

## **SUMMER SCHOOL ON DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING AND POLITICAL CONFLICT**

**27-30<sup>th</sup> September 2025**

**Conveners:** Manuela Caiani (SNS), Lorenzo Cicchi (EUI), Erik Jones (EUI)

**Time:** 27 September – 30 September 2025

**Location:** Scuola Normale Superiore, Palazzone di Cortona, Cortona (Arezzo) (<https://www.sns.it/it/palazzone-di-cortona>) & European University Institute, Villa Schifanoia, Firenze (<https://www.eui.eu/buildings?id=villa-schifanoia-1>)

**number of participants:** 25

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The Scuola Normale Superiore (Florence, Italy) in collaboration with the European Governance and Politics Programme (EGPP), part of the University Institute's Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, invites applications from doctoral students for the 2025 Ph.D. School on 'Democratic Backsliding'. The school will take place from 27 September to 30 September 2025. It will be held at the EUI's Villa Schifanoia (plenary session, first day, 27 September, start time 2.00pm) and at Palazzone di Cortona (days: 28-30 September, end time 2.30pm), one of the colleges of the Scuola Normale Superiore, in the small town of Cortona in southern Tuscany, Italy.

**Description/concept:**

The Summer School will offer an invaluable opportunity for young scholars to explore the complexities and challenges posed by democratic erosion across different regions (and its resistance). 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. In order 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, elections and citizens, and mobilisation, this PhD school focuses on several key themes and methods for understanding democratic backsliding: **social movements and collective actors**, identities and networks on the regressive side; the intersection of **(social) media and democratic backsliding**, exploring how the erosion of press freedoms plays a crucial role in undermining democratic institutions; **comparative analyses** of Eastern European democracies, focusing on 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. The Summer School will engage participants from a variety of academic disciplines, ensuring a multidisciplinary approach to understanding democratic erosion. Political science will be at the core of the discussions, with a focus on institutional dynamics, political elites, and legal frameworks that enable or hinder backsliding. Sociology will contribute to the understanding of civil society, social movements, and grassroots resistance

to democratic decline. Media studies will play a key role in examining the relationship between media freedoms and democratic stability, particularly in how information control and propaganda affect public opinion and political participation. Law and European studies will further enrich the program, exploring the role of international institutions and regional organizations, such as the European Union.

The PhD school welcomes papers on geographical areas and actors that are underrepresented in current research and media coverage.

#### **Application procedure:**

The PhD school will be advertised through a competitive international call. The PhD School is open to **25 Ph.D. researchers**. 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)) not later than **30 of July 2025, 5PM CEST (UTC+2)**. Accepted candidates will be notified not later than 10 August 2025.

#### **Enrolment fees, accommodation and location:**

There are no enrolment fees. The organisers will help participants finding accommodation in either single or double rooms in hotels in Cortona and Florence at a discounted price. Travel and accommodation costs for the duration of the stay need to be covered by the participants, except for students covered by the 'EUI Widening Programme scholarship' who will be fully covered for travel and accommodation as well (see paragraph below). Lunch and coffee breaks are covered by the School, plus 2 social dinners (one in Florence the first day and one in Cortona, on 29 September). Cortona is a small town in the South of Tuscany, Italy, in easy reach by train from Florence or Rome. After the plenary session (first day), which will take place at the EUI, the rest of the classes, the following days, will take place in Cortona. A transport from Florence to Cortona will be organized, and paid for, by bus from the EUI.

#### **EUI Widening Programme scholarship:**

**10 participants** from a selected group of ‘widening countries’ will be selected by the convenors of the Summer School to receive a full scholarship that completely covers for travel and accommodation costs to Florence and Cortona. The list of ‘widening countries’ is the following. Inside the European Union: Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Outside the European Union: Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Moldova, and Ukraine. The requirement to be eligible for this scholarship is twofold: participants must be citizen of one of the Widening countries, and be affiliated to an institution belonging to one of the Widening countries<sup>1</sup>. Participants who wish to apply to this scholarship must clearly state it in their application email, together with the CV and the cover letter. More information on the EUI Widening Programme can be found here: <https://www.eui.eu/en/public/widening-europe-programme/eui-widening-europe-programme>.

### **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 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**

14.00 – 14.30	Welcome coffee
14.30 – 15.00	Introductory remarks and practical information, Sala Europa, Villa Schifanoia, European University Institute (Erisk Jones, Lorenzo Cicchi, Manuela Caiani)

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<sup>1</sup> By means of example: a Bulgarian citizen enrolled in a Bulgarian University is eligible; a Bulgarian citizen enrolled in a Croatian university is eligible; a Bulgarian citizen enrolled in an Italian university is not eligible; an Italian citizen enrolled in a Bulgarian university is not eligible.

- 15.00 – 17.00 Plenary session with keynote speech: *The Risks of backsliding within the EU* | [R. Daniel Kelemen](#), Georgetown University,  
Discussant: [Veronica Anghel](#), European University Institute (EUI)
- 19.30 Social Dinner (location TBC, Florence downtown)

### **Sunday, 28 September**

- 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, Lorenzo Cicchi)
- 14.30 – 16.00 Lecture 1: *Lawyers in backsliding democracy* | [Scott Cummings](#), UCLA School of Law
- 16.00 – 16.30 Break
- 16.30 – 18.30 Feedback Session: students presentations, 15' each, and discussion. Parallel sessions can be organized.

### **Monday, 29 September 2025**

- 09.30 – 11.00 Lecture 2: *Far Right Movements and 'movement -parties'* | Manuela Caiani (SNS)
- 11.00 – 11.30 Break
- 11.30 – 13.00 Lecture 3: *Youth politics in context of polarization and autocratization* | [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.
- 16.30 – 17.00 Break

17.00 – 18.30      Lecture 4: *Monitoring Media Pluralism in the Digital Era* | [Iva Nenadic](#),  
European University Institute (EUI)

**Tuesday, 30 September**

09.30 – 11.00      Lecture 5: *Democratic Struggles in contested States* | [Jelena Dzankic](#),  
European University Institute (EUI)

11.00 – 11.30      Break

11.30 – 13.00      Feedback Session: students presentations, 15' each, and discussion.  
Parallel sessions can be organized.

13.00 – 14.30      Farewell lunch

**End of the summer school** and transfer by bus to Florence