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, Palazzone di Cortona, Cortona (Arezzo) and European University Institute, Badia Fiesolana (Florence).

Contacts: Manuela Caiani (manuela.caiani@sns.it), Lorenzo Cicchi (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

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 (Pontificial 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 (Pontificial Catholic University of Chile) – *Far right and populism from a comparative regional perspective*
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
From 13.00	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: TBC
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)

09.30 – 11.00	Lecture 2: Emanuela Lombardo (SNS) – *Anti-gender politics and feminist response*
11.00 – 11.30	Coffee break
11.30 – 13.00	Lecture 3: Kenneth Greene (UT Austin and EUI) and Andres Reiljan (University of Tartu and EUI) – *Politics in the context of polarization and autocratization*
13.00 – 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)

09.30 – 11.00	Lecture 5: Iva Nenadic (EUI) – *Where is the news media in democratic backsliding?*
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 **
13.00 – 14.30	Lunch
14.30-15.30	Method session 3. Silvia Díaz Fernández (CSIC, Madrid) – *Digital ethnography on anti-gender and far-right actors*
15.30	Transfer by bus from Cortona to Florence (no cost to participants)