

## ACTEU DOCTORAL SCHOOL

### “Democratic Frontiers: Charting Pathways for Trust and Participation in European Governance”

Fondation Universitaire, Brussels, 10-13 February 2025

#### INTRODUCTION

In the framework of the Horizon Europe project [ActEU](#) – Activating European Citizens’ Trust in Times of Crisis and Polarisation – the Trans European Policy Studies Association ([TEPSA](#)) organised a **four-day Doctoral School in Brussels for 16 PhD candidates and young researchers**. The participants were selected via an open call for applications, which attracted 50 high-calibre applications, and from the student bodies of university partners within the consortium.

The aim of the ActEU Doctoral School was to deepen participants’ understanding of the decline in institutional trust and political participation within the polarised multi-level system of governance of the European Union (EU).

The programme included lectures, methodological presentations, and interactive discussions with academics, civil society representatives, and EU policy-makers. Additionally, a workshop on storytelling and effective communication, led by a qualified trainer, equipped the participants with the key skills to effectively disseminate their research.

#### DAY 1: 10 FEBRUARY 2025

##### Introduction and Overview

At the start of the 4-day ActEU Doctoral School, participants were welcomed by members of the TEPSA team. **Ms Eva Ribera** (Project Manager, TEPSA) provided an overview of the agenda, introducing its various elements, including expert lectures, interactive working groups, methodological classes, a professional workshop, and a visit to the European Parliament (EP).

##### Lecture: “Unpacking EU democracy: Foundations, evolution, and contemporary challenges”

The first lecture of the ActEU Doctoral School was delivered by **Dr Alexander Hoppe** (Lecturer and Chair of European Politics, University of Duisburg-Essen). The session centred on a key question: *How severe is the crisis in the EU democratic system?* Dr



Hoppe presented findings from the ActEU project, arguing that current crises affect the EU not only at a policy level but also on a systemic level. He noted that the EU exhibits crisis symptoms in three out of four key aspects of democratic legitimacy: participation, representation, polarisation, and trust. He also highlighted several areas where further research could enhance understanding of the EU's democratic crisis, including:

- The measurement and conceptualisation of political trust;
- The linkages between political trust and both participation and representation;
- The interlinkages between political trust across local, regional, national, and supranational levels of governance.

Lecture: “Activating trust in Europe: The ActEU Project and its research approaches”

The session began with an introduction to **Prof Dr Daniela Braun** (Professor, Saarland University & ActEU Conceptual Leader), followed by a round of participant introductions, where each researcher presented their PhD themes and explored thematic links. The primary objectives of the Doctoral School were then outlined, focusing on four key areas:

- Theoretical: understanding trust and polarization;
- Empirical: familiarising participants with the ActEU dataset;
- Practical: engaging with policy-makers;
- Scientific: building professional networks and fostering collaborative publications.

The session also introduced the ActEU project, its objectives, methodology, and broader relevance to the discussion on trust and polarisation in European societies.

Interactive Working Groups: Peer Insights and Feedback

After the information session, participants formed interactive working groups to explore potential research collaborations. They engaged in brainstorming to identify key insights, unexpected findings, and the relevance of discussions to their research. In smaller groups of four, participants structured their ideas, assigned note-takers, and reflected on how trust and polarisation connected to their topics. The session fostered in-depth engagement, interdisciplinary cooperation, and future collaboration opportunities. The working groups were set to meet daily, following on structure progression:

- Monday: initial discussions to identify a shared research topic;
- Tuesday: refining their focus into a joint research question;
- Wednesday: developing a research design using ActEU data;



- Thursday: presenting their research design.

Beyond the session, participants were encouraged to continue developing their ideas, seek methodological feedback, and work towards publishing a collaborative paper.



## **DAY 2: 11 FEBRUARY 2025**

### *Methodological Mastery: Focus Group Discussions*

This interactive methodological class was given by **Dr Kristina Weissenbach** (Acting Professor, University of Duisburg-Essen). Referring to the ActEU project, Dr Weissenbach highlighted the role of focus groups in academic research, explaining how to design, organise, and conduct them effectively. She also explored various to align research questions with appropriate concepts and methodologies. Participants were invited to share their own (tentative) research questions and engage in collective reflection on methodologies and conceptual frameworks. Towards the end of the class, Dr Weissenbach provided a detailed overview of how focus groups have been used within the ActEU project.



Meeting with International IDEA: “Legitimacy at stake: Addressing challenges to European democracies”

Participants had the opportunity to meet **Mr Sam van der Staak** (Director Regional Europe, International IDEA). Drawing on data from his organisation, he showed that 2024 marked the eighth consecutive year in which more countries experienced a decline in the quality of their democracy rather than an improvement. While democratic backsliding has been less pronounced in the EU compared to other regions, Mr Van der Staak noted that only 22% of European countries are improving their democracies, whereas 40% are regressing. He also noted significant political dynamism in Central Europe over the past few years.

To encourage deeper reflection, he posed three key questions to participants:

1. How to strengthen democratic resilience in your country?
2. What ideas for democratic renewal do you suggest, especially to strengthen representation?
3. What role do you see for the EU and for other international actors in safeguarding European democracies?



Visit at the European Parliament: “EU Parliamentary diplomacy in practice: EU values and political engagement across the continent and beyond”

During their visit to the EP, participants met **Ms Nikolina Vassileva** (Head of Unit, Directorate-General for Parliamentary Democracy Partnerships), who underscored the importance of EU parliamentary diplomacy in fostering direct engagement with political actors and institutions. She explained that the Directorate-General, established in 2022, enhances democratic values and legislative cooperation through dialogue with both EU and non-EU parliaments, multilateral organisations, and initiatives like the EU Visitors Programme (EUVP).

Ms Vassileva also outlined the growing importance of parliamentary diplomacy tools, including standing delegations, committee missions, and democracy support activities. The EP external representations in Washington, London, and Kyiv, with planned expansions to Panama and the Western Balkans, serve as key platforms for strengthening political dialogue. She also highlighted the importance of the The Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the EU, as well as inter-parliamentary conferences, to enhance engagement with national parliaments and cooperation within the EU. Initiatives like the EUVP further promote global political and civil society engagement. Lastly, she noted the need for stronger ties with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to develop alliances on important legislative matters such as the Artificial Intelligence Act. Participants raised questions about the EP’s role in diplomacy and its engagement with stakeholders.

Brainstorming Session

With the guidance of **Prof Dr Daniela Braun**, two main questions were discussed to analyse the content of the day's presentations. The first addressed why legitimacy is at stake (based on insights from the International IDEA session). Participants noted that political instability, declining public trust, and the spread of misinformation were key factors undermining legitimacy.

The second question focused on how legitimacy can be studied (drawing from Dr Kristina Weissenbach’s session). The discussion emphasised the value of qualitative data sources in capturing nuanced perspectives on legitimacy and debated the strengths and limitations of a mixed-methods approach. Participants considered whether combining focus group data with other sources enhances research or presents methodological challenges, identifying where such an approach is useful or potentially limiting.

The session also reflected on ActEU’s project’s mixed-methods approach, assessing its planning and progress. Participants brainstormed how to apply the insights from the



day's session to their own research and interactive working groups, highlighting opportunities to refine methodological strategies and fostering collaboration. The session concluded with reflections on the practical application of different research approaches in studying legitimacy and adapting methods to specific research contexts.



### *Interactive Working Groups: Peer Insights and Feedback*

Under the supervision of **Prof Dr Daniela Braun**, participants engaged in collaborative discussions within their respective thematic groups to refine their research focus. The working groups were structured around four central themes:

- Participation and Populism;
- Attitudes and Public Opinion;
- Levels and Identity Construction;
- Discourse, Polarization, and Politicisation.

Each group examined key issues within their thematic area, considering the theoretical and methodological approaches presented earlier in the programme. Discussions revolved around how legitimacy interacts with public participation, shifting attitudes, identity formation, and discursive polarisation.

Participants worked toward formulating a research question that aligned with their specific theme while contributing to the broader study of legitimacy in contemporary

political contexts. Feedback was provided on their ideas, helping them refine their approach and strengthen their research focus.

### **DAY 3: 12 FEBRUARY 2025**

#### ***Interactive Working Groups: Peer Insights and Feedback***

**Prof Dr Daniela Braun** oversaw this session, where participants were divided into working groups. Each working group was tasked with preparing a research presentation for the following day, covering:

- Background information;
- A research question;
- An overview of the academic literature on the subject;
- A research design;
- Potential challenges.



#### ***Meeting with the European Parliament: “Understanding European public opinion: trends and challenges through Eurobarometer data”***

This session, led by **Mr Gonzalo Velasco Monasterio** (Public Opinion and Data Analyst, Public Opinion Monitoring Unit, Directorate-General for Communication)

presented the results of the 2024 Eurobarometer EU post-electoral survey. Key topics included (i) salient issues for voters and non-voters in each Member State and age group; (ii) citizen perceptions of the EP, the EU, and national membership of the EU; (iii) turnout in the 2024 EU elections; and (iv) motivations behind electoral (non-)participation. Mr Velasco Monasterio highlighted two major trends, namely (i) the decline in the salience of climate, environmental, and social welfare issues during the 2024 EP elections and (ii) the increase in overall citizen support for the EU after each major crisis. He concluded with a workshop allowing participants to explore survey's data and methodology in greater depth.

*Meeting with FIDE: "Deliberative democracy in action: Strengthening democracies through citizen engagement in policy-making"*

**Dr Yves Dejaeghere** (Executive Director, Federation for Innovation in Democracy – Europe) led this session on participatory democracy, examining how political science approaches democratic design and citizen involvement beyond elections. It began by questioning what democracy truly means and how its values are decided. Participants discussed how democratic systems often mix technical and normative challenges, leading to confusion in real-world applications. A key issue raised was that empirical evidence is not always used effectively in designing participatory mechanisms. While free and fair elections are fundamental, the session focused on non-electoral participation and how different methods can either strengthen or weaken democratic engagement.

The session also examined challenges such as a lack of clear rules for participation, risks of polarisation, and the role of information control in shaping citizen involvement. The discussion then addressed designing fair and effective participatory methods, considering factors like diversity, transparency, and accessibility. Practical examples included deliberative methods used in cities like Ghent and New York, where sortition (random selection of participants) was combined with participatory budgeting. The session highlighted key frameworks, such as the Council of Europe's "Reykjavík Criteria" and OECD guidelines, which set standards for fair citizen participation. Participants also explored the role of organizations like FIDE, which provides expertise, advocates for strong democratic criteria, and connects key actors in the field.





### Methodological Mastery: Experimental Survey

**Prof Dr Daniela Braun** led this session on the use of experimental to analyse political opinions and behaviours. She explained how small variations in survey questions can reveal hidden biases and improve the accuracy of public attitudes measurements. The discussion highlighted why careful design, including randomization and clear comparisons, is important for reliable results.

### Brainstorming Session

In the final session, overseen by **Prof Dr Daniela Braun**, participants reflected on the day's discussions, sharing key takeaways from the sessions on participatory democracy, public opinion data, and experimental surveys. They explored how these insights could strengthen their research, particularly in refining questions and improving methods.

## **DAY 4: 13 FEBRUARY 2025**

### Methodological Mastery: Web Scraping

**Dr Alexander Hartland** (Postdoctoral Researcher, Saarland University) led this session on web scraping, an important source of data collection for the ActEU





research project. He showed how ActEU relied on web scraping to collect new data to measure societal polarisation along three key policy areas, namely migration, climate change, and gender inequality. In addition, Dr Hartland taught the participants how they can make use of web scraping for their own research. Participants were invited to reflect on possible discourses and sources to 'scrape' and upon practical considerations which could guide their usage of web scraping in the future.



Panel Debate: "Building trust in tomorrow's democracies: Exploring the drivers of political trust"

**Prof Dr Daniela Braun** moderated a panel debate with three expert speakers: **Ms Elena Panchulidze** (Research Coordinator, European Partnership for Democracy), **Prof Dr Richard Youngs** (Senior Fellow, Carnegie Europe), and **Mr Sebastian Rodriguez** (Campaign Strategist, European Movement International). In the first two rounds, panellists offered possible strategies for the restoration of trust in democratic politics among citizens. Ms Panchulidze noted that women's and minority rights have become polarising issues in European society and stressed that a comprehensive and proactive approach towards rebuilding trust in European democracies should therefore include a gender perspective. Prof Dr Youngs highlighted academic research on the potential role for citizen assemblies in rebuilding trust in democracy, while also noting the crisis of legitimacy of civil society organisations and the

challenge posed by the increasingly multipolar world order. Mr Rodriguez underlined the importance of translating academic research into campaign products which can be consumed by persuadable citizens. In the final round, participants engaged directly with the panellists in a Q&A session.

### Interactive Working Groups: Final presentations

Participants gave a presentation about their research, including (i) background information; (ii) a research question; (iii) an overview of the academic literature on the subject; (iv) a research design; and (v) potential difficulties.

### Professional Workshop: Storytelling and Effective Communication

The ActEU Doctoral School concluded with a workshop led by a professional trainer, Elena Kienle, focusing on communication and storytelling. Through a combination of theory and hands-on exercises, participants learned how to simplify scientific discourses, craft an engaging narrative, and create an impactful elevator pitch. The session focussed on enhancing visibility and improving communication skills to captivate an audience, including through the 'ABT framework' (And, But, Therefore). At the end of the session, participants performed their elevator pitch and received feedback for further improvement in the future.



## CONCLUSION

The Doctoral School concluded with a closing ceremony, where participants received certificates in recognition of their engagement. The ceremony also provided a space for reflection on the overall experience, with participants sharing their thoughts on the programme's impact on their research and future academic work.

Following the Doctoral School, participants were given the opportunity to assess their experiences through feedback forms. 69% were very satisfied with their overall experience and a further 23% were satisfied. In addition, 77% indicated that the Doctoral School deepened their understanding of political trust, legitimacy, and democratic resilience in Europe. 77% of participants also felt that the group discussions and activities were valuable and engaging.





# AGENDA

TEPSA



*ActEU Doctoral School:*

## DEMOCRATIC FRONTIERS

*Charting Pathways for Trust and  
Participation in European Governance*

**Academic coordinator: Prof Dr Daniela Braun**  
**(Saarland University, ActEU Conceptual Leader)**

**ActEU**



Funded by  
the European Union



# MONDAY 10 FEBRUARY

13:15-13:30 **Registrations**

13:30-14:30 **Welcome address & introduction**

by Eva Ribera, Project Manager, TEPsA

14:30-16:00 **Lecture: Unpacking EU democracy: foundations, evolution, and contemporary challenges**

by Alexander Hoppe, Lecturer and Chair of European Politics, University of Duisburg-Essen

16:00-16:30 **Coffee break**

16:30-18:00 **Lecture: Activating trust in Europe: the ActEU Project and its research approaches**

by Daniela Braun, Professor, Saarland University

18:00-18:30 **Interactive working groups: Peer insights and feedback**

19:00-21:00 **Welcome drinks**

at Ultime Atome, Rue Saint-Boniface, 1050 Ixelles




# TUESDAY 11 FEBRUARY

- 09:00-10:30 **Methodological mastery: Focus group discussions**  
by Kristina Weissenbach, Acting Professor, University of Duisburg-Essen
- 10:30-11:00 **Coffee break**
- 11:00-12:30 **Meeting with International IDEA: Legitimacy at stake: addressing challenges to European democracies**  
By Sam van der Staak, Director Regional Europe, International IDEA
- 12:30-13:45 **Lunch break**
- 14:00-16:15 **Visit at the European Parliament: EU Parliamentary diplomacy in practice: EU values and political engagement across the continent and beyond**  
By Nikolina Vassileva, Head of Unit, Directorate-General for Parliamentary Democracy Partnerships, Innovation and Partnership Development Unit
- 16:30-17:15 **Brainstorming session**
- 17:15-18:30 **Interactive working groups: Peer insights and feedback**







## WEDNESDAY 12 FEBRUARY

- 9:30-10:30 **Interactive working groups:** Peer insights and feedback
- 10:30-11:00 **Coffee break**
- 11:00-12:30 **Meeting with the European Parliament:**  
**Understanding European public opinion: trends and challenges through Eurobarometer Data**  
by Gonzalo Velasco Monasterio, Public opinion analyst,  
Directorate-General for Communication, Public Opinion Monitoring Unit
- 12:30-13:30 **Lunch break**
- 13:30-15:00 **Meeting with FIDE:** Deliberative Democracy in Action: Strengthening democracies through citizen engagement in policy-making  
by Yves Dejaeghere, Executive Director, Federation for Innovation in Democracy - Europe
- 15:00-15:30 **Coffee break**
- 15:30-16:30 **Methodological mastery:** experimental survey  
by Daniela Braun, Professor, Saarland University
- 16:30-17:30 **Brainstorming session**



# THURSDAY 13 FEBRUARY

- 09:00-10:00 **Methodological mastery: Web scraping**  
by Alexander Hartland, Postdoctoral Researcher,  
Saarland University
- 10:00-10:15 **Coffee break**
- 10:15-11:45 **Panel Debate: Building trust in tomorrow's democracies: exploring the drivers of political trust with:**  
Moderated by Daniela Braun, Professor, Saarland University
- Elene Panchulidze, Research Coordinator, European Partnership for Democracy
  - Richard Youngs, Senior Fellow, Democracy, Conflict, and Governance Program, Carnegie Europe
  - Sebastian Rodriguez, Campaign Strategist, Community Building and Digital Outreach Lead, European Movement International
- 11:45-13:00 **Interactive working groups: Final presentations**
- 13:00-13:15 **Concluding remarks**  
by Daniela Braun (Professor, Saarland University)
- 13:15-14:30 **Lunch (provided)**
- 14:30-18:00 **Professional Workshop: "Storytelling and Effective Communication"**  
Learn more on the next page!





# PROFESSIONAL WORKSHOP

## **STORYTELLING AND EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION** with professional trainer **Elena Kienle**

This interactive workshop is designed to help PhD students transform their complex research into compelling stories that resonate with a broader audience. Through a combination of theory and hands-on exercises, participants will learn how to simplify scientific jargon, craft an engaging narrative, and create an impactful elevator pitch. The session focuses on enhancing visibility and improving communication skills to captivate an audience. By the end of the workshop, participants will gain practical tools and strategies to communicate the value of their work more effectively.

**Elena Kienle** is a certified leadership coach and facilitator who is passionate about supporting individuals and teams create meaningful impact. With an academic background in Human Resources and Business Psychology, and over seven years of experience working in People & Culture roles, she brings a thoughtful and supportive approach to her work. Elena works with people from all walks of life, helping them tap into their potential, communicate more effectively and increase their impact. Her passion for connecting with people and seeing them thrive is at the heart of her work.





# About TEPSA

The Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) was established in 1974 as the first transnational research network in the field of EU affairs. It comprises leading research institutes throughout Europe, with an office in Brussels. Its aim is to provide high-quality research on European integration to stimulate discussion on policies and political options for Europe. This is achieved by the interaction between the European and national institutions as well as the academic and research community. TEPSA is active on a wide range of research topics, focusing on differentiated integration, the EU's external relations, democratic participation and citizens' engagement.

More information on our activities can be found at <http://www.tepsa.eu>.



# About ActEU

ActEU explores political trust and legitimacy beyond traditional survey methods, addressing whether European democracies require uniform citizen support across regional, national, and EU levels. In phase 1, the project investigates declining trust, legitimacy, and societal polarization, focusing on the EU's multi-level structure. Insights will shape phase 2, where tailored toolkits for political and civil society actors, educators, and policymakers will offer solutions to counter declining trust and address polarization in areas like migration, the environment, and gender.

More information on our activities can be found at <https://acteu.org/>

Follow #ActEU on:





ActEU Doctoral School

# DEMOCRATIC FRONTIERS

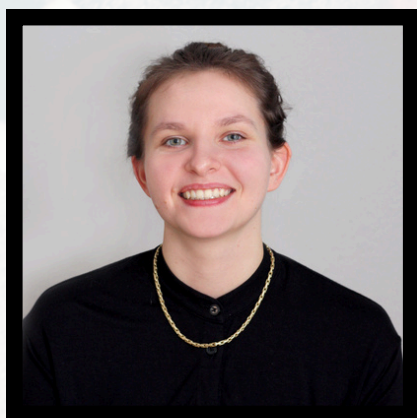
*Charting Pathways for Trust and  
Participation in European Governance*

## MEET THE PARTICIPANTS



### **Mariami Aladoshvili**

Mariami is a PhD student at Northeastern University London, in the Politics and International Relations faculty. Having obtained a Master's degree from the College of Europe, she specialises in EU International Relations and Diplomacy. Her research focuses on the complex phenomenon of common European identity formation in the climate policy domain, particularly in the case of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). Her PhD project explores the puzzle surrounding the EU's climate actorness, asking how the Green Deal contributes to European identity construction and whether we are witnessing a 'greening' of the European normative power. In general, Mariami's research interests include normative power Europe, EU climate policy, sustainable development, and the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. Apart from research, Mariami has completed internships at non-governmental organisations such as Transparency International Georgia, Youth Atlantic Treaty Association (YATA Georgia), and Media Development Foundation (MDF Georgia).



### **Ruth Berkowitz**

Ruth is a research associate at the University of Duisburg-Essen in the ActEU project. Her main research interest is populism with a special focus on participation. Employing a mixed-methods approach comprising focus group data, survey data and web-scraping data, Ruth's doctoral research seeks to uncover patterns of participation among supporters of populist parties and those expressing populist ideas themselves, investigating how these behaviours can be explained by both citizens' needs and party offerings. Adopting a comparative European approach, her study aims to identify overarching trends and country-specific mechanisms, contributing to a deeper understanding of populism's impact on democratic systems. This exploration not only investigates how populism shapes political participation but also offers insights into potential gaps in party representation.





## Jessica De Rongé

Jessica has two Master's degrees: one in Political Science and one in Statistics from UCLouvain. Since October 2024, she is a doctoral student at the Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics (CEE) at Sciences Po Paris. She is part of the POLLOT project conducted by Brenda Van Coppenolle. As part of her PhD, she is conducting research into citizens' confidence in various mechanisms for citizen participation, such as mini-publics. She is supervised by Brenda Van Coppenolle and Jan Rovny.



## Quido Haškovec

Quido is a PhD candidate with the EUROPE RE project at ETH Zurich. Prior to joining this extraordinary endeavour, he spent two joyful years running regressions during his MA in Comparative and International Studies, likewise at ETH. Alongside his Master's degree, he worked as a Research Assistant at ETH, for both the Center for Security Studies and the International Conflict Research Group. He has developed an appreciation for quantitative methodology, focusing particularly on quantitative text-as-data methods and large language model applications. Substantively his doctoral interests lie in the study of discourses, positioning, and politicisation on/of European solidarity. Coming from the Czech Republic, he has a special appreciation for the study of the Central and Eastern European region, as well as of European enlargement.



## Julian Ben Kahlen

Julian is a student of the Master's programme "Spaces, Politics, and Societies of Europe" at Saarland University. He participated in a seminar by Daniela Braun on legitimacy and polarity in the political system of the European Union, a topic which sparked his curiosity. At the ActEU doctoral school, Julian hopes to gain further insights into the project, the current challenges to European democracies, and advanced research methods.





## Saga Oskarson Kindstrand

Saga Oskarson Kindstrand is a PhD candidate at Sciences Po Paris, affiliated with the Centre for European Studies and Comparative Politics, where she also earned a Master's degree in Political Science. Prior to moving to Paris, she completed a Bachelor's degree at Bournemouth University, focusing on civil society and state-citizen relations, alongside a year-long internship at the Foundation for Environmental Education in Copenhagen. Under the supervision of Professor Colin Hay, her research examines the evolving role of political parties in contemporary European democracies, particularly how parties address challenges of legitimacy, representation, and citizen engagement amidst post-industrial societal changes. She seeks to contribute to the literature on party decline, focusing on why certain parties—especially right-wing populists—successfully foster grassroots participation and collective identity, while mainstream parties struggle. Her dissertation investigates how European radical-right parties mediate relationships with their members and supporters, with a specific focus on their strategies to navigate the ongoing legitimacy crisis facing political parties. By bridging academic analysis with practical implications, her work explores how political actors can rebuild trust and reconnect with disengaged citizens.



## Philipp Manuel König

Philipp König is a political scientist and has been a research assistant and doctoral candidate in the Junior Research Centre Europe at the CEUS - Cluster for European Studies at Saarland University since August 2023. After studying Integrative Social Science at the Technical University of Kaiserslautern, he worked as a research assistant at the TU Kaiserslautern in the joint project 'Education as an Exponent of Individual and Regional Development' and subsequently in the Department of Political Science III Policy Analysis & Political Economy. Most recently, he worked as a research assistant in the project 'EUNIDES - European and National Identification: Causes, Forms and Consequences of Solidarisation and Desolidarisation' at the Institute of Political Science at the Philipps University of Marburg. His PhD thesis "Nation and Europe: Measuring European Self-Concepts and Identity Subforms (NEMESIS)" asks what Europeans understand by European identity, which aspects they identify with, do not identify with, or which aspects may even lead them to turn away from Europe (disidentification). The project draws on theoretical foundations from Political Science and Social Psychology in order to develop new empirical measures capable of disentangling the complex nature of social identification with Europe.





## Malin Nissen

Malin is a doctoral researcher at Leipzig University (Heisenberg Chair of International Relations and Transnational Politics) with a focus on transnational civil society networks in post-Soviet states. Her research explores how varying levels of integration with the European Union impact the strength and role of civil society organisations (CSOs) in shaping public discourse, particularly in the context of rising illiberalism and the Russian war against Ukraine. By examining transnational ties between CSOs in EU Member States, accession candidates, and non-aligned states, she analyses how these networks influence democratic engagement, resilience, and the promotion of liberal values. Malin has a background in European Studies, Political Science and International Relations and has gained first-hand experience in the EU's policies and strategies in the Eastern Neighbourhood in the framework of her traineeship at the European Commission's DG NEAR. Her work addresses critical questions about the East-West geopolitical divide, focusing on the role of civil society in bridging these divides and fostering democratic governance in complex, often polarised environments. Her goal is to contribute to a deeper understanding of how civil society can serve as a catalyst for democratic renewal and regional stability in the face of authoritarian pressures and geopolitical conflict.



## Dilge Özcoşkun

Dilge is a researcher in Political Sciences and International Relations, currently pursuing a PhD at Riga Stradiņš University, focusing on the Turkey-Greece crisis and trust dynamics. Her Master's degree in International Governance and Diplomacy focused on the EU-Turkey refugee readmission agreements. Dilge's academic works hold topics like foreign policies, security and global challenges. She has contributed to teaching political economy, providing analysis developed through her researches.



## Andrea Pili

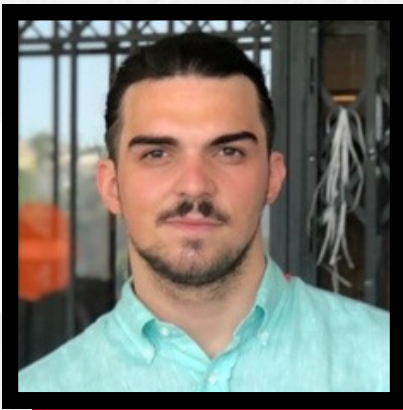
Andrea is a doctoral student in the PhD programme of Economics and Business at the University of Malaga. He obtained his Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Economics at the University of Cagliari, where he acquired skills in applied economics and public policy evaluation. Andrea's research field is Political Economy, but he has work experience in statistics and economic history. As a research assistant specialised in data analysis in the Department of Economic Theory and Economic History of the University of Malaga, he has been investigating the impact of identity attachments and preferences on contentious issues such as immigration and redistribution policies on political trust in the European Union. Andrea's PhD dissertation analyses the voting behaviour of citizens concerning Europeanism in three main different contexts (support for EU membership in a European-level survey; EU referendum in Scotland and Wales; European Parliament elections), to investigate the role of identity, policy issues, and social class.





## Milena Rapp

Milena is a doctoral student in Political Science at the University of Mannheim, Germany. Her dissertation topic focuses on the consequences of Euroscepticism on party competition and public support of the European Union. Milena is particularly interested in how pro-European parties and voters react to the increasing politicisation of the European integration process. Milena investigates the extent of Europhile backlash for different types of Europhile parties across the EU. Moreover, she is interested in how far European integration is a cultural issue – or an economic one. This has important implications on the extent to which and by whom the issue is (further) politicised. Thus, Milena investigates how parties and voters structure their attitudes regarding European integration and how these different aspects of European integration relate to the established economic and cultural dimensions of political competition. She explores these questions using quantitative methods, combining survey data from all EU Member States with other data sources, such as expert surveys and manifestos.



## Vasileios Simpseris

Vasileios is a PhD candidate at the Department of Political Sciences of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. His doctoral thesis is on “Data Analysis of National Election Surveys: The electoral Behavior of Greek voters”. He graduated from the Department of Political Science of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and holds a Master's degree in Political Analysis from the same department. Vasileios works as a researcher in the research project DATIS, funded by HFRI. He has worked in the web surveys research team of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, contributing to the design process, the collection and analysis of data, and the preparation of studies and reports for the needs of the collaborating research networks, such as the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), the Comparative Candidate Survey (CCS) and the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP). His direct research interests include the analysis of public opinion on Euroscepticism, democracy, populism, the analysis of survey data and the use of new methods and techniques to detect critical attitudes of citizens and political elites.



## Sammy Julian Siegel

Sammy works as a research associate at the University of Duisburg-Essen within the Horizon Europe projects InvigoratEU and ActEU. His research focuses on participation, populism and inequality. Sammy's PhD project focuses on the extent to which elections to the European Parliament are characterised by a stronger social bias than national parliamentary elections. The theoretical framework underlying this question is Tingsten's law of dispersion. This theory states that the difference in turnout between the poor and the better off is greater when turnout is low. European elections, which are characterised by a comparatively low turnout in most EU countries, provide an ideal framework for comparison. Sammy aims to answer this question by compiling a new and comprehensive dataset that includes turnout and social data at the local level and by using a quantitative approach.





## Lina Trygg

Lina is a doctoral researcher in Political Science at the University of Helsinki. Her PhD thesis focuses on public opinion on morality policy issues, such as abortion, euthanasia, sex work and LGBTQ-related issues, across Europe. The thesis combines data from the European Values Study (EVS) with survey experiments conducted in Finland through the University of Helsinki's Citizen Barometer, an online panel for Finnish citizens established by a research team Lina is a part of. The dissertation aims to explore trends in public opinion over time, with a particular focus on understanding the extent of polarisation and perceived polarisation on these issues. The thesis examines the relationship between changes in public opinion and social trust as well as political engagement. Lina has a Master's degree in social sciences, and her academic interests lie at the intersection of political behaviour, policy analysis, gender and politics, and European politics.



## Tatiana Velgan

Tatiana is an accomplished International Relations specialist currently pursuing an MSc in Peace, Security, and Development Studies at the University of Coimbra, where her research focuses on EU energy security. In the next academic year she will start her PhD in Political Science. Her academic background includes an MSc in International Business, emphasising cross-cultural analysis and quantitative and qualitative research. Tatiana brings extensive professional experience as a project manager, managing portfolios across European markets, a technical course instructor in engineering, and a Russian language teacher for international staff at UNDP. Her doctoral research investigates the erosion of trust in EU institutions caused by societal polarisation on critical issue such European Union security. Using a mixed-methods approach, she examines how political actors, civil society, and policy frameworks can foster democratic resilience and cohesion. Tatiana is proficient in five languages, including Portuguese, advanced English and Russian, and intermediate French and Spanish, which is crucial for building local engagement and supporting effective problem-solving.



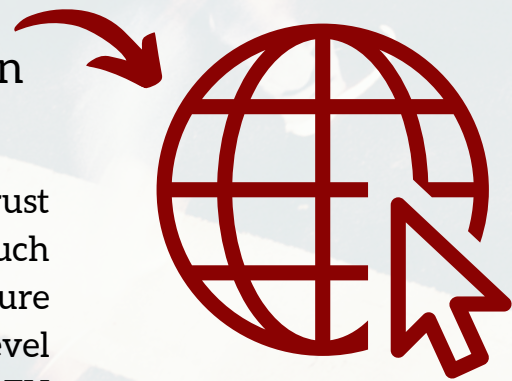
## Alexander Wallis

Alexander is a PhD fellow at the Roskilde Doctoral School for Social Sciences and Business. During his Bachelor's at the University of Texas in Austin, he researched the intellectual and political influence of American eugenicists on immigration restriction acts in the early Twentieth Century. His Master's thesis at the Universität zu Köln focused on Die Union's chancellor candidate selection procedure and how/when the CSU would challenge the CDU for the position and under what circumstances successfully take the position. His current doctoral research seeks to answer the question: How do electoral geographies affect the electoral competition between left/right-wing regionalist parties and radical populist parties on the regional level? This research seeks to better understand the evolving relationship between the electoral geographies in the EU and the increasing competition of regional and radical populist parties. Alexander's primary areas of interest are regional parties, far-right parties, and the intellectual history/background of the far right.



## ABOUT ActEU

Learn more on  
our website



How can we conceptualise and empirically measure political trust and legitimacy beyond the usual survey question “How much trust do you have in the parliament?”? Does the multi-level nature of European representative democracies require an identical level of citizen support at the regional, national and EU level? ActEU aims at finding answers to these questions and more by pursuing two overarching goals: First, in phase 1, we map and investigate persistent problems of declining trust, legitimacy and representation in Europe with a particular attention to the polarization of societies and the EU’s multi-level structure. Knowledge gained from phase 1 will flow directly into the development of a toolbox of remedial actions characterising phase 2, which will craft tailor-made toolkits for political and civil society actors, school teachers and university lecturers to deal with issues of declining political trust in representative democracies in flux and counteract a further decrease. We develop context-sensitive solutions for all polity levels and type of polarising policy field (migration, environment, gender).

## ABOUT TEPSA

The Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) was established in 1974 as the first transnational research network in the field of EU affairs. It comprises leading research institutes throughout Europe, with an office in Brussels. Its aim is to provide high-quality research on European integration to stimulate discussion on policies and political options for Europe. This is achieved by the interaction between the European and national institutions as well as the academic and research community. TEPSA is active on a wide range of research topics, focusing on differentiated integration, the EU's external relations, democratic participation and citizens' engagement. More information on our activities can be found at <http://www.tepsa.eu>.