



Summer School on 'Democratic backsliding and political conflict'

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

Time: 27 September - 30 September 2025

Location: European University Institute, Villa Schifanoia, Florence and Scuola Normale Superiore, Palazzone di Cortona, Cortona (Arezzo)

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Description

The Phd School will offer an invaluable opportunity for young scholars to explore the complexities and challenges of democratic erosion across different regions (and their resistance) 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, 'movement-parties', etc.) who act as 'entrepreneurs' of it. 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; 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 Eastern European democracies, 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; the impact of European Union policies on democratic resilience, examining how EU membership can both support and constrain democratic reforms in member states, as well as the emergence of new arenas of democratic backsliding, such as **legal mobilisations** against the rule of law. 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 to understanding democratic erosion. It welcomes papers on geographical areas and actors that are underrepresented in current research and media coverage.

Programme of the PhD School

The PhD School consists of three days with lectures (5 lectures) by prominent scholars in the field of political science, political sociology, and communication studies, and sessions on feedback of students projects/papers presentations in the afternoon (3 Feedback Sessions). The students will have a theoretical session and a more applied session on their projects/methodological session every day. Students will also get feedback from experts in the field about their own research projects.

Saturday, 27 September - European University Institute, Villa Schifanoia (Florence)

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| 14.00 – 14.30 | Welcome coffee |
| 14.30 – 15.00 | Introductory remarks and practical information, Sala Europa, Villa Schifanoia, European University Institute Erik Jones, Lorenzo Cicchi (EUI), Manuela Caiani (SNS) |
| 15.00 – 17.00 | Plenary session with keynote speech: <i>The Risks of backsliding within the EU</i> R. Daniel Kelemen, Georgetown University. Discussant: Veronica Anghel (EUI) |
| 19.30 | Conference Dinner: 7:30 PM at Restaurant Cafaggi, Via Guelfa 35/r, Florence (no cost to participants) |

Sunday, 28 September - Scuola Normale Superiore, Palazzone di Cortona (Arezzo)

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| 9.00 | Transfer by bus to Cortona (meeting point: Florence downtown) |
| 11.00 | Arrival and transfer to participants' hotels |

From 13.00	A lunchbox will be available for participants at the Palazzone of Cortona
14.00 – 14.30	Welcome and practical information in Cortona Manuela Caiani (SNS)
14.30 – 16.00	Lecture 1: <i>Lawyers in backsliding democracy</i> Scott Cummings, UCLA School of Law
16.00 – 16.30	Coffee Break
16.30 – 18.30	Feedback Session: students' presentations, 15' each, and discussion. Parallel sessions can be organized **Panel 1 and 2**

Monday, 29 September 2025- Scuola Normale Superiore, Palazzone di Cortona (Arezzo)

09.30 – 11.00	Lecture 2: <i>Far Right Movements and 'movement-parties'</i> Manuela Caiani (SNS)
11.00 – 11.30	Coffee Break
11.30 – 13.00	Lecture 3: <i>Youth politics in the context of polarization and autocratization</i> Marjoke Oosterom, Institute of Development Studies (IDS)
13.00 – 14.30	Lunch
14.30 – 16.30	Feedback Session: students' presentations, 15' each, and discussion. Parallel sessions can be organized **Panel 3 and 4**
16.30 – 17.00	Coffee Break
17.00 – 18.30	Lecture 4: <i>Monitoring Media Pluralism in the Digital Era; Media freedom and democratic backsliding</i> Iva Nenadic and Maria Zuffova (EUI)
20.30	Conference Dinner at Taverna Pane e Vino, Piazza Signorelli, 27, 52044 Cortona – Arezzo (no cost to participants)

Tuesday, 30 September - Scuola Normale Superiore, Palazzone di Cortona (Arezzo)

09.30 – 11.00	Lecture 5: <i>Democratic Struggles in Contested States</i> Jelena Dzankic (EUI)
11.00 – 11.30	Coffee Break
11.30 – 13.00	Feedback Session: students' presentations, 15' each, and discussion. Parallel sessions can be organized **Panel 5 and 6**
13.00 – 14.30	Farewell lunch
15.00	Bus transfer to Florence

Composition of panels

Panel 1. Political institutions and actors' Communication, Law and democratic erosion (5 presentations)

Presentations: Iván Merker, Myrte van der Zwet, Sakshi Rai, Jovand Malesevic, Svetoslav Malinov

Panel 2. Anti gender, anti-feminist, regressive actors and practices (3 presentations)

Presentations: Samuel Sameš, Théo d'Estienne du Bourguet, Uxa Reboiro Del Rio

Panel 3. Political parties and institutional trajectories in time of democratic crisis (7 presentations)

Presentations: Samuele Lucidi, Federico Taddei, Theodoros Ntounias, Karl Lembit Laane, Oana Marinescu, Romana Burianová, Seyedehmonir Shahmiri

Panel 4. Media, social media, and democratic backsliding (5 presentations)

Presentations: Marton Gera, Paulina Magdalena Milewska, Maja Dodić, Eva Gaigalnice, Taha Kalaycı

Panel 5. Civil society resistance against democratic backsliding (5 presentations)

Presentations: Andrijana Lazarevic, Anna Romandash, Maria Gabriela Mata Carnevali, Iuliana Nyerges, Tamar Oniani.

Panel 6. (New) Political conflicts and Illiberalism (4 presentations)

Presentations: Carina Siebler, Bonald Perkola, Bruno Bevilacqua, Chiara Pupillo