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Edited by
Monika Eigmüller
Vincent Gengnagel

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Culture, Practice & Europeanization

21 | 2025 10. Year

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Monika Eigmüller, Vincent Gengnagel*

Editorial note

It is hard not to sigh: Europe, once imagined as a promise on the horizon, feels increasingly distant as the political landscapes of its member states move in worrying directions. Trying to follow the daily news, a sense of hopelessness creeps in: Conflicts escalate while Europe's transformative agenda gets stuck, trust seems to erode as the media mostly mirrors the *realpolitik* of national interests.

In 2025, the EU, too seems more exhausted than ever before – and challenged to reinvent itself once more in the face of growing crises in its member states: The repeated and loud disputes over European migration and asylum policy; the continuing geopolitical instability in the shadow of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine; yet again, the failure to deliver on climate ambitions; and, shadowing everything, the drift of more and more European democracies toward anti-democratic and authoritarian politics. Yet precisely in this density of crises, it is worthwhile to look more closely to understand how and where Europe is shaped beyond high politics and institutional procedures. This is what our journal is for, and the contributions to this issue do exactly that. They open up perspectives on how Europe emerges in local contexts, how crises are politically framed, and how cultural practices create new spaces even in times of structural uncertainty.

After a series of thematically focused issues, we are particularly pleased to present an open issue once again. The contributions assembled here reflect the multifaceted nature of Europe's current challenges, ranging from local mobilisation processes to geopolitical crisis analysis and transformations in digital cultural practices.

In 'Co-creating Europe-related activities', *Benjamin Gröbe et al.* focus on the local level of Europeanisation and demonstrate how citizens and civil society organisations, in cooperation with municipalities, shape Europe "from below". Especially in times of political polarisation, their contribution highlights how Europe does not only emerge in Brussels, but in the everyday interactions of local networks, sustained by normative ideas of European identity and by positive, citizen-centered narratives that counteract dominant discourses of crisis and threat.

In her article 'War as a singular crisis?', *Susann Worschech* analyses Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine as both a singular crisis and an expression of longer-term political continuities. Making an important contribution to the sociology of crisis in Europe, the paper demonstrates the interplay between singularity and normality

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in this event – and the ways in which political narratives, spatial and temporal dimensions, and resilience practices shape the interpretation of the crisis.

Xiaotong Tan's cultural sociological contribution 'Reconfiguring the field of professional music' focuses on digital cultural practices in the music industry. In her paper, she shows how platforms such as Spotify and TikTok are transforming the logic of professional success, with digital metrics such as streams, visibility and algorithmic rankings becoming the standard benchmarks for career progression. Rather than creating new forms of capital, Tan argues, existing forms are reinterpreted under digital conditions, offering crucial insights into the power structures of platform capitalism in the cultural field.

In his essay 'Schengen in the suction of sovereignism', *Georg Vobruba* focuses on the Schengen system and its paradoxical effects on the relationship between European integration and state sovereignty. Using Hungary as an example, he discusses how populism and conspiracy theories are making border policy a key area of mobilisation, and how attempts to regain national control are having the opposite effect.

In their research note, *Gulsabah Palinko* and *Klarissa Lueg* conceptualize 'Danish municipalities' efforts in attracting and retaining skilled migrants' and sketch out a research agenda for a discourse analytical approach to how migrants are framed as "skilled" and how they respond to this discursive effort.

Finally, *Pauline Ahlhaus* offers a pointed review essay on the edited volume *Anti-Gender Mobilisations in Europe and the Feminist Response: Productive Resistance* (Smrdelj/Kuhar 2025). The volume shows how feminist actors in various European countries respond to the rise of anti-gender mobilisations and what forms of "productive resistance" emerge in doing so. Ahlhaus' discussion also links directly to our forthcoming special issue on gender contestation in Europe (1/2026), which will focus more deeply on conflicts around gender equality in Europe.

Before that, however, Issue 2/2025 will feature a special issue on Norbert Elias as a European sociologist: Edited by Bernd Sommer, Marta Bucholc, and André Saramago, the upcoming issue 'A Climate of (De-)Civilisation?' puts Elias figurational sociology to work in the context of environmental sociology.

And finally, a note on our editorial team: Vincent Gengnagel, co-editor of CPE alongside Monika Eigmüller and Klarissa Lueg, has stepped down from his role as Managing Editor. We are now consciously moving toward a more collaborative editorial structure and look forward to the new opportunities – may the future of CPE be brighter than the political and fiscal landscape under which it continues to operate! We would like to thank our co-editors, authors, reviewers, publisher and readers for their continued commitment. Thanks to your efforts, this journal remains a Diamond Open Access outlet for academic debate, critical analysis and diverse research perspectives on *Culture, Practice & Europeanization*.

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Benjamin Gröbe, Stephan Grohs, Renate Reiter, Dorothee Riese, Simon Lenhart*

Co-creating Europe-related activities. The role of German local governments in bottom-up mobilisation

Abstract

In the process of Europeanisation, the local level takes an intermediary position between citizens and the European level. A special feature of local authorities' European involvement is that many local Europe-related activities are developed and implemented not only for citizens, but to a considerable extent by them or in cooperation between civil society organisations and municipal actors. The paper presents fresh data from a research project focusing on the German case to examine the local level's role in the European multi-level-governance system. We ask in this paper: How do civil society actors and municipalities interact in organising Europe-related bottom-up activities and what are the driving motives and ideas for these activities? In a first step, we investigate the variety of bottom-up mobilisation found at the local level and the role of local actors – city administrations, civil society associations and others – in creating opportunities for citizen engagement. In a second step, we trace forms of co-creation, i.e. local civil society involvement in municipal European policy-making, across the four dimensions of Europeanization. Third, we typologize the different local networks based on the type of underlying relation. In summary, Europe-related bottom-up mobilisation takes place through different citizen-oriented activities, often organised and implemented in local networks. The motives for this engagement are mainly based on a normative understanding of Europe as an idea, encompassing notions of European identity and society.

Keywords: European Integration, Europeanisation, local level, local actors

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We thank the participants of the CES Conference 2023 Panel "Shaping European Integration from Below: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Social Mobilization in the EU" as well as the participants of the EGPA Conference 2023 Panel "PSG IV: Regional and Local Governance" for their valuable advice and comments. We would also like to thank Hannah Belau, who supported the underlying research project and the work of the project team, also in connection with this article.

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1. Introduction

In the process of Europeanisation, the local level takes an intermediary position between citizens and the European level. Cities and municipalities themselves often engage with Europe in various ways (Gröbe et al., 2023; Guderjan & Verhelst, 2021; Dossi, 2017). These include the use of European funding (Verhelst, 2017) and the implementation of European law at the municipal level (Barbehön, 2016; Paasch, 2022), advocacy for local interests in the European multi-level system (Callanan & Tatham, 2014; Heinelt, 2017), cooperation with other European cities and municipalities (Falkenhain et al., 2012; Jańczak, 2017), and Europe-related activities for citizens in their own municipality.

While local level Europeanization has been researched well (for a comprehensive overview see Guderjan & Verhelst, 2021), the focus often lies on local administrations alone. Co-creation, while researched for local government processes and local public service production in general (Teles et al., 2021) or in specific policy fields like sustainability policy (Ansell et al., 2022), has been focused on less when it comes to a cross-cutting theme like Europeanization. Focussing on Europeanisation as the outcome of a particular type of European-wide edge-crossing public policy-making initiated in or by municipalities and that benefits the local population in manifold ways (e.g. via the creation of access to new financial resources for the local community), we argue in favour of broadening the perspective on Europeanisation by including local networks and how they provide a framework for the co-creation of Europe-related activities. Co-creation refers to the inclusion of non-governmental actors – be they individual citizens or associations – in governance. It can be "defined as the collaborative effort of distributed actors to enhance public value production through creative problem solving" (Røiseland et al., 2024). While co-creation can refer to a wide array of (local) actors, we specifically focus on the cooperation between citizens/associations and local administrations in pursuing Europe-related activities.

A special feature of local authorities' European involvement is that many local Europe-related activities are developed and implemented not only for citizens, but to a considerable extent by them or in cooperation between civil society organisations and municipal actors. Local Europe-related bottom-up activities can be initiated by citizens or civil society groups and then taken up and supported by

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municipal actors or, conversely, they can be conceived by municipal actors and then implemented together with or by civil society groups. Hence, local Europe-related governance structures are not characterised by the coexistence, but rather by the close link between the European engagement of citizens and civil society organisations on the one hand and the European activities of local authorities on the other.

This also has a normative dimension. Both in academic and political-practical discourse, as the political level closest to citizens, cities and municipalities are seen as an important source of input and output legitimacy for the EU (Guderjan & Verhelst, 2021). The EU itself also directly addresses civil society, for example in the framework of the "Citizens for Europe" programme (Kapustāns, 2022), expecting impulses to strengthen bottom-up political cohesion and the broad recognition of democratic values in Europe precisely from the local level and the interaction between municipalities and civil society (European Commission, 2008). Funding schemes like LEADER for rural areas require the inclusion of civil society in the so called "Local Action Groups", i.e. public-privately mixed local organising committees.

Given both the practical and (assumed) normative potential of co-creation, we ask: How do citizens and civil society actors interact with municipalities in organising Europe-related bottom-up activities? To study this interaction, we examine the Europe-related activities and organisational structures in German cities and municipalities. This allows us to gain a better understanding of Europe-related co-creation and the role of local actors in mediating citizens' or citizen groups' bottom-up activities and engagement with the EU. For this purpose, we draw on two sets of original data. First, we use data from a new survey among German cities with more than 20,000 inhabitants on their Europe-related engagement (Gröbe et al., 2022). Second, we draw on the findings from case studies on Europe-related activities of municipal and civil society actors in eight selected German cities. Our analysis contributes to the scholarly debate on and the empirical study of local-level Europeanisation in the following ways. First, instead of limiting the Europeanisation of the local level only to city administrations, we look at the role of local-level networks in Europe-related activities. We argue that only the embeddedness in vivid local networks enables local governments to pursuit successful European activities. Second, we inductively shed light on the motives for the Europe-related bottom-up activities of local actors. These are manyfold and shape the key areas of action. In this way, thirdly, our article contributes to the discussion and future research on the impact of local action on political cohesion in Europe, also beyond the reach of our empirical case, Germany. A look beyond the core institutions of local government is necessary to understand variation in bottom-up Europeanization.

The paper is structured as follows. In the following section, we present the state of research on the topic and our framework for conceptualising the role of cities and municipalities as European intermediaries vis-à-vis European institutions on

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the one hand and Europe's citizens on the other. In section three we explain the methodology of the empirical study underlying this article. Then, in section four, we present the empirical results: Based on our survey, we reconstruct how local administrations create opportunity structures for co-creation through their own activities, and what resources they have to do so. Then, we identify forms of co-creation drawing on our qualitative case studies and typologize the networks and their underlying logics of interaction. Finally, in section five, we draw conclusions regarding the role of cities and municipalities in Europe-related bottom-up mobilisation.

2. State of research: Local level Europeanization and the role of networks

The concept and theory of Europeanisation is an important first point of reference for the analysis of the role of cities and municipalities vis-à-vis the European institutions on the one hand and the European citizens on the other. In general, the term Europeanisation "refers to interactions between the European Union, its member states or third countries" (Börzel & Panke 2019, 122). However, the concept of Europeanisation can cover different aspects and phenomena related to European integration (Olsen, 2002). Accordingly, several different definitions have developed in the academic literature, of which those by Ladrech (1994), Risse et al. (2001), Radaelli (2003), and Vink and Graziano (2008) are among the most prominent. For the purpose of this article, we refer to the definition of Hamedinger and Wolffhardt (2010, 28), who define Europeanisation "as the interplay between actors and institutions on the European and the city level, which leads to changes in local politics, policies, institutional arrangements, discourse, actors' preferences, values, norms and belief systems on both levels". This definition of Europeanisation has three advantages. Firstly, in contrast to the more general definitions, this definition explicitly refers to the local level. Secondly, this definition explicitly includes local actors in addition to local administrations. Thus, it is open for analysing the integration of citizens and civil society organisations in the process of Europeanisation. Thirdly, the cognitive dimension of Europeanisation is captured, which is particularly important for the analysis of the underlying motives for European-related activities of local actors.

The literature on local level Europeanization distinguishes between a horizontal and a vertical axis of Europeanisation (Rooij, 2002; Marshall, 2005; Kern & Bulkeley 2009; Hamedinger & Wolffhardt, 2010; Bever et al., 2011a; Guderjan, 2015; Guderjan & Miles 2016; Guderjan & Verhelst 2021). On the vertical axis, cities and municipalities act directly or indirectly with the European level, along the horizontal axis they act in cross-border cooperation and in networks with other cities as well as towards and with their own citizens. Based on this distinction, we can analytically divide local activities into four dimensions (Gröbe et al., 2023).

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While the first two dimensions, *downloading* and *uploading*, are oriented along the vertical axis, the other two dimensions, *horizontal networking* and *communication*, are aligned along the horizontal axis. *Downloading* includes both the implementation of European law and the use of EU funding. *Uploading* refers to the processes of formulating and representing interests on the European level.

In this study, a particular emphasis lies on the two horizontal dimensions, *horizontal networking* and *communication*, since activities in both dimensions involve local government actors interacting with citizens and civil society actors. *Horizontal networking* relates to the various forms of cooperation between municipalities in national and transnational networks (Kern & Bulkeley, 2009; Zerbinati & Massey, 2008; Zerbinati, 2004; Huggins, 2018) as well as in the context of town twinning (Falkenhain et al., 2012; Jańczak, 2017; Joenniemi & Jańczak, 2017; Kajta & Opiłowska, 2022) or cross-border projects (Bever et al., 2011b; Crossey & Weber, 2024; Svensson, 2015) aiming to collect information, develop and implement policies or exchange information and best practices (Frątczak-Müller & Mielczarek-Żejmo, 2020; Marshall, 2005). In this dimension, citizens and civil society actors are particularly involved in organising and shaping European activities by participating in their city's town-twinning activities, for example in the context of twinning associations, as participants in youth and citizen exchanges and cross-border projects. Here, we can also draw on sociological concepts of horizontal Europeanization that focus on processes of socialization in Europe (Heidenreich, 2019; Mau, 2015; Mau & Verwiebe, 2010). This perspective stresses the importance of concrete interactions and experiences. *Communication* is also located on the horizontal axis, but refers to the relationship between local government and the local population concerning European issues and activities. It includes the integration and mobilisation of citizens, civil society and political actors by the local government in European issues. Typical Europe-related activities in this dimension, developed both for and in cooperation with citizens and civil society actors, include providing information on European issues, establishing and supporting European exchanges by schools, associations and citizens and organising events on European topics. Local activities of this type are mainly driven by cognitive frames like norms and values of local actors towards the European project (Reiter et al., 2024) and local discursive practices (Barbehön, 2016). With the dimension *communication* we capture the role of the local government vis-à-vis its citizenry, civil society and local political actors in European issues. These aspects have received little attention in previous research, even though the Europeanisation of the local level as well takes place through the European bottom-up engagement of a municipality's citizens.

In order to understand the conditions for co-creation, we need to discuss both the constitutional framework and resources for EU-related activities. In Germany, like other EU member states, Europe-related policies are not among the mandatory tasks of municipalities. In Germany, there are different types of municipal tasks as defined in the municipal laws of the Länder. Obligatory tasks (like waste-disposal,

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school-maintenance, or social assistance) have to be fulfilled by the municipalities, while they can choose whether and how to pursue voluntary tasks (like funding of culture, European policy). As a voluntary task, cities can decide whether and how to conduct their Europe-related activities, how to organise them and what priorities to set. Although the integration of the local level into the European multi-level system is not linked to a specific model of institutionalisation (Guderjan & Verhelst, 2021, 75), similar organisational structures and procedures have become established within local governments in both Germany and other EU member states (Benington & Harvey, 1999; Marshall, 2005; Münch, 2006; Bacon, 2016; Verhelst, 2017; Guderjan & Verhelst, 2021). In the literature, the establishment of a (central) unit for EU affairs within the administration of local authorities, often in combination with the appointment of a municipal EU representative, is seen as an important step towards institutionalising European action (Münch, 2006, 181–189; Bacon, 2016, 113–118; Guderjan & Verhelst, 2021, 75; John, 2000, 884). By establishing their own EU organisational unit, municipalities not only emphasise the importance of Europe (Guderjan & Verhelst, 2021, 75), but also provide the organisational conditions for bundling the cross-cutting task of "Europe" and performing it effectively (Klausen & Goldsmith, 1997, 241; Münch, 2006, 178; Bacon, 2016, 114; Guderjan & Verhelst 2021, 75). In addition to the establishment of a (central) office for EU affairs within the administration of local authorities, these include in particular the diverse activities for networking with other actors, be it at national and European level (Kern & Bulkeley, 2009; Verhelst, 2017) or with civil society actors within the local authority itself.

For considering the interaction and linkages between local governments, civil society, associations and individual actors within the framework of a European-related network, we take up the ideas of policy networks (Klijn & Koppenjan, 2000; Baldassarri & Diani, 2007; Teles et al., 2021). Knoke has distinguished five basic types of relations amongst organisational or (we could add with regard to the local level) individual actors as structural basis of networks: resource exchange, information transmission, power relations, boundary penetration and sentimental attachments (Knoke, 2011, 211). Notably resource exchange which relates to the bundling of local state- and societal resources for accomplishing a common purpose, boundary penetration, referring to the mutual coordination of action for the achievement of a common goal, and sentimental attachments in the sense of reciprocal "emotional affiliations" as a basis for mutual support and common solidaristic action (Knoke, 2011, 211) seem particularly important to understand local networks' role in pursuing Europe-related action and in framing Europe. Drawing on Knoke's distinction, we can typologize the empirical manifestations of Europe-related networks. We can expect that co-creation in relation to European activities will be more prevalent the fewer resources (financial/material; knowledge) local government has available for the voluntary implementation of European policy. We can also expect citizens to be more involved in the co-creation of municipal European policy the more traditional

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or long-standing joint municipal-citizen relations are in the field of municipal European activities (e.g. town twinning). Furthermore, we can expect co-creation to be more intensive the more intensive the local government-citizen networking and the more active the local urban society is.

3. Methods

To examine the role of the municipal level in European bottom-up mobilisation, the paper proceeds in two steps. As a first step, we look at the nature and frequency of the various European activities that either address local people or are organised in cooperation with them. Furthermore, we examine the organisational resources that municipalities can use for this purpose. In a second step, we investigate the ideas driving the Europe-related bottom activities of these local actors. Empirically, we draw on two types of original data on German municipalities. First, we use the findings of an online survey conducted among all German cities with 20.000 or more inhabitants (n=700) (reference date: 31.12.2019) in the period 1.11.2021 – 16.1.2022. The survey was sent both by post and by e-mail to the cities' and municipalities' mayors, requesting them to forward the questionnaire to the employees responsible for European affairs. The questionnaire used for the online-based survey was developed considering the relevant research literature and consisted of both closed and open-ended questions asking about various aspects related to municipal European affairs, including the status of Europe, organisational structures, objectives, and activities of municipal European affairs. A total of 307 out of 700 cities and municipalities took part in the survey (response rate: 43.9 per cent).

Table 1: Cases and interviewees

Case City	Size	Economic situation	Interviewees
A-City	Small	Above average	■ Mayor ■ City Administration Department (Culture) ■ Economic development ■ Civil society, association ■ School
B-City	Small	Below average	■ Mayor ■ City administration, town twinning ■ Economic development ■ School

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Case City	Size	Economic situation	Interviewees
C-City	Medium	Below average	■ City administration, town twinning ■ City Administration Department (Culture) ■ Chamber of Industry and Commerce ■ Chamber of Crafts ■ Organization: Theatre (Culture) ■ Association (town twinning)
D-City	Medium	Above average	■ City administration, European representative + town twinning ■ City Administration Department (Building, Urban Development) ■ Economic development ■ Civil society, association 1 ■ Civil society, association 2 ■ School
E-City	Medium	Below average	■ City Administration European Affairs Officer + Europe Direct ■ Civil society, association 1 (town twinning) ■ Civil society, association 2 ■ School ■ Youth parliament (participatory body)
F-City	Medium	Above average	■ Mayor ■ Department (Economic Development) + Europe Direct ■ School ■ Civil society, association 1 ■ Civil society, association 2
G-City	Small	Below Average	■ Mayor ■ City Administration Department (Building and Economic Administration)
H-City	Small	Above average	■ Mayor ■ City administration, town twinning ■ Civil society, association (town twinning) ■ Europe Direct

Small: 20.000 – 50.000 inhabitants, medium: ~100.000 inhabitants or more; economic situation measured by tax revenue compared to *Land* average.

Second, the quantitative data is complemented with interviews from eight German case studies. In order to enable a comparison by keeping the framework (e.g. state politics and the legal framework for municipalities that is determined by the state) constant, two German *Länder* were chosen in a first step. In a second step, four cities were chosen for each *Land,* representing bigger cities (around and above 100.000 inhabitants) and smaller cities (20.000 – 50.000 inhabitants) with a

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different level of financial resources. Interviews were conducted with different local actors that are part of the local Europe-related networks: actors from municipal authorities (mayors, administrative staff in charge of European or town twinning matters), schools, local economy, and civil society (local associations, e.g. in the town twinning context). In each city, two to six interviews were conducted. In addition to these case studies, two interviews with German municipal umbrella organisations on their Europe-related work and their overview of cities' activities were conducted. The interviews were semi-structured by a general guideline that was adapted to each actor interviewed. They were transcribed and then coded using MAXQDA. The coding scheme was deductively developed to structure the empirical material, focusing on the four dimensions of Europe-related activities, the goals of Europe-related activities and the local Europe-related networks (see table 1).

4. Europe-related bottom-up mobilisation at the local level in Germany

4.1 Creating opportunities for citizen engagement – Local Europe-related activities

The role of cities and municipalities in mediating and co-creating citizens' bottom-up activities and their engagement with the EU is not only expressed by a variety of different activities, but also by different forms of interaction. For systematising these, we first present the results of our survey on municipal European affairs and classify them based on the findings from our case studies.

The results of our survey on the frequency of performing European activities in the four dimensions *uploading*, *downloading*, *horizontal networking* and *communication* show that the cities and municipalities in Germany pursue a variety of different activities, albeit to varying degrees and intensity. Comparing the frequency of the activities carried out in the four dimensions, it turns out that the cities and municipalities most often engage in activities that are either directly addressed to citizens and civil society actors or are carried out jointly with them (see table 2).

Table 2: Index of Europe-related activities

Dimension	Downloading	Uploading	Horizontal Networking	Communication
Average	2,9	2,7	3,1	3,3

Note: 1–5 scale (1: never – 5: often)

Two types of networks can be observed: Networks *within* cities and networks with *other* cities. The ubiquity of networks with other cities can be illustrated by the fact that the cooperation with partner municipalities in European countries within a formal town twinning represents the most frequently pursued European activity

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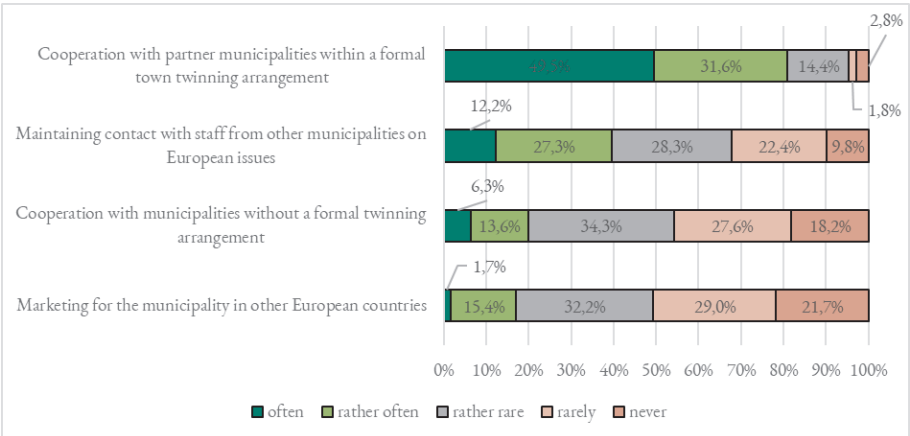
(see Figure 1). A total of 81.1 % of the municipalities stated to cooperate regularly with twinned towns. By contrast, only one fifth of the cities and municipalities stated to cooperate regularly with other European municipalities without a formal twinning agreement (19.4 %). Formal networks with other European cities by twinning thus play an outstanding role in the European engagement of many municipalities.

Figure 1: Europe related activities in the dimension of horizontal networking.



Source: Own chart (Survey question: How often are the following activities carried out by your local government?).

Networks *within* cities can be traced by focusing on the items in the dimension *communication.* Here, we surveyed European activities carried out by local authorities for or together with citizens and civil society actors (see Figure 2). These include the regular integration of civic engagement into the municipality's European activities (69.9 %), the support of youth exchanges with children and young people from other European municipalities (61.2 %) and the organisation as well as participation in exchanges with citizens from other European municipalities (59.3 %), for example from twin towns. Other activities, which are carried out somewhat less often but represent a significant part of citizen-based European activities accessible to a broader public, include the organisation of projects with children and young people (32.8 %), the organisation of information and discussion events (31.5 %) and the operation of a public information service on Europe and local European work (29.8 %). The participation in committees, working groups and events with European relevance within the own municipality is another activity that is regularly carried out by a considerable part of the cities (40.5 %).

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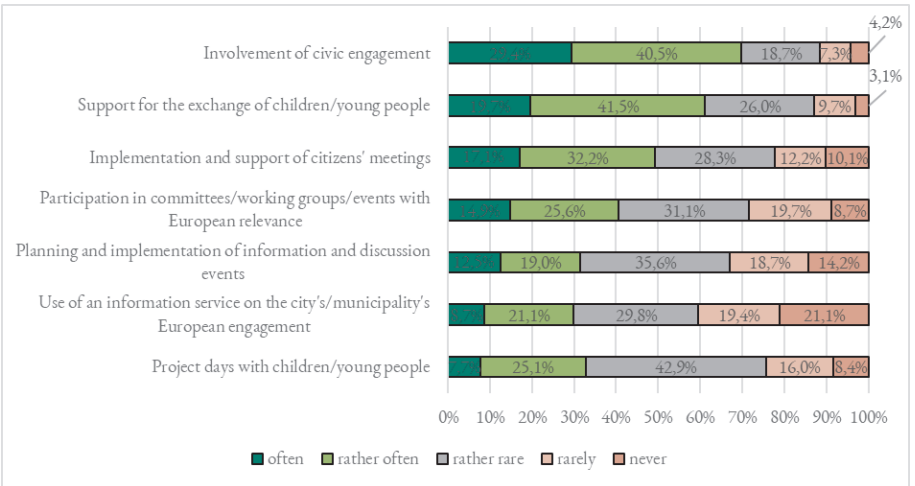
Figure 2: Europe related activities in the dimension of communication.



Source: Own chart (Survey question: How often are the following activities carried out by your local government?).

The high relevance of citizen-oriented European activities is also reflected in the target groups that local authorities, according to their own assessment in an open question, intend to address with their Europe-related work. The most important target groups of municipal European work include schoolchildren and young people, those involved in town twinning work in their own town and in the twin towns as well as local associations. Furthermore, the cities and municipalities also address with their activities all those actors who participate in the various topic-specific local or European networks, which include representatives from politics, administration, NGOs, civil society, sport, culture, and education. In addition to these more specific target groups, the cities indicated that the general public in their own municipality is also an important addressee of municipal European work. Thus, local administrations are interested in providing opportunity structures for citizen engagement.

The importance of networks, both within the cities and with other cities, can also be illustrated by the reported goals that cities pursue. The cities and municipalities in our survey rate the importance of the various goals of local European engagement differently (see Figure 3). A total of 95.0 % of the municipalities stated that maintaining and intensifying municipal partnerships was (very) important to them. Almost equally important is the improvement of cultural exchange between European municipalities, considered (very) important by 89.1 % of the cities and municipalities surveyed. Among the other objectives of local European engagement related to the citizens of a municipality, the promotion of civic engagement with

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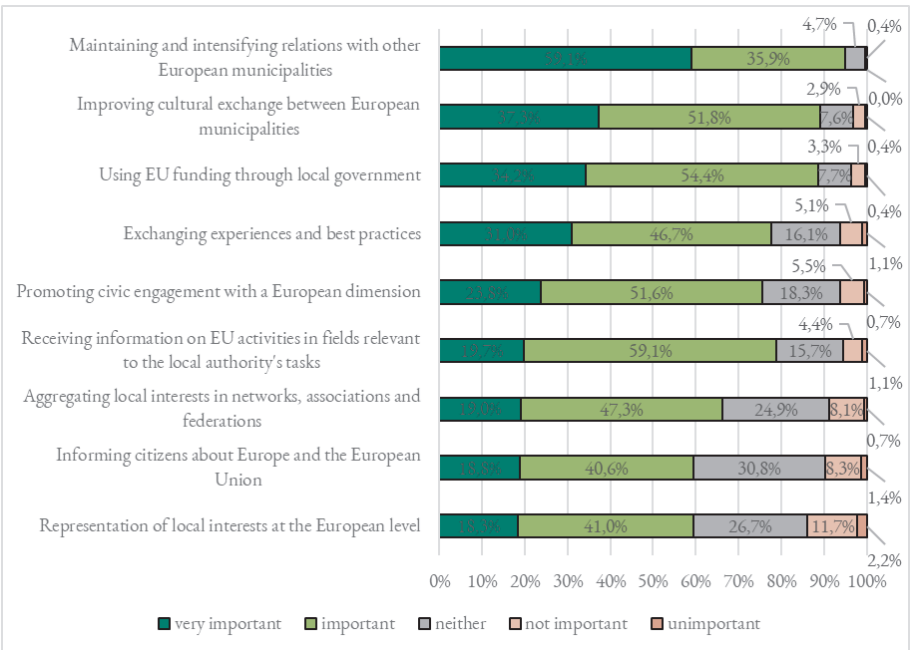
European relevance is in fifth place (75.4 % (very) important). By contrast to these objectives, the aggregation of interests in networks (66.3 % (very) important) and the effective representation of municipal interests at the European level (59.3 (very) important) have a much lower priority for municipalities. Thus, apart from the use of EU funds, the cities and municipalities in Germany pursue fewer benefit-oriented goals, understood here as the attempt to exert political influence in one's own favour. Instead, they prioritise goals that at first sight have no direct political or economic benefit, but which are based on a specific (common) understanding of Europe, the EU and the role of citizens.

Figure 3: Objectives of local European engagement.



Source: Own chart (Survey question: What are the objectives of your municipality's Europe related activities? How important are the following aspects for you?).

4.2 Resources for maintaining local networks

For analysing *how* EU-related bottom-up mobilisation takes place at the local level, we will take a closer look at the nature of local networks in which Europe-related activities are organised. We begin with the local governments, who often play a nodal role within these local European-related networks. For managing Europe-related activities, many municipalities have established organisational structures within their administration and have access to various resources (Klausen und Goldsmith 1997, S. 241; Münch 2006, S. 178; Bacon 2016, S. 114; Guderjan und Ver-

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helst 2021, S. 75). About two thirds of cities and municipalities have at least one organisational unit for European affairs within their local government (63.8 %). In a small group of cities and municipalities, the municipal European work is not only bundled in one EU office but is distributed over two (12.3 %) or three and more (3.8 %) units within the local government. The cities' focus on Europe-related activities is also reflected in the organisational decisions concerning the location and remit of staff responsible for EU affairs. The location of the office for EU affairs within the local administration and its area of responsibility differ between the cities and municipalities. Although we cannot quantify the information provided by the cities and municipalities in response to the open question about the organisational structure of their cities' European engagement – respondents answered the question at different levels of abstraction – the answers provide a valuable insight into the diversity of the organisation of Europe-related work in local governments. European affairs are by far most often located in the mayor's area of responsibility, followed by other departments like economy, culture, tourism, sport, public relations, finances, and citizens affairs. As our case studies reveal, only a few of the cities had staff explicitly responsible for European affairs (Europabeauftragte), but most had a town twinning coordinator.

Looking at the resources available for local European activities, about one third of the cities and municipalities rated the endowment with financial and human resources as adequate ("good", "very good") for fulfilling their tasks in the area of EU work, while two thirds of the municipalities considered these to be insufficient or at least not worth mentioning (see Figure 4). The different assessments of the endowment with financial and personnel resources observed in the survey have also become apparent in the case studies. According to the interviewees, Europe-related engagement, as a voluntary task, is seen as an addition to compulsory municipal tasks and therefore often not prioritised. Rather, Europe-related engagement competes with other voluntary tasks in the allocation of financial and human resources. In addition to staffing levels, the specific tasks performed by the staff officially responsible for European affairs vary considerably, depending on the priorities of a city's European engagement. By contrast to the endowment with "hard" resources (financial and personnel resources), the majority of municipalities (about three quarters) rated their networking resources, including the access to decision-makers, the access to information in the local administration as well as the cooperation with civil society actors, as positive ("good", "very good").

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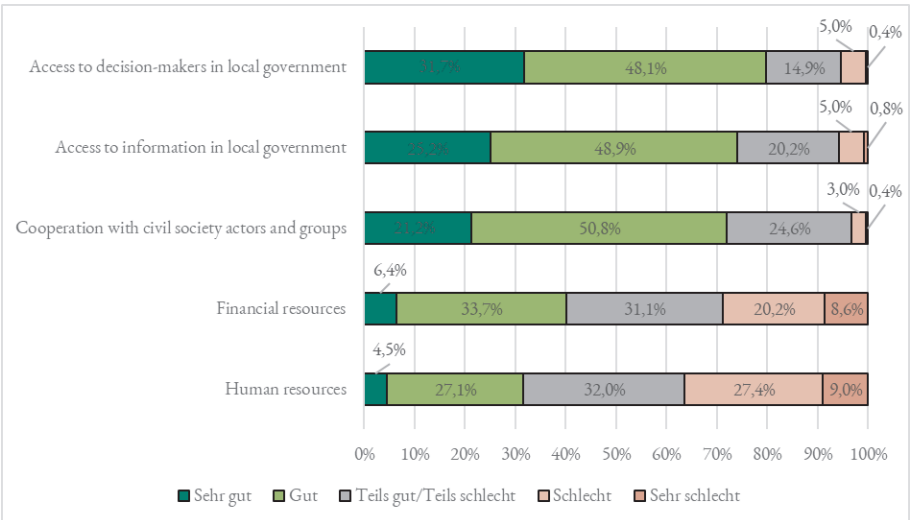
Figure 4: Organisational and resource-related foundations of German cities' European activity.



Source: Own Chart (Survey question: How do you assess the framework conditions for municipal European policy?).

The cooperation in local networks, consisting of representatives of the city administration, local politicians and civil society actors, thus has a significant role for the capability of municipalities to organise Europe-related activities. The high relevance of bilateral partnerships in the cities' Europe-related activities in the form of town twinning, already identified in the survey, also reflects in the structure of the local European networks in many cities. As our case studies have shown, these local networks have often developed around a city's twinning activities. Besides representatives from local government, these networks include local civil society actors, associations, schools or cultural institutions cooperating within the city in developing twinning projects and welcoming guests from the twinned city. Some cities have twinning associations for town twinning, mostly for a specific bilateral twinning, sometimes for all the city's twinnings. In addition, there are more loosely organised groups or individuals engaged in town twinning activities. Other important actors were schools, NGOs, sports groups, cultural institutions, and in some cases local economic actors.

The Europe-related networks of the individual cities are shaped by a variety of local characteristics such as individual engagement, path dependencies and framework conditions such as economic structure, and therefore take different forms. The networks differ in terms of the number of partnerships, their geographic focus, their intensity and rootedness in local civil society, and the actors involved in the network

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activities. Beyond the differences, however, there are several common characteristics that cut across the different organisational contexts and partnerships, all relating to the close connection between municipal actors, on the one hand, and civil society actors, on the other, in European-related bottom-up mobilisation.

Firstly, the close relationship between civil society and municipal actors in realising Europe-related activities is reflected at the organisational level. When asked about the organisational structure of the city, respondents also referred to civil society actors such as associations or committees. This illustrates that even the staff responsible for European affairs does not strictly distinguish between administrative and civil society actors. Moreover, the distinction between actors from the administration and civil society almost disappears in some cases. For example, one case city strategically sends municipal employees to participate in various civic and volunteer groups, while another has a representative in the citizen-led partnership association. In both cases, the aim was not to control the work of the civil society organisations, but to ensure continuity, to keep the organisations "alive" and to link the activities of the city and the citizens with each other.

Secondly, the municipality staff always stressed that the implementation of Europe-related activities crucially depends on the contributions of local network actors and civil society. While the town twinning coordinator of one case city explained that without civil society partners, they would not be able to organise the exchanges and activities, another indicated that the municipality is often only informed after an exchange that has been organised from civil society has taken place, instead of organising everything from the top down. Moreover, there is not necessarily a clear distinction between administrative action and civil society activities, as shown by an example where, on the one hand, citizens provide chapters for the city's official twinning report and, on the other hand, municipal resources are provided to civil society activities (e.g. the city's press officer). In other cases, civil society actors (such as twinning associations) or even private individuals participate in the design of twinning activities, e.g. by partially organising the programme for meetings and providing private accommodation for the guests.

Thirdly, twinning and other Europe-related activities, both in civil society associations and in local government, are highly personalised and driven by the commitment of individuals. In this way, over the years, individuals have often built up not only specialised expertise, e.g. in applying for funding, but perhaps more importantly, personal and sometimes friendly relationships with cooperation partners that are important for the realisation of local Europe-related activities. However, the great importance of individual commitment also has a downside. Many activities, for example in the context of town twinning, run the risk of not being able to be carried out in the future if the key actors retire for age reasons and there is no younger generation to take over.

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4.3 Forms of Co-creation in the four dimensions of Europeanization

Drawing on our case studies, we can observe different forms of co-creation together with individual citizens or associations across all four dimensions of Europeanization – downloading, uploading, horizontal networking and communication. Often, these only cover specific aspects of the overall activities in the respective dimension.

At first sight, *downloading* is not pertinent for co-creation. Implementing EU law is an administrative task. When it comes to the use of EU funding, though, we find several instances of co-creation, where citizens or associations get involved in acquiring EU funds for local projects. In one of the case cities (D-city), there was a civil society association specialized and professionalized in doing EU-funded projects on topics like EU rule of law. In the same city, the local administration in cooperation with the people active in a youth club managed to get EU funding for the modernization of said youth club. In another city, European funding for rural areas (LEADER) was the only noteworthy Europe-related activity, and one that was conducted in cooperation with civil society, using funding for different small-scale local projects. In several cases, the funding requirements for EU projects (e.g., including partners) provided an incentive for co-creation. Thus, the eligibility criteria for EU funding can foster processes of network-building and co-creation. However, as demonstrated by the aforementioned cases of civic engagement in connection with the acquisition of European funds, co-creation does not follow a mere rational purpose in the sense that municipalities involve citizens because this is a formal prerequisite for obtaining funding. Rather, there is a mutual interest and, in the cases we examined, genuine cooperation or co-creation can thus be observed.

Uploading, in turn, seems to be more suitable for co-creation from the first glance, given that it is about formulating European interests and communicating them to the European level. However, the comparatively low level of activity of local administrations in this dimension (see table 1) also showed in a low level of co-creation. Still, there are some examples of upload-related co-creation. In E-city, the local youth parliament cooperated closely with the city's European affairs officer. As a form of upload activity, the youth parliament developed a list of Europe-related demands directed at different levels of government (including EU level) that represented young people's interests and needs.

Most examples of co-creation were to be found in the dimension of *horizontal networking*. Nearly all case cities with the exception of one were active in town twinning, and town twinning is a prime example for co-creation. The concrete forms, however, differed. In B-city, for example, civil society associations not only cooperated with the city administration, but also did exchanges and projects independently. In C-city, the city strategically sends city representatives to participate in town twinning associations, for ensuring continuity and exchange. Co-creation is case-specific: in some cases, the networks are loosely knit, in others there are individuals carrying the cooperation over decades. The town twinning officer described

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their cooperation as "truly a symbiosis of administrative organization and voluntary organization" (town twinning officer C-city). Although many interviewees worried about recruiting problems, they nevertheless stressed the crucial role of citizen engagement in conducting a variety of horizontal networking activities.

Finally, for *communication* activities, we, too, found forms of co-creation. One example are events like Europe Day or festivals, where city administrations cooperate with citizens and associations in presenting their Europe-related work and addressing topics (e.g. in B-City). In C-city, the civil society actors could use the city's press mailing list for informing about their work. In E-city, the European affairs officer organized pop-up Europe Direct information centers at partners' venues.

In sum, we see that forms of co-creation can be found for all four dimensions of local level Europeanization. City administrations rely on civil society actors to make their Europe-related activities work. However, not all types of activities are equally suitable for co-creation. Some, like the implementation of European law, provide rather limited opportunity for cooperation with citizens and associations.

4.4 Types of co-creation networks

The survey results have shown the great emphasis that local administrations put on forms of horizontal networking. Drawing on Knoke's distinction of five types of relations in networks – resource exchange, information transmission, power relations, boundary penetration and sentimental attachments (Knoke 2011, S. 211) – we can systematize our observations (see table 2). The most important forms in the case studies were what he called exchange and sentimental attachments.

Table 2: Network types engaging in local Europe-related activities

Type of relation	Resource exchange	Sentimental attachment	Information transmission	Boundary penetration	Power relations
Empirical manifestations in the case studies	Both partners bring resources to the table	Two forms: personal level & shared normative ideas of Europe	Learning & best practices	Interest representation	---

Source: Own chart.

Resource exchange can grasp those kinds of cooperation that are based on different sides bringing in different types of resources. For example, city administrations provide the formal framework (e.g. twinning agreements), personnel (e.g. town twinning or European affairs officers) and a basic level of funding, while civils society actors contribute ideas, access to their networks, and organisational power. Concretely, this includes citizens hosting twin city guests in their private homes, organizing parts of the programme of a visit (H-city) or volunteers contributing reports on twinning activities for local council (C-city).

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Sentimental attachments include two forms of relations, which may empirically overlap: On the one hand, networks build on personal sympathy and cooperating with people one has good experiences working with. Many interviewees stressed the personal bonds and friendships they developed within networks. On the other hand, networks may also build on what we term "Europe as an idea" and a shared attachment to notions of creating a European society and promoting the "European idea". Engagement often is based on a shared normative understanding of *Europe as an Idea*, encompassing notions of European identity, society and community. Interestingly, actors not always clearly distinguished between notions of a broader Europe and references to the EU as a polity. Rather, both could be incorporated into an abstract "European idea". If such an abstract idea is shared it can serve as a basis for working together. As one city official noted, "So what I realize again and again is that it doesn't work without passion. As I said earlier, you have to identify partners over time who you can infect with a passion. Because if they, if I'm not passionate about it and only do it because it's on the agenda now, then it can't work. It has to be people who live it, who are convinced of Europe, who say, this is what we want, this is what we have to do, this is simply our history." (E-city European affairs officer) Within these networks, which usually include European affairs officers, town twinning coordinators, twinning associations, other civil society actors and individual citizens, and which focus on the organisation and implementation of citizen-oriented EU activities; Europe and European cooperation are conceptualised as a source of peace and mutual understanding. The narrative about Europe in these networks is distinctly one of both transactions and social bonding (cf. Baldassarri & Diani, 2007, 743–745). From the interviewees' perspective, exchanges, mutual visits and travelling help to get to know other Europeans better and to appreciate the diversity within Europe, for example of cultures, food, habits and way of life. According to the interviewees, visiting other European countries and other European citizens alters peoples' perspectives and makes them understand and feel European. In particular "doing Europe", for example by taking part in exchanges with twin cities, festivals, or projects, is seen as an important element for identification with Europe, as it is often associated with positive experiences and emotions. Moreover, such European activities would encourage mutual tolerance and respect, as well as prevent prejudice and racism. As already observed regarding the frequency of different European activities and goals of European, little priority was given to simply providing information about the EU and Europe in interviewees accounts of their activities, while emphasising the experience of Europe. Interestingly, Europe was rather rarely associated with socio-economic concepts, such as the notion of an area of convergence of living conditions.

Information transmission can be observed especially in the networks with other cities. Here, there are instances of cities exchanging best practices and learning from one another in addressing common challenges like skilled labour shortages

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or adapting to climate change. However, this learning from one another was often linked to a more basic sentimental attachment, e.g. to the idea of town twinning as a form of European society-building.

Boundary penetration takes the form of cooperation in formulating interests. As discusses above, this was less frequently pursued by cities and also only rarely organized in a process of co-creation. Still, the example of the local youth parliament and its Europe-related demands is one instance that can be typologized accordingly.

Finally, *power relations* were not relevant in the case studies. This may in part be due to Europe-related activities generally being a voluntary task for German municipalities. Co-creation, in turn, depends on citizens or associations willing and interest in engaging in such activities. They can be incentivised (e.g. by the eligibility criteria of EU funding) but not enforced.

5. Constraints, challenges and open questions referring to Europe-related co-creation

A special feature of local authorities' European involvement is that many local Europe-related activities are developed and implemented not only for citizens, but to a considerable extent by them or in cooperation between civil society organisations and municipal actors. This article therefore argues that there is considerable co-creation of activities and engagement with Europe and the EU. To study how citizens, civil society actors and municipalities interact, we analysed the Europe-related activities, organisational structures and local networks driving European engagement in German cities and municipalities by drawing on data from a survey of German cities with more than 20.000 inhabitants on their European engagement as well as case studies in eight cities. In summary, co-creation of Europe-related activities at the local level takes place through a variety of different citizen-oriented activities, often organised and carried out in local networks, which include representatives from local government, civil society actors, associations (but also schools or cultural institutions). This engagement is based on a normative understanding of *Europe as an idea* that encompasses notions of European identity, society, and community. By focusing on the cooperation between civil society and local actors in the organisation and implementation of European-related activities in local networks, our analysis provides a new perspective on the Europeanisation of the local level and on the way of local level mobilisation in the EU beyond the established channels for representing political interests. Interestingly, as our analysis has shown, Europe-related mobilisation at the local level is not necessarily directed at the EU as a polity, but towards Europe as a space to which people feel connected based on normative and ideational considerations as well as personal experiences.

However, there are also constraints, challenges, and open questions. Firstly, it is questioned how much impact the citizen-related local Europe-related activities have on the population of a city or municipality beyond the narrow circle of participants.

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Some of the cities and municipalities studied themselves stated that they would often only reach a limited group of participants with their activities and could only make their work better known, if at all, through good public relations and networking within a municipality. This is not only interesting from a political and practical point of view, but also highly relevant from a scientific perspective, as no study has yet investigated the impact of local European engagement on the attitudes and behaviour of a municipality's population. Keeping this observation in mind, we can – with regard to expectation two formulated at the outset of this article – state that the existence of long-established structures of cooperation between municipalities and citizens in relation to European issues (e.g. the organisation of town twinning schemes) can work as a basis for (continued) co-creation in the field of municipal European work which, however, has to be comforted by municipal engagement so as to persist. Secondly, it must be acknowledged that the local European networks and their activities are fragile, as they depend on civil society, individual engagement, and personal expertise. As they often lack institutionalisation, they can quickly disappear or change, as seen in some case studies. Thus, co-creation of Europe-related activities is thus in a state of constant change and raises the question of its perspectives for development. Regarding our third expectation formulated above, it has also become clear that a culture of intensive cooperation between local authorities and citizens and the existence of an active local civil society are important general prerequisites for Europe-related co-creation. Thirdly, our analysis has shown differences between cities and municipalities in both the scope and focus of local European-related activities, raising the question of the underlying reasons. As previous quantitative studies (Gröbe et al., 2023) and the case studies in particular have shown, resources play an important role for cities to establish and maintain local networks and to organise Europe-related activities – thus, we found indications so as to our first expectation being valid. In addition to these explanatory factors, the normative and ideational attitudes within the local networks and of key local actors should also be included in future analyses.

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Susann Worschech*

War as a singular crisis? An analysis of the singularity and continuity of crises using the example of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine

Abstract

When Russia launched its war of aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, it was seen as a watershed moment in European history, dividing time into "before" and "after". The German chancellor's talk of a "turning point" ("Zeitenwende") underscores the perception of this invasion as a singular crisis event. Its consequences were felt throughout Europe: in political debates, in support for Ukraine, and in the reception of numerous refugees. The force, suddenness, and violence of the attack, as well as the shock to the European peace order, argue for its classification as a singular crisis.

Against this backdrop, in this text I analyse Russia's war against Ukraine according to the criteria of a singular crisis as formulated by Kraemer and Steg (2025) in their essay. At the same time, however, I also consider the crisis from the theoretical perspective of Charles Tilly, who spent his life studying events that could be described as singular crises, but at the same time placed them in the context of a continuum of state formation and social and political change – which is obviously a contradiction.

Using the example of Russia's war against Ukraine, I analyse where singularity and normality or continuity of crises converge. I argue that the singular character of the crisis is strongly influenced by its spatial, temporal, and factual dimensions, which can blur the boundaries between crisis, normality, and 'new normality'. Finally, I argue that crisis response and the concept of resilience are also contingent and need to be integrated in our understanding of singular crises.

Keywords: Crisis, war, Ukraine, Tilly, singularity, resilience

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1. Introduction

Is Russia's war against Ukraine, which is a full-scale interstate war in Europe as it has not been seen in this intensity and dimension since 1945, a singular crisis? At first glance, there is much to suggest that it is, as this war differs significantly from the previous understanding of crises in the social sciences and has also been

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conceptually understood as a watershed moment – a 'turning point in history'. Klaus Kraemer and Joris Steg (2025) deserve great credit for their approach of differentiating the concept of crisis and focusing it on the phenomenon of singular crises, which seems to better capture a massive war than previous concepts of crisis.

A glance at common social science definitions of crisis makes it clear that this war does not correspond to the common understanding of crisis. It is undoubtedly to the credit of sociology, itself a crisis science, to underline that crises are not exceptions, but rather a core element of society and societal development. A central aspect of crisis is that internally or externally induced irritations, events, or ambivalences make existing orders or mechanisms of order appear inappropriate, ineffective, and unsuitable for solving problems. Luhmann (1991, 148) understood crisis as the disregard of the norms necessary for the continuation of an orderly society. Nassehi (2012, 37) emphasises the lack of a social "overall rationality" in modernity, which makes decisions uncertain, increases the effort required for governance and control, and makes ambiguity more present – which is ultimately experienced as a crisis in this concentration. As Kraemer and Steg also explain at the beginning of their essay, crisis, uncertainty, transformation, and contingency are inextricably linked to social modernity (and postmodernity).

The classical view of crises as part of socialization can thus initially be understood as differentiation, in that crises reveal the differences that orient a system. By establishing social interpretations, norms, and practices along the distinction between normality and crisis, crisis is both a component and an element of society (Luhmann, 2008, 51). Crises contribute to social change when they are responded to, which corresponds to the classical understanding. However, they can also promote social change through anticipation, namely when a phenomenon that could become a crisis and thus poses a danger is recognised as a risk and therefore as a threat to security. Luhmann (2003) thus supplements the pair of concepts of normality/crisis with security/risk, both of which represent an important differentiation. Social (incremental) change only takes place when the difference to normality or security is established, i.e., recognised.

In the event of an interstate war, especially in times when international norms and obligations under international law were considered to be more firmly established than during and before the two world wars of the 20th century, the question arises as to how normality and crisis, as well as security and risk, should be applied and classified in such a way that they can describe the events themselves and the possible consequences of the war for the societies involved. In the following, I will therefore analyse the extent to which Russia's war against Ukraine is a singular crisis, the extent to which the term helps to analyse the war, but also where the term is problematic or needs refinement.

I will contrast the concept of singular crisis with Charles Tilly's understanding of crisis, who in his works on war, contentious politics, protests, and revolutions did

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not deal with crisis as a theorem, but as a phenomenon, and considered transformation in the context of crises. It is particularly fascinating that Tilly dealt intensively throughout his work with phenomena that can presumably be regarded as singular crises: wars, revolutions, large-scale protests. However, Tilly did not regard these phenomena as singular or even isolated, but rather examined their structure-forming aspects and thus consciously integrated them into processes of state and society formation (Tilly, 1990). Tilly is credited with the 'bellicistic' understanding of transformation, which holds that wars are central drivers of social and institutional change, since states must acquire and centralise resources and introduce innovative processes in order to wage war. For Tilly, both the causes and effects of wars and crises are related to state capacity. Internal crises, protests, revolutions, and civil wars are often reactions to low state capacity, while state-building processes during and after wars involve the development of and even a push to state capacity (Tilly, 1993, 2004, 2007). The strength or weakness of state capacity – i.e., the capacity for political agency, which also includes institutional and administrative capacity – can therefore provide a window of opportunity for events that challenge claims to power and structures of governance. At the same time, a certain level of institutional openness and lower – but not too low – state capacity offers a window of opportunity for democratization (Tilly, 2007, 136). However, Tilly primarily considers internal processes such as revolutions, ethnic-religious conflicts, and civil wars. His early theory of state formation refers to the emergence of modern states through the paradox that nation states initially arose as a by-product of the accumulation of resources for inter-state wars, and that after the wars, military power was transferred to existing civil institutions – in very long processes. The theory-related questions in this essay are therefore: Is the concept of singular crisis (still) compatible with Tilly's state formation through war theorem and his integration of wars into long processes of social change? How do the two concepts complement each other? What do they exclude? These questions will be explored using the example of one of the most dramatic crisis events of the 21st century: the Russian war against Ukraine.

Several further questions with regard to the concept of the singular crisis arise in relation to this war. It is an interstate war between two (more or less) modern and, as such, established nation states. How are normality and crisis, as well as security and risk, negotiated in this war, and what is perceived as normality and security? How are both concepts disrupted for Ukraine and for Europe, and what understanding of crisis can be derived from this? What short- and long-term changes are induced by the war in Ukraine, as well as in Europe and beyond? And finally, are processes of normalization of the (possibly singular) crisis taking place?

In the field of tension between the extremes of (a) singular crisis and (b) normalisation/normality or (a) complete upheaval according to Kraemer/Steg and (b) structure formation according to Tilly, I will finally introduce another concept in this text that can bridge the gap between the singular crisis and a 'new normal-

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ity': resilience. Although resilience is mostly used as a meaningless buzzword or appealing political slogan, I propose it as a sociological concept for analysing and operationalising specific change processes associated with a singular crisis.

2. Russia's war against Ukraine: a singular crisis?

Crises are singular and therefore differ from normal crises when after an exogenous shock, normality "is not just temporarily interrupted but collapses from one moment to the next", write Klaus Kraemer and Joris Steg (2025, 5) in their conceptual article on the phenomenon of the singular crises. Singular crises are characterised by exogenous shocks as a starting point of a social process of crises intervention, and by abrupt interruption, extraordinariness and radical uncertainty (see also Kraemer, 2022). In a singular crisis, "established political-institutional rules, economic practices, collectively shared interpretations of the social world, epistemic beliefs, but also the social organisation of space and time, that ordinarily appear stable and immutable, become fundamentally problematic" (Kraemer & Steg, 2025, 5). In a systematizing approach, Kraemer und Steg (2025, ff.) then distinguish the singular crises from normal crises step by step based on nine core criteria. These criteria highlight (1) the high dynamic and spatial and temporal delimitation of singular crises; (2) their abrupt and forceful eruption; (3) the replacement of established principles of order by a primacy of the political; (4) the eruptive social changes they cause; (5) isomorphic adaptation to the 'TINA' principle; (6) a 'path reset' instead of path dependency of institutional and normative changes; (7) sudden re-orientation of narratives, shared interpretations and collective morality; (8) the change from input- and out-legitimation in politics to legitimation through the promise of protection; and (9) the double-sided nature of space as delimited to the crisis but creating realms of restriction, limited access or segregation.

Based on these nine dimensions and criteria, Kraemer and Steg (2025) underline and systematise the concept of a singular crisis, based on the example of the Covid 19 pandemic. These criteria also form a backdrop and a challenge for generalising the concept. Does the system that was developed in relation to the pandemic also apply to other presumably singular crises, such as a full-scale inter-state war? Can the concept be improved and refined, perhaps even corrected, and can war be explained on the basis of this concept? In the following, I will contrast the concept developed by Kraemer and Steg with Russia's war against Ukraine and at the same time relate it to Charles Tilly's crisis sociology. The aim is to critically examine the concept of singular crisis on the basis of a further case and thus contribute to the generalisability of the concept.

2.1. Extent and impact

Singular crises are characterised by the fact that they affect a society completely and comprehensively and that they have transnational and global effects. While

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the degree of involvement and impact in a normal crisis is limited, singular crises are defined by "their highly dynamic nature and their social as well as spatial and temporal delimitation and dissolution of boundaries" (Kraemer & Steg, 2025, 6). There are overlapping and simultaneous, intertwined, accumulating crisis phenomena, and the crisis also has effects in places where it is not taking place in the narrower sense.

This is undoubtedly the case with Russia's war of aggression. In military terms, Russia's attack affects 'only' Ukraine, but here it affects the entire country, which is the largest European country that is located entirely on the European continent. The fact that it is not safe anywhere in Ukraine is demonstrated both by Russia's attacks with ballistic missiles, drones, cyberattacks, and attacks on wider energy infrastructure throughout the country, and by the fact that travel warnings, for example from the German Foreign Ministry, still apply to the entire country. The impact of the war is also felt in different ways: while the areas under the control of the Ukrainian government are under military attack from Russia, the war in the Russian-occupied areas takes various forms of direct or indirect violence from torture, murder, kidnapping, persecution, discrimination to forced passport changes, control, surveillance, forced pro-Russian education and many more.

The war has numerous transnational and global effects. The term 'Zeitenwende' (turning point, established by German chancellor Scholz in late February 2022) but less political action expressed the concern of the countries of the European Union, the EFTA, and, beyond that, the member states of NATO. Concerns about their own security, anticipated or acute energy supply crises during the decoupling from Russian oil and gas, global food crises due to the difficulty of exporting Ukrainian grain, the admission of up to 7 million refugees from Ukraine, and institutional crises in the architecture of transnational and supranational decision-making processes, such as the adoption of sanctions packages by the Council of the EU, were and are consequential crises. The actual crisis – Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine – thus triggered a cascade of subsequent crises that are directly related to the singular crisis. The war thus affects the countries of Europe, North America, and the Global South in different and staircase-like ways, but all are directly linked to Russia's full-scale invasion.

2.2. Temporality

Singular crises erupt suddenly, abruptly, and with full force. Latent crisis symptoms would be difficult to anticipate, and the signs do not accumulate into a recognisable pre-crisis phase. Singular crises represent a radical interruption or even suspension of normality.

As compelling and appropriate as the first criterion of a singular crisis is, the second is problematic and deserves some differentiation. The vast majority of crises, wars, and even natural disasters have a certain lead time with signs that could be recog-

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nised and identified as an impending crisis. Exceptions are perhaps earthquakes and tsunamis – as was the case with the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake – and very sudden weather phenomena that lead to flood disasters, for example, as was the case with the 2021 Ahr Valley flood, the Elbe floods in 2002, and the Oder floods in 1997. But even volcanic eruptions can usually be predicted to such an extent that the danger becomes a risk that can be contained – as has been the case in southwestern Iceland since 2021, for example. In this respect, the aspect of temporality is less about the problem of there being no signs but more about signs of a crisis being interpreted and understood as such. At this point, it can be argued – following Luhmann – that the assessment of a phenomenon as a risk or danger is contingent, i.e., that the perception (or interpretation) of contingency and damage are linked and that an event is considered contingent in its outcome, but also dependent on decisions. While the danger (e.g., of a volcanic eruption) seems to be objectively present, the risk includes both the consequences of a decision to consciously face the danger and the consequences of not making a decision. In any case, it is perception or interpretation that first makes an event a hazard and then, eventually a risk, but this can also apply to crises: very few crises come completely out of nowhere; it is a question of measurement, the parameters of measurement, and the composition of fragments of knowledge into an interpretable pattern that allows for foresight.

In the case of Russia's war of aggression, there were numerous such moments and signs of crisis – however, they were not accumulated, or at least not sufficiently, to produce a picture that could be recognised and translated to society and politics on a broader scale. The war of aggression against Ukraine did not 'come out of nowhere', but it illustrates a serious failure of perception by Western audiences and a lack of societal recognition and translation of indicators into crisis knowledge. These indicators were obvious by Russia's frequent violations of international law, as well as in preparations within Russia for a war economy and a war society.

The history of Russian violations of international law can be observed since 1994, when Russia attacked the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and ended its independence, which was proclaimed in 1991 in accordance with Soviet legislation, in two brutal wars, killing an estimated 130,000 to 180,000 civilians. Russia's practice of issuing Russian passports to residents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from 2002 onwards in order to create a pretext for its 2008 invasion and occupation of parts of Georgia were another sign for Russia's deep disregard of international law. Internal destabilisation as a preparation to military attacks became a typical pattern of Russia's foreign policy towards former Soviet republics, as could be seen in 2012, when the Ukrainian pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych had pushed through a reform that effectively rendered the Ukrainian military incapable of action and therefore, practically defenceless. Only two years later, the annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula Crimea, the undeclared Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and the establishment of de facto states in eastern Ukraine were further

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violations of international law, none of which ever had serious consequences for Russia. Quite the opposite, Russia as the aggressor was even invited to participate as a 'mediator' in the peace negotiations of the so-called Minsk processes in September 2014 and February 2015 although it even intensified its military action in Eastern Ukraine during and directly after the talks. Additionally, between 2015 and 2020, Russia carried out numerous airstrikes against targets in Syria to support the dictator Assad. The attacks often hit hospitals and schools, killing thousands of civilians. Military experts concluded in March 2022 that Russia's military aid for the dictator was not at all altruistic, especially since 90% of Russian air force pilots gained combat experience and over 200 Russian weapon systems were tested – knowledge that could be applied in the invasion of Ukraine beginning in February 2022. Although these numerous violations of international law were obvious and experts, military personnel and civil society actors explained Russia's strategically aggressive actions and warned of further breaches of law, these warning signs did not add up to a pattern of Russian war preparations in the public perception.

Parallel to the multiple violations of international law, Russia prepared its economic and financial policy at for a prolonged conflict with Western countries. The accumulation of gold and foreign exchange reserves increased Russia's fiscal resilience; the diversification of trade relations opened up new strategic partnerships beyond Western countries. This deliberate preparation for a war economy was discussed intensively among experts from 2020 onwards, while Germany in particular sought to increase its energy dependence on Russia by commissioning NordStream2 and even called it a 'purely private sector project'.

The essay entitled "On the Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", written in the name of Vladimir Putin and published in July 2021, openly denied Ukraine's right to autonomy, Western orientation, and independence from Russia; the text even negated Ukrainian history and placed it entirely in the context of 'brotherhood' with Russia. What immediately alarmed historians and a few other experts, especially in connection with the increase in military manoeuvres, including the stationing of blood reserves in southwestern Russia and Belarus in late 2021, was largely ignored by political leaders and large sections of European societies.

These signs certainly culminated in a pre-crisis phase, but the indicators of a major war were only discussed among experts. However, those who were able to interpret the various signs of the crises did not succeed to provide knowledge about the escalation into a singular crisis, to contextualise it, and to consolidate this knowledge in such a way that the approaching singular crisis became visible to laypeople and politicians.

Against this background, it seems at least sensible to adjust the aspect of the temporality of singular crises. These crises may be preceded by numerous signs and indicators as well, but they are not seen, are deliberately ignored, or are not translated into an interpretable overall picture – there is a lack of perception and

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contingency to anticipate the crisis as such. Expertise and scientific analyses are not sufficiently taken into account, or events are interpreted in isolation without seeking a connecting context. In Charles Tilly's perspective, this means that structural contradictions and tensions are not recognised and/or connected as such – the crisis only 'arises' when these contradictions break out.

2.3. Principles of order

The third characteristic of a singular crisis is the abrupt change in principles of order and, above all, the primacy of politics over established social negotiation processes and otherwise autonomously operating subsystems. Kraemer and Steg argue that the established principles of the capitalist economy are being replaced by the primacy of the political while they are maintained in normal crises. As a result, the economy, culture, media, and other systems with their own independent logics would have to subordinate themselves to politics to a greater extent than is normally the case.

The example of a major war of aggression is somewhat more problematic – or at least more complex. On the one hand, a primacy of politics has certainly been evident in Ukraine since 2022, which has been enforced legally, not least through the declaration of martial law and the transfer of extensive powers to the president. At the same time, civil and political freedoms in Ukraine have been restricted, for example, a curfew must be observed, demonstrations and political gatherings are only allowed to take place to a limited extent, and political or religious organisations that cooperate with or express positive views about the aggressor state Russia are prohibited from engaging in public activities until the end of martial law.

On the other hand, this focus ignores the enormous contribution made by society to the defence against Russia and the maintenance of the state. Since 2014, civil society actors in Ukraine have been intensively active in genuinely governmental responsibilities, for example in supporting internally displaced persons, providing humanitarian aid and educational opportunities, digitisation, and material, financial, and medical support for the Ukrainian military. Since 2014, think tanks have increasingly formed reform coalitions to safeguard the goals of the Revolution of Dignity in corresponding legislative packages. Since 2022, these activities have intensified in terms of both quantity and quality and represent the societal side of defending and maintaining Ukrainian statehood.

In addition, civil society action in the above-mentioned areas in 2014 played a decisive role in preventing the Ukrainian state from collapsing at a time of greatest vulnerability and in stopping the Russian attack – in the weeks from the end of February to around May/June 2014, Ukraine's state capacity was almost zero. Civil society actors filled this gap quickly and in a well-organised manner until the structures thus formed could be integrated into state structures (especially in the

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military) in the course of 2015-16 and/or registered NGOs had been formed from the informal initiatives.

One conclusion could therefore be that the primacy of politics only applies during a crisis when state capacity is high. Low state capacity, on the other hand, can lead to the crisis becoming unmanageable – or to other, primarily civil society actors stepping in and taking on genuine state functions, at least until sufficient state capacity has been built up. In this respect, an interesting theoretical bridge emerges between the concept of singular crisis and Tilly's crisis sociology if one focuses less on 'politics' and asks instead who has the strongest capacity to act in a crisis and could thus take ownership of it.

2.4. Social change

The incremental social change that is common in normal crises and well researched in theory does not occur in singular crises; instead, abrupt change is possible in singular crises. However, since social change is usually an adaptation to gradual challenges, and singular crises do not allow for gradual adaptation, it seems reasonable to rule out social change as a direct effect of singular crises, as Kraemer and Steg do.

Nevertheless, it should not be underestimated that resilience – in the sense of adaptation, coping, or transformative resilience – can also cause social change as an effect. Mechanisms of resilience that aim to minimise the destructive effects of certain disruptive events can involve immediate learning effects and thus also relatively rapid social change. One example is civil society's self-assessment of its capacity for action and the resulting demands for political participation, or the rapid role changes of large sections of the Ukrainian population from civilians to members of the territorial defence forces. New social patterns and their infrastructural support – for example, online teaching, school and academic teaching in bunkers, the construction of new schools and university buildings with air-raid shelters, abrupt changes in logistics routines (towards the massive use of rail transport), digital activism, citizen science, and much more – are adaptation measures to the acute situation of the singular crisis, which include elements of social change. The change is also evident in the level of abstract trust, which has increased significantly both within society and towards certain social institutions and some state organisations (above all, the Ukrainian armed forces). The acceptance of previously marginalised and sometimes heavily discriminated groups has also increased significantly as soon as these groups have become a visible part of Ukraine's defence. The formation of a Roma battalion within the armed forces (and other similar battalions, e.g., Jewish, Crimean Tatar) as well as the public visibility of queer people in the defence forces (the 'Unicorn Battalion' project is one example of this) reflect this specific social change within the singular crisis.

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The level of social change could also depend on how deeply affected the respective society is. In Ukraine, which is directly and massively affected by Russia's war of aggression, change is tangible in almost every area. In countries such as Lithuania and Poland, which, in addition to a more concrete threat situation, also have a high level of awareness of Russian aggression as part of their collective memory and have feared becoming victims of Russian warfare since well before 2022, significant changes are also evident – for example, greater acceptance of military spending, individual willingness to join the armed forces, and greater willingness to provide massive support to Ukraine. In Germany, on the other hand, which has so far not considered itself particularly at risk in the broad discussion (although this differs from the assessment of numerous security and experts on Eastern European), no substantial social change due to the war is apparent, especially since Germany has so far only been affected by the cascade effects explained above. However, it is also clear here that the concept of resilience does not work without direct experience of a substantial crisis to which resilience functions as a response. Structural changes and transformative resilience in the sense of crisis prevention have hardly been implemented in Germany to date; the energy transition in 2022 has been the only large-scale adaptation to a (perceptible) crisis so far.

However, social change within resilience practices in a singular crisis align quite well with Tilly's bellicistic approach to social change: The singular crisis of war forces those affected by the aggression to immediately allocate resources and shift practices in order to react on the crisis and keep the core of state and society functioning.

2.5. Isomorphism

Isomorphism is the alignment of institutional practices and structures on the basis of coercion, imitation, or normative expectations, and usually involves actors operating in a specific, definable field. Institutional alignment takes place in order to gain competitive advantages, but at the same time leads to greater homogeneity within a social or organisational field. In singular crises, Kraemer and Steg argue, there is no gradual adaptation and homogenisation of the field, but rather an abrupt subordination to certain guiding principles, which in case of doubt can also be enforced by authorities. What became known as the TINA principle in economic crises and was the subordination to hygiene rules in the pandemic is usually the rally-round-the-flag effect in wars, which brings social groups, organisations, and social subsystems together behind the nation-state narrative.

This can be clearly observed in Ukraine; since 2014, there has been an increasingly strong patriotic movement that has rapidly gained dominance. Since 2022, the narrative of collective defence of the country has been the dominant pattern to which many things are subordinated; however, there are additions to this narrative taking place which can be understood as frame bridging processes. Officially, defence efforts imply not only defending the country itself, but also the values that Ukrainian

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society has defined as its foundations since the Revolution of Dignity, at the latest: freedom, self-determination, democracy, human dignity, Europeanisation, etc. are clearly part of the defence narrative. Conversely, this means that questioning the defence of Ukraine is also seen as questioning these values, especially freedom and self-determination.

Focusing on a central narrative in the crisis enables the enforcement and legitimisation of martial law and thus strengthens state capacity, but only to the extent that civil society actors, the media, and large sections of society are willing to support it. In this respect, the war had an initial TINA moment, but as the full-scale war of aggression is progressing, it requires additional legitimation and further negotiation.

Tilly might view this TINA moment as a particular opportunity structure in which a central narrative, a crisis response mechanism, or a specific mode of resilience is enforced without planning for lengthy (and usually customary) negotiation phases; however, in the course of the crisis, this somehow 'authoritarian' window of opportunity closes again relatively quickly and requires new negotiation and consultation processes on the level of society.

2.6. Path dependency

While social developments normally follow path-dependent trajectories and thus a certain degree of contained contingency, this is not the case in singular crises. According to Kraemer and Steg, these are more characterised by a 'path reset'. A new pattern of political decision-making is established, which in turn creates new path dependencies.

Several such path resets can be observed in Ukraine: First of all, there is the immediate focus on collective defence efforts and the broadly shared will to withstand the Russian aggression, even though the necessary assistance in the form of Western arms deliveries was anything but clear in the early days of the full-scale invasion and has still not reached the level that would be necessary for the effective defence and restoration of Ukraine's territorial sovereignty and integrity. Nevertheless, breaking away from the pattern that had been established since Ukraine's independence, which involved Ukraine repeatedly relinquishing its defence capabilities even in the absence of security guarantees from European or American states, has led to a clear and momentous reorientation. In a very short time, Ukraine has not only managed to reorganise and restructure its military, but also to implement technical and logistical innovations in many areas of the defence industry. The construction of cost-effective drone defence systems is one example of this innovation, from which numerous European states are likely to benefit greatly.

Another momentum for a 'path reset' was the Ukrainian government's immediate application for EU candidate status in late February 2022, immediately after the full-scale invasion began. This decision to focus everything on EU accession and to

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make the subject of political debate not the question of whether, but only how, was a clear and politically practically irreversible decision that also led very quickly to candidate status, which was granted in July 2022. Once again, the momentum for a landmark decision was seized upon, generating new path dependencies, primarily in foreign policy but increasingly also in domestic policy, especially since Ukraine now has to implement significant reforms in order to be allowed to join the EU, despite the war. Domestically, the government thus complied with the overwhelming majority's desire for accession (and the associated reforms), demonstrated determination and agency to the outside world, and at the same time integrated the aspect of accession into all further discussions on support for Ukraine.

In countries that were only indirectly affected by this singular crisis, there is no evidence of such fundamental changes. The much-cited 'Zeitenwende' may have created a rhetorical moment of path reset, but the term remained largely empty and inconsequential politically, and thus did not even begin to represent a path reset. Rather, with decreasing concern, we can observe a strengthening of political continuity, i.e., path dependencies.

2.7. Collective morality

In normal crises, narratives and shared interpretations as part of collective morality are not challenged, but they are replaced literally overnight in a singular crisis. In particular, collective morality would switch from a liberal market narrative to collective anxiety.

The focus of collective morality on the defence of Ukraine has already been mentioned in the section on isomorphism; all other collective moral concepts are currently subordinate to this dominant and widely accepted narrative; at the same time, this focus creates a strong collective identity.

However, the claim made in the singular crisis theorem that collective morality should differ fundamentally from narratives that are dominant in normal times is problematic. In the case of war, there has been an intensification of the central narrative of defending independence, as well as the addition of further aspects; resilience itself is also part of the collective Ukrainian narrative. However, these narratives have also been present since 2014, albeit not as dominant, and they are fed by the narrative of independence, which has been part of the collective Ukrainian memory for several hundred years, by the narrative of democratisation (prevalent since the Orange Revolution in 2004 at the latest), and by the orientation toward Europe and the West, which has gained massive popularity and presence since 2013/14. In this respect, a new level of intensity can be observed here, but not a qualitatively new narrative.

This aspect is consistent with Charles Tilly's theoretical approach, according to which major social changes and upheavals ultimately consist of many processes,

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which in turn consist of clearly identifiable mechanisms, some of which may, of course, be reactions to crises and acute disturbances. In his book "Big structures, large processes, huge comparisons" (1984), Tilly traces precisely this macro-micro link, thus illustrating that major processes of change, which are likely to include singular crises, ultimately consist of operationalizable mechanisms and individual moments. This allows for the analysis of continuities in moments of change.

Collective morality in singular crises is different from that in normal times and normal crises, but it requires a narrative basis for legitimacy and social resonance, and should therefore be seen more as an intensification, focusing, or reconstitution of existing narratives than as a crisis-induced new creation of morality.

2.8. Modes of legitimation

Political decisions are in normal times and normal crises based on input and output legitimation, thus focusing on legal norms, participation and the prospect of generating benefits. In a singular crisis, the mode of legitimation is the promise of protection, focusing questions of life and death, all or nothing. Political action and its legitimation thus become a zero-sum game in a singular crisis.

It is obvious that in a full-scale war of aggression, we may indeed speak of a matter of life and death for those under attack. In this respect, every political action in the singular crisis of an externally induced total war is legitimised by the immediate need to ensure survival, avoid lethality, and successfully repel the attacks. At the same time, it is clear that there are other modes of legitimation for political action, and that these become more relevant the longer the war lasts. Collective morality in the sense of resilience, but also as the promise to begin reconstruction during the war and ultimately emerge from the crisis stronger and better as a state and society (for example, by becoming a member of the EU, building a resilient economy, etc.), become additional aspects of legitimacy that, while not equal to the survival narrative, become increasingly important as the war goes on. Corresponding political action – such as reforms – is demanded by society, and political action that does not correspond to this is sanctioned or corrected. An impressive example of this negotiation of legitimacy were the immediate and successful civil society protests in July 2025 against the government's attempt to place independent anti-corruption institutions under political control. This shows the narrow limits of the legitimacy of political decisions in war: state activities that comprehensibly and directly serve defence (i.e., survival) are widely seen legitimate; however, this narrative does not serve as justification for domestic and foreign policy decisions that go beyond defence and shrink democratic rights.

2.9. Spatial order/dimension

Singular crises are characterised by their spatial dimension, as they take place in (social, material) space, and crisis response and management themselves create social

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spaces. But while normal crises can be localised, a singular crisis is characterised by its cross-border, delimited and unbounded nature. Space can become a social realm of restriction, limited access, or segregation.

Space plays a crucial role in Russia's war against Ukraine, as it is a territorial conflict and thus a question of which construct of power can be spatially enforced in certain places. Competing claims to power concern the question of power over space and the construction of new social, cognitive, moral, and identity-based spaces, and, of course, the exercise of power for the material and immaterial exploitation of these spaces.

In Russia's war of aggression, only a small part of eastern and southern Ukraine was initially affected, but the spatial dimension of crisis management affected much larger areas. In 2014, this dimension initially included the whole of the country, as its claim to sovereignty over the entire territory defined by international law was challenged by the Russian invasion and ultimately prevented in the occupied part. However, the spatial dimension also included European states that attempted to respond to the crisis and mediate; ultimately, Belarus was included when its capital, Minsk, was chosen as the supposedly neutral location for possible ceasefire and peace negotiations. The varying degrees to which the war affected different countries were manifested in different spatially oriented roles – which prevented any real attempts at resolution, as these assigned roles helped to obscure the actual interests and capacities of those involved in the war. First and foremost among these were Russia, which had started the war but acted as a mediator, and the then president of Belarus, who was closely allied with Russia and pretended to be a 'neutral host'. In this sense, the beginning of the war of aggression had already created new – one might also say alternative or even fake – socio-spatial realities.

With the full-scale invasion, the entire territory of Ukraine has become a social space of permanent risk of becoming a victim of war. Crisis response and crisis management mainly relate to those regions and cities in Ukraine that are heavily and frequently affected by military attacks; at the same time, a social space of reconstruction and resilience practices is emerging, as reflected in the diverse civil society engagement in the reconstruction and preservation of Ukraine.

At the same time, Russia's war of aggression is not limited to Ukraine. On the one hand, counterattacks are also taking place in Russia, although here too the theatres of war are different: while Russia is targeting social infrastructure and residential buildings indiscriminately, Ukrainian attacks are in fact focusing on military infrastructure and energy infrastructure. Ukrainian resistance in the occupied territories and in Russia itself also creates social spaces and spatial connections to the war – or to the narrative of collective Ukrainian defence, for example through the resistance activities of the organization "Yellow Ribbon". This group is primarily active in marking public space in the occupied territories as Ukrainian – through yellow ribbons woven onto fences, for example, but also through pro-Ukrainian graffiti

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and leaflets. This marks public space in the occupied territories as Ukrainian and demonstrates Ukrainian presence despite Russian claims to power.

The socio-spatial consequences of the war and the construction of new spaces can be traced in concentric circles. The Baltic states, Poland, and Finland, which border closely on Russia or Ukraine, have joined forces to become Ukraine's strongest advocates in the 'coalition of the willing'. Germany, France, and the United Kingdom act as rhetorically strong but practically hesitant to cautious advocates of Ukrainian freedom. The EU is primarily influenced by the German and French positions and is also among the rhetorically strong but only moderately consistent supporters. Crisis management measures at the EU level are becoming increasingly abstract, technical, and indirect, so that the creation of a space of concern about Russia's war of aggression and the countermeasures taken here are only indirectly perceptible and, moreover, fragile in its construction.

In Tilly's analysis of war and revolutions, space is a decisive factor. Rule and claims to rule focus on specific territories and are condensed into a space – rule over a specific space is thus institutionalised (Tilly, 1990). Wars arise in order to reverse this institutionalization from outside and to establish one's own patterns of institutionalization in a specific space. According to Tilly, this competition for space underlies both wars (and the subsequent formation of states) and revolutions (Tilly, 1993). The latter dynamic can be clearly seen in Ukraine, especially since all three major revolutions in modern Ukraine (1990, 2004, 2013/14) began in the country's largest cities and were also decisively carried out there. The revolutions – especially the Revolution of Dignity in 2013/14 – were ultimately a struggle for dominance in the public and social space, which was physically fought between civil society and the militias of the later deposed president. Tilly's understanding of space supports the assumption about the significance of space in singular crises, since social space is created by the crisis event itself. In the case of Ukraine, these are alternative patterns of rule enforced by violence in the occupied territories; but Ukrainian resistance also has spatial connotations and refers to the legitimacy of Ukraine's claim to sovereignty over its territory as guaranteed under international law, including the temporarily occupied territories. At the same time, the outcome of these spatially connoted claims to power also depends on the behaviour of other states, thus involving further social spaces. Russia's increasingly frequent attacks, such as espionage, drone strikes, airspace violations, parcel bombs, etc., in countries west and north of Ukraine are expanding the social space of the war and Russia's claim to power to these countries, even though the means and ideas for enforcing power here are likely to differ (for now) from those related to Ukraine.

3. Summary & Discussion

Is Russia's war against Ukraine to be understood as a singular crisis in the sense of Kraemer and Steg? And if so, to what extent do the parameters of the singular crisis

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correspond to the phenomenology of war, and to what extent can Charles Tilly's perspective of war as part of large structures and processes (Tilly, 1984) be linked to the theorem of the singular crisis? What insights does this connection provide?

At first, it should be noted that war corresponds to the concept of singular crisis in terms of scale and effect; it is a decisive event that completely challenges previous routines and certainties, especially for the society most affected – Ukraine. In addition, war results in a cascade of crises that affects both Ukraine and other countries and societies.

There is also broad agreement between empirical phenomena and theoretical assumptions regarding the characteristic of path dependency or path reset caused by the singular crisis; in many respects, Ukraine is facing new path dependencies that were not foresee-able before 2022, and certainly not before 2014 what marks the begin of the Russian war of aggression.

The aspect of establishing a collective morality and corresponding patterns of legitimacy in relation to a central goal – that of defence and thus survival – has been clearly evident in political narratives, practices, and society's self-image since 2022. It can also be observed that crisis management creates a new spatial order and categorising space, for example, into frontline areas, occupied areas, other endangered areas within Ukraine (i.e., the entire country excluding frontline and occupied areas), as well as areas outside Ukraine directly or indirectly affected by aggression, plus areas of support (or refusal of support) as new social spaces or cognitive maps.

However, some features of the singular crisis seem to be more debatable and need differentiation. As I could show, Russia's war had a number of clues, indications, and preparations that were known and that needed to be pieced together and interpreted – but this essentially only led to expert discussions and did not find its way into public debate. This aspect underscores my thesis that even singular crises do not usually 'happen' suddenly, but are only *perceived* as something sudden when experts fail to provide knowledge (or are actively prevented from doing so) about the escalation into a singular crisis, contextualising it, and condensing it in such a way that the approaching singular crisis also becomes visible to laypeople and politicians. In this respect, it would be worth discussing how strict the criteria of temporality and unexpected outbreak are.

Furthermore, my analysis showed that establishing the primacy of politics as the dominant organising principle in a singular crisis is only applicable to a limited extent and depends on state capacity as well as the capacity and role of other actors, such as civil society. In the case of Ukraine, with a strong and capable civil society and relatively weak state institutions, agency does not necessarily have to shift solely to politics; civil society actors can play a decisive role where state agencies leave a

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vacuum. At this point, an integrative approach that takes Tilly's state capacity into account might be useful.

With regard to social change and institutional alignment (isomorphism), it seems appropriate to consider the change that the crisis response can initiate. Resilience as a crisis response initially means finding acute modes of adaptation and coping, but transformative resilience is also relevant as it already contains the foundations for future structural changes in the response and is geared towards designing reconstruction in such a way that future structures are less susceptible to disruption. This also applies to social and socio-psychological structures. Social change takes place within the framework of resilience and also has a different dynamic than a singular crisis, yet the two are causally related. Isomorphism in acute war does not imply that specific patterns are predetermined and then unchangeable, but rather that a prioritisation of what to keep running takes place, while other issues, narratives, and practices can be negotiated over time.

Finally, it should be noted that the duration and also the 'location', i.e., the temporal and spatial dimensions of the singular crisis, are not entirely clear. Was the singular crisis only February 24, 2022, when Russia began its full-scale invasion? After more than 3.5 years of full-scale war, can we still speak of a singular crisis? If not, how can the massive changes that have taken place since February 25, 2022, in Ukraine, Russia, European countries, and the EU be attributed to this one moment? If so, what contradictions arise between the theory of singular crisis and the ongoing war?

I argue for the assumption that the ongoing war itself is a singular crisis because there is no normality and no reliable routines in war, but that it might make sense to differentiate the criteria in detail and, if necessary, to weight them. This could be done through quantification or scaling, but it seems more appropriate to broaden the perspective qualitatively – and thus ask what effects the singular crisis has on social entities depending on their spatial and factual involvement, what direct or abstract patterns of interaction arise as a result of the crisis, what new combinations of narratives, interactions, structures, or institutions the singular crisis might trigger, which path dependencies led to the crisis (but may have been overlooked or negated), and which patterns of resilience become visible in the crisis. More generally speaking, it might be worth to consider even singular crises in the context of *big structures, large processes, and huge comparisons*, thereby integrating Charles Tilly's sociology into the analysis.

Singular crises need to be recognised as such, i.e., they must be recognisable life-world-based and thus subjectively addressable; otherwise, they might be understood as normal crises, which will have an impact on crisis management and also on prevention and resilience. Making singular crises recognisable is a task for various actors in public discourse (experts, media, politicians) and should be included in

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the analysis as a narrative construction of crises: How, in what temporal, spatial, and factual context is it possible to articulate singular crises?

4. Crisis management: Resilience as analytical concept

Finally, the crisis management mode of resilience should be addressed. Even though resilience is a popular term that is widely overused, it still has considerable potential as an analytical concept. If it is understood not as normative, but analytical concept, resilience refers to the ability of a system to absorb some disturbance whilst maintaining its core properties (Thorén & Olsson, 2017). Resilience analysis therefore consists of regarding four "C"s: crisis, core, coping, and changes. Coping and changes focus on the elements that are subject to a necessary adaption in order to preserve the core of a system. This differentiation is crucial as is also distinguishes resilience from transition: As long as a core of a given entity remains unchanged while peripheral elements are changed, we speak about resilience. If the core of a social entity is changed, we speak about transition which means a complete turnover of these core features. Both can happen in the course of reacting to a singular crisis.

Coping and changes as crisis management can exist in three modes: First, the most direct variant is adaptation to disruptions, changed circumstances, or effects of crises that an individual or a collective considers irreparable. Adaption is often short-term and reversible in the way that changes can also be revoked again. Second, overcoming the crisis and the specific disruption means restoring the initial state, but also includes discursive resilience – i.e., a narrative about the cause of the crisis and possible strategies of endurance and mastering. Third, social change and long-term structural changes are made possible by transformative resilience, where actors learn from damage caused or crises they experienced, identifiy weaknesses and vulnerabilities, anticipate possible future crises and damage, and implement structural changes on this basis. Resilience is transformative – and thereby, a subtype of transformation – when several characteristics or elements are changed sustainably and simultaneously in order to minimise weak points, but the core of the entity remains unchanged. Transformative resilience therefore always requires a discussion about what belongs to the unchangeable core and which elements can be changed in order to preserve the core. Transformative resilience aims to strengthen collectives or individuals by reducing potential vulnerability – the danger is tried to be rendered harmless by taking precautions against the anticipated destruction. In the case of volcanic eruptions or earthquakes, this can take the form of appropriate construction methods, regular measurements and surveillance, and detailed evacuation plans; in the case of a possible war of aggression, it can take the form of an appropriate security architecture, emergency plans, and influence over the resources that would be allocated to make war possible – both material and immaterial.

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Coping and change as crisis management strategies and resilience modes also raise new questions, particularly in the area of transnational phenomena such as interstate war. Resilience implies both discourse – about what is an irrevocable core of a social entity and what are changeable non-core features – and agency for these changes. As the international arena is characterised by contradicting narratives and non-shared understandings, for example on the commitment to international law, on the role of hegemony or cooperation, or on the prohibition of aggression, resilience analysis might show that singular crises evoke the next singular crisis. One conceivable approach to a sociology of international relations would be to consider resilience versus transition of international norms, structures and practices as an aspect or consequence of singular crises. Russia's instrumentalization of the ambivalence of international legal norms to justify its violation of international law can thus possibly be conceived as the trigger for a fundamental transition of international relations, the core of which is controversial and thus deprived of resilience. And this might bring us full circle to Charles Tilly's nation-building theory: singular crises such as wars contribute to the formation of new large structures, also beyond the nation state.

Therefore, I argue that a singular crisis may lead either to transition or resilience of social entities – they may change societies, state structures or the international system fundamentally or their non-core characteristics may be changed in transformative resilience. Singular crises do not simply (or abruptly) end, instead, they emerge into a passage to a 'new normality', and this passage could be resilience.

However, key prerequisites for resilience are aspects such as capacity, trust, legitimacy, collective narratives/morals, and broad interaction. Charles Tilly, who did not explicitly study crises nor resilience, but who has proposed a relational understanding of politics, described the mechanisms of democratic cooperation as the decoupling of public political processes from categorical inequality, the integration of trust networks into politics, and the dismantling of autonomous centres of power in favour of establishing broad, equal, and mutually binding trust networks (Tilly, 2007). At the core of Tilly's state building and democratization theory are mutually binding consultations – whose quality might also have an impact on how crises are dealt with. Following Tilly, we may argue that singular crises can have lasting effects on transformative resilience if networks of consultation and trust can be established within crisis management – in which case, however, the singular crisis becomes the trigger for social change, it becomes manageable, and thus turns into a 'normal' crisis that can be addressed with newly established crisis management tools. These can be seen as the results and achievements of transformative resilience in and after a singular crisis.

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Xiaotong Tan*

Reconfiguring the field of professional music: New doxa and known capital forms on digital platforms

Abstract

Digital platforms are reshaping how career success is understood in the music industry. Existing research has mainly focused on the effects of platforms on music production, visibility, and professional practices, yet it has seldom explored how career success and capital are configured in platform environments. This conceptual article uses Bourdieu's theoretical framework to discuss how digital indicators become taken for granted makers of career success in the digital music field. It also outlines which forms of capital are performed within this context. This study argues that no new forms of capital have emerged in the digital music field and that existing forms are instead reinterpreted through digital practices. This conceptual clarification provides a foundation for applying Bourdieusian theory to research on digital cultural production.

Keywords: musicians' career success, digital platform, field of music, cultural production, doxa

1. Introduction

The rise of twenty-first-century digital technologies has changed how music is produced, distributed, and consumed. The spread of streaming services and social media platforms has created an alternative route for musicians to enter the industry (Ng & Gamble, 2024; Woods & Davis, 2024). Music creation and promotion no longer rely entirely on record labels, traditional broadcast media, or live performance institutions (Cayari, 2011). Musicians can create and record music at home, release their music online, and reach global audiences through digital platforms (Bröndum, 2019; Chen & Wang, 2025; Hracs, 2012; Tessler & Flynn, 2015) such as Spotify, TikTok or SoundCloud. This shift has expanded the ways in which musicians access markets and audiences, and it has also reshaped their musical practices and career development. The music industry's understanding of career success has changed as well. In the traditional recording era, album sales, awards, and the scale and revenue of live performances served as the core indicators of a musicians' career success (Baym, 2013; Gourévitch, 2023; Hughes et al., 2013; Perrin, 2020; Sutton, 2020). However, today, digital success indicators, such as platform visibility, online fan bases, engagement levels, and playlist placements (Ng & Gamble, 2024; Raffa, 2025; Woods & Davis, 2024) have become decisive. Digital platforms have become both the main channel for distributing music and the central place for musicians to carry out their professional practices and pursue their career development.

Existing studies have explored the impact of digital platforms on the music industry from several perspectives. Prior research shows that digitalization has lowered entry

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barriers. This gives musicians more autonomy and opportunities to produce and distribute their work (Bartleet et al., 2019). Scholars have also discussed the process of "disintermediation". The term refers to removing traditional intermediaries (e.g., record labels) from the distribution chain. With digital technologies, musicians can bypass these gatekeepers (Rogers, 2013b, 139). At the same time, these developments have led to "reintermediation". This means that while some intermediaries disappear from the field (Chircu & Kauffman, 1999, 110), new ones (digital platforms) have emerged and now influence music industry (Bernardo & Martins, 2014, 23). Another line of research explores the changes in revenue models. Under streaming, musicians are paid per listen. This differs from the earlier system, where income came from selling physical recordings or digital copies (Bonini & Gandini, 2019; van Kan, 2025). However, although some studies consider parts of the discussion on career success (e.g., Raffa, 2025; Woods & Davis, 2024), none of them treat it as their central concern. Digital indicators of career success are often mentioned as if they were simply part of the digital platform environment. They appear natural and taken for granted. However, few studies explain why these indicators come to be treated as self-evident measures of success, how they guide musicians' practical choices, or how they are reproduced and stabilized over time. A systematic explanation of these processes is still missing.

Similarly, although most studies recognize that the standards of success within platforms environments are changing, the value structures and capital logics behind these standards remain insufficiently explored. Existing research always focuses on describing platforms phenomena, such as the opacity of algorithms and the ways algorithmic systems influence musicians' creative and professional practices (Bucher, 2018; Karizat et al., 2021; O'Dair & Fry, 2019). Although Bourdieu's theory remains influential in digital research, few studies discuss which forms of capital are regarded as effective within digital platforms. Most work treats digital platforms as digital fields and focuses on capital conversion within specific platform contexts. For example, Schmitz (2017) viewed online dating as a digital social space and analyzed the structure of social space, habitus, and capital within it. However, the forms of capital that shape partner selection differ from those that shape musicians' careers. In addition, musicians' digital environments still involve other sources of capital and power, such as traditional gatekeepers and the platforms themselves (Järvekülg & Wikström, 2022; O'Dair & Fry, 2019; Raffa, 2025). We argue that those mechanisms active in and around digital platforms have not completely replaced those capital structures that existed in the traditional recording era. A system has emerged in which those forms of capital known through Bourdieusian theory comprise new and digital skills. Some studies proclaim the rise of new forms of capital, such as digital cultural capital and digital capital (Julien, 2015; Paino &Renzulli, 2013). In particular, digital capital is often presented as a new form of capital in research on the digital divide and digital inequalities (Ragnedda, 2018).

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These developments have resulted in some conceptual ambiguity in latter attempts to extend Bourdieu's capital framework.

To address these research gaps, this article draws on Bourdieu's theory to explore how the doxa of career success is constructed within digital platform environments. It discusses how digital indicators such as visibility, exposure, and audience scale become self-evident logics in musicians' evaluation systems and therefore constitute the doxa of career success on digital platforms. This doxa also incorporates elements of earlier doxa from the traditional recording era. In addition, the article reviews Bourdieu's capital concepts and brings together existing research to explain how different forms of capital operate or extend within the digital field. It also considers whether new forms of capital have emerged. More specifically, the article focuses on two research questions.

(1) What taken for granted assumptions about career success constitute the new doxa in the emerging digital field of professional music?

(2) What forms of capital structure career opportunities on digital platforms?

Through this analysis, the study provides a theoretical basis for understanding how platforms organize musicians' professional practices and competitive relations. It also offers directions for future empirical observation. In addition, the discussion expands the theoretical perspectives on career success in the digital era. It also offers a way to think about how platform intervention reshapes cultural production.

2. Overview: Changing field of professional music

2.1 The traditional music industry and its success conventions

In the traditional music industry dominated by the recording sector, musicians' career development was closely tied to industry organizations. Their access to distribution, public exposure, and resources usually depended on support from record labels, traditional media, and live performance institutions (Bielby & Bielby, 1994; Hirsch, 1972). In this system, musicians typically carried out their professional activities through specific organizations. For example, musicians signed to record labels were required to follow company arrangements for all aspects of their musical work (Maudonnet et al., 2019; O'Dair & Fry, 2019). Musicians employed by orchestras or ensemble structures had to comply with internal routines, rehearsal schedules, performance arrangements, and organizational evaluation practices (Westby, 1960). Musicians who worked under contracts with record labels faced clear institutional constraints on their creative work and career development. Those affiliated with performance institutions encountered similar limitations. Some independent musicians operated outside these organizational structures. They appeared to be free from institutional control, yet the traditional commercial model created substantial barriers for them. High recording costs and limited distribution channels made entry into the industry extremely difficult (Ogden et al., 2011).

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As a result, within the structure of the traditional music industry, a small number of organizations held significant power by controlling the main marketing and distribution channels.

Among these organizations, major record labels held the most dominant position (Österblom et al., 2015; Sen, 2010). Some studies describe the industry as a vertically integrated economic sector. A small group of labels owned recording technology and built global distribution and marketing networks. These labels controlled every stage of the music production process (Eiriz & Leite, 2017). They also established A&R (Artists and Repertoire) departments to identify and acquire music suitable for recording and release (Marrington, 2024). At the same time, media such as television, radio, and print outlets played a central role in promoting and exposing music. Radio stations largely determined which music the public listened to (Laor & Galily, 2020). A common practice in the industry was that major record labels used third-party intermediaries to influence radio stations. They relied on their financial leverage to encourage stations to play the music of their artists during regular programming (Messitte, 2014). Print media were also important for helping musicians gain wider recognition within mainstream music (Järvekülg & Wikström, 2022). In addition, professional award systems further reinforced the industry's internal standards of evaluation. Winning major competitions often created cumulative advantages for emerging musicians, and early winners were more likely to attract attention from industry insiders (Menger, 2014, 230; Merton, 1968). National level awards were usually decided by juries composed of industry professionals. Receiving such awards was not only seen as professional recognition but also shaped musicians' career opportunities and market positions (Malcomson, 2013; Schmutz, 2016).

Although these institutions controlled key stages of production, distribution, and evaluation, decisions were not made by organizations as a whole. Instead, agents in the music industry were assigned specific professional roles which allowed them to carry out the tasks of selection and judgment. In general, intermediary roles were fulfilled by record labels, A&R people, managers, distributors, and others (Barna, 2019). Some studies describe these decision makers as gatekeepers (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996), cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1984; Negus, 2002), or creative managers (Hesmondhalgh, 2002, 2006). They determined which musicians received attention, contracts, and market opportunities (Zwaan & ter Bogt, 2009).

Musicians' success requires multiple forms of understanding. On the one hand, some studies approach success from an artistic perspective and emphasize aesthetic achievement. For example, musicians' works may be included in musical reference books or receive evaluations from experts and critics (Kozbelt, 2005; Simonton, 1986). On the other hand, some studies focus on musicians' reputations. Cultural intermediaries (e.g., A&R managers) rely on evaluation standards to assess artists' reputations and treat them as indicators of artistic quality (Podolny, 2005). They

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use these assessments to rank musicians in the market (Aspers, 2009; Bielby & Bielby, 1994). In this hierarchical order, cultural intermediaries who hold evaluative power can push higher status musicians toward larger markets. They enable these musicians to convert reputation into greater rewards or opportunities (Aspers, 2011). These two approaches both show that musicians' success depends on experts or other intermediaries in the industry. They are the gatekeepers mentioned above. This study also agrees with Zwaan et al. (2009), who argue that these understanding of success are more suitable for well-known musicians than for ordinary or emerging ones. Ordinary musicians lack visibility, and emerging musicians have not yet accumulated sufficient reputation. Therefore, in this article, we consider success from the standpoint of ordinary musicians in order to provide a broader understanding and wider applicability for the music industry.

Research on how musicians' career success is measured and evaluated remains limited. Generally, existing studies distinguish between subjective and objective career success. Subjective success reflects musicians' own perceptions of their career situations. It includes satisfaction with creative or performance activities (Sutton, 2020), satisfaction with career development (da Silva Henrique et al., 2023; Hughes et al., 2013), and positive feedback from audiences (Toval-Gajardo et al., 2025). Several studies, particularly those conducted in Australia, show that musicians rarely view financial independence or long-term sustainable careers as their ultimate goals (Rogers, 2013a). They tend to prefer moderate levels of success and value the sense of achievement they gain throughout the process (Hughes et al, 2013). In some interviews, musicians also highlight the satisfaction they experience when creating music. This sense of satisfaction becomes especially strong when they realize that their music helps others understand and process emotions (Toval-Gajardo et al., 2025). These studies collectively show that musicians' subjective success does not rely solely on material rewards or recognition from professional institutions.

This article focuses more on objective career success. Many studies point out that album sales have long been regarded as the main indicator of musicians' success (Brooks, 2004; Liebowitz, 2004; Tessler & Flynn, 2015; Zwaan et al., 2009). Gourévitch (2023, 2) describes album sales as a "sacrosanct reference point" of the music industry. In the recording era, album sales were one of the main sources of profit for record companies. Zwaan and ter Bogt (2009) also note that success means earning sufficient income and becoming a professional musician who could generate profit for a record label. This shows that musicians' career success depended on economic outcomes. However, some studies point out that most musicians earn very little from recorded music, including releases and sales. They receive most of their income from concert ticket sales rather than actual recorded (Aspray, 2008). For musicians who are active in live performance circuits, audience reception, attendance levels, and being perceived as a worthwhile live act also form part of the evaluation system (Baym, 2013; Marrington, 2024; Negus, 2011; Nørholm Lundin, 2022; Perrin, 2020; Zwaan & ter Bogt, 2009). In addition, the total score

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on the U.S. Billboard charts, the number of charted albums, the length of chart presence, and whether an album reached the top position have all been treated as important indicators of commercial success (Gourévitch, 2023). For example, James Brown's Live at the Apollo (1963) remained on the U.S. charts for 66 weeks, which has been regarded as a major achievement (Perrin, 2020). Some studies also point out that, until the 1990s, Billboard's rankings were not fully based on actual sales. The industry standard relied on a sampling of record store personnel rather than direct measures of sales. The chart visibility largely came through radio airplay (Baym, 2013). Similarly, exposure through traditional media, such as television and radio play counts (Zwaan & ter Bogt, 2009), and evaluations in print media, such as Rolling Stone (Perrin, 2020), were also treated as key indicators of career success. These practices reflected the power of traditional media in defining what counted as success. In addition, for musicians who work in the symphony orchestras, the central criteria for evaluating success are salary levels and the length of the performance season. For some musicians, becoming an orchestra player at a certain point in their career was seen as a marker of success (Westby, 1960). For composers, commercial publications, victories in major competitions, and media reviews are important indicators of success (Menger, 2014; Sutton, 2020). Although these indicators are often treated as objective standards, they are not emerging on their own. Instead, they reflect rules shaped by the power structure in the industry. They key actors behind these indicators are usually gatekeepers, such as A&R staff, media managers, juries and critics. They decide whether a work is released, broadcast, included in charts, or circulated through musical networks and resources (Giuffre, 1999; Jones, 1997; Peterson & Berger, 1975). Therefore, musicians' objective career success depends on recognition from industry. Musicians are regarded as successful only when they meet the standards defined by the industry and pass through gamekeepers' selection.

Although many studies have discussed many indicators of musicians' career success in the traditional recording era, such as those mentioned earlier, they tend to analyse each indicator separately. These studies show the importance of album sales, exposure through traditional media, live performances, and professional awards (Menger, 2014; Perrin, 2020; Tessler & Flynn, 2015). Some research also explains how gatekeepers use these indicators to influence musicians (e.g., Laor & Galily, 2020; Marrington, 2024; Sen, 2010; Zwaan & ter Bogt, 2009). However, these studies approach individual indicators from separate angles. For instance, Gourévitch (2023) and Perrin (2020) focus on the U.S. charts, while Malcomson (2013) emphasizes the role of professional awards. Few studies address the broader question of what dimensions constitute musicians' career success. In other words, most research has not developed an integrated analytical framework or evaluation system. In addition, almost all studies emphasize album sales and profitability, yet none of them specify concrete quantitative standards. For example, they do not explain how many albums must be sold for an artist to be considered successful,

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or what level of ticket sales or audience attendance in concerts and music festivals counts as influential. These questions remain unanswered in the existing literature. Although the scale proposed by Zwaan and ter Bogt (2009) is one of the few attempts to quantify these indicators, it provides limited clarification of how the scoring levels are defined. They used a Likert-type scale to assign scores to media exposure, CD sales, and performance frequency over the past twelve months. However, the scale does not explain the basis for its scoring ranges. Overall, most studies focus on single dimensions and do not consolidate them into a unified scale or present the relationships among these indicators from a broader perspective.

2.2 Platformization and new success logics

With the development of digital technologies, the music industry underwent significant transformation after entering the twenty-first century. The rise of digital music followed a major shift from analog formats (e.g., vinyl records and cassette tapes) to CDs in the 1980s. The establishment of the MP3 format came next and eventually contributed to the widespread adoption of the iPod, which lead people to abandon older physical formats rapidly (Chen & Wang, 2025; De Notaris & Savonardo, 2022; Leyshon, 2009; Sen, 2010). Building on these developments, digital music services enabled the large scale spread of illegal file sharing, such as Nasper and Pirate Bay. Subsequent legal models for music downloads and streaming (e.g., iTunes and Spotify) gradually replaced the earlier piracy ecosystem. They made listening to music simpler, cheaper, and more convenient (Bröndum, 2019). Since the 2010s, internet-based media platforms have also reshaped several sectors of the music industry, especially the domain of music consumption (Wikström, 2019). Physical album sales have continued to decline, and on-demand streaming services have taken their place. Music consumption has shifted from traditional models, which relied on record labels, signed artists, radio, and physical formats, toward a digital music economy (Ng & Gamble, 2024). At the same time, streaming platforms (e.g., Apple Music and Spotify) and social media platforms (e.g., TikTok and Instagram) have become major channels. They help musicians reach global audiences and interact directly with listeners (Choi, 2016; Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Watson et al., 2022). These platforms also allow musicians to build closer relationships with their audiences. They can also monetize these connections and thereby create the possibility of a more sustainable career (Baym, 2011; Breen, 2004). Musicians' everyday practices on digital platforms extend far beyond the creative work that defined the traditional recording era. Negus (2019, 369) notes that musicians increasingly find themselves redefined as "content providers" rather than creative producers. Most participants in Ng and Gamble (2024) study strongly agree with this observation. Compared with the conventional recording process, this shift reduces the need for collaboration with other specialists (e.g., marketing strategists) and increase musicians' individual workloads. They not only have to compose, produce, and record music but also take on multiple additional respon-

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sibilities, such as distribution, promotion, communication, and event planning (Eiriz & Leite, 2017; Hracs, 2016; Tessler & Flynn, 2015; Zhang et al., 2024). Meanwhile, musicians commonly promote their work across multiple platforms, such as homepages, blogs, YouTube, Facebook, Myspace (Spilker, 2012). They use these spaces to showcase their work, maintain their artistic brand, and attract attention (Meier, 2017; Ng & Gamble, 2024; Tessler & Flynn, 2015). Some musicians release short subtitled clips through Stitch and invite audiences or other users to sing along or create responses. They also encourage forms of remixing or reinterpretation (Tintiangko et al., 2023). These strategies strengthen audience participation and expand the visibility of their work. Some musicians prefer to interact with their audiences through livestreaming, for example by using TikTok Live (Tintiangko et al., 2023). Others, such as Yung Skrrt, stream their creative process on platforms like Twitch (Ng & Gamble, 2024). Although independent musicians in the traditional recording era also undertook self-promotion and marketing work beyond creative production, digital platforms have intensified the need to maintain visibility (Burgess, 2021). These tasks are no longer limited to independent musicians. They have become necessary activities for all musicians who seek to build and sustain their careers.

The early waves of digitalization sparked discussions about digital disintermediation (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2017; Rogers, 2013b; Wikström, 2019). Scholars widely argue that the internet weakened the control traditionally exercised by gatekeepers in the music industry (Hracs, 2012; Leyshon, 2009; Pras et al., 2013). McLeod (2005, 530–531) even describes this shift as having "broken the music monopoly that has existed for a century." Many studies also highlight that these developments created a more democratic space for musicians to express themselves (Woods & Davis, 2024).

However, in practice, disintermediation has not been fully realized. Instead, a process of reintermediation has emerged (Bernardo & Martins, 2014; Wang & de Kloet, 2016). Digital platforms have become new gatekeepers. In the case of streaming services, "platform gatekeepers" refer to all employees involved in the operation of the platform (Bonini & Gandini, 2019, 3). Twitter represents a form of "networked gatekeeping" (Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013, 141). Algorithms, understood as computational processes used to make decisions, are also deployed as gatekeepers (Tufekci, 2015, 206). In this study, these forms are collectively referred to as gatekeepers. In addition, digital platforms function as inhuman intermediaries that shape musicians' activities on these platforms (Woods & Davis, 2024). Streaming services (e.g., Spotify) use machine learning and large-scale data analysis to manage and interpret music and user behaviour. That enables the delivery of highly personalized experiences (Bonini & Magaudda, 2024; Fry, 2019). Algorithms also influence listeners' choices through the curation of playlists (Kjus, 2016; Morris, 2015; Prey, 2020a). As a result, playlist placement has become highly significant for musicians (Charles, 2020; Fry, 2019; Ng & Gamble, 2024). However, algorith-

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mic recommendation systems are often described as opaque black box. Musicians struggle to understand what actually influences the visibility or recognition of their music on streaming platforms (Hodgson, 2021; O'Dair & Fry, 2019) or on social media (Bucher, 2012; Tintiangko et al., 2023). Even successful musicians and industry marketers know very little about how these algorithms operate internally (Rauh, 2024). This lack of transparency creates what Bucher (2018, 84) calls a "threat of invisibility." It means that when algorithms overlook a musicians' work. When this happens and the work is not recommended, displayed, or exposed, the musician's chances of being seen on the platform are greatly reduced. Musicians are therefore forced to adjust their creative and promotional strategies based on what they believe about how algorithms operate. For example, to align with streaming metrics and playlist dynamics, musicians shorten songs and intros. They also add memorable hooks or choruses that can be used in short videos (Hesmondhalgh, 2020; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). These practices are often described as part of "algorithmic imaginaries" (Bucher, 2016, 31) or "algorithmic folk theories" (Karizat et al., 2021, 5).

Although digital platforms have had a profound impact on musicians, the older market structures have not disappeared (Schwetter, 2019). Traditional music gatekeepers continue to play important roles in the industry (Barna, 2019). Record labels still control access to global mass media (Leenders et al., 2015). Even musicians who gain initial visibility through the internet often rely on record labels for further promotion and marketing (Zwaan & ter Bogt, 2009). Additionally, power in the music industry continues to be shaped by access to capital, financing, and marketing support. These resources are still concentrated in the hands of major companies (Hesmondhalgh & Meier, 2014). Record labels provide musicians with the infrastructure and networks needed to maximize revenue (Brown, 2012). Major record labels also maintain close relationships with music streaming platforms (Qu et al., 2021; Tintiangko et al., 2023). They have acquired equity stakes in several companies and platforms that provide access to streaming music (Negus, 2019). They also use their copyright holdings to exert market dominance over digital streaming service providers (Carter, 2024). Some interviewed curators also note that new releases from major record labels can be promoted on the front pages of streaming platforms through paid arrangements. This can increase their musicians' exposure (Barna, 2019). This effort to secure visibility resembles earlier practices in the traditional music economy, such as paying for radio airplay (Messitte, 2014). Record labels also enter agreements with streaming companies to monetize their music catalogues (Perrin, 2020). Overall, digital platforms have indeed introduced new forms of gatekeeping. At the same time, traditional industry intermediaries have quickly adapted and incorporated digital logics. They create a hybrid and opaque gatekeeping system (Maasø & Spilker, 2022). The rise of digital platform has changed how musicians' career success is measured. Unlike in the past, success is now linked to numerical indicators. These metrics are visible and easily accessible

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on platforms interfaces. They appear to signal transparent levels of popularity and engagement (Baym, 2013). The higher numerical values are widely interpreted as evidence of greater visibility and influence (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013; Raffa, 2025). They are also taken to indicate stronger economic potential (Baym, 2013). Following this trend, studies have gradually begun to examine the composition of digital indicators. Researchers focus on various engagement metric, such as likes, follower counts, engagement rate, comments, and shares (Baym, 2013; Carter, 2024; Florina & Andreea, 2012; Hughes et al, 2013; Jones, 2021; Morgan, 2019; Raffa, 2025; Tessler & Flynn, 2015). In particular, Hughes et al (2013) argue that the number of likes or followers is crucial for subsequent industry success.

However, in the digital era, platform metrics are not the only indicators of career success. In practice, digital and traditional indicators often coexist and are assessed together. Digital metrics have also become a prerequisite for traditional gatekeepers when considering new signings. Record labels expect musicians to demonstrate quantifiable market potential on digital platforms, such as viral reach or engagement rates. As a result, a strong social media fan base has become a necessary condition for securing a record deal (Arditi, 2020; Carter, 2024; Galuszka & Wyrzykowska, 2017; Maasø & Hagen, 2019; Prey, 2020b; Raffa, 2025). A&R assessments are not limited to digital metrics. They also incorporate qualitative elements such as audience sentiment, algorithmic momentum on TikTok, and long-term patterns of fan retention (Raffa, 2025). Woods (2023) interviewed industry professionals who stated that it is foolish to base decisions solely on likes or streaming numbers. They still value the potential of a song or an artist to sell. Therefore, evaluating musicians' success today requires a complex equation. It involves not only popularity across singles, concert tickers, albums, streaming data, and social media platforms (deWaard, 2021). Evaluating musicians' success also involves their commercial income. Many established musicians earn income from their current commercial success. They also earn revenue from compilations, touring, and catalogue resales (Gourévitch, 2023).

Existing research shows a clear shift in the indicators used to evaluate career success. Overall, these studies describe a transition in the professional music field from the traditional industry toward digital platforms (Carter, 2024; Ng & Gamble, 2024; Raffa, 2025). Resource allocation has moved away from traditional gatekeepers and toward algorithm-driven platform systems (Fry, 2019; Hesmondhalgh, 2020; Karakayali et al., 2018; Prey, 2018, 2020b; Qu et al., 2021; Woods & Davis, 2024). Career evaluation has shifted from offline sales to online sales and visibility (Baym, 2013; Gourévitch, 2023; Ng & Gamble, 2024). A hybrid structure has also emerged, and traditional and digital indicators operate together (Bonini & Gandini, 2019; Morgan, 2019; Ng & Gamble, 2024; Raffa, 2025). However, these discussions still remain largely descriptive. They do not provider a systematic analysis of how traditional and digital indicators work together in industry practice Most studies only explain that digitalization has changed how career success is mea-

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sured. But they do not address the structural logic behind this shift, how different indicators jointly shape industry norms, or how this hybrid structure forms and operates in the music field.

These shifts show that the value system and professional norms in the music field are being reshaped. Evaluation standards and resource allocation are on longer dominated by a single system. They are shaped by both traditional and digital logics. As platform governance and data-driven practices intervene in the field, musicians' career success is being redefined. The power relations within the industry are changing as well. To understand this structural logic behind this transformation, the following sections introduce Bourdieu's field-doxa-capital framework. This framework helps explain how digital platforms restructure the field of professional music, how they legitimize new principles pf evaluation, and how these changes influence capital structures ad career development.

3. Theoretical framework: A bourdieusian perspective

This study does not propose a new theoretical framework. It uses Bourdieu's conceptual tools to understand how digital platforms reshape the field of professional music, especially the standards of career success and the related structures of resources. To explain these structural changes, this study adopts Bourdieu's field-doxa-capital perspective. It discusses the logic of career success (doxa) and the forms of capital in the digital field of professional music. The goal is to understand how these dynamics influence musicians' career development.

3.1 Digital platforms as a new field

Digital platforms have created new spaces for musical production and distribution. Musicians now develop their careers both within the traditional recording industry and digital platforms. In digital research, several studies treat platforms as new social fields (Airoldi, 2018; Ignatow & Robinson, 2017; Levina & Arriaga, 2014; Verwiebe & Hagemann, 2024). Therefore, this article sees digital platforms as a new field of professional music. It discusses the relationship between this digital field and the traditional music field.

From Bourdieu's perspective, the field is a social space structured by specific rules, competitive logics, and systems of resource distribution (Bourdieu, 1989, 16; Lueg et al., 2023, 458). A social field provides the structural frame in which field members (here: musicians) compete in order to reach or preserve favorable positions (Graf & Lueg 2025). Digital platforms display these characteristics. They establish what participants can and cannot do through account registration requirements, content posting rules, and community governance policies. For example, musicians on Facebook must follow the platform's community standards and monetization policies to become eligible for content monetization. These requirements restrict many cover musicians who work with copyrighted material (Anacin, 2023). Plat-

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form preferences also shape which music is more likely to be promoted. Musicians shorten music and add hooks to increase the chances that their music will be used in social media (Polak & Schaap, 2025; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). Musicians' visibility varies according to their position within the platform. They receive different levels of exposure depending on how they perform in recommendation systems. This creates distinctions between central and peripheral positions (Deldjoo et al., 2024; Gupta et al., 2024; Hesmondhalgh & Sun, 2024; Maasø & Hagen, 2019). Digital platforms act not only as distribution channels like radio station but also as environments shaped by rules, algorithms, and user feedback. These elements influence how musicians present themselves and attract audiences.

Compared with the traditional recording field, digital platforms do not replace it. They create a new space for activity outside the existing system. In the traditional field, resources are mainly controlled by record labels, traditional media and live performance institutions (Barna, 2019; Perrin, 2020; Zwaan & ter Bogt, 2009). These organizations allocate resources through signing, production, promotion, and touring. They determine whether musicians can debut, how they are positioned, and how much exposure they receive (Cannizzo et al., 2023; Kwon et al., 2018; Netherton, 2017). In the digital field, algorithms and classification tags become key mechanisms that shape visibility (Fry, 2019; Raffa, 2025). Musicians do not need to rely only on record label or traditional media. They can gain attention through short videos, livestreaming, and interactions with fans (Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Tessler & Flynn, 2015; Tintiangko et al., 2023; Woods & Davis, 2024). As a result, most musicians operate in two coexisting fields. They may still gain professional recognition through traditional routes, such as touring (Everts, 2023; Gourévitch, 2023). Meanwhile, they must compete for visibility on digital platforms to maintain audience relationships and market presence (Ng & Gamble, 2024; Tintiangko et al., 2023; Woods & Davis, 2024). Because this dual structure is highly complex, this article only focuses on digital platforms as a digital field.

3.2 New doxa: redefinition of success

Bourdieu (1977, 164) describe "doxa" as the way the social world is experienced, by agents in a certain social field, as a "natural world" and accepted as self-evident. It is through misrecognition that the underlying power relations are concealed and come to appear natural. Doxa is treated as something taken for granted (ibid., 165–166), a set of unquestioned beliefs through which people understand the world and their own position in it. These beliefs make social divisions, practices, and one's own circumstances appear "natural" (s. also Charlesworth, 2000, 30; Vakalopoulos, 2023, 262).

In the digital music field, career success is no longer determined only by traditional industry criteria. As music production and distribution move into platform environments, musicians increasingly organize their practices around what they believe

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makes a musical career in the digital age. This article discusses its formation across three aspects.

First, the distribution structure of digital platforms shapes musicians' choices. Platforms control content distribution and exposure mechanisms. This determines the visibility of musicians and their work at the structural level. Platforms do not explicitly require musicians to increase streams or engagement. However, recommendation systems, playlist curation, and ranking mechanisms all operate through measurable indicators (Morgan, 2019; Prey, 2020a; Qu et al., 2021). Musicians realize that they need to follow the platform's algorithmic preferences if they want their work to be shown to more listeners (Woods & Davis, 2024; van Kan, 2025). Bucher (2018, 84) describes this novel orientation by musicians towards algorithmic indicators as a "threat of invisibility." For musicians, their income from performances and fan services depends heavily on their visibility on streaming platforms (O'Dair & Fry, 2019). If they do not stay active, their work may struggle to reach new listeners (Prey & Lee, 2024; Tintiangko et al., 2023; Woods & Davis, 2024). In this process, platforms control the thresholds through which content enters the audience's field of view. This gives them the power to distribute career possibilities for musicians. As a result, digital indicators become the guidelines, and digital visibility the new doxical belief, musicians feel obliged to follow. These indicators appear natural within the industry because platform structures embed them in daily practice. Pursuing streams, engagement rates, and similar metrics is treated as a legitimate action that requires no justification. By controlling visibility and the flow of resources, algorithmic structures cause these indicators to be internalized as the default rules of career success.

Second, market and industry practices give these platform indicators their legitimacy. Algorithms alone cannot turn digital metrics into shared industry norms. When the industry begins to use these indicators for talent selection and investment decisions, the metrics gain further legitimacy. Record labels, A&R managers, and commercial brands always rely on streams, follower numbers, and engagement data to consider a musicians' market potential and commercial value (Baym, 2013, 2018; Carter, 2024; Raffa, 2025; Rauh, 2024; Scott, 2012; Tessler & Flynn, 2015). Therefore, digital indicators not only reflect audience behavior but also guide how industry resources are allocated. In this structure, success is no longer determined mainly by artistic qualities or professional evaluators (e.g., critics). It depends on market-oriented data performance (Baym, 2013; Cayari, 2011; Evans & Baym, 2022; Ng & Gamble, 2024; Prey, 2018). Higher numbers signal greater commercial potential and a more stable audience base. They can directly shape whether musicians receive performance opportunities, collaboration requests, or recording contracts (Baym, 2013, 2018; Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013; Watson et al., 2022). These metrics also help industry actors assess whether a musician is likely to attract attention before committing resources. The institutionalized use of these metrics within the industry means that digital indicators are no longer treated as simple

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numbers. They are viewed as objective and legitimate standards of career success. With such broad acceptance, musicians also tend to treat them as benchmarks for assessing their own career status. They follow these indicators as the basis for their actions. In the end, industry institutions legitimize these metrics through their reliance on them. This process stabilizes digital indicators as natural rules within the music field.

Third, beyond platform structures and market institutions, musicians' practices also push digital indicators to become unavoidable industry norms. On platforms, the visibility of a work often depends on systematic feedback. Content that performs well is more likely to be promoted (Hesmondhalgh & Sun, 2024; Jerasa & Burriss, 2024; Pilati et al., 2024; Raffa, 2025; van Kan, 2025; Watson et al., 2022; Woods & Davis, 2024). To gain more visibility and career opportunities, musicians adjust their creative and promotional strategies to fit platform logics (Ng & Gamble, 2024; Prey & Lee, 2024; Rauh, 2024; Toval-Gajardo et al., 2025). They must act as skilled content creators. They go beyond making music, recordings, and performances and update their social media presence on a regular basis (Everts et al., 2021; Gross & Musgrave, 2020; Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Thomson, 2013; Tintiangko et al., 2023). They also need to learn digital tools and follow platform trends as part of their daily work (Bröndum, 2019; Tessler & Flynn, 2015; Tintiangko et al., 2023). Although digital platforms operate as black boxes to their users, musicians still try to develop their own strategies in practice (Bucher, 2016; Karizat et al., 2021). Jerasa & Burriss (2024, 124) note that some musicians rely on "TikTok lore" or rumored tips. They combine these tips with their own experiences of past content that either failed or went viral. Some musicians believe that posting on Monday, Thursday, or Tuesday around 4 p.m. produces the best results. They also believe that videos using trending audio are more likely to succeed. In addition, musicians sometimes adjust their creative work to match popular TikTok audio, even if the audience will not hear that audio in the final product. These practices reflect musicians' attempts to work with the (assumed) platform's algorithmic logics. Musicians adjust their creative work to fit recommendation systems and visibility demands (Morris, 2020; Raffa, 2025; Polak & Schaap, 2025; Zulli & Zulli, 2022). They also design musical elements and metadata to match platform logics, similar to Search Engine Optimization (SEO) (Seaver, 2022). Some musicians even over-produce large numbers of tracks with similar sonic features in the hope that one of them will perform well (Polak & Schaap, 2025). These practices and platform feedback strengthen the link between digital performance and career opportunities. Research has also noted that "data-literate actors are the winners" (Hagen, 2021, 197). As a result, musicians no longer treat digital indicators only as tools to meet visibility demands. They regard the pursuit of these indicators as a reasonable and necessary practices. At these practices are repeated and shared, their legitimacy no longer requires justification. They eventually become taken for granted bases for defining career success.

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In light of these three aspects, this study treats the standards of career success on digital platforms as doxa. These standards do not come from formal regulations or unified criteria. They emerge through the combined reinforcement of platform distribution, industry judgements, and musicians' practices and experiences. Through this process, career success becomes accepted as "taken for granted" (Bourdieu, 1977, 164). It is important to note that these standards do not constitute nomos. Bourdieu argues that every social field has a set of fundamental rules. What he calls nomos (Bourdieu, 2000, 96) functions as a legitimate principle of classification (Bourdieu, 2000, 97). Nomos refers to structural, institutional, and classifying principles within a field (Lueg et al., 2023, 458). Digital indicators on platforms are not formal or institutional rules, and they do not play this structural role. Although these indicators are widely discussed, no clear thresholds exist. For example, the industry cannot define what level of streams or follower counts qualifies as success. These indicators operate more like informal reference points formed through collective practice, not explicit principles that actors must follow. More specifically, the doxa of career success on digital platforms does not replace the traditional standards from the recording era. It shows a mix of traditional and digital indicators. Traditional indicators such as sales, awards, and offline performances still serve as reference points for evaluating musicians' success (e.g., Everts, 2023; Perrin, 2020; Reitsamer, 2011; Woods & Davis, 2024). Digital indicators such as playlist placement, online visibility, and follower counts have also become essential for gaining industry resources and platform visibility (e.g., Baym, 2013; Carter, 2024; Gourévitch, 2023; Morgan, 2019; Ng & Gamble, 2024; Raffa, 2025; Watson et al., 2022). This dual track forms the taken for granted doxa of career success in the digital era.

3.3 Capital in the digital field

After clarifying the doxa of career success on digital platforms, it is necessary to discuss the capital structures that support this logic. This study does not propose new form of capital. It uses Bourdieu's capital framework as the basic theoretical foundation. It returns to research on the structure of the music industry and discusses how different forms of capital are translated and expressed in the digital platform environment.

Bourdieu views capital as a key resource that allows social actors to gain advantages in the field. He first identifies three forms of capital: economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Economic capital is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights (Bourdieu, 1986, 243). Cultural capital includes educational background, forms of knowledge, aesthetic preferences, and symbolic appreciation (Bourdieu, 1986, 243–248). Social capital consists of social ties embedded in networks and reflects an individual's ability to access resources through relationships (Bourdieu, 1986, 248). Bourdieu (1986, 255) adds symbolic capital in the notes. It refers to

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the recognition that economic, cultural, or social capital can acquire once they are converted into symbolic forms.

In the traditional recording era, the music industry was highly centralized and controlled by record labels, traditional media, and live performance organizations. Since the industry relied on album sales, live performance income, and copyright revenue, record labels controlled recording costs, promotional resources, and distribution channels (Murphy & Hume, 2023; O'Dair & Fry, 2019; Perrin, 2020; Sen, 2010; Zhang et al., 2024). Musicians with economic capital, especially those signed to major labels, gained easier access to exposure, performance opportunities and commercial returns. Therefore, economic capital held a clear structural advantage during this period. It directly shaped musicians' career development and social position. Cultural capital appeared mainly in musical skills, formal training, artistic judgement, and educational background musicians needed professional training to enter the mainstream industry. Those with strong musical education held advantages in professional evaluation systems (Bataille & Perrenoud, 2021; Smith & Thwaites, 2019; Sutton, 2020). In the traditional recording era, social capital appeared in musicians' ties with industry organizations. Musicians depended on industry networks and organizational recognition to access career opportunities (Everts, 2023; Everts et al., 2022; Woods & Davis, 2024; Zwaan et al., 2009). Symbolic capital came from industry institutions, such as mainstream media and professional awards. Musicians who received industrial recognition were more easily able to gain commercial opportunities and resources (Carter, 2024; Connell et al., 2020; Reitsamer, 2011; Sutton, 2020).

With the development of digital communication technologies, the music industry has moved to a digital platform system centered on social media and streaming services. Capital operates differently in this new field. Digital platforms reduce the cost of releasing music. Musicians can publish and circulate their work on their own (Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Hracs, 2012; Spilker, 2012; Thomson, 2013; Woods & Davis, 2024). However, economic capital still plays an important role in promotion, content production, and brand collaborations (Järvekülg & Wikström, 2022; Ng & Gamble, 2024; Schwetter, 2019; Woods & Davis, 2024). Major record labels also work with digital platforms to increase the visibility of their musicians (Barna, 2019; Fry, 2019; Tintiangko et al., 2023; van Kan, 2025). The digital era has not reduced the importance of economic capital. It has only shifted it into a new competitive logic. Musicians face competition from offline performance opportunities, and they also need to secure digital visibility on platforms. Verwiebe and Hagemann (2024, 1863–1864) propose the concept of "digital economic capital." This concept refers to the economic aspects that operate in digital environments. Its theoretical logic does not change the original idea of economic capital. It still can be seen as an explanation of economic capital in a digital context.

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Cultural capital is still the core source of musical creativity and artistic value. But its components have changed in meaningful ways. In the digital era, cultural capital is not only about musical skills or formal training. It also includes an understanding of platform mechanisms and the ability to create content for online environments. Musicians need to understand platform preferences and the hidden rules behind algorithmic opacity. They have to integrate these elements into their creative work (Jerasa & Burriss, 2024; Polak & Schaap, 2025; Raffa, 2025; Tintiangko et al., 2023; Woods & Davis, 2024). In this context, cultural capital highlights the combination of musical creativity and media literacy. In Bourdieu's later work, he noted that the technological revolution of the computer age might require an extension of this capital framework to include a new form of technological capital (Bourdieu, 2005, 80). He described technological capital refers to a set of knowledge, skills, and know-how that can increase effectiveness when engaging with technology (Bourdieu, 2005, 75). For musicians who work on digital platforms, this form of technological capital refers to their ability to understand and use digital platforms. It overlaps with cultural capital. Therefore, it can be seen as a specific form of cultural capital. Later, Brock et al. (2010) discuss online activities that are similar to those examined in this article. They also argue that these activities related to digital skills and abilities. They can be seen as a new expression of cultural capital. Additionally, Ollier-Malaterre et al. (2019, 432) introduce the term digital cultural capital. They define it as the awareness, motivation, and skills needed to manage technology in digital environments. This concept reflects Bourdieu's cultural capital in digital contexts rather than a new form of capital.

Social capital has expanded from traditional professional networks to platform-based networks. Fan communities, user interactions, and community circulation serve as key sources of social capital on digital platforms. Musicians build online communities, maintain relationships with fans, and interact with other creators to access resources (Cayari, 2011; Haynes & Marshall, 2018; Prey & Lee, 2024; Sutton, 2020; Watson et al., 2022). Research on digital social capital suggests that social activities in digital environments follow logics similar to those of traditional social capital (Chen, 2013). Digital social capital is accumulated through digital social connections and takes shape on social media platforms and in virtual worlds (de Zúñiga et al., 2018; Villanueva-Mansilla et al., 2015). Here, it refers to integrated digital skills and the ability to convert them into other forms of capital. Smith et al. (2017) also argue that digital social capital is particularly important in creative industries. In addition, social practices are becoming central to professional self-identity and brand formation (Gandini, 2016). For musicians working on digital platforms, their activities and practices can be understood as digital social capital. This represents a new dimension of social capital.

It is worth noting that Julien (2015, 365) describes online interaction as a new form of capital. He argues that digital social capital deviates from Bourdieu's original concept in several ways. However, this study views these differences as a result

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of Juline's research focus and research subjects rather than a structural or ontological change in social capital on digital platforms. First, in terms of competence, Julien (2015) argues that this ability has shifted toward understanding online culture and internet memes that seems different from Bourdieu's focus on professional or cultural skills. But musicians who work on digital platforms also need to understand trending topics and follow online trends. They often integrate these elements into their creative work. For musicians, this is a digital expression of maintaining social capital and a means through which they sustain relationships as actors. Second, Julien (2015) argues that the purpose of exchange in digital social capital differs from Bourdieu's view. He claims that online interaction aims more at confirming online identity and gaining online cultural recognition, rather than at securing access to resources. However, musicians' online interactions remain closely tied to resource access and opportunity conversion. Their interactions with fans, other musicians, and media actors help them expand audiences, gain commercial collaborations, and increase visibility through livestreams, short videos, and community engagement. These outcomes can be converted into economic or cultural capital. In this sense, online identity and online recognition are themselves important parts of social capital accumulation, not departures from the purpose of social capital. Third, Julien (2015) considers that digital social capital is difficult to convert into offline forms and therefore has weak convertibility. However, musicians' cases show a different pattern. Their online social capital does not circulate only within digital spaces. It can turn into offline income (Cho et al., 2018; Hansen & Bickford, 2023; Morgan, 2019; Tintiangko et al., 2023; Watson et al., 2022). In practice, the digital field of professional music allows a two-way conversion between online and offline domains. This dynamic matches Bourdieu's view that social capital is convertible into other forms of capital. Finally, as for maintenance, Julien (2015) proposes that digital social capital depends more on immediate content creation and interaction. Musicians do rely on frequent content output and constant audience engagement. However, we suggest that these practices do not replace long-term relationships. They function as strategies to maintain and expand them. Content helps musicians sustain their existing fan base, and it also attracts new audiences. Audience practices, such as reposting or producing derivative work, further extend this reach. These differences do not change the nature of social capital. Content production is simply the digital form of maintaining social ties. It does not conflict with Bourdieu's emphasis on long-term relationships. Instead, the digital field expands how musicians build and preserve their social capital. Therefore, this study views musicians' digital social capital as a continuation of Bourdieu's original concept rather than a departure from it. In addition, de Zúñiga et al. (2018) show that online and offline social capital take different forms. This point aligns with the present study. Musicians still rely on traditional forms of social capital in offline setting or in activities linked to the recording era, such as industry networks. These practices remain consistent with Bourdieu's concept of social capital. For this

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reason, the term social capital is used throughout the following discussion. Social capital in digital contexts also shows a degree of decentralization. Here, decentralization refers to the broader sources of relational resources. Industry recognition and access to key professional networks remain important. At the same time, wider user networks on platforms can also generate career opportunities for musicians. Platforms recommendation systems partly recentralize these resources by making visibility a key form of social capital.

Symbolic capital on digital platforms comes from platform mechanisms and user interactions, such as the visibility, follower counts, monthly listeners on playlists, video views, and likes (Baym, 2013; Carter, 2024; Ng & Gamble, 2024; Raffa, 2025). Digital platforms add new layers of recognition. In the past, symbolic capital mainly came from industry validation. Public recognition also existed, but it appeared through album sales or tickets sales. Today, public recognition also takes the form of platform followers and engagement metrics, and these indicators are easier to quantify. Platform approval has also become a source of symbolic capital. A musician who is frequently recommended or appears on trending pages is seen as being endorsed by the platform. Although symbolic capital appears more decentralized on platforms, it is still recentralized through algorithmic logic. Platforms decide who receives visibility and control the production of symbolic capital. Platform-based forms of validation, such as trending tags or highlighted content, operated as new mechanisms for granting symbolic capital. They increasingly function alongside traditional awards and industry-based evaluations.

Additionally, researchers have suggested further concepts pertaining to the digital environment. These are e-capital (electronic capital) and digital capital. Merisalo (2016, 31) defines e-capital as a form of intangible capital. "It emerges from the possibilities, capabilities and willingness of individuals, organizations and societies to invest in, utilize, and reap benefits from digitalization." Another frequently discussed concept is digital capital. Ragnedda (2018, 2367) defines this as "the accumulation of digital competencies (information, communication, safety, content-creation and problem-solving), and digital technology." Ragnedda (2018, 2020) treats digital capital as the accumulation of digital access and skill. He argues that it is an independent form of capital (Ragnedda, 2018, 2366). However, other scholars do not regard digital capital as a separate capital, but see it as an extension of cultural capital. For example, Emmison and Frow (1998) reject the idea that digital skills construct a new form of capital, but instead argue that information technology can be read as a form of cultural capital. Paino and Renzulli (2013) hold a similar view and consider digital skills and knowledge to resemble cultural competence. Leguina and Downey (2021) argue that analysis should focus on the key features of capital. From their perspective, digital capital is always as a secondary form that connects the major capital (economic, cultural, and social) and supports conversion across them. Most work that treats digital capital as an independent form comes from research on the digital divide and digital inequalities. Such a focus differs from

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our research and conceptual approach. This article considers digital capital within the context of musician's digital practices. If following Ragnedda (2018), musicians possess digital access and skills when they upload content, interact with audiences, navigate platform tools and adjust their creative strategies, and these abilities belong to the cultural domain. Therefore, we consider these digital strategies, skills and knowledge as belonging to cultural capital.

Furthermore, Sadowski (2019) introduces the concept of data capital. He defines it as "discrete bits of information that are digitally recorded, machine processable, easily agglomerated, and highly mobile" (ibid., 4). However, musicians do not hold data capital. Digital platforms control it. They collect and process user-behaviour data and institutionalize these data as a form of capital. In practice, this gives platforms the power to shape how other forms of capital circulate in the digital environment. This role is close to Bourdieu's idea of meta-capital. In Bourdieu's formulation, meta-capital "allows the state to wield a power over the different fields and over the various forms of capital that circulate in them" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, 114). Platforms exercise a similar type of power within the digital music field. A similar form of platform-controlled capital is algorithmic meta-capital (Lundahl, 2020, 1447). It is a type of symbolic power that shapes what counts as symbolic capital through algorithmic operations. It also influences habitus. On the platforms, musicians are affected by algorithms. These systems remain opaque (e.g., O'Dair & Fry, 2019; Woods & Davis, 2024). They also shape musicians' habits through their effects on digital visibility. They include how musicians create, release, and promote their work (e.g., Polak & Schaap, 2025; Raffa, 2025; Tintiangko et al., 2023). Therefore, algorithmic meta-capital can be understood as an extension of symbolic capital. However, both data capital and algorithmic meta-capital are held by platforms rather than by musicians. Bourdieu's concept of capital refers to resources that actors can possess. These two forms operate as structural resources at the platform level. They are not new types of capital within Bourdieu's framework. This research does not discuss them in depth.

In the era of social media and expanding visual culture, physical attractiveness has become increasingly important. A pleasing appearance is treated as a requirement in many forms of work (van den Berg & Arts, 2019). Andreoni and Petrie (2008) also show that appearance is often understood as attractiveness and is linked to economic and social returns. That also includes higher income. In a media environment that shows idealized beauty, the social impact of appearance becomes even more visible (Holla & Kuipers, 2016). Anderson et al. (2010, 566) define aesthetic capital as "traits of beauty that are perceived as assets capable of yielding privilege, opportunity and wealth." Aesthetic capital can be seen as symbolic form of cultural capital, because beauty holds intrinsic value within social evaluation (Anderson et al., 2010). Musicians' appearance includes their face, body shape, clothing, style and accessories. They can be understood as a form of aesthetic capital. At present, no studies specifically explore aesthetic capital or its potential inequalities among

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musicians on digital platforms. This article follows findings from research on attractiveness in labour markets (e.g., Kukkonen et al., 2024) and aesthetic capital (e.g., Sarpila et al., 2021) to assume that musicians with more aesthetic capital are more likely to attract audiences on platforms. In line with Anderson et al. (2010) and Sarpila et al. (2021), aesthetic capital is treated as part of cultural capital in this study. In addition, a related concept is attention capital. It refers to the ability to mobilise individual attention and is difficult to quantify (Maliński, 2017, 5). Maliński (2017) shows that income in media industries is unevenly distributed and that a small number of starts accumulate most of the rewards. This pattern resembles the winner-takes-all dynamics observed in digital music markets (e.g., Pilati et al., 2024; Raffa, 2025). Therefore, attention capital is treated here as an element of economic capital.

Overall, this study argues that the digital music field has not generated new forms of capital beyond Bourdieu's original formulation. Although the literature introduces concepts such as digital capital, aesthetic capital and attention capital, these ideas mainly extend forms of capital to digital contexts. They do not constitute independent capital categories. Based on the above discussion, economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital remain the main resources in the digital music field. E-capital and digital capital are expressed mostly through musicians' creative processes and can be understood as part of cultural capital. Aesthetic capital also falls within cultural capital. Attention capital highlights commercial and economic dynamics, and it is treated as a component of economic capital. By contrast, data capital and algorithmic meta-capital are controlled by platforms. These forms shape musicians' experiences and opportunities on digital platforms, but they are structural resources at the platform level rather than new forms of capital held by individual actors.

Given the complexity of Bourdieu's capital concepts and later extensions, Table 1 summarizes the main forms of capital in the digital music field. It lists their key manifestations, primary holders, and this study's classification of each type to support clearer understanding.

Table 1. Capital structure and classification in the digital music field

Capital type	Key manifestations on digital platforms	Primary holders	Classification (Bourdieu lens)	Author's position in this study
Economic capital	Production budget; brand collaboration	Major labels; established musicians	Original capital	Retains economic capital
Cultural capital	Musical skills; digital literacy; content creation	Musicians	Original capital	Retains cultural capital
Social capital	Industry networks; fan communities; platform networks	Musicians; networks	Original capital	Retains social capital
Symbolic capital	Visibility; playlist placements; follower counts	Musicians (platform and audience)	Original capital	Retains symbolic capital

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Capital type	Key manifestations on digital platforms	Primary holders	Classification (Bourdieu lens)	Author's position in this study
Aesthetic capital	Appearance; style; visual branding	Musicians	Cultural subtype	Classified as cultural capital
Attention capital	Ability to attract attention; viral potential	Musicians	Viewed as economic manifestation	Treated as economic capital
Digital capital	Digital skills; content production; platform operation	Musicians	Viewed as cultural extension	Classified as cultural capital
Data capital	Ownership/processing of user data	Platforms	Platform-level resource	Not musician capital
Algorithmic capital	Algorithmic influence on visibility	Platforms	Platform meta-capital	Not musician capital

As a conceptual article, this study provides a conceptual synthesis of existing theories and empirical research. Its aim is to define the doxa of career success in the digital music field and to outline the relevant capital structure. Because this article does not analyse empirical data, the discussion cannot extend to further propositions or hypotheses. Therefore, the mechanisms through which doxa and capital may shift within the digital field are not examined in detail. Future research can build on empirical evidence to explore how different forms of capital are converted, accumulated, and reproduced through practice in the digital field.

4. Discussion: Towards a research agenda

Digital platforms have reshaped musicians' career development and evaluation systems. This article conducts a conceptual synthesis and theoretical deduction. This argues that career success on digital platforms can be seen as the new form of doxa. It also operates together with pre-existing doxa in the music field. Existing forms of capital are reinterpreted within the digital filed as well. However, current research still lacks systematic empirical evidence on how these mechanisms are constructed, legitimized, and reproduced in practices. Therefore, this section outlines an agenda for future research and identifies several directions for further investigation.

4.1 Promising directions for future studies

Future research can first examine how digital platforms shape new logics of career success It can clarify how platform doxa emerges, spreads, and becomes taken for granted. Researchers can study how musicians learn platform preferences in practice and how they interpret playlist placement, follower growth, and fluctuations in visibility. These indicators gradually become shared markers of success. Future work can also compare differences in doxa across genres, audience structures, or market size, and examine how these differences influence musicians' strategies and access to resources.

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Second, future research can examine how capital operates and converts within digital platforms. Economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital take on new forms of conversion in platform environments. For example, aesthetic presentation, content production, and platform literacy have become important parts of cultural capital. Symbolic capital includes indicators such as visibility, playlist position, or viral content. Future studies can explore how digital skills and aesthetic presentation help musicians gain symbolic and economic capital through concrete practices. They can also analyse how data and algorithms act as structural forces that reshape the thresholds, speed, and direction of capital conversion.

Moreover, future research can explore musicians' strategic practices and the formation of their habitus. Musicians adjust their strategies across creation, release, interaction, and platform operation. Their repeated attempts and corrections shape new professional dispositions. This process is central to understanding the dynamics of the digital field. It is also important to study relational labour. Fan community maintenance and livestream interactions can strengthen social capital in structural ways.

Finally, the rise of digital platforms has not eliminated inequality. Research on the digital divide shows that differences in digital skills and resources create new forms of stratification (e.g., Brock et al., 2010; Chen, 2013; Villanueva-Mansilla et al., 2015). These differences appear across generations and regions. Platform algorithms can also produce new forms of invisibility and exclusion because of their opaque and preference-driven mechanisms. Future research can explore how musicians understand their position within these structural constraints and how they adapt or resist in the different ways.

4.2 Implication for research design

Future studies should adopt a mechanism-oriented approach to understand how digital platforms shape doxa (beliefs about musical career success) and capital conversion. Studies can focus on the processes and conditions through which these mechanisms unfold. Researchers can focus on how musicians learn platform rules, form their strategies, and gain or lose capital. They can also explore how new habitus emerges through repeated practice. Attention to these processes can help researchers identify how doxa becomes naturalized and how capital conversion operates in the digital field.

In addition, future studies can combine qualitative and quantitative methods to identify and verify key mechanisms. Qualitative studies can take the lead in the early stage. They can show how individuals understand platform logics, what strategies they use, and under which structural conditions they gain specific forms of capital. Quantitative studies can then test whether the relationships between doxa and different forms of capital are stable and generalizable. For example, quantitative

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analysis can help clarify which conditions enable symbolic capital to turn into economic capital.

This study also suggests that future research should pay attention to events and timing. Digital platform mechanisms often operated around key moments. Examples include new releases, playlist placement, collaboration exposure, and offline tours. These moments can strongly influence musicians' strategic adjustments and their positions in the digital field. A longitudinal design or event sequence approach is suitable for analysing such dynamics. By comparing behaviours before and after these events, researchers can better understand how capital is accumulated, transformed, or becomes ineffective under platform logics.

Finally, this article also suggests that future research design should consider structural factors. Digital platforms act as structural forces. They operate as agents that combine human and algorithmic decisions. Research should treat online visibility and playlist curation as structural variables. These variables are set by the platform. They influence the doxa (career success) and the ways capital is converted. Furthermore, future work also needs to observe how these structural variables shape capital conversion and career in concrete situations. For instance, Spotify announced in 2024 that track with fewer than 1000 annual streams would be demonetized (Spotify for Artists, 2023). This policy creates a threshold for capital conversion. If symbolic capital reflected by streams is too low, economic capital cannot be generated. Musicians the adjust their practices in response. Reaching 1000 stream becomes a new element of career success doxa. This would provide clearer explanatory paths for the digital field.

4.3 Potential samples and settings

This article considers that future work can use multi-level sampling to capture differences across groups. One approach is to distinguish musicians who work only online, only offline, or across both spaces. Another approach is to compare signed musicians with independent musicians. This can show how different capital structure shape career opportunities. Researchers can also group musicians by fan size and visibility into high, medium, and low levels. This helps reveal how the scale of symbolic capital affects strategy choices and the efficiency of capital conversion.

Sample heterogeneity can also be examined through age groups. This would allow researchers to see how generational differences shape platform adaptation, digital skill development, and learning patterns. Musical style and audience structure offer another angle. Future studies can compare mainstream and niche genres to see how their career success doxa differ. Cross national comparison is also a possible direction. This is especially useful when platforms operate with similar features and indicators, such as TikTok and Douyin. This can help control contextual factors and identity how cultural differences influence platform preferences and audiences' responses.

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Small sample, in-depth studies and analyses of key events are also important in this research context. Events such as new releases, awards, or shifts in musical style may mark turning points in musicians' strategies and practices. Openness or restriction of fan group, and the interaction in comment sections can also provide useful clues. These situations can help researchers observe how social support networks are organized and maintained.

4.4 Data collection and analytical possibilities

To understand how doxa and capital operate, and convert in digital filed, future studies need to collect multiple types of data and build a dynamic, multi-level observational framework.

This article suggests that future research should systematically collect trajectory data from digital platforms. This can track how musicians' accounts change over time. It may include the frequency and timing of content uploads, the types and formats of work, the tags they use, and the levels of engagement and views. With time-series data, researchers can reconstruct musicians' practices on the platform. They can also analyse how changes in platform rules or recommendation mechanisms affect visibility and financial outcomes in the short and medium term. This needs to choose appropriate time windows and define what counts as short-term and medium-term periods. In addition, platform data can be combined with in-depth interviews. Interviews can show how musicians understand platform logic and how they experience it. They can reveal the concrete strategies musicians use to adjust their practices. Interviews can help researchers see how musicians adapt to, internalize, and respond to the doxa of career success. They also capture musicians' experiences with fan interaction, platform image management, and other forms of work. On the other hand, researchers can also interview platforms employees (e.g., human curators) and traditional gatekeepers (e.g., A&R managers). These interviews can clarify the human judgment and negotiation that shape algorithmic outcomes. They can also show how the platform, as a hybrid agency that mixes human and algorithmic elements, participates in forming digital doxa. Also, future research can consider to use digital ethnography or participant observation. These methods allow them to stay close to platform interactions. By entering open or restricted fan groups and comment sections, researchers can observe how symbolic capital is assigned and redistributed in communities. They can also identity how musicians or key fans shape social capital through mobilization, content circulation, and emotional labour. Close observation can further show that visibility is not produced by algorithms alone. It is created through the joint actions of musicians and their audiences.

These data can support several analytical strategies. Qualitative analysis can use thematic analysis, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, or process tracing to explore how musicians adjust their creation and release strategies. It can also show how they

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interpret success and failure, and how their repeated adjustments form new digital career habitus. Quantitative analysis can treat platform data as structured data for regression or social network analysis. These methods can reveal the relationships between visibility (as symbolic or cultural capital) and income (as economic capital). That shows the role of collaboration networks in capital accumulation. This helps future studies examine causal relations within Bourdieu's capital, habitus, and field framework. Moreover, it is also possible to develop measurement tools based on qualitative research (e.g., interviews and online observation/digital ethnography). These tools can update the concept of career success for musicians, and they combine traditional indicators with digital indicators. Statistical validation and later adjustments can support the reliability of these tools. This can help to understand the career conditions of musicians in the digital age. It can also offer a reference for evaluating the careers of other digital artists in the wider creative industries. Lastly, this study agrees with Kopf's (2025) argument about the four common analytical approaches used in research on digital platforms. The directions proposed in this article align with these approaches. For example, using social media as data repositories for discourse-analytical examinations is consistent with the suggestion to collect platform trajectory data and tack musicians' accounts over time. Digital ethnography and participant observation also fall under this approach. The second approach, discourse-analytical contextualisation and theorisation of social media, is also reflected in this study. The recommendation to build a dynamic and multi-layered analytical framework and to examine the effects of platform governance represents efforts to theorise social media as a new mode of communication and a new field. Third, the analysis of discourse produced by social media providers appears in this study through the suggestion to interview platform employees and traditional gatekeepers. Future research can pay more attention to how platform providers formulate rules and curate content. This perspective can fill an important gap in the current literature. The analysis of discourse(s) about social media can be advanced by combining platform data with in-depth interviews. This combination can show how musicians understand platform logics, how they experience them, and how they adjust their strategies. This perspective is still limited in existing research. Comparing musicians' interviews with the views of platform employees and traditional gatekeepers can provide a more complete picture of the discourses surrounding social media. It can also help identify points of convergence and tension between these groups. Overall, these data sources and analytical approaches do not aim to build a single causal chain. Digital platforms act as intermediaries in which multiple indicators work together to shape outcomes. Using diverse forms of data can give future researchers several points of entry into the digital field. It also allows them to explore doxa, power, capital, and capital conversion from different disciplinary perspectives. This study also emphasizes that doxa (career success) in the digital era is not static. It is shaped through the interaction between musicians and digital platforms (platform itself and its users).

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4.5 Theoretical implications

From a theoretical perspective, this study provides a new way to apply Bourdieu's field theory to digital contexts. It argues that digital platforms have not replaced traditional forms of capital or created entirely new ones. Capital on digital platforms appears in both online and offline forms. Platform data and algorithms give platform owners a structural power that is similar to meta-capital. This power can shape how musicians' capital is converted, under what conditions it is converted, and which musicians are able to convert it. For example, it can influence which types of musicians are more likely to turn online audiences into actual income. In addition, the doxa (career success) does not come from a single perspective. It develops gradually through the interaction between platform distribution systems, market digitalization, and musicians' practices. This mechanism provides a theoretical basis for understanding how doxa is produced in digital settings.

Moreover, although this study does not discuss habitus, habitus remains connected to field and capital in Bourdieu's framework. The literature reviewed here suggests that musicians' habitus do not follow a linear path. Their habitus takes shape gradually through repeated engagement with platform environments and ongoing adjustments. Their positions in the field change over time as algorithms and social relations (e.g., fan communities) influence their visibility and opportunities. These positional shifts offer an important lens for understanding career development in the digital field.

5. Conclusion

This article uses Bourdieu's field-doxa-capital framework to reconsider the influence of digital platforms on the field of professional music. By integrating existing literature and reviewing key theoretical discussions, this study argues that digital platforms function as structured social spaces. Algorithms, data indicators, and visibility mechanisms shape how musicians understand and pursue career success. Digital metrics such as streams, follower counts, engagement levels, and playlist placement operate together with traditional standards. They form a new doxa of career success. This doxa is not created by formal rules. It emerges through the interaction of platform logics, industry practices, and musicians' practices.

At the same time, this study argues that digital platforms have not brought to light new forms of capital with a view to the Bourdieusian capital structure. By reviewing Bourdieu's capital concepts and later development, this article shows how economic capital still shapes production and promotion. Cultural capital now includes digital skills and media literacy. Later concepts such as technological capital (Bourdieu, 2005, 80) and digital cultural capital (Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2019, 432) are often described as new forms of capital. This research sees them as digital versions of cultural capital rather than new forms of capital. Aesthetic capital (Anderson et al., 2010) can also be understood as part of cultural capital. Social capital expands

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from industry networks to online relationships and community interactions in the digital environment. Several studies propose the idea of digital social capital (e.g., Julien, 2015) argues that digital social capital departs from Bourdieu's concept in several ways. This study looks at it from the perspective of musicians in digital fields and sees it as a continuation of Bourdieu's social capital. Symbolic capital is redistributed through algorithmic visibility and platform recognition. Public recognition now includes digital indicators. This study also discusses other digital capital concepts, such as e-capital (electronic capital) (Merisalo, 2016, 31) and digital capital (Ragnedda 2018, 2367). It concludes that these concepts mainly relate to cultural elements. This study consider they should be understood as forms of cultural capital. It is important to note the debate on whether digital capital should be treated as a new form of capital. This study focuses on musicians in digital field and understands digital capital as an extension of cultural capital. However, when viewed from Ragnedda (2018) perspective and from digital divide research, digital capital can be seen as a new form of capital. There are other digital-related concepts. They are data capital (Sadowski, 2019, 4) and algorithmic meta-capital (Lundahl, 2020, 1447). Both forms are controlled by platforms rather than musicians. They belong to the structural power of platforms. Therefore, this study does not treat them as new capital. In sum, no new forms of capital emerge for musicians working in digital fields.

Theoretically, this article provides implications for three research areas. First, in career success research, it shows how digital platforms naturalize algorithmic logics and turn digital indicators into widely accepted evaluation standards. Second, regarding Bourdieusian theory, it demonstrates how capital can adapt and extend within digital contexts. This provides an analytical path for understanding the restructuring of cultural production in the digital era. Third, for platform studies, this article argues that digital platforms are not only technical intermediaries. They also operate as structural forces that shape social meanings and professional norms. This mixed agency view helps clarify the social role of platforms in organizing cultural production.

Future research can develop along several directions. First, researchers can examine different types of musicians, such as independent and contracted musicians. Then, research can aim at comparing how musicians respond to and co-construct platform doxa in their daily practices. Future studies can combine qualitative data (e.g., interviews and digital ethnography) and quantitative data (platform data) to identify how capital transforms in digital platforms. Last, researchers can also explore differences in the field of (digitalized) music across regions and analyse whether the logics of career success converge or diverge.

Finally, this article argues that digital platforms have not only changed how the music industry operates but also reshaped the evaluation of career success. We conclude that no new forms of capital have emerged in the digital production field

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of music. Instead, existing forms of capital are both reinterpreted and reproduced through digital mechanisms. This shift shows that digitalization is a process of continuous reconfiguration in which known power logics take on new expressions within an equally new media structure. Understanding this process is essential for examining how digital platforms continue to shape inequalities and opportunities in cultural production.

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Schengen in the suction of sovereignism

Abstract

This article examines how the Schengen system generates new tensions between European integration and state sovereignty. Schengen challenges the traditional concept of sovereignty by transferring border control to the European level, while simultaneously creating perceptions of lost national control. These contradictions provide fertile ground for sovereignist politics, which promise to simplify complex transnational realities by invoking "the will of the people" and reinforcing symbolic and material borders. Drawing on the Hungarian case, the paper shows how populist narratives and conspiracy thinking transform border politics into a self-reinforcing dynamic – the "suction of sovereignism" – in which political efforts to assert control intensify rather than resolve the paradoxes of European border governance.

Keywords: sovereignty, border sociology, European integration, populism, Hungary

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1. The argument

The European Schengen system poses a double challenge to state sovereignty. Programmatically, free mobility of persons within the Schengen area is established by handing over control of the borders of all member states to those members with Schengen external borders. This represents a break with the traditional understanding of state sovereignty. In practice, however, control of the EU's external borders falls short of the Schengen program. This results in a certain loss of internal control and a sense of vulnerability in the face of complex transnational contexts that cannot be controlled at national level. This is the starting point for sovereignist politics. Sovereignism is the political program and practice of radically simplifying complex social relationships by constructing a clear common interest of „the people" and strict demarcations against a hostile environment. State borders play a central role here, as they are both symbols and instruments for interrupting interdependency, thus shielding „the people" from external factors.

The core of the Schengen constellation is that the liberalization of mobility rules within the Schengen area is safeguarded by reliable control of the external border (Vobruba, 2016a). Doubts about this therefore reactivate internal borders. The shift of controls back to internal borders in the Schengen area sets in motion a dynamic of increase that is fed by two sources: 1. An excess of expectations: Restrictive border policy, especially as a central element of a political agenda, evokes more

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expectations of solving problems than it can fulfill. 2. The domino effect: The more intensively an internal country controls entries or enforces exits, the stricter the other countries have to be. Both result from the special interdependencies in the Schengen area. The excess of expectations and the domino effect together cause the suction of sovereignism.

2. What are borders?

Spatial borders are not lines, but areas perpendicular to the Earth's surface (Hilpert & Vobruba, 2025, 851). They separate three-dimensional political domains from one another. Political spatial borders separate the same from (largely) the same (Luhmann, 1997, 641). This becomes particularly clear when considering borders as boundaries of three-dimensional spaces with regard to airspace and ground. Although the air is similar on both sides of the border, there is the possibility of military violations of the respective airspace. There can also be conflicts over mining rights. Almost the same applies to the fundamentals of everyday life on both sides of a border: „Because on the other side, in other families or other villages, life is not fundamentally different, but similar to ours." (Luhmann, 1997, 641, my translation).

Since borders separate the same from the same, they must be technically fixed and symbolically elevated in order to be observable and relevant to action. This also makes it clear that political spatial borders are constructs, and rigid constructions at that: They are by no means "natural", but they are harsh realities for those who have to deal with them.

Borders manifest themselves through symbols and rules, influencing some cross-border processes, such as migration. As cross-border and border-protecting actors observe each other's border-related actions and act accordingly (Vobruba, 2016b. 215 ff.), borders are constituted as social facts (Simmel, 1908/1992, 697). This points to the fundamental paradox of spatial political borders (Eigmüller, 2016, 60f.). Borders make different territories identifiable through separation, thus creating the prerequisite for connection. Border politics operates with conflicts arising from the technical availability of space and the conflict dynamics of global society, both vertically and horizontally.

3. The Schengen system

From a sociological perspective on borders, the European border regime, the Schengen System, is a special case for two reasons.

Firstly, the Schengen Agreement calls into question one of the core elements of the traditional understanding of state sovereignty (Jellinek, 1900; Koselleck, 1990): The sovereign disposition of the state over its own borders, and thus over entries to and exits from the national territory. „‚Staat' und ‚Souveränität' sind zwei Be-

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griffe, die in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung und ihrer rechtlichen Zuordnung aufeinander verweisen." (ibid.: 1) It is precisely this connection that is dissolving in the course of European integration. "The position of the nation state in the European constellation of institutions can no longer be adequately summarized in terms of traditional state semantics." (Bach, 2013, 124, my translation. See also Lepsius, 2000; 2013)

This also includes a new understanding of European borders. Sovereignism attempts the opposite: the adaptation of reality to an outdated model of political order.

In light of the long tradition and the paramount importance of state sovereignty in traditional state-theoretical thinking, the renunciation of controls at the internal borders of the Schengen area is an unlikely state-commitment. Secondly, Schengen is a particularly interesting case in terms of border sociology. Two relations are decisive here: firstly, the fundamental relationship in border sociology between separation and connection, stability and fluidity (Nail, 2021; Schindler, 2021), between border security on the one hand and border crossings on the other (Cantó i Milà, 2016). The obvious evidence: Borders only become a hot issue through the global flow of refugees and the attempts to control them, and only through the cross-border movement of goods, including controls and customs duties. Secondly, there is the Schengen-specific relationship between the liberalization of the movement of persons within the Schengen area and the strengthening of external border controls. Schengen encroaches on the sovereignty of all member states (Bach 2010, 164 ff.). Countries with internal borders give up sovereignty by ceding their border security to the countries with an external EU border. The sovereignty of countries with an external EU border comes under pressure, as securing their borders is no longer just a national matter, but concerns all member states (Vobruba, 2003; Eigmüller, 2007; Müller, 2014; Hilpert, 2020). The Schengen constellation has come under pressure mainly due to the increased migration in 2015, restrictive mobility policies during the Covid-19-crisis (Vobruba, 2023) and the influx of refugees in the wake of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. Overall, the widely shared view that the EU's external border does not protect sufficiently increases the desire for borders within the Schengen area that separate strongly and thus revitalizes the traditional understanding of sovereignty, which is fixated on national borders.

Among many other effects not discussed here, the development of the Schengen system contributes to a general sense of threat from transnational interdependencies and complex interrelationships that are beyond the reach of national politics, but whose consequences are felt in people's everyday lives (Vobruba, 2024, 29ff.). This constellation significantly increases the real and symbolic importance of borders in terms of protection and the interruption of interdependence. State border controls are widely regarded as an effective and simple defense against external threats. This

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is why borders have a prominent position in the political-ideological toolbox of sovereignism.

4. Sovereignism as the promise to simplify society

What is simple politics?

Sovereignist positions are primarily represented by the parties organized within the European Parliament's two factions: „Patriots for Europe" (PfE) and „Europe of Sovereign Nations" (ESN).

The basic idea of sovereignism is that political intentions can be easily translated – i.e. in a 1:1 ratio – into corresponding effects (Vobruba, 2024, 23ff.). The „will of the people" determines the political intentions and thus the policy. Politics that is simple in this sense has plausibility, as it adopts and uses people's everyday understanding of causality, which is dominant in their Lebenswelt (Vobruba, 2024, 23ff.). Whether such simple connections merely create an "illusion of control" (Luhmann, 2000, 23) – more precisely: an illusion of implementability – or are in fact a promising basis for political action, cannot be theoretically decided in advance, nor does it need to be decided here. The decisive factor is that, in sovereignism, the political control of society as a whole is presented as simple. This is precisely why it must be seen as a promise to simplify society. In this simplified society, there is no complexity, no emergent processes, and there are no unintended effects. Failures of sovereignist politics are again simply interpreted: They are simply attributed to the malevolent intentions of enemies. We will see that this plays a role in the attraction of sovereignism.

The will of "the people"

The anchor of sovereignist politics is the populist concept of political will formation: "The people", as a pre-political entity, are both the source and carrier of the common political will, as well as the beneficiary and the object of political protection (Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2016, 83ff.; Vobruba, 2019). Populist political actors claim to know this will and present themselves as instruments that implement it. The misuse of instruments of direct democracy is integral to this.

In order to present the position of the present Hungarian government, I refer to one official Hungarian government source („about Hungary") and to two semi-official ones („Hungary today" and „Ungarn heute"). The current Hungarian government, currently a role model for sovereignist politics, organizes "national consultations" to determine the "will of the people". They are „an important instrument for the defense of national sovereignty", as the government refers to the results, especially when trying to legitimize divergent positions in the Council of the EU. In 2025, the Hungarian government asked the population about Ukraine's EU membership. The consultation was accompanied by an intensive anti-Ukraine campaign,

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in which it was claimed in particular that "Brussels" was planning Ukraine's accession during the war. The consultation attracted 2.27 million participants and resulted in a 95 % rejection rate (data not verifiable; Deutsche Welle, 26.6.2025).

The governmental fabrication of the will of the people becomes particularly clear in the following example. Several leading questions were asked in the consultation in December 2024, for example: Are you in favour of retaining the 13th monthly pension? – 96 % approval; of doubling the family allowance and rejecting the migration penalty? – each with 99 % approval. There were 1,350,690 responses and the result was as follows: "The 11 questions were answered with an overwhelming majority of 95–99 percent in favor of the government's proposals." From this, the current Hungarian government concludes: "The results of the national consultation give the government an enormous tailwind." (Ungarn heute, 16.1.2025, my translation) This is the circularity in which populist politics constructs the "will of the people", which it then implements.

Friend/enemy

The main characteristic of sovereignist politics is the way it positions itself externally, or how it constructs its outside. According to this perspective, all problems ultimately originate from outside, are caused by enemies and threaten "the people" within, necessitating defense. This is the core of the sovereignist program. State borders are therefore a prominent object of sovereignist politics. They create a clear distinction between ‚inside' and ‚outside', ‚friend' and ‚foe': almost every topic is adapted to this pattern of inside-friend/outside-foe. This is the decisive difference between populism and sovereignism: Populism constructs the opposition between the "people" and the "elites", while sovereignism charges it with the distinction between inside and outside, thereby radicalizing it.

In this process, an astonishing fantasy unfolds.

The current Hungarian government is tackling inflation in this way. The price gouging and profit hunger of international corporations are being blamed for rising prices. The Hungarian government, on the other hand, declares its position to be "always on the side of Hungarian families" (Ungarn heute, 26.2.2025) and introduces price controls. These directly demonstrate the simple connection between "political will" and social effect, but of course they do not solve the inflation problem. Despite state-imposed price ceilings for various foodstuffs, hygiene products, interest rates on loans, etc., the Hungarian government is not achieving its inflation target. (Ungarn heute, 25.6.2025). The country is seen as being under permanent pressure and needing to be defended: „Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said on Facebook on Wednesday that the Ukrainians are ramping up their attacks on Hungary because we have prevented Ukraine's European Union accession in Brussels. … ‚Kyiv must accept that they are not the ones who get to decide what

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the Hungarian people should think', the Prime Minister added." (About Hungary, 4.7.2025)

Hungary's borders must be protected against two external threats, namely migrants and the EU Commission: "Hungary pays daily fines for defending its external borders, the parliamentary state secretary of the interior ministry said in Brussels on Wednesday.... The proponents of migration have a plan to bring one million migrants to Europe every year, although the negative consequences of illegal migration are obvious." (Ungarn heute, 6.3.2025, my translation) Finally, Hungary's integration into the EU is viewed as particularly dangerous in light of historical events. "For a decade and a half, we have been resisting the insidious and aggressive ambitions of a new empire, now based in Brussels, in the spirit of Kossuth's Realpolitik." (Ungarn heute, 14.4.2025, my translation) Internal unity requires portraying all internal opponents as external enemies. This is why the national opposition is subsumed into the internal friend/external foe logic and thus turned into an external enemy. "Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said Brussels and the opposition Tisza Party are candid about their goal to lower Hungarian living standards and they are conniving to turn Hungary into a failed state." (About Hungary, 16.4.2025) The current Hungarian government repeatedly emphasizes that it is defending the country against the opposition, which is making common cause with foreign enemies. (About Hungary, 9.5.2025) This is a late echo of the „innerstaatlichen Feinderklärung" (Schmitt, 1932/1996, 47) in authoritarian thinking on sovereignty.

All in all: Social relations are organized according to the friend-foe-pattern; all problems are seen as originating from outside. This is countered by a strong government that invokes the will of the people and translates it directly into policy. Sovereignism aims to simplify society by fantasizing about a permanent state of exception (Ausnahmezustand).

5. Sovereignist border politics

Sovereignist politics promises and attempts to simplify complex social relations, both real and symbolic. Reducing complexity requires interrupting interdependencies. The prominence of borders in sovereignism is essentially based on the idea of cutting off transnational interdependencies that generate complexity. Border policy is attractive to sovereignists because it is clearly visible (construction of facilities, controls, deportations) and because it allows them to demonstrate the "political will" more easily. The tendency to make individual actions (deportations etc.) public, but to withhold data that would make reports on the success of restrictive border policies verifiable, also points in this direction (The Economist, April 19th-25th 2025, 30f.). At least for the Schengen area, the following applies: In order to make restrictive border control policies publicly visible, police work must be concentrated on large, high-traffic borders. However, this means that small border crossings and

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even more so the green borders are hardly guarded. There is not enough manpower or funding for seamless border surveillance. In addition to this, sovereignist policies establish connections between migration and numerous phenomena that they consider to be problematic. Restrictive border policies must therefore be used as an instrument to achieve many goals: The fight against crime, terrorism, and the destruction of Western Christian culture. If the declared intention of stopping migration flows cannot be realized, or if unintended side effects occur, this is simply interpreted as follows: Malicious opposing forces were – for the time being – stronger. The sanctions against the Hungarian government for violations of the rule of law (Art. 7 TEU) are constantly reinterpreted by Hungarian officials to mean that the EU Commission is "punishing" Hungary's restrictive border policy. On the occasion of the presentation of the Hungarian Presidency's program for the second half of 2024 to the European Parliament in Strasbourg, Orbán stated, among other things: „We must agree that anyone who wants to enter the territory of the EU must stop at the border of the EU and submit an entry request, and until it is positively assessed, that person cannot enter the territory of the EU. If we cannot achieve this, we will never stop migration. This is the only option. Today Hungary is being punished for doing just this." (Orbán, 8.10.2024)

If necessary, success is postponed and the same approach is continued in order to achieve it. In this sense, the pariah status of the current Hungarian government within the EU is reinterpreted: "Trump government adopts elements of Hungarian migration policy" (Ungarn heute, 7.4.2025, my translation), and the success of the sovereignist policy becomes a hope for the future: "The moment will come when the Hungarian point of view will be the majority, says Viktor Orbán." (Ungarn heute, 21.3.2025, my translation).

6. Sovereignism in the Schengen system

The specific dynamics of the European border regime result from the fact that the relationship between border security and border crossing determines not only the social quality of the external border, but also has consequences for border security and border crossings at the internal borders. The decisive consequence: The Schengen-constellation is an invitation to engage in the blame game. Migration pressure at internal borders can always be traced back to a lack of monitoring of the external border. This justifies the reintroduction of internal border controls and jeopardizes the free movement of persons within the EU. This is why the interaction between the external border and internal borders allows sovereignist politicians such as Orbán and Salvini to present themselves as the true defenders of free mobility in the Schengen area and the EU as a whole. By rigorously defending against migration at the national border, which is also the EU's external border, they are defending their country, the freedom of mobility within the Schengen area, and the Western civilization. In contrast to this „Brussels wants to erase our Judeo-Christian

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culture“ (About Hungary, 2.6.2025), as Balázs Hankó, the minister for culture and innovation, puts it. And the Commission is withdrawing millions of euros from Hungary as a penalty for securing the borders. “EU bureaucrats”, on the other hand, are planning to take in millions of migrants on behalf of their backers. “Our Real Political Opponents Are in Brussels, Says Prime Minister.” (Hungary today, 19.2.2025) The numerous references to the Hungarian government’s achievements in protecting the EU’s external border contrast with the Commission’s policy of allowing millions of migrants in at the behest of George Soros, combined with the suggestion of outsourcing migration defence: “Today, ‘Brussels is the threat and Cairo is the protection of Europe’ in relation to migration.“ (Ungarn heute, 18. 9.2024, my translation)

Explanations of migration and criticism of the EU’s Schengen policy are rooted in conspiracy thinking. “Us” (the people), versus “them” (the corrupt elite) is a classic pattern in which conspiracy theorists construct their world (Vobruba, 2024, 46ff.) This results in the demand that: „The ‚agents of the Soros network‘ must be expelled from the European Commission and corrupt lobbyists removed from the European Parliament.“ (Hungary today, 20.3.2025)

The evil intentions of a powerful entity are seen as the cause of migration. It is George Soros. Orbán consistently speaks of a “so-called George Soros plan, which he said was aimed at bringing a million migrants a year to Europe...” (Hungary today 7.2.2025) This is classic conspiracy thinking (Vobruba, 2024, 105ff.). Everything fits into a master plan: A super-rich and powerful entity in the background uses a political elite acting against the people to fundamentally and irreversibly change social conditions. The danger of migration is imminent: „The prime minister said, ‚we are doomed‘ if they entered, and ‚there is no way back.‘“ (About Hungary, 16.7.2025) But it is not yet too late. Because „we will not tolerate Hungary being made a puppet state again, a vassal of Brussels.“ (Hungary today, 23.10.2024) It’s five to twelve. Conspiracy thinking always constructs a great danger that can just about be averted. „To be Hungarian is to fight” (ibid.) This implies: (Almost) all means are considered appropriate (Vobruba, 2024, 106ff.), resulting in aggressive rhetoric. „They are attacking us because we are sovereignists and even patriots. We are under attack because we demand that the rule of law should also apply to Brussels. We are under attack because we demand that the fight against corruption should also apply to Brussels. Instead, European bureaucrats threaten their political opponents with fines, sanctions, and the loss of voting rights.“ (Hungary today, 20.1.2025) He sees the key to the future in “whether we can recapture Brussels from George Soros.” (Ungarn heute, 20.12.2024, my translation) Brussels is revealed to be the “Soros headquarters” (ibid.), as it does not organize effective external control and is therefore responsible for the reintroduction of internal controls (Hungary today, 6.3.2025). What's more, the fine proves that the Commission does not want to control the external border! Finally: Migration

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leads to terrorist attacks in Germany (Hungary today, 5.3.2025), which proves that Soros and the EU Commission are enemies of the people.

The relationship between conspiracy thinking and sovereignism can be explained by the fact that they are both different expressions of the desire to simplify society. Adopting this perspective enables us to recognize that this longing not only leads to an aberrant view of the world, but can also have tangible political consequences.

7. The suction of sovereignism

According to the sovereignist understanding, a state is only sovereign if it is in a position to strictly defend its borders. Sovereignist border policy thus becomes self-reinforcing. It feeds on two sources. Firstly, every restrictive border policy is driven by the border paradox, which leads to more of the same. Secondly, the Schengen constellation exacerbates the self-reinforcing dynamic of sovereign border policy. Due to the border paradox, restrictive border policies can never completely control their borders. The propagandistic, organizational and technical upgrading of borders (that which divides) never establishes complete control, and in fact makes border crossings (that which unites) even more conspicuous. The more visible the defense against transgressions becomes, the more conspicuous they become. Sovereignist politics do not resolve the border paradox (Eigmüller, 2016, 60), but are driven by it.

The prerequisite for the self-reinforcing dynamic of sovereignism is that politics must present itself to people in the logic of simple thinking. Political intentions and effects are simply linked. Otherwise, political programs would not exist. Since the logic of simple politics only depends on "political will", all problems can, in principle, be solved. This inevitably creates a surplus of people's expectations of politics. Politicians react to this by declaring even more far-reaching intentions, such as the promise of total control over borders. In other words, they reinforce the illusion of the feasibility of sovereign border policies. If the intended effects cannot be realized, the reaction is simply more of the same.

Secondly, the interdependencies of the Schengen constellation make border policy doubly susceptible to sovereignism.

A) Entries. As the concentration of controls at the common Schengen external border always involves a renunciation of state sovereignty, and since border crossings can never be fully controlled, there is always a willingness in the background to reactivate controls at internal borders. This becomes acute in the event of a (perceived) loss of control. If one country reactivates its border controls, there is strong pressure for other countries to follow suit.

B) Departures. Deportations from the center trigger a chain of deportations towards the periphery. This causes conflicts within and between individual Schengen countries, involving various institutions (courts, journalism, border guards). As a

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result, the importance and visibility of national borders continues to increase. The diplomatic row between Poland and Germany in the summer of 2025 illustrates this clearly.

8. Summary

The two related theses were can be summarized as follows:

A) Sovereignist politics is based on the need to simplify society. The appeal of sovereignism is enhanced by the corresponding self-portrayal of politics, as well as by people's desire for simple order in the face of complex social conditions.

B) The paradox of borders is that attempts to close them make their permeability all the more apparent, a phenomenon that is particularly evident in the Schengen constellation and that can be exploited in terms of sovereignty policy. This is the suction of sovereignism.

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Danish municipalities' efforts in attracting and retaining skilled migrants: Towards a discourse analysis of how municipal measures frame skilled migrants

Abstract

Motivated by the growing political and economic significance of global talent mobility, this study focuses on municipal initiatives that aim to foster inclusion and retention. The purpose of this paper is to examine how Danish municipalities contribute to attracting and retaining highly skilled migrants through local initiatives and discursive practices. It further examines how highly skilled migrants interpret, negotiate, and respond to such institutional representations and contributes to broader discussions on migration, integration, and identity construction in municipal contexts. Despite strong national recruitment policies, Denmark continues to face challenges in retaining international professionals, which highlights a gap between attraction strategies and migrants' lived experiences. This research note addresses this issue by setting a research agenda for exploring how municipal programmes construct the identities of highly skilled migrants through communication and events, and how migrants respond to these constructions.

Keywords: highly skilled migrants, municipal initiatives, inclusion, retention, identity construction, migration governance

1. Introduction

Driven by labour shortages due to the shrinking working-age population in OECD countries and the competition to build knowledge-based economies, global competition to attract highly skilled migrants will continue to increase (Pekkala et al., 2016). Permanent-type migration to OECD countries set a record in 2023 with 6.5 million new permanent immigrants, which is 28 % above 2019 levels (International Migration Outlook, 2024). Although the United States and the United Kingdom have remained the top OECD destinations for new migrants, the European Commission has proposed a set of voluntary measures to make it easier for third-country nationals to work in the EU and to help member states address widespread labour and skills shortages (Friis & Mia, 2024). As both an EU member state and an OECD country that has received fewer (-9 %) new permanent-type immigrants in 2023 than in 2022, Denmark has followed a similar path by setting forth measures to attract and retain highly skilled migrants (International Migration Outlook, 2024).

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1.1 Initiatives towards attracting highly skilled migrants

At the national level, the Danish government has launched a reform of international recruitment to improve competitive conditions for companies to recruit more highly skilled migrants (Beskæftigelsesministeriet, 2023). The reform promotes the equal treatment of international professionals and has lowered salary thresholds for work permits, which is explicitly designed to attract global talent from outside the EU (Denmark's National Reform Programme, 2023; KPMG, 2025; The Copenhagen Post, 2025). The reform also seeks to increase the number of international students in fields that require a highly educated workforce by proposing that universities offer 1,100 study places on programmes taught in English per year between 2024 and 2028, and 2,500 annually from 2029 (Denmark's National Reform Program, 2023).

At the municipal level, organized initiatives to support the relocation and retention of highly skilled migrants have emerged or intensified. This can be exemplified by two municipalities in Denmark that have recently adopted measures to attract an international, skilled workforce: the City of Odense, a city of 210,838 inhabitants in 2024 (Odense i Tal, 2024) and the City of Aarhus, Denmark's second largest city, with 373,512 inhabitants in 2024 (Aarhus i Tal, 2024). Both cities already host full universities and numerous international students and expatriates. To strengthen Odense's international profile and help position it as the "world's best robot city" (Vedtaget Budget 2025), Odense municipality has doubled the number of employees who support highly skilled migrants and expanded the pre-existing newcomer service to what is called an "international house", which serves as a central hub for international newcomers (Odense Byråd, 2018–2021). Aarhus municipality has also launched similar initiatives. To enhance the city's internationalization efforts, Aarhus City Council has established a committee comprising representatives from both the public and private sectors to develop new initiatives aimed at increasing the number of foreign professionals by 40 % between 2025 and 2030 (Aarhus International Strategi).

Municipalities in Denmark are playing a growing role in international migration by implementing strategies to support immigrant inclusion and retention. This paper therefore seeks to illuminate the efforts extended by Danish municipalities to attract and retain highly skilled migrants. Our interest is particularly directed towards the municipal level of governance in welcoming highly skilled migrants and how municipal discourses frame them. Hence, we propose to pursue the following research questions:

1. How are migrants constructed in the strategic communication material of municipality welcome measures?
2. How are migrants discursively constructed in organized municipality events?
3. How do migrants respond to this discourse?

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1.2 Municipal initiatives

A number of municipalities in Denmark offer free services to highly skilled internationals, as well as their accompanying partners and families, to facilitate relocation and retention in the country. These services have manifested in several forms, such as international houses, newcomer services or international communities, and they are often run as a partnership between public municipalities, private companies, universities, and, in some cases, community volunteers (see Table 1). The services vary across municipalities depending on the scope of the support and are offered in the form of organized events or personal consultations. The overall aim is to equip highly skilled migrants with practical information, support their integration into Danish culture and society, create networking opportunities, and assist with job searches (International House Copenhagen, International Community by Erhverv Aarhus, International House Odense). Some municipalities focus primarily on newcomer services which provide essential practical information, such as obtaining health cards or residence permits, finding accommodation or enrolling children in school. Other municipalities offer international communities or international houses which provide broader, ongoing support throughout an international professional's stay. These services may include regular events to facilitate networking, initiatives to support the career paths of accompanying partners, and activities promoting cultural understanding. Importantly, international houses also provide a physical location where internationals can drop in and access resources directly.

1.3 Overview of municipal initiatives

Municipal initiatives in Denmark can be traced back to 1994, when Copenhagen Capacity was created by Copenhagen Municipality, Frederiksberg Municipality, Copenhagen County, Frederiksborg County, and Roskilde County (counties were abolished in the administrative reform of 2007). The organization Copenhagen Capacity works closely with Invest in Denmark, the official investment promotion agency within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark (Invest in Denmark n.d.), and its main purpose is to attract international companies, investments, and highly skilled migrants to the region of Eastern Denmark (Copenhagen Capacity n.d.).

In 2008, the first International Community initiative was established in Aarhus by the business organization Erhverv Aarhus, Aarhus University, and the City of Aarhus with the aim of developing the region as an attractive destination for international employees and their families (International Community by Erhverv Aarhus n.d.). Following this, International House Copenhagen was founded in collaboration with the University of Copenhagen and the Capital Region to make the city more open to international researchers and ease their relocation and integration into Danish society (Young, 2013; International House Copenhagen n.d.). In the same year, Esbjerg Municipality launched Newcomer Service to support interna-

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tional employees and their families, which later expanded into International House in 2021 (Esbjerg Kommune). Currently, we have identified 15 municipalities that offer such services in varying forms (see Table 1):

Table 1: Overview forms of newcomer services in Danish municipalities

Municipality	Name	Run by/Partnership	Types of Services Offered	Target Group(s)
Copenhagen	International House Copenhagen	City of Copenhagen with partnership between public bodies, educational institutions, and private organizations and businesses	Registration and guidance, events, job and career programmes	International talents (employees, job seekers, students and their accompanying spouses)
Kalundborg	Newcomer Service	Kalundborg Municipality	Assistance with practical matters such as finding accommodation or childcare/school	Danish and international newcomers
Lolland	Newcomers Service	Lolland Municipality	Settlement service and job search support	International newcomers
Bornholm	Newcomer Service	Regional Municipality of Bornholm	Settlement service and job search support	International newcomers
Aarhus	International Community	Erhverv Aarhus with partnerships between the City of Aarhus and Aarhus University	Settlement service, local engagement, social and networking opportunities	International professional, accompanying family member, student or graduate
Aalborg	International House North Denmark	Aalborg Municipality with partnership between public organizations and businesses	Job seeking, business startup, and culture & leisure	International professionals and accompanying spouses, international graduates and residents
Horsens		Volunteer organization that collaborates with local organizations	Social gathering and networking events	Internationals
Herning and Ikast-Brande	Expat in Herning and Ikast-Brande	Municipalities of Herning and Ikast-Brande	Newcomer service	Internationals in the area and newcomers
Odense	International House Odense	City of Odense municipality in partnership with SDU	Newcomer service, spouse service, events and activities	International highly skilled employees, accompanying partners
Esbjerg	international house	Esbjerg Municipality collaborates with the International Community of Esbjerg, which is run by international volunteers	Newcomer service, partner/spouse service	Danish and international newcomers, international employees and their families

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Municipality	Name	Run by/Partnership	Types of Services Offered	Target Group(s)
Billund	Newcomer Service	Billund Erhverv and Billund Municipality	Settlement support and job search support for accompanying partners	International employees and their families
Sønderborg	Newcomer Service	Sønderborg Municipality	Settlement service, job search support for accompanying partners, social network	Danish and international newcomers, international employees and their families
Vejle	Newcomer Service	Vejle Municipality	Settlement service, partner career support	International employees and their families
Kolding	New in Kolding	Kolding Municipality collaborates with public organizations and The Expats Association of Kolding run by international volunteers	Settlement service, but plans to extend partner career support as of 2026	International employees, students, graduates, accompanying family and partners

Source: Own chart.

Some of these initiatives are centralized, which means that they provide services to more than one municipality. For example, International Citizen Service (ICS East), located in International House Copenhagen, serves international citizens across 37 municipalities (Outside of Copenhagen, International House of Copenhagen). Similarly, International House North Denmark supports internationals in northern Denmark by offering services across 11 municipalities.

2. Literature review

The immigration of highly skilled migrants is frequently described in political discourse as an economic necessity (Bauder, 2008). Highly skilled migrants are thought to contribute to the establishment of new businesses and jobs and improve the competitiveness of existing businesses through innovation (Hall & Beaverstock, 2012). A study conducted in a panel of 20 European countries reveals that "a larger pool of migrants in the skilled professions is associated with higher levels of knowledge creation" both in the public and private sectors (Bosetti et al., 2015). Another study which was carried out in 15 European countries, including Denmark, suggests that economic considerations affect individuals' attitudes towards migration and that natives strongly prefer the immigration of highly skilled rather than low-skilled migrants due to their contribution to taxes and social security payments (Naumann et al., 2018). In Denmark, skilled migrants are acknowledged as economic assets in terms of filling labour shortages, sustaining the welfare state, and contributing to national growth through taxation (Cengiz & Karlsson, 2021; Aragones & Salgado, 2016; Beskæftigelsesministeriet, 2023). They are discursively constructed as "a good business deal" and estimated to contribute around DKK

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183,000 annually in tax revenue (Klintefelt, 2024). However, despite the positive framing of highly skilled migrants and institutional investments by the media and business associations, Denmark faces persistent challenges in retaining international workers (Copenhagen Capacity, 2024; Ministry of Higher Education and Science, 2019).

2.1 Persistent challenges of retention

A record number of internationals have recently left Denmark, which suggests a disconnect between official narratives and lived experiences (The Copenhagen Post, 2025). Statistics show that only 35 % of highly skilled migrants remain in Denmark after five years (Copenhagen Capacity, 2024), and 42 % of international graduates from English-taught master's programmes in Denmark leave the country within two years of completing their studies (Aterini & Wolf, 2019). Studies highlight subtle workplace discrimination, underemployment, and weak workplace inclusion (Lueg, 2024; Risberg & Laurence, 2022). A strong aversion to accepting highly skilled migrants among highly skilled natives (e.g. in Denmark or the United Kingdom) has also been reported (Naumann et al., 2018). The most recent Expat Survey (Copenhagen Capacity, 2025) confirms that job security and inclusion are decisive factors in retention. However, research also suggests that EU migrants who integrate relatively easily into the labour market often depart quickly, whereas those facing greater challenges remain (Jensen & Pedersen, 2007), which indicates a gap between national and municipal discourses of "international talent" and the lived realities of highly skilled migrants. Understanding this gap requires attention to how institutional contexts both enable and constrain the work and life experiences of international employees (Bjerregaard, 2014). Studies show that although countries and host institutions are eager to recruit international academics, internal processes are rarely adjusted to accommodate their specific career capital (Richardson, 2008).

The Danish case suggests a similar pattern: attraction policies are robust, but retention remains fragile. In the context of a "boundaryless workforce" (Tung et al., 2008) whereby professionals can move easily across borders, Denmark's challenge lies not only in recruitment but in ensuring that institutional and workplace practices foster genuine inclusion and long-term belonging. In the meantime, the tension between national discourse, local initiatives, and migrants' lived experiences raises important questions about how highly skilled migrants are discursively constructed and how they respond to such portrayals in practice. This study explores this disconnect by investigating how municipality events discursively construct highly skilled migrants and how highly skilled migrants respond to these narratives. The study aims to uncover whether municipality discourses align with highly skilled migrants' perceptions of identity and belonging within Danish society.

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2.2 Research gap and proposed approach

Existing research on migration governance in Denmark has paid attention to national discourses, policy reforms, and welfare state concerns (e.g. Jensen & Pedersen 2008; Tung et al., 2008; Jensen et al., 2017; Bjerregaard, 2014; Cengiz & Karlsson, 2021; Brown, 2024). Other studies have focused on the economic contribution of highly skilled migrants and their role in sustaining welfare systems (Aragones & Salgado, 2016; Brodmann & Polavieja, 2010). However, there is limited research that systematically examines how highly skilled migrants themselves experience and interpret the discourses that position them as "talent" or "good business". In particular, the municipal level, where attraction and retention policies are operationalized in practice, remains underexplored.

This research note proposes to address this gap by investigating how municipal initiatives, particularly international houses, newcomer services, and international communities, construct the identity of highly skilled migrants through their organized events and how these individuals respond to such constructions. Municipal events and services are not only sites of practical support but also arenas in which ideas of belonging, inclusion, and "Danishness" are negotiated. By focusing on these sites, the study will capture the interplay between institutional discourse and migrants' lived experiences.

2.3 Theoretical framework and methodology

This research note suggests drawing on discourse and narrative theory to examine how highly skilled international professionals are constructed in municipal discourse and how these individuals respond to this discourse. Following Gee (2010), we understand discourse as the integration of language, action, symbols, and values to enact socially recognizable identities. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), materials from municipal welcome events will be analyzed through van Leeuwen's (1996) and Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) frameworks on identity and immigration. To complement this approach, we will use narrative theory to emphasize how individuals use stories to make sense of experiences and construct belonging (Loseke, 2007; De Fina & Tseng, 2016). Drawing on Weick's (1995) concept of sense-making, the study aims to explore how migrants interpret and create meaning in unfamiliar environments, and to reveal how migrants negotiate identity and belonging in local contexts.

Methodologically, we propose to combine ethnography, more specifically, virtual content analysis and participant observation, with narrative interviews. First, we will provide a descriptive overview of all welcome and newcomer measures in Denmark, as such a comprehensive overview does not exist. From this overview, we will select a limited number of sample cases, that is, four municipalities that represent the diverse forms of initiatives. Participant observation at welcome events will be employed to capture how identities are constructed through interaction (Jor-

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gensen, 1989; Van Maanen, 1995), and virtual ethnography will be used to analyze online communication on municipal platforms. Finally, narrative interviews will offer insight into migrants' own stories and meaning-making processes (Riessman, 2008; Loseke, 2007; Lueg 2025).

2.4 Conclusion: Towards an analytical focus on everyday welcome and retention practices

The Danish case illustrates the paradoxes of migration governance in a small welfare state. Although national and municipal institutions have invested heavily in attracting international professionals, retention remains a weakness. Initiatives such as international houses and newcomer services exemplify the growing role of local actors in shaping Denmark's international profile. Yet persistent patterns of discrimination, underemployment, and premature departure suggest a disconnect between official narratives and the lived experiences of migrants. This research note argues that understanding these dynamics requires shifting analytical attention from attraction policies to the everyday practices of retention. By examining how municipalities discursively construct the identity of highly skilled migrants and how such individuals interpret or resist these constructions, the study will generate insights into the barriers to and enablers of long-term inclusion.

In doing so, the project contributes to the following three broader debates: first, the Europeanization of welfare states and the states' strategies for reconciling openness to global talent with restrictive approaches to other migrant groups; second, the role of local institutions in global mobility governance; and third, how highly skilled migrants negotiate identity and belonging in host societies. The Danish case thus offers a window into the contradictions of "talent attraction" in Europe, showing that success in the global competition for labour requires not only recruitment but also institutional change to sustain inclusion and belonging.

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Pauline Ahlhaus*

From "backlash" to "productive" responses.

Review essay: *Rok Smrdelj & Roman Kuhar. Anti-Gender Mobilisations in Europe and the Feminist Response: Productive Resistance.* Cham, Springer Nature Switzerland, 2025

Abstract

The book *Anti-Gender Mobilisations in Europe and the Feminist Response: Productive Resistance* (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025a) asks how feminists adapt their strategies over time in response to a new, hostile environment of anti-feminism.

This review essay critically acclaims the volume against the state-of-the-art research. It emphasises that the book advances research by focusing on the analysis of reactions; critically rethinking the concept of "backlash" for analysis; and offering a clear definition and typology of forward-looking, productive reactions to anti-gender actors on a continuum from low to high engagement with anti-gender actors.

The essay proposes that future research could further develop four aspects of the book's contributions to the field: First, methodological approaches to studying how responses to anti-gender mobilisations change over time could be further elaborated to go beyond a linear "backlash" understanding of temporality. Second, to sharpen the distinction between responses to anti-gender mobilisations and feminist mobilisations, it is argued that "productive resistance" could be further spelled out beyond the level of engagement with anti-feminists. Third, the critique of reactive logics could be extended by challenging the corresponding strict two-camp frame (feminists vs. anti-gender), instead building on a co-constitutive lens, and fourth, determining who responds beyond normative assumptions.

1. Introduction

A backlash against gender equality has become a defining feature of the social movement landscape in Europe and beyond. Women's and LGBTIQ* rights and policies are under threat, with hard-won advances being reversed. Faludi (1991) coined the term "backlash" to describe this phenomenon, and it has since become a widely studied concept. Research has mapped the actors, frames, and diffusion of anti-gender politics (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017; Krizsán & Roggeband, 2019; Krizsán & Roggeband, 2021a).

The repertoires of responses have been criticised for a lack of strategic engagement with feminist knowledge production: for example, Gill-Peterson argues that

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responses have often been given insufficient consideration of the complexities of the issue, taking anti-trans political violence as an example (Amirali et al., 2024, 250). Cattien warns that gender equality policy alone is not an adequate antidote to anti-gender politics, calling for more intersectional and anti-racist responses (2023). Studies on illiberalism have argued that, given the ideological heterogeneity of the challenges to liberal democratic norms, defenders of liberal democracy cannot rely on general counterarguments, but must tailor their responses to the specific logic of the attacks to be effective (Enyedi et al., 2025, 3).

Despite this criticism, however, feminist responses have received little attention, in comparison to the extensive body of literature devoted to the subject of feminist backlash. The European Union's call for proposals, "Feminisms for a New Age of Democracy", aimed to address this imbalance (Lombardo & Caravantes, 2024). With the goal of supporting knowledge production on resistance to gender equality in Europe and feminist democratic responses, the project "Feminist Movements Revitalising Democracy in Europe" (FIERCE) was funded, out of which *Anti-Gender Mobilisations in Europe and the Feminist Response: Productive Resistance* (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025a) resulted. Offering a comprehensive framework for understanding feminist responses, the volume fills this gap and will thus be of particular interest to the field of feminist studies. The remainder of this review essay will provide a glance into the volume's content and arguments before critically acclaiming it against the backdrop of the state-of-the-art and outlining the implications of these issues for future directions in research.

2. What the book does

The edited volume offers a comparative overview of anti-gender mobilisation and feminist and LGBTIQ* responses. It tests and extends core concepts, challenges the limits of the concept of "backlash", and advances the notion of "productive resistance" as an organising framework (Kuhar & Smrdelj, 2025, 6–10; Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025b, 255–274). The introduction poses a multi-part research question: How do feminist and LGBTIQ* movements adapt under anti-gender mobilisation, antagonistic politics and the post-truth era? How do polarisation and digital media shape repertoires? And how do actors build resilience and new forms of resistance as norms erode? (Kuhar & Smrdelj, 2025, 13–14). "Productive resistance" is the central analytical focus (ibid., 15–16).

The volume comprises an introduction (ibid., 1–16), eight country case studies and a concluding chapter presenting a strategy typology (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025b, 262–272). The cross-national synthesis highlights solidarity and inclusive spaces for action (Kuhar & Smrdelj, 2025, 16), noting a general shift towards forward-looking initiatives with limited direct engagement (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025b, 255–256, 260, 262–274).

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2.1 Eight country cases

In the first chapter "Contentious Gender Politics in Italy: Feminist Responses to Anti-Gender Mobilisations", Anna Lavizzari, Anastasia Barone and Giada Bonu Rosenkranz demonstrate that feminist and LGBTIQ* movements adapt by employing confrontational and non-confrontational strategies, while facing significant challenges due to a stark imbalance in resources and institutional access compared to well-funded anti-gender groups. Confrontational tactics span from "loose confrontational action" like spontaneous street protests and cultural subversion to "strong confrontational actions" such as large-scale demonstrations. Non-confrontational strategies include "direct social action" through peer-to-peer support and monitoring, cultural initiatives, reshaping narratives, and "camouflage within institutional channels" (Lavizzari et al., 2025, 28–29, 33–45, 47–48).

In "Navigating Antagonism: Feminist and LGBTIQ* Responses to Slovenian Anti-Gender Mobilisations", Rok Smrdelj theorises responses against an antagonistic public sphere and identifies five categories of response, Strategic Non-Engagement, Solidarity Actions and Counter-protests, Public Education and Awareness Campaigns, Reporting Threats and Incidents to Authorities, and Social Media Moderation and Messaging Control (Smrdelj, 2025, 56; 63–77).

In "The Battle of Concepts: French Feminist Mobilizations Against the Far Right's Appropriation of the Feminist Legacy", Ségolène Pruvot proposes a categorization into two main types of responses in France: Direct responses, characterized by their promptness and focus on mitigating the immediate impact of the attacks, refer to immediate and often reactive measures taken by feminist movements to address and counteract anti-gender attacks. There are four types of direct response, strategic visibility reduction, mirroring actions, collective defense strategy, and fake news debunking. Long-term strategies focus on systemic change and developing sustainable frameworks to support feminist movements over time. These proactive and sustained efforts aim to build resilience and foster a positive cultural shift. These strategies include three types of reactions, joyful and humorous media engagement, narrative reconstruction, and educational outreach (Pruvot, 2025, 93–102).

In "From Confrontation to Avoidance: Feminist Responses to Anti-Gender Mobilization in Spain", Inés Campillo, Eduardo Romanos, Igor Sádaba and Guillermo Fernández-Vázquez demonstrate that Feminist and LGBTIQ* movements in Spain adapt their strategies in response to anti-gender mobilisations, shifting between confrontational tactics like large-scale protests and non-confrontational approaches such as avoidance and institutional monitoring, depending on the political landscape (Campillo et al., 2025, 118–129).

In "Anti-Feminist and Anti-Gender Coalitions and Feminist Resilience in Turkey", Ayşe Alnıaçık and Özlem Altan-Olcay demonstrate how Feminist and LGBTIQ* movements in Turkey adapt to anti-gender mobilisations by forming diverse coali-

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tions, developing creative protest methods, and utilizing digital media for knowledge production and counter-narratives. They build resilience through mutual support, transnational networking, and transforming spaces like courtrooms into venues for activism (Alnıaçık & Altan-Olcay, 2025, 138, 148–157).

In "Not Just Ranting in the Streets, but also Concrete Actions: Polish Feminist and LGBTIQ* Responses to Anti-Gender Politics", Magdalena Muszel traces a shift from reactive protest to system-oriented engagement. This adaptation includes diversifying tactics beyond protests to encompass legal activities like litigation, launching educational campaigns, and engaging in active political participation, including running in local and parliamentary elections. They also strategically engage with mainstream media, build broad coalitions, pressuring "gray zone" actors and "frenemies" and countering misinformation, thereby influencing public policy and discourse from within the system (Muszel, 2025, 168, 176, 178–190).

In "Patriarchal Backlash and Feminist Responses in Greece Today", Alexandros Kioupkiolis demonstrates how Feminist and LGBTIQ* movements adapt their strategies by employing swift, multimodal, and multi-layered counter-mobilisations that target both civil society and national and international institutions. These responses include extensive networking, public protests, digital campaigns, and the use of legal and evidence-based arguments to debunk misinformation and expose the patriarchal biases of anti-feminist initiatives. While some efforts, particularly those defending established rights like abortion, achieve rapid success, others, like the fight against mandatory joint custody, face significant challenges from well-funded and politically connected anti-feminist lobbies, highlighting the need for broader coalitions and sustained counter-hegemonic action (Kioupkiolis, 2025, 200–206, 210–216, 219–221, 223–227).

In "So Common to Score Cheap Points on Being an Antifeminist", Andreas Beyer Gregersen, Susi Meret and Lise Rolandsen Agustín show how feminist and LGBTIQ* movements in Denmark primarily respond to anti-gender mobilizations through three strategies: critique, issue reappropriation, and disengagement. While critique often addresses anti-gender movements generally, issue reappropriation involves acknowledging and integrating some concerns raised by opponents within a feminist framework. Disengagement, particularly from online debates and direct interactions, is also a common tactic, though feminist politicians face more pressure to engage with their counterparts (Beyer Gregersen et al., 2025, 229–235, 240–251).

2.2 Comparative claim: "productive resistance"

The comparative chapter, "Productive Resistance" (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025b, 255–274), forms the core of the volume. The chapter compares all eight country cases and traces a shift from defensive rebuttal to a proactive phase termed "productive resistance". It critiques the backlash paradigm and offers a typology covering a

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continuum of responses from reactive to proactive (ibid., 255–256, 260, 262–273). The strategies are: Public actions (ibid., 263–264); legal and institutional actions (ibid., 264–265); watchdog advocacy (ibid., 265–266); strategic communication (ibid., 267); digital activism (ibid., 268–269); strategic retreat, including non-engagement and camouflage (ibid., 269–270); community and coalition building (ibid., 271); and empowerment and protection advocacy (ibid., 271–272). A defining feature of "productive resistance" is limited direct engagement with anti-gender actors, with energies channelled into forward-looking policy work and coalition building (ibid., 263, 273).

The chapter also specifies the conditions under which the strategies qualify as "productive" and emphasises the importance of functioning democratic institutions (ibid., 262–274). Effectiveness depends on institutions, which in turn are exploited by anti-gender actors to erode democracy (ibid., 273–274).

2.3 Theoretical anchors

The volume draws on social movement studies, including movement–countermovement dynamics, repertoires of contention, diffusion, and framing, which have been tested in digital and institutional settings (Kuhar & Smrdelj, 2025, 6–8, 13–16; Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025b, 255, 260, 263). Chapter 5 uses political-opportunity structures and collective-action frames to demonstrate how national, regional and judicial arenas reconfigure tactics over time (Campillo et al., 2025, 108–109, 127–129). Chapter 6 applies repertoire theory to repressive contexts, emphasising coalitions, municipal partnerships, courtroom disputes, and feminist knowledge infrastructures as counter-publics (Alnıaçık & Altan-Olcay, 2025, 148–157). Chapter 7 integrates alliance theory and hybrid-media systems to explain a planned shift from street protest to system-oriented engagement (Muszel, 2025, 167, 187–191). Chapter 3 incorporates Mouffe's concept of antagonism, viewing conflict as a constitutive element of the public sphere. It links strategy selection to organisational structure, resources, media access, institutional integration, and legal considerations (Smrdelj, 2025, 53–56, 72).

3. Contribution to the state-of-the-art

For three reasons the volume is an important contribution to the state of the art: First, the book focuses on analysing reactions. Second, it provides a critical rethinking of the concept of "backlash" for analysis purposes. Third, it offers a clear definition of, and typology for, forward-looking reactions.

3.1 Towards analysing responses

The FIERCE project, home to the volume, has four sister projects, all of which have been funded by the same call, namely CCINDLE ("Co-creating Inclusive Intersectional Democratic Spaces across Europe"), RESIST ("Fostering Queer

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Feminist Intersectional Resistances against Transnational Anti-Gender Politics"), Push*Back*Lash ("Anti-Gender Backlash and Democratic Resistance") and UN-TWIST ("Policy Recommendations for Winning Back the 'Losers of Feminism' as Mainstream Voters"). This means that there will soon be more insights from feminist research to counter anti-gender movements in Europe. However, until now, compared to vast research on anti-gender mobilisations, responses to it remain understudied. As the editors of the reviewed volume note, compared to anti-feminism, "we understand far less about how feminist and LGBTIQ* actors respond" (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025, 12).

The book fills this gap together with a growing number of existing empirical studies: Based on observations from four backsliding Central and Eastern European countries, Croatia, Hungary, Poland and Romania, Krizsán and Roggeband have identified three main feminist response strategies; first, turning to grassroots and disruptive protest; second, new patterns of coalition building; and third, abeyance and demise (2018, 90–91). Taking Romania's gender identity bill as a case study, Chiva (2023) analyses feminist critical actors' resilience. Both in response to far-right politics, Kitlinski and Leszkowicz (2024) examine feminist artivism in Poland; and Farvardin (2024) analyses the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement in Iran. Vivaldi demonstrates how feminist civil society organisations respond to, resist and contest reactionary biopolitics in Chile (2024, 162–172). Minj and Pandit (2024, 120) explore "ongoing feminist responses" to policies of India's BJP. Göker and Çelik (2025) identify "coping, co-optation, and resistance" as strategies of countering anti-gender challenges in local governance (2025). As mentioned above, the anthology adds eight insightful new case studies to this list.

Conceptually, scholars within the field of democratic resilience research have identified the stages and mechanisms of responses (Boese et al., 2021; Lührmann, 2021; Merkel & Lührmann, 2021). Krizsán and Roggeband have tailored this to the context of gender policy backsliding and proposed a multi-dimensional conceptual framework to analyse feminist resilience and adaptive strategies of feminist movements in response (2018, 94–98). In 2021, the same authors have proposed a two-dimensional conceptual framework that analyses feminist responses considering how feminist groups adapt their capacities, strategies, and coalition-building in response to reconfigured state engagement with both feminist and anti-gender actors (Krizsán & Roggeband, 2021b, 9–10).

Still, gender scholarship lacks a systematic framework of how anti-gender campaigns are countered. Recent feminist work begins to address this gap by e.g. analysing feminist institutional strategies (Kantola & Lombardo, 2024). Meanwhile, Amirali conceptualises anti-anti-gender organising as "creative, lived responses" in the sense of embodiment, prefiguration, and politics of presence (Lorey, 2022): "Together, we create something which serves as an inspiration to help us move in that direction" (Amirali et al., 2024, 259). The biggest contribution of the

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anthology is its role in filling this gap. By advancing the reaction-centred agenda from a feminist perspective, the book represents a significant step forward in the field. It offers a comprehensive typology of responses and argues that feminist actors develop strategies of "productive resistance" against anti-feminism, focusing not on combatting anti-gender mobilisations, but on envisioning and enacting forward-looking agendas (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025, 15–16). By proposing the concept of "productive resistance", which describes proactive agenda-setting in response to anti-gender mobilisations, the book enables the field of (anti-)gender studies to progress beyond mere dismissal and rebuttal (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025b, 255–256, 260–273).

3.2 Revisiting "backlash"

For the editors and authors, the seminal notion of "backlash" (Faludi, 1991), is both a starting point and an object of revision. Chapter 2 refines "backlash against gender politics" as a contextual descriptor, cautioning that anti-gender action is not always reactive and that progressive action is not always proactive. It foregrounds the co-constitution and resource asymmetries that shape strategic choice (Lavizzari et al., 2025, 27–28, 45, 47–48). The conclusion then critiques backlash narratives, which obscure the substantial content of the broader neoconservative project. Ultimately, the book rejects "backlash" as a simplistic, binary concept that focuses too much on what is attacked and too little on the construction of a neoconservative order, as well as on feminist and LGBTIQ* innovation (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025b, 273–274).

This builds on research that criticised "backlash" as an inadequate framework for describing anti-gender politics, as it presents anti-gender movements as purely reactive and underestimates "the productive dimension of anti-gender ideology discourses" (Meneses Sala & Rueda-Borrero, 2024, 87). Previously, anti-gender backlash was defined as "counter-movements or counter-reactions and thus reactionary" (Escoffier et al., 2023; Kuhar & Smrdelj, 2025, 6). However, scholars have argued that these mobilisations are not simply "anti" or "reactive" and have instead emphasised the "productive nature" of the anti-feminist movement, pointing out that they actively promote patriarchal family values and certain notions of sex, gender and nation (Serrano Amaya, 2017). Others have introduced terms such as "heteroactivism" and "heteropatriarchal activism" to describe these productive elements (Ojeda et al., 2024, 17). Shevtsova, for example, shows how heteroactivists "move from reactive to proactive positions" (2024, 92). The volume under review contributes to these debates by introducing the concept of "productive resistance" as a compelling non-reactive alternative to "backlash"-only narratives (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025, 260–261, 272–273).

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3.3 Forward looking "productive" responses

The core of the book is the categorisation of empirical feminist phenomena as "productive resistance", which serves as a central analytical focus (Kuhar & Smrdelj, 2025, 15–16).

In line with the criticism of reactivity explained above, gender studies have also proposed readings of feminist responses that go beyond reactivity. In "Transnational Anti-Gender Politics", a conversation between Alia Amirali, Mauro Cabral Grinspan, Jules Gill-Peterson, Stella Nyanzi, and Haley McEwen stress the importance of moving beyond "resistance" when aiming for transformative politics (Amirali et al., 2024, 252). This encourages scholars and activists to "break free from these logics to come up with new vocabularies, ideas and modes of action" to "imagine otherwise", thereby expanding political imagination in ways that are both locally embedded and transnationally connected (ibid., 254). Following this line of thinking, Galán argues that these ideas should guide future research and activism on anti-gender politics (2025, 738).

The book's signature concept includes a clear definition of "proactivity": "A defining feature is limited direct engagement with anti-gender actors, with energies channelled into forward-looking policy work and coalition building" (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025b, 263, 273). However, the title foregrounds the prefix "re-" in "responses" and "resistance", thereby signalling counteraction and reactivity. Therefore, the claim that productivity requires low reactivity may not seem intuitive at first. Nevertheless, the book's overall argument is well-grounded in the country cases fleshed out above that illustrate a shift towards forward-looking strategies with limited direct engagement (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025b, 255–256, 260, 262–274). Alongside prior critiques of "backlash", this offers a convincing categorisation that will be useful to future empirical research.

All in all, the volume's central argument makes a significant contribution to the evolving field of (anti-) gender studies. Overall, the eight country case studies are rich in empirical detail, and the structure guides readers from context to comparative typology. This meaningful typology allows us to consider productive responses and resilience, and thus orient future research.

4. New avenues for future research agendas

Further research may build on and critically examine four key claims of the book. These are: first, the question of measuring changes over time and temporality; second, the relationship between "productive resistance" and interaction with anti-gender mobilisations; third, the antagonistic juxtaposition of action and reaction; and fourth, the normative restriction to reactions that are described as "feminist".

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4.1 Change over time

The volume's central argument that feminist and LGBTIQ* movements are shifting towards "productive resistance" in response to anti-gender mobilisations (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025a, 14) is necessarily temporal. Empirically demonstrating such adaptation requires baselines, identifiable indicators and cross-time comparisons. Some chapters present clear before-and-after contrasts, while others are qualitatively persuasive but lack systematic temporal markers. The chapter on Italy offers the clearest time series: a baseline from the 2010s (Lavizzari et al., 2025, 25); organisational consolidation from 2013 (ibid., 32); a turn towards institutionalisation after the introduction of civil partnerships in 2016 (ibid.); tighter party alliances by 2018 (ibid., 33); and agenda placement after 2022 (ibid., 33–34). There are also documented shifts in venues, tactics, and outcomes such as the withdrawal of the Pillon Bill (ibid., 35–40). The chapter on Spain likewise provides transparent markers, including an increasingly feminist context by 2018 (Campillo et al., 2025, 107) and early coordinated mobilisation (ibid. 119–120, 127). After 2019, there was a Vox-driven shift to regional and judicial arenas, met with strategic avoidance and targeted protest (ibid., 120–126; 128–129). Other cases would benefit from designs that allow changes to be traced over time, thus strengthening the argument for forward-looking repertoires (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025b, 260–261, 272–273).

Conceptually, however, there is a danger that measuring the adaptation over time as simply "before" (feminist) and "after" (anti-gender) reintroduces the linear temporality associated with "backlash" (Browne, 2013) – a framework that the book otherwise seeks to overcome. As Paternotte (2020) notes, backlash presupposes a "mechanical" linearity in which an action "almost automatically" triggers a counteraction. Decolonial scholars have pointed out that a central problem with the "backlash" narrative is precisely this inherent temporality; that the concept perpetuates a colonial interpretation of historical developments by repeatedly suggesting that anti-gender mobilisations originate solely in Europe, ascribing both feminism and anti-feminism outside Europe to a different temporality (Ojeda et al., 2024, 16; 22). Although the book touches upon this criticism by introducing the notion of "productive resistance", it could be further fleshed out, when it comes to temporality. Taking this critique seriously would mean defining "productivity" beyond a fixed linearity of "before" and "after" anti-gender mobilisation and measuring change over time accordingly. This would also allow the concept to travel to contexts outside Europe and to be compatible with decolonial thought.

4.2 Clarifying "productivity"

Empirically, several chapters derive "productivity" primarily from reduced direct interaction with anti-gender opponents. For example, the chapter on Italy highlights non-confrontational strategies such as accompanying women during abortions as productive, as direct interaction with opponents is minimal (Lavizzari et al., 2025,

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40–45). However, if "productive" is equated with low engagement, this could lead to a possible mischaracterisation. Some chapters do not show clearly enough that the tactics are responses to anti-feminism and not examples of general feminist repertoires. Deriving the "productivity" of reactions to anti-gender mobilisations primarily from a low level of engagement with anti-gender opponents carries the risk of conflating opponent-specific counter-mobilisation with the advancement of a "regular" feminist agenda, blurring the boundary between "anti-anti-feminism" and "ordinary" feminism.

To sharpen the distinction between reactions to anti-gender mobilisations and feminist mobilisations, future research should specify the conditions that link "productive resistance" to anti-gender mobilisations rather than to disengagement per se. Limited direct engagement should remain an important criterion, but it should be complemented by additional criteria to define "productive" and forward-looking resistance. In that way, "productive resistance" could be further specified beyond the degree of engagement with anti-feminists.

4.3 Towards co-constitutive dynamics

The anthology begins with antagonism, namely "feminists and LGBTIQ*" versus "anti-gender" actors. However, if we take the book's critique of reactivity seriously, the same logic should also challenge a strict two-camp separation between the two. While the binary clarifies opposition, it obscures the mutual shaping, including shared vocabularies and tactical borrowing (Avanza, 2018; Corredor, 2019). Instead, a co-constitutive approach would consider the spaces in between, not just the opposites, and treat the field as a dynamic constellation of actors and connections, examining how interaction changes strategies, identities and repertoires for all involved (Fillieule & Broqua, 2020; Beck et al., 2023).

The volume has already demonstrated this in parts, albeit not yet with sufficient consistency. The Polish case is a good illustration: Muszel argues for mapping and including "gray zone" or "frenemy" actors. These include individuals (such as politicians, public figures and journalists) who publicly present themselves as neutral or mildly supportive of progressive causes, but who do not implement inclusive policies internally and undermine the efforts of the feminist movement. In other words, they are not openly hostile to feminist demands or LGBTIQ* rights; however, their actions, statements or lack of clear support can contribute to maintaining the status quo of inequality or perpetuating discrimination indirectly. According to Muszel, the challenge of the gray zone lies in its subtlety and the difficulty of mobilising against these ambiguous positions. Unlike overt opponents, whose positions are clear and can be directly challenged, dealing with "gray zone" actors requires nuanced strategies to expose the contradictions in their positions and encourage them to adopt more definitive supportive stances (Muszel, 2025, 180).

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To further elaborate those ambivalent actors and the co-constitutive ways of "friend" and "enemy", future research could borrow from populism studies: The so-called "fifth-wave of populism studies" theorises the mutual shaping, the crossing of boundaries, and the diffusion of ideas between the mainstream and the extreme (Newth et al., 2025; Valentim, 2024). Research on the far-right models such co-constitution, demonstrating the dissolution of artificial barriers and discursive symbiosis, whereby mainstream authority amplifies radical narratives (Brown et al., 2023). When applied to anti-gender mobilisations, this shift would move the analysis beyond a two-camp framework towards co-production and fluidity. Specifically, it invites examination of when and how feminist and LGBTIQ* actors interact with reactionary entrepreneurs, which frames and tactics travel between them, and how institutional and media venues facilitate these exchanges. Operationally, this would mean further questioning actor overlap and frame appropriation.

4.4 Who responds?

The book deals with the eponymous "feminist responses". By "feminist response", the editors summarise feminist and LGBTIQ* movements' responses because they work closely together and are both attacked by anti-gender movements (Kuhar & Smrdelj, 2025, 12). Hence, the editors, a priori, single out responses to include in the volume on a normative basis.

However, following the above suggestion to take greater account of the co-constitutive paths, thinking beyond binaries, taking feminism as a starting point may be unintentionally self-limiting, while the book's criticism of reactive logics urges us to broaden our perspective. This is mainly for three reasons; empirically it is not so easy to distinguish between those who count as feminist and those who don't; conceptually, it may obscure the view of important ambivalent actors, as well as necessary alliances.

Assessing according to feminist criteria requires a "robust and context-specific definition of feminism" (Celis & Childs, 2018a, 20). However, much of the literature, including many chapters of this book, has highlighted the difficulty of identifying "feminist actors". For example, when feminist activists strategically downplay their feminist identity, as in the Italian case, they may adopt a "camouflage strategy" (Lavizzari et al., 2025, 44–45) and may be difficult to identify. Additionally, in times of blurring boundaries between feminist and anti-feminist actors, when "pro-life feminists" and "gender-critical feminists" appropriate feminist language while opposing feminist goals, self-identification as a feminist becomes an unreliable indicator (Farris, 2017; Calderaro, 2023). The French case illustrates this well. Anti-gender movements attempt to claim the legacy of feminism as their own, presenting themselves as the genuine protectors of women's rights (Pruvot, 2025, 82). The Italian case also discusses the complexity of the scenario of feminist responses, noting the presence of "gender-critical feminists" whose positions can sometimes

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lead to "unintended convergences with far-right, populist, and anti-gender groups" (Lavizzari et al., 2025, 28).

Another reason for moving beyond "feminist responses" is that it could draw attention to the contributions of other actors to the pushback against anti-feminism. Writing about substantive representation, Celis and Childs (2018a, 20) have suggested to move beyond "judging all gendered representative claims against feminist ideological criteria" because it risks excluding other accounts of claims to substantively represent women's interests. This is why, literature on conservative feminism has asked us to take "conservative feminism" seriously (Celis & Childs, 2018b, 1–4). Moreover, reactions could also come from defenders of democracy; the chapters themselves point in this direction. In Turkey, for example, the defence of the Istanbul Convention was led by 77 bar associations, opposition parties, major trade unions, and business and professional organisations. These actors operate with legal, partisan, and corporatist mandates rather than explicitly feminist ones, and have not previously focused on feminist topics (Alnıaçık & Altan-Olcay, 144, 148–152). Furthermore, analysing responses to anti-feminism within the broader framework of democratic resilience would also speak to the claim made in the volume that "productive resistance" relies on functioning institutions, which are exploited and undermined by anti-gender actors (Smrdelj & Kuhar, 2025b, 256–261).

A third reason would be to take into consideration the necessary alliances. The Italian case implies that, while feminist and LGBTIQ* actors are prominent and crucial in responses, a broader coalition of "progressive" actors, whether they identify as feminists or not, engaged in countering anti-gender movements (Lavizzari et al., 2025, 41–45). Similarly, Cattien has pointed out that responses to anti-feminism also come from potential intersectional allies, such as anti-racist activism, and that we should include those allies into our analyses (2023).

All in all, a more precise way to determine who is responding might be to go beyond normative labels, such as "feminism". Thus, one potential future research agenda could be to study reactions to anti-gender mobilisations leaving behind a narrow, normative understanding of feminist intentions, and instead including all actors in the analysis who are (potentially) implementing countermeasures and the conditions under which they do so.

5. Conclusion

The critical assessment of the volume *Anti-Gender Mobilisations in Europe and the Feminist Response: Productive Resistance* demonstrated that the book advances research in three significant ways: First, by focusing on the analysis of reactions, second, by critically rethinking the concept of "backlash" for analysis, and third, by offering a clear definition and typology of forward-looking, productive reactions on a continuum from low to high engagement with anti-gender actors.

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Finally, it suggested that future research could develop four of the book's arguments further: First, it could align methodological approaches to study how responses to anti-gender mobilisations change over time, adopting a non-linear understanding of temporality. Second, it could sharpen the distinction between responses to anti-gender mobilisations and "regular" feminist mobilisations. Third, it could spell out "productive resistance", extending the productive logics that challenge the strict two-camp frame of feminists vs. anti-gender actors, and introducing a co-constitutive lens. Fourth, it could determine who responds, moving beyond normative assumptions.

Will the volume ultimately move us beyond the reactive ping-pong between feminists and anti-gender actors? Yes, particularly within the framework of social movement studies, and if the reactions originate from feminist or LGBTIQ* movements, assuming that it is clear who is considered a "feminist". This book will be of interest to scholars of women's and gender studies, sociology, and political science, as well as to practitioners and researchers concerned with responding to anti-gender mobilisations and strengthening LGBTIQ*-inclusive democracy.

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