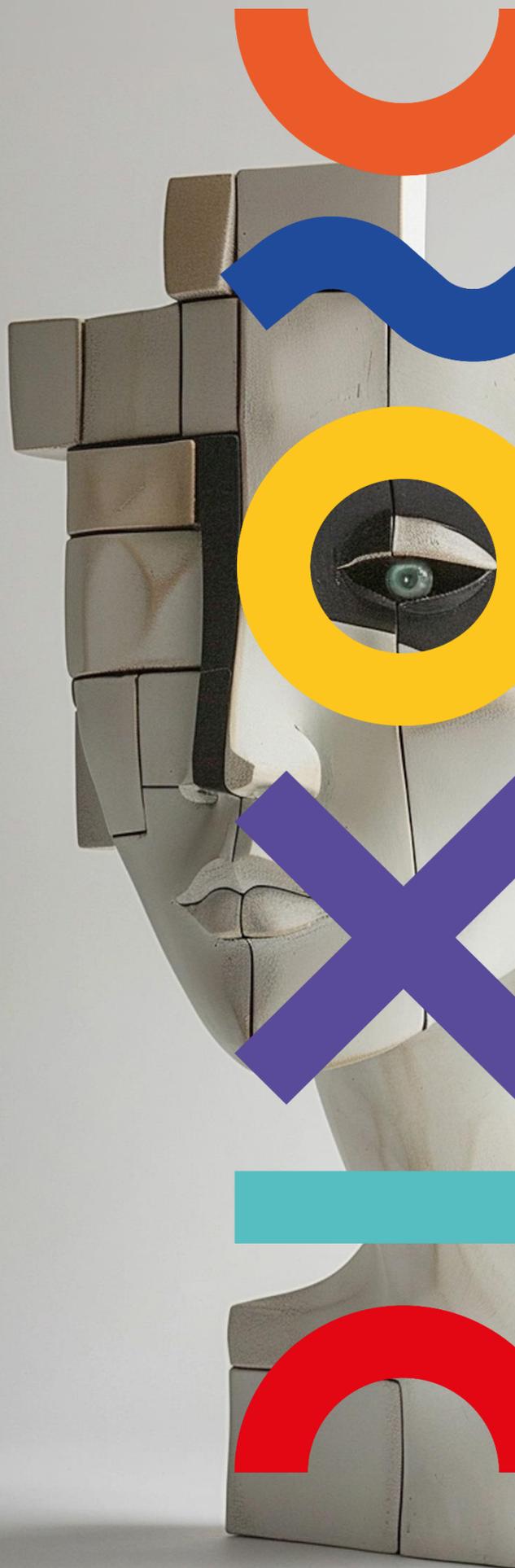# D2.3

Emotion-related drivers of politics

D2.3 Emotion-related drivers of politics

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TABLE OF CONTENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents and overview of the emotional impact on political discourse and the style of politics and leading of the six ENCODE case study countries of Poland, Bulgaria, Austria, Denmark, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The report does not aim to test theories or establish causal relationships. Instead, it offers comparative contextual information intended to support subsequent empirical research tasks within the ENCODE project.

The four research dimensions of the study are well-understood concepts used in the study of politics and emotion and have been recognized:

1. Political landscape overview,
2. Emotional politics drivers, emphasizing the use of traditional and social media.
3. Emotional mechanisms in political decision-making, and
4. Emerging leadership styles.

The dimensions were chosen since they are core areas where emotion expression, mediation, and politicization take place. The dimensions have a descriptive role in this deliverable, as opposed to explanations and predictions.

Through the cross-national analysis, there are obvious structural discrepancies between the established democracies where institutionalized trust in the political system is high (Denmark and Austria) and the post-communist systems or systems with identity-related problems (Poland, Bulgaria, Bosnia-Herzegovina, or North Macedonia). Although fear, anger, pride, or hopes are always there in whatever political systems, the degree of their intensity, political credibility, or mobilized potential varies systematically in line with the institutional stability of the respective societies or the media context. It also emphasizes how social media is increasingly used as a platform to disseminate emotional stories across all nations yet proves how its political influence is shaped by country-specific media structures as well as trust levels within conventional journalism. New approaches to leadership styles also stem from these differences, with increasingly polarizing, personalized, and crisis-cantered styles of emotional leadership emerging in cases where there is political fragmentation, as opposed to restricted styles in stable democracies.

Explanatory note:

The report is based on desk research conducted between October and December 2024, using a common data-gathering template applied across all countries. This ensured thematic consistency and enabled systematic comparison. Data sources include media content, policy documents, publicly available documents, expert commentary, and secondary literature. National inputs were prepared by researchers from the case-study partners with social science backgrounds, drawing on qualitative interpretation rather than standardized measurement. As such, the report should not be read as a scientific publication, but rather as a contextual mapping exercise, closer to political journalism.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 THE ENCODE PROJECT

The ENCODE project, titled "Unveiling Emotional Dimensions of Politics to Foster European Democracy," aims to explore and decode the role of emotions in political discourse and their impact on democratic processes. Recognizing that emotional appeals have significantly influenced political movements and voter behaviour, ENCODE seeks to understand the interplay between emotions, values, and identities. The project's primary goal is to create new positive narratives that can foster trust and engagement in European democratic processes, thereby counteracting the negative emotions that often dominate political discussions. Through innovative methodologies, including social media sentiment analysis, biometric research, and surveys, ENCODE aims to provide policymakers with tools and strategies to better incorporate the emotional needs of citizens into governance, ultimately enhancing democratic resilience and fostering a more inclusive political environment.

1.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE DELIVERABLE

The objective of this task deliverable is to provide a comprehensive empirical review of emotional politics, focusing on its drivers, mechanisms, and patterns. It will analyse recent empirical literature and longitudinal or panel data to explore the relationship between societal emotions and democratic axiological and institutional structures. A key aspect will be cross-country comparisons between ENCODE's case study countries:

- A)   Poland,
- B)   Bulgaria,
- C)   Austria,
- D)   Denmark,
- E)   Bosnia and Herzegovina,
- F)   and North Macedonia.

Main goal of this comparison is to identify similarities and differences in emotional dynamics and their impact on democracy. What is more the interviews with policymakers responsible will provide additional validation. Special attention will be given to the role of emotions in political discourse, particularly through media analysis and leadership styles, using the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine as case studies.

1.3 STRUCTURE OF THE DOCUMENT

The deliverable is structured in the following sections:

- Chapter 1 - Introduction to the deliverable – gives the main information about the report and its content.
- Chapter 2 – Background and methodology – present the theoretical background relevant for the deliverable and presents the research objectives and methodology.
- Chapter 3 – Country-level summary – this chapter summarised state-of-art desk research conducted in 6 countries with regards the emotional-political landscape focusing on the main 4 topics: political landscape overview, emotional politics drivers, emotional mechanisms in political decision-making and emerging leadership styles.
- Chapter 4 – Cross-country comparison – gives a summarised comparison between case study countries highlighting similarities, differences and a final comparison summary note.
- Chapter 5 – Validation through interviews – this chapter provides a summary of the IDI interviews in reference to the data gathered within desk research presented in the

chapter 3.
- Chapter 6 – Bibliography – gathers different publications and/or articles, on-line sources related with the emotions in politics on the national level.

1.4 RELATION TO OTHER TASKS

Deliverable D2.3 provides an informative basis for ascertaining how emotions are shaping politics throughout Europe, underpinning and guiding a series of tasks in the ENCODE project. It situates the digital emotional trends identified in WP3 (Social Media Analysis) by providing situated political and cultural accounts. It guides WP4 and WP5 (Biometric, Qualitative, and Survey Research) through the identification of pertinent emotional patterns to be explored with experiments, interviews, and surveys. T2.3 also feeds into WP6 (Citizen Labs and Foresight) by making visible emotional tensions and stories that need to be considered in participatory processes. Finally, its cross-country findings feed into WP7 (Policy Recommendations), informing emotion-sensitive policy design and context-specific governance approaches.

2 BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY
2.1 BACKGROUND AND RELEVANCE OF EMOTIONAL POLITICS

The assertion that politics is inherently emotive appears almost self-evident today. Emotions and affects have become an inseparable part of the socio-political reality. This phenomenon is observable both in the practical dimension of exercising and competing for political power and in the broader public sphere—including the activities of social movements, media discourse, and citizens' engagement on social media platforms. However, dominant discursive practices in modern democracy have traditionally promoted a rationalist conception of politics, in which emotions ought to yield to reason. One may question whether such a vision has ever been fully realized in the history of the world, despite its alignment with the Enlightenment ideal of a competent citizen and politician (see more in Zieliński & Nowakowski, 2025, chap. 4).

In the second half of the 20th century, democracy came to be characterized by what Philip Rief somewhat paradoxically termed an "irrational passion for dispassionate rationality" (as quoted in Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 21). However, in recent years, Western societies have once again begun to recognize the significance of emotions in socio-political life. This shift has been linked to the rehabilitation of emotive states in both private and public life, promoted by *emotional culture* and *confessional culture*. The invocation of emotions and affects was no longer regarded as shameful or contemptible but instead became a legitimate component of the language through which political matters were once again articulated. A natural consequence of this development was the increased prominence of affective-emotive messaging in political discourse (Zieliński & Nowakowski, 2025, p. 19).

As highlighted in report D2.2, it should not be assumed that emotional politics is synonymous with politics in contemporary contexts. While politics shares significant connections with emotions, *emotional politics* remains a term that designates specific phenomena. In D2.2, the following conceptual approaches to *emotional politics* have been outlined:

1. "Political practice, which is marked by a clear predominance of emotional narratives and activities driven by affect and emotion.
2. Interdisciplinary studies aimed at investigating the meaning and role of affective states in politics.

3. Historical studies, which examine both political practice and the history of ideas through the lens of emotive categories.
4. Theoretical and philosophical studies which recognize the primary role of affective states (emotions, affects, passions) in politics and, on this basis, propose conceptions of collective life" (Zieliński & Nowakowski, 2025, p. 20).

In the context of this report, *emotional politics* primarily refers to the first approach, as our focus is on emotionally driven determinants of political practice.

In contemporary politics, many fundamental categories are conceptualized in relation to emotive states. For instance, such states can motivate citizens to engage in *political participation* but can also lead them to disengage from politics altogether. The latter aspect is less frequently discussed in the context of the role of affects and emotions in politics. However, in an environment of heightened political polarization and group divisions, merely disclosing one's political preferences can provoke negative reactions from others, which has a demotivating effect (see Nowakowski & Zieliński, 2024, pp. 13-14).

Given these observations, it is unsurprising that emotive states also permeate the realm of *political communication*. The emotionalization of political communication enhances its effectiveness while simultaneously shifting it toward the domain of popular culture. Moreover, emotive aspects play a significant role in *political decision-making*. In this context, scholars emphasize the influence of emotions such as anxiety and fear, anger, moral, and discrete emotions. Even within the framework of rational decision-making theory, it is acknowledged that "[it] (...) is both inseparable from and inextricably linked to emotion" (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019, p. 28; see Nowakowski & Zieliński, 2024, pp. 25-26).

Another concept that is strongly charged with emotional and affective significance is *populism*—particularly when understood as a mobilization mechanism that draws on political ideology and a structural feature of democracy. Populist views are associated with both negative and positive effects and emotions. Negative emotions are primarily directed toward individuals perceived as representing *corrupted elites*, whereas positive emotions are reserved for those who share views similar to those of the populists (see Nowakowski & Zieliński, 2024, pp. 14–16). The growing significance of emotive states in politics is also linked to the increasing popularity of *conspiracy theories*, which can serve as a response to perceived threats from others. Jan-Willem Van Prooijen (2018, p. VIII) maintains that "[c]onspiracy theories are a natural defensive reaction to feelings of uncertainty and fear, blaming dissimilar out-groups for the distressing circumstances that one has to deal with."

It also happens that emotions and affects themselves become subjects of political debate. A notable illustration can be found in the Covid-19 pandemic, during which the emotion of fear not only accompanied political disputes but even became their central focus. Opponents of pandemic restrictions coined the popular slogan: "My freedom doesn't end where your fear begins." This serves as a recent and striking example of how politics can engage with and address the emotive sphere—not merely in relation to other issues, but due to the significance of emotions and affects in their own right.

Another example of this phenomenon is the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. As Bleiker and Hutchison (2008, pp. 115-116) point out:

> Many of the subsequent political actions, from the swift US-led wars of response in Afghanistan and Iraq to the suspension of basic civil rights and the legitimisation of torture, would not have been possible without the highly emotional impact of 9/11 and the equally emotional governmental appeal to defend the world of good against the forces of evil.

The difference may not be immediately obvious, but these are fundamentally different situations—one in which someone opposes open-border policies out of fear, and another in which someone fears a virus or terrorists and demands government action in response (see Müller, 2019).

The accumulation of affects and emotions in political life has also led to the development of a phenomenon known as *affective polarization*, defined as "an affective distance between political opponents" (Talisse, 2021, p. 210). As a result, mutual antipathy and distrust emerge between competing political groups. Specifically, this entails "(a) positive in-group affect towards a party and its supporters and (b) negative out-group affect towards the other party and its supporters" (Wagner, 2021, p. 2). In the framework adopted by the ENCODE project, *affective polarization* refers both to institutional politics—conducted by political parties and other institutions—and to dynamics within civil society (Nowakowski & Zieliński, 2024, p. 39).

2.2 OBJECTIVES, SCOPE AND THE METHODOLOGY OF THE CROSS-COUNTRY COMPARISON

The central point of the cross-national comparison of the study is to systematically juxtapose the national contexts of the emotional politics, and the aim of the study would be to map and analyse the emotional politics of the various distinct national contexts and the impact and role of emotional politics on the process of democratic participation and citizen engagement and involvement at the various national contexts and political structures.

The analysis comprises six countries which are representative of the variety of political cultures, institutional trajectories of stability, and socio-historical experience, including long-standing democracies and post-communist or post-conflict societies. By including these six countries, it is possible to discern generic patterns as well as specific variations of the political employment of emotions in particular settings. The argument will be organized in four analytical sections: political landscape, drivers of the political employment of emotions with special attention to traditional as well as digital media, mechanisms of emotions in political decision-making processes, and the rise of leadership styles.

2.2.1 METHODOLOGY FOR DATA GATHERING PROCESSING, SYNTHESIS AND PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

Data for this study were collected from six countries using a structured data collection template developed by ASM, with support from UWR. The template included detailed instructions to ensure consistency across partners and guided the systematic completion of all relevant fields. The design of the template followed a deductive approach, informed by insights from previous theoretical and empirical work within the project. Data entry was performed by designated partners in each country: UNIVIE (Austria), CSD (Bulgaria), UCPH (Denmark), ASM and UWR (Poland), UNSA (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and IDSCS (North Macedonia). Contributors responsible for filling in the templates had backgrounds in social sciences and related fields, ensuring methodological rigor and an informed perspective.
Once collected, ASM undertook the processing and preliminary analysis of the data. This included cleaning and harmonizing the datasets, consolidating entries into a unified format, and synthesizing the information to facilitate comparison across countries. This phase focused on the organization and structuring of the material and the development of an initial version of country profiles. For the preliminary analytical phase, elements of both content analysis and thematic analysis were employed. Content analysis principles (Krippendorff,

2004[1]) guided the systematic coding and organization of the data, ensuring transparency and reproducibility. Thematic analysis steps (Braun & Clarke, 2006[2]) informed the identification of initial patterns and themes emerging from the data, providing a structured framework for the preliminary analytical insights.

The structured data collection template, along with instructions for its use, is presented below to illustrate the approach and ensure transparency in the data gathering process. The full, unprocessed versions of the collected data prior to consolidation are available on demand and they will be also uploaded as a dataset on the project website. This stage of work served exclusively as a baseline for subsequent analyses and comparisons, without advancing to in-depth interpretation or cross-country synthesis.

Template for data gathering

Table 1 - Section 1: Country Overview and Key Political Context

Political Landscape Overview			
Political regime (*Instruction:* Provide a brief description of your country's political regime (e.g., parliamentary democracy, constitutional monarchy, or based on the Economic Intelligence Unit classification), including the separation of powers, key institutions, and how the country is geographically divided into regions, provinces, or other subnational units and explain the distribution of authority between	**Key Political Parties and Movements** (*Instruction:* List and describe the major political parties, movements, and influential political actors. Include their ideological positions and roles in the political system.)	**Recent Major Events Impacting Politics** (*Instruction:* Summarize significant political events from the past 5- max 10 years (e.g., elections, policy reforms, protests) that have shaped the current socio-political climate.)	**Current Emotional Climate** (*Instruction:* Assess the prevailing societal affects and emotions (e.g., optimism, fear, anger) and any major tensions or sentiments influencing politics, such as economic or social cleavages.)

[1] Krippendorff, K. (2004). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071878781

[2] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

national and local levels of government.)			

Table 2 - Section 2: Emotional Politics Drivers

Drivers of Emotions in Political Communication			
Media Influence: (*Instruction:* Analyse how traditional and social media shape political discourse and societal affects and emotions. Identify key media outlets, platforms, and any media regulations that impact this dynamic.)		**Key Drivers Identified in the Literature:** (*Instruction:* Review empirical studies focusing on your country that identify factors driving affects and emotions in politics and the patterns involved. Summarize the main findings and theories.)	**Notable Emotional Triggers in the Country's Politics:** (*Instruction:* Identify specific issues or events (e.g., historical conflicts, immigration, economic crises) that elicit strong affective and emotional responses and explain their significance.)
1) Traditional Media Sources: (*Instruction:* List major traditional media outlets and analyse their role in framing political issues emotionally. Include circulation numbers and	**2) Social Media Data:** (*Instruction:* Examine social media platforms prevalent in your country, identify key influencers, and analyse the dominant emotional narratives circulating online.)		

audience demographics if available.)			
Role of Crises			
Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic: (*Instruction:* Examine how the pandemic has influenced political communication, public policies, and public emotions. Consider government responses and public trust levels.)	**Impact of the Russia vs Ukraine War:** (*Instruction:* Discuss the war's effects on your country's foreign policy, security concerns, and the emotional reactions of the populace, including any shifts in attitudes toward international alliances.)	**Ecology crisis?**	**Other?**

Table 3 - Section 3: Mechanism of Emotion in Politics

Emotional mechanisms in Political Decision Making

Influence on Voter Behaviour: (*Instruction:* Explore how emotions affect voter choices, citing examples from recent elections or referendums where emotions played a significant role.)	Influence on Policy Formation: (*Instruction:* Provide instances where emotive narratives have shaped public policy or legislative actions, explaining the mechanisms involved.)	Prominent Emotional Trends in National Politics: (*Instruction:* Identify and analyse significant patterns in how affects and emotions affect political engagement and discourse within your country. Discuss recurring themes or affective/emotional responses observed during elections, public debates, or major political events.)

Table 4 - Section 4: Affects and Emotions in Political Leadership

Emerging Leadership Styles		
Notable Leaders and Their Emotional Appeal: (*Instruction:* Highlight political leaders who effectively use emotional appeals. Describe their communication styles and strategies.)	**Emotional Narratives Used by Leaders:** (*Instruction:* Analyse the key emotional themes leaders employ (e.g., unity, patriotism, etc.) and provide examples of speeches or campaigns.)	**Impact of Leadership Style on Societal Emotions:** (*Instruction:* Evaluate how different leadership styles influence public emotions, affects and attitudes, including any shifts in public opinion or behaviour, focus on both effective and non-effective cases.)

Table 5 - Section 5: Data Sources and Literature Review

Country-Specific Longitudinal Data Sources	
Key Datasets: (*Instruction:* Identify and describe the main datasets used (e.g., national surveys, electoral data), including details on how they measure societal affects/emotions vis-à-vis democratic indicators.)	**Empirical Literature Summary:** (*Instruction:* Provide an annotated bibliography of the most relevant and recent studies, summarizing their methodologies, findings, and relevance to your research.)

2.2.2 CROSS-COUNTRY COMPARISON METHODOLOGY

The cross-country comparison was conducted through a qualitative synthesis of six country-level desk research summaries (Poland, Bulgaria, Austria, Denmark, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia). Each national report was produced using a standardized data-gathering template (as described above), ensuring easy comparison across countries and thematic consistency with ENCODE Task 2.3 objectives. The template was

The comparison focuses on four analytical dimensions:
1. Political landscape overview
2. Emotional politics drivers (with emphasis on traditional and social media)
3. Emotional mechanisms in political decision-making
4. Emerging leadership styles

For each dimension, country-level findings were systematically extracted into an excel file (see table below), and compared to identify recurring emotional patterns, structural similarities, and country-specific deviations. The analysis follows a three-step comparative logic applied consistently across all four sections:
- Identification of shared trends and common emotional dynamics
- Identification of key differences shaped by institutional, historical, or media contexts
- Formulation of a comparison note synthesizing cross-country insights and explanatory factors

The base of the analysis was a short excel tool/template summarising main aspects of the four case study dimensions (political landscape overview, emotional politics drivers, emotional mechanisms in political decision making and emerging leadership styles) and basic metadata. It helped to operationalise this comparison and providing country profiles. The excel file was filled by a researcher based on the country summaries and was a starting point for the further written analysis.

Table 1 - Excel file template for summarising country profiles

Metadata					
Country	*Political system*	*EU status*	*Media system*	*Political stability*	
Political landscape					
Country	*Regime stability*	*Party fragmentation*	*Polarisation*	*Dominant cleavages*	*Key emotions*
Media drivers					

Country	Traditional media	Social media	Dominant frames	Media polarisation	
Decision mechanisms					
Country	Mobilising emotions	Demobilising emotions	Crisis use	Impact on voters	
Leaderships styles					
Country	Dominant style	Emotional Tone	Crisis Rhetoric	Personalisation	

Source: Encode project

3 COUNTRY-LEVEL SUMMARIES

3.1 POLAND
3.1.1 POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OVERVIEW

3.1.1.1 POLITICAL REGIME

Poland operates under a parliamentary republic system, where the President serves as the head of state, and the Prime Minister is the head of government. The political regime is characterized by a multi-party system, with power divided among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. However, in recent years, the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party has been accused of undermining the independence of the judiciary, leading to conflicts with the European Union over the rule of law. The President, Andrzej Duda (affiliated with PiS), holds a largely ceremonial role but has significant influence over foreign policy and the power to veto legislation. The Sejm (lower house of parliament) and the Senate (upper house) are the primary legislative bodies, with the Sejm being the more powerful of the two. The Prime Minister, Donald Tusk (from the Civic Platform, PO), leads the government. Poland's political regime has been marked by a struggle between liberal democratic values and authoritarian tendencies, particularly under the PiS government (2015-2023). PiS has been criticized for centralizing power, limiting press freedom, and politicizing state institutions, which has led to tensions with the EU and domestic opposition. The 2023 parliamentary elections, which resulted in a coalition government led by Donald Tusk, marked a significant shift, with promises to restore democratic norms and improve relations with the EU.

3.1.1.2 KEY POLITICAL PARTIES AND MOVEMENTS[3]

Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS), founded in 2001 by Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński, is a right-wing, nationalist, and conservative party with roots in the anti-communist movement and Solidarity. PiS first gained power in 2005, lost it in 2007, and returned in 2015. Key policies include judicial reforms, social welfare expansion, opposition to EU centralization, and restrictions on abortion and LGBTQ+ rights.

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[3] Sejm.gov.pl

Civic Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska, KO), led by **Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO)**, is a pro-European political alliance founded in 2001 by Donald Tusk and Maciej Płażyński. Initially centre-right, it later shifted toward the centre and governed Poland from 2007 to 2015. It currently leads a coalition with Lewica and Third Way, focusing on EU integration, liberal economic policies, judicial independence, and social progressivism.

The Left (Lewica), formed in 2019, unites various socialist and social-democratic movements, including the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), with roots in the post-communist era. Key policies include social justice, environmental reforms, LGBTQ+ rights, and pro-EU stances.

Confederation (Konfederacja), a right-wing, libertarian party founded in 2018, combines nationalist, conservative, monarchist, and radical libertarian groups. Its main policies are nationalism, opposition to immigration and EU policies, and minimal government intervention.

Third Way (Trzecia Droga), founded in 2023, is a centrist coalition between Poland 2050, led by Szymon Hołownia, and PSL, an agrarian party. Key policies focus on economic pragmatism, EU cooperation, and social liberalism.

3.1.1.3 RECENT MAJOR EVENTS IMPACTING POLITICS

Women's Rights and Abortion Protests. In 2020, Poland's Constitutional Tribunal, influenced by PiS, tightened abortion laws, leading to mass protests. The ruling mobilized civil society and further polarized political discourse.

Russia-Ukraine War. Since 2022, Poland has been one of Ukraine's strongest allies, accepting millions of refugees and supplying arms. However, relations soured in late 2023 due to a grain import dispute, revealing tensions over economic interests. Poland remains committed to NATO and security cooperation, but internal divisions on Ukraine policy persist.

Migration Policy and EU Border Tensions. Poland has been at the centre of the EU's migration debate. In 2021, the Belarus-Poland border crisis saw thousands of migrants pushed towards Poland by the Belarusian regime. Poland reinforced its border security, citing hybrid warfare tactics by Belarus and Russia. The new government in 2024 faces pressure to align with EU migration policies.

EU Green Deal Resistance. Poland has resisted elements of the European Green Deal, particularly regarding coal phase-out and carbon neutrality. The government argues that Poland's energy sector, heavily reliant on coal, cannot rapidly transition without economic repercussions. This stance has strained relations with Brussels, leading to potential funding reductions for Poland.

3.1.1.4 CURRENT EMOTIONAL CLIMATE

Poland's emotional climate is shaped by political polarization and social unrest, with citizens growing disillusioned by the ongoing rivalry between the ruling PiS and opposition PO. This has fuelled demand for new political alternatives, such as the centrist Polska 2050. At the heart of the divide is nationalism and sovereignty, with PiS supporters viewing external influences, particularly from the EU, as threats to Poland's independence. This has led to a rise in nationalist rhetoric and a pushback against European integration, reinforcing PiS's appeal among conservative voters.

On the other side, opposition groups and pro-democracy advocates warn of creeping authoritarianism, citing judicial reforms, media control, and attempts to reshape democratic institutions. This anxiety has sparked protests, with many fearing Poland is abandoning democratic principles. Social divisions have deepened on issues like abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and the role of the Catholic Church. The 2020 tightening of abortion laws ignited mass protests, while LGBTQ+ rights policies sparked resistance from progressive groups and support from conservatives defending traditional family values. These issues highlight a generational and ideological rift.

Economic uncertainty adds to the emotional climate. Strained EU relations over judicial independence, migration policies, and environmental regulations have created financial

unpredictability. The risk of reduced EU funding and non-compliance with EU directives has contributed to economic anxiety, impacting business confidence and social stability. This uncertainty, along with political turmoil, further fuels public dissatisfaction and a sense of instability in Polish society.

3.1.2 EMOTIONAL POLITICS DRIVERS

3.1.2.1 DRIVERS OF EMOTIONS IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Traditional Media Influence

In recent years, traditional media in Poland has lost reach, particularly among younger audiences, as online platforms gain influence. However, it remains crucial in framing political issues and shaping public sentiment. In the October 2023 elections, the opposition coalition led by PO defeated the ruling PiS, leading to media reforms aimed at reducing political influence in public broadcasting. The main TV channels in Poland include TVP1, Polsat, TVP2, TVN, and TV Republika, while the top daily news programs are *Fakty*, TVP's *19:30*, and *Wydarzenia* (Reisner, 2024a; Makarenko, 2024). Before the 2023 public media reforms, *Wiadomości* was highly popular but was discontinued and replaced by *19:30* (Reisner, 2024b). Its anti-EU editorial stance was continued on TV Republika, which saw a significant rise in viewership between late 2023 and early 2024 (Reisner, 2024a; Reisner, 2024c). Media polarization remains strong. *Wiadomości* under PiS control was overwhelmingly favourable to the ruling party while critical of the opposition, whereas *Fakty* mirrored this bias in reverse, providing positive coverage of the opposition and negative coverage of PiS (Głodowska, 2019).

Radio, particularly RMF FM, Radio Zet, and Eska, remains influential, especially among older audiences (Makarenko, 2024). Radio Maryja exemplifies how radio fosters emotional connections, shaping political attitudes (Przybylski, 2019; Bobrowska, 2007). Print media, including *Fakt*, regional newspapers, and *Gazeta Wyborcza*, also plays a role in reinforcing partisan narratives (Makarenko, 2024).

Online news platforms like Wirtualna Polska, Onet, TVN24.pl, and Interia dominate, using emotional framing - often negative - to influence perception (Makarenko, 2024; Sentimenti, 2019). Public trust in media is low (CBOS, 2023), with many people seeking information from politically aligned outlets, reinforcing polarization.

Social Media Influence

In 2024, social media in Poland reached 96.5% of internet users; the most popular platforms are Facebook, Facebook Messenger, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok (Kemp, 2024). While Facebook has broad reach, users spend more time on TikTok and YouTube. However, only 15.2% follow news accounts directly, indicating limited engagement with traditional news (Kemp, 2024; Sas, 2024).

Social media has fuelled aggressive behaviour and fake news, with 43% of Poles expressing distrust in platforms due to unreliable information (Sas, 2024). Despite this, it remains a key source of information, especially for young people. Young Poles are shifting from Facebook to TikTok and Instagram, where entertainment and news merge, driving emotional responses and rapid opinion shifts through trends, influencers, and viral content (Kemp, 2024; Puzio, 2024; Sas, 2024). This dynamic, driven by tactics such as fake news, hate speech, astroturfing, and propaganda, undermines rational discourse and poses risks to democratic processes, particularly among young voters (Jakubowski, 2021; Jakubowski & Pająk-Patkowska, 2022; Lipiński & Stępińska, 2018).

The impact of social media is exemplified by the shift in public focus on the Ukraine war, where pro-Russian content and declining engagement with the conflict influenced political attitudes, demonstrating the power of social media narratives in shaping both domestic and foreign policy (INiMS & IBRiS, 2022).

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Social media has transformed political engagement by emphasizing emotional content and personalization. Politicians craft relatable public personas and foster emotional connections with voters, while media sensationalism shifts political discourse from rational deliberation to affective spectacle. Polish politicians with significant social media followings - including Donald Tusk, Mateusz Morawiecki, Roman Giertych, Szymon Hołownia, and Sławomir Mentzen - illustrate the dynamic role of digital platforms in political discourse (eGospodarka, 2024). Media-related channels such as *Kanał Zero* and the Sejm's "Sejmflix" further underscore this shift, rapidly attracting large audiences and highlighting the changing landscape of online influence in Poland (Makarenko, 2024).

Key Drivers Identified in the Literature
Poland's political landscape is shaped by emotional drivers rooted in its historical, cultural, and socio-economic context.

The historical and cultural legacy of World War II, Soviet domination, and communism plays a key role in shaping emotions such as pride, anger, and fear. These legacies are central to national identity debates, with political leaders invoking collective memory to justify policies and reclaim national sovereignty (Grzymała-Busse, 2015, 2019; Zielonka, 2018). Memory is also used to popularize narratives that support national unity and pride (Wawrzyński et al., 2015). Catholicism strongly shapes political emotions in Poland, symbolizing national pride and unity, particularly during periods of external threat (Osewska et al., 2022). At the same time, discomfort with its political influence - especially on abortion and LGBTQ+ rights - reflects tensions between heritage and democratic governance (Gołębiowska & Gancheva, 2019; Grzymała-Busse, 2017).

Economic insecurities related to employment, welfare, and migration fuel fear and resentment. Populist leaders exploit these emotions by framing economic challenges as a conflict between "the elite" and "the people" (Krawatzek & Goldstein, 2022; Margalit, 2019; Gozgor, 2022).

Nationalism and EU relations are emotionally charged, with sovereignty debates triggering pride and fear. Kaczyński's rhetoric, linked to the "Besieged Fortress Syndrome," amplifies external threat perceptions to foster national loyalty and solidarity (Ziółkowski, 2023; Kazlauskaitė & Salmela, 2021; Wagner & Enyedi, 2024).

Political polarization has intensified emotional divides between urban liberals and rural conservatives. Competing narratives around nationalism, tradition, European identity, and progressivism generate emotions such as anger, fear, and disappointment (Górska & Grzymała-Busse, 2017; Zielonka, 2018).

Notable Emotional Triggers in the Country's Politics
Poland's national identity, shaped by WWII, Soviet domination, and communism, evokes pride, anger, and fear, frequently mobilized by political leaders to assert sovereignty (Grzymała-Busse, 2015, 2019; Zielonka, 2018). The post-socialist transformation intensified emotional responses ranging from hope and euphoria to disillusionment and anger (Gilbert, 2019; Svašek, 2006; Duijzings, 2020; Jansen, 2009; Petrović, 2014).

Despite strong economic growth since 1990, by 2024, 41% of Poles reported significant financial stress, driven by inflation and high living costs (Money.pl, 2024; Big InfoMonitor, 2024). These anxieties are often reframed by populist leaders as a struggle between elites and ordinary citizens (Margalit, 2019; Gozgor, 2022).

Women's rights, particularly abortion, generate strong emotional reactions. Poland's restrictive abortion law has sparked large-scale protests, notably Black Monday in 2016, with anger and fear acting as key mobilizing emotions (Urzędowska & Suchomska, 2020; Blackington, 2023).

The Smolensk Presidential Crash in 2010 intensified nationalist rhetoric and feelings of betrayal, symbolizing disillusionment with Poland's post-communist transformation (Koczanowicz, 2012).

Finally, PiS policies, often described as authoritarian populism, have provoked strong emotional responses, including mass protests against judicial reforms, rising living costs, and perceived democratic backsliding, notably the June 4th march and pro-EU demonstrations in 2021 (Fomina & Kucharczyk, 2016).

3.1.2.1 ROLE OF CRISIS

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic
The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly impacted Poland, with government responses and public trust shaped by the crisis. Early lockdowns and restrictions were introduced, but inconsistent messaging undermined trust. By mid-2020, political tensions and disputes with experts eroded public consensus, and post-election criticisms focused on politicizing the pandemic and misinformation. Despite high vaccination support, the government's failure to follow scientific advice further decreased trust (Hallin et al., 2024; Winiarska-Brodowska, 2022).
Trust in the government declined, while other institutions remained stable. Greater religiosity and trust in the Church correlated with higher acceptance of restrictions, but interpersonal trust did not (Pilch et al., 2023; Sas, 2024b).
Over 20% of Poles experienced anxiety, depression, and health concerns, with fear and anger supporting health policies, while anxiety linked to economic measures. Emotional challenges were more intense for those balancing remote work and family duties (Sas, 2024a; Głogowska-Gruszka & Wypych-Ślusarska, 2023). Over time, there was an unrealistic optimism as people perceived Poland as less affected (Szuster et al., 2022).

Impact of the Russia vs Ukraine War
Following Russia's 2022 aggression in Ukraine, Poland focused on preventing the conflict from spreading and ensuring Ukraine's defeat didn't threaten its security. Poland provided military, financial, and humanitarian support to Ukraine, played a key logistical role, and welcomed millions of refugees, enhancing its international image. It strongly advocated for sanctions on Russia and criticized Western Europe's slower response. Poland emphasized Ukraine's sovereignty and strengthened its own defence along NATO's eastern flank (Bieńczyk-Missala, 2023; Pawłuszko, 2023).
Emotions like anger and fear emerged in response to Russia's actions, while sympathy and solidarity were directed toward Ukraine (David, 2024; Fabiś et al., 2024). Political communication has been characterized by emotion-based solidarity, with Poland framing the conflict as a shared struggle against a common threat (Kamiński & Śliwa, 2023; Szabó & Lipiński, 2024).

Migration Crisis
Attitudes toward immigration in Poland are shaped by economic concerns and perceptions of cultural homogeneity. Support for Ukrainian refugees was initially very high but declined over time. By February 2024, approximately 1.76 million Ukrainian refugees had registered for temporary protection in Poland, with 952,109 individuals receiving social services; by January 2025, the number of registrations increased to 1.91 million (Eurostat, 2024, 2025). While 48% of Ukrainians who arrived before the full-scale war declared an intention to stay in Poland, only 21% of those arriving after 2022 planned long-term settlement, indicating declining settlement intentions over time (Eurostat, 2024).
Public support for accepting Ukrainian refugees dropped sharply, from 94% in March 2022 to around 53% in 2024, while 40% of respondents opposed further acceptance, reflecting growing economic insecurities, job competition, and welfare-related concerns (CBOS, 2024; Krawatzek & Goldstein, 2022; Vogt Isaksen, 2019).
Resistance to Muslim refugees has also increased, fuelled by fears related to cultural integration and perceived economic harm. During the 2015–2016 migration crisis,

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Islamophobic narratives framed refugees as a threat to national security. These narratives were reinforced by political discourse, media representations, and cultural framing of national identity (Jaskulowski, 2019; Margalit, 2019; Vogt Isaksen, 2019).

The situation on the Polish–Belarusian border escalated after 2021, with irregular crossings attributed by Polish authorities to hybrid actions by the Belarusian regime, supported by Russia. This led to a humanitarian crisis and a state of emergency. Since 2021, opposition to granting asylum has increased significantly, with 72% of Poles opposing asylum access, shaping political discourse on migration and border security (CBOS, 2024).

3.1.3 EMOTIONAL MECHANISMS IN POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING[45]

3.1.3.1 INFLUENCE ON VOTERS' BEHAVIOUR

Emotions play a crucial role in shaping political preferences and voter behaviour. Political parties use emotional strategies to mobilize supporters and discredit opponents. Analysing the 2015, 2019, and 2023 Polish parliamentary elections shows how fear, disgust, and anger were used to influence outcomes.

2015 elections: fear and anti-immigrant rhetoric. In 2015, fear, largely driven by the European migration crisis, dominated public discourse. PiS capitalized on this emotion, framing immigration as a threat. By depicting themselves as protectors of national security, PiS mobilized voters seeking stability, leading to a decisive victory and a parliamentary majority.

2019 elections: disgust and anti-LGBTQ narratives. In 2019, the campaign focused on cultural values, using disgust to marginalize the LGBTQ community. PiS framed LGBTQ rights as a threat to traditional family values and national identity. The concept of "LGBT ideology" provoked rejection, particularly among conservative voters, enabling PiS to secure another win.

2023 elections: anger and mass protests against abortion law changes. In 2023, anger over tighter abortion laws became the driving force. Protests, particularly among women and young people, galvanized opposition forces. Parties like the PO and the Left framed their campaigns around defending women's rights, leading to a shift in the political landscape and a power shift in parliament.

While negative emotions have dominated political mobilization, positive emotions like national pride have also been important. PiS's "good change" narrative appealed to collective pride, tradition, and sovereignty, cultivating loyalty and uniting voters behind their vision of a strong, independent Poland.

3.1.3.2 INFLUENCE ON POLICY FORMATION

In recent years, emotions have heavily influenced Polish public policies, with political actors using fear, outrage, compassion, and pride to shape public opinion and justify their actions.

In 2015, the refugee crisis sparked fear, with the ruling PiS framing refugees as a national security threat. Poland refused to participate in the EU's refugee relocation scheme, appealing to public concerns about safety and sovereignty.

The 2012 pension reform raised the retirement age to 67, causing public outrage. PiS capitalized on this, promising a return to 65 for men and 60 for women, which resonated as a fairness and dignity issue, boosting their image as defenders of social justice.

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[4] Cbos.pl

[5] Ibris.pl

In 2018, revelations about excessive government bonuses led to public anger. PiS responded by returning the bonuses and freezing politicians' salaries to restore accountability and ease public dissatisfaction.

The 500+ child benefit program, introduced in 2016, was framed as a compassionate policy to support families. Its emotional appeal to solidarity and care garnered broad public approval, reduced child poverty, and strengthened PiS's electoral support.

PiS's judicial reforms were presented as efforts to restore national sovereignty and cleanse the judiciary of communist influences, appealing to national pride. Despite protests and EU criticism, the reforms maintained public backing.

3.1.3.3 PROMINENT EMOTIONAL TRENDS IN NATIONAL POLITICS

Polish political discourse has been shaped by emotions like national pride, revenge narratives, and mediatized politics.

PiS has focused on national pride, positioning itself as the protector of Poland's sovereignty. Judicial reforms and education policies were justified as acts of national restoration, appealing to voters' sense of dignity and unity. PiS frequently frames political rivals, especially PO, as elitist and disconnected from the people, appealing to resentment and a desire for accountability. This narrative deepens political divisions and mobilizes support.

Some political actors use "symmetry," presenting both sides as equally flawed. While appealing to frustration with partisanship, this risks false equivalence, diluting accountability and obscuring moral distinctions.

3.1.4 EMERGING LEADERSHIP STYLES

3.1.4.1 NOTABLE LEADERS AND THEIR EMOTIONAL APPEAL[6]

Jarosław Kaczyński (PiS) appeals emotionally through national pride, historical grievance, and moral righteousness, invoking Poland's past struggles, especially World War II and communism. His paternalistic leadership presents him as the protector of traditional values and defender against external threats like the EU and liberal ideologies.

Donald Tusk (PO) focuses on modernization, European integration, and economic progress, appealing to the middle class and younger generations. His emotional appeal is rooted in optimism, stability, and the benefits of EU membership, resonating with those seeking a forward-looking future.

Szymon Hołownia (Polska 2050) targets a younger, progressive electorate, emphasizing authenticity, transparency, and a break from traditional politics. His emotional appeal centers on hope, moral integrity, and social responsibility, positioning himself as an alternative to political elites.

Krzysztof Bosak (Konfederacja) taps into nationalism, libertarianism, and anti-establishment sentiment. His confrontational leadership appeals to those frustrated by globalization and EU influence, particularly younger, male voters feeling alienated from mainstream politics.

Włodzimierz Czarzasty (Lewica) appeals to solidarity and social justice, focusing on the struggles of the working class. His leadership emphasizes equality, social welfare, and empathy, resonating with those concerned about healthcare, education, and workers' rights.

Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe, PSL) connects with rural values, tradition, and community. His emotional appeal focuses on stability, preserving agriculture, family, and local governance while addressing modernization challenges.

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[6] Sejm.gov.pl

3.1.4.2 EMOTIONAL NARRATIVES USED BY LEADERS

Across Poland's political spectrum, emotional narratives are central to party discourse, shaping leaders' identities and resonating with their audiences.

PiS's emotional narrative is grounded in historical destiny and the mission to protect Poland from internal and external threats. It emphasizes resilience, sacrifice, and patriotism, framing Poland as a besieged nation, under threat from globalization and foreign powers. This fosters a sense of urgency and unity among supporters, portraying them as guardians of Poland's legacy.

PO's narrative focuses on modernization, European integration, and progress. Leaders like Donald Tusk emphasize rational optimism, celebrating technological innovation, cultural diversity, and the benefits of EU membership. This creates an image of Poland as a dynamic, forward-looking society that embraces change while retaining core values.

Konfederacja's narrative is rebellious and intense, positioning itself as the defender of individual liberty against an overreaching state. Its rhetoric provokes feelings of defiance and empowers those who feel alienated by mainstream politics, championing personal autonomy and traditional values.

Lewica's narrative centres on justice, empathy, and solidarity, highlighting societal inequalities and the need to care for the vulnerable. It evokes compassion and urgency, calling for societal transformation through collective responsibility and inclusivity.

PSL's narrative is rooted in rural identity, celebrating the virtues of rural life and traditions. It appeals to those nostalgic for a way of life threatened by urbanization, offering a protective, restorative vision that honours the past while cautiously engaging with the future.

Polska 2050 presents a narrative of renewal, transparency, and pragmatic hope. It calls for a "reset" in Polish politics, focusing on accountability, reform, and honest dialogue. This narrative inspires hope and encourages constructive political participation.

3.1.4.3 IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP STYLE ON SOCIETAL EMOTIONS

The interplay between leadership styles and societal emotions in Poland is deeply influential, shaping public sentiment through mechanisms like emotional contagion, identity reinforcement, and collective memory. Political leadership not only formulates policies but also influences how they are internalized by society.

PiS's hardline leadership fosters both unity and division. Nationalist rhetoric and appeals to tradition create pride and security among supporters, reinforced by historical narratives of resilience. However, this same approach fuels anxiety and alienation in those who perceive it as exclusionary. The stark contrast between "insiders" and "outsiders" deepens social tensions.

PO, with its emphasis on openness and pro-European engagement, generates cautious optimism and trust, particularly among urban professionals and the middle class. Its technocratic and measured style promotes inclusivity but can feel detached, lacking the emotional intensity that populist rhetoric evokes.

Konfederacja's confrontational, anti-establishment stance triggers indignation and empowerment among supporters who feel politically disenfranchised. While this mobilizes political engagement, balancing dissent with constructive participation remains a challenge.

Lewica's empathetic leadership fosters compassion and solidarity, addressing social justice and economic equality. By highlighting systemic injustices, it forges deep connections with marginalized groups, reinforcing a narrative of collective responsibility and reform.

PSL's leadership, rooted in rural traditions, evokes stability and continuity. By defending local identity and traditional values, it offers emotional reassurance amid rapid modernization, countering urban-centric discourses.

Polska 2050's reformist approach cultivates renewed political engagement by emphasizing accountability and participative democracy. Its open, discursive leadership style channels

social disillusionment into hopeful re-engagement, bridging divides and fostering an inclusive vision for Poland's future.

3.2 BULGARIA

3.2.1 POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OVERVIEW

3.2.1.1 POLITICAL REGIME

Bulgaria is a parliamentary democracy established by its 1991 Constitution (Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, 1991). The unicameral National Assembly, consisting of 240 members elected by proportional representation for four-year terms, holds sole legislative authority and elects the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers (Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, 1991, arts. 62–64). The President represents the nation internationally, appoints caretaker governments when necessary, and ensures national unity (art. 92 §1; art. 99 §1–7). Power is divided among the executive (Council of Ministers), legislative (National Assembly), and judiciary, which operates independently through the Supreme Court of Cassation, Supreme Administrative Court, and other courts (Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, 1991, arts. 8, 108, 117 §2, 119). Bulgaria's governance structure includes three administrative levels: 28 districts and 265 municipalities. Municipalities are the primary units of local self-governance, managing budgets, taxes, education, healthcare, social services, and territorial development (Law on Local Self-Government and Local Administration, 1991 [rev. 1999]; European Committee of the Regions, n.d.). Municipal councils are directly elected, while regional governors are appointed by the Council of Ministers (Eurydice Network, 2024).

3.2.1.2 KEY POLITICAL PARTIES AND MOVEMENTS

Prior to the October 27, 2024, parliamentary election, the centre-right **GERB** party (**Grazhdani za Evropesko Razvitie na Bŭlgariya, Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria**) held the most seats in parliament, though it lacked a majority with 68 seats (PolitPro, 2024). Despite surviving mass protests and corruption accusations in 2020–21, GERB formed a coalition with **We Continue the Change** (**Prodŭlzhavame promyanata, PP**) and **Democratic Bulgaria** (**Demokratichna Bŭlgariya, DB**), despite **PP-DB**'s previous opposition to **GERB**'s governance. The coalition collapsed in April 2024 after a failed power rotation agreement between Prime Minister Nikolay Denkov (PP-DB) and Deputy PM Maria Gabriel (GERB) (Strazha, 2024).
PP-DB, a reformist coalition with an anti-corruption focus, includes three parties: **Yes, Bulgaria!** (**Da, Bŭlgarija!**), **Democrats for Strong Bulgaria** (**Demokrati za silna Balgariya, DSB**), and the **Green Movement** (**Zeleno dvizhenie**) (Democratic Bulgaria, 2024; The Sofia Globe, 2024). Anti-corruption narratives dominate Bulgarian politics, especially given the country's past ranking as the EU's most corrupt member state (Bedrov, 2024). Another anti-corruption party, **There Is Such a People** (**Ima Takav Narod, ITN**), gained initial success in 2021 through populist, anti-elitist policies (ITN, 2023).
The **Movement for Rights and Freedoms** (**Dviženie za Prava i Svobodi, DPS**), a centrist liberal party advocating minority rights, became the second-largest party with 47 seats in June 2024 (Central Election Commission, 2024; Dviženie za Prava i Svobodi, 2016). On the left, the **Bulgarian Socialist Party** (**Bylgarska sotsialisticheska partiya, BSP**), a successor to the Communist Party, has shifted toward pro-Russian and socially conservative policies, aligning more with the far-right **Revival** (**Văzraždane**) party (Gueorguieva, 2023). Revival, known for nationalist and Eurosceptic stances, grew its vote share significantly, alongside the emerging far-right **Greatness** (**Velichie**) party (Vazrazhdane, 2024; Novinite Insider, 2024).
The **Left** (**Levitsata**), established in 2023 by former BSP members and other leftist groups, positions itself as the true representative of leftist democratic ideals and opposes both far-right populism and BSP's perceived betrayals of leftist principles (Dimova, 2023; Vyara Dimova, 2023).

3.2.1.3 RECENT MAJOR EVENTS IMPACTING POLITICS

Bulgaria's contemporary political crises trace back to the 2020–21 anti-corruption protests, triggered by scandals involving judicial corruption, business schemes, overdevelopment on the Black Sea coast, and government negligence of vital infrastructure like dams (Tsoneva, 2020). Tensions peaked when Chief Prosecutor Ivan Geshev raided the Presidency, violating constitutional principles and fuelling accusations of his complicity in corruption (Vassileva, 2024). Protesters demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Boyko Borissov and Geshev, early elections, and judicial reform. Borissov stepped down after nine years in office, but trust in the political system remains fragile, with no lasting reforms achieved (Vassileva, 2024).

Since the protests, Bulgaria has held six elections in three years, with the seventh scheduled for October 2024 (Todorov, 2024). Emerging parties challenging the dominance of GERB and BSP have further fragmented the political spectrum, making stable coalitions increasingly difficult (Kaleynska, 2023). This was exemplified by the brief 2023 coalition of PP-DP and GERB, which disappointed voters due to perceived betrayals of anti-corruption promises (Vassileva, 2024; Strazha, 2024). GERB's inability to form coalitions after winning the June 2024 election led to another snap election (Central Election Commission, 2024). Voter fatigue is evident, with participation plummeting to 34.41% in the most recent election (Central Election Commission, 2024).

The political landscape, marked by fragmentation and polarisation, has fuelled governance crises and voter disillusionment (Ivanov, 2024). The failure to address the core issue of judicial reform, which sparked the 2020 protests, remains unresolved (Yotova, 2020; Vassileva, 2020). Compounding this instability are new challenges from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, inflation, the energy crisis, and EU-Russia tensions (Hajdu et al., 2023; Kaleynska, 2023). These issues have deepened distrust in politicians and fuelled support for nationalist parties like the far-right Revival party, which opposes EU reforms and prioritises domestic agendas (Vazrazhdane, 2024; Novinite Insider, 2024). Without effective coalitions or meaningful reforms, Bulgaria's political instability and corruption are likely to persist (Kaleynska, 2023; Ivanov, 2024).

3.2.1.4 CURRENT EMOTIONAL CLIMATE

The emotional climate in Bulgaria has shown gradual improvement since the peak of pessimism in 2020, marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and anti-government protests (Alpha Research, 2023a). While political scandals and global conflicts in 2023 fuelled discontent, public evaluations of the year were slightly better than those of 2022 (Alpha Research, 2023a). Despite this, pessimism remains dominant: 26% of Bulgarians found 2023 worse than 2022, and 55% believed the country's situation worsened, compared to just 11% noting improvement (Alpha Research, 2023a). Optimism is more prevalent among young people, urban residents, and the educated, while retired and rural populations show higher levels of pessimism (Alpha Research, 2023a).

The political crisis drives negative sentiments, with nearly half of citizens feeling disappointment and 18% expressing anger toward the political status quo (Paunovski, 2024). These emotions have eroded trust in liberal democracy, with 31% favouring authoritarian rule and only half supporting liberal democracy (Angelova, 2024; Hajdu et al., 2023). Nonetheless, EU membership garners strong support, and trust in EU institutions remains higher than in national ones, being perceived as a guarantor of democracy and stability (Hajdu et al., 2023; Ivanova et al., 2022).

The war in Ukraine exacerbates fear and anxiety. Many view Bulgaria's NATO membership and military aid to Ukraine as risky, with a majority believing it provokes Russia, and only slightly more than half trusting NATO's deterrence capabilities (Hajdu et al., 2023). Attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees reflect socio-economic divisions, with a significant portion believing refugees receive support at the expense of vulnerable Bulgarians, though over half favour continued aid (Hajdu et al., 2023).

Cultural and ideological divides further shape the emotional landscape. Polarization is evident in attitudes toward LGBTI+ issues: over half see LGBTI+ as immoral, and a significant majority oppose granting LGBTI+ rights like marriage, underscoring the tension between traditional and liberal values (Hajdu et al., 2023).

3.2.2 EMOTIONAL POLITICS DRIVERS

3.2.2.1 DRIVERS OF EMOTIONS IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Traditional and Social Media Influence

In Bulgaria, media play a critical role in shaping political discourse and societal emotions. Social media and online news have gained significant influence, particularly during key events like elections (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2021). However, media influence is heavily shaped by Russian involvement, with substantial control over Bulgarian media through direct or hidden ownership (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2018, 2021a). This "media capture" enables the Kremlin to propagate its narratives across Bulgaria and Southeastern Europe (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2021a). Press freedom in Bulgaria remains fragile, ranking 59th globally and 23rd in the EU, with political and oligarchic influences compromising media independence (Reporters Without Borders, 2024; Vodenova, 2024).

Television and online media dominate, while traditional print media decline. Public trust in mainstream media has plummeted, dropping from 48% in 2021 to 31% in 2023 (Hajdu et al., 2023, p. 85). Over 60% believe media are controlled by oligarchs and financial groups, while a third see government influence (Hajdu et al., 2023, p. 87). Notably, individuals who trust the media are more likely to attribute responsibility for the war in Ukraine to Russia, highlighting trust as a key factor in public opinion (Hajdu et al., 2023, p. 90).
Legislation offers minimal journalist protections, and corruption within the judiciary leaves investigative journalists vulnerable (Reporters Without Borders, 2024). Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok are major avenues for political communication. During elections, disinformation campaigns are prevalent, including narratives minimizing COVID-19, promoting Russian energy projects, and criticizing the EU (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2021a). These campaigns often aim to erode trust in institutions and opponents, fostering public disillusionment (Zafirova & Toncheva, 2024).
Negative emotions dominate media narratives, with a focus on fear, anger, and distrust, which amplifies societal divisions and undermines public trust (Popova, 2022, p. 18). While some advocate for constructive journalism to inspire positivity, media content often exacerbates feelings of helplessness and hostility among the electorate (Zafirova & Toncheva, 2024)

Key Drivers Identified in the Literature
There is limited research specifically examining factors driving emotions in contemporary Bulgarian politics. However, existing literature highlights internal and external drivers contributing to the predominantly negative emotional climate (Ganev, 2014; Smilov, 2015; Popova, 2022).
Internal factors originate within Bulgaria's political context and often provoke emotions like anger, fear, and distrust. A key example is the ongoing political crisis, marked by an inability to form stable governments, exacerbated by endemic corruption, political scandals, and normalized crises (Detev, 2024). Past protests have shown that civic anger often stems from a lack of democratic accountability (Ganev, 2014). Additionally, recurring snap elections have led to voter apathy and low electoral participation (Detev, 2024). Studies reveal a generational divide, with younger Bulgarians holding more positive views of democracy, while older generations remain sceptical and disillusioned (Zankina, 2019).

External influences, such as foreign crises and geopolitical tensions, also shape emotional dynamics. Radical and nationalist parties exploit emotions through divisive rhetoric, portraying foreign powers like the USA, EU, and Russia as either allies or adversaries (Smilov, 2015). This polarization mobilizes emotions around themes of nationalism and foreign influence. The media plays a significant role in disseminating emotionally charged content, often dramatizing political narratives (Popova, 2022). "Politainment" further undermines political discourse by prioritizing entertainment over substantive debate (Kitanov, 2013). Disinformation, amplified through media channels, manipulates public emotions and influences political campaigns (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2021b, 2021c, 2022, 2023b). The broader impact of these external factors on Bulgaria's emotional political climate will be explored further in the ENCODE project.

Notable Emotional Triggers in the Country's Politics

The war in Ukraine has exposed Bulgaria's vulnerabilities in its relations with Russia and the EU, highlighting public susceptibility to Russian narratives and the pro-Russian influence on sanction policies (Alpha Research, 2022a; Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023b). Despite efforts to reduce dependency on Russian gas, a significant portion of Bulgaria's natural gas still comes indirectly via the Turkstream pipeline, through Greece, Turkey, and Romania, reflecting ongoing challenges in achieving energy diversification (Bedrov, 2023; Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023b).

Public concerns predominantly focus on domestic issues like inflation, energy prices, and healthcare, overshadowing geopolitical matters (Alpha Research, 2022a). Political parties like Revival have capitalized on these concerns, promoting neutrality in conflicts such as Ukraine through campaigns that emphasize peace and economic stability while subtly advancing pro-Russian rhetoric (Kirilov, 2024).

The absence of strong governance has further hindered energy reforms and diversification efforts. Since the protests in 2020, fragmented governments have struggled to implement effective policies (Simeonova, 2022). Dissatisfaction with successive administrations and persistent conflicts over energy policies reflect the public's anxiety over fuel prices and energy security, which remain central to Bulgaria's political and emotional landscape (Alpha Research, 2023b).

3.2.2.1 ROLE OF CRISIS

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic

Bulgaria's political and emotional climate is shaped by ongoing crises, including the aftermath of COVID-19 and geopolitical conflicts (Ivanov, 2024). Political psychologist Prof. Ivan Ivanov argues that the key political developments in 2024 are driven by these crises, highlighting the need for a stable government capable of making strategic decisions (Ivanov, 2024).

Impact of the Russia vs Ukraine War

Bulgaria's political instability since the 2020 protests has been further complicated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, intensifying historical pro- and anti-Russian sentiments (Zankina, 2023). Historically considered the EU's most pro-Russian country, Bulgaria has witnessed sharp divisions over Russia, with 58% of Bulgarians holding positive views before the invasion (Zankina, 2023). By 2023, roughly a quarter of Bulgarians still saw Russia as a strategic partner, while a third considered it a threat (Hajdu et al., 2023, pp. 12, 36). Public opinion on the war is divided, with 44% blaming Russia, 32% blaming the West, and 15% blaming Ukraine (Hajdu et al., 2023). Government policies have fluctuated, with the Petkov government initially supporting Ukraine through humanitarian and military aid (Spirova, 2023). However, internal disagreements, such as BSP's opposition to military involvement, led to the firing of the defence minister for promoting Russian narratives and the expulsion of Russian diplomats (Oliver, 2022; Republic of Bulgaria Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022;

Zankina, 2023). These moves initially garnered public support but eventually led to strong criticism, revealing the complexity of Bulgaria's position within the EU and NATO, and its relationship with Russia (Kotseva & Nikolov, 2024; Todorov, 2023; Mateeva-Kazakova, 2024). Despite this, support for pro-Russian far-right parties like Revival has grown, alongside increasing public belief in Western provocation being responsible for the invasion (Central Election Commission, 2024; Szicherle, 2024; Filipova, 2024).

Ecology crisis
In 2020, public dissatisfaction with government corruption was fuelled by mismanagement and fraud in an EU-funded project to reconstruct Bulgaria's water supply network (Todorov, 2024b). The European Public Prosecutor's Office seized €2.6 million in assets after uncovering inflated prices charged to the paying company (Todorov, 2024b). Water shortages, particularly in the Sofia area, raised suspicions of mismanagement and sparked protests in towns like Svishtov, Chepelare, and Pleven (Todorov, 2024b). These protests echoed previous 2019 demonstrations in Pernik over similar water mismanagement, culminating in the resignation of the Minister of Environment (Todorov, 2020). Ongoing shortages, compounded by the government's failure to address resource mismanagement, have fuelled frustrations (Todorov, 2024b). In Svishtov, protests connected water shortages to broader ecological crises linked to industrial development and waste disposal, particularly around Ruse, which has struggled with air pollution (Zheleva et al., 2017). The campaign "Let Bulgaria Breathe" gained momentum in 2021 against a new incinerator, highlighting public dissatisfaction with the government's industrial priorities (Stoyanova, 2021). In Sofia, air pollution remains a serious issue, with fine particle levels consistently exceeding safe limits (Ingilizova, 2024).

Political crisis
It is essential to also consider the role of the political crisis which has been unfolding in Bulgaria over the last 3 years regarding the repeating election cycles and snap elections and the inability of the main political parties elected to the parliament to form a well-functioning government (details in the "Recent Major Events Impacting Politics" subsection under "Political Landscape Overview") (PolitPro, 2024; Strazha, 2024).

3.2.3 EMOTIONAL MECHANISMS IN POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING

3.2.3.1 INFLUENCE ON VOTERS' BEHAVIOUR
Ahead of the June 9th snap election, the Mediana agency noted that snap elections were seen as "pacifiers" for voters' disillusionment, reflecting widespread mistrust and scepticism towards Bulgaria's democratic process (Kandilarov, 2024). A project on Bulgarian national identity identifies shame and pride as key emotional drivers, with shame linked to issues like lawlessness, dirty streets, and inefficient public institutions (Petkov et al., 2022). This emotional landscape has shaped recent elections, where promises of reform and infrastructure development resonated strongly with voters. The rise of reformist parties, particularly Revival, can be attributed to their focus on addressing these issues, mobilizing voters through feelings of shame (Petkov et al., 2022).
While shame can hinder development if not accompanied by a motivating factor, it played a significant role in the 2020 protests, which shifted the political landscape (Petkov et al, 2022). However, this initial anger has turned into disengagement over time due to ongoing political crises (Petkov et al. 2022). Revival party's focus on promising solutions has helped maintain voter engagement, contributing to its electoral success (Petkov et al., 2022).

3.2.3.2 INFLUENCE ON POLICY FORMATION

In 2024, Bulgaria amended its education laws to ban the promotion of non-traditional sexual orientations or gender identities (State Gazette, 2024). Parliamentary debates framed LGBTI+ people and activists as tools of Russian hybrid attacks, leveraging anger to sustain the dominant Russia/EU narrative (Mitov, 2024). This reflects a common populist strategy of framing crises and blaming specific groups to create a unifying "enemy" (Stavrakakis et al., 2018; Marchlewska et al., 2018). The crisis in Bulgaria has shifted from internal instability to external threats, with LGBTI+ people linked to perceived Russian influence (Stavrakakis et al., 2018; Marchlewska et al., 2018). A similar dynamic emerged in Bulgaria's 2018 rejection of the Istanbul Convention, where fears over the term "gender" were framed as threats to traditional values (Bunch, 2022). Both cases illustrate a broader "culture war," using antagonistic narratives to stoke fears and assert group identity (Stavrakakis et al., 2018).

3.2.3.3 PROMINENT EMOTIONAL TRENDS IN NATIONAL POLITICS

Feelings of disappointment and dissatisfaction from the 2020 protests persist in Bulgaria's political landscape (Alpha Research, 2023b). Leading up to the October 2024 election, voter fatigue was evident, with only 39% turnout and widespread scepticism about forming a stable government after the 7th snap election (Rusev, 2024). Many view these elections as "pacifiers" for public disillusionment, reflecting deep mistrust in Bulgarian democracy (Kandilarov, 2024). Amid this fatigue, radical parties, particularly the far-right, have gained traction by appealing to undecided voters and protest supporters (Tsabala, 2024). Revival, which secured third place in the election, has steadily recruited protest votes through promises of infrastructure development and distancing Bulgaria from international conflicts, framing these as efforts to protect national interests (Pavlov & Karova, 2024; Pavlov & Teneva, 2024). This shift highlights a growing trend of disillusioned voters gravitating toward uncompromising, populist platforms, complicating coalition-building and reshaping political discourse (Tsabala, 2024).

3.2.4 EMERGING LEADERSHIP STYLES

Bulgarian voters are increasingly guided by emotions rather than rationality, influenced by the party-system crisis and the rise of social media (Ivanov, 2023). While some still base their decisions on political ideology, many are drawn to the emotional appeal of politicians' personalities (Ivanov, 2023). Political psychologists identify three main personality types among Bulgarian leaders—narcissistic (seeking validation), neurotic (pursuing dominance), and hysterical (focused on fulfilling a cause)—which shape distinct leadership styles and emotional connections with voters (Ivanov, 2023). Prominent examples include **Boyko Borissov** (narcissistic), **Ivan Kostov** (neurotic), and Slavi Trifonov and Yane Yanev (hysterical), reflecting the interplay of personality and voter behaviour (Ivanov, 2023).

3.2.4.1 NOTABLE LEADERS AND THEIR EMOTIONAL APPEAL

The leadership styles of Bulgarian political figures have become increasingly emotional, characterized by the use of emotionally resonant strategies and the influence of personal emotions on decision-making (Smilov, 2023; Ivanov, 2024). A defining feature is the reliance on emotional storytelling, particularly by populist and nationalist leaders. **Boyko Borissov**, leader of GERB, exemplifies this approach with narratives likened to a "hero's journey," portraying himself as a self-made leader who overcame adversity (Smilov, 2023). Similarly, Vazrazhdane employs the David-and-Goliath metaphor, casting their leaders as heroes battling external threats (Smilov, 2023), while BSP's **Kornelia Ninova** has attempted similar narratives with less success (Smilov, 2023). President **Rumen Radev** blends themes of common-man leadership with geopolitical opposition, crafting a unique emotional appeal (Administration of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2024a; 2024c). In contrast, PP-DB avoids emotional storytelling, which has limited their connection with voters (Smilov,

2023). Despite achievements in governance, the lack of a cohesive narrative and high mutual expectations between the leadership and their base have created tension. Supporters demand moral rigor and results, while leaders expect both rationality and loyalty, leading to frequent clashes (Smilov, 2023; Ivanov, 2024).

At the local level, leadership preferences vary. In Veliko Tarnovo, residents favour leaders who are calm, composed, and non-aggressive, reflecting traditional conservatism and suppressed societal discontent (Ivanov, 2023). Overall, Bulgaria's political environment increasingly reflects the interplay of emotions, narratives, and voter expectations, shaping leadership styles and electoral outcomes (Smilov, 2023; Ivanov, 2024).

3.2.4.2 EMOTIONAL NARRATIVES USED BY LEADERS

Bulgarian political figures often rely heavily on emotionally evocative rhetoric, particularly during election campaigns (BTV, 2024a; 2024b). Pre-election debates provide a lens into these dynamics, showcasing emotional appeals and their thematic focus. In the first debate before the June 9, 2024, election, emotionally charged rhetoric overshadowed policy discussion (BTV, 2024a). Many candidates used shaming language, personal attacks, exaggerations, and false claims. While representatives from PP-DB (Bogdan Bogdanov), GERB (Ekaterina Zaharieva), and ITN (Stanislav Balabanov) maintained respect for debate rules, others disregarded timing and structure (BTV, 2024a).

Key emotional themes included the political crisis, corruption, demographic issues, energy policy, and Bulgaria's EU and NATO membership (BTV, 2024a; 2024b). Examples of emotive statements included claims of "national treason" and "demographic catastrophe," alongside misleading assertions about Bulgaria's involvement in the Ukraine war (BTV, 2024a). These emotionally resonant but inaccurate claims often gained traction, as seen when ITN candidates echoed Vazrazhdane's false statements on military involvement (BTV, 2024a). The second debate, involving non-parliamentary parties, was more structured, with clearer policy discussion. Yet, candidates like VMRO's representative (Krasimir Karakachanov) invoked emotionally charged themes such as "national sovereignty," opposition to "gender ideologies," and resistance to "utopian experiments" (BTV, 2024b).

President Rumen Radev also employs emotionally laden rhetoric, emphasizing unity, freedom, and dignity while critiquing division, foreign influence, and apathy (Administration of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2024a; 2024b; 2024c; Iliyasov et al., 2024). His speeches often invoke historical pride and religious nationalism, portraying the Bulgarian Orthodox Church as a pillar of national identity (Administration of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2024b). On significant occasions like Liberation Day, he highlights the vision of a "united and European Bulgaria," urging unity around shared values to overcome political stagnation (Administration of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria, 2024c).

3.2.4.3 IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP STYLE ON SOCIETAL EMOTIONS

The extensive use of negative PR in Bulgaria's pre-election campaigns exemplifies how emotive rhetoric can fail or backfire (Kodzhaivanova, 2024). Recent campaigns have increasingly cantered on derogatory language and defamatory exchanges among political leaders, culminating in what has been described as the most "repulsive" campaign period in recent history (Kodzhaivanova, 2024; Petrova, 2024). This approach aimed to discredit opponents and evoked emotions like distrust, anger, and outrage but largely alienated voters by sidelining substantive discussions about policies and ideas (Kodzhaivanova, 2024). Negative campaigning contributed to historically low voter turnout in the June 2024 elections, reflecting citizens' political fatigue and disillusionment (Boulevard Bulgaria, 2024). It also deepened divisions among parties, further obstructing inter-party dialogue and coalition-building (bTV News, 2023). Despite warnings from President Rumen Radev about the damaging effects of such tactics, including their impact on post-election collaboration,

these strategies persist, exacerbating public frustration and undermining political cohesion (bTV News, 2023).

3.3 Austria
3.3.1 POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OVERVIEW

3.3.1.1 POLITICAL REGIME

Austria is a federal parliamentary republic with a representative democracy. The population elects the National Council and regional parliaments (Parliament Austria, 2024). The country has a chancellor as head of government and a president as head of state. The Federal Parliament consists of two chambers: the directly elected National Council (Lower House) and the Bundesrat (Upper House), elected by provincial parliaments (Parliament Austria, 2024). The Federal Government, which includes the Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, and federal ministers, holds supreme administrative functions unless otherwise reserved for the Federal President. The Federal President, while mostly ceremonial, is also commander-in-chief of the armed forces, appoints the Chancellor, can dismiss the Government, dissolve the National Council, and reject proposed ministers. Only the Federal President and National Council are elected by direct popular vote (oesterreich.gv.at-Redaktion, 2024).
Austria is composed of nine federal states: Vienna, Lower Austria, Burgenland, Upper Austria, Styria, Salzburg, Carinthia, Tirol, and Vorarlberg. The federal principle, enshrined in the Constitution, ensures a sharing of legislative, executive, and financial tasks between the provinces and the federal government, which can only be changed by referendum (oesterreich.gv.at-Redaktion, 2024). The separation of powers is reflected in Austrian constitutional law, with distinct roles for legislative, executive, and judiciary bodies (Hofmann, 2012). However, the government and parliamentary majority are closely aligned, blurring the separation of powers, particularly in the legislative process, where most bills are introduced by the Government. Austria joined the European Union in 1995, and EU law takes precedence over Austrian law (European Union Directorate General of Communication, 2024). The Economist Intelligence Unit's 2023 Democracy Index ranks Austria as a full democracy with a score of 8.2, placing it 19th globally (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2006–2023).

3.3.1.2 KEY POLITICAL PARTIES AND MOVEMENTS

The five key political parties are represented in the Austrian National Council: FPÖ (28,85 %), ÖVP (26,27 %), SPÖ (21,14 %), NEOS (9,14 %), Grüne (8,24 %) (based on parliamentary elections 2024).
The ÖVP (Austrian People's Party), founded in 1945, has a Christian-democratic, conservative, federalist background. The party currently provides the Federal Chancellor, Karl Nehammer, in coalition with the Greens (2019-present).
The SPÖ (Austrian Social Democratic Party) is the successor to the Austrian Social Democratic Labor Party, founded in 1888/89. The SPÖ is traditionally a labor party. Its program is built on five pillars: freedom, equality, justice, solidarity, and democracy.
The traditional core groups of the SPÖ and ÖVP have shrunk in recent decades, due to the decreasing role of religion, economic changes, and shifting social attitudes. This tendency is observed in other Western European countries and Austria is no exception.
The FPÖ (Freedom Party of Austria), founded in 1955 as a right-wing conservative party, shifted to right-wing populism under Jörg Haider in the late 1980s, adopting anti-foreigner, anti-Islam, and EU-critical positions. The FPÖ has reshaped Austria's political system, attracted protest voters and became a new labor party. The party won the 2024 election, coalition talks are ongoing.

Founded in 1986, **the Greens** focus on environmental protection, feminism, social justice, and anti-militarism. After years in opposition, they returned to the National Council in 2019 and have been in a coalition government with the ÖVP since 2021.

Founded in 2012, **NEOS** is a socially and economically liberal, reform-oriented party that describes itself as pro-European. It's represented in parliament since 2013. In public perception, the NEOS program is often positioned between the ÖVP and the Greens.

3.3.1.3 RECENT MAJOR EVENTS IMPACTING POLITICS

The 2019 Ibiza affair was Austria's largest political scandal in decades. A secretly recorded video from 2017 showed FPÖ politicians Heinz-Christian Strache and Johann Gudenus discussing manipulating Austria's largest newspaper, Kronen Zeitung, and using nonprofits for covert party donations in exchange for state contracts (European Union Directorate General of Communication, 2024). The video led to the resignation of Strache, Gudenus, and Interior Minister Herbert Kickl, along with all FPÖ ministers. Early elections were scheduled for September 2019, with the ÖVP forming a minority government in the interim (European Union Directorate General of Communication, 2024).

On May 27, 2019, a no-confidence motion succeeded against Chancellor Kurz, resulting in Austria's first successful no-confidence vote since WWII. A transitional government, led by Constitutional Court president Brigitte Bierlein, remained in office until the elections. In January 2020, an investigation committee questioned Strache, Gudenus, and Kurz over false statements. The inquiry revealed the "Buberl Protocols," showing Kurz's influence over state appointments and media, and accusations of manipulating opinion polls. Kurz resigned in 2021 after losing his parliamentary immunity (European Union Directorate General of Communication, 2024).

The Ibiza scandal also triggered the 2020 shredding affair, where data from the Federal Chancellery was destroyed under a false name. In June 2019, police investigated the appointment of Peter Sidlo (FPÖ) as CFO of Casinos Austria, allegedly backed by Novomatic in exchange for political favours and covert party donations to the FPÖ (European Union Directorate General of Communication, 2024).

Austria's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was pivotal. The first case was confirmed on February 25, 2020, with 6,084,529 cases reported by June 30, 2023 (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2006–2023). Austria was among the first in Europe to implement strict lockdowns and measures. The crisis strained Kurz's government, with issues such as the vaccination mandate and political polarization. Kurz resigned in October 2021 amid investigations into the Ibiza scandal and corruption allegations (European Union Directorate General of Communication, 2024).

The 2015 refugee crisis also significantly impacted Austria, with a large influx of asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Media portrayals of refugees raised concerns about border control and sovereignty, shifting political discourse and making migration and EU integration central issues for both governing and opposition parties (European Union Directorate General of Communication, 2024).

3.3.1.4 CURRENT EMOTIONAL CLIMATE

Recent crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the climate crisis, and rising inflation, have all contributed to uncertainty. The pandemic posed significant challenges to social institutions, creating widespread instability in daily life. Similarly, the ongoing war in Ukraine, rising living costs, and the intensifying effects of climate change are possibly fuelling fear, anxiety, and insecurity in Austria and across Europe (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2006–2023).

Economic and social cleavages play a key role in shaping political tensions in Austria, with disparities in opportunities across various sectors. For instance, children's educational

opportunities often depend on their parents' income and education level (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2006–2023). Discrimination further compounds inequality, with women, older people, migrants, Muslims, LGBTQ+ individuals, those with disabilities, and marginalized groups facing systemic barriers. A 2018 survey found that 21% of respondents faced discrimination in job searches, 13% in housing, 10% in education, and 8% in healthcare (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2006–2023). Income inequality is stark, with the top 1% earning 14 times more than the median and holding around 40% of Austria's wealth (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2006–2023). The at-risk-of-poverty or marginalization rate increased from 16.7% in 2020 to 17.3% in 2021 (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2006–2023).

While Austria's welfare state offers mechanisms for redistribution, some pre-pandemic policies deepened social divisions. For example, the "new social assistance program" reduced benefits, particularly affecting large families and those with limited language skills (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2006–2023). Though some of these measures were overturned by the Constitutional Court, they contributed to a climate of selective social marginalization (Hofmann, 2012).

The COVID-19 pandemic also led to a significant erosion of trust in Austria's institutions. Satisfaction with democracy fell sharply from March 2020 to January 2022, with trust in national governments declining especially quickly in Austria compared to other countries (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2006–2023). Emotional polarization increased during the pandemic, with surveys showing a marked deterioration in mental health, particularly among those with lower socio-economic status (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2006–2023). Vulnerable groups reported increased marginalization, and people in lower economic brackets showed stronger negative emotional reactions to politics (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2006–2023). The most common societal emotions during the pandemic were solidarity, anxiety, anger, and sadness (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2006–2023).

Between 2003 and 2014/15, political polarization in Austria grew more sharply than in most other European countries (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2006–2023). Although Austria weathered the economic fallout from the 2007-2008 financial crisis better than many, unemployment still rose from 7% in 2003 to over 9% by 2015 (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2006–2023). Debates over immigration during this period also amplified divisions, further exacerbating polarization (European Union Directorate General of Communication, 2024).

3.3.2 EMOTIONAL POLITICS DRIVERS

3.3.2.1 DRIVERS OF EMOTIONS IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Traditional Media Influence

Austria's media landscape is traditional, with new media complementing rather than replacing traditional sources (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Media-Analyse, 2024). Print newspapers and ORF (Austria's largest public broadcaster) dominate, but about two-thirds of the population engages with new media (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Media-Analyse, 2024). ORF operates independently but faces criticism over political influence due to its Foundation and Public Councils.

In 2023, key daily newspaper readership was: Krone Zeitung (21.5%), Heute (9%), Österreich/oe24 (7.4%), Kleine Zeitung (7.7%), Der Standard (6.8%), and Kurier (5.7%) (Österreichische Auflagenkontrolle, 2024). Although newspaper reach has declined from 73.7% in 2010 to 51.9% in 2023, ORF's TV channels hold 32% market share (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Media-Analyse, 2024). Regional newspapers have broad reach, especially among older Austrians. Younger people increasingly turn to online media, with Der Standard, Heute, and ORF's online platforms attracting millions of users (Österreichische Webanalyse, 2024).

Krone Zeitung has been criticized for xenophobia and fear-mongering (Fixl, 2006), while Österreich/oe24 has faced accusations of blurring editorial lines (Demmel, 2024). The Kurier,

associated with the ÖVP, is a bourgeois-conservative paper, and Der Standard advocates for pluralism and progressive policies (Demmel, 2024). Media research shows Krone Zeitung has the greatest political influence, followed by ORF, with Der Standard and Kurier further behind (Kaltenbrunner, 2010).

Social Media Influence

In Austria, the most popular social media platforms are Instagram (3.2 million users), Facebook (3.05 million), TikTok (2.57 million), Snapchat (2.33 million), LinkedIn (2.3 million), Pinterest (2.07 million), and X (1.7 million) (Statista, 2024). Social media is crucial for Austrian politicians to promote themselves, with the city of Vienna collaborating with over 250 influencers to reach diverse audiences (Crisan, 2023). The far-right FPÖ is skilled at using social media, especially Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, and YouTube, often clashing with traditional media like ORF and Der Standard (Schäller, 2020). Right-wing audiences tend to focus on tabloid media, including their online presence. Austria has notable right-wing influencers, such as Martin Sellner, founder of the Austrian Identitarian Movement (Schäller, 2020). Left-wing Green party voters are more likely to rely on online-only news sources, influenced by outlets like Der Standard and Die Chefredaktion, which target younger audiences through platforms like Instagram and TikTok (Crisan, 2023).

Key Drivers Identified in the Literature

In Austria, political spaces are very emotion-based and governed by emotions that dictate voter turnout and public opinion (Prandner & Glatz, 2020). Political players use emotional appeals, especially in addressing issues of national identity, immigration, and social policy, to rally support (Thiele, 2021). The rise of populist parties, such as the Freedom Party of Austria, has been closely associated with fear and anger and the inclination to frame immigration and the European Union as dangers to Austrian sovereignty and cultural identity (Thiele, 2021). Political campaigns also employ positive emotions such as hope and pride by emphasizing national success, cultural heritage, and economic stability to foster cohesion and optimism (Prandner & Glatz, 2020). Electioneering increasingly uses emotional storytelling and personal narrative to induce empathy and trust, which get live amplified on social media (Prandner & Glatz, 2020). Outside electoral politics, social movement and protest, like climate or social justice protests, emphasize the power of common emotions like solidarity and outrage that fuel activism through common experience (Wardana et al., 2022). It also constructs public opinion on an emotional level, with news reporting on topics such as immigration or financial crises serving to entrench existing biases, illustrating how emotions still rule supreme in Austria's political and social life (Prandner & Glatz, 2020).

Notable Emotional Triggers in the Country's Politics

Immigration, especially after the 2015 refugee crisis, remains a key issue in Austrian politics, with debates on national security, cultural identity, and economic strain (Josipovic, 2021). From 2015 to 2019, anti-migration rhetoric dominated, particularly from the FPÖ and ÖVP under Sebastian Kurz, portraying migration as a threat to security and cultural values (Josipovic, 2021). This emotional discourse remains polarizing, with populist movements framing it as a danger to Austria's safety and identity (Thiele, 2021). Scandals like the Ibiza affair (2019) and Kurz's resignation (2021) fuelled distrust in political elites, particularly among low-income groups (Oberluggauer, 2021). However, these events did not significantly reduce overall satisfaction with democracy (Oberluggauer, 2021). Austria's WWII role is contentious, with two narratives: the "first victim" claim and the acknowledgment of shared responsibility for Nazi crimes (Enderlein, 2013). Right-wing populist parties use this emotional complexity to shape national identity, sometimes emphasizing patriotism or engaging in historical revisionism (Enderlein, 2013). Other key events influencing Austria's political landscape include the 1980s scandals (AKH, Lucona, Noricum), the rise of right-wing populism under Jörg Haider, and ongoing church-state conflicts (Thiele, 2021).

3.3.2.1 ROLE OF CRISIS

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 crisis exacerbated existing social inequalities, creating challenges for institutions and generating widespread uncertainty, fear, anxiety, and insecurity (Blum & Kuhlmann, 2021; Dirtl, 2022). Political communication framed the crisis with a "giving-to-promote" narrative, casting the virus as the villain and the government as the hero (Blum & Kuhlmann, 2021).

Media sentiment during the crisis was surprisingly positive, likely due to a "rally round-the-flag" effect, which boosted public support for political leadership (Eisele et al., 2022). Audiences reacted more emotionally to leaders' portrayals than to specific policies (Eisele et al., 2022). Emotional intensity peaked during the lockdown, with public comments reflecting heightened reactions to political figures, especially Chancellor Kurz (Eisele et al., 2022).

However, the relationship between the lockdown, government actions, and political figures, particularly Kurz, led to a significant loss of trust in both the government and established media like ORF (Blum & Kuhlmann, 2021).

Impact of the Russia vs Ukraine War

Before the Ukraine war, Austria maintained friendly relations with Russia, with Austria's neutrality and non-NATO membership facilitating unique diplomatic roles (Skrabacz, 2022). While Austria does not provide military support to Ukraine due to its neutrality, it has imposed political and economic sanctions against Russia, publicly condemning the invasion and supporting EU sanctions (Skrabacz, 2022). This shift from neutrality prompted diplomatic backlash from Russia (Skrabacz, 2022).

The war has caused growing social uncertainty in Austria, with rising concerns about escalating conflict, rising prices, and the future of the war (Statistik Austria, 2024). The refugee migration from Ukraine in 2022 surpassed the 2015 crisis, further adding to anxieties (Statistik Austria, 2024). While anti-globalization sentiment hasn't gained momentum, Austrians are increasingly aware of their economic dependencies, particularly in energy imports (Skrabacz, 2022).

Ecology Crisis

The climate crisis became a central issue in Austria during 2019-2020, with "Fridays for Future" protests and media coverage highlighting the country's failure to meet Paris Agreement targets (Umweltbundesamt, 2024). However, the COVID-19 pandemic shifted public attention to the virus, though climate change remained a serious concern (Wardana et al., 2022). Climate change is viewed as a major issue, especially by younger people and women, though fewer Austrians see it as directly affecting them compared to COVID-19 (Umweltbundesamt, 2024). A significant majority (85%) recognize climate change as a serious problem, 95% support climate protection measures, and 88% believe media coverage is not exaggerated (Umweltbundesamt, 2024).

3.3.3 EMOTIONAL MECHANISMS IN POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING

3.3.3.1 INFLUENCE ON VOTERS' BEHAVIOUR

In the 2017 Austrian Presidential Election, emotions heavily influenced voter behaviour. Norbert Hofer (FPÖ) used fear-based appeals on immigration and national identity, while Alexander Van der Bellen (pro-EU) promoted hope and European solidarity (Gavenda, 2016; Fuchs, 2018). This emotional divide—fear vs. hope, nationalism vs. European unity—shaped voter choices, with Hofer appealing to rural and working-class voters, and Van der Bellen attracting urban, pro-European voters. Van der Bellen won by a narrow margin (Gavenda, 2016).

In the 2019 European Parliament elections, emotions like fear, anger, and national pride shaped voter behaviour. The FPÖ capitalized on fear of the EU, immigration, and economic

inequality, while Sebastian Kurz's ÖVP promoted hope and unity, evoking pride in Austria's role in a strong EU (Nai et al., 2021; García Hípola et al., 2021). The ÖVP won, though populist sentiments remained strong.

In the 2019 Austrian National Election, emotions like anger and disillusionment, particularly after the Ibiza scandal, played a key role. Kurz's ÖVP capitalized on national pride and security, while the FPÖ stoked fear over immigration. The Greens attracted support with their environmental message (Thiele, 2021; Obermaier, 2021). Kurz's emotional appeal to hope and stability helped the ÖVP win, while populist and environmental concerns remained influential.

3.3.3.2 INFLUENCE ON POLICY FORMATION

In 2015, Austria's response to the European migrant crisis was shaped by strong emotional reactions, particularly from the FPÖ, which framed the influx of refugees as a threat to Austria's culture and values (Josipovic, 2021; Thiele, 2021). Their rhetoric of fear, focusing on national sovereignty and security, resonated with rural voters. Sebastian Kurz, then Foreign Minister, adopted a hardline stance, advocating for tighter border controls, reduced refugee quotas, and the closure of the Balkan route (Puller, 2018). This approach gained public support for restrictive immigration policies.

During the 2017 election, immigration and national identity were central issues. Hofer (FPÖ) capitalized on fears about the refugee crisis and the EU's policies, portraying the EU as undermining Austria's sovereignty (Thiele, 2021). After the election, as part of the governing coalition, the FPÖ pushed for stricter immigration laws and asylum policies focused on national security, cementing their influence on these issues (Thiele et al., 2023).

The emotional appeal to national unity during the COVID-19 pandemic also shaped policy. Under Kurz's leadership, the government framed the pandemic as a national crisis requiring collective effort (Blum & Kuhlmann, 2021). Emotional appeals to responsibility and sacrifice led to compliance with lockdowns, mask mandates, and social distancing. Fears of overwhelming the healthcare system and illness were central to the messaging, justifying restrictive policies such as emergency measures and financial support packages (Blum & Kuhlmann, 2021). Kurz's narrative of resilience encouraged broad public support and significant legislative actions (Blum & Kuhlmann, 2021).

3.3.3.3 PROMINENT EMOTIONAL TRENDS IN NATIONAL POLITICS

Fear, particularly about immigration and national identity, is a major emotional driver in Austrian politics, especially since the 2015 refugee crisis (Thiele, 2021; Josipovic, 2021). Populist and right-wing parties exploit this fear, framing migration as a national security issue. Anger and distrust towards the political elite, fuelled by scandals like the 2019 Ibiza scandal, also play a key role, leading to disillusionment and support for populist parties promising reform (Obermaier, 2021). Kurz's rise as ÖVP leader was partially driven by his ability to tap into these sentiments (Puller, 2018).

National pride and European solidarity are significant emotional factors, particularly regarding Austria's role in the EU. Pride in national identity contrasts with fears about sovereignty, creating divides between pro-EU and Eurosceptic voters (García Hípola et al., 2021). Hope for political renewal, especially after scandals, motivates voters seeking change and new solutions (Nai et al., 2021).

Recent years have seen increased polarization in Austrian political discourse, with emotions driving rhetoric and deepening divides. Populist parties like the FPÖ and mainstream parties such as the ÖVP and Greens use emotional appeals to mobilize their bases, intensifying political tensions (Thiele et al., 2023). Fear and hope, particularly related to immigration and national or European identity, have made political affiliation and voting behaviour more emotionally driven, further dividing society (Fuchs, 2018; García Hípola et al., 2021).
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3.3.4 EMERGING LEADERSHIP STYLES

3.3.4.1 NOTABLE LEADERS AND THEIR EMOTIONAL APPEAL

Herbert Kickl (leader of the FPÖ) as well as former leaders of right-wing populist parties (e.g., Jörg Haider, Heinz-Christian Strache) have been linked to using fear and anger appeals in the context of migration.

3.3.4.2 EMOTIONAL NARRATIVES USED BY LEADERS

Political leaders in Austria have used emotional narratives to shape public discourse, engage voters, and influence political outcomes, often tapping into national values, collective fears, and hopes. These narratives typically focus on patriotism, unity, fear, and hope.

Sebastian Kurz, former Chancellor and leader of the ÖVP, frequently emphasized patriotism and national identity protection, especially during the 2015 migration crisis. He warned that Austria's identity and security were at risk due to uncontrolled immigration and the influx of refugees. His appeal to national pride resonated with conservative voters who saw him as a defender of Austrian values in the face of globalization and European integration.

Heinz Fischer, President of Austria from 2004 to 2016, presented a contrasting narrative of unity and solidarity, reflecting Austria's humanitarian values. During the refugee crisis, Fischer championed Austria's tradition of welcoming refugees and called for national solidarity, framing Austria as a compassionate society with a moral obligation to help those in need. His message was designed to unify the country around empathy and inclusion, countering the fear-driven rhetoric of figures like Kurz and Strache.

Heinz-Christian Strache, former leader of the FPÖ, used fear-based emotional appeals, particularly focusing on immigration from Muslim-majority countries. He warned that Austria was under threat from refugees, framing immigration as a danger to Austria's cultural and social fabric. His appeals to fear, particularly the "Islamization" of Austria, resonated with voters anxious about national security and cultural preservation.

Alexander Van der Bellen, supported by the Green Party, ran for president in 2016 with a message of hope, unity, and European solidarity. He emphasized Austria's role in the European Union and rejected nationalist rhetoric, offering an optimistic vision of diversity and inclusion. His campaign framed Austria's identity as progressive and forward-looking, appealing to voters seeking an alternative to the populist, fear-driven politics of the far right.

3.3.4.3 IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP STYLE ON SOCIETAL EMOTIONS

Media speculated that former chancellor Kurz was able to reduce political apathy by saying that he wants a "leadership style" opening the deadlock of the previous Grand Coalition (promising more transparency, less regulations, and a more organized government communication strategy). After political scandals, the media reporting shifted in tone and scrutinized the claims about transparency. According to media reports, this had a negative impact on political trust.

3.4 Denmark

3.4.1 POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OVERVIEW

3.4.1.1 POLITICAL REGIME

Denmark is a constitutional monarchy with negative parliamentarism. While the current government is a coalition majority, Denmark generally has stable minority coalition governments (Christiansen & Pedersen, 2014). Political parties hold significant influence in parliament, while committees are relatively weak (Jensen, 1995, 2002). Most legislation is

agreed upon in broad political agreements before formal drafting, limiting parliamentary debate but maintaining strong measures to hold the government accountable (Christiansen, 2005; Damgaard & Jensen, 2006; Holli & Harder, 2016).

Denmark follows the Nordic separation of powers, with a strong legislature and limited judicial intervention (Krunke & Thorarensen, 2018). Political institutions are rooted in good governance, democracy, rule of law, human rights, and low corruption (Krunke & Thorarensen, 2018). The country's welfare system, supported by high taxes, emphasizes redistribution, free state-funded education, public childcare, and a labour market built on "flexicurity," which combines employer flexibility with unemployment benefits (KL, 2024).

The Danish government has three levels: state, regions (5), and municipalities (98). Municipalities, governed by elected councils, are responsible for local welfare services, including healthcare, social services, primary education, and infrastructure (Ministry of Interior and Health, 2024). Their funding comes from local taxes and state grants, though national laws restrict their autonomy (KL, 2024). Regions, managed by elected councils, oversee public hospitals, high schools, public transport, and environmental issues (Danske Regioner, 2024). These regions were created in 2007 as part of a structural reform that also reduced municipalities, and their future remains a topic of debate (Danske Regioner, 2024). Together with Greenland and the Faroe Islands, Denmark forms the Danish Realm. While Greenland and the Faroes are largely self-governing, foreign policy and international security remain under Denmark's control, which continues to be a subject of political discussion (Harder, 2022).

3.4.1.2 KEY POLITICAL PARTIES AND MOVEMENTS

After the last election, the national parliament consists of twelve political parties of which three parties across the left/right spectrum form a majority government with a Social Democratic Prime Minister (Christiansen & Pedersen, 2014). The recent election continued a recent trend of much voter movement between the Danish political parties (Jensen, 2002). The parties in the Danish Parliament can be categorized based on their political orientation. On the political middle, there are the Social Democratic Party (A), the Liberal Party (V), the Conservative Party (C), and the Moderates (M); to the right of the middle, the parties include the Denmark Democrats (DD), the Danish People's Party (DF), and the Liberal Alliance (LA); on the left side of the middle, the parties consist of the Red-Green Alliance (O), the Green Left (SF), the Social Liberal Party (RV), and The Alternative (AA) (KL, 2024).

The Danish Social Liberal Party (Radikale Venstre), founded in 1905, is a centrist party historically collaborating with both left- and right-wing parties. Led by Martin Lidegaard, it holds 7 seats in Parliament and is currently in opposition (KL, 2024).

The Social Democratic Party (Socialdemokratiet), Denmark's oldest party (1871), is led by Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen and holds 50 seats. Historically rooted in labor unions, it now focuses on welfare and state-driven growth, leading the centre coalition government (Christiansen & Pedersen, 2014).

The Conservative People's Party (Det Konservative Folkeparti), founded in 1915, is a right-wing party advocating individual liberty and social responsibility. Led by Mona Juul, it holds 10 seats and is in opposition (KL, 2024).

The Green Left (Socialistisk Folkeparti), founded in 1959, is a left-wing party emphasizing the environment, welfare, and equality. Led by Pia Olsen Dyhr, it holds 15 seats and is the largest opposition party (KL, 2024).

The Liberal Alliance, founded in 2007, promotes economic liberalism, tax cuts, and public sector restructuring. Led by Alex Vanopslagh, it holds 14 seats and is in opposition (KL, 2024).

The Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti), founded in 1995, focuses on welfare for Danish citizens, strict immigration policies, and national culture. Led by Morten Messerschmidt, it holds 5 seats and is in opposition (KL, 2024).

The Liberal Party (Venstre), established in 1870, supports individual freedom, free markets,

and business liberalization. Led by Troels Lund Poulsen, it holds 23 seats and is part of the centre coalition government (KL, 2024).

The Denmark Democrats (Danmarksdemokraterne), founded in 2022 by Inger Støjberg, advocate conservative values and rural-urban balance. The party holds 14 seats and is in opposition (KL, 2024).

The Red-Green Alliance (Enhedslisten), founded in 1989, is a socialist party focusing on public sector development and environmental issues. Led by Pelle Dragsted, it holds 9 seats and is in opposition (KL, 2024).

The Alternative (Alternativet), founded in 2013, emphasizes sustainability and new political culture. Led by Franciska Rosenkilde, it holds 6 seats and is in opposition (KL, 2024).

Labour and employer organizations
Due to the structure of the Danish labour market, particularly the large labour and employer organizations are powerful in Danish society (Christiansen & Pedersen, 2014). In terms of civil society, a study by Altinget.dk found the following organizations to be the most influential: Danish Cancer Society, DaneAge Association, National Olympic Committee and Sports Confederation of Denmark, Danish Red Cross, Danish Society for Nature Conservation, Danish Refugee Council, Amnesty International, DanChurchAid, Children's Welfare, Danish Patients (Altinget.dk, 2024).

Movements
There is a rather big and loosely oriented movement on issues of the climate, with participation from both young and old. Biodiversity and environmental issues have lately been topics of concern. The Danish Society for Nature Conservation opposes the organisation Sustainable Farming (Bæredygtigt Landbrug), which focuses on economic sustainability of farming, and, to a lesser degree, the large Danish farming organisation Danish Agriculture & Food Council (KL, 2024).

3.4.1.3 RECENT MAJOR EVENTS IMPACTING POLITICS

#MeToo (2020) - on August 26, 2020, media host Sofie Linde spoke during the "Zulu Comedy Galla" about being pressured into sex by an older colleague at age 18 while working at Danish National Television (DR). Her speech ignited Denmark's second #MeToo wave, exposing harassment and inequality in multiple sectors.

Mink Scandal (2020) - on November 3, 2020, the government ordered all minks in Denmark to be culled due to fears of virus transmission threatening public health and COVID-19 vaccine development. The decision lacked legal basis, requiring subsequent parliamentary approval in December. A commission later criticized the government for its unlawful actions, highlighting failures in adherence to the principle of legality (Christensen, 2024).

Støjberg Impeachment (2021) - former Immigration Minister Inger Støjberg was sentenced to 60 days of unconditional imprisonment for illegally directing the separation of asylum-seeking couples where one partner was under 18. The directive violated Danish and international law, requiring individual case assessments. Following her impeachment, she left the Liberal Party and founded The Denmark Democrats in 2022.

Russia's Invasion of Ukraine (2022) - the invasion on February 24, 2022, led Denmark to increase its defence budget and support Ukraine with aid and refugee assistance. A July 2022 referendum saw 66.9% of voters approve abolishing Denmark's EU defence opt-out, signaling heightened defence integration within the EU.

Nord Stream Sabotage (2022) - on September 26, 2022, leaks were detected in the Nord Stream pipelines near Bornholm, later identified as intentional sabotage. Investigations concluded in February 2024 without sufficient evidence for prosecution. Public opinion suggests involvement by Russia or Ukraine, while German authorities continue investigating.

This incident, alongside the Ukraine invasion, intensified focus on national and regional security.

3.4.1.4 CURRENT EMOTIONAL CLIMATE

Optimism about Denmark's future is limited, and pessimism is prevalent. Only about one in ten Danes believes society will improve significantly in the next decade, and just one in three expects their children to be better off economically than themselves. Gender and age differences are pronounced: 16% of men believe society will improve compared to only 8% of women. Older Danes, particularly those over 60, are more optimistic about children's future economic prospects, while younger generations, especially those under 40, largely believe children will be worse off than their parents (Operate, 2024).

Trust remains a cornerstone of Danish society. Nearly three-quarters of Danes believe "most people can be trusted," ranking Denmark among the highest globally for social and civic trust (Wiliams, 2024). Institutional trust is also strong, with high confidence in the police, judicial system, and news media. Trust in the national government, though above the OECD average, dropped by five percentage points from 2021 to 2023; men report higher levels of trust in government (51%) than women (37%), and higher education correlates strongly with trust (OECD, 2024).

Affective polarization in Denmark is relatively low, with only 16% of Danes viewing political opponents as "evil," a figure that has remained stable since the 1970s. This sentiment is slightly higher on the political left. Danes also tend to overestimate the popularity of their own parties (Hansen & Stubager, 2024).

The 2022 election was primarily cantered on welfare politics. The top three issues were health, the economy (amid high inflation), and climate. Immigration regained prominence but saw little debate among centrist and right-wing parties due to general alignment on strict policies (Hansen & Stubager, 2024). COVID-19 was absent from discussions, though the mink scandal was a point of contention, particularly when the party V dropped its demand for further investigation after forming a government coalition (Hansen & Stubager, 2024).

While still important, climate received less attention compared to 2019 due to broad consensus on its significance and policies (Hansen & Stubager, 2024). Key divides included identity politics and the urban-rural split. Right-wing and centrist parties emphasized preventing rural areas from being left behind (Hansen & Stubager, 2024,), while most Danes leaned conservative on identity politics (Hansen & Stubager, 2024). The election underscored a growing divide between urban and rural voters, with rural areas leaning right and cities leaning more left. This urban-rural divide was the largest since the early 1970s (Hansen & Stubager, 2024).

3.4.2 EMOTIONAL POLITICS DRIVERS

3.4.2.1 DRIVERS OF EMOTIONS IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Traditional Media Influence

Danes trust their news media highly, with 57% expressing trust compared to only 13% distrust (Bedsted & Rønn, 2023).

Public service outlets, such as DR and TV2, are dominant, with DR reaching 99% of those over 65 and 87–91% of younger age groups weekly (Bedsted & Rønn, 2023). DR and TV2 are the most trusted, with 84% and 81% trust, respectively (Faizzad, 2024a; Faizzad, 2024b). However, concerns about fake news have increased significantly, rising from 36% in 2023 to 45% in 2024 (Faizzad, 2024b).

Notable opinion-shaping newspapers include:

Politike – left-leaning, with 79% of readers identifying as left-wing (2010–2011) (Politiken, 2024). Readers are mostly over 50 years old (61%), and 65% hold a university degree. Politiken's

readership is geographically concentrated in the capital region (55%) and Zealand (14%) (Ocast, 2024), with 492,000 weekly readers (JP/Politikens Hus, 2024).

Berlingsk – conservative-leaning, with 65% of readers identifying as right-wing in 2010–2011 (Winther, 2011). Readers tend to be aged 30–60, with higher incomes and a slight male majority (55%) (Berlingske, 2023a; Berlingske, 2023b). It has 333,000 weekly readers (Olsen, 2023).

Information – prioritizes stories on climate, equal rights, and political values (Skjoldjensen, 2024a). 26% of readers are under 30 (Skjoldjensen, 2024b), and 56% have higher education (Mollerup, 2001). Historically left-wing oriented, it now has 165,000 weekly readers (Olsen, 2023).

Jyllands-Posten – right-leaning, with 67% of readers identifying as right-wing in 2011 (Berlingske, 2011). Readers are primarily men (55%), highly educated, and work in the business sector (JP/Politikens Hus, 2024). It has 340,000 weekly readers (Jyllandsposten, 2024).

Ekstrablad – a tabloid that challenges society's elite, appealing to readers with lower incomes and less education (Ekstrabladet, 2024a). It has a slight male readership (58%) and 36% of its audience is from the capital region (Ekstrabladet, 2024b). Ekstra Bladet reaches 258,000 weekly readers (Ekstrabladet, 2024c).

Social Media Influence

One-third of Danes use Facebook to read news, while about one in ten use YouTube or Instagram. Meanwhile, 45% do not use social media at all to access news (Faizzad, 2024). A current European research project studies the role of hyper-partisan alternative media in the digital public sphere in Denmark, Sweden, Germany, and Austria. It finds that influencers, social commentators, activists, alternative news outlets, digital interest communities, and political discussion groups play a significant role in the dissemination of news and opinions in Denmark. Many Facebook pages and groups, X (formerly Twitter) profiles, and even a few Telegram channels have nearly as much influence on the spread of information as political parties, politicians, and established media outlets. A particularly Danish characteristic is that many of the most central actors in the news flow are public Facebook groups—groups that have recently been described as "new community centres" (Mayerhöffer et al., 2024). These groups should not only be understood as community centres but also as independent and active news distributors and editors (Mayerhöffer et al., 2024).

Key Drivers Identified in the Literature

Affective polarization in Denmark has been debated, with some studies finding it relatively low (Hansen & Stubager, 2024; Pedersen, Christensen, & Pedersen, 2022), while others show it to be slightly higher. Around one in four Danes would feel uncomfortable having a neighbour with opposing political views, a sentiment more pronounced among older left-wing voters in urban areas (Hjort, Dinesen, & Sønderskov, 2019; Hansen & Stubager, 2024). In contrast, the level of social distance toward immigrants is lower. Immigration, once a major point of division, was only briefly discussed in the most recent election (Hansen & Stubager, 2024).

A significant concern for rural Danes is the fear that their areas are being left behind, with many believing that city residents look down on them and that rural areas receive less economic development than they deserve (Hansen & Stubager, 2024). These concerns about rural versus urban divide have been ongoing for years.

Identity politics became an important issue in the latest election, with voters forming strong attitudes on these matters, particularly on the right side of the political spectrum (Hansen & Stubager, 2024). Political parties are divided on these issues, but voters' stances on identity politics were notably more pronounced than in previous elections (Hansen & Stubager, 2024). Another issue shaped by emotions and affects is gender equality. Danes are divided on the issue, with 40% of left-wing voters believing gender equality is still lacking, while 60% of right-wing voters think it has gone too far (Hansen & Stubager, 2024). These views are influenced

by gender, age, and political party affiliation. Generally, women are more inclined to prioritize gender equality than men, with the difference being more pronounced among younger generations. Political party choice also plays a key role in shaping attitudes towards gender equality (Hansen & Stubager, 2024).

Notable Emotional Triggers in the Country's Politics

Identifying emotional triggers in political discourse is challenging. However, certain issues consistently emerge as significant concerns for the public. Among these, immigration, the rural-urban divide, and climate change stand out as key topics that influence public sentiment and political engagement in Denmark. These issues are deeply felt and contribute to shaping the emotional landscape of political communication.

3.4.2.1 ROLE OF CRISIS

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic

As mentioned in previous sections, COVID-19 policies themselves were not a key issue in the election, but the handling of the pandemic remained relevant due to its lasting impact. A particularly significant issue was the Mink Scandal of 2020 (see section 1.3 Recent Major Events Impacting Politics), which persisted as a point of discussion during the election and beyond, contributing to the broader discourse on government accountability in the context of COVID-19 (Hansen & Stubager, 2024).

Impact of the Russia vs Ukraine War

Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, significantly shifted Denmark's defence policies. The government increased its defence budget, and a national referendum on July 1, 2022, saw 66.9% of Danes voting to abolish the opt-out from EU defence policy (Euronews, 2022). Public opinion in Denmark has largely supported aid to Ukraine and assistance to Ukrainian refugees (Hansen & Stubager, 2024). Moreover, the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines on September 26, 2022, intensified security concerns, as gas leaks near Bornholm were later confirmed to be intentional. The investigation, concluded in February 2024, found insufficient evidence for criminal charges, but speculation pointed to Russia or Ukraine as potential culprits. This event, along with the ongoing war, has heightened security and defence concerns in Denmark (Hansen & Stubager, 2024).

Ecology Crisis

In a one-year study, 29% of Danes cited the climate crisis as the most significant factor shaping their view of the future. Along with economic challenges, this was the top issue in a European study conducted in Fall 2023, with young people particularly concerned about the climate (European Parliament Research Service, 2024). Despite its importance, the climate crisis received less attention in the latest national election compared to previous ones. Scholars suggest this is because the issue does not deeply divide Danish society. Although left-wing parties are more vocal about the need for political changes, all parties agree on the necessity for government action to combat climate change (Hansen & Stubager, 2024).

3.4.3 EMOTIONAL MECHANISMS IN POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING

3.4.3.1 INFLUENCE ON VOTERS' BEHAVIOUR

There are few studies on emotions and political choice in Denmark. Most research focuses on voters' positions and preferences rather than political emotions. Notable scholars like Professor Michale Bang-Pedersen and Professor Lene Aarøe have used Denmark as a case to explore the relationship between emotions, affects, and attitudes (Bang-Pedersen & Aarøe, 2018). However, these studies mainly focus on theoretical frameworks rather than

practical insights into political emotions in Denmark. For example, Bang-Pedersen's study on Danish students finds that emotions like anger and compassion influence opinions on criminal justice, with anxiety having no relation to perceptions of criminal intent (Bang-Pedersen & Aarøe, 2018).

3.4.3.2 INFLUENCE ON POLICY FORMATION

Voter preferences have shaped public policy on immigration, particularly in the past decade. Initially introduced by the 'Fremskridtspartiet' in 1986 and later championed by The Danish People's Party (DF), immigration became a central issue in Danish politics. Over time, it has been adopted by middle and right-wing parties, influencing several governments. The issue of supporting rural areas, though not new, has gained significant traction in the past 10 years. Both left- and right-leaning governments have implemented reforms, such as moving state institutions and higher education facilities to rural areas, as seen in the 'Better Balance' reforms (2015–2018) and the 'Closer' reforms (2021) (Hansen & Stubager, 2024).

3.4.3.3 PROMINENT EMOTIONAL TRENDS IN NATIONAL POLITICS

Emotions surrounding climate issues in Denmark can be grouped into six distinct attitudes: Alarmed, Alert, Ambivalent, Cautious, Indifferent, and Doubtful (Hansen & Stubager, 2024). Concern for climate change and support for climate mitigation policies tend to be lower among individuals with right-leaning political views, a preference for hierarchical structures, and individualist values. Despite Denmark's culture of consensus and widespread acceptance of climate science, political orientation remains a significant factor in shaping differences in climate-related perspectives.

3.4.4 EMERGING LEADERSHIP STYLES

3.4.4.1 NOTABLE LEADERS AND THEIR EMOTIONAL APPEAL

The 2022 national election in Denmark marked an unprecedented focus on party leaders. Two parties, M (led by Lars Løkke) and DD (led by Inger Støjberg), were notably centred around their leaders' personas, both being former leaders of V (Hansen & Stubager, 2024). Inger Støjberg's right-wing DD party focuses on strict immigration policies and advocating for rural areas. During the election, she framed her party as representing "ordinary people" against the "elite salons of Copenhagen" (Hansen & Stubager, 2024). Recently, she opposed government plans to establish solar energy parks, accusing them of transforming agricultural land without public consent—despite rural mayors supporting such initiatives (Hansen & Stubager, 2024). Støjberg has successfully crafted her own narrative, portraying herself as a defender of young girls against oppressive traditions, even while standing trial (Hansen & Stubager, 2024). She launched a subscription-based website to share her perspective directly with citizens. In 2017, she famously celebrated a tough immigration policy milestone with a viral Facebook post featuring a cake, further cementing her image (Hansen & Stubager, 2024).

While emotional appeals are often associated with right-leaning politics, left-wing parties like the Red-Green Alliance (OO) and The Alternative (AA) also employ emotion-driven narratives. OO emphasizes a collective "we" tied to historical struggles, while AA builds emotional connections through narratives of unity formed by collective deliberation on societal issues (Augustin, 2019).

3.4.4.2 EMOTIONAL NARRATIVES USED BY LEADERS

The divide between urban and rural populations frequently features in Danish political narratives. Politicians often present themselves as defenders of rural communities,

contrasting the "ordinary people" of the countryside with the perceived elite and detached urban populations. This rhetoric highlights the challenges faced by rural areas and positions leaders as advocates against urban dominance. The theme of being relatable to "ordinary Danish people" is also emphasized through symbolic actions. Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen often mentions her love for "makrelmadder," a typical Danish lunch dish, while Inger Støjberg prominently displays her preference for Coca-Cola Zero, framing herself as someone in touch with the everyday lives of citizens. These choices are showcased as symbols of authenticity, even featured at political events. In addition, middle- and right-wing politicians have increasingly criticized "wokeism," portraying it as an urban-driven phenomenon disconnected from the values of rural and working-class communities (Hansen & Stubager, 2024).

3.4.4.3 IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP STYLE ON SOCIETAL EMOTIONS

Assessing the precise influence of leadership style on public emotions, attitudes, and behaviours presents challenges. However, it is evident that specific issues have experienced notable shifts in public discourse, political opinion, and policy direction in response to narratives and proposals advanced by political actors. This is particularly evident in matters related to immigration, climate, and biodiversity. Moreover, as described in previous sections, political reforms have led to the relocation of education and state institutions from Copenhagen to more rural areas (Hansen & Stubager, 2024).

3.5 Bosnia and Herzegovina
3.5.1 POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OVERVIEW

3.5.1.1 POLITICAL REGIME

Bosnia and Herzegovina's (BiH) political system is based on the Dayton Peace Agreement, which ended the 1992-1995 war and established a uniquely complex political structure. BiH is a single political unit comprising two entities, three main ethnic groups, and 14 semi-independent governments with varying policymaking powers (Kapidžić, 2019; Bargués & Morillas, 2021). The governance structure includes four tiers: the State, Entity, Canton, and municipal levels, with ethnic-based veto rights inherited from Dayton (Kapidžić, 2019; Fejzić, 2023).

BiH consists of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska (RS), and Brčko District. The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina entity is highly decentralized, with ten cantons, each having its own governing system. This post-Dayton structure is widely regarded as inefficient, affecting the state's ability to effectively implement both internal and international policies (Fejzić, 2023).

The political and constitutional system is interpreted differently by various scholars, resulting in diverse perspectives. The Dayton Peace Agreement established the Office of the High Representative to oversee the implementation of the agreement, coordinate with civilian organizations, and report progress to international stakeholders. This institution holds ultimate authority in interpreting the civilian aspects of the agreement (Banović et al., 2021).

BiH is commonly categorized as a post-war consociational democracy, a highly decentralized state, or a form of multinational federalism. It has also been described as an asymmetric ethnic federation with weak central authority or a hybrid federal model combining elements of both federation and confederation (Bieber, 2006, as cited in Kapidžić, 2019; Keil, 2016, as cited in Kapidžić, 2019; Banović et al., 2021).

Key institutions include the State Presidency, consisting of one member from each constituent group; the bicameral Parliamentary Assembly, comprising the House of Representatives and the House of Peoples; the Council of Ministers; and the Constitutional Court, the sole judicial body defined in the Constitution. These institutions reflect elements

of parliamentary democracy, though the state's unique organization sets it apart globally (Banović et al., 2021).

3.5.1.2 KEY POLITICAL PARTIES AND MOVEMENTS

The Party of Democratic Action (SDA) is the largest Bosniak political party in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), with roots in the conservative Yugoslav Muslim Organization. Since its founding, it has been a significant part of the state government. Key goals include constitutional changes to centralize the country and abolish Republika Srpska (RS), unity among Bosnian patriots, equal rights for constituent nations, EU and NATO membership, and electoral law amendments (Banović et al., 2021; Stranka demokratske akcije, 2023). Bakir Izetbegović has led the party since 2014. SDA is an associate member of the European People's Party (epp.eu, 2024).

The Social Democratic Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina (SDP BiH), the successor of the Communist Party, promotes a multi-ethnic and democratic state, focusing on social and economic policies. Led by Nermin Nikšić since 2014, SDP BiH advocates for EU and NATO integration, democratic socialism, social equality, human rights, gender equality, industrial democracy, fiscal reform, and a republican government structure (Banović et al., 2021; Socijaldemokratska partija Bosne i Hercegovine, 2015). It is part of the Troika coalition governing the Bosniak-multiethnic electoral subsystem and is associated with the Party of European Socialists.

The Democratic Front (DF), founded in 2013 by Željko Komšić, emerged as a response to SDP's coalition with nationalist parties. Operating mainly in Bosniak-majority areas, it declares itself multi-ethnic. DF supports EU and NATO integration, a civil state with fiscal federalism, electoral law amendments to ensure equal political rights, and improved relations with war victims (Banović et al., 2021; fronta.ba, 2021). Despite earlier promises, it is now in coalition with SDA.

Our Party (NS), a socio-liberal and multi-ethnic party, was founded in 2008 by filmmaker Danis Tanović. Initially based in Sarajevo, it now operates at higher government levels. Key goals include EU and NATO integration, minority and LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality, constitutional changes to strengthen the Council of Ministers, abolishing the House of Peoples, and aligning the Constitution with European Court of Human Rights rulings (Banović et al., 2021; nasastranka.ba, 2022). Led by Edin Forto since 2021, NS is part of the Troika coalition and affiliated with the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (aldeparty.eu, 2024).

The Croat Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ BiH) is a Christian democratic party established in 1990. It advocates for federal arrangements, consociational democracy, EU and NATO integration, tax relief, family values, education in the Croatian language and curricula, and Croatian veterans' rights (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica Bosne i Hercegovine, 2023; Kapidžić, 2017; Banović et al., 2021). It opposes civil universalism, viewing it as Bosniak nationalism, and claims to exclusively represent Croatian interests in BiH. Dragan Čović has led HDZ BiH since 2005. The party is an associate member of the European People's Party (epp.eu, 2024).

The Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), founded in 1996, is the dominant party in RS, led by Milorad Dodik. The party supports preserving and strengthening the entities, dissolving the Office of the High Representative, RS statehood, military neutrality, enhanced relations with Serbia, Serbs' rights in the Federation, and self-determination (Banović et al., 2021; Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata, 2024). SNSD is critical of EU and NATO integration and cooperates with Russia's United Russia party.

People and Justice (NiP), a member of the Troika coalition, entered politics in 2018. Positioning itself as centrist, it blends liberalism with traditional conservatism. NiP prioritizes anti-corruption efforts, labour rights, judicial reform, progressive social policy, veteran support, strengthening regional diplomacy, EU and NATO accession, and creating a state ministry for diaspora affairs (Narod i pravda, 2021).

3.5.1.3 RECENT MAJOR EVENTS IMPACTING POLITICS

Political events that have influenced the current socio-political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be traced back to 2014, marked by widespread protests that began in Tuzla and spread to cities such as Mostar and Sarajevo. These protests, driven by grievances over failed privatization, high unemployment, corruption, and the collapse of companies, led to the dismissal of several cantonal governments (Pašić, 2014; Hasanović et al., n.d.).

Another significant event was the 2020 local elections, which saw the rise of the 'trojka' coalition—a union of two left-wing and one centre-right political parties—taking power in the Sarajevo Canton, where they remain in control (Repovac-Nikšić, 2021; Jandrić, 2020). Additionally, in these elections, the government of Mostar was elected for the first time in 12 years (Izbori.ba, 2020).

In 2021, the then-High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Valentin Inzko, enacted a law prohibiting the denial of genocide, further shaping the political landscape (Al Jazeera, 2021).

The state elections in 2022 brought notable changes, particularly in the presidency. Denis Bećirević of the SDP was elected as the Bosniak member, ending the long-standing dominance of the SDA. Meanwhile, Željko Komšić was elected as the Croatian member, despite criticism from many Croats who claimed he was not their legitimate representative, arguing the position should have gone to Dragan Čović, known for his nationalist policies (Izbori.ba, 2022).

In 2023, Milorad Dodik, president of the Republika Srpska, faced an indictment for defying the authority of Bosnia and Herzegovina's High Representative, Christian Schmidt. The charges focus on Dodik's attempts to obstruct Schmidt's decisions, which are backed by the Dayton Peace Accords (Bursać, 2023).

Most recently, the adoption of a UN resolution on the genocide in Srebrenica deepened polarization among the population and political elites, particularly along entity lines (Hodžić, 2024).

3.5.1.4 CURRENT EMOTIONAL CLIMATE

Negative emotions such as anger, despair and dissatisfaction prevail among the population. These emotions are caused by the long-term state's failure to solve economic problems, the collapse of companies, and unsatisfactory working conditions and wages. Dissatisfaction is expressed mainly through protests, as evidenced by several examples: protests of the police, judiciary, and health system in 2016; protests in Banja Luka in 2023, merchant protests on May 1, 2024; the health workers' protest on September 10, 2024, etc. (Hasanović et al. 2024, Drljić, 2024). Also, many decide to leave the country, mainly young people who cannot find work in the profession or any kind of work, but also older people who are dissatisfied with the conditions provided. The country they mostly go is Germany (Deutsche Welle, 2021).

3.5.2.1 DRIVERS OF EMOTIONS IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Traditional Media Influence

There are several traditional media outlets in BiH. *Dnevni Avaz* is known for its shocking headlines, superficial analysis, and sensationalist news, which, when taken out of context, provoke numerous negative debates and reactions (Bajramović, 2024). *Face TV* and its famous show, hosted by editor and founder Senad Hadžifejzović, is one of the most up-to-date television channels. It attracts the most attention through live interviews with relevant figures, such as political candidates before elections. However, recently, the questioning style of the host has become more leading, directing answers in a specific way, and his speeches have become more aggressive and less professional (Face.ba, 2024). The portal *Birn/Detektor* provides the most detailed and thorough analysis, but it is not the most influential, as people generally prefer shorter, more superficial news over deeper analysis (Memčić, 2024; Hodžić, 2024). *Klix* is the most visited and influential portal in BiH, known for its objective, fast, and efficient reporting (Klix.ba, n.d.).

The dominant media in RS is *RTRS*, which reports in a manner that aligns with the visions and policies of the dominant SNSD party. Along with *Kurir*, another major media outlet in RS, *RTRS* is one of the most visited media sources in this entity, significantly influencing the formation of public opinion by reporting subjectively. In Herzegovina, *RTV Herceg Bosna* has a large audience. Similar to the media in RS, it also plays a significant role in shaping public opinion, as it supports views that align with HDZ policies. The name *Herceg Bosna* itself is historically controversial, as it refers to a nationalist para-territory that existed during the war.

Social Media Influence
The most popular social media platform among older generations in BiH is Facebook. The most influential are the posts of certain politicians, journalists, and public figures, which can be both negative and positive, but in both cases cause a large number of reactions. Reactions are also caused by news published on Facebook by news companies, and they are reflected in the comments below the post and are often riddled with arguments, insults and offensive comments. Other than Facebook, younger people are more likely to use Instagram or TikTok, and mostly for good reasons. These platforms serve to promote youth activism, various campaigns, and as informative or entertainment sites. The most influential names and organizations are as follow: Srđan Puhalo, Dragan Bursać, Slobodan Vasković, Vijeće mladih, Kult.

It is also useful to mention, Professor Jasna Duraković's analysis of the media reporting, where she pointed to a certain amount of 'media spectacle', which can be seen in her research titled Extradition of Politics in BiH (Duraković, 2021).

Key Drivers Identified in the Literature
The study done by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Medijske slobode u BiH 2024- Usporedni izvještaj 2016 – 2024, shows that in 2024, citizens of BiH show the most trust in media and religious communities, with political parties and politicians trusted the least. Compared to 2023, the trust hierarchy among institutions is stable, though media trust has declined by 5%. Additionally, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina favours media trust, while RS residents trust religious communities more.

Also, freedom of expression often prevails over restrictions on hate speech, which is widely used by politicians across the political spectrum to influence supporters. Hate speech is frequently a calculated tool to manipulate public opinion without concern for societal harm. Weak institutional response and limited accountability within political circles exacerbate the issue, allowing hate speech to persist as a political strategy (Lučka, 2021).

Notable Emotional Triggers in the Country's Politics
The main source of people's emotions and the emotions that politicians use to score points is the Bosnian War (1992-1995) and everything related to it. This includes convicted and sentenced persons – whether they should have been condemned or who should have been sentenced in their place; different dates that are celebrated - whether they should be celebrated or not; glorification of heroes or criminals - what are they for one and what for others. But one of the most important issues is the Constitution and the provisions of the Dayton peace agreement, which prevent the functional operation of the institutions for the sake of division and the electoral law that is based on ethnicity. It further supports already existing negative emotions and forces people to have a negative perception of another ethnic group because of rights that are denied to them, not by that group, but by the law itself. Populist politicians use ethnic arguments and arguments from the war, and they are all spinning in a circle from which it is difficult to get out and move towards solving other issues, which are also pressing - such as the economic situation or education (Bojanić-Savić, Repovac-Nikšić, 2019; Butković, 2019; Džananović, Repovac-Nikšić, 2021; Agić, 2021; Kovačević, 2024).

3.5.2.1 ROLE OF CRISIS

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic

The team of people from Faculty of Political Science in Sarajevo, School of Science and Technology, and Stockholm University did an online study conducted in BiH during the COVID-19 Pandemic. "The study examined a range of social and behavioural responses by youth from different ethnic backgrounds and across 63 cities...As expected, results indicate that higher perceived threat relates to higher compliance with health and safety measures despite extremely low levels of political trust" (Janković et al., 2020).

Impact of the Russia vs Ukraine War

The war in Ukraine led to a polarized opinion of the population as well as officials. Besides many comparing the current situation in Ukraine to the war in BiH (1992-1995), it is also believed that there will be no significant progress without an apology from the aggressor (Kapidžić, 2023). As for the situation in BiH, opinions are polarized, mostly along entity lines, where the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is in the favor of sanctions against Russia. On the other hand, the RS and its president, Milorad Dodik, maintain close ties with Vladimir Putin, organize visits, and they even handed him and the medal of the RS (Milišić, 2022; Jukić-Mujkić, 2022; Aljović, 2022; Ljevo, 2023).

Ecology Crisis

A clear example of the ecological crisis is the recent floods that affected the area of Jablanica. Many people were killed and houses were destroyed, which caused a wave of solidarity and help among residents, as well as acquaintances. The Minister of Security of BiH, Nenad Nešić, visited Jablanica and rescue teams that are searching for missing persons, thereby giving his contribution (N1, 2024). It is also interesting that the president of the RS, Milorad Dodik, paid a certain amount of money to those affected by these disasters (Klix, 2024).

Many examples from the past indicate that when it comes to a natural disaster, people are ready to help and react very quickly, regardless of the place or the people who are threatened (Klix, 2024).

3.5.3 EMOTIONAL MECHANISMS IN POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING

3.5.3.1 INFLUENCE ON VOTERS' BEHAVIOUR

Pre-election campaigns and addresses to the public are mostly composed of abstract words and expressions, which have nothing to do with the party's program, but rather play the card of provoking voters' emotions and their solidarity with the party through some general concepts (Repovac-Nikšić, 2021). Some of the slogans in the 2024 local elections read: 'better', 'good people', 'we continue responsibly', 'people's choice - now it is clear why', 'Srpska will win', etc. (Ljevo, 2024; Ljevak- Bajramović, 2024). A significant case study of Professor Dijana Sulejmanović was also done on the topic of *The influence of information manipulation on political choices* (Sulejmanović, 2021).

3.5.3.2 INFLUENCE ON POLICY FORMATION

The influence on policy formation is most evident on the official websites of political parties, where emotional statements, references to the past, and portrayals of suffering are used to generate support for planned actions. For example, the SNSD party used posters with extremely graphic images of suffering alongside the message *"I don't want NATO,"* which contributed to widespread opposition to RS's membership in NATO. Similarly, on the SDA website, speeches by party officials can be found in which they accuse the opposition of various actions, insult them, and use derogatory language (sda.ba, 2024).

3.5.3.3 PROMINENT EMOTIONAL TRENDS IN NATIONAL POLITICS

The discussions are mainly reduced to several topics, namely the constitution, the legitimacy of BiH, the legitimacy of the elected representatives and the high representative for BiH, and all these issues are related to ethnic issues. If the discussions are located within one ethnic group, then they come down to accusing each other of betraying their own people, of embezzlement, lies and thieves (Džananović, Repovac-Nikšić, 2020).

3.5.4 EMERGING LEADERSHIP STYLES

3.5.4.1 NOTABLE LEADERS AND THEIR EMOTIONAL APPEAL

Milorad Dodik has been on the political scene since the 1990s, and during that time has created something that resembles a personal cult. Over the years he changed his rhetoric, accepting the one that would bring him the most benefit at that moment. At one point he admitted that the Genocide in Srebrenica took place, and today he strongly disputes it. On the official page of his party, all the announcements concern him, he is present in all the pictures. In his speeches he makes false promises to the people, brags about false successes and figures, and does not hesitate to use insults and derogatory language.

Bakir Izetbegović succeeded his father, Alija Izetbegović, who was the chairman of the Presidency of BiH in the period from 1992 to 1996. Bakir is known for his warmongering and populist statements, often alluding to the importance of Muslim solidarity and the equalization of Bosnyaks and Muslims.

Dragan Čović has been a member of HDZ since 1994 and is currently the leader of the party. He is known for various affairs and a total of three indictments that were brought against him by the court, and all three related to abuse of position and accepting bribes. His policy is based on demands for the introduction of a third, Croatian entity, and obstructing any attempt to find an alternative (cin.ba, 2024).

3.5.4.2 EMOTIONAL NARRATIVES USED BY LEADERS

Political speeches, announcements, and interviews often focus on a few key themes, including war, war crimes, defence, homeland, victims, enemies, sovereignty, the Dayton Peace Agreement, the High Representative for BiH, RS, peace, independence, unity, and the Genocide in Srebrenica. Many politicians, particularly those on the right end of the political spectrum, do not hesitate to use hate speech (Lučka, 2021).

A news portal listed some of the most frequently used phrases by politicians, such as: *"It is a classic political spin," "We are committed to peace and stability," "Some treat the Dayton Agreement as a buffet, taking only what suits them," "OHR expressed concern," "We need to leave the past behind and focus on the future,"* and *"The situation is the most serious since Dayton."*

3.5.4.3 IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP STYLE ON SOCIETAL EMOTIONS

According to the OSCE survey from 2022, concerning the citizens' opinions about the elections in BiH, the opinion about the electoral process and political participation of citizens in BiH, is dominantly negative. Respondents have expressed negative views on most aspects of elections in BiH. 43 per cent of respondents believe that elections in BiH are not fair and people generally have low motivation to participate and vote (OSCE, 2022).
Another analysis shows that citizens have the least trust in politicians (16,6%), and they trust the media the most. (61, 8%) (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2024) 60% of the citizens believe that government and politicians don't do they work as good as they should (Halimović, 2010).

3.6 North Macedonia
3.6.1 POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OVERVIEW

3.6.1.1 POLITICAL REGIME

North Macedonia is a unitary parliamentary democracy with a constitutionally defined separation of powers among the parliament (Sobranie), executive (Prime Minister-led Government and President), and judiciary. The Sobranie, comprising 120 MPs elected every four years through proportional representation, appoints and oversees the Government. The Prime Minister leads the executive, while the President, elected for five years, holds a largely ceremonial role. Despite its unitary status, the country has adopted consociational elements to manage ethnic diversity, particularly after the 2001 conflict with an Albanian armed group. Measures like enhanced minority representation in state institutions, shared decision-making, and the official use of minority languages were introduced under the Ohrid Framework Agreement. Local governance consists of 80 municipalities and the City of Skopje, forming 81 local self-government units with authority over infrastructure, education, and healthcare. Although decentralised in principle, substantial policy control remains centralised. As of 2022, the population is 1.8 million, with ethnic Macedonians at 58.5% and Albanians at 24.3%. Coalition governments typically involve a major Macedonian party and an Albanian junior partner. The current government, formed in 2024, includes VMRO-DPMNE, the Albanian VLEN coalition, and the ZNAM party. VMRO-DPMNE won 58 MPs and the presidency, with Gordana Siljanovska Davkova as President. The Economic Intelligence Unit ranks North Macedonia as a "flawed democracy" (72nd globally), citing executive dominance, judicial interference, and ethnic-based political polarisation as key challenges (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2024).

3.6.1.2 KEY POLITICAL PARTIES AND MOVEMENTS

Main political parties and coalitions are: 1) **VMRO-DPMNE**, a right-wing nationalist party representing ethnic Macedonians. It has governed since 2024, winning 58/120 MPs, the presidency, and 42 mayoral posts. Led by PM Hristijan Mickoski; 2) **SDSM**, centre-left party with roots in the League of Communists. It governed until 2024, now holding 18 MPs and 16 mayoral posts under Venko Filipče; 3) **DUI**, the dominant Albanian party since 2002, except for brief periods. It has 18 MPs, 11 mayors, and is led by Ali Ahmeti; 4) **VLEN Coalition**, a bloc opposing DUI, including splinters from the Alliance of Albanians, BESA, and Democratic Movement. It joined the government in 2024 with 14 MPs; 5) **Levica**, a populist, radical left-wing, and nationalist party. It holds 6 MPs under Dimitar Apasiev; 6) **ZNAM**, a centre-left SDSM splinter, led by Maksim Dimitrievski. It won 6 MPs in 2024 and joined the government.

3.6.1.3 RECENT MAJOR EVENTS IMPACTING POLITICS

North Macedonia has faced political turbulence over the past decade. A 2015 wiretapping scandal exposed systemic corruption under VMRO-DPMNE, leading to mass protests and eventual leadership change. The SDSM-led government (2017-2024) prioritised foreign relations, resolving disputes with Bulgaria and Greece, including renaming the country to "North Macedonia" for NATO accession. However, domestic backlash and a failed referendum reflected deep societal divides. Bulgaria's 2020 EU accession veto further strained public sentiment, despite a 2022 agreement aimed at progress. The post-2015 era saw ongoing corruption scandals and judicial failures, eroding trust. VMRO-DPMNE regained dominance in 2024, excluding DUI from government, leaving a legacy of mistrust and polarisation. North Macedonia has faced political turbulence over the past decade. A 2015 wiretapping scandal exposed systemic corruption under VMRO-DPMNE, leading to mass protests and eventual leadership change. The SDSM-led government (2017-2024) prioritised foreign relations, resolving disputes with Bulgaria and Greece, including renaming the

country to "North Macedonia" for NATO accession. However, domestic backlash and a failed referendum reflected deep societal divides. Bulgaria's 2020 EU accession veto further strained public sentiment, despite a 2022 agreement aimed at progress. The post-2015 era saw ongoing corruption scandals and judicial failures, eroding trust. VMRO-DPMNE regained dominance in 2024, excluding DUI from government, leaving a legacy of mistrust and polarisation.

3.6.1.4 CURRENT EMOTIONAL CLIMATE

The emotional climate in North Macedonia is marked by mistrust, uncertainty and pessimism regarding politics, the economy, and social conditions. According to 2022 European Social Survey (ESS) data, North Macedonia's population is among the most mistrustful in Europe toward politicians, political parties, parliament, and the legal system (ESS ERIC, 2022). Many citizens perceive that ordinary people have little influence on politics or government actions. Mistrust toward the EU has also risen over the past decade, reflecting a significant drop in public support, though it remains the majority stance (Damjanovski, 2023).

Economically, the country faces persistent challenges, with the 2023 unemployment rate estimated by the ILO at 13%, the highest in the Western Balkans (World Bank, 2023). The population has been decreasing since the early 2000s, with a 1.1% decline in 2023, according to World Bank estimates. Dissatisfaction with the economy is high, with North Macedonia and Bulgaria ranking lowest in Europe on this metric (ESS ERIC, 2022). The country also ranks among the lowest in Europe in terms of life happiness, based on ESS findings.

Ethnic division is the primary societal cleavage, especially between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians. Additionally, an intra-ethnic divide has emerged among ethnic Macedonians: a cosmopolitan segment, which calls for moderation in handling relations with neighbouring countries and ethnic-Albanian citizens, contrasts with a traditional, ethno-centric group. Economic status cleavages are less pronounced, yet dissatisfaction remains pervasive.

3.6.2 EMOTIONAL POLITICS DRIVERS

3.6.2.1 DRIVERS OF EMOTIONS IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Traditional Media Influence.

Television is the most widely used medium in North Macedonia, with 75% of citizens watching daily (IPSOS, 2021). Key broadcasters include: 1) MRT, the public broadcaster offering multiple channels, including MRT 1 (general programming) and MRT 2 (Albanian-language content). MRT has faced criticism for bias toward government views; 2) Sitel, a private station historically aligned with VMRO-DPMNE, often accused of biased reporting; 3) Kanal 5, a major private broadcaster, occasionally shifting bias depending on political power and ownership; 4) Telma Televizija, known for balanced reporting and editorial independence; 5) Alsat-M, a bilingual station serving Macedonian and Albanian audiences, critical of policies ignoring ethnic Albanian needs.

Radio remains important, with 16% of citizens tuning in daily (IPSOS, 2021). Notable stations include: 1) Radio Skopje (MRT 1), reflecting MRT's government-leaning approach while striving for balance; 2) Kanal 77, a popular station, generally more balanced but with a slight pro-establishment tilt; 3) Radio Lider, known for its pro-VPMO-DPMNE stance.

Print media's influence has declined, but notable outlets include: 1) Nova Makedonija, a long-standing newspaper with a moderate pro-government bias, especially on national issues; 2) Vecher, a conservative daily aligning with VMRO-DPMNE, sceptical of liberal reforms; 3) Fokus, a weekly magazine known for investigative journalism, challenging political parties with critical commentary.

Social Media Influence

In January 2024, North Macedonia had 944.6K active social media users, with Facebook at 944.6K, Instagram at 811.5K, TikTok at 754K (18+), and Twitter at 133.1K (Datareportal, 2024). Facebook is central to political discourse, with influential leaders like Hristijan Mickoski (VMRO-DPMNE) and former PM Dimitar Kovachevski (SDSM), Venko Filipche (SDSM) Dimitar Apasiev (The Left) communicating with voters. Among ethnic Albanians key political influencers include the leader of DUI, Ali Ahmeti, Arben Taravari (VLEN), Afrim Gashi (VLEN). Independent groups, such as Green Humane City and Chance for Centar, also engage politically on Facebook. These profiles are also prominent on Instagram. Investigative journalism is supported by IRL Macedonia and BIRN Macedonia, which promote accountability and democratic values in North Macedonia.

Key Drivers Identified in the Literature

The literature on emotions in North Macedonian politics is limited and primarily consists of qualitative case studies on specific events by area specialists, historians, sociologists, political scientists, and social psychologists. While various topics are explored, studies tend to be descriptive rather than theoretical, offering insights into the emotional dimensions of key political developments without systematically testing hypotheses. This literature, however, serves as an indicator of events that elicit significant emotional responses in Macedonian politics.

Key topics linking emotions and politics in North Macedonia include the "Name Dispute" with Greece (Roudometof, 1996; Blazheva, 2019) and the antiquization policy under Gruevski's VMRO-DPMNE, which used historical symbolism to fuel populist mobilisation (Stefoska & Stojanov, 2018; Petkovski, 2016). Research also addresses tensions between the Macedonian majority and the Albanian minority, particularly in studies exploring ethnic relations and societal divisions (Engström, 2007; Kenig et al., 2017; Bliznakovski & Todorov, 2020). Media portrayals of the 2015 political crisis (Serafimovska & Markovikj, 2015) and conspiracy theories impacting EU sentiments (Gjoneska et al., 2020) illustrate how public discourse shapes emotional responses toward systemic issues. Additional studies examine emotional reactions to marginalised groups' systemic injustice (Dimitrov & Blazheva, 2023) and responses to transitional justice measures (Trajkovski, 2017).

Notable Emotional Triggers in the Country's Politics

The primary emotional triggers in North Macedonia's politics revolve around ethnic issues, both in relations with neighbouring countries and between ethnic Macedonians and the Albanian minority within the country.

The "Name Dispute" with Greece (1991-2018) has been a major flashpoint, as Greece opposed the name "Republic of Macedonia," viewing it as a territorial claim. This dispute also involved historical interpretations, particularly regarding antiquity and the identity of Alexander the Great, claimed as a foundational figure by both Macedonian and Greek narratives. Resolved in 2018 with the country's name change to "North Macedonia," this issue reflects deep-rooted tensions over history and identity. Currently, more intense emotional responses are linked to relations with Bulgaria, as the name dispute with Greece is largely settled.

Relations with Bulgaria similarly provoke strong responses, as Bulgaria disputes the legitimacy of the Macedonian ethnic group, language, and history, framing them as extensions of Bulgarian identity. Bulgaria's demands for historical concessions have stalled North Macedonia's EU accession - impacting national pride and intensifying public sentiment.

Historically, a sensitive issue existed with Serbia regarding the autonomy of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. Resolved in 2022 in favour of autocephaly, this development likely fostered a positive response within the ethnic Macedonian community.

Domestically, relations between ethnic Macedonians and ethnic Albanians remain a constant source of tension, often leading to displays of mistrust and occasional clashes. The 2001 conflict remains divisive, with ethnic Macedonians viewing it as an unlawful insurgency, while ethnic Albanians see it as a rightful struggle for rights. Political leaders frequently voice

grievances publicly, perpetuating these historical divisions and provoking emotional responses across both communities.

Recently, a cleavage has developed between cosmopolitan and traditionally oriented segments of the population on topics such as women's rights, LGBTQ rights, and related issues. Religious institutions, advocating for the "traditional family," play a significant role in shaping this divide, alongside more traditionally oriented political parties and civil society organisations. These issues frequently elicit strong emotional responses across society.

3.6.2.1 ROLE OF CRISIS

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on North Macedonia, affecting both public health and the economy. The government quickly implemented public health and social measures (PHSMs) to curb virus transmission, but the country's small, open economy was heavily impacted by global trade disruptions, weakened tourism, and reduced financing. Vulnerable groups, particularly the poor and unemployed, were hit hardest, exposing socio-economic weaknesses. The healthcare system's inability to provide timely care led to a 40% excess mortality in 2020–2021 (State Statistical Office of North Macedonia, 2022).

Initial public compliance with PHSMs was high, reflecting trust in the government. However, by mid-2020, economic hardship and fatigue led to reduced adherence, especially to social distancing, which was less followed by those with lower education levels and trust in institutions. Mask-wearing had 70% compliance, while social gathering and business restrictions were more controversial, with only about half in support. Easing restrictions led to a resurgence in cases, highlighting difficulties in maintaining public cooperation (Tille et al., 2022).

Research from the Institute for Public Health revealed widespread mental health challenges, including anxiety, stress, and depression, especially among younger adults, women, and those with pre-existing health conditions. Economic strain and isolation exacerbated these issues, and lifestyle changes, such as reduced physical activity and increased screen time, further impacted both mental and physical health (Bachanovikj & Vasileska, 2023).

Impact of the Russia vs Ukraine War

The Russia-Ukraine war has had significant economic and security impacts on North Macedonia. The conflict has driven up inflation, particularly in energy and food prices, as the country relies on imports from affected regions, straining household budgets and increasing pressure on the government to find alternative energy sources. Security concerns have also intensified, prompting greater focus on NATO collaboration and regional stability. The government has aligned with EU sanctions against Russia, balancing international commitments with domestic economic pressures.

A December 2022 survey revealed that 55.2% of respondents lacked understanding of Russia's motives for the war, with disapproval of Russian aggression varying by political affiliation. The war has stirred strong negative emotions, including fear and anger, with nearly half of respondents feeling it worsened personal and national security. Additionally, 61.2% opposed military aid to Ukraine, and 61.6% disagreed with sanctions against Russia. Economic impacts, particularly rising prices, were widely attributed to the war, with many believing it will lead to global instability and prolonged conflict (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2022).

Ecology crisis

North Macedonia faces a severe ecological crisis driven by air pollution, deforestation, poor waste management, and the growing impacts of climate change. Air pollution is among the most serious environmental challenges, particularly in urban areas such as Skopje, where emissions from outdated industrial plants, coal-based household heating, and vehicle traffic

result in prolonged periods of hazardous air quality, especially during winter months (IQAir, 2024). This has significant consequences for public health and quality of life.

Deforestation and illegal logging further contribute to soil erosion and biodiversity loss, threatening many of the country's unique plant and animal species. Water pollution is also a major concern, with rivers and lakes affected by untreated sewage, industrial discharge, and agricultural runoff. Lake Ohrid, a UNESCO World Heritage site, faces increasing ecological pressure from pollution and unregulated tourism, endangering its fragile ecosystem.

Waste management remains inadequate, with widespread illegal dumpsites and limited recycling infrastructure. Climate change exacerbates these environmental problems by increasing the frequency of droughts, wildfires, floods, and other extreme weather events, placing additional strain on ecosystems and natural resources.

Public awareness of environmental issues is relatively high, particularly regarding air pollution and climate-related extreme weather. A national study shows that many citizens perceive climate change as directly affecting their lives, especially through agricultural impacts and environmental degradation. However, while there is broad support for climate mitigation measures, active public engagement remains limited. Responsibility for action is largely placed on governmental institutions, with individual behavioural change constrained by perceived lack of infrastructure and support (UNICEF, 2022).

Economic challenges

The weak economic performance, high unemployment, and a significant portion of the population living in socio-economic vulnerability, relative to other European countries, contribute to a perception of an ongoing economic crisis dating back to the early 1990s transition to a market economy. While global economic crises exacerbate this situation, they are rarely perceived by the population as distinct external shocks; instead, they are seen as a continuation of existing hardships.

3.6.3 EMOTIONAL MECHANISMS IN POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING

3.6.3.1 INFLUENCE ON VOTERS' BEHAVIOUR

Emotions play a significant role in shaping voter behaviour in North Macedonia, with political campaigns increasingly targeting emotional responses to build loyalty, sway undecided voters, and mobilize supporters. Emotions like fear, hope, pride, and frustration have been particularly influential in recent elections and referendums (Veliu, 2021).

A key example is the 2018 referendum on the name change to North Macedonia. The "Yes" campaign focused on hope and pride, framing the change as a path to EU and NATO integration, promising economic stability and growth. In contrast, the "No" campaign tapped into fear of losing Macedonian identity, leading to polarized views and low turnout, raising concerns about the referendum's legitimacy, with only 36.9% participation (The New York Times, 2018; Veliu, 2021).

In the 2020 parliamentary elections, opposition parties played on public frustration and fear related to the pandemic, while the ruling Social Democrats emphasized trust and stability (Veliu, 2021). In 2024, emotions surrounding EU integration and the dispute with Bulgaria were central. Opposition parties appealed to frustration over Bulgaria's veto, fuelling Euroscepticism and anti-Western sentiment. The government, on the other hand, promoted hope and pride by highlighting progress in EU accession (Veliu, 2021). This emotional divide—between frustration over economic concerns and optimism for future integration—demonstrated how emotions drive electoral choices in North Macedonia.

As the country continues facing challenges around EU integration, national identity, and economic issues, emotional appeals by political parties are expected to remain a powerful tool in shaping voter behaviour (Veliu, 2021).

3.6.3.2 INFLUENCE ON POLICY FORMATION

The 2018 Law on Languages in North Macedonia is a key example of how emotions shape policy. The law elevated Albanian to official language status, which evoked strong feelings of pride and validation among ethnic Albanians, addressing long-standing underrepresentation. However, for many ethnic Macedonians, it sparked fears of fragmentation and the preservation of national unity. Nationalist groups amplified these concerns, framing the law as a threat to cohesion (Koha, 2017; Jacobin, 2022). The government navigated these emotions by presenting the law as a step toward integration while maintaining Macedonian as the primary language. In the 2024 elections, the new VMRO-DPMNE government promised to review or repeal the law, appealing to nationalist sentiments and arguing it disproportionately favoured one ethnic group. This ongoing debate illustrates the deep emotional influence on policy, particularly in the context of EU integration (Jacobin, 2022).

Hate speech is another example of how emotions shape policies in North Macedonia. Increasingly prevalent, particularly targeting LGBTQI+ individuals and women, it often goes unreported. Anti-gender movements have gained momentum, posing significant risks to progress in equality and non-discrimination. These movements have led to proposed laws on education that remove protections for "gender," "gender identity," and "sexual orientation." These changes contradict existing legal frameworks, normalizing violence against marginalized groups. The laws would violate the Constitution and the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination. The lack of transparency in adopting these laws undermines public trust and democratic principles (Danaj et al., 2023).

3.6.3.3 PROMINENT EMOTIONAL TRENDS IN NATIONAL POLITICS

Emotions significantly shape political engagement in North Macedonia, especially around issues of national identity, EU integration, and ethnic relations. Key emotional themes like pride, fear, frustration, and hope are central during elections and political events (Veliu, 2021). National identity tensions, particularly between the Macedonian majority and the Albanian minority, have been prominent, especially during the 2018 Prespa Agreement debate. The agreement, which aimed to resolve the Greece dispute and facilitate NATO and EU membership, sparked emotions of pride and hope among supporters and fear and anger among opponents, particularly nationalists who saw it as a loss of identity (The New York Times, 2018; Veliu, 2021). Similarly, ethnic Albanian parties emphasize pride and equality for their community (Koha, 2017).

Frustration with government performance, especially on corruption, economic hardship, and inefficiencies, fuels public distrust. In the 2020 elections, opposition parties capitalized on emotions of frustration and fear over the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis and economic struggles, portraying the ruling party as disconnected (Tille et al., 2022).

Hope is another powerful emotion, especially regarding EU integration, seen by many as a path to stability and economic growth. While progress has been slow, EU accession remains a unifying goal (Veliu, 2021). Emotions of loyalty, solidarity, and defiance are also frequently used in election campaigns, particularly by parties like VMRO-DPMNE, which positions itself as a protector of national interests. These polarizing emotional appeals intensify political division, especially in social media and rallies, overshadowing policy-focused discourse and contributing to a politically charged atmosphere (Veliu, 2021).

3.6.4 EMERGING LEADERSHIP STYLES

3.6.4.1 NOTABLE LEADERS AND THEIR EMOTIONAL APPEAL

Hristijan Mickoski (VMRO-DPMNE), leader of VMRO-DPMNE, uses a nationalist and defensive communication style, appealing to pride and fear. He emphasizes perceived threats to Macedonian identity and sovereignty, particularly regarding the Prespa Agreement, the

French Proposal/Bulgarian dispute, and EU negotiations. Mickoski portrays his party as the protector of Macedonian heritage, resonating with voters anxious about ethnic identity and cultural integrity. His strategy focuses on mobilizing support through national pride and solidarity, especially during elections (Veliu, 2021).

Ali Ahmeti, leader of the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), taps into the emotions of ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia, advocating for their rights and representation. His communication style combines pride and empowerment, focusing on themes of equality and inclusion. Ahmeti uses personal stories to resonate with the Albanian community, emphasizing the importance of preserving the Albanian language and culture. This emotional appeal has been crucial in gaining support among ethnic Albanians, especially during elections and key political discussions (Koha, 2017).

Dimitar Apasiev, leader of the Left party, uses populist rhetoric on social justice, economic equality, and workers' rights, appealing to frustration over economic hardships (Bosilkov, 2021). He promotes an anti-Western narrative, criticizing "Russophobic" remarks after meeting the Russian Ambassador in 2022 (Simonovska, 2024). Apasiev critiques major parties like SDSM, VMRO-DPMNE, and DUI, building distrust among voters feeling neglected. He emphasizes national pride and sovereignty, resonating with concerns over external threats to Macedonian identity, while engaging grassroots support to position himself as a genuine alternative (Veliu, 2021).

3.6.4.2 EMOTIONAL NARRATIVES USED BY LEADERS

Unity, hope, and EU integration are recurring themes in the rhetoric of North Macedonia's political leaders, particularly in the context of the country's ethnic diversity. Zoran Zaev, former Prime Minister and SDSM leader, frequently emphasized national cohesion following the 2018 Prespa Agreement, framing NATO and EU integration as a collective goal for all citizens, transcending ethnic divides (Veliu, 2021).

National identity and sovereignty are also central emotional themes. Leaders often appeal to patriotism and pride in Macedonian identity. Hristijan Mickoski, leader of VMRO-DPMNE and current Prime Minister, uses patriotic rhetoric to stress the protection of Macedonian heritage and sovereignty, particularly during elections. In the 2024 parliamentary elections, he positioned his party as the defender of national values and identity, appealing to voters' pride and loyalty (Veliu, 2021).

Identity, pride, and ethnic representation are emphasized especially regarding the Macedonian majority and the Albanian minority. Ali Ahmeti, leader of DUI, stresses equality and political representation for ethnic Albanians. His rhetoric highlights achievements in language rights and community representation, portraying these struggles as essential for a democratic society (Koha, 2017; Jacobin, 2022).

Frustration and disillusionment are used by opposition leaders to critique the ruling government, focusing on corruption, economic hardship, and inefficiency. Dimitar Apasiev, leader of the Left party, capitalizes on citizen frustration, emphasizing social inequality and portraying the political system as corrupt, invoking anger and disillusionment (Bosilkov, 2021). Apasiev also employs an anti-Western narrative; for example, following a 2022 meeting with the Russian Ambassador, he criticized "Russophobic" remarks by the Foreign Affairs Minister, appealing to nationalist and sovereignty concerns (Simonovska, 2024).

3.6.4.3 IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP STYLE ON SOCIETAL EMOTIONS

While it is difficult to fully assess the effect of leadership styles on societal emotions due to limited research, Zaev's "One Society for All" concept sought to foster an inclusive, multi-ethnic society (BTI, 2024). In the 2016 elections, Zaev drew an estimated 40,000–50,000 ethnic Albanian votes by campaigning in cities with large Albanian populations and emphasizing narratives of inclusion, bridging divides, and addressing key issues for the Albanian community (BTI, 2024). This strategy set a precedent for SDSM's engagement with

parties representing North Macedonia's ethnic Albanians, who make up roughly a quarter of the country's population (BTI, 2024).

4 CROSS-COUNTRY COMPARISONS

This chapter presents a cross-country comparison of emotional dynamics in politics across six ENCODE case-study countries: Poland, Bulgaria, Austria, Denmark, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia. For each thematic dimension, a comparative table is presented first. These tables summarise the key patterns identified through systematic coding of the country summaries using the common analytical framework developed for Task 2.3. The tables serve as a synthetic map of similarities and differences, while the accompanying narrative sections provide interpretative depth. The text does not repeat the tables mechanically; instead, it explains, contextualises, and critically interprets the patterns shown in the tables by drawing on country-specific evidence, illustrative examples, and quotations from the national summaries. This combined table–text approach ensures transparency and comparability, while allowing the analysis to remain sensitive to national contexts and historical trajectories.

4.1 POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OVERVIEW

Table 1 Summary overview of political landscapes

Country	Regime Stability	Party Fragmentation	Polarisation	Dominant Cleavages	Key Emotions
Poland	Medium	High	High	EU integration, equal rights, nationalism	Anger, fear, anxiety
Bulgaria	Low	High	High	Corruption, minority rights, immigration	Distrust, dissapointment
Austria	High	Medium	Medium	Social and income inequality	Distrust, anxiety, solidarity
Denmark	High	Low	Low	Identity politics, urban-rural split	Trust, pessimism
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Low	High	High	Ethnicity, sovereignty	Dissatisfaction, anger, despair
North Macedonia	Medium	Medium	High	Ethnicity, EU integration	Distrust, uncertainty

Similarities

Across all six countries, political competition formally takes place within representative democratic systems, predominantly organised around parliamentary institutions and regular elections. Despite differences in constitutional design and governance quality, all cases demonstrate that political conflict increasingly extends beyond programmatic disagreement and is strongly shaped by emotionally charged narratives. Issues such as national identity, fairness, corruption, sovereignty, and social justice repeatedly emerge as

emotionally resonant themes structuring political debate. As noted in the Polish summary, political conflict has become "*a struggle over values and identity rather than policy details,*" illustrating a trend that is echoed, in different forms, across other countries.

Another shared feature is the growing strain on political legitimacy. Even in relatively stable systems, public trust in political actors is under pressure, and emotions play an important role in how citizens evaluate institutions. The Bulgarian summary explicitly refers to "*chronic dissatisfaction with political elites and a widespread sense of betrayal,*" while the Austrian summary highlights a more contained but still visible erosion of confidence following major political scandals. These observations confirm that emotional dynamics are not limited to unstable systems, but are present across the full spectrum of political contexts.

Differences

The most significant cross-country differences concern the degree of institutional consolidation and the emotional consequences of political stability or instability. Denmark represents the most consolidated case, characterised by high institutional trust, limited party fragmentation, and relatively low polarisation. Political conflict exists, but emotions such as concern or responsibility are generally embedded within a consensual political culture. As the Danish summary notes, political debates tend to be "*pragmatic and solution-oriented,*" with emotions rarely escalating into sustained confrontation.

Austria occupies an intermediate position. While institutions remain strong and democratic norms well established, emotional polarisation increases during specific episodes, particularly around corruption scandals or migration debates. The Austrian summary points out that emotions such as anger and disappointment intensify during crises but "*do not fundamentally undermine trust in the political system,*" indicating a capacity for emotional containment.

In contrast, Poland and Bulgaria display more persistent emotional volatility. In Poland, high polarisation reflects deep ideological and cultural divisions, particularly around national identity, the rule of law, and moral values. The country summary emphasises that political competition is structured around "*long-term antagonistic camps,*" making emotional mobilisation a constant feature of politics rather than an episodic one. Bulgaria's case differs in that emotional intensity is driven less by ideological conflict and more by institutional dysfunction. Repeated elections, unstable coalitions, and corruption scandals have produced cycles of anger followed by apathy, as captured in the observation that citizens increasingly feel "*exhausted rather than mobilised by politics.*"

Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia differ again due to the structural role of ethnicity in political organisation. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, emotional politics is deeply intertwined with collective memory and group insecurity, with the summary noting that "*political competition often reproduces fear-based narratives linked to past conflicts.*" In North Macedonia, tensions between ethnic accommodation and national cohesion generate alternating patterns of distrust and cautious optimism, particularly in relation to EU integration.

Summary note

The analysis suggests that emotional intensity in political landscapes correlates strongly with institutional fragility and unresolved legitimacy questions. Where democratic institutions are widely trusted and function predictably, emotions tend to be episodic and moderated. Where institutions are contested, fragmented, or historically burdened, emotions become a permanent feature of political competition, shaping not only political alignments but also citizens' expectations of democracy itself.

Figure 1 - Political Landscape Comparative Radar*
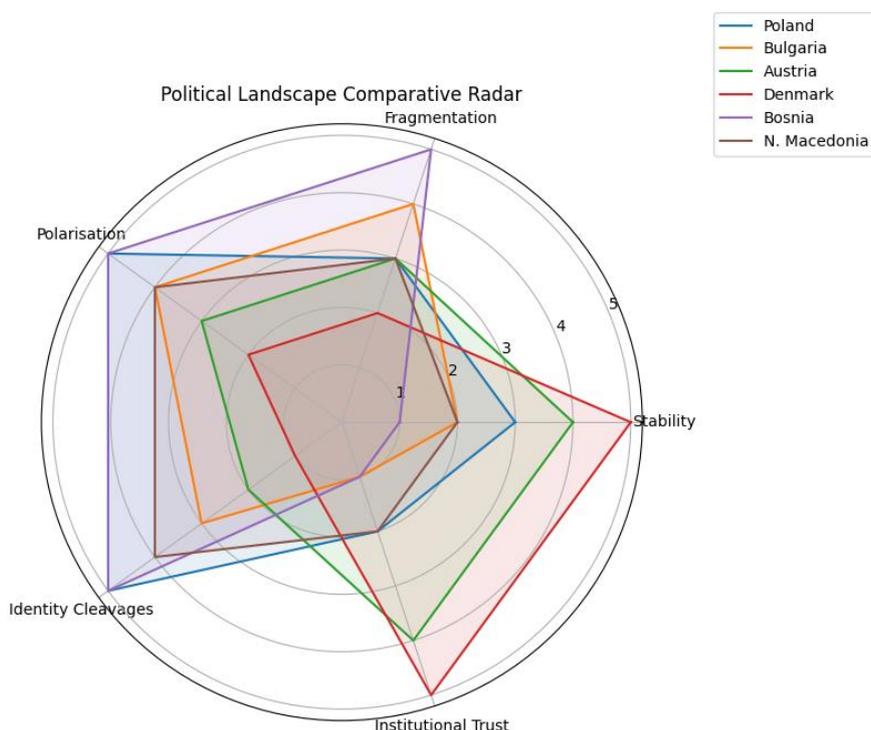
Source: Encode own elaboration: Scores (expert scoring) were assigned based on recurring descriptors in the national summaries.

*To support the comparison of political landscapes, a radar chart was developed using qualitative scores derived from the cross-country desk research. Each dimension reflects the relative position of countries based on the national desk research summaries. The chart does not represent statistical measurement but visualises differences across a common analytical framework.

4.2 EMOTIONAL POLITICS DRIVERS

Table 2 - Media-related emotional drivers across countries

Country	Traditional Media	Social Media	Dominant Frames	Media Polarisation
Poland	Low trust, polarized	Highly influential (especially among the youth)	Threat, national identity	High
Bulgaria	Propagandistic, not trusted	Influential, primary, emotionally manipulative	Corruption, disillusionment, disinformation	Low
Austria	Dominating, though declining	Complementary, targeted	Immigration, patriotism	Low
Denmark	Trusted	Limited influence, similar to traditional	Equality, climate	Medium-Low
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Subjective	Dramatic	War, ethnicity	High
North Macedonia	Biased	Identity-driven	Injustice, ethnical inequality	Medium

Similarities

Across all six countries, media—both traditional and digital—constitute the primary infrastructure through which political emotions are generated, amplified, and normalised. Regardless of national context, political actors increasingly rely on media to frame political issues in emotionally resonant terms, transforming complex policy debates into narratives of threat, injustice, responsibility, or moral urgency. The country summaries consistently indicate that emotional framing has become a central feature of political communication, rather than a peripheral or exceptional strategy.

Another shared pattern is the growing importance of social media as an amplifier of emotional content, even in contexts where traditional media remains dominant. Social platforms accelerate the circulation of emotionally charged messages, facilitate personalised communication, and reinforce identity-based interpretation through algorithmic filtering. Although the intensity of this influence varies, all countries show evidence that social media contributes to emotionalisation by rewarding sensationalism, confrontation, and moral clarity.

A further similarity concerns the erosion of media trust, albeit to different degrees. With the partial exception of Denmark, respondents and observers across countries express scepticism toward media objectivity. This scepticism increases the receptiveness of audiences to emotionally framed narratives, as trust in factual mediation gives way to affective alignment with preferred sources or political camps.

Differences

Despite these commonalities, the configuration of media systems and their emotional effects differ substantially across countries, reflecting variations in media ownership, journalistic norms, political parallelism, and historical experience.

In Poland, both traditional and social media play a central role in emotional polarisation. Traditional media are widely perceived as politicised and polarised, with low levels of cross-cutting trust. The country summary highlights how media outlets often function as extensions of political camps, reinforcing antagonistic narratives centred on national identity and existential threat. Social media, particularly influential among younger audiences, intensifies these dynamics by amplifying fear-based and identity-driven frames. As noted in the summary, digital platforms *"contribute to the normalisation of conflict-oriented political communication,"* sustaining high levels of emotional mobilisation and polarisation.

Bulgaria presents a different configuration. Traditional media are frequently described as propagandistic and lacking credibility, which limits their capacity to act as trusted intermediaries. Instead, social media emerge as the primary arena for emotional political communication. The Bulgarian summary emphasises that social platforms are not only influential but often emotionally manipulative, spreading narratives of corruption, betrayal, and systemic failure. Interestingly, despite high emotional intensity, the overall level of media polarisation is coded as low, reflecting a more generalised distrust rather than clear ideological segmentation. Emotional disillusionment, rather than partisan loyalty, dominates media-driven political engagement.

In Austria, traditional media continue to dominate political communication, although their influence is gradually declining. Public service broadcasting and mainstream newspapers retain credibility, shaping emotional frames around immigration, security, and patriotism in a comparatively restrained manner. Social media play a complementary and more targeted role, often reinforcing existing attitudes rather than radically transforming them. The Austrian summary suggests that emotionalisation occurs episodically, particularly during crises, but remains embedded within a relatively stable media environment with low polarisation.

Denmark stands out for its high level of trust in traditional media and comparatively limited emotional disruption from social media. Traditional journalism continues to set the agenda, and social media largely mirror rather than distort mainstream narratives. Dominant frames such as equality, welfare, and climate responsibility are emotionally engaging but rarely framed as existential threats. The Danish summary notes that emotional appeals tend to be balanced by factual reporting and institutional accountability, resulting in medium-low media polarisation and limited affective escalation.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, media dynamics are shaped by deep fragmentation and historical trauma. Traditional media are often described as subjective and aligned with ethnic or political interests, while social media amplify dramatic and emotionally charged narratives. Dominant frames related to war, victimhood, and ethnic division continue to structure political communication. The country summary underscores that media frequently reproduce *"emotionally loaded interpretations of past and present conflicts,"* sustaining high levels of polarisation and reinforcing group boundaries.

North Macedonia occupies an intermediate position. Traditional media are widely perceived as biased, while social media play a significant role in identity-driven mobilisation. Dominant frames focus on injustice and ethnic inequality, reflecting ongoing tensions within the political system. Media polarisation is moderate rather than extreme, but emotional

narratives still shape political debate by emphasising grievance and recognition rather than policy performance. The summary highlights that media discourse often oscillates between reform-oriented narratives and emotionally charged identity claims.

Summary note

The cross-country comparison demonstrates that while emotionalisation through media is a universal phenomenon, its political consequences depend strongly on media trust, polarisation, and institutional context. In high-trust systems such as Denmark—and to a lesser extent Austria—media-driven emotions tend to be moderated and integrated into deliberative processes. In contrast, in Poland, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia, media environments are more prone to emotional escalation, either through polarised parallelism, generalised distrust, or identity-based segmentation.

Importantly, the analysis shows that high emotional intensity does not always correspond to high polarisation. Bulgaria illustrates how emotionally manipulative media can coexist with low ideological structuring, producing disillusionment rather than stable partisan alignment. Conversely, Poland and Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrate how polarised media ecosystems reinforce durable emotional divides. These differences underline the need to consider not only the presence of emotional framing, but also the structural characteristics of media systems that determine how emotions shape political understanding and democratic engagement.

Figure 2 - Media Influence Spectrum*
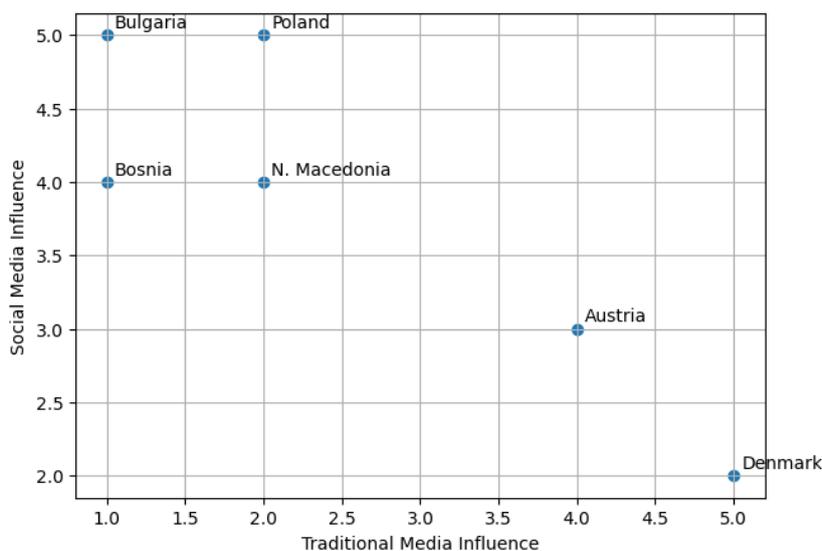
Source: Encode own elaboration: Scores (expert scoring) were assigned based on recurring descriptors in the national summaries.

*The media influence spectrum was constructed by qualitatively assessing the relative importance of traditional and social media in emotional political mobilisation. Placement reflects patterns identified in national summaries regarding trust, reach, and emotional amplification

4.3 EMOTIONAL MECHANISMS IN POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING.

Table 3 - Emotional mechanisms influencing political decision making

Country	Mobilising Emotions	Demobilising Emotions	Crisis Use	Possible Impact
Poland	Fear, pride, anger, disgust	Fatigue	High	Polarisation
Bulgaria	Shame	Fatigue, scepticism	High	Disappointment
Austria	Fear, hope(, anger, disillusionment, pride)	Hopelessness	Moderate-High	Social division
Denmark	Anger, compassion	Disappointment	Low	Stability
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Dissatisfaction	Despair	Medium	Ethnic issues
North Macedonia	Fear, hope, frustration, pride	Distrust	Medium	Political division

Similarities

Across all six countries, emotions function as key mediating mechanisms between political events and individual political decisions. Rather than operating as isolated reactions, emotions shape how citizens interpret information, assign responsibility, and evaluate political alternatives. The country summaries consistently show that political decision-making is rarely a purely rational assessment of policy proposals; instead, it is embedded in emotionally charged narratives that simplify complex realities into morally or existentially meaningful choices.

A shared feature is the central role of crisis framing. In all cases—albeit to different degrees—political actors and media frame developments as crises, whether related to governance, corruption, security, identity, or international positioning. This framing activates emotions that lower cognitive complexity and encourage heuristic decision-making. As noted in the Polish summary, electoral choices are often made "under conditions of heightened emotional mobilisation, where political actors frame elections as decisive moments for the survival of core values." Similar observations appear in the Bulgarian and Western Balkan cases, where repeated crises normalise emotional urgency as a background condition of politics.

Another commonality is that mobilising and demobilising emotions coexist. Fear, anger, pride, or hope may initially activate political engagement, but prolonged exposure to emotionally intense politics frequently produces fatigue, cynicism, or withdrawal. Even in Denmark, where emotional volatility is low, the summary acknowledges that trust-based engagement relies on the absence of sustained fear, suggesting that emotional moderation itself is a stabilising mechanism.

Differences

Despite these shared mechanisms, the dominant emotional configurations and their political consequences differ markedly.

In Poland, political decision-making is shaped by a strong combination of mobilising emotions—particularly fear and pride—paired with increasing fatigue. Crisis framing is highly prevalent, with elections repeatedly presented as existential moments. The country summary highlights that political competition has been structured around *"binary moral and identity-based oppositions,"* which intensify polarisation and produce visible turnout shifts between electoral cycles. Fear (e.g. related to security or cultural threat) and pride (linked to national sovereignty and historical narratives) mobilise voters, while prolonged conflict generates exhaustion among parts of the electorate.

In Bulgaria, anger emerges as the primary mobilising emotion, closely linked to perceptions of corruption, elite failure, and systemic injustice. However, this anger frequently transitions into cynicism rather than sustained engagement. The Bulgarian summary explicitly notes a pattern in which *"emotional mobilisation does not consolidate political alternatives but instead reinforces distrust in all political actors."* Crisis framing remains high due to repeated elections and unstable governments, but its effect is often disengagement or protest voting rather than stable partisan alignment.

Austria presents a contrasting model. Mobilising emotions are more subdued and often take the form of concern rather than fear or anger. Emotional responses are typically event-driven—most notably during corruption scandals or migration-related debates—but are moderated by relatively high institutional trust. The Austrian summary observes that voters tend to respond to crises through *"pragmatic reassessment rather than wholesale rejection of the political system,"* resulting in pragmatic voting patterns and limited long-term polarisation.

In Denmark, trust is the dominant emotional backdrop to political decision-making, and fear plays a minimal role. Crisis framing is comparatively rare and, when present, is embedded within institutional consensus. The Danish summary emphasises that political debates are "largely oriented toward problem-solving rather than moral confrontation," which helps explain stable participation and limited emotional volatility. Emotional mechanisms here support continuity rather than disruption.

The Western Balkan cases display structurally distinct emotional mechanisms. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, fear and hopelessness dominate political decision-making. Fear is closely tied to collective memory and perceived group vulnerability, while hopelessness reflects entrenched perceptions of political stagnation. The summary notes that electoral behaviour is *"largely driven by ethnic affiliation rather than issue evaluation,"* resulting in ethnic bloc voting reinforced by persistent crisis narratives.

In North Macedonia, emotional mechanisms are more ambivalent. Hope—particularly related to EU integration and reform—coexists with anger and distrust stemming from identity disputes and political compromises. Crisis framing is present but less constant than in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The country summary points to *"oscillating emotional expectations,"* which translate into volatile participation and shifting electoral support rather than stable alignment.

Summary Note

Taken together, the comparison reveals a **continuum between event-driven and structurally embedded emotional decision-making**. In consolidated democracies such as Denmark and, to a lesser extent, Austria, emotions influence political decisions primarily in response to specific events and are moderated by institutional trust. In Poland and Bulgaria, emotional mechanisms are more persistent and destabilising, though driven by different dynamics: ideological polarisation in Poland and institutional frustration in Bulgaria.
In Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, emotional mechanisms are deeply embedded in political structures and identity-based competition, making emotions a permanent filter through which political choices are made. Across all cases, the analysis confirms that emotions do not merely accompany political decision-making but actively shape its logic, intensity, and outcomes—albeit in ways that are strongly conditioned by institutional context, historical experience, and media environments.

4.4 EMERGING LEADERSHIP STYLES

Table 4 - Overview of emotional leadership styles

Country	Dominant Leadership Style	Emotional Tone	Crisis Rhetoric	Personalisation
Poland	Polarising leadership	Confrontational	High	High
Bulgaria	Anti-elite populism	Volatile	High	Medium
Austria	Mixed technocratic-populist	Controlled	Medium	Medium
Denmark	Consensus-oriented	Calm	Low	Low
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Ethno-populist	Defensive	High	High
North Macedonia	Identity-based	Defensive	Medium	Medium

Similarities:

Across all six countries, political leadership increasingly relies on emotional communication and symbolic performance as a core component of political authority. Regardless of regime stability or political tradition, leaders are expected not only to articulate policy positions but also to embody emotionally legible roles—such as protectors, reformers, moral arbiters, or defenders of collective identity. The country summaries consistently indicate that leadership legitimacy is closely tied to the ability to resonate emotionally with citizens, particularly in periods of uncertainty or crisis.

A shared trend is the personalisation of political leadership, reinforced by media logic and platform-based communication. Even in systems with strong party structures, leaders are increasingly presented as individual carriers of political meaning. As noted in several summaries, leadership communication often centres on personal credibility, authenticity, and emotional consistency rather than collective party identity alone. Crisis rhetoric also appears across contexts, though its intensity and permanence vary; leaders in all countries

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employ crisis framing selectively to mobilise support, justify decisions, or delegitimise opponents.

Differences

Despite these common features, the emotional register and political function of leadership styles differ substantially across countries.

In Poland, leadership is characterised by a highly polarising and confrontational emotional style. Crisis rhetoric is persistent and central, with political leaders frequently framing political competition as a struggle over national survival, moral order, or sovereignty. The country summary highlights that leadership discourse often relies on "*strong emotional binaries that divide society into opposing camps,*" contributing to deep polarisation and high personalisation. Leaders are not only policy-makers but symbolic figures representing competing visions of national identity, which intensifies emotional loyalty as well as rejection.

Bulgaria exhibits a more volatile form of emotional leadership, dominated by anti-elite populism. Emotional tone fluctuates between anger, indignation, and performative sincerity, often linked to narratives of betrayal and systemic failure. Crisis rhetoric is frequent but less ideologically coherent than in Poland. The Bulgarian summary notes that leadership appeals are *"strongly personalised but unstable,"* which helps explain why emotional mobilisation often fails to consolidate long-term support and instead feeds cycles of protest, disappointment, and renewed anti-system sentiment.

In Austria, leadership styles are more mixed, combining technocratic competence with selective populist appeals. Emotional tone is generally controlled, even during crises, and personalisation remains moderate. The Austrian summary points out that leaders tend to *"balance emotional responsiveness with institutional responsibility,"* particularly during corruption scandals or migration debates. Crisis rhetoric is present but episodic, allowing emotional escalation without undermining long-term system legitimacy.

Denmark stands out as the least emotionally polarised leadership context. Leadership is predominantly consensus-oriented, with a calm emotional tone and limited reliance on crisis rhetoric. Personalisation is low compared to other cases, and emotional appeal is embedded in narratives of responsibility, trust, and collective problem-solving. The Danish summary emphasises that leaders are expected to *"demonstrate competence and reliability rather than emotional confrontation,"* which supports political stability and high institutional trust.

The Western Balkan cases display leadership styles that are deeply intertwined with identity politics. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethno-populist leadership dominates, characterised by a defensive emotional tone and high levels of personalisation. Leaders frequently position themselves as guardians of group interests, invoking historical grievances and existential threats. The summary explicitly notes that leadership legitimacy is derived from "*protecting the collective rather than delivering policy outcomes,*" making crisis rhetoric a permanent feature of political communication.

In North Macedonia, leadership is similarly identity-based but less rigid. Emotional tone is defensive, yet mixed with reform-oriented narratives, particularly in relation to EU integration. Crisis rhetoric is present but not constant, and personalisation remains moderate. The country summary describes leadership as operating *"between confrontation and compromise,"* reflecting tensions between national identity concerns and external integration pressures.

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Comparative note

The cross-country comparison reveals that emotional leadership styles mirror broader institutional and emotional environments. In consolidated democracies with high trust (Denmark, partly Austria), leadership emotionality is constrained by norms of responsibility and institutional continuity. Emotional appeals exist but are moderated, episodic, and rarely framed as existential struggles.

In contrast, in politically polarised or institutionally fragile contexts (Poland, Bulgaria), leadership becomes more confrontational and personalised, with crisis rhetoric serving as a key tool for mobilisation and boundary-setting. In post-conflict and post-transition settings (Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia), emotional leadership is structurally embedded in identity-based competition, making defensive and group-oriented emotional appeals a persistent feature of political authority.

Overall, the analysis confirms that emotional leadership is not an anomaly but a central component of contemporary politics. However, its form, intensity, and democratic implications depend strongly on institutional stability, media environments, and historical legacies. Emotional leadership can function either as a stabilising force that fosters trust and collective responsibility or as a polarising mechanism that reinforces division and perpetuates crisis-driven politics.

Figure 3 - Leadership Emotional Style Radar*
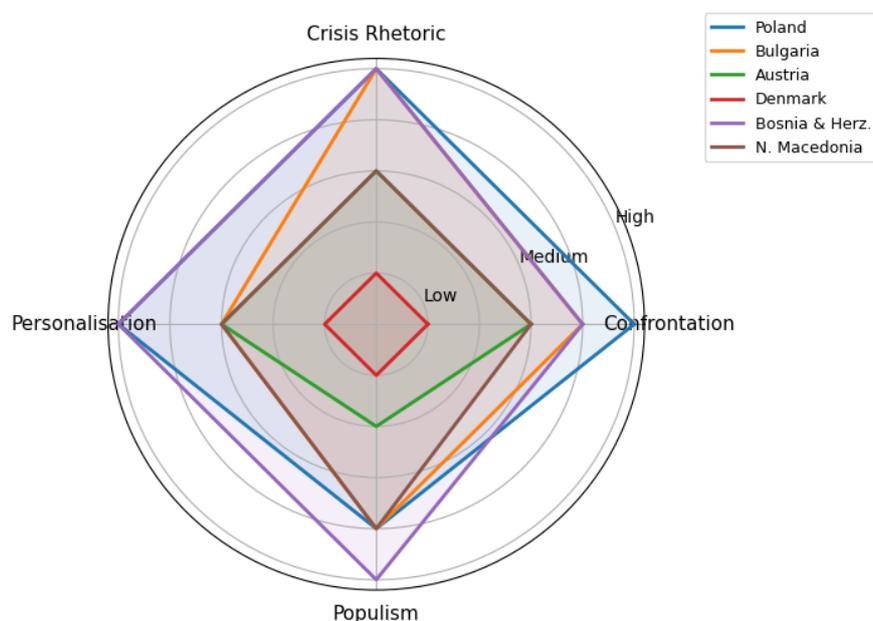
Source: Encode own elaboration: Scores (expert scoring) were assigned based on recurring descriptors in the national summaries.

*The radar chart was constructed using ordinal qualitative scores derived from the cross-country comparison table and national desk research summaries. Each leadership dimension was translated into a five-point ordinal scale (low–high) based on systematic interpretation of recurring patterns in leadership rhetoric, media portrayal, and political communication styles described in the country reports. The values shown do not represent statistical measurement but relative comparative positioning across countries, allowing visual comparison of emotional leadership styles.

5 VALIDATIONS THROUGH INTERVIEWS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of these interviews is to gather qualitative insights from policymakers responsible for managing misinformation, communication activities, and public sentiment. The aim is to understand the role emotions play in political communication, especially in response to national crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The interviews will also help validate findings from the empirical and desk research review and provide practical perspectives on how emotions influence policy formation and political discourse. This qualitative data will complement the empirical and theoretical findings of the ENCODE project, especially in relation to how emotions shape societal responses and political leadership.

In the interviews there were 15 questions asked with specific purpose, as presented in the table below:

Questions asked	Purpose of question
How do you perceive the role of emotions in shaping political communication in your country?	To understand the general view of policymakers on the influence of emotions in political messaging and communication strategies.
In your experience, which emotions tend to be most effectively utilized in political discourse?	To identify specific emotions that are more commonly targeted in political communication and their effectiveness in shaping public opinion.
How have traditional and social media influenced emotional narratives in political communication?	To explore the impact of media on the dissemination and amplification of emotional messaging, including the role of misinformation.
In your view, how has the COVID-19 pandemic affected public emotions and trust in government communication?	To gather insights on how a major crisis has shifted public emotions and the government's communication strategy.
How has the war in Ukraine influenced political communication and public emotions in your country?	To understand the emotional impact of the war on foreign policy and national security discussions, as well as public sentiment.
Can you provide examples of how emotional narratives have been used to address societal issues or policy reforms (e.g., healthcare, immigration, economic policy)?	To link emotional narratives with specific policy initiatives and societal responses.
In your opinion, how do emotions influence voter behaviour during elections or referendums?	To explore the connection between emotional appeals and electoral outcomes, based on policymakers' experiences and observations.
What strategies have been most effective in addressing misinformation and managing public emotions during crises?	To identify effective approaches to misinformation and emotional management, particularly in times of national crisis.
How have emerging leadership styles (e.g., populist, technocratic) shaped the emotional climate in politics?	To assess the role of leadership styles in manipulating or addressing public emotions and sentiment.
Can you describe how emotional appeals from political leaders have shaped public opinion on key national or international issues?	To examine specific cases where emotional appeals have been used to influence public opinion on significant political matters.
How do you perceive the role of emotions in policymaking, especially when dealing with	To understand how emotions shape not just public discourse, but also the policy decision-making process.

controversial or highly sensitive issues (e.g., abortion, constitutional reforms)?	
What role do emotions play in fostering or eroding public trust in democratic institutions?	To explore the broader impact of emotions on public trust and the functioning of democratic institutions.
How has your communication strategy adapted to the challenges posed by misinformation and emotional polarization in the media?	To gather practical insights into how policymakers are dealing with the intersection of misinformation and emotional politics.
In your experience, are certain emotions more effective in specific policy domains (e.g., security, healthcare, economy)? If so, could you provide examples?	To understand if certain emotions are more prominent or effective in different areas of policy.
Do you believe that emotional narratives will continue to play a significant role in future political communication and policy formation? Why or why not?	To gauge long-term views on the evolving role of emotions in politics.

Below there is presented a summary and comparison of the insight from the interviews structured into 10 sections, which are also connected with data gathering from the previous chapter:

5.2 THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION:

Emotions are a constituent of political communication, shaping the reception, interpretation, and action of political messages by citizens. In all four countries under interviews, policymakers recognized that appeals on an emotional level have come to overshadow reason-based argument in public discourse, especially where politics has become polarized. Greater use of electronic communication has hastened the trend even more, as emotions—fear, anger, and resentment being the most prominent—become more engaging and mobilizing than policy-based argument.

In Poland, the interviewee pointed to the way political communication is increasingly based on emotional storytelling as a way of engaging with voters, mobilizing support, and framing public opinion. Though emotions can be utilized in a positive way, creating civic engagement and solidarity, more often they are utilized to polarize society and reinforce ideological dividing lines. Political leaders' calculated utilization of emotional appeals has served to exaggerate political exigency and moral crisis, fostering an environment where emotions take the place of rational policy discussion.

Likewise, in Austria, the interview participant recognized that feelings have become more prominent in political communication than previously. Policy issues and facts still matter, yet the attractiveness of emotionally grounded messaging has become more prevalent than classically rational claims.

The arrival of social media has hastened the process, for a volatile, rapid-fire political climate. Negative emotions, particularly fear, resentment, and doubt, are more effective than positive emotions, as they spread faster and resonate more deeply with the public.

The example of Bosnian and Herzegovina also demonstrates the emotionalization of political discourse, where communication strategies are led by national identity politics and historical injustice. Forto had observed that emotion is the key driver of political decision-making but needs to be followed with real policy proposals if it is to be successful. Nationalist politicians have placed the use of fear, pride, and victimhood narratives at the top of the agenda, where public opinion is rooted in historical cleavages instead of policy-based debate.

In Bulgaria, cynicism and emotional exhaustion were identified by the interviewee as typical of public attitude towards politics. Disengagement, mistrust, and disillusionment mark much of the political communication experience of the electorate. Although anger and

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discontent have the potential to mobilize oppositional movements, more often they contribute to political apathy rather than active civic engagement. This implies that although emotion's structure political communication, their impact is context-dependent—ranging from mobilizing engagement to fostering disengagement—on the broader socio-political environment. In all four countries, political players recognize the necessity of appeals to emotion but disagree on tactics and future implications. The appeal to fear and anger have been hugely effective for populist and nationalist movements, while hope and trust remain main tools of democratic engagement. However, excessive dependence on emotional messages with no policy substance can drain public faith, sustaining ongoing disillusion and polarization.

5.3 MOST UTILIZED EMOTIONS IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

The interviews confirm that while different emotions prevail in political rhetoric depending on context and leadership style, certain emotional appeals are universally effective in shaping public opinion, mobilization, and voting behaviour. Fear, hope, anger, resentment, and pride are the strongest emotional motivators, but their specific application varies by nation and political party.

In Poland, fear has been exploited to a large degree to alert against alleged dangers, whether economic, migrational, or geopolitical from without. It has been a particularly useful instrument for nationalist and conservative forces, presenting political conflicts in existential terms. Hope and trust, on the other hand, have been the most frequent emotions invoked by pro-European and progressive forces, especially in campaigns for reform, modernization, and EU integration. Competing emotional agendas entrench political polarization, and more and more it is hard for dispassionate debate to take hold.

In Austria, according to the interviewee, fear is among the most pervasive emotions, and especially so within immigration discourse, economic security, and social transformation. Hatred, although not as overtly expressed, is generally a secondary emotional reaction, especially when fear is continually reaffirmed. The balancing emotion is hope, and this is utilized to provide other, different stories to fear-oriented messaging. How long-term and sustainable hope-based messaging can be is, however, an open question, given that fear messages are more activating.

Political discourse in Bosnia and Herzegovina is marked by sentiments of pride, fear, and victimhood. Nationalist politicians have for decades used narratives of collective trauma to consolidate ethnic lines and secure political allegiance. Minister Forto explained how calls to fear are still powerful, yet there are other political movements that are trying to alter the discourse towards trust and advancement. Yet, in a political landscape ruled by emotional manipulation, altering public opinion is no easy feat.

Likewise, in Bulgaria, anger and mistrust are the prevailing emotional drivers of public engagement with politics. The profound frustration with corruption, misgovernance, and impunity has resulted in a highly cynical citizenry where political disillusionment and emotional burnout prevail. Whereas populist leaders draw on fear and resentment, it is difficult for progressive actors to maintain hope-based narratives, since institutions are not trusted by the public.

The most effective type of political mobilization in all four nations is fear-based communication, while hope-based communication needs efforts to establish trust over time to be effective. Negative emotions, especially anger and resentment, are more influential in determining the behaviour of voters, which indicates how difficult it is to construct positive political communication in emotionally polarized contexts.

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5.4 IMPACT OF TRADITIONAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA ON EMOTIONAL NARRATIVES

The interviews underscore that political communication has been revolutionized by the transition from old media to social media, rendering it quicker, emotional, and less contemplative. Social media's algorithmic nature promotes emotional content, which amplifies polarization and misinformation.

In Austria and Poland, interviewees recognized that social media has amplified the emotionalization of political communication, namely by intensifying outrage and fear-inducing messages. The sensationalized character of news consumption encourages partisan echo chambers, where audiences become repeatedly exposed to emotionally manipulative messages. The interviewees noted that traditional media still exerts influence, but one that is diminishing in the context of digital engagement patterns.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Minister Forto pointed out that unregulated online media has resulted in extensive misinformation, with right-wing populists taking advantage of low media literacy to influence public opinion. In Bulgaria, the interviewee explained how low confidence in journalism and extensive misinformation contribute to political cynicism and disillusionment.

Across all countries, it is clear that social media has intensified emotional polarization, solidifying fear-based narratives and ideological divides. Fact-checking initiatives and media literacy programs are touted as solutions, but their effectiveness is limited by strongly held emotional biases.

5.5 THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND PUBLIC TRUST IN GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION

The COVID-19 pandemic was a deep emotional inflection point in political communication, one that permanently changed trust in institutions and how governments communicated with citizens. The interviews affirm that the emotional trajectory of the crisis went through clear phases, mirroring changes in public opinion, policy efficacy, and crisis fatigue. Across all four nations being examined, policymakers recognized that fear, uncertainty, and frustration were the prevailing drivers of both government activity and public reaction. Nevertheless, variations in crisis management approaches and communications efficacy resulted in varying levels of public confidence erosion.

In Austria, the interviewee distinguished three emotional phases of the pandemic. Trust in government was initially high, as uncertainty and fear induced a rally-around-the-flag effect and increased approval ratings for governing parties. As the pandemic wore on, though, public opinion turned to frustration and scepticism, especially as lockdowns became increasingly restrictive and were enforced unevenly. Compulsory vaccination policies in the third wave induced widespread distrust, as they were viewed as overreach and political rather than exclusively scientific. The interviewee identified that the mismanagement of messaging—namely, the effectiveness of vaccines at preventing transmission rather than severe illness—undermined public trust. This communications breakdown was also exploited by populist parties, such as the FPÖ, who opportunistically used anti-government sentiment to shore up their electoral base.

In Poland, we saw the same path, with early obedience and faith in government instructions slowly making way for mistrust and political resistance. The early pandemic period was marked by tight government control, with emergency measures legitimized by scare-mongering discourse. However, as the emergency turned into a protracted crisis, fragmented communications, expert disagreement, and politicization of containment policies created widespread public disillusion. The instrumentalization of COVID messaging by opposition groups and populist leaders also contributed to further polarization, so that pandemic discourse remained intensely emotionalized long after the immediate health crisis had subsided.

From Bosnia and Herzegovina, interviewee provided a highly personalized account of crisis management, emphasizing the emotional toll on policymakers compelled to make high-pressure decisions under conditions of radical uncertainty. He asserted that crisis communication has to be led by truth, for mistruth and misinformation erode trust more quickly than policy failure. At the same time, however, he noted that popular opinion about the crisis depended on people's direct experience of COVID-19—those who experienced personal loss were more likely to accept drastic government intervention, while those who experienced economic loss due to lockdowns were more likely to become cynical and defiant. Affective polarization between these two segments added another layer of political strain, entrenching ideological and socioeconomic divides. In Bulgaria, the interviewee painted a picture of complete public disillusionment with government communication throughout the pandemic. In contrast with Austria or Poland, where governments went through cycles of early trust followed by erosion, Bulgaria's pandemic response was marked by constant suspicion from the very beginning. The low trust baseline in institutions made it difficult for government communication to take hold, and conspiracy theories surrounding COVID-19 were able to find fertile soil in the public mindset. The emotional atmosphere was overshadowed by fear and frustration, but unlike in other nations, this fear was not just focused on the virus but also on the government itself, which was seen as untrustworthy and ineffective.

Throughout the four cases, COVID-19 successfully reordered the place of emotions in political communication, illustrating both the potency and fragility of crisis messages. Though early fear-based appeals were successful in obtaining cooperation, they were not sustainable in the longer term, particularly as trust was eroded by inconsistency, politicization, or coercive policy. The pandemic further highlighted how opposition forces harness emotional exhaustion as a mobilizing force for anger, paving the way for populism and anti-establishment parties to gain additional political traction.

5.6 WAR IN UKRAINE AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The war in Ukraine introduced a new emotional quality to political communication, shaping public debate, foreign policy debate, and national security deliberations. In each of the four countries, the interviews confirmed that emotions of fear, solidarity, anger, and economic concern were a driving force in how political actors framed their response. However, governments varied in their effectiveness in communicating their position based on historic relations, domestic political structures, and economic dependencies.

In Austria, the interviewee stressed the emotional whiplash experienced by the public, as the war in Ukraine followed hard on the heels of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had instilled in people a lasting feeling of uncertainty and instability. The war was framed early on as a binary choice between democracy and authoritarianism, for which there was widespread public sympathy for Ukraine. When economic concerns—most prominently inflation and rising gas prices—began to take over the agenda, however, public sentiment changed. The FPÖ politically exploited this turn, demanding a more isolationist approach to Russia, reasserting

an emotionally driven "Austria first" motif. The failure of the Austrian government to present its position was a contributing factor to public opinion's ambivalence and fragmentation, stated the interviewee. The discussion regarding neutrality became complex, with some factions calling for greater European alignment and others advocating for classic non-intervention policies.

In Poland, the war in Ukraine revived long-standing historical feelings, reasserting Poland's historical role as a frontline defender of European security. Unlike in Austria, where economic interests later tempered public opinion in favour of Ukraine, Poland's national identity and historical grievances with Russia maintained firm support. The interview revealed that emotional narratives of solidarity, resilience, and moral duty were at the centre of media and government discourse, shoring up Poland's pro-NATO and pro-Western orientation. However, the affective meaning of the crisis also reinforced Poland's prevailing ideological divisions, with nationalist movements seeking to capitalize on the refugee crisis and defence policy for political purposes.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Minister Forto described the war in Ukraine as an intensely triggering event for its many citizens, who saw parallels between the conflict and their own experiences of the Yugoslav Wars. The psychological impact of viewing familiar images of destruction and displacement induced mass emotional pain, as people reacted instinctively to reports of conflict. However, unlike in Poland, where support for Ukraine was politically unifying, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, political cleavages framed conflicting narratives. Pro-NATO and pro-Westerners strongly identified with Ukraine, while pro-Russian forces framed the conflict as Western aggression, entrenching geopolitical fault lines in the state.

In Bulgaria, the interviewee identified the two emotional responses to the war—humanitarian sympathy vs. geopolitical self-interest. While there was sympathy among Bulgarians for Ukrainian refugees, economic fears, namely energy reliance on Russia, meant that political support for strong anti-Russian policies dissipated. As in Austria, economic fear gradually displaced humanitarian rhetoric, giving opposition parties room to advocate for isolationism or pro-Russian policies.

In each of the four countries, the war in Ukraine reshaped political discourse through emotional appeals to national identity, historical memory, and economic security. While fear and solidarity dominated the initial phase, the onset of economic fears, political opportunism, and geopolitical alignments generated more diffuse emotional responses. The interviews confirm that government communication played a key role in shaping public opinion, but the emotional character of the crisis made long-term unity impossible to sustain.

5.7 EMOTIONAL NARRATIVES IN SOCIETAL AND POLICY ISSUES

Political communication is also directly linked to emotional narratives, particularly in explaining society's issues and policy change. In most countries, emotional appeals are utilized to mobilize popular support, legitimize policy decisions, or create false opposition frames. The interviews illustrate that emotional framing is an intentional political strategy, varying based on the policy area and socio-political context.

In Poland, emotional narratives have been utilized extensively in health, immigration, and economic policy. During the COVID-19 crisis, political actors employed feelings of responsibility, common good, and fear to sustain public health policy such as vaccination. During debates over immigration, appeals to sympathy and solidarity dominated, particularly towards Ukrainian refugees. Fear and safety dominated economic policy, however, as concerns about inflation and economic insecurity were framed in such a way as

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to require policy response. These trends illustrate the manner in which positive and negative emotional appeals are both key to the construction of public opinion about government decisions.

Emotional storytelling has also played a significant role in Austrian policy discourse, particularly on immigration and economic tax policy. Political communications have come to rely more strongly on appeal to fear-based discourse, particularly in the context of migration, which has transited from diffuse xenophobia to targeted fears of political Islam. Debates about economic policy have also been fuelled by emotions such as fear and resentment, with redistributive policies leading to tales of unequal taxation and economic insecurity. The interviews demonstrate how emotions of envy, frustration, and fear could be enlisted to frame public opinion towards taxation and redistribution.

The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina is especially intriguing in that it is a context in which emotional rhetoric is strongly embedded in history and political cleavages. The interview with Minister Edin Forto highlighted the extent to which long-term mistrust in the private sector—cast through affective tales of corruption—has had considerable influence on economic policy. This mistrust, encouraged by several decades of affective conditioning, has resulted in state-dominant employment methods, even when there is evidence that the private sector is performing well. Besides, nationalist leaders employ feelings such as pride, anger, and fear to maintain political power, making policy debates emotionalized rather than fact-based.

Similarly, in Bulgaria, emotive narratives have been used to frame problems of governance, namely corruption and trust in institutions. The interviews report that anger, frustration, and cynicism are the dominant emotions that fuel popular debate over governance and accountability. Policymakers recognize that public disillusionment is a serious issue since emotional fatigue can lead to either increased political polarization or complete disengagement.

Across all four countries, emotional stories are evidently a double-edged sword—a double-edged sword that can be used to mobilize public engagement as well as sharpen social cleavages. While positive emotions like hope, trust, and solidarity are well-suited to mobilize support for change, negative ones like fear, resentment, and anger are largely used to legitimize pre-existing prejudice and define opposition to change. Emotion over deliberative policy argument is a challenge to the degree to which constructive political debate can ever be realized.

5.8 EMOTIONS IN VOTER BEHAVIOUR AND ELECTIONS

Voting behaviour, by its very nature, is emotion-driven, and fear, hope, anger, and trust are the emotions that underlie political choice, turnout, and mobilization to the polls. The interviews reveal that emotional appeals in the four countries can play a decisive role in determining the shape of elections, quite often determining whether citizens get involved in the voting process at all.

In Poland, anger and fear have been instrumental in shaping voter sentiment. Fear-based messaging, particularly in the context of external threats, economic uncertainty, and social transformation, has been an effective tool in rallying nationalist and conservative voting blocs. Meanwhile, opposition forces have employed hope, optimism, and trust to push progressive change. Polarization of emotional narratives has led to a political culture where elections are framed increasingly as existential battles, cementing deep-seated political divisions.

In Austria, interviews show that fear and resentment are key motivators in voter mobilization, particularly on the right of politics. The Freedom Party (FPÖ) has drawn on economic concerns, xenophobia, and suspicion of political elites to build its support base. But it was said that while emotions influence the engagement and participation of voters, they might not necessarily lead to radical party preference shifts. Rather, disappointed voters will stay home or shift to nearby ideological parties, consolidating bloc politics.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethnic and nationalist sentiment predominantly determine voter behaviour. Election campaigns are defined by fear, identity politics, and historical grievance, in which rational debates over policy come second to emotive mobilization. The interview with Minister Forto demonstrated that alternative political movements find it difficult to challenge appeals to fear with hope-based campaigns. However, nationalist leaders hold sway by playing up fear and division, and so voter behaviour remains emotionally embedded in historical pain.

Similarly, frustration and indignation characterize electoral processes in Bulgaria. Disappointment with the government, as well as corruption scandals, have caused fluctuating voter turnout, with emotional exhaustion sometimes being a reason for political apathy. Nevertheless, indignation at the political establishment remains a driving force, and populist forces profit particularly from this.

Overall, the interviews confirm that voter behaviour is strongly driven by emotional narratives, with fear, hope, anger, and trust playing a central role in determining electoral turnout. While positive emotions can inspire political participation, negative emotions are stronger drivers in shaping political allegiances and mobilizing voters.

5.9 MISINFORMATION AND EMOTIONAL MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

The interviews present a balanced picture of misinformation and demonstrate that policymakers are cognizant of the challenge of combating emotionally driven false narratives. Across all four countries, misinformation thrives in politically charged atmospheres where fact-checking corrections consistently fail to get past rooted bias.

In Austria and Poland, the respondents stressed that social media enables the dissemination of misinformation, particularly in the form of fear-mongering stories. The emotional draw of fake news is stronger than debunking it with evidence, and it results in political polarization. Fact-checking initiatives and campaigns in media literacy are considered potential antidotes, although their impact is limited by the dominant ideological cleavages.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Minister Forto emphasized that the best way to fight disinformation are direct confrontation, crisis management, and open communication. However, he acknowledged that citizens' lack of trust in institutions makes it very difficult to fight false narratives.

Similarly, in Bulgaria, the interviews show that media pluralization and low institutional trust levels make disinformation difficult to fight, furthering social divisions and emotional manipulation.

In each of the four countries, crisis communication strategies must incorporate emotional intelligence—understanding how fear, uncertainty, and distrust shape public opinion is critical to successfully countering misinformation.

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5.10 LEADERSHIP STYLES AND THEIR EMOTIONAL IMPACT ON POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The role of leadership styles in the emotional climate of politics is evident in all four countries being researched in the interviews. Populist, technocratic, and hybrid leadership styles each produce unique emotional responses and play a key role in shaping public trust, policy acceptance, and political participation. The interviews reveal that populist leaders manipulate feelings such as fear, resentment, and nationalism, whereas technocratic leaders cannot emotionally connect with the public even as they offer reason-based, data-driven rule.

Politics in Poland is characterized by a double battle between populist and liberal narratives. The conservative government party in Poland tends to rely on nationalist sentiments, fear of foreign intervention, and moral panic regarding social issues in order to build power. The opposition, on the other hand, is based on hope, European integration, and democratic values. This emotional divide has led to a more polarized electorate in which emotional allegiance to leaders matters more than policy issues. Populism in Poland is part of a larger Central European trend, in which leaders build power by using emotionally charged messages that solidify us-versus-them attitudes.

In Austria, the interviewee identified populist rhetoric as a primary driver of public opinion, particularly in conservative and extremist political movements. The FPÖ's capacity to mobilize public emotion—particularly fear and resentment of migration and economic uncertainty—demonstrates how leadership influences emotional engagement. The Austrian case demonstrates the power of fear-driven leadership, which uses economic uncertainty and cultural anxieties to achieve a solid political foundation.

Bosnia and Herzegovina have a unique leadership environment, one in which public life is characterized by ethnic identity politics and complaint, defined by nationalist politicians. Minister Forto's observations reveal that nationalist politicians, such as Milorad Dodik, use emotional manipulation to maintain leadership, so that fear and fragmentation are central to the governance of society. His interview does suggest, however, public fatigue with such a paradigm and that there are voters who do desire alternative hope-based leadership models. The popularity of populist leaders in Serbia, Hungary, and Turkey also supports the idea that authoritarian-trending leaders are successful because they feed on emotional polarization, employing scapegoating, nationalism, and perceived external threats to attain power.

In Bulgaria, the interview suggests charismatic and authoritarian-type leaders have shaped political debate based on anger and fear in creating a culture of extreme public distrust of institutions. While there are voters who mobilize around strongman leadership, there are others who are politically disillusioned, creating electoral volatility and mixed trust in government. Technocratic leaders who resonate more to policy than emotion have had little traction, as appeals to reason struggle to galvanize an electorate accustomed to emotional politics.

Across all four cases combined, populist leaders have the most powerful appeal emotionally, establishing voter sentiments through frames of national hardship, economic hardship, and social peril. Technocratic and centrist leaders, however, fail to reconcile these appeals, often failing to form strong emotional connections with citizens. The interviews confirm that political leadership is no longer an issue of policy knowledge—rather, it has become an issue

of emotional connection, the ability to inspire, and the deployment of fear, pride, and hope as manipulation tools to move public opinion.

5.11 THE FUTURE OF EMOTIONAL NARRATIVES IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The interviews collectively indicate that emotions will remain at the core of political communication, whereas the way they are used is most likely to evolve with technological changes, generational changes, and global crises. Political actors see the power of emotional appeals increasingly throughout election campaigns but also within governments, crisis choices, and policy persuasion. The greatest future challenge is whether emotionally framed narratives would be employed in constructive debate or more polarization.

Political communication in Poland will likely be emotionally charged in the future, particularly with growing partisan cleavages. The competition between nationalist conservatism and pro-European liberalism will most likely continue as fear and moral panic construct narratives on the right and hope, optimism, and civic responsibility construct narratives on the left. The Polish interview suggests that social media echo chambers for emotion will merely make political polarization worse, making it harder to hear neutral or moderate voices.

In Austria, the respondent was concerned that negative feelings will still dominate political discourse, particularly through social media-induced outrage cycles. Online discourse sensationalism, coupled with the propagation of conspiracy theories and fake news, will most likely continue to destroy rational debate. On the other hand, there is hope that fatigue with emotional politics, particularly fear politics, will generate a demand for more positive and solution-oriented communication strategies.

Bosnia and Herzegovina possess a complex history, whereby grievances, identity politics, and nationalism continue to guide political feelings. Minister Forto was not sure about the role of emotions in the long run, particularly as future generations, who have lived in the digital era, may redefine emotional narratives in politics. But he believes that there will never be a time when emotions are eliminated from politics, as fear, pride, and resentment remain the primary forces behind policy discussions and voter turnout.

In Bulgaria, the interviewee predicted that the emotional tone of politics would remain to oscillate, fuelled by corruption scandals, government dysfunction, and economic anxiety. Public trust in institutions remains low, and if leaders fail to rebuild credibility, political communication will likely remain driven by frustration, distrust, and populism. The interview highlights that emotions will remain a primary driver of political participation, but their impact will depend on whether they are employed for constructive mobilization or reinforcing cynicism.

Across all four countries, the political communications technological leapfrog—most significant among them being artificial intelligence, algorithmic social media, and micro-targeted messaging—will amplify even further the strategic deployment of emotion. Future political campaigns will likely be even more customized, employing psychological profiling to tailor emotional appeals to particular electors. This raises ethical concerns over democratic manipulation of emotion, as political actors come to possess increasing ability to map affective stimuli onto electors with precision.

In spite of these reservations, the interviews affirm that emotions will be an unavoidable feature of political discourse. The challenge that lies ahead is whether political leaders will decide to use emotions responsibly, generating trust, participation, and joint problem-

solving, or if they will persist in weaponizing emotions to divide, instil fear, and consolidate authoritarian rule. The future of democracy will be greatly determined by which direction shapes the political climate in the coming years.

6 CONCLUSIONS

This comparative study highlights the significant role that emotions play in political processes across national contexts. Although each nation has its own emotional terrain, there are overriding trends that become apparent, notably with respect to the increasing role of online media in expounding emotional narratives and influencing voter sentiment.

A crucial observation here is that societies that have greater political fragmentation and distrust of institutions are most likely to be confronted with heightened emotional polarization, which results in either decreased turnout or radicalization. Conversely, nations with stable democratic institutions and high trust levels tend to exhibit a more even emotional discourse, in which emotions serve to bolster democratic participation rather than undermining it.

The research also underscores the political leadership's dynamic nature, with emotional appeal being a key factor in electoral victory. Politicians that invoke emotions such as fear, pride, or anger frequently prosper under polarized conditions, but those that focus on hope, trust, and togetherness have been known to attract support in stable political systems.

In conclusion, the study calls for media stakeholders and policymakers to recognize the emotional underpinnings of political discussion. Formulating strategies that promote positive emotional investment, debunk false information, and establish institutional trust will be key in maintaining democratic system health amidst increasing political and societal strains.

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ACRONYM	FULL NAME
AIP	Access to Information Programme (Bulgaria)
AKH	Allgemeines Krankenhaus (Austria)
AUSSDA	Austrian Social Science Data Archive
AUTNES	Austrian National Election Study
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BESA	BESA Movement (Albanian political party in North Macedonia)
BIRN	Balkan Investigative Reporting Network
BSP	Bulgarian Socialist Party
BTA	Bulgarian News Agency
BTI	Bertelsmann Transformation Index
CBOS	Public Opinion Research Center (Poland)
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CSES	Comparative Study of Electoral Systems
DQA	Data Quality Assurance
DW	Deutsche Welle
DUI	Democratic Union for Integration (North Macedonia)
EC	European Commission
ECFR	European Council on Foreign Relations
EP	European Parliament
ERIC	European Research Infrastructure Consortium
ESS	European Social Survey
EURACTIV	EU policy-focused news network
EUROPP	European Politics and Policy (LSE Blog)
EVS	European Values Study
FENA	Federal News Agency (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
FYRO	Former Yugoslav Republic of (used historically for North Macedonia)
GA	General Assembly
GERB	Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria
GERB-UDF	GERB – United Democratic Forces (coalition)
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GLOBSEC	Global Security Forum (think tank)
HDZ	Croatian Democratic Union (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
IDI	In-Depth Interview
IDSCS	Institute for Democracy 'Societas Civilis' Skopje
IPSOS	Global market and opinion research firm
ITN	There Is Such a People (Bulgarian political party)

KoM	Kick-off Meeting
LGBTI / LGBTQI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Intersex
LSE	London School of Economics
MAKSTAT	Statistical Office of the Republic of North Macedonia
MARPOR	Manifesto Research on Political Representation
MRT	Macedonian Radio Television
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NEOS	The New Austria and Liberal Forum (Austria)
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OHR	Office of the High Representative (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
ORF	Austrian Broadcasting Corporation
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PM	Prime Minister
PO	Civic Platform (Polish party)
PP	We Continue the Change (Bulgarian party)
PP-DB	PP + Democratic Bulgaria (coalition)
PSL	Polish People's Party
RS	Republika Srpska (entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina)
RTRS	Radio Television of Republika Srpska
RTV	Radio-Television
SDSM	Social Democratic Union of Macedonia
SDA	Party of Democratic Action (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
SDP	Social Democratic Party
SLD	Democratic Left Alliance (Poland)
SNSD	Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (Bosnia)
SSRN	Social Science Research Network
TVN / TVP	Major Polish private/public television broadcasters
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UWR	University of Wrocław
VMRO-DPMNE	Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity
VLEN	VLEN Coalition (Albanian political coalition in North Macedonia)
WVS	World Values Survey
WWII	World War II

ENCODE