



## 2026 Spring School

# Democratic Backsliding and Political Conflict

## II Edition

Organized by the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences of the Scuola Normale Superiore (SNS), and the European Governance and Politics Programme (Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute). The School is funded by the PNRR through MERITA, the network for talent project and the EUI.

**Time:** March 30 (EUI, Florence); March 31–April 2, 2026 (SNS, Cortona).

**Location:** Scuola Normale Superiore, Palazzo di Cortona, Cortona (Arezzo) and European University Institute, Badia Fiesolana (Florence).

**Contacts:** Manuela Caiani ([manuela.caiani@sns.it](mailto:manuela.caiani@sns.it)), Lorenzo Cicchi ([lorenzo.cicchi@eui.eu](mailto:lorenzo.cicchi@eui.eu))

**Tutors:** Giovanni Starita, Nikolaos Saridakis, İpek Demirsu Di Biase and Batuhan Eren — SNS Postdoctoral Researchers

### DESCRIPTION

The PhD School will offer an invaluable opportunity for young scholars to explore the complexities and challenges of democratic erosion (and their resistance) across different regions, and from a variety of disciplinary and methodological perspectives.

Studies of political participation and mobilisation are increasingly focusing on democratic regression and the political actors (far right political parties, reactionary social movement organizations, populist 'movement-parties', anti-gender actors in both movements and institutions, etc.) who act as 'entrepreneurs' of it. This edition will focus particularly on placing **gender equality** and intersectionality at the center of political contestation. Anti-gender movements and political parties actively oppose feminist politics, women, LGBTQIA+, and racialized people's rights, delegitimizing and attacking gender, sexuality, and race equality organizations, policies, and institutions. Opposition to gender equality contributes to democratic backsliding by curtailing democratic rights and attacking key democratization forces such as feminist politics.

The same is true of public opinion, electoral and party politics studies, which increasingly focus on the norms, values, opinions, attitudes that might embed it and the mechanisms of regressive orientations of society and collective political actors and policy makers. This also poses important methodological challenges that go beyond the analytical ones, in terms of reflecting on the research methods that are better suited to capturing these current trends in the European and global spheres. The Internet and social media are also part of the story, including various processes they mediate.

To explore the contextual, meso-organisational and micro-level attitudinal and value characteristics that accompany and sustain democratic backsliding in online campaigning, contentious politics, political participation and elections, this PhD school will focus on several key themes and methods: **social movements and collective actors**, identities and networks on the regressive side, with attention to anti-gender politics; the intersection of **media and democratic backsliding**, focusing on how the erosion of press freedoms plays a crucial role in undermining democratic institutions; **comparative analyses** of European democracies, and beyond, including the role of civil society and grassroots movements in resisting democratic decline; how **political elites and state institutions** may contribute to or combat backsliding; how political elites and state institutions may contribute to or combat backsliding; the impact of European Union policies on democratic resilience, examining how EU membership can both support and constrain democratic reforms in member states. Together, their diverse perspectives will provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the multifaceted dynamics of democratic backsliding, offering both theoretical frameworks and practical approaches for addressing these issues. This PhD School will engage participants from a variety of academic disciplines, ensuring a **multidisciplinary approach and methodological pluralism** to understanding democratic erosion. It welcomes papers on geographical areas and actors that are underrepresented in current research and media coverage

## Application procedure

The PhD School is open to 20 Ph.D. researchers. Applicants from the SNS are welcome.

Applicants should submit a curriculum vitae and a short cover letter (no more than 1 page) outlining how their research focus fits with the topic of the PhD School and how participation in the school would benefit their research. These materials should be submitted as one PDF by sending an email to Prof. Manuela Caiani ([manuela.caiani@sns.it](mailto:manuela.caiani@sns.it)) and Lorenzo Cicchi ([lorenzo.cicchi@eui.eu](mailto:lorenzo.cicchi@eui.eu)) before January 7, 2026. Accepted candidates will be notified no later than 15 January 2026.

## Enrolment fees, accommodation and location

There are no enrolment fees. The organisers will assist in providing accommodation in either single or double rooms in hotels in Cortona and Florence. Travel and accommodation costs for the duration of the stay need to be covered by the participants. Lunch, the two social dinners and coffee breaks are covered by the School. Cortona is a small town in the South of Tuscany, Italy, in easy reach by train from Florence or Rome. Classes will take place in the same location.

## PROGRAMME

The PhD School consists of three days with **Lectures** (5 lectures) by prominent scholars in the field of political science and political sociology, and sessions providing **feedback** on students' presentations in the afternoon (3 feedback sessions).

The School will also include a series of applied **Methodological Workshops** on qualitative and mixed-method approaches to the study of democratic backsliding, designed to actively engage participants throughout the entire duration of the program. The students will therefore be able to learn from a theoretical session and a more applied session on their projects/methodological session every day, as well as receiving precious feedback from experts in the field about their own research.

**Keynote:** Cristóbal Rovira-Kaltwasser (Pontifical Catholic University of Chile) – *Far right and populism from a comparative regional perspective*

### Monday, 30 March - European University Institute, Badia Fiesolana (Florence)

- |               |  |
|---------------|--|
| 14.00 – 14.30 | Welcome coffee   |
| 14.30 – 15.00 | Introductory remarks and practical information, European University Institute, Badia Fiesolana   Erik Jones and Lorenzo Cicchi (EUI), Manuela Caiani and Emanuela Lombardo (SNS)   |
| 15.00 – 17.00 | Plenary session with keynote speech: Cristóbal Rovira-Kaltwasser (Pontifical Catholic University of Chile) – <i>Far right and populism from a comparative regional perspective</i> |
| 19.30         | Conference dinner (no cost to participants)  |

### Tuesday, 31 March - Scuola Normale Superiore, Palazzone di Cortona (Arezzo)

- |                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| 9.00              | Transfer by bus from Florence to Cortona (no cost to participants)                       |
| 11.00             | Arrival and transfer to participants' hotels   |
| <i>From 13.00</i> | Coffee break available for participants at the Palazzone of Cortona                      |
| 14.00 – 14.20     | Welcome and practical information in Cortona   Manuela Caiani (SNS)                      |
| 14.20 – 15.50     | Lecture 1: <i>Lawyers in backsliding democracy</i>   Scott Cummings (UCLA School of Law) |
| 15.50 – 16.20     | Coffee break   |
| 16.20 – 17.50     | Feedback session: students' presentations, 15' each, and discussion.                     |

Parallel sessions can be organized \*\*Panel 1 and 2\*\*

17.50-19.30 Methods session 1: Nicolo' Pennucci (University of Namur) and Elena Cossu (EUI) – *LLM techniques, text analysis and Illiberal speech*

### Wednesday, 1 April - Scuola Normale Superiore, Palazzone di Cortona (Arezzo)

10.00 – 11.30 Lecture 2: Emanuela Lombardo (SNS) – *Anti-gender politics and feminist response*

11.30 – 12.00 Coffee break

12.00 – 13.30 Lecture 3: Kenneth Greene (UT Austin and EUI) and Andres Reiljan (University of Tartu and EUI) – *Politics in the context of polarization and autocratization*

13.30 – 14.30 Lunch

14.30 – 16.00 Feedback session: students' presentations, 15' each, and discussion. Parallel sessions can be organized \*\*Panel 3 and 4\*\*

16.00 – 16.30 Coffee break

16.30 – 18.00 Lecture 4: Manuela Caiani (SNS) – *Far-right movements and parties and the transnationalization of illiberalism*

18.00-19.00 Methods session 2: Martin Portos (SNS) – *Youth, participation and radicalization: quantitative data & datasets*

20.30 Conference dinner (no cost to participants)

### Thursday, 2 April - Scuola Normale Superiore, Palazzone di Cortona (Arezzo)

10.00 – 11.30 Lecture 5: Iva Nenadic (EUI) – *Where is the news media in democratic backsliding?*

11.30 – 12.00 Coffee break

12.00 – 13.30 Feedback Session: students' presentations, 15' each, and discussion. Parallel sessions can be organized \*\*Panel 5 \*\*

13.30 – 14.30 Lunch

14.30-15.30 Method session 3. Silvia Díaz Fernández (CSIC, Madrid) – *Digital ethnography on anti-gender and far-right actors*

16.30 Transfer by bus from Cortona to Florence (no cost to participants)

**PANELS:**

**Panel 1. Understanding the Radical Right: Electoral Appeal, Policy Positions, and Democratic Challenges (chair: Manuela Caiani)**

*Discussants:* Nikos Saridakis, Batuhan Eren

*4 Presenters:* Anna Guildea, Mahalia Thomas, Emiliano Focosi, Javid Ibad

**Panel 2. Anti Gender and Far Right Politics in Institutions and Civil Society (chair: Manuela Caiani / Emanuela Lombardo)**

*Discussants:* Nikos Saridakis, Batuhan Eren, Ipek Demirsu Dibiase, Silvia Diaz Fernandez

*4 Presenters:* Karolina Nugumanova, Karin Carlsson, Esther Romero González, Anna Lea Bernhard von Schlechtleitner,

**Panel 3. Gender Equality and Democratization Struggles (chair: Emanuela Lombardo)**

*Discussants:* Ipek Demirsu Dibiase, Silvia Diaz Fernandez

*5 Presenters:* Mohammad Allahham, Berfin Tutku Ozcan, Nico Isa Borrelli, Sofia Oliveira, Alice Pinotti

**Panel 4. Institutions and the Role of Collective Actors in both promoting and resisting illiberalism (chair: Lorenzo Cicchi)**

*Discussants:* Batuhan Eren and more

*5 Presenters:* Silke Herms, Fabio D'Aguanno, Jana Ruwayha, Jakob Piep, Dilara Özaydın

**Panel 5. Media, Disinformation, and Democratic Backsliding in the Digital Age (chair: Lorenzo Cicchi)**

*Discussants:* Giovanni Daniele Starita

*5 Presenters:* Gerliani Tornike, Filip Trbojević, Cosima Annabelle Hofacker, Ana Jovanovic-Harrington, Katarina Bogicevic