to restore or at least preserve a sense of control and self-esteem, perceived as hindered especially during periods of personal or collective economic crisis. It also refers to people feeling that large companies amass excessive profits at the expense of fair wages for workers, as well as the perception that major societal economic challenges can be swiftly resolved.

Finally, the perception of social and economic injustice represents the feeling that the political system favours a select group of people and does not ensure a fair distribution of resources and opportunities. The sense of injustice can drive citizens to support authoritarian alternatives that promise to restore equity and fairness (Foa & Mounk, 2016). The perception of injustice is an important driver of authoritarianism (Norris, 2017). When tackling perceived injustice, we refer to views according to which other national or supranational organisations (as is the EU) are accused of exploiting the goodwill of the people and the resources of one's country, or even treating one's country as a colony. It also refers to perceptions related to one's personal situation, considering to be caught in an endless cycle of adversity, with no respite in sight, or with no chance of being taken into consideration by decision-makers.

The Covid-19 pandemic has profoundly affected how governments operate worldwide, heightening public fears and changing how people view authority. Governments had to take extraordinary measures, often over-centralizing power and enforcing strict public health measures. While these were meant to protect citizens, the way they were communicated was often flawed, thus leading to a decline of trust in democratic institutions. As such, people might have started to prefer an authoritarian type of leadership, which they perceive as more capable during crises (Boin et al., 2009). This shift suggests that the pandemic has increased the appeal of authoritarianism among those frustrated with what they perceived as the ineffective responses of democratic systems to such large-scale emergencies. This trend highlights the importance of understanding how health crises can move public support towards more centralized and less accountable forms of governance (Tooze, 2021).

The war in Ukraine adds another layer to this issue, bringing more insecurity and uncertainty. The conflict's closeness to East-Central Europe has intensified nationalistic feelings and the desire for strong, protective leadership. In countries like Poland and Romania, which have significant historical connections to Ukraine, the war has increased fears of political instability and external threats. These fears likely lead to more support for authoritarian leaders who promise stability and security against perceived existential threats. Additionally, the economic impact of the conflict, such as disruptions in trade and energy supplies, has worsened existing economic fears, pushing voters towards authoritarian solutions that offer economic protectionism and resilience. It is very possible that the mix of economic insecurity and political anxiety has strengthened the demand for authoritarian leadership, which can supposedly protect national interests against foreign enemies (Norris, 2017).

Therefore, we consider the pandemic and the war to be contexts that accelerated the demand for authoritarianism, altering the socio-political landscape. These crises revealed the weaknesses of democratic institutions and highlighted the perceived effectiveness of authoritarian governance in managing unprecedented challenges. This trend was especially noticeable in East-Central Europe, where historical experiences and current crises created a favourable environment for authoritarianism. The resulting public desire for strong, decisive leadership indicates a broader narrative of democratic decline, where disillusionment with democratic processes pushes people towards autocratic alternatives.

3. Authoritarian Demand in East-Central Europe Post-Pandemic and Amid Neighbouring War

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, populist governments saw opportunities to consolidate their power in this crisis, as noted by Batory (2022). In Hungary, the Orbán government has centralized power through an emergency response to the pandemic, perceived as an extension of authoritarianism, raising concerns about the abuse of power (Drinóczi & Bień-Kacała, 2020). He criticized the EU for its slow and bureaucratic response to the pandemic, amplifying Euroscepticism (Lundgren et al., 2020). In Poland, the pandemic was used by the Law and Justice (PiS) government to promote controversial judicial reforms and criticize the organization of elections under the pretext of public health, which damaged public trust and strengthened nationalism (Batory, 2022; Drinóczi & Bień-Kacała, 2020; Tatarczyk & Wojtasik, 2023). In Romania, opposition to mandatory vaccination and allegations of corruption in managing the pandemic have amplified scepticism and criticism of EU vaccine distribution, highlighting feelings of neglect and unfair treatment (Bârgăoanu et al., 2022).

The war in Ukraine has given populist leaders in Hungary, Poland, and Romania a new opportunity to adjust their speeches. The prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, adopted a position different from that of the EU, taking advantage of the situation to justify opportunistic policies (Özoflu & Arató, 2023). In Poland, populists are forced to ensure that their decisions are consistently ideological, while in Romania, newly formed political groups such as the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) approach the war through a nativist lens, avoiding direct condemnation of the invasion by Russia and criticizing any refusal to make peace with Russia (Kopper et al., 2023; Soare, 2023).

This section of our article describes the four main triggers of authoritarian demand in each of the three countries that represent our case studies. The particularities and similarities of the three countries offer a nuanced picture of the manifestations of authoritarianism that are present in this region.

3.1. Hungary

After Fidesz's electoral victory in 2010, Hungary underwent a series of transformations culminating in the consolidation of party power and the reduction of political pluralism, configuring a competitive authoritarian regime (Scheiring, 2020). This context allowed the government to manipulate four interdependent factors to strengthen its position: anti-elitism, political anxiety, economic threat, and the perception of injustice.

Firstly, anti-elitism flourished against the backdrop of political and economic polarization in the 1990s and 2000s, during which rising wealth and power disparities fuelled perceptions of corruption. Fidesz exploited these resentments, presenting itself as a defender of "ordinary people" against corrupt elites. Government-controlled media constantly amplified these sentiments, promoting the party's image as the nation's saviour (Kornai, 2019; Scheppele, 2018).

Simultaneously, political anxiety was cultivated through fears of losing national sovereignty and cultural identity. The government used nationalist and xenophobic narratives to portray the EU, migrants, and the LGBTQ+ community as existential threats. These strategies mobilized the population and justified the implementation of strict anti-immigration measures (Magyar, 2019).

On the other hand, the economic threat was used to justify populist policies, presenting the national economy as under siege due to foreign influences and internal corruption. Fidesz promised to protect national interests while favouring allied capitalist groups, exacerbating corruption and state intervention in the economy to ensure political loyalty (Magyar, 2019).

Finally, the perception of injustice was amplified through anti-immigration and populist rhetoric, portraying immigration as a threat to national security and culture. Statements by Fidesz leaders, such as "Hungary will not be a colony," resonated strongly with sentiments of sovereignty and resistance against external control ("Orbán: Gazdasági bevándorlóknak," 2015; Taylor, 2012).

3.2. Poland

The 2015 parliamentary elections marked a historic victory for PiS, which formed a government without coalition partners. Some authors consider that this result was influenced by electoral thresholds, not major changes in voter preferences (Markowski, 2019). However, we argue that electoral absenteeism in 2015 is a passive voice of anti-elitism as most non-active voters blame the same corrupted political class. Nevertheless, as Müller highlights, "it is thus no accident that populists in power...often adopt a kind of 'caretaker' attitude towards an essentially passive people" (Müller, 2016, p. 30). Even with a voter turnout of 74% in 2023 (compared to 51% in 2015), PiS remained in first place with 35% (compared to 38% in 2015), and the new government could only be formed through a coalition around the Civic Coalition. In fact, PiS won the top position in the last three elections by capitalizing on public fears and needs, promising economic redistribution and the protection of traditional cultural values while attempting to control the judiciary under the pretext of combating corruption and restoring national dignity (Sadurski, 2019).

PiS systematically dismantled checks and balances, exploiting anti-elitism and discrediting the Civic Platform through audits and accusations of national compromise. This rhetoric created a division between "ordinary" citizens and liberal elites perceived outside traditional Polish values (Traub, 2016).

Political anxiety was intensified through nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric, targeting the EU and the LGBTQ+ community. President Andrzej Duda signed a “Family Charter” banning LGBTQ marriages and adoptions and promoted parental control over sex education. Political anxiety was also fuelled by the controversial management of judicial independence and reproductive rights, culminating in the restrictive abortion decision of 2020, which generated massive protests (Sadurski, 2019; Wróbel, 2022).

Economically, PiS emphasized persistent inequalities, criticizing the favour of foreign investors and promising to protect local capital through new criteria for foreign investments (Zbytniewska, 2022).

The perception of injustice was cultivated through anti-colonialist discourses, which criticized EU influence and amplified sovereignty sentiments. For example, PiS portrayed opposition leader Donald Tusk as “always pursuing German interests, not Polish ones” (Wintour, 2023). Judicial reforms and media control were presented as necessary measures to combat corruption, though critics saw them as attacks on democracy (Pytlas, 2016; Sadurski, 2019).

3.3. Romania

These interconnected factors were exploited by populist parties to consolidate authoritarian tendencies in Romania as well. Anti-elitism in Romania was resuscitated by populist narratives, especially during the Covid-19 crisis. The AUR exploited the pandemic to portray elites as anti-religious and opposed to traditional Romanian values such as family and faith, amplifying deeply rooted resentments against political elites associated with corruption (Dragoman, 2021; Stoica, 2021).

Political anxiety in Romania is closely linked to populist movements that combine radical nationalism with communist nostalgia. Post-EU accession political instability fuelled this anxiety, attracting voters to populist messages that promise to correct perceived injustices and imbalances, thereby contributing to the rise of authoritarian tendencies (Stoica, 2018).

Economic threats have exacerbated this authoritarian trend. Populist rhetoric promising economic revival and protectionism has exploited the perception that external forces or elites threaten economic stability. The tumultuous post-communist economic transitions in Eastern Europe have been used to rally support for authoritarian figures promising economic stability (Balaban et al., 2021).

Perceptions of injustice are strong in the Romanian context, bolstered by Euroscepticism and the feeling that the EU undermines national sovereignty. Parties like AUR capitalize on these nationalist sentiments, portraying themselves as defenders of sovereignty against external injustices and Brussels bureaucrats perceived as elites uninterested in the needs of member states (Stoica & Voina, 2023). Frequently used themes in AUR’s narrative include blocking Romania’s accession to the Schengen area. The leader of this party declared, “It is shocking for us to see the discrimination we face in European institutions, to see that there is a two-speed Europe and that we, as Romanians, have the status of second-class citizens of the European Union” (“George Simion despre aderarea României,” 2023).

4. Methodology

The current study seeks to identify the main driving forces behind the need for authoritarianism in Romania, Poland, and Hungary, in a post-Covid-19 context and during an armed aggression in their immediate vicinity. We do this with a series of linear regressions, examining the relationship between demand for authoritarianism and variables that refer to *anti-elitism* (H1), *political anxiety* (H2), *economic threat* (H3), and *perceived injustice* (H4). The data were collected between May 9–June 30, 2023 via a political compass launched simultaneously in all three East-Central European countries. The data comprised a total of 4,974 respondents who voluntarily opted into the platform.

Generally, political compasses have the advantage of reaching a large number of observations and answers. One disadvantage is that they do not rely on random probability sampling, given the fact that users self-select. Given the nature of such data, this leads to potential limitations for our study. Usually, users of political compasses tend to be higher educated, younger, and have a greater interest in politics compared to the general population (e.g., Boogers & Voerman, 2003; van de Pol et al., 2014). We limited our sampling error by using targeted recruitment so that the sample obtained for each country closely matches the characteristics of the general population of Romania, Poland, and Hungary. Moreover, academic literature points to the fact that estimates calculated with data obtained from political compasses do not differ significantly from those of surveys (Toshkov & Romeijn, 2021), and as such are powerful tools for examining patterns of policy preferences and political behaviour.

After providing their informed consent, participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire with their own opinion on 33 policy items which referred to many salient issues on the political agenda, common for all three countries that represent the case studies of the current research. Moreover, users were asked to provide background information such as year of birth, gender, and level of education. The statement “[our country] needs a strong leader who can quickly decide on everything” was defined as the dependent variable in this analysis, and the independent variables were computed using several other statements in the questionnaire. Based on the academic literature presented above, we named the four independent variables as follows: *anti-elitism*, *political anxiety*, *economic threat*, and *perceived injustice*.

Anti-elitism was measured by evaluating citizens’ perceptions of the corruption and competence of political and economic elites. For example, participants were asked how much they agreed with statements such as “Usually, those who lead our society get in those positions through immoral or illegal means,” or “The government is pretty much run by a few big interest groups looking out for themselves.” In our current study, *political anxiety* encapsulates the sentiment of fear in the face of war, as well as of potential government actions that could disrupt the fabric of one’s life. We evaluated political anxiety through questions related to the feeling of political or social insecurity. For example, respondents were asked about their level of concern regarding their country’s political stability, potential external threats, or crimes committed by immigrants.

Economic threat was measured using questions that addressed job insecurity and living standards. Participants were asked about their concerns related to the profitability of large companies and employee wage levels. We used statements such as “Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the wealth of this nation,” or “Large companies in our country make too much profit at the expense of a good wage for workers.”

As for the *perception of injustice*, we evaluated it through statements regarding political, social, and economic equity. Participants were asked to express their opinions about the degree of fairness in how resources and opportunities are distributed in their society. One such example is “Problems of people like me never make it on the agenda of politicians.” The full list of all statements can be found in the Supplementary Material.

Previous studies have intensely debated whether voters of populist parties with authoritarian tendencies in Hungary and Poland are predominantly motivated by economic or cultural factors (Bill & Stanley, 2020; Kubik & Kotwas, 2019). Our choice to focus on political and economic factors is not meant to minimize the importance of cultural ones, but to provide a specific analysis in the context of current economic and political crises. Excluding cultural factors from this analysis does not undermine their relevance, but reflects a methodological decision. Cultural factors are undoubtedly important and have been widely analysed in the academic literature. However, for this study, we chose to focus on those factors that are directly measurable and provide a clear picture of the political and economic dynamics post-pandemic and in the context of the neighbouring war. Moreover, we selected our case studies—Hungary, Poland, and Romania—by relying on the “Most Similar Systems Design” method. This method allows us to compare countries that exhibit similar cultural features (Gyórfy, 2020) but show variations regarding relevant political aspects (such as parties in power, or general political and public discourse). In this way, we can isolate the effects of the variables that trigger the demand for authoritarianism.

5. Regression Analysis

Table 1 shows the logistic regression results for our three case studies. The largest explanatory power is represented by the case of Romania (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.336$), followed by Poland (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.156$)

Table 1. Regression coefficients for Romania, Poland, and Hungary.

	Romania	Poland	Hungary
Age	−0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
Gender (male = 0)	0.36*** (0.04)	0.38*** (0.07)	0.35*** (0.05)
Education	−0.01 (0.02)	−0.13*** (0.04)	−0.06 (0.03)
Anti-elitism	0.10 (0.05)	0.26*** (0.50)	0.12 (0.06)
Political anxiety	0.12 (0.05)	0.14 (0.06)	0.21*** (0.06)
Economic threat	0.37*** (0.04)	0.22*** (0.05)	0.17*** (0.05)
Perceived injustice	0.28*** (0.05)	0.23*** (0.06)	0.32*** (0.05)
Constant	0.55*** (0.07)	0.37 (0.40)	0.93*** (0.30)
Nagelkerke R^2	0.336	0.156	0.102
Observations	2,502	1,234	1,238

Notes: *** $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; * $p < 0.1$; standard errors in parentheses.

and Hungary (Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.102$). Overall, the linear regression revealed a significant positive relationship between economic threat and demand for authoritarianism ($\beta = 0.37, p < 0.001$ for Romania, $\beta = 0.22, p < 0.001$ for Poland, and $\beta = 0.17, p < 0.001$ for Hungary). Quite similarly, there is a significant positive relationship between perceived injustice and demand for authoritarianism in all three countries ($\beta = 0.28, p < 0.001$ for Romania, $\beta = 0.23, p < 0.001$ for Poland, and $\beta = 0.32, p < 0.001$ for Hungary).

The analysis also reveals several particularities for each country, apart from the common features presented above. In contrast to public attitudes in Romania and Hungary, in Poland, anti-elitism works as a strong driver of authoritarian demand ($\beta = 0.26, p < 0.001$). Then again, in Hungary, much more than in the other two countries, political anxiety seems to cast a strong influence on authoritarian demand ($\beta = 0.21, p < 0.001$).

6. Discussion and Conclusions

Our study was underpinned by four distinct hypotheses, positing that authoritarian demand is propelled by anti-elitism, political anxiety, economic threat, and perceived injustice. To test these assumptions, we relied on a robust data set ($N = 4,974$) collected in Romania, Poland, and Hungary after the end of the Covid-19 pandemic and approximately one year after the onset of the war in Ukraine. This unique dataset forms the backbone of our research, lending it a high degree of originality. The originality of the study also rests on the fact that comparative studies related to attitudes in a post-pandemic context and in times of neighbouring war have so far been very limited. The data allowed us to empirically test the theories related to the rise of authoritarian demand in East-Central Europe, in a special context since the accession of Romania, Poland, and Hungary to the EU. Moreover, the analysis of the data is relevant since it also develops a refined image of politics in East-Central Europe in the prelude to the elections for the European Parliament. Moreover, compared to other recent pieces of research that study public attitudes in the context of a health crisis (Roccatto et al., 2020), and of war (Alyukov, 2022), but do so by generally referring only to one case study, our data allows for a uniform understanding of authoritarian attitudes in a comparative manner.

The article examines trends towards authoritarianism in East-Central Europe, highlighting the critical determinants that appear to be economic threats and perceived injustice. This analysis reveals that economic instability in Hungary, Poland, and Romania drives the need to restore control and self-esteem, which is often shaken during economic downturns. This reaction confirms assumptions suggesting that crises drive support for authoritarian measures as a means of economic recovery and stability (Fritsche & Jugert, 2017; Greskovits, 2015). In Hungary, the framing strategy of national victimization and external threats significantly affects perceptions of injustice rooted in historical resentments of foreign interference. This manipulation helps justify populist narratives calling for drastic corrective action, appealing to those who feel betrayed by external forces. Poland's scenario differs slightly as anti-elitism remains a vector that significantly shapes electoral options, incorporating itself with the populist rhetoric of PiS. However, the opposition's recent electoral success suggests voters are shifting to a more balanced approach, even as they retain resonance with anti-elite sentiments. This phenomenon points to a complex relationship between voters' dissatisfaction with elites and their political choices, spanning right-wing and left-wing ideologies. In Romania, the strong correlation between economic threats and authoritarian demand highlights how economic fears, such as job losses and insecurity, can drive voters toward authoritarian options that promise quick and stabilizing solutions. In addition, significant perceptions of injustice, fuelled by inequality and systemic deficiencies, further push the electorate toward leaders who promise to fix these problems.

Our key findings indicate that economic threat and the perception of injustice are the strongest determinants of the demand for authoritarianism in East-Central Europe, but there are different explanations for each country. In Poland, the perception of injustice was most probably amplified by the restrictive abortion laws and the governmental decision of competing imports in agriculture, which prompted massive farmers' protests (Matthews, 2024), thus fuelling political anxiety and insecurity. In Hungary, political anxiety is heightened by the anti-immigration rhetoric and the government's illiberal measures, while in Romania, the economic threat and perception of endemic corruption are still dominant. These variations between cases underscore the complexity of the links between economic and political factors and the demand for authoritarianism in the specific context of each country.

Our findings underscore the complex nature of the relationship between the identified factors and authoritarianism or democratic erosion. They interact with each other and with other context-specific factors in each country. For instance, the alternation of power, as seen in Poland, demonstrates that support for democracy does not significantly vary between government and opposition supporters. However, democratic erosion can occur through abuses of power by elected actors. These insights have significant implications for the future of democracy in the region and warrant further research. Overall, the dynamics in these countries show how economic and social grievances are potent factors in the rise of authoritarian populism, with each nation displaying triggers and responses based on its historical and political context. This article provides empirical evidence to add to the debate on how East-Central European societies exhibit propensity towards authoritarianism, especially during unprecedented times since the accession of these countries to the EU.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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About the Authors



Mihai Alexandrescu is a senior lecturer at the Department of International Studies and Contemporary History within the Faculty of History and Philosophy, Babeş-Bolyai University. He specializes in international relations history, political behaviour and leadership, and Central and Eastern European history and diplomacy. Alexandrescu's research delves into the historical and political dynamics that shape Central and Eastern Europe, focusing on the interplay between historical events and political behaviour. He explores the implications of leadership and diplomatic strategies in contemporary and historical contexts.



Mihnea S. Stoica is an associate professor at the Department of Communication, Public Relations and Advertising within the Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University. He specializes in political communication and teaches political ideologies and political advertising. Stoica's main academic interests include populism, Euroscepticism, and public opinion. He has extensive research experience with political compasses, which he has developed in several countries, including Romania, Hungary, Poland, the Netherlands, Italy, and France.