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# Crisis-exploitation or fear-mongering? A research agenda for the comparative study of policy crises and illiberal policy frames

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## ABSTRACT

The pervasive and growing illiberal movement is, perhaps, the greatest global challenge to liberal democracy today. Scholars argue that domestic and international crises have played an important role in perpetuating illiberalism among leaders and growing its support among their populace. In this paper, we set out a research agenda for the systematic study of illiberal policy frames (IPFs). In illustrating the potential of the concept and its operationalisation, we analyse how legislative politicians have used policy crises to communicate their policy ideas through IPFs. First, we define and measure illiberal frames in four countries (Austria, Germany, Hungary and the United States) for two policy issues (migration and COVID-19) using a novel IPF codebook and state-of-the-art large language models. Second, we assess the extent to which the use of these frames is sensitive to exogenous policy crises. Our findings suggest that the usage of illiberal political frames does not closely track the pertinent policy crisis metrics, such as the number of asylum seekers (for migration) or casualties (for COVID-19). Narratives show no relation to markers of the underlying policy crises, which points to a political strategy based on continued fear-mongering rather than crisis exploitation.

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## Introduction

Since the 2008 global financial crisis, advanced industrial countries have experienced a series of overlapping policy crises (Schmidt, 2019; Voltolini et al., 2020), as well as the ‘pernicious’ polarisation of democratic societies (McCoy et al., 2018). This new age of ‘polycrisis’ with its multiple cross-cutting cleavages (Zeitlin et al., 2019) has provided the opportunity for elected leaders to acquire and maintain their grip on power across the globe, from the United States (President Donald Trump) to Hungary (Prime Minister Viktor Orbán) to India (Prime Minister Narendra Modi). Regardless of whether these politicians operate in autocracies, liberal democracies, or in some sort of in-between hybrid regimes, illiberal policy frames (IPFs) have played a critical role in their political success.

In this paper, we set out a research agenda for the systematic study of these illiberal policy frames. In illustrating the potential of the concept and its operationalisation, we analyse how legislative politicians have used policy crises to communicate their policy ideas through IPFs. Adherents to illiberalism believe that liberalism has gone so far as to inflict damage on a sometimes, but not always, silent majority. They argue that belief in the political order, the protection of minority rights, the pursuit of globalism, and the trust placed in experts have sufficiently damaged the populace, leading them to advocate a return to majoritarianism and cultural homogeneity. Crises, which ‘constitute urgent threats to the core community’ (Boin et al., 2009), untether constituencies from their preferences for the status quo. Consequently, legislative politicians have discretion in how they frame the crisis, their solutions to it, and how much emphasis they put on them in their overall communication concerning the topic. These *hows* constitute the central puzzle for our research design: how do political actors strategically mobilise specific IPFs in times of crisis, and how does the volume of IPF utilisation change over time?

We understand IPF usage as a strategic and variable response to perceived threats that can be measured and analysed across contexts. Therefore, our research tests whether legislators from across the democratic spectrum use crises to perpetuate illiberalism. Our central hypothesis in this context is *crisis exploitation* theory. By challenging existing institutional routines, policy instruments, and agendas (Alink et al., 2001), crises present leaders with the opportunity to further their ideological aims while their constituencies are rattled by uncertainty. These crises may emerge when external shocks expose capacity shortages (policy failure) or when the core values and principles of the policy become internally contested (attacks on the polity; Schimelfennig, 2024). These may be two sides of the same coin: political forces antagonistic to liberal democracy can exploit policy crises (Boin et al., 2009) or contribute to a ‘populist performance’ of a crisis (Hinterleitner et al.,

2023; Moffitt, 2015). Alternative hypotheses related to this linkage between policy crises and political communication include *fear-mongering* regardless of any underlying policy crises (the counterpart to the crisis exploitation thesis) or the assumption of *sticky narratives* that linger long after the crisis subsides (which we take up in the Appendix).

We make three contributions to the overlapping literatures on illiberalism and policy crises. First, as our primary ambition, we develop a research agenda centred around the novel notion of illiberal policy frames (IPFs) to conceptualise a device of illiberal political communication within particular policy domains. We combine the emerging conceptual work on illiberalism with research on policy framing to define IPFs as issue-specific frames that problematise politically, economically, socially, culturally, or geopolitically liberal policies. IPFs can be utilised by both illiberal and liberal political actors to propagate their ideas. By focusing not just on illiberal actors, we can detect broader trends within domain-specific policy communication.

Second, we make a methodological contribution by creating a new operationalisation (a coding scheme) to extract and categorise IPFs automatically with the help of artificial intelligence (for more on this approach, see Sebők et al., 2024). One of the widely used schemes, the Policy Frames Codebook (Boydston et al., 2014; Card et al., 2015), serves as a valuable precursor for applying a systematic analysis to policy frames. Yet, it focuses on identifying generic frames and not ideology-specific ones. We also address a common shortcoming of computational frames analysis, which is the confusion of topics with frames (Ali & Hassan, 2022), by clearly delineating our system from popular topic coding endeavours, such as the Comparative Agendas Project (Baumgartner et al., 2019).

Third, we demonstrate the empirical relevance of our new concept and methodology by analysing whether Members of Parliament and Congress (MPs) relied upon IPFs in reaction to extant policy crises (see the abovementioned hypotheses). We analyse legislative speeches in Austria, Germany, Hungary and the United States across the policy domains of migration and public health (COVID-19 pandemic). We analyse whether the use of IPFs in legislative speeches is sensitive to the quantitative empirical markers unique to each crisis, which allow for distinguishing 'normal' from crisis periods in the given policy domain. For the migration crisis, we use monthly data on asylum applications per country. For COVID-19, we draw on monthly mortality statistics collected from official sources and media outlets.

Our findings suggest that the use of illiberal political frames does not track the pertinent policy crisis metrics. For migration, asylum applications have no predictive power on IPF volume. For COVID-19, the number of casualties did not affect the usage of IPF either. Rather than finding support for the hypothesis that the crises would increase IPFs, we find that they remained high even

after the crises subsided. Legislators, so it seems, abide by former Obama chief of staff Rahm Emmanuel's recommendation never to let 'a serious crisis go to waste'. The ebb and flow of policy crises allows MPs to rely on entrenched frames regardless of the severity of the emergency.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. First, we intersect the concepts of illiberalism and communicative frames to define illiberal policy frames. Second, we develop our hypotheses on the role of IPFs in illiberal strategic communication. Third, we describe the ILLFRAMES codebook and our methodology to discern the use and diffusion of IPFs. In the penultimate section, we present our empirical findings. We conclude by exploring avenues to further our research agenda related to the measurement of illiberal policy frames.

## Defining illiberal policy frames

We draw on two strands of the wider social science literature, illiberalism studies and policy frame research, to define illiberal policy frames. While some authors warn against the usage of the term (Canihac, 2022), an ever-growing literature on illiberalism has emerged since the 2010s (see Laruelle, 2023; Sajó et al., 2021), reflecting the rise of mostly right-wing, populist politicians across the globe. Illiberalism in this strand of research is treated as a thin ideology that is 'in permanent situational relation to liberalism' (Laruelle, 2022, p. 303). It is a reaction against 'hegemonic liberalism, expressed through cultural, political, and economic elements' (Waller, 2024b, p. 1).

This illiberal movement exhibits a distrust of checking or of minoritarian political institutions formed by apolitical experts and is focused on promoting a variety of collective, hierarchical, and majoritarian proposals (Waller, 2024a, p. 372). Illiberalism is also the antithesis of the core liberal democratic characteristics by rejecting pluralism, promoting political polarisation, and disregarding the rule of law and minority rights (Pappas, 2019, pp. 58–59). It manifests itself through efforts to concentrate power, create a partisan state and close society to pluralism. Illiberalism can be operationalised along three dimensions: reducing societal diversity, nationalism, and undermining power-constraining institutions (Coman et al., 2023, p. 2).

These definitions of illiberalism clearly need delineation from bordering concepts such as populism and conservatism. While some illiberal claims may draw from conservative values, we find that 'conservative' is too ideologically broad and often used as a shorthand obscuring the anti-liberal and anti-pluralist logic in the frames we study. Our empirical approach is therefore not about identifying right-leaning or traditionally conservative policy positions, but rather detecting frames that implicitly or explicitly challenge liberal-democratic principles and policies (such as belief in science, an

independent judiciary, or the assimilation of migrants as proposed by Angela Merkel, for instance – none of which is inherently anti-conservative).

Illiberalism vs. liberalism is also the most relevant distinction for the era covered in the paper. Trump, Orbán, the AfD in Germany, and the FPÖ in Austria are not run-of-the-mill conservatives, as evidenced by their political battles with the (formerly most powerful) neoconservative-neoliberal wing of the Republican Party or the Christian conservatism of the European People's Party. The two policy domains covered in the article (migration and COVID-19) are critical examples of the different approaches of illiberals and traditional conservatives.

As for populism, it is primarily characterised as a political style or discourse that pits 'the pure people' against a 'corrupt elite', claiming to represent the general will (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6). Such populist rhetoric can serve as a mobilisation strategy for illiberal politicians, potentially accelerating autocratic tendencies (Blokker, 2021, p. 264). While populism often incorporates illiberal elements, it is not inherently illiberal in all its forms: Moffitt (2020, p. 89) argues that populism can 'weaponise' certain aspects of liberalism while rejecting others, leading to a form of 'liberal illiberalism.' As some sub-types of populism (e.g., paternal) only partially share populism's strong anti-elitism (Enyedi, 2015, p. 21), we do not expect IPF-driven crisis narratives to be overwhelmingly focused on this dimension at the expense of the ideological spectrum of liberalism-illiberalism rooted in policy positions.

Besides ideology, another relevant strand of the literature concerns policy frames. This defines policy problems by focusing on selected features of a situation and binding them together into a coherent pattern (Rein & Schön, 1977). They are perspectives 'from which an amorphous, ill-defined, problematic situation can be made sense of and acted on' (Rein & Schön, 1993, p. 146). Policy frames emerge through dynamic processes of sense-making in which key features of a situation are selected, named, categorised and woven into coherent stories (Boin et al., 2009). They shape the preferences actors hold, influence how they behave in the policymaking process, and affect how policy outcomes are received (Daviter, 2007). They are grounded in context-dependent socio-political processes (van Hulst & Yanow, 2016), which result in regionally and ideologically varied patterns of frame use within policy areas (Mendelsohn et al., 2021).

By combining the notions of illiberalism and policy frames, we introduce the term 'illiberal policy frame' (IPF) to describe political communication that frames crises, policy problems, and solutions in an illiberal light. Related to our definition of illiberalism, these frames may propose reducing diversity or undermining power-constraining institutions. Similar to how populists link various failures together (Moffitt, 2015), we hypothesise that illiberal actors employ IPFs to use policy issues for their strategic purposes (see Laruelle, 2022). We also posit that IPF classification is a feasible task:

we assume that astute observers of global politics can make intuitive decisions about whether to classify Donald Trump's 'building the wall' and Geert Wilders's 'Muslim ban' as illiberal or liberal policy frames (or none of the above). Yet, the systematic study of these policy frames is often neglected despite their emerging role in global politics, with a few exceptions already touching on IPFs (e.g., Josua, 2021; Szikra & Öktem, 2023; Trimikliniotis et al., 2023).

The critical question in defining illiberal policy frames concerns both the illiberal aspect and the empirical measurement strategy. Although research analysing explicitly illiberal (and not populist, far right, etc.) policy frames is still rare, most existing studies identified all forms of discourse, frames and narratives by illiberal actors as manifestations of illiberal communication. They have shown how illiberal actors communicate about specific topics, such as gender (Dragolea, 2022) or migration (Elshehawy et al., 2021), and how illiberal communication systems in general may erode democracies (Bennett & Kneuer, 2024). IPFs were defined by who was using them rather than by what they were.

However, the implicit assumption that all communication by illiberal politicians is illiberal and only illiberal politicians use illiberal policy frames is problematic from both a policy studies and political communication perspective. Empirical evidence shows that even generally liberal actors can support illiberal policies and use IPFs. The rightward shift (on issues ranging from border security to gun control) of Democratic Party candidates, during the 2024 U.S. electoral campaign, is a case in point (Martínez-Beltrán, 2024). Previously studied examples of illiberal practices in well-established liberal democracies include harsh immigration regulation (Triadafilopoulos, 2011), media control (Culloty & Suiter, 2021), protest policing (Hamilton, 2021), and restrictive gender laws (Mancini & Palazzo, 2021). Consequently, given our primary aim to craft a general research agenda for the study of illiberal policy frames, we define IPFs not by the user but by the content.

## **Crisis exploitation or fear-mongering?**

A key question about illiberal policy frames is to what extent they respond to policy crises or are used independently. Poor policy decisions, exogenous shocks and the popular discontent created in their wake cause policy crises to emerge (Alink et al., 2001). In this sense, policy crises are both real and socially constructed phenomena; therefore, crisis frames often emerge alongside reality (Walby, 2015). More generally, failures in a system are 'necessary but insufficient conditions for the mobilisation of perceptions of systemic failure (crisis)' (Hay, 1999, p. 324). This complex relationship between the real world and discursive manifestations of policy crises has at least four forms.

The first option, which we label the *crisis-exploitation thesis*, assumes that crisis rhetoric is dependent on an actual, real-life, exogenous crisis. The first step of operationalisation requires a definition of a policy crisis. The abrupt changes with rapid impact (Seabrooke & Tsingou, 2019) on the policy environment, such as those caused by natural disasters, are the clearest examples. Yet, as 'T Hart and Boin (2001) point out, policy crises can also be slow-burning, posing narrative challenges for decision-makers with the emergence of 'sense-making vacuums' (Boin et al., 2021, p. 77). For the sake of simplicity, in these preliminary explorations, we follow the concrete examples of Boin et al. (2009), such as natural disasters (floods, tsunamis) and terror attacks, in analysing how political actors can exploit these crises for their own strategic purposes. This definition can also cover cases such as mass-scale migration that overloads state infrastructure and the public health emergency of COVID-19, both of which meet objective crisis intensity measures (in comparison to previous 'normal' periods). Expert opinion is an additional source of validation for marking these two cases as policy crises (see the high volume of articles and policy analyses that call both cases instances of a policy crisis).

Once the existence of a crisis is determined, political actors engage in framing contests to assign blame or otherwise exploit the new developments for political purposes (Boin et al., 2008, p. 4; 2009, p. 81). Because actors choose different frames, they intensely compete to interpret and frame the events, their causes, responsibilities, and potential lessons in ways that align with their political objectives and policy visions. These framing contests are not merely rhetorical exercises but have significant implications for both political outcomes and policy directions. Incumbent politicians, opposition figures and other stakeholders engage in strategic efforts to either escape blame for the crisis or consolidate their political capital while simultaneously advancing or defending their preferred policy positions (Boin et al., 2008, p. 285). The success or failure of these framing efforts can determine institutional legitimacy, the trajectory of public policies in the wake of a crisis, or the fate of political careers (Boin et al., 2009, p. 82).

Second, the flip side of the crisis-exploitation thesis is that *fear-mongering* takes the place of reality-based discourses. Political psychology research has long established that fear appeals can be strategically deployed by political actors independently of objective threat levels, with anxiety-inducing messaging effectively shaping political attitudes and behaviour even when the actual danger is minimal (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Brader, 2005). In the context of illiberal politics, such manufactured threat narratives may prove particularly effective when the chosen crisis feels distant from citizens' immediate experience, allowing political entrepreneurs to freely distort policy problems and frame them as emblematic failures requiring illiberal solutions (Marcus et al., 2000).

An influential case of such politically motivated fear-mongering is related to the 'migrant caravans' approaching the U.S. southern border in 2018, which then-president Donald Trump called a 'humanitarian crisis' (Iannaccone, 2021; Spector, 2019). In fiscal year 2019, at the peak of caravan coverage, Border Patrol reported about 977,500 total border encounters (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2019a), which was higher than the previous few years but significantly lower than historical peaks in the early 2000s (e.g., 1.6 million in 2000) (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2019b). The moral panic surrounding the 'caravans,' therefore, was as much a media phenomenon as one rooted in a real-life policy crisis.

Such populist performances of crisis are of a 'distinct political choreography' (Stavrakakis et al., 2018, p. 22) and can connect real-world failures and economic and/or social dislocations to broader narratives of crisis, in which some form of 'the elite' or 'the establishment' is held accountable for the crisis that endangers or impoverishes 'the people' (Moffitt, 2015, p. 198; Stavrakakis et al., 2018, p. 17). The performance of a crisis is most efficient when the chosen crisis feels distant from the mass public, allowing politicians to freely distort and simplify the issue and present a coherent narrative framing it as emblematic of the failure of the ruling elite (Hinterleitner et al., 2023, p. 1504). Illiberal fear-mongering can leverage these strategies even in the absence of any real crisis.

Third, *sticky narratives* are a hybrid of crisis exploitation and fear-mongering, where crisis rhetoric persists long after the actual crisis has subsided. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the aftermath of terrorist attacks and their impact on security policies. For instance, following the 9/11 attacks in the United States, the narrative of an ongoing terrorist threat remained potent for years, influencing policy decisions and public discourse well beyond the immediate crisis period. This sticky narrative led to long-lasting changes in airport security procedures, surveillance policies and foreign interventions despite the absence of subsequent large-scale attacks on U.S. soil.

The fourth option is when political entrepreneurs *endogenously manufacture crises* for their own advantage (Sebök, 2019; Wood et al., 2023). Here, the difference with fear-mongering is that an actual policy crisis is observable – only it is man-made. Ansell et al. (2016, p. 419) argue that institutional crises, characterised by 'performance deficits', can also be the outcomes of 'institutional erosion', a less personalistic endogenous factor. Overall, cases for endogenous policy crises include the U.S. debt ceiling and government shutdown debates, trade war escalations leading to import shortages (as seen in 2018 in China with limitations on U.S.-originated soybeans), and the Brexit deadline set by Prime Minister David Cameron in the United Kingdom. Although some commentators, mostly on the fringes of the political spectrum, posited an intentional relationship between elite behaviour and migration or the COVID-19 pandemic, we argue that the overwhelming

majority of policy experts would not consider these two to be prime examples of endogenous, manufactured crises. Therefore, we discard this theoretical option from our discussion going forward.

Out of the hypotheses listed above, it is unclear if crisis exploitation is the only one viable for our two selected cases. In the discourse surrounding immigration in Europe following the 2015 refugee crisis, the narrative of an ongoing 'migration crisis' continued to shape political debates and policy decisions in many European countries. This persistent framing has influenced electoral outcomes, border policies, and international relations, even as actual migration numbers returned to pre-crisis levels. The COVID-19 pandemic has also generated sticky narratives that have arguably outlasted the acute phase of the health crisis. Concepts such as 'social distancing,' 'lock-downs,' and 'vaccine mandates' have become deeply ingrained in the public consciousness and continue to influence policy decisions and public behaviour, even as the immediate threat of the virus diminished in many regions. Fear-mongering, understood as crisis communication unrelated to the underlying facts on the ground, is also a possible explanation.

For our hypothesis testing, we define empirical markers as metrics that allow for the distinction of crisis periods from 'normal' periods in a given policy domain. In line with our overall objective to identify whether IPFs are reactions to real-life policy crises, we treat the crisis-exploitation thesis as our baseline theory:

H1 (crisis-exploitation thesis): The volume of illiberal policy frames is correlated with established empirical markers of policy crises.

The testing of H1 also offers insights regarding its counterpart, the fear-mongering thesis. We provide additional results for sticky narratives in Appendix A.

## **Data and methods**

### ***Case selection and data***

We analysed the emergence of illiberal policy frames across two policy domains (migration and COVID-19), using data from four countries (Austria, Germany, Hungary and the United States) to account for cross-national variation in the empirical relationship between policy crisis indicators and the usage of IPFs. Although we realise that the selection is quite narrow, thus limiting the generalisability of our findings, we concentrated on these cases as our main task is to demonstrate the feasibility and analytical value of the proposed research agenda. The case selection ensured a decent level of external validity. Still, it cannot comprehensively explain crisis responses in each country (see more on this in the Conclusion).

We operationalised policy crises as the main explanatory variable with statistical data on migration trends and COVID-19 deaths. At the same time, we

used plenary legislative speeches (made by all legislators, not just illiberal ones) as our data source for the dependent variable, which is the volume of illiberal policy frames. Due to theoretical and public law considerations related to states of emergency (see below) and data availability, we compared the three European countries for the period between July 2014 and June 2017 for migration and Hungary and the United States between March 2020 and November 2021 for COVID-19. While the examined time frames could be longer, we were looking for relatively short, few-year periods for which the presence of a policy crisis is difficult to disprove. That said, we ensured that the periods in question also contained a pre-crisis and a cooling-off time frame.

Selecting these four countries allowed us to study the emergence of IPFs in different political, social, geographical, and linguistic contexts within developed countries (see [Table 1](#)). In the given periods, Austria had a strong illiberal party, FPÖ, which had also been in national government as a junior partner (2017–2019), while the up-and-coming German illiberal party, AfD, was never part of such a coalition (nor had they even been in the federal parliament up until the period in question). Hungary, the only post-communist country in the sample, had a hegemonic illiberal party, Fidesz, throughout the entire period for both crises. In contrast, in the United States, an illiberal (Donald Trump) and a liberal president (Joe Biden) served as chief executive during our selected period for the COVID-19 pandemic. This diversity of the political context allowed for nuanced interpretations of the results and the detection of specific trends worth pursuing in wider samples.

We measured the spread of IPFs in connection with two policy crises: the migration crisis of the mid-2010s in Europe and the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021. Migration is an example of both a slow – and fast-burning crisis. Austria, Germany and Hungary faced immigration as a fast-burning crisis during the 2015–2016 European case, when the number of first-time asylum applicants in the EU reached 1.2 million in 2015 and 1.1 million in 2016, respectively, marking more than a twofold increase from previous levels. Germany registered around half of these asylum applications (Eurostat, [2024](#)), whereas Hungary was a significant transit country until it

**Table 1.** Overview of policy crisis periods and chief executives.

Domain	Time Frame	Chief executive			
		Austria	Germany	Hungary	United States
Migration	08/07/2014 –23/06/2017	Faymann (until 9/5/2016), Kern	Merkel	Orbán	-
COVID-19	9/3/2020–29/11/2021	-	-	Orbán	Trump (until 20/1/2021), Biden

Note: Due to the availability of aggregated data, we examine COVID-19 cases on a monthly basis from March 2020 to the end of November 2021, while migration is analysed from July 2014 to June 2017.

physically closed down its border, registering more than 400,000 border crossings in 2015 (International Organization for Migration, 2023). To account for both the run-up and ease-off periods within the European migrant crisis, we used the number of asylum applicants covering the period between July 2014 and June 2017. Appendix B shows the detailed descriptive statistics for all three countries per official Eurostat statistics.

The COVID-19 pandemic was a fast-burning public health crisis that developed quickly due to the rapid spread of the virus and the lack of a cure in the early days. For the definition of our cases, we factored in government-declared states of emergency. In Hungary, the government declared a 'state of danger' on 11 March 2020, based on Article 48 of the Basic Law. A 'state of medical crisis' on 28 June 2020 ensued, which remained in effect until 18 June 2022 (Hungarian Helsinki Committee, 2022) (though the government lifted most restrictions on 7 March 2022) (A3M Global Monitoring, 2023). In the United States, the federal COVID-19 public health emergency was in effect from 31 January 2020 until 11 May 2023 (Miller & Seitz, 2023).

For the explanatory variable, we utilised monthly aggregated data on COVID-19-related mortality. In the case of Hungary, we relied on data compiled by the Hungarian news portal 444.hu, which published visualisations of data provided by the official koronavirus.gov.hu website during the reporting period (444.hu., 2020). We resorted to using this secondary source because the official website ceased operations permanently in January 2023, rendering the original data inaccessible (Portfolio, 2022). For the United States, we aggregated the weekly mortality data published by the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024).

On the dependent variable side, our database relied on existing corpora from various sources (see Table 2). For the European countries, we used a selection of the whole variable suite of ParlLawSpeech (Schwalbach et al., 2025). For the United States, we obtained the data from van der Does et al. (2024) and the America's Political Pulse (APP) database. All legislative speech corpora comprised seven key variables: the full-text vectors of the speeches (both the original and the English translation), the speaker's name and party, the date of the speech, and two identifiers (see Appendix B).

We employed both dictionary and date-based filtering methods to produce the corpora containing migration and COVID-19-related sentences (a more detailed description of the filtering process can be found in Appendix C). The number of relevant sentences ranged from 5000–10,000 in the case of migration, with Hungary having the lowest count (4994) and Germany the highest (10,196) during the July 2014 – June 2017 time frame. For COVID-19-related sentences, the two-year pandemic period produced counts ranging from 2972 in Hungary to 7164 in the United States.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics of the legislative speech datasets.

Country	House of Parliament	Source	Total number of speeches	Total number of sentences	Migration-related sentences		COVID-19-related sentences Count	Period
					Count	Period		
Austria	Nationalrat	ParlLaw Speech	204 876	3 566 248	6 977	08/07/2014 - 29/06/2017	–	–
Germany	Bundestag	ParlLaw Speech	126 101	2 373 896	10 196	02/07/2014 - 30/06/2017	–	–
Hungary	Országgyűlés	ParlLaw Speech	361 044	5 178 812	4 994	04/07/2014 - 23/06/2017	2 972	04/03/2020 - 23/11/2021
United States	House of Representatives	van der Does et al. (2024)/APP	286 025	2 333 888	–	–	7 164	04/03/2020 - 23/11/2021



### ***The ILLFRAMES codebook***

To capture illiberal policy frames in legislative speeches, we adopted a quantitative methodology that leverages state-of-the-art artificial intelligence solutions. We created a novel ILLFRAMES codebook (see Appendix D), a coding scheme of ex-ante given classes similar to the master codebook of the Comparative Agendas Project (Baumgartner et al., 2019; Bevan, 2019) and that of the MARPOR/Comparative Manifestos Project (Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006; Lehmann et al., 2024). The codebook allocates each unit of text (in our case, a sentence) a single code of an illiberal frame (or a code for 'no frame present' in the sentence), which is hierarchically categorised into larger domains, such as migration and COVID-19 (for more details, see Appendix D).

The ILLFRAMES codebook differs from other frame extraction coding schemes, such as the *Policy Frames Codebook* (PFC, Boydston et al., 2014; for use in research, see Ali & Hassan, 2022), because it combines ideological positions with frames (see Appendix E for a comparison of different approaches to measuring policy frames and the related codebooks). The codebook was set up as a framework allowing for future extension in line with our more general research agenda. It could encompass additional domains such as 'Climate' or 'Gender-LGBTQ.' The codebook categories were developed based on existing literature on migration and COVID-19-related communication, as well as empirical iterations based on the material to be coded.

A rich literature on migration frames shows how illiberal parties have leveraged migration as a tool to reinforce their agendas, using emotionally charged strategic frames that blend fear and negative emotions with elements of nationalism, security and economic threats to mobilise public opinion against the alleged dangers of migration (Heidenreich et al., 2024). From the recent literature, we identified several IPF-compatible migration frame categories, which formed the basis of our codebook on migration: frames related to the administrative burden of migrants (Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017), border protection (Heidenreich et al., 2019), crime (Beckers & Van Aelst, 2019; Czymara & Klinger, 2021), culture (Heidenreich et al., 2019; Kovář, 2022, 2023), economy (Czymara & Klinger, 2021; Gottlob & Boomgaarden, 2019; Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017) and security (Czymara & Klinger, 2021; Greussing & Boomgaarden, 2017; Heidenreich et al., 2019; Kovář, 2022, 2023).

Similarly, we drew from the literature on populist, far-right and/or conspiratorial framing of the COVID-19 pandemic when developing our illiberal frame categories. Framing analyses using various techniques show that during the COVID-19 pandemic, populist and illiberal politicians employed distinct strategies that varied depending on their political standing, from

governing illiberal parties trying to legitimise their crisis response while simultaneously delegitimising external criticism, particularly from the European Union (Szabó & Szabó, 2022), to the opposition depicting government restrictions as infringements on personal liberties and sovereignty (Weisskircher, 2023). Blaming the pandemic on migration, globalisation, bad governance, and conspiracies was a common theme among fringe groups (McNeil-Willson, 2020). Other relevant frames, identified by populist framing research, include the relativisation of the threat (Persson et al., 2022), distrust in experts (Imran & Javed, 2024), blaming foreign actors (Homolar & Ruiz Casado, 2024; Imran & Javed, 2024), and accusing political opponents of exploiting COVID-19 for political gain (Roberts, 2022).

Following this literature, for our pilot project, we developed two domains within the broader IPF framework. The migration sub-codebook has six frame groups: cultural, economic, legal, political, security and social. Within these dimensions, we identified a total of 10 labels: *culture under attack; economic burden; illegals and fraudsters; extradition necessity; nation-state should decide; administrative burden; general system failure; security threat; criminals; and welfare state overload*. The COVID-19 sub-codebook contains three frame groups (political, economic, and cultural) with the labels *threat scepticism; great reset and elite control; undermining the economy; medical choice; truth; and threatening way of life*. Both codebook parts contain a *none of the above* category. For the complete codebook with example sentences, please refer to Appendix D.

### ***The methodology of classifying illiberal policy frames***

While double-blind human coding can still be considered to be the gold standard for many content analysis tasks, machine learning and the text-as-data approach have gained widespread popularity (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013). This was partly due to issues with the reliability and feasibility of deploying teams of highly qualified coders over extended periods to code millions of observations. The applications of natural language processing (NLP) methods offered a straightforward solution to these issues, provided the problem of prediction validity could be solved. Their usage in political science evolved from the dictionary-based and traditional machine-learning algorithms of the 2010s (Barberá et al., 2021; Hillard et al., 2008; Wilkerson & Casas, 2017) into the era of pre-trained large language models (LLMs) such as BERT (Bommasani et al., 2021; Devlin et al., 2019; Kaplan et al., 2020), and generative AI in the 2020s (Bail, 2024).

The computational analysis of policy positions and domains has also gained prominence recently. Klüver and Mahoney (2015) and Tang et al. (2010), for example, exemplify different approaches – bag-of-words and topic models – while Boräng et al. (2014) demonstrate word-based cluster

analysis and Kermani et al. (2024) attempt to detect framing in social media using LLM methodologies. Contrary to such unsupervised approaches, some international collaborative projects, such as MARPOR, CAP and PFC, use a pre-defined list of classes in their codebook, allowing for the deployment of supervised machine learning methods.

While extant studies indicate that machine learning can achieve human-level coding proficiency with regard to performance metrics such as accuracy, precision, recall and F1 scores (Frantzeskakis & Seeberg, 2023; Loftis & Mortensen, 2020; Navarretta & Hansen, 2022; Rytting et al., 2023; Sebők et al., 2022; Sebők & Kacsuk, 2021), such analysis has not been extensively applied to the problem of classifying ideological policy frames, let alone IPFs proper. To solve the problem of automated policy frame classification, we deployed a complex methodological stack (see Appendix F for detailed steps). For fine-tuning new LLMs and processing data for the downstream task of frame classification, we relied on the CAP Babel Machine service (babel.poltextlab.com), a state-of-the-art AI-based tool for classification tasks (Sebők et al., 2024).

This solution automatically classifies various types of data (media, social media, legislative speeches) in 100+ languages with the help of fine-tuned large language models. Our approach exploited the deductive potential offered by the codebook, while also incorporating an inductive process (whose effectiveness has been demonstrated by several relevant studies, e.g., McDonnell and Ondelli (2025)) through iterative feedback. As non-topic modelling-based policy frames analysis is still in its infancy (Ali & Hassan, 2022), we experimented with several models to find the best-performing one for our pilot analysis. We selected the models for migration and COVID-19 based on the weighted macro F1 score, which was evaluated on a test set that was double-blind coded by researchers. We also accounted for label-level imbalances present in both the training and test sets by examining label-specific metrics to assess model performance more accurately.

Given the limited availability of hand-coded examples for use as training data, we employed data augmentation through synthetic data generation methods, utilising both open and proprietary state-of-the-art large language models. To generate synthetic examples, we employed Llama 3.1 (8B) and GPT-4o. For the classification task itself, and to explore the potential of generative models in frame detection tasks, we developed a method for fine-tuning instruction-tuned large language models.

This approach is implemented in an open-source library, GenAI4SeqCls,<sup>1</sup> which facilitates supervised fine-tuning of generative LLMs on sequence classification tasks. The framework is designed to bridge the gap between generative capabilities and classification requirements by incorporating prompt-based input formatting. In this approach, both the task description and the complete codebook are embedded into the prompt alongside the

input text. Using this framework, we fine-tuned Unslloth's LLaMA 3.1 (8B) Instruct model on both the migration and COVID-19 domains. We compared its performance to XLM-RoBERTa models, which were fine-tuned and evaluated on the same translated dataset. Based on the models' performances, the predictions for this paper were made by the LLaMA 3.1 model. Detailed performance results, fine-tuning parameters, and prompt formatting examples are provided in Appendix G.

Although high-precision models have already been developed for several languages other than English, available German and Hungarian language models seriously lack in size vis-á-vis English and multilingual models. Therefore, we translated all text data to English in an automated fashion with the help of EasyNMT, a freely available library (which uses multiple tools collectively covering 150+ languages). Previous research validated many of these packages and found they are up to par with paid services such as Google Translate and DeepL (Mate et al., 2023). The training data for the models was also translated from the original languages into English. Based on the findings of McDonnell and Ondelli (2025), among others, we can observe that (populist) politicians from different countries tend to use similar yet distinct vocabularies in their communication. Consequently, a training dataset that covers a broader range of legislative speech increases the likelihood of identifying a wider variety of frames.

The final step in creating the dependent variables for this study involved calculating the saliency of IPFs within the general corpus of legislative communication at hand. Our primary dependent variable is the volume of all identified IPFs within a month (similar to all other variables used, except for COVID-19 casualties, where we used rolling periods of 4 weeks). The usage of volume allowed for the examination of general trends at a high level of confidentiality (good weighted macro F1 scores) as opposed to code-level analysis. While we are confident in the accuracy of code-level results, they exhibit lower and uneven count values, along with a substantial standard deviation. Therefore, we present code-level results in Appendix H.<sup>2</sup> Volume metrics were normalised for 1000 sentences in the topic-filtered database in the given month to account for seasonality and other factors affecting legislative business.

## Results

We tested our hypotheses in two phases: first, using data from Austria, Germany, and Hungary for the migration domain, followed by analysing Hungary and the United States regarding COVID-19. In this section, we focus on the mutually exclusive hypothesis pair of crisis exploitation and fear-mongering. We also provide a brief assessment of our tests for the sticky narratives hypothesis (see Appendix A for full results).

**Table 3.** The ratio of migration sentences with no illiberal policy frames.

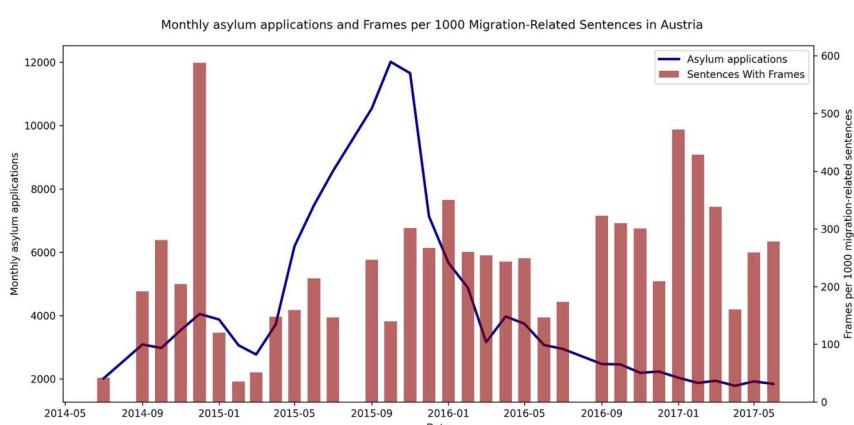
Austria		Germany		Hungary	
Total migration sentences	Out of which: 'None of them'	Total migration sentences	Out of which: 'None of them'	Total migration sentences	Out of which: 'None of them'
6977	5285 (75.75%)	10,196	8620 (84.54%)	4994	3078 (61.63%)

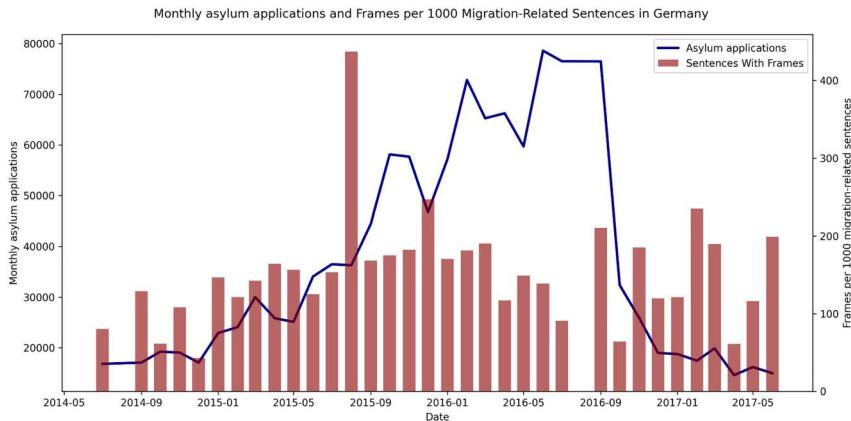
For the crisis exploitation hypothesis in the case of migration, we juxtaposed monthly data on asylum seekers and illiberal policy frames. As shown in [Table 3](#), we found that overall, only 14.25% of all migration-related sentences contained any illiberal framing in Germany, while this ratio was around 15.46% in Austria and 38.37% in Hungary.

[Figures 1–3](#) display annual asylum seeker numbers (line graph, left Y-axis) alongside the frequency of migration-related IPFs in parliamentary speeches from Austria, Germany and Hungary (bar chart, right Y-axis) from 2014 to 2017.

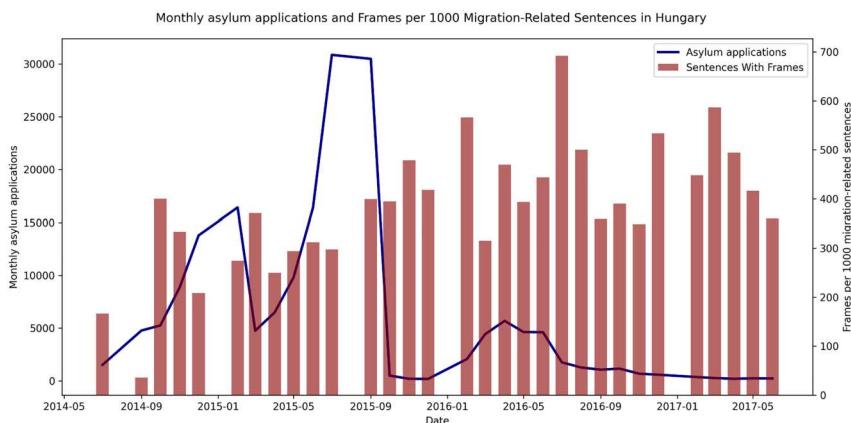
In Austria, the number of asylum seekers steadily increased from the beginning of 2015 to reach a peak later in the Autumn of that year. The trendline for Hungary showed similar characteristics, only with an earlier start and a temporary decline in the spring. Due to obvious geographical reasons (most migrants came through the Balkans route, where in 2015 the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX) reported more than 700,000 illegal border crossings<sup>3</sup>), Germany faced the climax of the crisis in summer 2016.

The number of illiberal political frames per 1000 migration-related sentences shows high variability during this period in all three countries. The figures suggest that the relative number of sentences containing frames in parliamentary discourses did not track the changes in asylum applications.

**Figure 1.** Asylum applications and migration IPFs in Austria.



**Figure 2.** Asylum applications and migration IPFs in Germany.



**Figure 3.** Asylum applications and migration IPFs in Hungary.

While a marked increase in the inflow of migrants was observed in Austria and Hungary in 2015, Austria had the lowest volume of IPFs during this period. In Germany, IPF usage peaked in 2015 following a steady, balanced rise, then briefly declined in 2016 before stabilising at this level in 2017, contrary to the number of asylum applications.

In Hungary, both migration data and the incidence of sentences containing IPFs show distinct patterns compared to the other two countries. The use of illiberal frames exhibited a slight but steady increase over the studied period, only loosely mirroring the migration trends. While asylum figures doubled within the first half of the period examined, IPFs mostly held steady. The drastic drop in asylum applications in early Autumn of 2015 did not directly affect the usage of illiberal migration frames.

An OLS regression analysis of the time series in question further supports the insights observed in the descriptive statistics. We estimated the following equations for migration (EQ1):

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Frames per thousand sentences}_t = & \beta_0 + \beta_1 * \text{asylum applications}_t \\ & + \beta_2 * \text{asylum applications}_{t-1} + e_t \end{aligned}$$

As [Table 4](#) shows, for Hungary, the number of asylum seekers has a small but statistically significant negative effect on the number of IPFs. The model's explanatory power, as manifested in the  $R^2$  metrics, is relatively low, suggesting that other factors not included in the model may contribute to variations in the dependent variable. The regression models are statistically insignificant overall, as indicated by the F-statistics. For Austria and Germany, asylum applications have no predictive power, and neither do the models as a whole. A substantive interpretation of these results lends no support for the crisis exploitation hypothesis, as in the second half of the period investigated, any previous linkage between asylum and IPF data breaks down, leading IPFs to take a life of their own regardless of real-world developments.

For COVID-19-related legislative speeches, we found a much lower overall use of frames in both countries compared to the migration-related cases ([Table 5](#)). This could signal that IPF-use can be determined both by issues and country-specific variables.

**Table 4.** Migration regression results for Austria, Germany and Hungary.

	Dependent variable:		
	Frames per thousand sentences		
	Austria	Hungary	Germany
Asylum applications	-0.016 (0.018)	-0.007* (0.004)	0.001 (0.001)
Asylum applications lag1	0.014 (0.018)	0.003 (0.003)	-0.0004 (0.001)
Constant	249.289*** (38.590)	411.883*** (28.140)	128.501*** (24.880)
Observations	33	31	34
$R^2$	0.026	0.130	0.046
Adjusted $R^2$	-0.039	0.067	-0.015
Residual Std. Error	120.376 (df = 30)	125.148 (df = 28)	71.033 (df = 31)
F Statistic	0.399 (df = 2; 30)	2.083 (df = 2; 28)	0.751 (df = 2; 31)

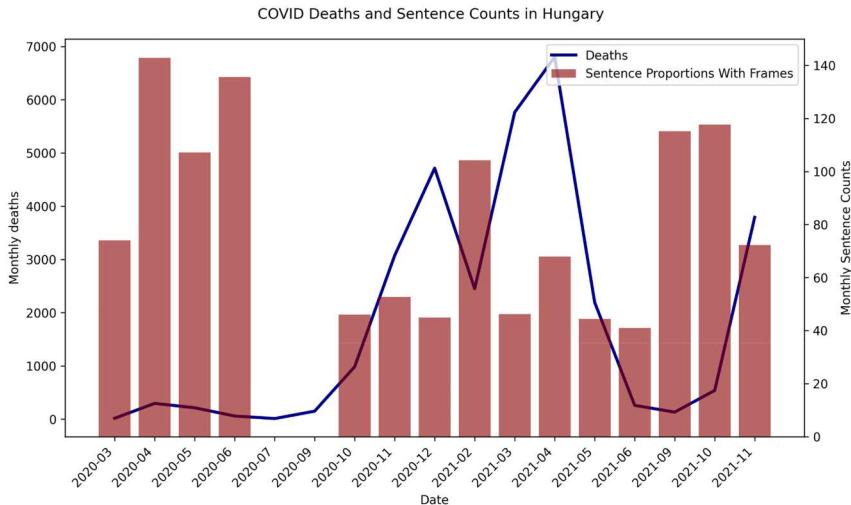
Note: The number of observations differ by country due to the variations in parliamentary session schedules (as can also be seen in the figures).

\* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

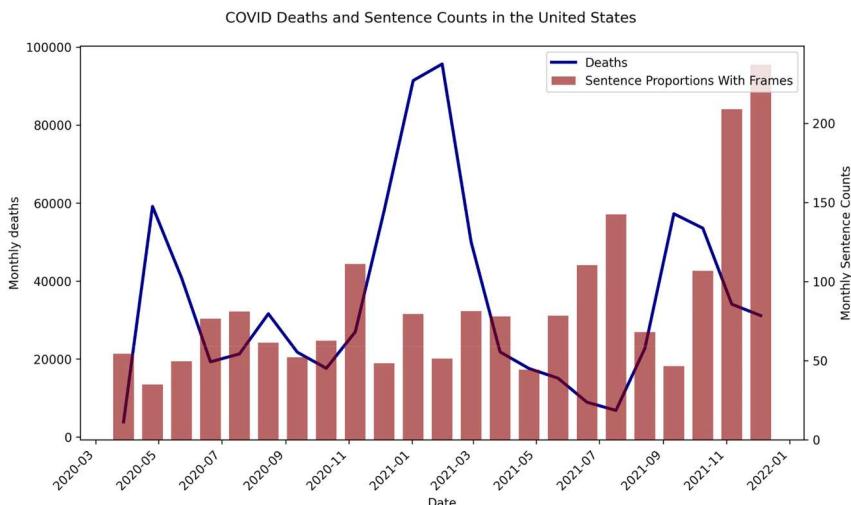
**Table 5.** Number and ratio of non-IPFs in COVID-19-related sentences.

Hungary		United States	
Total COVID-19 sentences	Out of which: 'None of them'	Total COVID-19 sentences	Out of which: 'None of them'
2972	2777 (93.44%)	7164	6571 (91.72%)

The aggregated monthly COVID-19 mortality data for Hungary and the United States (line graph, left Y-axis) alongside the frequency of IPFs per 1000 sentences in Hungarian parliamentary and U.S. House of Representatives speeches (bar chart, right Y-axis) between March 2020 and November 2021 indicate their weak relationship (see [Figures 4 and 5](#)). In Hungary, COVID-19-related casualties show a three-peaked distribution in the period in question. After an initial flare-up on the turn from 2020 to 2021, the



**Figure 4.** COVID-19-related mortality and IPFs in the Hungarian Parliament.



**Figure 5.** COVID-19-related mortality and IPFs in the U.S. House of Representatives.

maximum monthly number was reached in spring 2021, followed by a third wave late in 2021. American data also show three peaks, albeit with different timing: after a first maximum at the outbreak of the crisis in March 2020, the highest total was reached in the first two months of 2021, while September 2021 marked the peak of the third wave.

The volume of illiberal policy frames shows more variation in the COVID-19 case than for migration in the Hungarian parliamentary data. Relatively high values in the first half of the period were supplanted by decreased attention and framing in the spring of 2021, followed by a new spike in September 2021. In contrast, in the U.S. House of Representatives, the trendline of IPF usage remained steady and peaked in late 2021. The high IPF ratio at the end of the period suggests that, by the time the discourse subsided, it was primarily shaped by those who generally use a high number of frames. The third peak in both Hungary and the United States can partially explain the stabilisation of the relatively high usage of IPFs.

Similarly to the migration case, we used OLS regressions for the time series for COVID-19. We estimated the following equations for COVID-19 (EQ2):

$$\text{Frames per thousand sentences}_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 * \text{deaths}_t + \beta_2 * \text{deaths}_{t-1} + e_t$$

For our linear regressions, we used the volume of IPF-containing sentences as the dependent variable and aggregate mortality data (Casualties) and its one-month lagged value (lag1) as explanatory variables (see [Table 6](#)). The number of casualties did not affect IPF usage. The explanatory power of the models, proxied by the  $R^2$  metrics, is weak, once again suggesting that alternative variables may have more purchase on IPF usage. As in the case of migration, the test does not lend robust support for the crisis exploitation thesis for the whole period.

The joint analysis of two domains based on a total of five cases shows no clear evidence for the crisis exploitation thesis, as IPF usage partially moved independently (or even contradictorily) from the respective data on the

**Table 6.** COVID-19 regression results for Hungary and the United States.

	Dependent variable: Frames per thousand sentences	
	Hungary	United States
Casualties	−0.002 (0.007)	−0.001 (0.001)
Casualties lag1	−0.003 (0.007)	0.001 (0.001)
Constant	80.137*** (16.002)	91.853*** (19.503)
Observations	16	23
$R^2$	0.052	0.093
Adjusted $R^2$	−0.094	0.002
Residual Std. Error	46.639 (df = 13)	50.644 (df = 20)
F Statistic	0.356(df = 2; 13)	1.024 (df = 2; 20)

Note: Since the Hungarian Parliament did not hold sessions in certain months, the full observation period consisted of 17 units, which was reduced to 16 observations due to the lag.

\* $p < 0.1$ ; \*\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.01$

**Table 7.** Summary of the findings for the crisis exploitation hypothesis.

Country	Crisis	Crisis metric	Crisis metric lag1	Robustness
Austria	Migration	Not significant	Not significant	<b>Robust</b> for time series analysis
Germany	Migration	Not significant	Not significant	<b>Robust</b> for time series analysis
Hungary	Migration	-0.007*	Not significant	<b>Not robust</b> for time series analysis
	COVID-19	Not significant	Not significant	<b>Robust</b> for time series analysis
United States	COVID-19	Not significant	Not significant	<b>Robust</b> for time series analysis

severity of the policy crisis (asylum seekers and casualties – see Table 7). At least for the data undergirding the current research design, fear-mongering has a better explanatory value.

In order to do a robustness check on our OLS results, Appendix I contains results from additional time series analyses. We assessed that there were unit roots in our data (using Augmented Dicky-Fuller, Phillips-Perron and KPSS tests), resulting in first differencing our time series where needed. We also used the Johansen test to determine if there was at least one cointegrating vector between our variables. Based on these metrics, we decided that VAR models for Austria (migration), Germany (migration), the United States (COVID-19), and Hungary (COVID-19) were the most fitting. At the same time, a VECM was utilised for Hungary (migration). These models show no significant effect of the lagged number of asylum applications or COVID-19-related deaths on IPF usage in any of the five domain-country pairs.

These conclusions underline the detachment of exogenous crisis variables from IPF usage and lend support for its counterpart, the fear-mongering hypothesis. We can also assume that alternative variables would have a bigger effect on IPF usage than the chosen policy crisis metrics. Furthermore, more conclusive inferences can only be derived from more extensive data analysis with a wider case selection. This need for further empirical analysis is underpinned by the fact that the number of observations in our research design did not exceed 34 in any case, with only 16 for the lagged COVID-19 model for Hungary.

## Conclusion

While illiberal movements exert political influence even under normal circumstances, crisis periods may amplify their ability to shape policy and discourse. Charismatic leaders and illiberal parties can use policy crises to grow their support in the electorate during more vulnerable times. In this article, we analysed whether policy crises played a role in increasing the use of policy ideas expressed through illiberal policy frames (IPFs) in legislative speeches, as Boin et al. (2009) predicted.

Our analysis of two issues (migration and COVID-19) and four countries (Austria, Germany, Hungary and the United States) showed that the usage of illiberal political frames is not influenced by pertinent policy crisis

metrics such as the number of asylum seekers (for migration) or casualties (for COVID-19). Such empirical markers of policy crisis produced no clear effects on IPF usage, and our results held up under alternative model specifications as well. In most cases, as measured by the normalised volume of IPFs, fear mongering was the order of the day, regardless of the metrics of the related policy emergency situation.

Our research design and results offered three contributions to the literature, each with distinct possibilities for furthering the research agenda of IPFs, our primary aim. First, we created a codebook that is generic in scope and applies to jurisdictions beyond the four analysed in this article. Similar codebooks for other illiberal policy frames, along with matching large language models, can be created based on this template as a natural extension of the current research agenda. Such areas of particular focus could, for instance, cover gender-LGBTQ issues, the Russian invasion of Ukraine or narratives surrounding climate change.

Second, we used a new AI-based data processing pipeline to analyse IPF volume and composition. While the accuracy of our models is adequate for the task at hand, and at the same time perfectly reliable and scalable, there is still room for further improvement. Despite advancements in machine translation, some level of accuracy may still be 'lost in translation.' Recreating the research design with four additional models (for German and Hungarian, for both policy domains) might salvage some validity loss (or lead to further losses due to the relative dearth of pre-training data, especially for Hungarian in mono – or multilingual LLMs).

Additional improvement steps could involve a deeper, unsupervised analysis of the 'none of them' categories to find hidden patterns or new illiberal frames that are not yet accounted for in the current labels. Breaking down the largest frames into smaller, more detailed ones could help us better capture differences within broad categories and make the analysis more precise. Regularly updating the codebooks is also important to keep up with changes in language and political speech, ensuring the labels stay relevant. On the statistical side, accounting for the seasonality of legislative speech (see the visible gaps in activity in, for instance, the Hungarian case) could help smooth the data.

Third, our empirical results deepened our understanding of the impact of policy crises on political communication in a sample of four countries. One could deepen and broaden the search for more insight into the factors driving the usage of IPFs. Breaking down results by parties and frames (within the overall volume), or controlling for the level of attention, is the natural extension of the present research agenda, as shown in the Appendices. Appendix H and J present preliminary results of an IPF-level analysis, revealing that the 'General system failure' frame is the most prevalent across Austria, Germany and Hungary, with particularly high usage in Germany. In contrast, frames like 'Extradition necessity' show pronounced

adoption in Austria and Hungary. Importantly, IPF usage intensifies after crisis peaks in nearly all cases, with actors showing both higher average percentages and more concentrated usage patterns.

Appendix K showcases a case study of IPF usage in the United States, supporting the notion of prevalent IPF use among Republicans during both administrations. The analysis demonstrates how government-opposition dynamics influence framing strategies. While Republicans and Democrats showed surprisingly similar IPF usage during the first Trump administration, Republicans substantially increased their reliance on IPFs under Biden. At the same time, Democrats reduced theirs, supporting the anticipation that opposition parties will leverage IPFs more extensively to critique governing parties during crises.

The expansion of the geographical scope and time frames could allow for the detection of general trends that were not discernible based on our more limited case selection. Furthermore, while the present framework is amenable to extensions to other polities, an equally promising research direction is the study of the global diffusion of illiberal policy frames. Dynamic network analysis (Kossinets & Watts, 2006; Woo & Chen, 2016) could be applied to demonstrate the temporal and geographical diffusion of IPFs and their causes, allowing for the testing of theoretical propositions beyond those considered in this paper. A more exhaustive categorisation of illiberal policy frames could also use the argument of Schimmelfennig (2024), who distinguished frames related to policy failures from those attacking the core values of the polity.

Finally, in keeping with the policy agendas tradition, the overall level of attention devoted to the given policy area could also have a distinct effect on the strategic use of IPFs in that policy domain. While such an analysis could only be implemented through the wholesale coding of legislative speeches for a given legislative cycle, using AI-supported automated coding, this is also a feasible future research direction.

## Notes

1. The library was developed by Martin Balázs Bánóczy, a member of the poltex-tLAB AI laboratory (poltextlab.com). Available at <https://github.com/mbnycz/GenAI4SeqCls>.
2. As part of validating the results, we compared which labels were the first and second most likely predictions for each sentence. In our analysis, we found that for the most frequent label pairs the second most probable label was either 999 or 399 for every class, indicating a clear distinction between groups in the model's predictions.
3. EWB Archives. (2017, February 22). *Balkan Migration Route: Ongoing Story*. European Western Balkans. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/02/22/balkan-migration-route-ongoing-story/>

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## Data availability statement

Reproduction materials are available at: <https://osf.io/cfdm8/>

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