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Delegitimising climate policy on social media platforms: dominant narratives

Abstract

The article examines climate policy-related negative narratives circulating between February 20, 2024 and May 18, 2025, in the Polish-language social media environment. It aims to identify the dominant narrative categories used to delegitimise climate policy and to assess their potential societal consequences. The study applies quantitative and qualitative content analysis to a corpus of social media posts. It codes recurring negative and, in some cases, disinformation-related claims about climate policy in narrative frames, with attention to how they connect climate policy to social problems. The findings indicate that the most visible narratives frame climate policy primarily through classic welfare-state domains, presenting it as a threat to household, economic security, employment, and living conditions. Some narratives also express broader opposition to regulation and public intervention. The article concludes that the

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visibility of such narratives may weaken the legitimacy of climate action and intensify contestation over compensatory measures and social protection instruments linked to the climate transition. It highlights the need for climate policy to be accompanied by clearly communicated compensatory measures and social protection instruments that address distributive concerns and strengthen state legitimacy.

Keywords: social media, climate policy, social policy, public trust, negative narratives

Introduction

Climate change constitutes one of the most urgent and systemic challenges facing contemporary societies. According to the World Economic Forum, environmental risks occupy the top positions among the most severe global threats anticipated over the next decade (World Economic Forum, 2026). At the same time, climate change cannot be reduced to an environmental issue alone. It is a complex and multidimensional challenge with far-reaching effects across multiple domains, including the environment, the economy, and society (Arnell et al., 2016). The climate crisis, therefore, constitutes a new structural condition, and there is no scientific doubt that it also poses a serious challenge to welfare-state institutions and social policy (Hirvilammi et al., 2023).

Its impacts affect deepening inequalities (World Bank, 2025), public health (IPCC, 2023; World Health Organization, 2023), energy security (IPCC, 2023), and the long-term stability of national economies (Keane et al., 2025). As a result, climate governance is becoming an increasingly central issue for both public policy and social policy.

Policymakers operate in an environment characterizsed by growing interdependencies, geopolitical tensions, and the difficulty of reconciling development priorities and economic advancement with environmental stewardship (Klaassen & Opschoor, 1991; UN Environment, 2020; Belaïd, 2022; Belaïd & Flambard, 2023). Despite mounting scientific evidence and rising public awareness, governmental responses often appear insufficient in relation to the scale and urgency of the crisis (Stantcheva, 2024). This raises a fundamental question of political feasibility: why does climate action remain contested and unevenly implemented, even when the societal costs of inaction are widely recognised? Addressing this question requires not only an analysis of institutional capacity and policy-making processes, but also an understanding of the factors that shape public acceptance of climate policy.

Meeting climate targets depends on formal policy plans and coordinated implementation and sustained societal legitimacy and public acceptance. For this reason, examining the factors that shape public attitudes toward climate policy is becoming increasingly important (Łódzki, 2023).

In terms of those factors, growing importance is attributed to social media communication and narrative framing, as online platforms facilitate the rapid circulation of emotionally charged and conflict-oriented interpretations of climate policy. Some highlight their democratising potential, while others argue that social media accelerates political polarisation (Falkenberg et al., 2022).

Despite increasing recognition of climate change as a new social policy risk in scientific literature (Petmesidou & Branco, 2026), its societal implications remain still underexplored, particularly in relation to mediated public discourse. This article addresses this gap by analysing how social media narratives construct climate policy as socially and politically problematic, linking climate governance to core welfare-state concerns.

The aim of this article is to identify and analyse dominant negative narratives about climate policy circulating in the Polish-language social media environment and to assess their potential societal implications from a social policy perspective. Specifically, the article examines how delegitimising narratives emerge and circulate, framing climate action as socially and politically problematic. To guide this analysis, the study addresses the following research question: how do dominant negative narratives about climate policy circulating on social media frame climate action as socially and politically problematic, and what potential societal implications may follow from their visibility within the analysed corpus? To answer this question, the study adopts a theoretical perspective grounded in mediatisation theory, which describes the growing role of media in contemporary societies and the ways in which social and political institutions adapt to media logic (Krotz, 2007; Schulz, 2004; Thompson, 1995).

The article is empirical in nature and draws on both qualitative and quantitative content analysis. Data were collected using Gerulata Juno, a digital platform for monitoring and analysing media narratives (Gerulata, 2025). The study examines a corpus of 9,656 posts published between February 20, 2024 and May 18, 2025, drawn from multiple social media platforms monitored by Gerulata Juno. The analytical procedure involved identifying recurring negative claims, including those of a disinformation-related nature, concerning climate policy and clustering them into broader narrative frames. The study combined exploratory keyword-based monitoring, qualitative analysis, clustering, and automated classification supported by a locally deployed language model, followed by a quantitative analysis of narrative visibility measured by the number of post views.

Theoretical Framework

Climate change as a social policy issue

In recent decades, climate change has become one of the key global challenges that not only alters environmental conditions but also affects economic stability and the functioning of societies. The years 2011–2020 recorded the highest temperatures in measurement history compared to the pre-industrial average. Research indicates that among human-driven factors, carbon dioxide emissions contribute the most to the observed global warming (Friedlingstein et al., 2022).

The scientific consensus regarding the anthropogenic nature of climate change is broadly confirmed in the literature, including in research by John Cook (2013) and Naomi Oreskes (2004). It is worth emphasising that although carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions resulting from human activity constitute approximately 5% of total emissions, they are not balanced by natural absorption processes in the same way that natural emissions are. As a result, anthropogenic CO_2 accumulates in the atmosphere over time. Furthermore, CO_2 as a greenhouse gas absorbs longwave radiation, leading to warming of the atmosphere and, consequently, the Earth's surface (Kardaś, 2023; Popkiewicz & Malinowski, 2023).

With ongoing global warming, many changes in the climate system, particularly extreme weather events, are expected to gain increasing importance in the near future (IPCC, 2023). The literature already points to the intensification of wildfires, droughts, floods, and extreme heat across different regions of the world, which constitutes not only an environmental threat but also a major social concern (Bradshaw et al., 2021). Importantly, climate risks do not operate in isolation: multiple climatic and non-climatic threats can interact and reinforce one another, increasing the magnitude of impacts and making them more difficult to manage. Losses, damage, and broader social costs are projected to rise with continued warming, while the heaviest burden is expected to fall on the poorest and most vulnerable social groups (IPCC, 2023).

For these reasons, treating climate change solely as an environmental issue is no longer sufficient. The impacts of the climate crisis extend far beyond ecosystems and directly affect living conditions, health, security, and the everyday functioning of households. Consequently, climate policy and pro-climate action are closely linked to policy, both in terms of cushioning the consequences of transformation and in building justice and societal resilience. While 20th-century social policies were primarily designed to respond to the challenges of industrialisation, urbanisation, and globalisation, 21st-century social policies increasingly need to address inequalities and conflicts emerging from environmental policies, including climate policy (Arnell et al., 2016).

In this context, particular importance is attributed to adaptation and mitigation actions implemented across different scales, sectors, and regions, especially those that prioritise equality, climate justice, rights-based approaches, social justice, and inclusiveness. According to the IPCC (2023), such approaches lead to more sustainable outcomes, reduce social trade-offs, support transformative change, and promote climate-resilient development. At the same time, some scholars describe climate change as a new, all-encompassing type of social risk, a "third generation" of social risks that increasingly shapes the priorities of welfare states and social policy (Gough, 2013). Existing evidence also suggests that ecosocial risks generate new inequalities, new forms of distributional conflict, and new types of injustice, within societies, between developing and developed countries, and between present and future generations (Gough & Meadowcroft, 2012).

This is important because the effectiveness of climate policy depends not only on policy design and implementation instruments, but also on how such policies are socially interpreted and evaluated. Delegitimising narratives surrounding climate policy may strengthen societal perceptions of injustice, intensify conflicts related to the distribution of goods and resources, and thereby weaken public acceptance of climate action. This makes narrative analysis a crucial element of research on climate policy. However, a significant part of the scientific literature still focuses primarily on the institutional dimensions of climate-related risks, paying less attention to the ways in which these risks are socially interpreted.

Climate policy: origins, goals, and societal dimension

For the purposes of this study, climate policy refers to both EU-level regulatory frameworks shaping Member State obligations and national strategic instruments that implement these objectives domestically, including Poland's National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP).

Within the European Union, climate policy has gained the status of a strategic project strongly tied to energy transition, economic modernisation, and the long-term security and resilience of the EU as a whole. In this context, the European Green Deal has become the overarching political framework through which climate objectives are integrated with wider development, industrial, and social priorities. The Green Deal thus represents a set of environmental regulations as well as a broader growth strategy aiming to restructure the European economic model toward climate neutrality, reduced pressure on natural resources, and strengthened socio-economic resilience (European Commission, 2019). A key component of this architecture is the Fit for 55 legislative package, which operationalises emission reduction targets through a set of instruments addressing, among other areas, emissions trading, carbon border adjustment mechanism, social climate fund, and increase of energy efficiency.

The main components of EU climate policy can be divided according to groups of public policy instruments, which constitute their basic analytical framework. The first category includes regulatory instruments aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions (such as the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive and the regulation tightening CO_2 emission standards for new passenger cars). Market-based mechanisms constitute the second category within this system and include the Emissions Trading System and the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). Fiscal instruments, including the Just Transition Mechanism and the Social Climate Fund, form the third category, as they enable the financing of activities related to the energy transition. EU climate policy also employs informational instruments, including energy labels for household appliances, the EU Taxonomy, and the European Climate Pact, which was established to facilitate knowledge sharing and support local community initiatives. Together, the elements of this system create a coherent framework that combines environmental objectives with economic transformation and social welfare initiatives.

An important feature of the EU approach is the translation of climate objectives into national implementation strategies. Member states are required to prepare National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs) to present "national contributions to the energy union and to respond to the challenges of climate change, energy dependency and aging infrastructure" (Ministerstwo Klimatu i Środowiska, n.d.). In the Polish context, this has involved the need for coherent long-term planning of energy transition in a setting shaped by specific economic structures, social conditions, and the continued prominence of the fossil fuel sector in public debate (Nadziak-Ignaszak, 2026). As a result, climate policy in Poland is not only a regulatory and strategic issue, but also a contested political domain characterised by disputes over costs, pace, and the perceived fairness of the transition.

Crucially, although climate policy targets are expressed through environmental and emission-related indicators, they are implemented through instruments with direct societal consequences. Energy transition affects energy prices, household heating and transport costs, business conditions, and the economic situation of households, particularly those with lower incomes. In this sense, climate policy is inherently linked to distributional tensions: questions of who bears the costs of transition, who benefits from its outcomes, and how risks and burdens are compensated by the state. This highlights the fundamentally social policy dimension of climate governance, as effective climate policy requires the design of protective measures, compensatory instruments, and solutions that prevent the deepening of inequalities. Such integration of climate and social policy is also essential for sustaining public legitimacy, without which climate reforms may face strong societal and political resistance (Markkanen & Anger-Kraavi, 2019).

From both the EU and Polish perspectives, climate policy can, therefore, be understood as a process in which environmental objectives are inseparable from energy security, economic stability, and social cohesion. It is also an area particularly prone to political conflict and delegitimising narratives, precisely because it concerns everyday social practices and politically sensitive issues related to redistribution, justice, and state responsibility. For this reason, analysing how climate policy is framed and interpreted in public debate, especially within social media environments, constitutes an important step toward understanding patterns of support and opposition to climate action in Poland and across the European Union and their risks and social consequences.

Mediatisation, media logic and social media dynamics: emotions and polarisation

In contemporary societies, media no longer operate merely as intermediaries transmitting information about external reality. Instead, they increasingly constitute a social environment in which reality is framed and interpreted, shaping what becomes visible and relevant. This shift is captured by the concept of mediatisation, a theoretical framework that has been discussed in scholarship for over three decades, first gaining prominence in the study of political communication (Asp, 1986).

The notion of mediatisation initially emerged as a way to describe how political actors and institutions gradually adapted to the "logic of the media," adjusting their communication strategies, public performances, and sometimes even decision-making patterns in order to align with dominant media formats and attention structures. Over time, this analytical lens expanded beyond politics to include a wide range of social domains, while consistently emphasising the long-term impact of media logic on institutional behaviour and social practices (Schulz, 2004).

Although mediatisation is sometimes treated as a relatively new concept in academic debate, it should be remembered that it is often described as a meta-process, comparable to globalisation, industrialisation, or commercialisation. Mediatisation does not reflect a short-term trend; rather, it refers to broad and long-term societal transformations. As Krotz argues, mediatisation concerns the process of the "(inter) penetration, integration, saturation, and even colonisation of socio-cultural life" by media in its various dimensions (Krotz, 2007).

Over the past two decades, the concept has been applied in multiple research contexts, including the mediatisation of society (Mazzoleni, 2008; Hjarvard, 2008), the mediatisation of politics (Mazzoleni, 2008), the mediatisation of language (Hjarvard, 2007), the mediatisation of climate change (Mormont & Dasnoy, 1995), and the mediatisation of consumption (Jansson, 2002). However, many of these studies were conducted in media environments that existed before the emergence of social media platforms. Since then, the contemporary media ecosystem has been reshaped by the rapid expansion of networked platforms, which have altered both the speed and, above all, the scale of information circulation. These developments have also contributed to changes in communication styles and the structure of target audiences.

Trends in the diffusion of internet and social media use in Poland, as well as their increasing role in public life, are confirmed by the recurring DataReportal *Digital in Poland* reports, which track changes in user numbers and patterns of platform use over time. At the beginning of 2025, approximately 34.5 million people in Poland were using the internet, corresponding to an online penetration rate of 89.8%, while the country had an estimated 29.0 million social media user identities, equal to 75.6% of the total population (Kemp, 2025).

The growing importance of social media platforms in Poland was already visible in the early 2010s and was documented in industry reports examining the development of the social media market (Internet Standard, 2010). This major shift in media communication can be linked to the moment when Facebook gained widespread popularity and became a key platform for social interaction, self-expression, and everyday information exchange. According to data from the PBI/Gemius Megapanel, this happened in September 2011 (PBI & Gemius, 2011). Initially used primarily to maintain contact with friends and share personal experiences, social platforms gradually evolved into spaces of political communication and public debate. Subsequent developments included the growing relevance of Instagram as a visually oriented platform and the increasing normalisation of paid advertising and targeted content distribution, which contributed to the greater commercialisation of social media and more strategic management of content visibility.

A further transformation emerged with the rising dominance of short-form video formats, particularly through TikTok and the expansion of “reels” across multiple platforms. “If Instagram was like a photo magazine, TikTok is already a full-scale amusement park” (Kwak, 2025). This shift marked a renewed convergence between social media and television-like logic: algorithmic systems increasingly curate the content users encounter at any given moment, shaping coherent and engaging streams tailored to user attention and preferences. While television relied on editorial producers to design programming schedules, contemporary platforms depend on algorithmic recommendation systems that govern visibility and structure information exposure.

Such systems are commonly associated with the creation of so-called echo chambers. They result from social network homophily and algorithmic filtering, which limit the range of information sources individual users encounter, shielding them from content that challenges their views and encouraging the adoption of more extreme positions (Kitchens et al., 2020). It should be noted, however, that research on echo chambers is still ongoing, and findings remain inconclusive, making it difficult to determine the exact scale of echo chambers and their overall impact on users. Nevertheless, the attention-driven dynamics of social media tend to favour emotionally charged, simplified, or conflict-oriented messages. As a consequence, online political communication may contribute to increasing polarisation, as users increasingly split into opposing camps that share fewer common reference points and struggle to sustain dialogue across political divides. In their systematic literature review, Emily Kubin and Christian von Sikorski consistently find that pro-attitudinal media exacerbate polarisation (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021).

A study conducted by Smitha Milli, Micah Carroll, Yike Wang, Sashrika Pandey, Sebastian Zhao, and Anca D. Dragan demonstrates that Twitter's engagement-based ranking algorithm amplifies emotionally charged, hostile content about outgroups, which users report as worsening their attitudes toward political groups outside their own (Milli et al., 2025). In such an environment, hostile forms of communication, including hate speech, may become more visible and increasingly normalised, especially when engagement metrics rise alongside escalating conflict and outrage. Higher levels of user interaction, including comments, reactions, and shares, become the mechanism through which content reaches wider audiences, reinforcing divisive narratives and accelerating their circulation.

In this way, through algorithmic work, emotionally resonant content, and the reinforcement of polarisation, social media platforms not only describe political and social reality but also shape how it is perceived and evaluated. They influence what attracts attention, which topics are framed as urgent, and how responsibility is attributed to events. These processes may distort public perceptions and contribute to shifts in public opinion, creating fertile ground for the spread of misleading or manipulative information. A particularly critical challenge within this mediatised environment is the growing prevalence of disinformation, which constitutes an important mechanism through which public understandings of climate policy can become contested and destabilised. Despite the significant contribution of this research, many analyses of mediatisation were developed within the context of earlier media environments and do not fully account for the scale, speed and algorithmic structure of contemporary social media platforms. Given the rapid pace of changing narratives and the evolution of social media environments themselves, mapping and analysing narratives is vitally important in order to understand the direction of these changes. in strategically shaping narratives within these environments remains insufficiently theorised.

Disinformation and its role in shaping climate policy perceptions

As described in the previous chapter, processes of mediatisation contribute to the increasing importance of mediated communication in how reality is perceived and interpreted. When media ecosystems become saturated with false or misleading content, the public understanding of reality can become deeply distorted, particularly in areas that require trust in expertise and complex policy knowledge, such as climate policy.

In this context, Cook argues that addressing the polarisation of public opinion on climate change requires recognising polarisation and, crucially, confronting its underlying causes (Cook, 2019). According to Cook, one of the most important drivers of climate polarisation has been decades-long ideological disinformation campaigns designed to undermine public trust in climate science and delay political action.

Wachowicz defines disinformation as a mechanism to obtain financial and political benefits, creating chaos within a given community, and promoting the desired end result of the party using disinformation (Wachowicz, 2019). Wenzel and Stasiuk-Krajewska emphasise that disinformation is typically defined through two dimensions: truth and intent (Wenzel & Stasiuk-Krajewska, 2024). From this perspective, disinformation can be understood as a strategic, long-term process of spreading false information with the aim of misleading audiences and achieving tangible benefits: political, economic, or ideological.

One of the most widely discussed examples of climate-related disinformation campaigns concerns the actions of ExxonMobil, described in the 2007 report *Smoke, Mirror and Hot Air* by the Union of Concerned Scientists. In 1998, ExxonMobil established the Global Climate Science Team and began purchasing extensive advertising space in major newspapers, such as *The Wall Street Journal*, in order to disseminate climate-related disinformation. One published advertisement, titled *Unsettled Science*, claimed that observed global warming was part of a natural cycle. Another advertisement, published in *The New York Times*, sought to undermine the credibility of scientists by questioning their ability to forecast climate change decades in advance.

In contemporary information environments, disinformation does not spread exclusively through mass media or recognisable tabloids. Already in 2013, the World Economic Forum, within its assessment of global risks, identified one major threat as "Digital Wildfires in a Hyper-connected World" (World Economic Forum, 2013). This phenomenon refers to the rapid circulation of misleading information online, especially via social media, and highlights its "serious consequences" and its potential to "cause major disruption in the real world" (World Economic Forum, 2013)

A growing body of research suggests that climate-related disinformation misleads the public, contributes to political apathy, and weakens support for mitigation-oriented climate policies or may even lead to their rejection (Brulle, 2018; Cook et al., 2018; Ding et al., 2011; van der Linden et al., 2017). Importantly, individual disinformation claims circulating online can connect and accumulate into coherent negative narratives about climate policy.

It should be emphasised that negative narratives about climate policy are not necessarily entirely false and this approach was adopted for the purposes of empirical study. In many cases, they concern socially sensitive and contested issues and may be based on real events or actual policy measures. However, they often frame these developments selectively, emphasising particular aspects in ways that amplify doubt or perceptions of unfairness. Also, same mechanism can be adopted by actors spreading disinformation who may strategically use real-world events, public statements, or excerpts from legislative documents as "grains of truth" within misleading messaging, particularly through techniques such as cherry-picking.

Such strategies can also involve amplifying selective elements of climate policy that are difficult to understand or do not constitute central components of policymaking yet are effective in triggering public frustration and symbolic resistance. A relevant example is the EU Single-Use Plastics (SUP) Directive, implemented in Poland, which requires that from July 1, 2024 plastic caps on beverage bottles of up to 3 litres must remain attached to the packaging. While the directive is real and aims to reduce plastic waste entering the environment, especially oceans, by preventing the loss of small plastic components, media coverage and public discussions around it were often dominated by negative framing. Some outlets labelled the regulation as the "cap scandal" and used it as a symbol of EU bureaucracy. Critics questioned why such changes were introduced instead of addressing "more serious" challenges, framing the policy as unnecessary interference in everyday life.

For these reasons, the present article focuses on negative narratives about climate policy, rather than solely on discrete disinformation claims. Narratives tend to circulate longer in the media environment than individual statements and may, therefore, exert a stronger influence on public opinion formation and the social legitimacy of climate policy**.** Previous research of Polish media sphere in this domain has often focused on individual false claims or specific social media platforms, rather than on the broader narrative structures that give these analyses coherence and allow for a better understanding of their evolution over time. The analysis must go beyond examining individual claims, as understanding the public perception of climate policy depends on analysing narrative structures.

Narratives and delegitimisation of climate policy

Narrative theory has a long-standing research tradition spanning several decades, during which both its analytical scope and its object of inquiry have evolved. In contemporary science, narratives are no longer treated exclusively as a literary category but have become a key concept in philosophy and the social sciences (Rosner, 1999). Rosner traces this conceptual shift by describing the move from structuralist analyses of plot and function, initiated, among others, by Vladimir Propp, toward an understanding of narrative as a fundamental structure through which people make sense of reality. In this perspective, narrative serves as a tool for organising experience in time and for constructing individual identity in late-modern social conditions (Rosner, 1999).

In public and media discourse, however, the term "narrative" is often used in a more pragmatic sense. It is understood as a repertoire of arguments, a widely shared set of interpretive schemas, or a matrix of collective imagination that helps audiences attribute meaning, responsibility, and causality to social and political events (Franczak, 2018). In practice, the term is frequently used interchangeably with "story", but it also increasingly functions as an instrument of political struggle, often as a rhetorical label or accusation (e.g., references to a "deceptive narrative of those in power"). Public actors accuse their opponents of "aligning with a narrative" perceived as illegitimate or problematic, or of "constructing false narratives" about the state, society, or international developments. Political commentators likewise examine the "narratives" promoted by particular parties as a foundation of their communicative strategies and ideological positioning (Franczak, 2018).

In recent years, narrative approaches have also gained prominence in climate communication research, where scholars seek to understand how climate-related stories and interpretive frames shape public meaning-making and policy contestation. Researchers increasingly employ advanced methodological tools, including qualitative content analysis and machine learning techniques, to examine how climate narratives influence public interpretations of responsibility, fairness, and feasibility in climate governance. For instance, an analysis of large-scale discourse on the platform X indicates that narratives portraying the US government as a "villain" have gained visibility, while corporations have been increasingly framed as "heroes" taking action on climate change (Gehring & Grigoletto, 2023).

In the Polish context, narrative analyses of parliamentary climate debates likewise reveal recurring interpretive patterns. Based on an analysis of Sejm debates between 2015 and 2020, Biedenkopf identifies three dominant narrative axes: claims that Poland is in a "special situation" requiring exceptional treatment; or that it is following an "alternative pathway" grounded in coal-based energy and forest resources; and framings in which climate policy is portrayed as a threat to national competitiveness (Biedenkopf, 2021).

Similar dynamics have also been identified in other Central and Eastern European countries. Research conducted in Czechia and Slovakia on narratives surrounding the European Green Deal indicates that climate policy is frequently framed through concerns related to economic costs, perceptions of Germany as responsible for the severity of the energy crisis, threats to Czech self-sufficiency, and distrust toward EU institutions (Mindeková, 2023).

Taken together, findings from different national and regional contexts demonstrate that narratives operate as a key mechanism through which climate policy is interpreted, particularly in terms of justice, national interest, institutional trust, and perceived legitimacy. This is especially relevant from a social policy perspective, as climate policy is increasingly entangled with questions of inequality, protection against social risks, and the social acceptability of regulatory change. In this article, the analytical focus on social media narratives enables the identification of dominant narratives through which climate policy is framed as socially and politically problematic. By examining these narratives, the study contributes to understanding how climate policy is largely structured around classical welfare state domains and its implications for the future of social policy.

Methodology

Research aim and data collection

The study aimed to identify and analyse negative narratives about climate policy in the Polish-language social media environment and to assess their potential societal implications. Content analysis was selected as the primary method, as it allows for the systematic examination of communication through relatively objective identification and extraction of formal or content-related elements, as well as estimating their occurrence and supporting comparative inference, which enables the exploration of broader determinants and conditions of the communication process (Lisowska-Magdziarz, 2004). In the first step, the study focused on identifying recurring negative and, in some cases, disinformation-related claims about climate policy. In the next step, claims were clustered into broader narrative frames used to delegitimise climate policy.

The research was conducted using Gerulata Juno, a digital platform designed for monitoring, classification, and analysis of media narratives (Gerulata, 2025). The platform enabled the collection and filtering of large volumes of content and supported both exploratory and structured approaches to content analysis. In particular, it made it possible to combine qualitative analysis of social media posts with scalable, tool-assisted monitoring of thematic trends over time.

The dataset was built using content monitored across multiple platforms supported by Gerulata Juno. These included Facebook posts, Facebook group posts, Instagram posts, Reddit posts, Telegram channel posts, Telegram messages, TikTok videos, VKontakte posts, web feed articles, website articles, X posts, and YouTube videos.

At the time of the study, the platform stored tens of thousands of sources under active monitoring, with several thousand additional sources available but not continuously tracked. Poland remained among the countries with the highest level of source coverage within the active monitoring framework.

Gerulata Juno operates on a crowdsourcing model, meaning that once a user adds a new channel or account for monitoring, content from that source becomes accessible to other platform users. This structure supported flexible and adaptive monitoring, allowing users to actively expand the pool of sources across platforms depending on the needs of a given research design.

The platform enabled content retrieval through advanced search functions, including logical queries based on Boolean operators such as AND and OR. This functionality made it possible to capture both broad discussions about climate policy and more specific disinformation-related claims by combining general keywords with phrases characteristic of particular claims.

Exploratory analysis and time frame selection

The first stage consisted of an exploratory scan of climate-policy-related content published across monitored channels. A broad set of general keywords was applied to capture the widest possible range of discussions about climate policy. The initial keyword list included phrases such as “Green Deal”, “Fit for 55”, “energy transition”, “climate policy” and other terms frequently used in public debate.

To determine the time frame for analysis, Gerulata Juno was used to generate a heat map visualising the intensity of published posts over time. Based on this output, the study selected the period characterised by the highest narrative intensity: from February 20, 2024 to May 18, 2025. The starting date corresponded with the farmers’ protests in Poland, while the end date corresponded with the presidential election day in Poland.

The time frame selection was guided by three main considerations. First, it covered a period of heightened socio-political and media salience, during which climate policy was repeatedly framed as a source of social conflict and economic pressure. Second, it ensured sufficient topical proximity to everyday social concerns present in public debate, such as inequality and rising cost-of-living pressures. Third, it allowed the study to capture how concrete real-world developments shaped the emergence and amplification of negative narratives, especially in moments when climate-related policies were linked to social grievances and expectations of public intervention.

Qualitative content analysis

After the exploratory phase, the keyword list was systematically expanded. The refinement process was based on the actual language observed in social media content, including colloquial expressions and formulations used by online users, rather than relying exclusively on expert terminology. The final keyword list was stored in the Gerulata Juno system and applied in all subsequent queries and data extraction procedures.

To focus the analysis on the most influential and persistent sources of negative and disinformation-related claims about climate policy, a list of 253 source accounts was compiled. These accounts met at least one of the following criteria: they had been previously identified in external reports as connected to disinformation narratives; they published a large volume of climate-related content during the analysed period; or they represented actor types particularly active in shaping public debate, including politicians, journalists, and media outlets.

The accounts were also analysed in terms of their connectivity to other disinformation channels through upstream and downstream amplification patterns. These relationships were assessed using account relationship graphs available on the Gerulata Juno platform.

Based on the refined keyword list and the identified account set, a detailed review of posts published within the selected time frame was conducted. The final dataset consisted of 9,692 posts.

After compiling the full corpus, an inductive qualitative content analysis was conducted to identify recurring claims and develop a coherent coding system. The goal of this phase was to capture the dominant ways in which climate policy was presented as problematic in the analysed material. The selection of narrative categories and claims was not arbitrary but grounded in the theoretical framework. In particular, the analytical focus on narratives draws on literature emphasising the role of interpretive frames in shaping public understanding of complex policy issues (Franczak, 2018; Rosner, 1999), as well as research on the social dimensions of climate policy and its links to inequality, distributional conflict, and welfare-state dynamics (Gough, 2013; Markkanen & Anger-Kraavi, 2019). Moreover, the emphasis on mediated communication reflects insights from mediatisation theory, which highlights the role of media logic in structuring public discourse (Krotz, 2007; Schulz, 2004).

Consequently, the coding framework was designed to capture recurring narrative patterns through which climate policy is framed as socially and politically problematic, through classic welfare-state domains, including income maintenance and social security, health care, personal social services, education and training, employment, and housing (Bochel & Daly, 2021). These dimensions correspond to key areas identified in the literature as central to the societal interpretation and contestation of climate policy.

The identification of claims was performed iteratively. Posts were analysed to detect recurring semantic patterns and similarities in the construction of arguments or interpretive frames that delegitimised EU and national climate policies. Individual claims were defined as distinct, recurring statements expressing specific criticisms or consequences attributed to climate policy. Claims were recorded when they appeared repeatedly across different profiles and platforms and when they served a similar delegitimising function, even if couched in different linguistic forms.

In the initial round of coding, 48 recurring claims were identified and documented with representative quotes. These statements were then grouped into broader narrative categories based on thematic similarity and the type of social concerns they evoked (e.g., threats to economic stability and of ideological nature, interference with autonomy). This process resulted in the identification of 12 overarching negative narrative categories that constituted the initial version of taxonomy.

Quantitative content analysis and classification procedure

At this stage of analysis, we utilised a local LLM-powered automation that allowed systematic identification and classification of climate-policy-related disinformation on the whole corpus of 9,692 posts. The automated procedure consisted of two main stages. First, each unit of content (post) was assessed in order to determine whether it concerned climate policy. At this stage, the language model evaluated whether the post included references to the climate policy of Poland or the European Union. Posts that did not contain climate-policy-related content were excluded from further analysis. Second, for entries classified as climate-related, the language model was used to conduct a multidimensional analysis aimed at capturing message meaning, narrative framing, and thematic categorisation.

For each climate-policy-related post, the script generated a short description limited to 10 words, intended to summarise the core meaning of the entry with particular attention to disinformation logic. Additionally, the script extracted up to five keywords from each post, selected to reflect the most salient concepts and references present in the text, including vocabulary associated with climate policy, the energy transition, and EU directives and regulations. Each post was then assigned to one of 12 predefined narrative categories (see: the previous section) related to the European Green Deal.

The language model used in the process of automated analysis was Gemma 3:12B, run locally via an Ollama server. The model was configured with a temperature value of 0.0 to enhance output stability and ensure greater consistency across the dataset. The script processed text collected from two input fields in the input database: the

“Title & Body” column containing the main textual content, and the “Media Text” column containing additional text extracted from embedded media. Prior to analysis, both fields were combined into a single input string to preserve the semantic context. The model returned outputs in a structured JSON format and included a binary indicator specifying whether the post contained climate content, along with the message description, extracted keywords, and narrative category. Posts that did not match any predefined narrative were classified as “other”.

A number of reliability and quality-control mechanisms were included in the automated workflow. The script verified the presence of required columns in the input file, checked whether model outputs followed the expected JSON format, and handled cases in which the model generated missing or unexpected values. The script also included automated start and stop routines for the Ollama server to ensure stable processing. The automated approach was intentionally constrained in order to generate standardised and comparable outputs across posts. Message descriptions were limited to 10 words, and keyword extraction was limited to five terms per entry. Classification was further constrained by the use of predefined narrative taxonomies. The final output was saved as an Excel file containing the original content and additional analytical columns.

A validation stage was conducted to assess the quality of automated classification. Narrative assignments were largely accurate, as the model consistently captured the sense and intended meaning of the messages. The procedure was conducted in several iterations. Posts initially classified as “other” were qualitatively reviewed by researcher to assess whether they reflected genuinely residual content or indicated missing categories. This process led to the identification of additional recurring claims and the refinement of narrative boundaries. As a result, the final taxonomy was extended to 54 claims grouped into 13 narrative categories. At this point, the procedure of automatic analysis was repeated with updated list of claims and categories. The iterative process was concluded once analytical saturation was reached, that is, when further review did not yield substantively new narrative frames but only repetitions of existing ones. Ultimately, only 302 posts were not assigned to any narrative. A further review of unassigned posts showed that most of them consisted of general political attacks rather than content directly related to climate policy.

Finally, a quantitative analysis was conducted by counting the number of views generated by posts assigned to each narrative category within the dataset of 9,692 posts. This made it possible to identify the narratives with the greatest visibility and potentially the strongest societal impact within the monitored corpus. Based on this metric, a ranked list of dominant narratives was produced.

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Results

The dataset consisted of a sample of 9,656 Polish-language social media posts published between February 20, 2024 and May 18, 2025, which were assigned to 13 narrative categories. Narrative visibility was assessed quantitatively using the aggregated "view" values associated with posts classified within each narrative category. This indicator was treated as an approximate measure of narrative exposure within the analysed corpus, rather than as an objective measurement of actual reach across the broader social media ecosystem. It should be emphasised that these data serve an indicative purpose and are primarily intended for relative comparisons between narratives within the study sample, rather than for comparisons across different studies.

Table 1 presents the full ranking of the 13 narrative categories ordered by overall visibility. The resulting ranking suggests that delegitimising discourse surrounding climate policy concentrated around a limited number of dominant interpretive frames, while the remaining narratives achieved comparatively lower visibility. Throughout the narrative labels, the term European Green Deal is consistently used, as it frequently appears in user-generated social media content as a shorthand reference for a broader set of EU- and Poland-level climate policy measures. Using this term in the final narrative framework also supported semantic consistency during automated clustering and classification. However, as noted in the theoretical and methodological sections, the underlying keyword set and data retrieval strategy covered a wider range of climate-policy-related terms and regulatory frameworks, including both EU-level policies and national climate and energy policy instruments, rather than being limited solely to the European Green Deal.Top of Form

Table 1. Ranking of climate policy-related negative narratives by total visibility (views) in the analysed corpus (N = 9,656)

Rank	Narrative category	Views
1.	The European Green Deal as a threat to the economy, industry, and the labour market	108,791,572
2.	The European Green Deal as a harmful left-wing ideology	80,494,987
3.	The European Green Deal as a driver of a rapid increase in the cost of living	48,226,648
4.	The European Green Deal as a set of absurd and oppressive regulations	15,185,598
5.	The European Green Deal as a threat to agriculture and traditional food production	12,440,687
6.	The European Green Deal as weakening the European Union in favour of third countries	11,653,130
7.	The European Green Deal as a threat to individual freedom and property rights	6,563,359
8.	The European Green Deal as a threat to national security	2,323,669
9.	The European Green Deal as a tool of global elites aimed at controlling ordinary citizens	2,065,513
10.	The European Green Deal as a threat to infrastructure and its reliability	1,041,493
11.	The European Green Deal as a mechanism for enriching "green business"	896,927
12.	The European Green Deal as ineffective and having no impact on the climate	562,835
13.	The European Green Deal as promoting inefficient energy technologies	418,740

As shown in Table 1, the highest visibility was achieved by the narrative framing the European Green Deal as a threat to the economy, industry, and the labour market (108,791,572 views). The next most visible narratives portrayed the Green Deal as a harmful left-wing ideology (80,494,987) and as a driver of a rapid increase in the cost of living (48,226,648). High visibility was also observed for narratives pointing to allegedly absurd and oppressive regulations (15,185,598) and to threats to agriculture and traditional food production (12,440,687).

Further positions in the ranking included interpretive frames referring, among others, to the weakening of the European Union in favour of third countries, threats to individual freedom and property rights, national security concerns, and the control of citizens by global elites. The lowest visibility was recorded for narratives suggesting that the Green Deal promotes inefficient energy technologies (418,740) and that climate policy is ineffective (562,835).

Table 2 and Table 3 presents selected examples of recurring claims and excerpts from posts within the five most visible narratives. These examples demonstrate that debates on climate policy were often translated into simplified and highly emotionally charged messages emphasising conflict, threat, or injustice, thereby shaping the interpretive environment in which climate policy is socially evaluated.

Table 2. Selected recurring claims from posts across the five most visible narrative categories

Narrative category	Recurring claim (statement)
The European Green Deal as a threat to the economy, industry, and the labour market	The European Green Deal causes bankruptcies of Polish businesses
	Climate regulations lead to rising unemployment
The European Green Deal as a harmful left-wing ideology	The European Green Deal is based on ideology rather than science
	EU climate funds are used to support left-wing NGOs
The European Green Deal as a driver of a rapid increase in the cost of living	Climate policy drives price increases and higher household bills
	Climate policy costs are framed as a loss of ordinary people’s private money
The European Green Deal as a set of absurd and oppressive regulations	Climate policy bans the use of gas stoves
	The EU will force citizens to eat insects under the European Green Deal
The European Green Deal as a threat to agriculture and traditional food production	The European Green Deal aims to replace traditional food with synthetic products
	The European Green Deal will lead to food shortages

Table 3. Selected illustrative excerpts from posts across the five most visible narrative categories

Narrative category	Illustrative post excerpt (translated quote)
The European Green Deal as a threat to the economy, industry, and the labour market	*"We need to reject the European Green Deal because the European Green Deal is bringing the Polish business down".*
	"Two thousand people will lose their jobs because of the European Green Deal".
The European Green Deal as a harmful left-wing ideology	*"In the name of a new religion, the European Green Deal".*
	"To fund left-wing non-governmental organisations! The goal of these actions was to defend the European Green Deal and silence European right-wing forces as part of a secret influence operation".
The European Green Deal as a driver of a rapid increase in the cost of living	*"I was at the store today to buy a few basic products and I spent almost 100 PLN! Politicians are responsible for everything getting more expensive! We need to make sure the European Green Deal gets rejected!".*
	"The state – you also added your own huge money to this, money that you could have spent on holidays if they didn't make you pay, often you don't even know that you're paying for it, simply for all these green stupidities, it's your enormous work".
The European Green Deal as a set of absurd and oppressive regulations	*"Just wait until they raise the tax on having gas stoves and blinds on the windows – you own a home, but you'll be banned from smoking on the balcony or terrace".*
	"And yet the EU says we will be eating bugs already, they are showing that they want to shut down those barns because the cow has warmth or something else, holding it".
The European Green Deal as a threat to agriculture and traditional food production	*"The European Green Deal is aimed at eliminating family farms and food grown in soil and replacing it with synthetic laboratory food".*
	"The European Green Deal means hunger and flooded fields".

The excerpts are translated from original Polish-language posts and retain the informal style and linguistic characteristics of user-generated social media content. Overall, the most visible narratives consistently framed climate policy in terms of economic insecurity, distributive injustice, and broader social and political threats, such as food security, suggesting that societal contestation over climate policy is shaped primarily by its perceived everyday consequences.

To further interpret the societal significance of the identified narratives, the dominant frames were analytically mapped onto classical welfare-state domains discussed in the theoretical framework. This allows for a more systematic assessment of how climate policy contestation extends beyond environmental issues and becomes embedded in broader concerns related to social protection, employment, housing, institutional legitimacy, and everyday economic security. Table 4 presents the relationship between the dominant 5 narratives and the principal welfare-state domains they mobilise.

Table 4. Dominant narratives mapped onto main domains

Narrative category	Main domain	Secondary domain	Social policy concern
Green Deal as a cost-of-living increase	Income maintenance and social security	Housing	Household budgets, energy poverty
Green Deal as a threat to economy/labour market	Employment	Income security	Job loss, livelihoods
Green Deal as oppressive regulations	Housing / public intervention	Legitimacy of public intervention	Autonomy, state intervention
Green Deal as a threat to agriculture/food	Income security	Employment	Rural livelihoods, food security
Green Deal as a left-wing ideology	Legitimacy of public intervention	Institutional trust	Polarisation, distrust

While Table 4 demonstrates the substantive social-policy areas through which climate policy is contested, the analysed material also reveals recurring mechanisms through which these narratives delegitimise climate action in public discourse. Beyond the specific thematic content of individual narratives, similar rhetorical and interpretive strategies repeatedly appeared across the corpus. Table 5 summarises the principal delegitimisation mechanisms identified in the analysed material, the ways in which they operate, and their potential societal implications.

Table 5. Main delegitimisation mechanisms in dominant narratives

Delegitimisation mechanism	How it operates	Narratives where it appears	Potential societal implication
Economic threat framing	Presents climate policy as causing costs, inflation, unemployment	Narratives 1, 3, 5, 13	Lower acceptance of transition costs
Injustice framing	Suggests costs fall on ordinary citizens	Narratives 11, 12	Perceived distributive injustice
Coercion/control framing	Frames regulation as state/EU oppression	Narratives 4, 7, 9	Distrust in institutions
Cultural threat framing	Presents climate policy as attack on tradition/normality	Narratives 2, 5	Polarisation and identity conflict
Sovereignty/external imposition framing	Presents EU policy as imposed by distant actors	Narratives 6, 8, 10	Resistance to EU/ national climate policy

The analysis presented in Table 5 demonstrates that negative climate-policy narratives circulating on social media create coherent interpretive frameworks that portray climate action primarily as an economic threat, a social injustice, a form of political coercion, a cultural threat, and a threat to national sovereignty. The repeated occurrence of delegitimisation mechanisms across different narratives indicates that conflicts surrounding climate policy concern not only specific policy measures, but also broader struggles over public trust, the distribution of resources, and the role of the state in conditions of social change. In the long term, this phenomenon is particularly dangerous, as it is not merely about undermining individual regulations. Once a specific public policy becomes part of a political and communicative struggle in which elements of the welfare state are challenged, the long-term consequence may be a decline in citizens' trust in state institutions and their mechanisms of operation. Such a loss of trust is extremely difficult to rebuild in a short term.

Discussion

To structure the discussion from a social policy perspective, the societal implications of dominant climate-policy, narratives are interpreted through classic welfare-state domains, including income maintenance and social security, health care, personal social services, education and training, employment, and housing (Bochel & Daly, 2021).

As shown in Table 4, the most visible narratives framed climate policy primarily through welfare-state domains related to (1) income maintenance and social security, (2) employment, and (3) housing, while other domains such as health care, education and training, and personal social services were less salient. This indicates that contestation over climate policy rarely remained limited to technical or strictly environmental considerations, but instead focused on its perceived consequences for the everyday socioeconomic realities of households. At the same time, the qualitative examples presented in Table 2 and 3 suggest that some narratives extended beyond economic and social risks and were framed as opposition to regulation and state intervention as such. From a social policy perspective, this is particularly significant, as such narratives may weaken public acceptance not only for climate action, but also for broader instruments of public policy based on redistribution, social protection, and compensatory measures aimed at cushioning the social costs of transition.

One of the dominant frames strongly emphasized a narrative portraying climate policy as a harmful left-wing ideology, which shifted the debate from the level of public policy instruments to the level of an axiological conflict. Within this framing, the European Green Deal was criticised as economically costly and also as a project perceived to threaten social "normality" and the traditional social order, thereby activating dynamics of polarisation and antagonisation.

In the following subsections, these implications are discussed in greater detail by interpreting the dominant narratives in relation to the three most salient social policy domains, as well as the broader issue of the legitimacy of public intervention.

Income maintenance and social security

The most visible narratives are linked to the welfare-state domain of income maintenance and social security by framing climate policy as a direct source of financial loss for "ordinary citizens". Within this perspective, the European Green Deal and related regulatory instruments were presented as mechanisms driving rising prices of goods and services, higher household bills, including increased energy costs, and an overall deterioration of household material conditions. It should also be emphasised that even if certain climate-policy instruments may temporarily contribute to higher energy costs, their long-term objective is to accelerate the transition toward cheaper and more stable sources of energy, thereby reducing households' exposure to future price shocks. Negative narratives, however, tend to privilege short-term cost framings and reinforce short-sighted evaluations of public policy, which may undermine public acceptance for reforms that are designed to deliver substantial benefits in the longer run.

In addition, portraying climate policy as a threat to traditional agriculture highlighted the risk of income loss and even the collapse of the agricultural sector, while at the same time linking climate regulations to broader concerns such as food security. From a social policy perspective, this implies that climate transition is framed not as a protective response to long-term environmental risk, but primarily as a threat to economic security. As a result, the public may reject the trade-offs necessary for effective transition due to perceptions of injustice, stemming from the shifting of costs onto economically more vulnerable groups and concerns about the stability of their material conditions. Moreover, such framing encourages a negative perception of the state as an actor that intervenes in market dynamics, imposes additional financial burdens, and simultaneously fails to develop adequate compensatory and protective instruments. This may further contribute to the erosion of institutional trust and deepen the legitimacy crisis surrounding climate reforms.

Beyond the economic context described above, these narratives also reveal a broader problem in how the dilemma between long-term collective benefits and short-term risks at the level of individual households is presented and perceived. Climate policy is often framed through anecdotal experiences related to rising prices and increasing financial burdens, while at the same time the benefits resulting from the energy transition remain temporally distant, difficult to understand, and less visible within public discourse.

The literature also points to a strong relationship between feelings of fear and vulnerability to disinformation or misleading content (Pan et al., 2021). If individuals perceive their economic situation as unstable and feel highly sensitive to price increases, they are more likely to listen to and believe narratives that directly address these concerns. As a result, narratives emphasising immediate financial losses have a greater chance of gaining visibility and public resonance than those referring to avoided future costs or to the more abstract concept of long-term societal resilience. This may contribute to an asymmetry in public debate, in which the short-term distributive costs of the energy transition become exaggerated, while its future savings and long-term benefits remain underrepresented.

Employment

The second salient category within the dominant narratives concerned employment, the labour market, and broader economic stability. In the analysed corpus, climate policy was frequently portrayed as a source of constraints on economic activity, ultimately leading to business closures and rising unemployment, and thus as a direct threat to workers and socio-economic stability.

Such messages delegitimise climate action by mobilising a particularly socially sensitive issue, namely, "the risk of losing one's job" and source of livelihood, by presenting it as a real and unavoidable cost of transition. From a social policy perspective, this constitutes a significant risk, as it may contribute to increasing poverty exposure, widening social inequalities, and deepening exclusion, thereby raising demand for public benefits and social services.

Although job losses, especially in sectors directly linked to fossil fuel processing, such as mining, may indeed be a real consequence of transition, the high visibility of narratives emphasising employment threats can strengthen public opposition and hinder the formulation of policies that simultaneously address mitigation and adaptation goals while ensuring just transition conditions for groups most vulnerable to the costs of transformation.

What is also worth emphasising is that employment-related narratives may be particularly influential in regions that are economically dependent on carbon-intensive sectors. In such places, the energy transition is not perceived as a response to the climate crisis, but rather as a threat to local traditions, the continuity of occupations known for generations, and overall stability. In these regions, narratives about job losses may function as expressions of fears connected to declining socio-economic security. Therefore, resistance to climate policy should not be interpreted solely as opposition to pro-environmental regulations, but also as a reaction to underlying uncertainties regarding the future of employment and the preservation of local traditions.

Housing

The third classic welfare-state domain, particularly salient in the qualitative examples, concerned housing and the material security associated with owning and using property. Within the analysed narratives, climate policy was linked to a vision of imposed regulations regarding building standards and energy requirements, whose non-compliance was allegedly portrayed as potentially leading even to the loss of property rights. Such framing touches on a highly emotional and socially sensitive area, as housing constitutes one of the fundamental goods underpinning life stability and a sense of security.

From a social policy perspective, delegitimising climate policy through references to housing may reinforce concerns about the need to bear high modernisation costs, misunderstandings of the objectives and underlying logic of regulations in this domain, and the belief that climate transition entails interference in the most private spheres of everyday life. This issue is particularly sensitive in Central and Eastern Europe, where historical experiences, such as war, forced displacement, and post-socialist restitution processes, were associated with housing insecurity and remain present in collective memory.

Narratives of this kind may weaken public support for building renovation and thermal modernisation measures, which carry both climate and social potential (e.g., by reducing energy poverty). As a result, housing becomes one of the key arenas of social conflict surrounding climate policy, and the buildings directive is framed as an "expropriation directive" and a threat to the stability and autonomy of households.

The strong emotional charge associated with housing also illustrates how climate policy becomes perceived as a negative phenomenon when viewed through the lens of privacy and personal control over everyday life. Compared to abstract emissions, which cannot be seen with the naked eye, discussions concerning homes or property rights are more easily translated into the public imagination and intensify feelings of fear, which, as noted above, gives them greater persuasive potential. In this perspective, housing ceases to be merely an issue related to material goods and instead becomes a symbolic arena through which broader anxieties concerning sovereignty, state intervention, and loss of control are expressed. This may help explain why building-related regulations have become so highly visible in online debates compared to other, often more technically significant, dimensions of climate policy.

Opposition to regulation and public intervention

The analysed material not only revealed narratives that did not focus exclusively on economic costs, employment, or housing, but also expressed a more fundamental opposition to the idea of regulation and public intervention instead. Within the corpus, climate policy was sometimes portrayed as a purely ideological and oppressive project, or as a tool for controlling citizens and privileging elites, which reinforced the delegitimisation of public institutions' pro-climate actions.

From a social policy perspective, this constitutes a particularly serious challenge, as undermining the legitimacy and authority of the state to intervene weakens not only the capacity to implement climate policies, but may also have far-reaching consequences for the functioning of the welfare state. Such narratives undermine public acceptance of core social policy instruments, including redistribution, social protection, and compensatory measures designed to cushion the social costs of transition and prevent the deepening of inequalities.

As a result, these narratives may contribute to the erosion of institutional trust and to declining social legitimacy for state intervention, both in the context of transformation and in times of crisis. This, in turn, complicates the development of public policies that integrate environmental objectives with the minimisation of social costs, the protection of vulnerable groups, and the strengthening of social cohesion. More broadly, such narratives may weaken societal capacity to accept and sustain long-term, strategic, and complex policy mechanisms that span multiple domains of public policies simultaneously.

From a broader perspective, such narratives may also be interpreted as reflecting a transformation in the relationship between citizens, the scientific community, and public institutions. Climate policy often relies on technocratic knowledge. It is connected with long-term actions and complex public policy instruments that cannot be tested under laboratory conditions before implementation. All of this may contribute to declining trust in pro-climate measures, particularly among groups characterised by low trust in public institutions, limited dialogue resulting from social polarisation, or environments where knowledge is not primarily acquired through formal education but through social media platforms, where algorithms tend to amplify controversial content rather than reliable and expert-based information.

The analysed narratives indicate that contestation of climate policy on social media is based less on disagreements concerning climate science itself and more on competing interpretations of social risk, fairness, and state legitimacy. This suggests that resistance to climate policy is becoming increasingly rooted in broader conflicts concerning redistribution, public intervention, and the future role of the welfare state. Consequently, climate-policy narratives become part of wider societal struggles over how the costs, responsibilities, and protective mechanisms associated with large-scale transformations should be distributed within modern societies.

Conclusion

This study examined how dominant negative narratives about climate policy circulating in the Polish-language social media environment frame climate action as socially and politically problematic, and what potential societal implications can be inferred from their visibility within the analysed corpus.

The findings of this study both confirm and extend existing research at the intersection of climate change and social policy. In line with earlier work emphasising the social consequences of climate transition (Gough, 2013; Markkanen & Anger-Kraavi, 2019), the results demonstrate that climate policy is increasingly interpreted through the lens of economic insecurity, inequality, and social protection. At the same time, the analysis advances this literature by showing how these concerns are not only structurally embedded, but also actively constructed and amplified through mediated narratives, particularly by non-state actors operating in digital environments. Furthermore, the findings resonate with emerging ecosocial policy perspectives (Hirvilammi et al., 2023), while also suggesting that the key challenge lies not only in designing socially just policies, but in maintaining their legitimacy in the face of narrative-driven contestation.

The findings indicate that the most visible narratives rarely challenged climate policy primarily on technical or environmental grounds. Instead, they constructed it as a direct threat to citizens' everyday lives and economic stability. Climate policy was consistently framed through the lens of high costs, distributive injustice, the risk of job losses, and perceived threats to living conditions and household autonomy. At the same time, some narratives went beyond material concerns and portrayed climate governance as an ideological, oppressive, or fundamentally illegitimate project, thereby expanding the conflict over climate policy into a broader debate about the role of public regulation and state intervention. The article contributes to research by demonstrating that online contestation over climate action is largely structured around classic welfare-state domains and thus overlaps with core areas of social policy concern.

Several limitations should be noted. First, while the dataset covers a large sample of social media content, it does not represent the full universe of climate-policy-related communication online. Therefore, visibility indicators should be treated as approximate and applicable primarily to internal comparisons within the analysed corpus, rather than as objective measures comparable across studies. Second, data collection relied on keyword-based logical queries, which entails an unavoidable risk of missing relevant content, retrieving false positives, or excluding posts in which meanings are expressed indirectly, ironically, or through informal and non-standard language. These limitations are characteristic of large-scale online content monitoring and highlight the importance of transparent reporting, iterative validation procedures, and methodological reflexivity. Last but not least, important limitation emerges from the use of LLM in the analytical algorithm. Large language models are inherently non-deterministic, meaning that identical inputs may produce varying outputs across runs, which poses challenges for scientific reproducibility even when using low temperature settings. This limitation is amplified when using smaller, locally-deployed models like Gemma 3:12B, which have reduced capacity for nuanced interpretation tasks such as detecting irony, sarcasm, or implicit disinformation narratives. Additionally, local deployment introduces further variability through differences in hardware configurations, software versions, and model quantisation levels, potentially compromising cross-study comparability.

Future research could extend this approach by conducting comparative analyses of climate-policy narratives across other European countries during the same period, which would enable the assessment of transnational similarities and the identification of frames specific to particular socio-political contexts. In addition, it would be valuable to examine audience exposure and acceptance of specific claims, e.g., by measuring how frequently respondents encountered selected statements and whether they consider them credible. This direction will be pursued in the next stage of the author's research project.

From a public policy perspective, the findings suggest that strengthening the social legitimacy of climate action requires not only communicating scientific evidence and environmental arguments, but also embedding communication in everyday social realities and designing visible compensatory instruments that address perceived fairness concerns, the distribution of costs, and the protection of households most exposed to transition-related risks. Equally important is sustained communication about the existence and purpose of such measures in order to reduce fear and negative emotions, and to gradually rebuild institutional trust and perceptions of the state's capacity to deliver a just transition.

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Is social dialogue still effective in Europe? Ritualisation, technocratisation and the vacancy of collective agency

Abstract

The paper examines the contemporary condition of social dialogue in the context of structural transformations in labour markets and governance. It argues that social dialogue has not disappeared but has undergone a progressive hollowing-out: while its institutional forms persist, their capacity to redistribute power and translate conflict into binding outcomes has significantly weakened. The analysis situates social dialogue within two genealogies: conflict-based and cooperative-ethical, and shows how their historical coexistence was sustained by the post-war paradigm of embedded liberalism. Building on this framework, the paper identifies three interrelated processes shaping the current transformation of social dialogue: ritualisation, technocratisation, and dis-embedding. It further demonstrates that commonly invoked alternatives – direct democracy instruments, labour law utopias and ethical consumption – fail to generate durable forms of collective agency or institutional leverage. These developments are linked to broader structural shifts, including platformisation and the emergence of

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techno-feudal economic architectures, which limit the space for meaningful negotiation.
The paper concludes by conceptualising the present condition as a vacancy of collective agency and proposes a research agenda focused on emerging micro-dialogical forms, fragmented, hybrid, and experimental practices that may signal new, though still fragile, configurations of collective action.

Keywords: social dialogue, ritualisation and technocratisation, embedded liberalism, ethical consumption, vacancy of collective agency

Introduction

In late November 2025, social media feeds once again filled with images of Amazon warehouses: banners, megaphones, clusters of high-visibility vests. As part of the Make Amazon Pay campaign, strikes and protests were organised across more than 30 countries and on six continents, from India and Germany to the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States (UNI Global Union, 2025; Farrant, 2025). The coordinated actions were deliberately timed to coincide with the Black Friday–Cyber Monday shopping period, symbolically confronting what campaign organisers describe as Amazon's extractive labour model, tax avoidance practices, and environmental externalities.

In Germany, where the services union ver.di has pursued one of the most consistent and long-term campaigns targeting Amazon's refusal to enter collective bargaining, around 3,000 workers participated in strike actions across nine major logistics centres, including Bad Hersfeld, Dortmund, Frankenthal, Graben, Koblenz, Mönchengladbach, Rheinberg, Werne, and Winsen (Reid, 2025). From a trade-union perspective, the action was meaningful: it covered strategically important hubs, formed part of a coordinated transnational mobilisation and achieved high public visibility. Yet, as in previous years, Amazon issued a familiar statement that "customer deliveries will not be affected" and that operations would continue as planned (Reid, 2025). Algorithmic systems of labour allocation, logistical redundancy and the reserve workforce absorbed the disruption before protestors had finished their speeches in front of television cameras. This scene illustrates a paradox that increasingly defines the contemporary world of work: protest is highly visible, yet its disruptive capacity is structurally neutralised. Conflict has not disappeared, but its capacity to alter rules, redistribute power or reshape institutional arrangements appears diminished. This case should be read as a boundary instance rather than a representative one, illustrating dynamics that are particularly visible in sectors characterised by high logistical redundancy, algorithmic control, and fragmented labour forces. It is against this background that the central question of this article emerges: What happens to social dialogue and collective agency when conflict persists, yet ceases to translate into meaningful institutional change?

Although social dialogue has, for decades, been one of the core concepts of European and international labour governance, it is surprisingly rarely subjected to sustained critical interrogation. Unlike concepts such as workers' rights, participation or collective bargaining – each of which has generated rich theoretical and empirical literatures – social dialogue is often treated as an axiomatic and normatively self-evident good, difficult to question. In the official discourse of institutions such as the International Labour Organization, the European Trade Union Confederation, Eurofound, and the European Commission, it is presented as a rational mechanism of interest mediation, a tool of social stabilisation and a condition of democratic legitimacy in economic decision-making (Streeck, 1992; Hyman, 2001).

Although such framings are not incorrect, they are incomplete. In practice, we increasingly encounter forms of dialogue that neither enable genuine co-decision, nor redistribute power or resources, nor open space for contesting the underlying social and economic order. Instead, they risk evolving into ritualised procedures that symbolically reproduce institutional order without altering its distributive foundations. While notions of ritualisation, façade participation or post-democratic governance appear in analyses of neoliberal policymaking (Fraser, 2019; Fraser, 2022; Zeitlin & Vanhercke, 2014), they have rarely permeated debates on social dialogue itself as an institution. Similar dynamics have been observed in research on European wage coordination, where collective practices persist despite limited material outcomes, suggesting a decoupling between discursive commitment and practical effect (Seeliger, 2018).

The aim of this paper is, therefore, not to negate the idea of social dialogue, but to reclaim it through critique by questioning whether its present institutional forms may in fact undermine its original normative promise. The argument proceeds from two genealogies. The first, conflictual and labour-centred links social dialogue to trade unions, collective bargaining and the institutionalisation of class conflict, as exemplified by ILO Conventions 87 and 98 and the broader tradition in which bargaining is both a regulatory instrument and a recognition of structurally opposed interests between labour and capital (Hyman, 2001). The second, ethical-co-operative derives from Catholic social teaching and the post-war Soziale Marktwirtschaft, emphasising social partnership, shared responsibility and the moral duty to cooperate in pursuit of the common good (Streeck, 1992).

For several decades, these genealogies co-existed and mutually reinforced one another within the broader paradigm of embedded liberalism (Ruggie, 1982), in which market liberalisation was constrained and socialised through welfare institutions, sectoral bargaining and forms of co-determination. In a Polanyian sense, social dialogue was one of the key mechanisms through which markets were "embedded" in society (Polanyi, 2001) – not an accessory to capitalism, but a structural counterweight that translated conflict into negotiated compromise.

Today, however, the material conditions that once made this embedding possible have been progressively eroded. This erosion is particularly visible in Central and Eastern European contexts, where the institutionalisation of social dialogue has often remained shallow and fragmented despite EU-driven reforms. The bargaining coverage of trade unions has declined in many European countries; labour markets have fragmented; non-standard and platform-mediated forms of work have multiplied; and the right to strike is increasingly constrained in law or hollowed out in practice. At the same time, the language of social dialogue has undergone technocratisation and managerial colonisation: power asymmetries are reframed as issues of compliance, risk management or stakeholder coordination, while references to conflict, redistribution or class interests recede from view (Ahmed, 2012; Eller, 2025). Dialogue becomes a procedure rather than a site of negotiation, a mechanism of symbolic legitimacy, not of power rebalancing.

Against this backdrop, the European Union has attempted to re-institutionalise the conditions for collective bargaining from above, most notably through Directive (EU) 2022/2041 on adequate minimum wages, which explicitly links wage adequacy to the expansion of collective bargaining coverage, and through its judicial confirmation in the Court of Justice of the European Union judgment of November 11, 2025 in Case C-19/23. This is a normatively significant gesture: it expresses institutional faith in the potential agency of collective bargaining even where its material foundations have weakened. Yet, as this paper argues, such regulatory reinforcement may amount to a form of "re-animation from above", unable to compensate for the erosion of power resources at the base of labour relations.

The hollowing-out of social dialogue is further intensified by the emergence of techno-feudal economic architectures, characterised by informational asymmetry, infrastructural dependency and platform-mediated control of labour, data and value extraction (Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019; Morozov, 2022; Dencik et al., 2022). What disappears is not conflict itself, but the negotiable space in which conflict can be translated into institutional outcomes. The result is not the end of social dialogue, but its ritualisation – a structurally persistent form emptied of redistributive capacity.

The central thesis of this paper is therefore that the erosion of social dialogue should be understood not merely as an institutional crisis, but as the manifestation of a broader vacancy of collective agency, in which neither traditional labour institutions nor the most frequently invoked alternatives, including instruments of direct democracy, utopian labour-law imaginaries or consumer-based ethical activism (Donaghey et al., 2014; Fletcher, 2014; Ahmed, 2012) provide viable functional substitutes for workers' collective power. The paper concludes by suggesting that, instead of seeking to revive 20th-century institutional forms, we should develop a new analytical vocabulary and research agenda oriented towards emerging micro-dialogical forms at the intersection of institutions, social movements and digital infrastructures – fragile, partial and experimental – yet potentially capable of re-articulating collective agency under new structural conditions.

Conceptual framework: social dialogue between conflict, cooperation and embedded liberalism

The conceptual approach developed in this paper rests on the assumption that social dialogue cannot be understood solely as a set of institutional arrangements or participatory procedures, but must be situated within broader historical, normative and distributive constellations. In particular, the analysis draws on two partially overlapping, yet analytically distinct, genealogies of social dialogue: a conflict-centred genealogy, grounded in collective bargaining and the institutionalisation of class conflict, and a cooperative-ethical genealogy, rooted in Catholic social teaching and the post-war social market economy. These genealogies should be understood as ideal-typical constructions rather than empirically discrete traditions; in practice, they have been historically intertwined and mutually constitutive.

The conflict genealogy: social dialogue as institutionalised class antagonism

In the first genealogy, social dialogue is understood as a product of labour conflict and of the political struggles through which workers' organisations secured recognition as legitimate collective actors. As Richard Hyman has argued, collective bargaining is not only a regulatory mechanism, but an institutional expression of structurally opposed interests between labour and capital, in which negotiation presupposes the possibility of conflict, including the threat of strike action (Hyman, 2001). From this perspective, social dialogue emerges as secondary to power: its existence depends on the capacity of unions to organise, mobilise and compel employers or the state to enter negotiations.

This tradition is normatively embedded in the international labour rights framework, most notably the ILO Conventions No. 87 and 98, which construct freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining as preconditions for democratic labour relations. Dialogue, in this sense, is not a substitute for conflict, but its civilised expression – a means of translating antagonism into institutional compromise without erasing its structural foundations.

The cooperative-ethical genealogy: social partnership and the social market economy

Running alongside this conflict-centred tradition is a second genealogy, shaped by Catholic social teaching and the normative architecture of the Soziale Marktwirtschaft. Here, social dialogue is articulated not as the outcome of power struggles, but as an ethical obligation to cooperate in the pursuit of the common good, grounded in ideas of social partnership, subsidiarity, and shared responsibility. As Streeck shows in his analysis of West German post-war capitalism, this tradition attributed to organised labour and employers a joint role in economic coordination and social stability, with dialogue conceived as a mechanism of co-responsibility rather than confrontation (Streeck, 1992).

The ethical language of cooperation gained credibility because it rested upon the material strength of organised labour; conversely, conflict-based bargaining was stabilised by institutionalised frameworks of participation and co-determination.

Embedded liberalism and the institutional "embedding" of markets

Both genealogies must be situated within the broader post-war paradigm of embedded liberalism (Ruggie, 1982), which sought to reconcile the openness of markets with strong social protections and redistributive institutions. Drawing on Karl Polanyi's notion of the "embedding" of markets in social order (Polanyi, 2001), social dialogue can be read as one of the core institutional mechanisms through which labour interests constrained and shaped the dynamics of capitalist accumulation. Rather than a technocratic governance device, it functioned as a structural counterweight – an arena in which distributional conflicts were negotiated and partial power asymmetries were corrected.

From genealogy to critique: ritualisation, technocratisation and dis-embedding

While these historical perspectives clarify the normative foundations of social dialogue, they also provide a lens through which to interpret its contemporary transformation. To capture this shift, the article works with three analytical categories: ritualisation, technocratisation, and dis-embedding.

Ritualisation

By ritualisation I refer to processes in which formally participatory or consultative institutions continue to exist and operate, however, their capacity to influence distributional outcomes is progressively reduced. Drawing on post-democratic analyses of governance (Streeck, 1992) and critiques of consultationism in EU policymaking, ritualisation describes situations where dialogue performs a symbolic legitimating function – staging inclusion, and deliberation while substantive decision-making occurs elsewhere or remains insulated from contestation. In this sense, ritualisation does not imply the disappearance of dialogue, but its transformation into a reiterated procedural form that reproduces institutional order without redistributing power.

This phenomenon is not merely theoretical. Empirical research on European wage coordination shows that collective practices may persist despite limited material effects, reflecting a decoupling between discursive commitment and practical outcomes (Seeliger, 2018). In such contexts, ritualisation can be understood as a mode of organisational adaptation: actors continue to engage in formally coordinated practices not because they deliver immediate distributive gains, but because they sustain legitimacy, organisational identity and the possibility of future coordination.

Technocratisation

The notion of technocratisation captures the semantic and procedural shifts through which relations of conflict and power are reframed as questions of technical coordination, risk management or compliance. This is visible in the increasing prevalence of managerial vocabularies – stakeholder engagement, diversity management, due diligence, best practices that displace references to conflict, class or redistribution (Ahmed, 2012; Eller, 2025). In this process, social dialogue becomes embedded within a compliance-oriented governance logic, where disagreement is treated as a communication or efficiency problem rather than as an expression of structurally opposed interests. Technocratisation thus entails a form of de-conflictualisation: contestation is not suppressed directly but neutralised discursively.

Dis-embedding

Finally, dis-embedding is used here as a theoretical short-hand for processes in which the institutional and material foundations that once enabled labour to constrain market dynamics are progressively eroded. In a Polanyian register, dis-embedding signifies not simply deregulation, but the weakening of those institutional mediations such as sectoral bargaining, co-determination or strong representative organisations through which social dialogue historically operated as a mechanism of constraint. In contemporary political-economic conditions, marked by the fragmentation of labour markets and platform-mediated infrastructures, dis-embedding describes the shrinking of the negotiable space within which conflict can be translated into institutional outcomes.

Clarity of terms

For the purposes of this paper, social dialogue is understood not merely as a procedural category encompassing consultation, participation and negotiation, but as a historically situated redistributive institution whose meaning depends on the presence, or absence, of material counter-power on the side of labour. When the capacity to mobilise and negotiate weakens, dialogue may persist in formal terms while losing its substantive content.

Correspondingly, the terms ritualisation, technocratisation and dis-embedding are not used normatively, but analytically, to designate distinct, yet mutually reinforcing, dimensions of the contemporary transformation of social dialogue:

1) ritualisation refers to the persistence of form without power,
2) technocratisation to the semantic and procedural neutralisation of conflict,
3) and dis-embedding to the erosion of structural conditions that once made negotiation effective.

Together, these categories provide the conceptual lens through which the empirical and normative analysis in the subsequent sections is developed.

The hollowing-out of social dialogue: from power to procedure

The weakening of unions and the loss of conflict as a productive force

The first dimension of the hollowing-out of social dialogue concerns the weakening of trade unions as collective actors capable of converting conflict into institutionalised bargaining outcomes. Historically, the effectiveness of social dialogue depended not only on formal participation structures, but also on the underlying capacity of unions to mobilise, threaten disruption and negotiate from a position of material counter-power. As Richard Hyman notes, collective bargaining has never been a merely technical or cooperative exercise; rather, it is an institutional expression of structurally opposed interests between labour and capital, in which negotiation presupposes the possibility of conflict, including the threat of strike action (Hyman, 2001, pp. 46–48). From this perspective, social dialogue emerges as secondary to power: its existence depends on the capacity of unions to organise, mobilise and compel employers or the state to enter negotiations.

Across Europe, however, a growing body of research documents the erosion of the structural bases of union power since the late 20th century. Declining union density, shrinking coverage of sectoral collective agreements, decentralisation of bargaining and the individualisation of employment relationships have progressively reduced unions' organisational reach and leverage (Streeck & Thelen, 2005; Visser, 2011). In many national systems, coordinated sectoral arrangements have been replaced or weakened in favour of firm-level bargaining, where asymmetries of power are greater and distributive conflict is more easily absorbed into managerial decision-making (Baccaro & Howell, 2017, pp. 63–88). This transformation is particularly pronounced in Central and Eastern European contexts, where the institutionalisation of industrial relations has remained comparatively shallow and fragmented despite EU-driven reforms. Comparative research indicates that mechanisms such as sectoral bargaining, tripartite dialogue or European-level coordination have not translated into durable bargaining capacity, contributing to persistent gaps in wages, representation and institutional effectiveness (Kahancová et al., 2024).

This decline is not only quantitative; it also entails a qualitative transformation of conflict. In highly networked and digitalised production environments, the disruptive capacity of strikes is increasingly mitigated by infrastructural redundancy, algorithmic labour allocation and the availability of temporary or subcontracted workforces. As the 2025 Make Amazon Pay mobilisations illustrate, particularly in sectors characterised by high logistical redundancy and algorithmic labour allocation, strikes may achieve high symbolic visibility while being operationally neutralised by infrastructural flexibility and reserve capacity, particularly in transnational logistics chains (Reid, 2025; UNI Global Union, 2025). Conflict persists, it ceases to function as a productive institutional force, that is, as a mechanism capable of translating disruption into bargaining concessions or regulatory outcomes.

Comparative studies of European industrial relations suggest that this transformation reflects not a cyclical downturn but a broader recomposition of capitalism. Baccaro and Howell describe this as a trajectory of "liberalisation without liberalism", in which corporatist and collective institutions formally survive but are substantively re-oriented towards flexibility, competition and firm-level adaptation (Baccaro & Howell, 2017, pp. 1–5). Visser likewise warns of forms of "illusory corporatism", in which high formal coverage coexists with declining enforceability and weakened effectiveness of collective agreements in everyday employment relations (Visser, 2011, pp. 213–216).

From the perspective of social dialogue, the implications are twofold. First, the credible threat of conflict – once the implicit foundation of negotiated compromise –

becomes weaker, reducing unions' ability to shape macro-level policy or sectoral regulation (Hyman, 2001). Second, conflict itself increasingly takes on a ritualised form: it reappears periodically in the form of visible strikes or protest actions, yet its structurally constrained disruptive capacity limits its translation into institutional change (Baccaro & Howell, 2017; Visser, 2011). What remains is not the disappearance of dialogue, but a form of dialogue increasingly detached from the power resources that historically made it an effective redistributive institution.

This weakening of conflict as a productive force does not imply that unions have lost relevance or that resistance has vanished. Rather, it indicates that the institutional terrain on which conflict is articulated – has shifted – a shift that, as the next subsections argue, is closely connected to processes of technocratisation and dis-embedding, which further transform social dialogue from an arena of negotiation into a procedural device within post-democratic governance architectures.

Technocratisation and the managerial colonisation of language

The second dimension of the hollowing-out of social dialogue concerns what may be described as the technocratisation of participatory and consultative practices, that is, the progressive re-framing of conflictual and distributive relations in the language of technical coordination, stakeholder management and organisational efficiency. Rather than eliminating disagreement, technocratisation transforms the discursive terrain on which it is articulated. Conflict no longer appears as a structural opposition of interests, it is rather a problem of communication, risk, optimisation or governance design.

This process is closely connected to the diffusion of managerial vocabularies across domains traditionally associated with labour relations and democratic participation. Terms such as stakeholder engagement, diversity management, responsible business conduct, supply-chain due diligence or best practices increasingly occupy the semantic space once associated with class, bargaining power, redistribution or structural inequality. As Ahmed shows in her analysis of institutional diversity regimes, practices of inclusion may operate primarily as surface-level performances of commitment, generating narratives of organisational responsiveness while leaving underlying hierarchies intact (Ahmed, 2012, pp. 40–44). In a similar vein, contemporary corporate and policy discourse tends to re-code participation as a compliance obligation – something to be documented, evaluated and reported rather than as an arena of contestation or co-decision.

In the field of labour governance, this re-coding is particularly visible in the relocation of labour-related issues into broader frameworks of corporate social responsibility, ESG accountability and human-rights due diligence. These regimes typically rely on consultation procedures, grievance mechanisms and stakeholder mapping exercises which reproduce the formal grammar of participation but are oriented primarily towards risk mitigation and reputational management (Donaghey et al., 2014, pp. 231–234). As Eller argues in the context of global value-chain regulation, responsibility is dispersed along transnational supply-chain architectures, while the capacity of workers and unions to assert binding claims is displaced by softer mechanisms of dialogue, monitoring and voluntary commitment (Eller, 2025, pp. 82–84).

Technocratisation does not, therefore, replace social dialogue; instead, it re-codes the debate. Where earlier institutional traditions acknowledged conflict as a constitutive feature of capitalist labour relations, the managerial colonisation of language produces a form of de-conflictualisation: disagreement is translated into an object of expert knowledge to be balanced, coordinated or absorbed into process design. Consultation becomes an input into decision-making rather than a site of shared authority. The promise of participation is retained at the level of form, but its redistributive horizon has narrowed (Ahmed, 2012; Donaghey et al., 2014).

This dynamic is particularly evident in supranational regulatory initiatives, where participatory procedures are embedded within complex technocratic architectures. Public consultations, impact assessments and stakeholder dialogues create an infrastructure of formal openness while simultaneously reinforcing the asymmetry of expertise and resources between corporate and labour actors. As Zeitlin and Vanhercke show in their analysis of the European Semester, social and labour concerns are not excluded from policymaking, but are increasingly absorbed into consultative and coordinative mechanisms that are only weakly connected to binding distributive outcomes (Zeitlin & Vanhercke, 2014).

From the standpoint of social dialogue, technocratisation thus entails a twofold transformation. First, it shifts the grammar of participation from negotiation to management: the emphasis moves from contesting interests to aligning expectations, harmonising positions, and producing consensual policy frames (Eller, 2025). Second, it creates conditions in which participation can be performed without power, where the visibility of stakeholders substitutes for their capacity to influence outcomes (Ahmed, 2012). In this sense, technocratisation operates as a key mechanism through which social dialogue becomes detached from its conflictual and redistributive foundations, reinforcing its evolution into a procedural artefact of governance rather than a site of collective agency.

European attempts at re-embedding: Directive 2022/2041 and CJEU case C-19/23

The adoption of Directive 2022/2041 and the subsequent judgment of the Court of Justice in C-19/23 represent one of the most visible recent attempts to re-embed collective bargaining within an institutional framework at EU level. Although formally presented as an instrument on "adequate minimum wages", the Directive is, in normative terms, at least as much about the institutional conditions for collective bargaining as about wage floors themselves. This is particularly evident in Article 4, which obliges Member States with collective bargaining coverage below 80% to develop action plans and strengthen the capacity of the social partners – a provision widely recognised in the literature as the Directive's centre of gravity, especially in countries with structurally weakened bargaining institutions (Janda & Álvarez Alonso, 2025; Schmid, 2025).

The judgment in C-19/23 largely confirms this interpretation while circumscribing its transformative potential. The Court upheld the Directive within the limits of Article 153 TFEU, annulling only those elements that were deemed to amount to direct interference in wage-setting, while characterising the remaining provisions, and particularly Article 4, as imposing procedural obligations of diligence rather than obligations of result (Freshfields, 2025; Brameshuber, 2025; Aranguiz & Garben, 2019; Menegatti, 2025).

This reasoning stabilises the Directive by reframing its core instruments as planning, coordination and capacity-building tools rather than mechanisms of substantive redistribution. As commentators note, the Directive survives not because collective bargaining is recognised as a justiciable social right requiring reinforcement, but because its operational measures are recoded within a procedural and coordinative logic that respects the autonomy of the social partners and avoids binding prescriptions on wage levels or bargaining coverage (Countouris, 2025; Otto, 2025). Article 4 thus becomes a framework for the promotion and facilitation of bargaining rather than a vehicle for restoring its material power basis.

From the conceptual standpoint developed in this paper, this configuration justifies describing the Directive, as interpreted by the Court, as a form of "re-animation from above". It constitutes a top-down attempt to revive collective bargaining in systems where it has become fragile or residual, but it does so through administrative architecture, monitoring instruments and national action plans, rather than through the re-establishment of the power resources that historically sustained collective bargaining (Schmid, 2025; Ratti, 2025). The Directive provides a language of encouragement, capacity building and institutional facilitation; it does not (and, within the competence framework, it cannot) supply the conflictual foundations that make bargaining an effective redistributive institution (Countouris, 2025).

For these reasons, the Directive, as read through C-19/23, can be understood simultaneously as a meaningful gesture of re-embedding and as an illustration of its structural limits. It re-introduces collective bargaining into the architecture of EU social governance, yet it does so primarily as an object of procedural reinforcement from above rather than as a practice rooted in renewed distributive power from below. What is restored is the institutional shell of bargaining plans, frameworks and monitoring, while the underlying political economy of conflict remains largely untouched (Schmid, 2025; Countouris, 2025).

Techno-feudal architectures and the disappearance of negotiable space

This section argues that the erosion of social dialogue cannot be understood solely as a weakening of institutions, and rather as a consequence of a deeper structural shift in the organisation of capitalism. Contemporary digital infrastructures – platforms, data-extraction systems and algorithmic management tools – do not merely mediate work, but increasingly constitute a private, enclosed economic space in which the conditions of participation are defined unilaterally by corporate actors. The result is not only a decline in bargaining outcomes, but the progressive disappearance of spaces where negotiation could meaningfully occur.

Following Srnicek, Morozov, and Zuboff, techno-feudalism may be understood as an emerging economic order in which value extraction is grounded not primarily in competitive markets, which on the other hand exerts control over digital infrastructures, data monopolies and behavioural governance, producing forms of dependency and subordination that resemble feudal relations more than market exchange (Srnicek, 2017; Morozov, 2022; Zuboff, 2019). While the term remains contested, it provides a useful heuristic for capturing the concentration of infrastructural power and the asymmetries it generates in contemporary labour relations. Building on this perspective, the section develops three analytical claims.

First, digital platforms restructure labour relations by shifting power from contractual negotiation to infrastructural dependency. Access to work, visibility in ranking systems and remuneration levels are increasingly mediated through opaque algorithmic architectures that cannot be contested through traditional collective bargaining mechanisms. The worker ceases to be a party to a negotiable relationship and becomes a user embedded in a closed ecosystem, whose terms of participation are constantly adjustable and formally non-negotiable (Zuboff, 2019). This dynamic is particularly visible in platform-mediated sectors, where bargaining claims encounter not only employer resistance but the structural opacity of algorithmic governance.

Second, techno-feudal architectures undermine the conflictual foundations of social dialogue. Where industrial relations historically presupposed a shared institutional arena – a factory, a sector, a workplace – contemporary digital regimes fragment workers across jurisdictions, contractual statuses, and interfaces. The possibility of coordinated disruption is weakened not only materially, but also topologically: workers do not inhabit a common social or spatial platform of struggle, rather, they are distributed across infrastructures designed to isolate, individualise and measure performance (Srnicek, 2017).

Third, these dynamics contribute to what may be termed the disappearance of negotiable space. Even where consultation or participation procedures formally exist, they operate downstream of technological architectures that have already fixed the parameters of value creation, allocation and control. In this sense, negotiation is displaced from the level of rules and distributions to the level of acceptance or exit, echoing Morozov's insight that platform governance increasingly functions less as market coordination and more as a form of private sovereignty (Morozov, 2022).

The section concludes that techno-feudal architectures do not simply hollow out existing institutions of social dialogue; they reconfigure the very ontology of labour relations, replacing arenas of contestation with infrastructures of dependency. Institutional attempts to revitalise collective bargaining even when normatively ambitious remain structurally constrained when the space in which bargaining could occur has itself been rendered inaccessible or obsolete.

Direct democracy: high symbolism, low agency

In the context of the weakening of collective bargaining institutions and the erosion of organised labour as a structural actor, instruments of direct and deliberative democracy are increasingly presented as potential substitutes for traditional forms of collective agency. Citizens' initiatives, participatory consultations and citizens' assemblies are framed as mechanisms capable of reconnecting political decision-making with social expectations, rebuilding legitimacy and opening new channels of voice. However, although these instruments often generate visibility, recognition, and symbolic inclusion, their capacity to produce transferable political power remains limited. They expand participation procedurally yet rarely transform the underlying distribution of authority or resources. As such, they may function less as alternatives to social dialogue than as arenas in which the absence of such alternatives becomes visible.

The gradual institutionalisation of participatory and deliberative formats has taken place within what Sheldon Wolin termed managed democracy – a political constellation in which participatory procedures are preserved and even multiplied, while the range of outcomes they can influence is progressively narrowed. Participation becomes routinised, embedded in administrative cycles and expert-led processes rather than emerging from conflict or collective mobilisation. In this environment, deliberative innovation does not challenge the concentration of power; instead, it is incorporated into governance as a technology of legitimation, producing consent rather than contestation.

This tension has been widely discussed in the literature on post-democracy and participatory governance. Scholars have argued that participatory institutions may, over time, move away from conflict-oriented engagement toward technocratic and problem-solving formats, in which disagreement is reframed as a coordination issue among stakeholders rather than as a clash of interests (Blondiaux, 2018). The role of experts increases, agendas become more tightly structured, and participants are encouraged to deliberate within predefined frames. As a result, deliberative arenas may become procedural rather than political: citizens are often invited to discuss policy design and implementation within given institutional parameters, while questions of distribution, authority and structural control remain only weakly open to contestation (Sintomer et al., 2008).

A European example illustrates this pattern clearly. Over the last decade, citizens' assemblies particularly those addressing climate and social policy have been convened in countries such as France and Ireland. These assemblies are frequently celebrated as democratic laboratories, producing carefully reasoned recommendations and strengthening public deliberation. Yet their institutional status remains strictly consultative. Their outputs are acknowledged, publicly debated and occasionally referenced in political communication, but implementation remains at the discretion of governments and parliaments. Selective uptake is common, while core structural or distributional proposals may be set aside without any formal obligation to justify the decision. The assembly thus becomes a site of symbolic recognition rather than a locus of enforceable authority.

From the perspective of labour relations, the limits of these mechanisms become especially visible. Unlike collective bargaining or strike action, citizens' assemblies do not generate leverage: they do not affect the material capacity of actors to disrupt production, reallocate value or renegotiate institutional rules. Their power lies in moral persuasion, publicity, and discursive framing. They can elevate issues and shape narratives, but they cannot compel employers, states or transnational corporations to act. Participation is thus decoupled from conflict and, consequently, from redistribution.

Moreover, these instruments rely on an implicit individualisation of agency. Participants are invited as citizens rather than as members of organised groups or social classes. The plurality of social positions is bracketed in favour of a universal standpoint, which can obscure conflicts of interest and flatten structural asymmetries. What emerges is a form of equality within the deliberative space that does not extend beyond it: outside the assembly, actors remain unequally positioned in relation to power, resources, and institutional access. Deliberation thus risks producing an appearance of equality without its material correlate.

This is not to deny that direct-democracy instruments can have symbolic and mobilising effects. They may expand the repertoire of participation, create temporary publics and strengthen political imagination. In some cases, they can amplify broader social movements, prompting more substantive institutional responses. Yet even then, their effectiveness depends on external mobilisation unions, social movements or organised networks capable of exerting pressure beyond the consultative forum. Deliberative arenas themselves rarely generate such pressure; rather, they rely on pre-existing collective capacities.

In this sense, direct and deliberative democracies do not constitute a structural alternative to social dialogue, they are rather a reconfiguration of its symbolic dimension. They preserve the vocabulary of participation voice, engagement, consultation while detaching it from the mechanisms that historically translated conflict into institutional change. What they reveal is not the emergence of a new form of collective power, but the persistence of a vacancy: a condition in which people may speak, deliberate, and recommend, yet lack the organisational instruments through which speech becomes enforceable.

Thus, the paradox at the heart of these initiatives can be formulated as follows: they expand the repertoire of democratic expression while shrinking the domain of actionable power. They provide arenas in which the crisis of representation can be articulated and rendered visible, however, not necessarily resolved. For an analysis concerned with the future of collective agency, their significance lies precisely here – not as replacements for unions or bargaining institutions, but as indicators of a transformation in which participation increasingly operates without leverage, and voice is acknowledged without being translated into shared authority.

Labour law utopias: imagination without institutional anchoring

Alongside the proliferation of deliberative and participatory governance instruments, a different strand of reflection has emerged within contemporary labour law scholarship one that does not seek to revitalise existing institutions of social dialogue, instead it steps outside their conceptual horizon altogether. The body of work gathered under the label *Labour Law Utopias* exemplifies this orientation (Bueno et al., 2024). Rather than asking how collective bargaining might be restored or how trade unions might adapt to new labour markets, these interventions create images of worlds in which employment, the firm, the wage relation, and the institutions of industrial relations – as well as the central categories of modern labour law – are transformed, displaced, or even rendered obsolete.

This subsection interprets these interventions through the lens of future imaginaries in the social sciences. Such imaginaries do not operate as predictions or policy proposals; instead, they function as epistemic devices that widen the field of what can be thought (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015). By loosening the connection between present institutions and future possibilities, they create analytical distance from what otherwise appears natural or unavoidable. This distance enables a critical interrogation of the normative premises embedded in labour law, for instance, the assumption that wage labour should remain the central organising principle of social cooperation, or that the employer–employee dyad is the primary site at which vulnerability and dependency arise.

In this sense, utopian labour law scholarship belongs to a broader critical tradition that treats the future as a method of critique rather than a projection of existing trends (Levitas, 2013). Imagining labour regimes that depart from current institutional arrangements reveals the contingency of categories such as productivity, value, contribution or dependency, linking them to specific historical configurations of capitalism and the welfare state (Ghai & Dermine, 2024).

Within this framework, two strands of utopian thinking are particularly relevant. One explores scenarios in which the centrality of paid employment is weakened by universal basic income schemes, expanded care infrastructures or shorter working time. Here, labour law is reconceived as a general grammar of cooperation extending beyond wage labour to encompass unpaid care and hybrid forms of contribution (Haberl & Vielle, 2024). Another strand questions the primacy of the employer–employee relationship as the core unit of regulation, proposing instead a shift toward situations of dependency and vulnerability regardless of contractual form (Ghai & Dermine, 2024). In both cases, labour law is detached from its firm-centred architecture and reoriented toward broader patterns of social interdependence.

These perspectives are analytically productive because they foreground the limits of the present institutional configuration. By imagining social orders in which employment is no longer the dominant axis of social citizenship, they illuminate how strongly the current system of social dialogue depends on a specific industrial model: large firms, stable employment, nationally bounded economies, and identifiable bargaining counterparts (Bueno et al., 2024). As this model erodes due to platformisation, global value chains and fragmented contractual arrangements, the institutional scaffolding built around it becomes increasingly fragile. The weakening of collective bargaining thus appears not as an accidental decline, but as the result of a structural misalignment between inherited legal categories and the contemporary organisation of work.

At the same time, a crucial limitation must be emphasised. Utopian labour law imaginaries indicate directions of thought; they do not constitute institutional alternatives capable of replacing collective agency. Their value lies in conceptual estrangement rather than in institutional design. They do not specify how representation should be organised, how bargaining power might be rebuilt, or how conflicts over value and control could be mediated in practice. They remain deliberately non-anchored in organisational structures, enforcement mechanisms or power relations.

From this perspective, utopian labour law scholarship does not fill the vacancy of agency created by the erosion of collective representation. It diagnoses, problematises, and re-imagines, yet it does not generate organisational capacity or provide strategies for collective action within existing configurations of platform capitalism, supply-chain governance or techno-feudal infrastructures.

For this reason, labour law utopias should be read not as an escape from the crisis of social dialogue, but as a critical mirror that reflects its depth. They show that the erosion of collective bargaining is not simply a failure of institutions, but a symptom of a broader transformation in how work, value, and dependency are organised. Yet precisely because they remain at the level of conceptual imagination, they reinforce the central claim of this article: the decline of traditional mechanisms of collective power has not been matched by the emergence of viable institutional substitutes. Utopias illuminate horizons of thought, yet they leave unresolved the question of how such domain might be institutionally realised.

Ethical consumption: moral pressure without economic power

Alongside deliberative democracy initiatives and utopian labour law imaginaries, ethical consumption is often presented as another putative alternative to the erosion of collective labour institutions. Consumer boycotts, brand-based campaigns, and "responsible purchasing" strategies suggest that, in the absence of strong unions or meaningful collective bargaining, the market itself – via reputational pressure and consumer choice – might function as a corrective mechanism. In this vision, individuals act as moral agents whose consumption decisions are expected to discipline corporations and compensate for the shrinking capacity of workers to act collectively. Yet although ethical consumption generates visibility, discursive resonance and occasionally targeted reform, its capacity to operate as a substitute for collective agency remains fundamentally limited.

The analysis begins from the premise that ethical consumption operates primarily within the register of moral pressure rather than structural power. Campaigns urging consumers to boycott particular brands, reward ethical producers or support alternative goods from fair-trade products to niche initiatives such as Fairphone are grounded in the assumption that reputational vulnerability will compel firms to modify behaviour. However, as Nancy Fraser argues, many of these practices become integrated into what she terms progressive neoliberalism: a political constellation in which the language of emancipation, responsibility and ethical awareness is combined with ongoing processes of marketisation and inequality (Fraser, 2019). Ethical consumption, in this sense, may signal moral concern while leaving untouched the deeper architecture of value extraction and power asymmetry that characterises global supply chains.

Sara Ahmed's critique of institutional "performances of inclusion" sheds further light on this dynamic. Ahmed observes that gestures of responsibility or inclusion often function as surface-level confirmations that something has been done, rather than as mechanisms transforming underlying social relations (Ahmed, 2012). Applied to the field of labour governance, this insight suggests that ethical branding, corporate social responsibility labels, and consumer-oriented transparency rankings may produce evidence of ethical engagement without shifting decision-making authority, bargaining leverage or distributional outcomes. Ethical consumption becomes a mode of affective reassurance rather than a vehicle of structural change.

To move beyond theoretical critique, the subsection turns to one of the most widely cited empirical cases in which consumer-driven mobilisation appeared to contribute to significant corporate and regulatory responses: the aftermath of the Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh in 2013. In the wake of sustained transnational campaigning and reputational pressure, a group of multinational brands signed the Accord on Fire and Building Safety – a binding agreement that introduced independent inspections and remediation plans for a segment of the garment sector. As Donaghey and colleagues demonstrate, this development represented a departure from the voluntary, non-binding CSR frameworks that had dominated supply-chain governance (Donaghey et al., 2014). Yet the same research underscores the partial and uneven character of the resulting reforms: the Accord covered only a subset of factories, did not fundamentally alter sourcing practices or purchasing pressures, and left the broader political economy of the sector largely intact.

Subsequent research, however, suggests that this process did not remain at the level of reputational pressure but evolved into a more structured form of transnational governance. Analyses of the Accord and its successors point to a shift from “constructive ambiguity” to “escalating commitment”, whereby initially flexible arrangements gradually generated more binding obligations and enforcement mechanisms (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2025). The significance of this case, therefore, lies not in confirming the effectiveness of ethical consumption as such, but in illustrating the conditions under which moral pressure can, under specific circumstances, be translated into institutionalised commitments.

The Rana Plaza case thus illustrates the central paradox of ethical consumption and reputational activism. Under exceptional circumstances, concentrated global attention can produce targeted institutional innovations. Nevertheless, these tend to operate at the margins of systems whose core dynamics remain unchanged. Improvements are often geographically or sectorally circumscribed, temporally constrained, and heavily dependent on continued external scrutiny. They prove that ethical pressure can prompt reform, yet they also reveal its fragility in the absence of durable collective bargaining structures or regulatory regimes capable of sustaining and extending change.

A key argument of this subsection is, therefore, formulated explicitly: the consumer is not a collective negotiator. Whereas collective bargaining and strike action are based on shared organisation, coordinated withdrawal and enforceable mandates, consumer activism is structurally individualised, intermittent, and difficult to coordinate. Participation depends on personal motivation and fluctuates with income level, convenience, price sensitivity, and time. Even when campaigns mobilise large numbers of participants, they lack the institutional mechanisms that give bargaining its force: representation, rules of engagement, recognised counterparts, and credible sanctions. Ethical consumption generates signals such as shifts in brand perception, symbolic pressure, moments of visibility, which unfortunately are not binding commitments or redistributive outcomes.

Moreover, ethical consumption reconfigures the locus of responsibility in ways that further distance workers from agency. Instead of employers, regulators or transnational corporations being positioned as primary decision-makers, the burden of action is displaced onto individual consumers whose capacity to withdraw demand is mediated by class position and market constraints. Workers themselves remain largely outside these processes, appearing primarily as objects of protection or compassion rather than as authors of demands. Campaigns often speak about or for workers but rarely operate with them in forms that would build organisational power or enable participation in negotiation.

This reframing also narrows the universe of possible interventions. Ethical consumption treats labour conflict as a matter of market preference to buy or not to buy rather than as a site of contestation over governance structures, ownership or distribution. Action becomes reactive and issue-specific, oriented toward particular products or scandals, while the broader institutional mechanisms through which workers might influence decision-making remain underdeveloped or absent. In this way, ethical consumption risks reinforcing a model of politics in which dissent is channelled through individualised acts of refusal rather than through collective strategies capable of modifying structural relations of power.

The subsection, therefore, concludes that ethical consumption neither replaces nor restores the functions once performed by collective bargaining. It can raise awareness, create moral visibility and, in exceptional cases, contribute to targeted improvements in workplace safety or transparency. Rather than a new form of collective agency, ethical consumption should be understood as a symptom of its absence, although, under specific conditions, it may contribute to the emergence of more structured forms of transnational regulation.

Conclusion: a vacancy of representation and the search for micro-dialogical forms

The paper returns, in conclusion, to the central question posed in the introduction: what becomes of social dialogue when conflict does not disappear, yet no longer translates into institutional power? The analysis developed across the paper suggests that social dialogue is not simply in decline or “dead”; rather, it has undergone a process of progressive hollowing-out. It continues to exist in the form of procedures, consultations and symbolic performances, however, it increasingly lacks the material and organisational foundations that once connected it to workers’ collective agency. In this sense, the present crisis is not the absence of dialogue, but its emptiness is a condition in which institutional forms persist while their capacity to redistribute power diminishes (Fraser, 2022).

The argument has shown that this hollowing-out results from the interaction of two mutually reinforcing dynamics. On the one hand, social dialogue has been subject to ritualisation and technocratisation: it has become embedded in managerial and compliance-oriented governance, where conflict is reframed as coordination and disagreement is channelled into controlled procedural formats (Streeck, 2014). On the other hand, the potential "alternatives" that are often mobilised in response to the erosion of collective bargaining – direct-democracy instruments, utopian labour law imaginaries, and ethical consumption do not generate durable organisational capacities or new forms of leverage. Rather than filling the void left by weakened unions and fragmented labour markets, they reveal the emergence of what may be described as a vacancy of collective agency, in which conflict remains socially visible yet institutionally ineffective.

This diagnosis carries important implications for social and labour policy. The weakening of collective bargaining does not lead to a straightforward transfer of representation to new arenas; instead, representation becomes fragmented, dispersed, and weakly institutionalised. Voice is distributed across deliberative forums, CSR architectures, consumer activism, and episodic transnational campaigns but without shared mandates, enforceable commitments or stable interlocutors (Hyman, 2018). Policy strategies that rely primarily on strengthening procedural participation or consultation risk reinforcing this dispersion, especially when they fail to address the deeper asymmetries of power, data and infrastructural control that characterise contemporary platformised and supply-chain capitalism (Zuboff, 2019; Srnicek, 2017).

At the same time, the analysis suggests that the absence of consolidated alternatives does not imply a complete absence of emergent forms. Recent empirical work points to the existence of fragmented yet tangible practices of bargaining and coordination in new sectors, particularly in the platform economy. These include collective agreements, recognition arrangements and hybrid negotiation mechanisms, often facilitated by supportive legal frameworks but limited in scope and unevenly distributed across sectors and jurisdictions (Forsyth & McCrystal, 2025). Such developments indicate that new forms of coordination are not purely hypothetical, yet they remain structurally fragile, dependent on context and rarely capable of scaling into generalised institutional arrangements.

In a similar vein, the evolution of the Bangladesh Accord demonstrates that under specific conditions moral pressure and reputational activism may be translated into more binding institutional commitments. The shift from "constructive ambiguity" to "escalating commitment" identified in recent analyses shows how initially flexible arrangements can, over time, generate more robust governance structures and enforcement mechanisms (Reinecke & Donaghey, 2025). However, such cases remain exceptional and contingent, requiring sustained transnational coordination and external pressure, and do not in themselves constitute a systemic alternative to collective bargaining.

These developments should also be read alongside countervailing evidence from institutional contexts where collective bargaining retains significant redistributive capacity. Comparative research on Nordic labour markets suggests that, under conditions of high union density, coordinated bargaining and strong institutional embedding, collective negotiation continues to function as a central mechanism of wage-setting and solidarity, even in periods of economic disruption (Ibsen et al., 2024). This contrast reinforces the core argument of the paper: the erosion of social dialogue is not universal but conditional, reflecting the presence or absence of the institutional and material resources that sustain collective power.

For this reason, the conclusion neither advocates a nostalgic restoration of the post-war model of social dialogue, nor assumes that legal or technocratic reinforcement alone can reconstitute its material foundations. Instead, it proposes a research and policy agenda oriented toward the identification and analysis of micro-dialogical forms emerging, hybrid and frequently fragile practices of coordination, representation and solidarity that arise at the intersection of institutions, social movements and digital or infrastructural spaces. These may include experimental local bargaining arrangements, informal coordination networks among fragmented workers, cross-border organising in global value chains, worker-driven data collectives, or new forms of solidaristic infrastructure-building in sectors that lack stable interlocutors.

Micro-dialogical forms do not, at present, constitute a consolidated alternative to the institutional architecture of social dialogue, nor should they be romanticised as inherently emancipatory. However, they indicate where new forms of agency may be crystallising, often in partial, situated and experimental ways. Tracing their conditions of emergence, identifying their limits and understanding how they relate to processes of techno-feudal dependency and infrastructural subordination (Morozov, 2022) is essential if scholarship and policy are to move beyond the binary between technocratic repair and institutional nostalgia.

Consequently, the vacancy identified in this paper should be understood not merely as a sign of institutional decline, but as a transitional space, one in which the boundaries of collective action are being renegotiated under new material and technological conditions. Whether this space becomes a zone of further fragmentation or a terrain for the reconstruction of collective power will depend on both legal innovation and also on the ability to recognise, support and critically evaluate these micro-dialogical experiments as they emerge.

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Auto-enrolment in voluntary pensions: comparative OECD case studies

Abstract

Six OECD countries (New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Türkiye, Poland, Lithuania, and Ireland) have introduced auto-enrolment into the third pension pillar. The latest one, implemented in Ireland, begins operating in 2026. All projects are designed to achieve wide coverage of voluntary pension schemes among employees, to supplement moderate replacement rates from the public ones. Using case studies and a multi-dimensional comparative analysis, the study identifies key factors determining the success of these implementations. The research focuses on behavioural design, financial incentives, and the institutional and macroeconomic environment to identify factors that affect participation rates. The collected data show that auto-enrolment schemes constitute an attractive way of saving due to the offered subsidies or tax exemptions and have achieved wide coverage among the population (above 50%, except for Türkiye). Currently, the highest coverage is achieved in the United Kingdom, despite the highest contribution rate. This demonstrates that factors such as the quality of the institutional environment and a culture of saving in occupational schemes are crucial for auto-enrolment success, while a higher contribution burden is not discouraging. Additionally, the findings indicate that the structure of financial

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incentives affects participation rates across income groups: flat-rate subsidies attract low-income earners and lead to more even coverage, whereas tax exemptions are more favourable to high-income earners, resulting in participation that rises with income.

Keywords: pension system, behavioural economics, auto-enrolment, third pension pillar, voluntary savings

Introduction

In many countries, pensions paid from public schemes are expected to be at a moderate level in the future. Projected low replacement rates require individuals to accumulate capital for old age on their own. However, as behavioural economics has proven, voluntary long-term saving is difficult for many people due to myopia, status quo bias, preference for instant consumption, and inertia (Thaler, 2016).

Auto-enrolment (AE) is becoming an increasingly popular solution to boost participation in third-pillar pension schemes. It is defined as the automatic registration of individuals into a pension scheme, with the possibility to opt out (European Commission, 2021). AE requires setting up a default contribution rate and investment strategy, which may be changed upon participant request. This approach to the enrolment process allows for the use of myopia and inertia as factors supporting saving, because after AE individuals may procrastinate changing the contribution rate or investment strategy, but are active savers in the scheme. Many studies have confirmed that under an AE scheme people join pension schemes significantly earlier, which translates into a longer time of paying contributions (Choi et al., 2004; Madrian & Shea, 2001).

Auto-enrolment schemes are linked to employment (or self-employment) which is necessary to provide automatic deductions of contributions along with other levies. The law may require employers to introduce an AE scheme with specified employee and employer contribution rate or may allow adding AE to voluntarily created occupational schemes. So far, six OECD countries have gained experience with mandatory auto-enrolment schemes: New Zealand, the United Kingdom, Türkiye, Poland, Lithuania (AE operated until 2026), and Ireland, which introduced the AE scheme at the beginning of 2026. Some sources, e.g., OECD (2025c) and Foster et al. (2020), also cite Italy and Slovakia as countries with auto-enrolment pension schemes. In both cases, schemes do not require employees to pay additional contributions, still, there is another "way" of investing contributions already made. Therefore, this article will concentrate on schemes in which participants receive lower net pay. This is in line with the role of the third pension pillar, which should create additional pension savings, rather than crowd out already made to more favourable accounts. The implementation of the AE programme in Ireland is a good opportunity to study the experiences of already functioning schemes, identify factors that have translated into their success (or caused their failure) as well as compare the Irish project with prior implementations.

Despite the growing literature on behavioural initiatives in pension savings, existing studies predominantly concentrate on firm-level schemes (see: Choi et al., 2004, 2024; Madrian & Shea, 2001) or analyse the functioning of nationwide AE programmes in a limited number of countries (Bielawska & Turner, 2023; Peksevim & Akgiray, 2019).

While the former offer insights into individual behavioural patterns, the latter, although allowing for a better identification of local characteristics, limit the possibility of drawing general conclusions regarding the functioning of AE programmes across a broader range of countries. In this respect, the European Commission (2021) stands out, as it covers most AE schemes in operation at the time of its publication. However, it lacks a detailed cross-country comparison and instead focuses on identifying the best practices in AE implementation. The recently introduced Irish scheme has also received limited attention, as so far only three scientific articles[2] have addressed this topic (Foster et al., 2020; Keane et al., 2023; Whelan & Hally, 2023). Additionally, these studies were based on the project's initial design concept and, therefore, assessed the proposed design features rather than analysing its final implementation.

This paper addresses these gaps by providing a detailed cross-country comparison of all nationwide AE schemes in OECD countries, including not only overall participation rates but also their distribution across income groups, where available. This enables drawing general conclusions on their effectiveness across diverse institutional and regulatory frameworks. Specifically, the text analyses issues such as contribution structures, AE and opt-out mechanisms, early withdrawal options, and behavioural and financial initiatives for participation, evaluating them as social policy instruments that shape AE take-up rates and impact pension adequacy and life-cycle welfare outcomes. Furthermore, it incorporates the newly implemented Irish AE scheme into the analysis, drawing on the provisions of the enacted legislation.

The issue of quasi-mandatory pension schemes is important, as it contributes to the discussion on the public-private welfare mix. As many countries diminish the generosity of public pension benefits, more space is left for private savings products and their effective functioning becomes crucial, e.g., in terms of coverage and contribution rates. AE schemes are operated by private providers but within a strictly designed regulatory framework, which allows for their control by the government. The operation of these schemes provides evidence on whether by incorporating behavioural initiatives it is possible to establish widely utilised voluntary savings schemes, or if governments should concentrate on the development of mandatory funded pension programmes.

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: What factors affect participation rates in AE schemes across OECD countries?
- RQ2: How do financial incentives favour specific income groups, and are these differences reflected in participation rates across income groups?
- RQ3: How does the newly introduced AE scheme in Ireland compare to previously implemented schemes in other countries?

Literature review

Literature describing behavioural methods of increasing pension saving is quite substantial. Because AE combines most of them, it is crucial to present different aspects of such schemes, resulting in more effective and popular capital accumulation.

[2] Articles were identified through searches in the Scopus and Web of Science databases.

The Behavioural Life-Cycle Hypothesis is developed on the principle of the existence of three mental accounts, which affect people's financial decisions. They include: current income, current assets and future income accounts. Individuals assign particular funds to different accounts depending on heuristics. The highest willingness to spend applies to the current income account. This account is credited by labour income, net of taxes and other contributions. Current assets account consists of wealth, excluding pension funds. As a rule, individuals are unwilling to spend accumulated wealth, therefore, propensity to consume capital on this account is low. However, the lowest propensity, close to zero, applies to funds on the future income account. It consists of pension savings and income which will be earned in the future (Shefrin & Thaler, 1988).

The occurrence of mental accounting implies that it is possible to increase an individual's savings rate by transferring funds from the current income to the future income account. Participation in a pension scheme that deducts contributions from salary allows for achieving it. Manual transfer of contributions to a pension fund, although equally effective from the point of view of classical economics theory, requires greater willpower and may be more challenging for most people (Bańbuła, 2006).

Mental accounting helps members of pension schemes to save regularly declared contribution, but does not explain factors that affect people's decisions on participation and contribution rate. Participation rate may be increased and equalised between employee groups by simplifying opting-in or introduction of AE. First option includes, e.g., offering all new employees a pension scheme enrolment forms, ideally with a default option to choose – which allows for participation with sustainable contribution rate and investment strategy. This limits the possibility of procrastination in joining the fund and reduces complexity of this decision. It is also possible to require people to decide pension scheme participation while signing job contract (Carroll et al., 2009; Thaler & Sunstein, 2021).

AE is a combination of a default option and a need of quick decision on participation. It enrols all individuals to the scheme with default contribution rate and investment strategy and requires those who do not want to participate to resign in the "opt-out window". Depending on the programme, after this period participation may become mandatory or refund of already collected contributions will be impossible. Many studies have confirmed the positive impact of the described methods on the level of retirement savings (Orlik, 2023). AE is especially effective in boosting pension scheme participation of new hires, but its effect is visible also among people working longer for the company (Choi et al., 2004). Other research has shown a stronger impact of passive savings decision (including automatic contributions or mandatory participation) on the overall household saving rate. While policies raising the financial attractiveness of pension saving attract a relatively small group of the population, which redirects savings already made to more profitable solutions, initiatives that do not require people to take action in order to start saving receive wider coverage at a potentially lower cost (Chetty et al., 2014).

The effectiveness of AE was initially studied on a firm-level (e.g., 401k pension accounts in the US), but led to nationwide legislations requiring introduction of AE covering all employees in the economy. This allowed for conducting more general research and analysis of the impact of nationwide AE rules on pension scheme participation, including differences among firm size and sectors. Most subsequent studies have concentrated on one (Cribb & Emmerson, 2016; Jakubowski, 2021; Kritzer, 2007; Marriott, 2010) or a few countries (Bielawska & Turner, 2023; Peksevim & Akgiray, 2019) and identified AE as an effective tool for increasing pension scheme participation. In addition, this literature suggests that AE is less effective in countries characterised by macroeconomic instability and lower institutional quality.

However, as recent evidence from Choi et al. (2024) demonstrates, the long-term effect of behavioural initiatives may be attenuated by several factors. Automatically enrolled employees may prefer current consumption over retirement savings and use opportunities to withdraw accumulated funds. On the other hand, in the absence of AE, many people actively join the scheme and increase their contributions over time, narrowing the differences with the group treated by behavioural initiatives. In light of this research, the introduction of AE may be seen as an opportunity to establish uniform saving rules for all employees, including the mandatory establishment of occupational schemes and immediate vesting of employer contributions. This would help even active savers, who previously did not have the option of automatic payroll deductions, nor did they receive employer matching contributions, to save more effectively for retirement.

Background and methodology

The article employs a multiple-case study design (Yin, 2018), supplemented by a multi-dimensional comparative analysis. Given that all examined countries share the implementation of AE and have achieved a substantial level of development (reflected by OECD membership), their selection reflects the logic of the most-similar cases methodology (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). The study evaluates the participation in voluntary pension schemes by examining the interplay between behavioural design (AE rules, and opt-out possibilities), financial incentives (government subsidies and employer contributions), the institutional and macroeconomic environment (the rule of law and wage levels), and the benefits paid from mandatory schemes. Specifically, it seeks to explain which factors reinforce or attenuate the effectiveness of AE. Data on the use of third-pillar solutions were synthesised from official national sources, which (depending on local practices) are published by financial regulators, statistical offices, or other public institutions. Academic literature, identified through targeted searches in the Scopus and Web of Science databases, complemented by Google Scholar queries and backward reference screening, constitutes the scientific basis of this study. Special attention was given to works directly addressing the design and outcomes of nationwide AE schemes.

There are three main indicators of the development of voluntary pension products: participation (savers/working-age population), contributions (average contribution/average wage), and assets (total assets/GDP) (see: Marcinkiewicz, 2019). In the case of newly established nationwide AE schemes, the most important indicator is participation rate, calculated here as a percentage of eligible population saving in a scheme. This approach enables measuring the precise impact of AE, as a denominator depends on particular legislation, which may establish age or income AE criteria. For this reason, the article will concentrate on participation rate among eligible population (as a rule, the complement of the opt-out rate). Both the contributions and assets deserve less attention due to establishment of the minimum/default level of contributions in the AE schemes. It closely defines nominal contributions as well as assets.

Whilst the participation rate is identified as the primary indicator of scheme success, it should be acknowledged that it does not fully reflect adequacy and long-term outcomes. Participation rates are driven by individuals' decisions whether to partake in a given scheme and are shaped by the dimensions analysed in this article. By contrast, long-term outcomes and adequacy depend to a greater extent on regulatory parameters set by the government, such as contribution rates and withdrawal rules, as well as on the persistence of saving behaviour over the life course. As Cribb & Emmerson (2016) demonstrated, in the UK, introducing an AE scheme may "anchor" contribution rates at a statutory minimum, despite the prior practice of setting higher rates in voluntarily established occupational schemes. In such cases, AE increases the total participation rate, however, it may decrease the contribution level among groups previously covered by pension agreements. On the other hand, people seem to make active decisions more frequently when the default contribution rate (which is also the minimum rate in the case of a nationwide AE scheme) is suboptimal or excessively high (Beshears et al., 2023). This implies that it cannot be set too high, so as not to result in a high opt-out rate. Ultimately, this creates a policy trade-off, where parameters designed to maximise participation may compromise the long-term adequacy of retirement savings. A similar dilemma applies to early withdrawal rules. While their presence may increase a scheme's appeal and boost the participation rate, they can result in significant leakages that reduce old-age income adequacy (Munnell & Webb, 2015).

Since the design of the mandatory pension system is the reference point for additional savings, Table 1 presents the replacement rates projected for the studied countries. Because in some parts of the article, values in national currencies are presented, the exchange rate to the EUR and the average wage level are also given. Additionally, as institutional quality is an important factor influencing opt-out decisions and one of the dimensions analysed, the Rule of Law score collected from the Worldwide Governance Indicators is also included.

The presented data show low benefits paid in all studied countries except Türkiye. For mean earners in remaining states, replacement rates are significantly below 70%, the rate is used as a benchmark of decent pension, allowing for consumption smoothing. Ireland, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom offer flat-rate pensions. This results in a higher replacement rate for minimum wage earners than high-income earners. AE in such cases offers the possibility to add a widely available and used earnings-related component of pension provision.

The Lithuanian public scheme pays a combination of a flat-rate and an earnings-related component. This also results in a lower replacement rate for high-income earners. Poland has only an earnings-related scheme, which offers a stable but low replacement rate for all income groups (there is also a minimum pension) (OECD, 2025c). For these countries, AE helps increase the replacement rate to a more appropriate level for all workers.

Table 1. Replacement rates, average wages, Rule of Law scores, and exchange rates to EUR in the studied countries

Country	**Gross replacement rate**			**Average wage**	**Rule of Law score**	**Exchange rate to EUR**
	50%	100%	200%			
New Zealand	65*	40	20	92,779	85.7	2.04
United Kingdom	45	22	11	44,806	78.8	0.87
Türkiye	69 *(66)*	69 *(66)*	69 *(66)*	389,034	42.5	50.48
Poland	30 *(33)*	29 *(22)*	28 *(22)*	91,625	66.9	4.22
Lithuania	27	17	13	28,756	80.6	NA
Ireland	49	24	12	55,591	84.4	NA

*For New Zealand, the values for the 63% mean wage.

Source: Own work based on European Central Bank (2025), OECD (2025a; 2025b; 2025c), World Bank (2025).

The gross replacement rate for a worker entering the labour market in 2024, earning 50/100/200% of the mean wage until retirement age (values for women in parentheses when different). Average annual wages in local currencies as of 2024 (2023 for Türkiye). The Rule of Law indicator as of 2024, measured on a scale from 0 to 100 captures “the extent to which agents respect and follow the rules of society, including contract enforcement, property rights, the police, courts, and the likelihood of crime and violence” (World Bank, 2025). Exchange rates as of December 31, 2025.

Country case studies

New Zealand

KiwiSaver, introduced in New Zealand in 2007, was the first auto-enrolment programme at the national level worldwide. It was motivated by a low household saving rate and the flat-rate benefit in the public scheme. Low occupational scheme coverage (13.4%) and the absence of previous tax support for retirement saving were also critical factors (Marriott, 2010).

The key idea of KiwiSaver, stable since its introduction, is auto-enrolment of all employees aged 18–65 starting new employment, with the possibility to opt out between the second and eighth week. After this period, resignation is not possible, but contributions may be suspended up to 1 year, with the option to make resuspensions (Dale, 2019; Kritzer, 2007). Employee contributions are made from net income (no tax exemption). Accumulated capital can be withdrawn at retirement age as a lump sum or in instalments. KiwiSaver is not only dedicated to working people, as there is a possibility to opt in via provider and make voluntary lump sum contributions, qualifying for government subsidies. Taxation of investment gains is similar to the rules for other forms of saving (MacDonald & Ross, 2019).

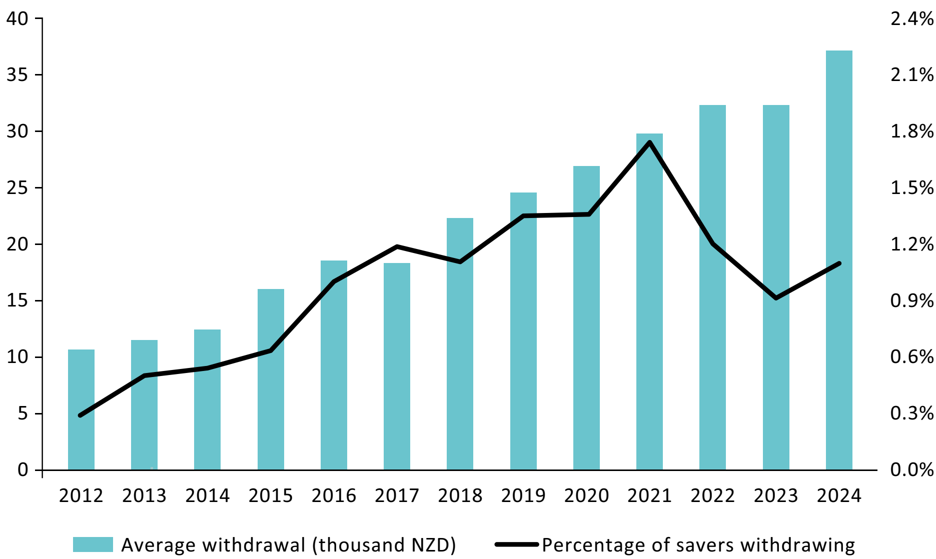
KiwiSaver has been reformed many times since its introduction. Most changes reduced its attractiveness and lowered the fiscal cost of government subsidies. Initially, the scheme offered a 100% government match of employee contributions up to

1,043 NZD per year, a rate that was gradually reduced to 25% in 2025, with individuals earning above 180,000 NZD becoming ineligible for the subsidy. There was also a 1,000 NZD "kick-start" deposit for new accounts, which was phased out in 2015.

At the inception of KiwiSaver, the default employee contribution rate was 4% of salary and employer contributions were planned to reach this level in 2011. In 2009, however, a new default rate of 2% was applied to both employees and employers. The reform was partly reversed in 2013, when 3% became the default[3]. Since 2012, employer contributions have been taxed at a rate close to PIT (previously tax-exempt) (Hobbs & Feld, 2023; Marriott, 2010).

Early withdrawals (before the age of 65) are possible in three cases: a first-home purchase, illness, and financial hardship. Figure 1 presents the average value of the first home withdrawals and the percentage of total savers who have withdrawn funds. The increase in the average pay-out over time is logical due to the relatively short duration of the programme, so that those making later withdrawals have generally participated for a longer time. The recent withdrawal rate of more than 1%, given that this pay-out can be made only once and the KiwiSaver is a lifelong scheme, means that this way of using funds is quite popular.

Figure 1. Average value (LHS) and share of savers (RHS) making first-home withdrawals from KiwiSaver, New Zealand, 2012–2024

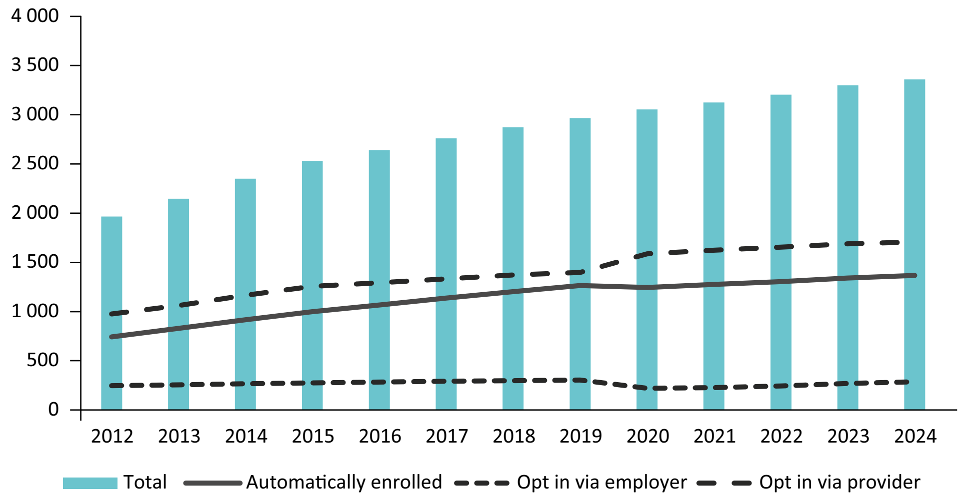


Source: Own work based on Inland Revenue (2025).

[3] In April 2026, the default contribution rate and employer subsidies rose to 3.5% and are scheduled to increase further to 4% in April 2028.

In KiwiSaver, 75% of the eligible population participates. Among all savers, 59% opted in and 74% actively chose the investment fund. Many opt-ins result from auto-enrolment of individuals starting new jobs, which means that those in stable employment need to take action to participate and receive attractive subsidies. The number of participants is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Number of KiwiSaver participants and enrolment method (thousands), New Zealand, 2012–2024

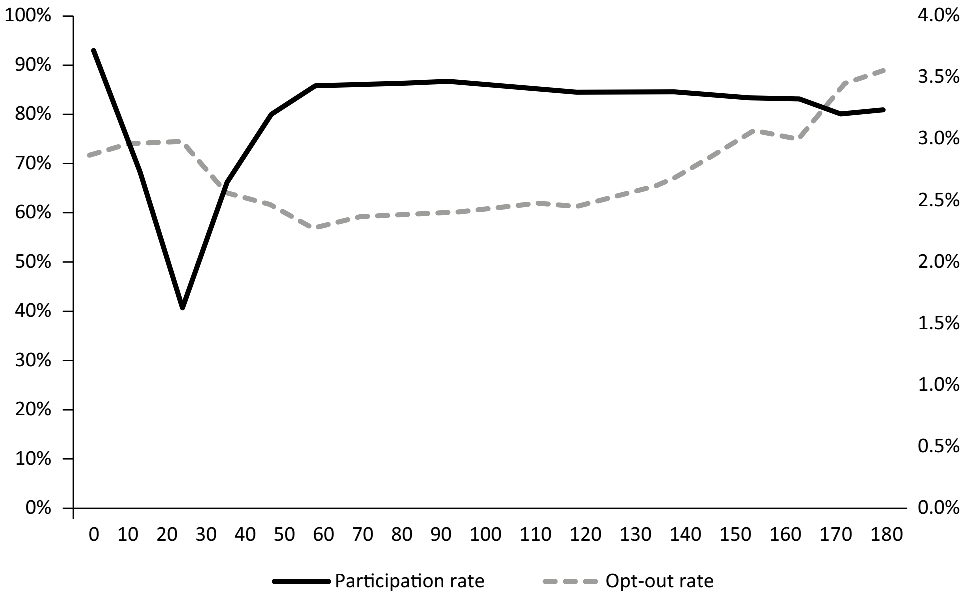


Source: Own work based on Inland Revenue (2025).

KiwiSaver is most attractive to low-wage earners because government subsidies are capped in nominal terms and subject to an income eligibility limit. Minimum wage earners contributing 4% of their salary have been able to receive most of the government subsidies available since the inception of the programme. Conversely, higher earners benefit from larger nominal employer contributions and a lack of their taxation since 2012 (progressive PIT). This implies that the (low-income) group, which has a high replacement rate in the public scheme, also receives attractive conditions in KiwiSaver. This is reflected in the stable participation rates (Figure 3), which oscillate above 80% for all income groups above 40,000 NZD (slightly below minimum wage). Such consistency across the income spectrum demonstrates that the scheme's financial design effectively incentivises lower-income workers to participate, despite relatively generous pension expected from public pillar.

For income groups up to 40,000 NZD, the participation rate is V-shaped but opt-out rates are only up to 0.3 p.p. higher than average. This indicates that the higher number of non-savers in the 10,000–40,000 NZD income range is a result of not opting-in despite the possibility of gaining subsidies, rather than massive resignations.

Figure 3. Participation (LHS) and opt-out (RHS) rates in KiwiSaver among income groups, New Zealand, 2024



* The horizontal axis represents income bands in thousands of NZD, ranging from 0 to 180,000 and above. Data are grouped in 10,000 income brackets.

Source: Own work based on Inland Revenue (2025).

United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom, AE was introduced in 2012. Its implementation was parallel to the reform of the public scheme, which abolished the earnings-related component and introduced a flat rate benefit (Robertson-Rose, 2021; for a review of public scheme see: Crawford et al., 2013). Voluntary pensions can thus help medium-high earners to achieve an appropriate replacement rate.

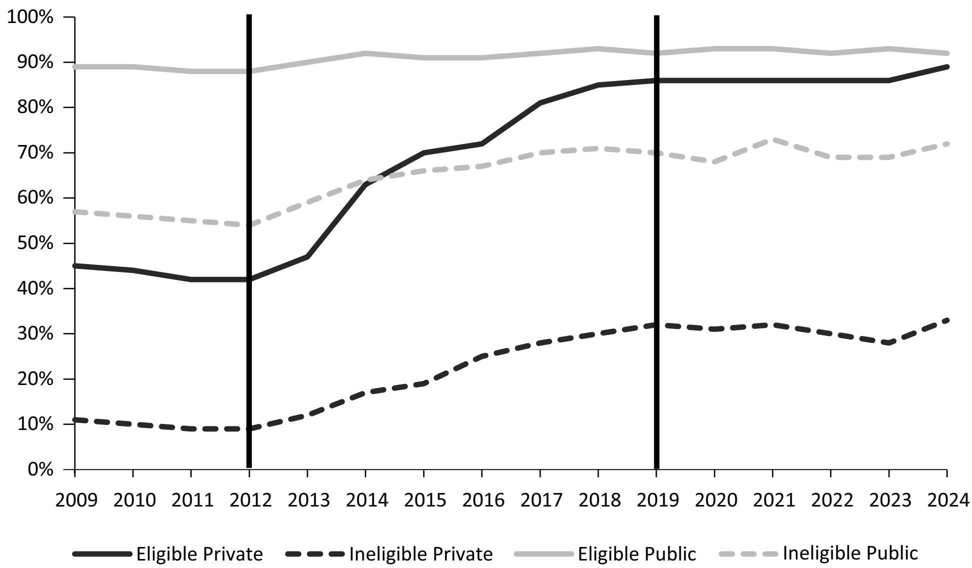
Even before 2012, the UK had a well-established tradition of voluntary occupational schemes, which covered 36% of private sector workers. Additionally, 20% of the population participated in personal schemes. Employers who did not offer occupational pensions were required to offer deductions of contributions from salary to Stakeholder Pensions. Like other third-pillar solutions in the UK, this offers tax exemption for contributions and investment returns. Withdrawals are taxed at the marginal PIT rate (except the first 25% of capital) and are possible after reaching age 55 or in cases of ill health (Cribb & Emmerson, 2016; Disney et al., 2007).

AE into pension schemes was combined with mandatory employer matching contributions. Employees of big companies were enrolled first (in 2012), while small enterprises joined up to 2018. Contribution rates increased to 5% for employees and 3% for employers in 2019. As contributions are tax-exempt, the real contribution of workers is 4% (at the basic 20% tax rate) because the tax relief covers the rest. The standard withdrawal rules apply (Cribb & Emmerson, 2016). AE was introduced as part of occupational schemes, so employees with pension plans and appropriate contributions were not subject to any changes.

AE applies to persons older than 22 but below retirement age, if their yearly income exceeds the 10,000 GBP "earnings trigger". However, contributions are paid for "qualifying earnings" bracket (currently 6,240–50,270 GBP) (The Pensions Regulator, 2026). Those who want to opt out must do so within one month to get their contributions back; thereafter, they remain invested in the scheme until retirement but it is possible to suspend saving. After three years or while changing an employer, AE takes place again (Davies & Kolaczkowski, 2022).

In 2026, the minimum yearly wage for adults is above 25,000 GBP, so all full-time workers are subject to AE. However, those earning twice the minimum wage are close to the upper level of qualifying earnings, and high-income earners do not save additional money in occupational pensions. Introduction of AE significantly increased coverage of occupational schemes in the private sector – Figure 4. Before mandatory AE, 42% of employees who met future AE criteria participated. After the end of the programme implementation, more than 85% were active savers. Additionally, many individuals not affected by AE reform, due to low income or young/old age, decided to join the scheme actively (Cribb & Emmerson, 2016).

Figure 4. Participation rates in occupational schemes, United Kingdom, 2009–2024

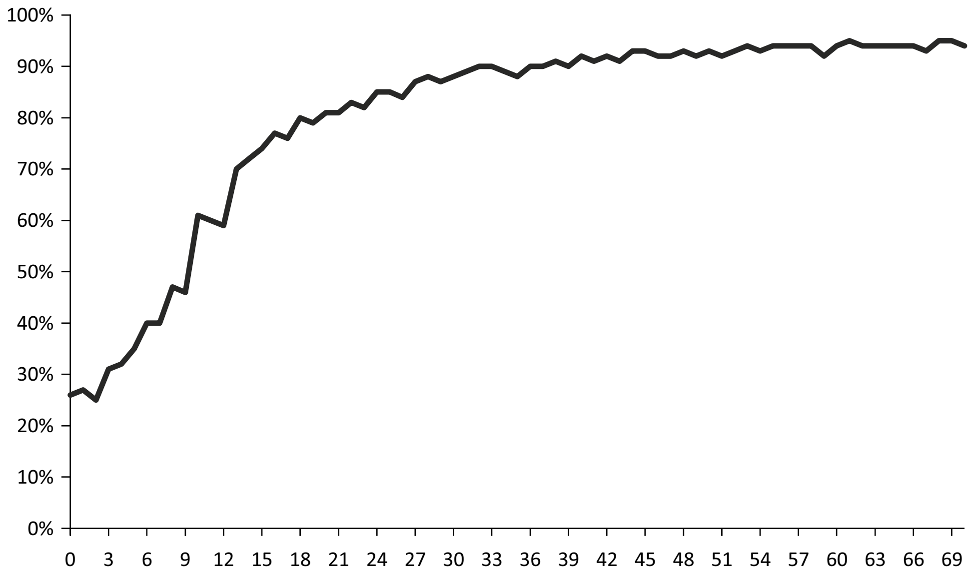


* Eligible employees are defined as those meeting the AE criteria, including the period prior to the scheme's introduction. Vertical lines mark the period of AE introduction.

Source: Own work based on Department for Work and Pensions (2025).

Like previous third-pillar accounts, the AE programmes favour high-income savers who pay PIT at a higher marginal rate. The scheme allows them to receive greater tax relief and take advantage of a 25% tax-free withdrawal, combined with a possible lower marginal PIT rate in old age. This also applies to employer matching contributions, which all savers receive at a similar level (compared to their contributions). However, high earners may benefit from higher marginal tax relief for this (deferred) part of remuneration. The greater attractiveness of the scheme for higher-rate taxpayers is reflected in a participation rate that increases alongside income levels (see: Figure 5). Participation rises rapidly among the lowest-income groups, especially around the 10,000 GBP earnings trigger – this upward trend continues up to approximately the average wage level.

Figure 5. Participation rates among income groups in the AE scheme, United Kingdom, 2024



* The horizontal axis represents income bands in thousands of GBP, ranging from 0 to 70,000 and above. Data are grouped in 1,000 income brackets; axis labels are displayed every 3,000.

Source: Own work based on Department for Work and Pensions (2025).

Türkiye

Auto-enrolment was introduced in Türkiye in 2017 (with enrolment taking two years depending on company size) as a continuation of the savings incentive projects started in 2013 (Sahin & Elveren, 2011). Benefits for savers in the AE scheme are similar to those established in 2013 in the Individual Pension System (IPS), which offers a 20% government subsidy on participants' contributions[4]. Standard withdrawal is possible after 10 years of saving and upon reaching the age 56. Contributions are made from net income, so capital is not taxed upon withdrawal, but investment returns are taxed at 5% (OECD, 2015; Pension Monitoring Center, 2025b). According to the earliest data published by the Pension Monitoring Center (2025c), 21% of the workforce participated in the IPS in 2019. Occupational schemes were almost non-existent in the private sector (Peksevim & Akgiray, 2019).

Although it is possible to withdraw the entire capital from IPS at any time by closing the account, state subsidies are reduced (most benefits vesting only after 10 years of participation) and higher taxation of investment returns may apply. In the case of disability, pre-retirement withdrawal is possible without loss of government subsidy (5% tax on profits). The AE system is separate from the IPS; however, the above-described rules apply to both third-pillar solutions. All employees younger than 45 are subject to AE with a 3% contribution rate (Social Security Administration, 2022). The scheme did not introduce employer contributions. Opt-out is possible within 2 months; after this period, the individual may close an account (described above, as in IPS) or suspend contributions – employees who decide to stay in the scheme receive a 500 TRY government subsidy[5]. There is also a subsidy of 5% of accumulated funds if a saver decides to withdraw money as at least 10-year annuity at retirement (Pension Monitoring Center, 2025b).

As only 29% of workers participate, the AE programme is evaluated as unsuccessful and not achieving the desired goals (Bielawska & Turner, 2023). However, it attracted participants much faster than IPS, which demonstrates that AE helps boost participation but does not guarantee success (Yanıkkaya et al., 2023). Additionally, the lack of re-enrolment (except upon starting new employment) hinders future increases in coverage. The participation rate is presented in Figure 6.

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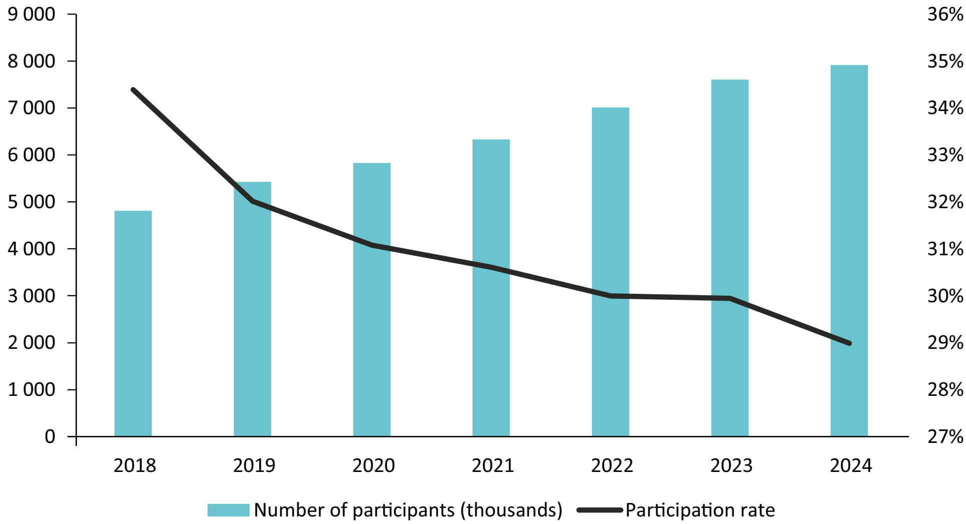
[4] The government subsidy was 25% until January 2022 and 30% until January 2026. In 2026, further changes to the AE scheme are planned, as it is going to be transformed into a mandatory second pillar scheme.

[5] 1,000 TRY until January 2026.

Figure 6. Number of participants (LHS) and participation rate (RHS) in the AE scheme, Türkiye, 2018–2024

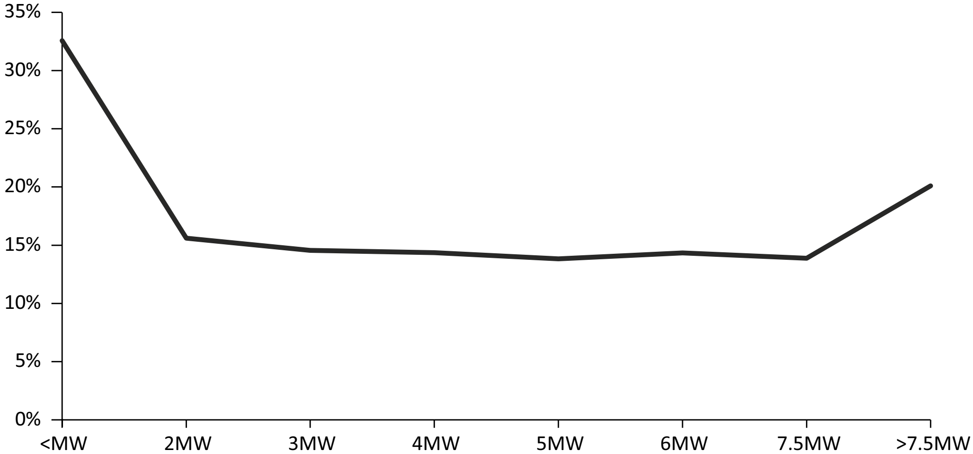


* The participation rate is calculated by comparing the number of individuals with active and closed AE contracts.

Source: Own work based on Pension Monitoring Center (2025d).

The low interest in the programme can be attributed to its limited attractiveness: the lack of an employer match and moderate state subsidies. The government's welcome deposit of 500 TRY theoretically makes the scheme more attractive to low-income individuals, as this amount is higher in relation to their contributions. Data on participation rates among income groups (Figure 7) show that people earning below the minimum wage (e.g., part-time workers) participate in the AE scheme most frequently (33%). This may confirm the importance of the welcome deposit for this group or be a result of a small nominal burden, which is outweighed by the perceived bureaucratic cost of opting out. Participation ranges between 14% and 16% for middle-income employees (earning between one and 7.5 times the minimum wage), rising slightly to 20% for the highest-income earners.

Figure 7. Participation rates among income groups in the AE scheme, Türkiye, 2018–2024



* The horizontal axis represents income bands as multiply of minimum wage (MW). Data are based on the number of certificates.

Source: Own work based on Pension Monitoring Center (2025a).

Overall, the low participation rate may partly result from high inflation levels (with historical peaks above 50%), which diminish confidence in long-term investment returns and, combined with the taxation of nominal investment gains, effectively overshadow the 20% government subsidy. Yanıkkaya et al. (2023) identified that an increase in returns from investments in gold or USD negatively affects the number of new participants in the IPS. Low income, debt repayment and lack of affordability of pension contributions are also cited as important reasons (Bielawska & Turner, 2023).

Poland

Poland introduced auto-enrolment when setting up an additional third-pillar scheme. Employers with more workers entered the scheme faster, the first in 2019, while smaller companies and the public sector joined in 2021. The introduction of the AE scheme was intended to raise coverage of voluntary pension plans from a mere 12% of the workforce (Urząd Komisji Nadzoru Finansowego, 2019a; 2019b; 2025b).

Employee Capital Plans introduced auto-enrolment of all employees younger than 55 who are subject to social contributions. Those who decide to opt out (available at any time) are enrolled again every four years. Default employee contribution is 2% (no tax relief) and can be reduced to 0.5% for workers earning below 1.2 times the minimum wage. Employer match (exempt from social contributions, but taxed by PIT) is set at 1.5% of salary. The government offers 250 PLN for everyone who decides to stay in the scheme, plus an additional 240 PLN for each year of participation.

Withdrawal is possible at age 60. To obtain relief from capital gains tax (no other taxes apply), the individual must withdraw at least 75% of the capital in instalments spread over 10 years. Before the age of 60, participants can withdraw all accumulated capital. However, taxation of investment profits applies, government subsidies are removed, and a 30% social contribution levy is imposed on employer contributions (Pogonowski, 2023). Withdrawal is also possible (without penalties) in the event of serious illness (25% of assets) and to cover a down payment when taking out a mortgage (for savers younger than 45; 100% of assets)[6]. As of May 2024, a total of 3.1 thousand participants (0.06% of all members) had utilised the home-purchase withdrawal option, taking out on average 16,200 PLN (Polski Fundusz Rozwoju, 2024). This relatively low use may reflect limited awareness of the option, or the short duration of the programme, meaning participants have not yet accumulated balances large enough to justify the effort required for withdrawal.

State and employer subsidies make the AE scheme financially more attractive than other third-pillar solutions. However, the investment rules are heavily regulated. Equity allocation must include at least 40% stocks of companies from the WIG20 index[7]. This raised some concerns, as at the end of 2018, 12 out of the 20 companies in the WIG20 index were under the control of the State Treasury, accounting for 74% of the index's total weight (Jakubowski, 2021; Prusik, 2021).

Another issue is the relatively low quality of the institutional environment in Poland, evidenced by the second lowest Rule of Law score among the analysed countries. This undermines the perceived credibility of pension arrangements and the capital market. The AE scheme is often compared to Open Pension Funds, which were a funded part of the mandatory pension scheme. However, in 2014, the government transferred 51.5% of their assets to the public pay-as-you-go (PAYG) pillar (Szczepański et al., 2022). Fear of a potential state "takeover" of ECP funds discourages some employees from participating in the programme (Bielawska & Turner, 2023). Therefore, as presented in Figure 8, the participation rate is at a moderate level of 50%. The dynamic increase in the number of participants in 2023 can partly be attributed to the first re-enrolment round.

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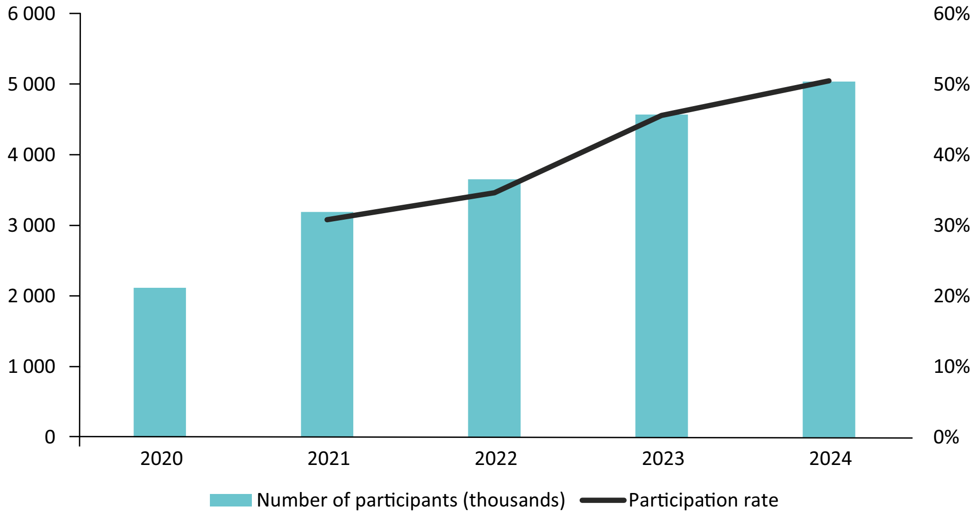
[6] Funds must be repaid at nominal value to the scheme within 15 years; otherwise, capital gains tax applies.

[7] This index comprises the twenty largest companies listed on the Warsaw Stock Exchange.

Figure 8. Number of participants in occupational plans (LHS) and participation rate (RHS), Poland, 2020–2024



* The number of participants is calculated as the sum of participants in the EPP and AE schemes. The participation rate is defined as the share of participants covered by AE who remain in the scheme.

Source: Own source based on PFR Portal PPK (2025), Urząd Komisji Nadzoru Finansowego (2025a; 2025b).

Participation in the AE scheme is slightly more attractive for low-income earners, as government subsidies are relatively higher in comparison to their contributions. Special rules for minimum wage earners – possibility to reduce contributions to 0.5% keeping all subsidies constant – make the ECP very attractive. This should encourage low earners to participate in the scheme, which is desirable given the small public pension for this group.

Lithuania

In Lithuania, auto-enrolment to voluntary savings was implemented after the reform of the second pillar. Capital part of the mandatory pension scheme began with the optional transfer of a part of the mandatory social contribution to funded accounts instead of PAYG in 2004 (Bitinas, 2011). The reform of 2014 introduced additional contributions – participants could contribute 2% of their salary and receive a government match of 2% of average pay (Bitinas & Maccioni, 2014). As a result, since 2014, the second pillar did not have (yet) auto-enrolment, but became another option for making voluntary pension savings.

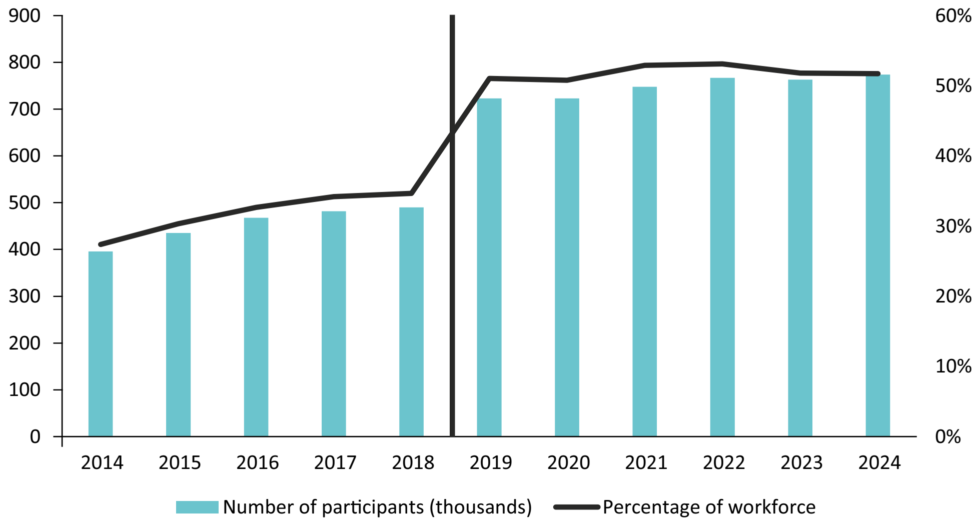
The second pillar was reformed again in 2019, when the transfer of mandatory contributions from the PAYG scheme to the second pillar was abolished, so those who wanted to contribute needed to do so voluntarily. New rules introduced contributions of 3% of a salary and a government subsidy of 1.5% of the average wage. Most employees automatically joined the second pillar with voluntary contributions; people over 40 who were not saving in the second pillar were not AE (Katinaitė, 2020). People (younger than 40) entering the labour market after 2019 were also AE with 3% contribution.

Further changes were introduced in 2026: AE was discontinued, current savers were allowed to withdraw part of accumulated assets during a two-year grace period, and more flexible withdrawal options were introduced (including pre-retirement). The main focus is going to be placed on informing (through annual invitation letters) individuals about second pillar saving opportunities, rather than relying on AE. However, the main parameters such as contribution rate and government subsidy remain unchanged. Because the reform was implemented only recently, it is not yet possible to assess its impact on scheme development (this will be fully possible after 2027); therefore, the article will describe the scheme as of 2025 (after the key 2019 reform).

Under 2019 legislation, opt-out was possible within six months after AE; following that period, participation became mandatory to the end of career. All workers younger than 40 were re-enrolled every three years. Withdrawal was possible after reaching retirement age, without taxation. Depending on the value of the assets, benefit could be taken as a lump sum, in instalments, or as an annuity.

Introduction of AE, as presented in Figure 9, increased the number of participants making additional contributions (to 52% of the workforce). This implies that AE has proven to be an effective way of increasing retirement savings, and its impact has been more substantial than state subsidies. In 2014, when the possibility of making additional contributions was introduced, the government offered effective 100% match for average income earner. However, the participation rate increased slowly, up to 35%. Introduction of AE, combined with reduction of subsidy and increasing contribution (50% match for average income earner), raised participation by 16 p.p. within one year.

Figure 9. Number of participants making voluntary contributions to the second pillar (LHS) and participation rate (RHS), Lithuania, 2020–2024



* The participation rate is calculated as the number of participants in relation to the active workforce. The vertical line marks the year of AE introduction.

Source: Own work based on Lietuvos Bankas (2023; 2025).

The scheme is more attractive for low-income earners because a 1.5% average wage subsidy is higher in relation to their contributions[8]. Given a low expected replacement rate for all income groups, additional pension benefits accumulated by all workers are desirable.

Ireland

Ireland launched its AE scheme in 2026. The pension system in this country is similar to that of the United Kingdom; both countries began the evolution of pension provision with the same Act in 1908, during British rule in Ireland. The programme aims to increase private-sector supplementary pension coverage. As in the UK, additional pension schemes were widespread in Ireland even before AE (37% of the workforce participated). However, those without an occupational plan rarely accumulated pension savings, as in 2022 only 13% of the labour force held a Personal Retirement Savings Account (PRSA) (The Pensions Authority, 2022; Department of Social Protection, 2022). Employers without occupational plans had to offer automatic deduction of contributions into a PRSA (The Pensions Authority, 2024).

[8] Medaiskis et al. (2018) studying data before 2019 reform, identified that the share of workers voluntary making additional contributions was higher among lower earners.

Unlike previous third-pillar solutions, which offered exemption from progressive PIT and attracted high-earners, the new AE scheme introduces government subsidies at the same rate for all participants; additionally, a 100% employer match applies. Contribution rates are scheduled to increase in the first years of the scheme's operation – details are presented in Table 3. Employees contribute a set percentage of their gross wages, deducted from net pay (Whelan & Hally, 2023).

Table 3. Contribution rates and state subsidy in the AE scheme in Ireland

Year of operation	Employee	Employer	State subsidy	Total
1–3	1.5%	1.5%	0.5%	3.5%
4–6	3.0%	3.0%	1.0%	7.0%
7–9	4.5%	4.5%	1.5%	10.0%
10+	6.0%	6.0%	2.0%	14.0%

Source: Own work based on the Automatic Enrolment Retirement Savings System Act 2024.

AE applies to all employees between 23- and 60-years old earning more than 20,000 EUR per year (slightly below minimum wage). Workers who participate in another pension plan cannot join the AE scheme. Any scheme related to held position, to which contributions are payable by the employee, employer or even PRSA contributions deducted from net pay, meets this criterion. No minimum level has been set for the contributions that must be made to exclude participants from the AE scheme; however, they will probably be introduced in the future. As in Britain, the earnings threshold was applied – earnings above 80,000 EUR are not subject to contributions.

After enrolment into the scheme, all individuals must participate for six months; after that period, there is a two-month "opt-out window" in which all contributions are refunded (re-enrolment every 2 years). Thereafter, an employee becomes a scheme member and can only suspend contributions for a maximum of two years (Department of Social Protection, 2022).

Withdrawal is possible upon reaching retirement age or in the event of ill health. Currently, only a lump-sum payment (25% of the withdrawal tax-free and 75% subject to PIT) is available, although other options are planned to be added in the future. The lack of well-defined withdrawal rules may raise uncertainty about the overall attractiveness of the scheme and discourage individuals from saving.

Discussion and conclusions

The case studies showed a variety of solutions used in countries implementing auto-enrolment. The experience of the five countries in which AE was functioning for several years (the first participation data for Ireland will probably become available in the second half of 2026, after "opt-out window") makes it possible to identify several broad patterns.

Addressing RQ1 on coverage, the analysis suggests that AE schemes achieve high participation rates across target populations in countries where behavioural nudges are supported by a stable institutional environment and attractive saving rules. At the same time, replacement rates from mandatory schemes appear to be less important, meaning that low public pension benefits are not the sole factor motivating individuals to save.

Countries with a lower rating in the Rule of Law score (Türkiye and Poland) achieve lower participation rates than their higher-scoring counterparts (New Zealand and the United Kingdom). In this respect, the moderate popularity of the Lithuanian scheme stands out negatively. This is probably a result of a less developed saving culture, the ongoing post-Soviet economic transition, and the emerging role of voluntary pension schemes, which contrast with the mature structures in the UK.

The case of New Zealand shows that, once the institutional environment is favourable, pension schemes may achieve high participation level even under weaker behavioural nudges. In this country, due to the lack of AE for people in stable employment, most participants actively opted in, encouraged by generous financial incentives and broad information campaigns (O'Connell, 2009). This observation aligns with the premise explored in RQ2, which confirms that financial conditions encourage the targeted population to save.

Additionally, no straight relationship between the replacement rate from the public scheme and participation in AE programmes was identified. The lowest participation rate occurs in Türkiye, where the benefits from the mandatory scheme are the most generous, but the other factors (institutional quality and financial incentives) are probably the ones discouraging participation. On the other hand, high participation in New Zealand is achieved in parallel to a relatively decent replacement rate from the public scheme (the highest among the remaining countries, except Poland's high-income workers). This lack of dependence is further evidenced by Lithuania. Despite offering the lowest replacement rates from mandatory contributions (except for high-income groups in the UK), it has achieved only moderate participation in the AE scheme.

In both New Zealand and Poland, accumulated funds may be withdrawn to finance a first-home purchase. This solution should make participation in the AE scheme more attractive for young workers, who are subject to AE, but face more urgent financial expenses than retirement saving. However, the evidence suggests that this feature probably plays a secondary role in determining participation rates. Although this withdrawal option is widely utilised in New Zealand, high participation rates are better explained by the favourable institutional environment and generous financial incentives discussed above. Similarly, the availability of a housing withdrawal option in Poland has not prevented elevated opt-out rates driven by a weak institutional environment.

It should be noted that while this study focuses on participation, which is crucial for ensuring broad coverage and avoiding income inequalities in old age, other factors like contribution rates and saving persistence were given less attention. However, because countries with higher total contribution rate (the sum employee and employer contributions, as well as government subsidy) also achieve higher scheme coverage, incorporating these adequacy dimensions would likely reinforce the overall conclusions of the study.

Addressing RQ2 on the impact of financial incentives, data on participation rates among income groups collected for New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Türkiye allows for the measurement of the relationship between the attractiveness of the schemes and the coverage. Schemes offering relatively greater benefits to low--income workers (New Zealand and Türkiye) through lump-sum government subsidies, achieve a mostly stable participation rate across different groups of workers (earning above the minimum wage). On the other hand, the British AE programme, which is more attractive to high-income earners due to tax exemptions, exhibits a participation rate that rises with income. This suggests that even low-income households may be willing to reduce their current consumption if incentives are sufficiently large and that governments may influence participation across socio-economic groups through tailored benefit structure.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of drawing conclusions from a limited sample of three countries. Furthermore, there are significant differences among them. In the case of New Zealand, due to the lack of AE for people in stable employment, participation rates and opt-out rates present a different picture of programme participation. Although it is assumed that in this case the opt-out rate is a more informative indicator, this results in further limitations regarding the direct comparability of the data. These constraints may only be addressed by analysing a significantly larger number of countries for which participation data across income groups are available or through detailed micro-level studies.

Addressing RQ3 on the design of the AE scheme introduced in Ireland, the analysis shows that it shares significant similarities with the model successfully operating in the United Kingdom. Both countries apply lower and upper earnings thresholds for the contributions. The minimum level excludes low-income earners (part-time workers), who can count on a high replacement rate from the first pillar. For this reason, it makes sense not to enrol them and not to burden their (low) income with additional contributions. In Poland, the possibility of lowering the contribution rate when earning minimum wage corresponds to a low replacement rate for all workers. This mechanism does not fit into the Irish system. On the other hand, the contribution cap corresponds to the Beveridge pension model, which provides (more generous due to AE) a safety net rather than consumption smoothing for high earners.

As in the UK, young workers are excluded from AE in Ireland. On the one hand, younger workers tend to earn less and have more important life expenses to meet. On the other hand, people starting a career may still live with their parents and do not have many current expenses, which is a favourable situation to accumulate savings (Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community & Rural Development and the Islands, 2023). New Zealand and Poland enrol young employees into the scheme but allow for withdrawal in case of home purchase. Therefore, two main models of treatment of young people may be identified: AE combined with first home withdrawal or higher AE age combined with uninterrupted accumulation, with the Irish implementation establishing the latter approach. Overall, as Foster et al. (2020) noticed, excluding some working periods (young age) from pension saving translates into a higher impact of potential career breaks on pension benefits (in the absence of early withdrawals), so higher inequalities and gender gaps may be observed.

Ireland is going to have, after nine years of the scheme's introduction, the highest contribution rate. The success of the British scheme, currently with the highest rate, seems to assume that this will not translate into an increased opt-out rate. The six-month mandatory participation in the scheme is a pioneering solution. From the point of view of behavioural economics, it may allow employees to get used to a new, lower level of pay, before making a premature decision to opt out. As people compare their situation (net pay) to the previous one, an initially painful decrease in salary will be observed, but individuals will not be allowed to respond immediately. After six months, a possible increase in net wage (return to the previous level) should be seen as pleasant. However, as gains are two times less impactful than losses, savers should feel less incentive to resign (Kahneman, 2012). Re-enrolment every two years will be the most frequent among the studied countries, further hindering non-participation. This represents a shift in later programmes from the principle of "nudging" individuals to participate by AE, towards more restrictive solutions (frequent re-enrolments and mandatory participation periods).

Increases in contributions are planned to take place once, at the same time, for all workers. As a result, individuals entering the workforce after 2035 will face a 6% contribution rate upon joining the scheme. This may translate into many opt-outs because of the initial burden being too high. Therefore, it may be beneficial to set up a gradual increase in contributions for all new joiners (e.g., from the age of 18) and achieve the target rate after some years. This would align with the "Save More Tomorrow" programme identified by Thaler & Benartzi (2004) as most appropriate in achieving a high saving rate despite myopia and preference for current consumption. On the other hand, as Choi et al. (2024) showed, many people opt out of auto-escalation plans at subsequent contribution increases. Given that the Irish scheme does not permit cancellation of further increases, but only allows total resignation from the scheme, the final effect of gradual escalation of contributions would be similar to an instant 6% burden faced by new members in 2035. This also means that a full evaluation of participation levels in the Irish scheme will only be possible after the 10-year period of contribution increases. This lack of participation data, even for the first stages of implementation, constitutes a major limitation for cross-country comparisons and the evaluation of the Irish scheme. At this stage, the Irish scheme was only assessed based on its design features and the environment in which it operates, but not on its outcomes (e.g., participation rates), which partly narrows the scope of the analysis.

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The politicisation of youth issues in party programmes: symbolic rhetoric or policy priority? The case of Georgia as a transitional democracy

Abstract

This article analyses how Georgian political parties have addressed youth issues in their election programmes since 2008 and how their perspectives on these issues have evolved over successive election cycles. In particular, it examines whether this focus reflects a genuine party policy or is merely an electoral strategy. Using the 2024 parliamentary elections as the central case study and analysing comparative data from the 2008–2024 electoral periods, the study draws on rational choice theory (Shepsle & Bonchek, 2010) and the concept of symbolic politics (Edelman, 1985) as part of a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative content analysis with qualitative discourse analysis. The results show that the parties focus on youth issues only during elections and do not make them long-term priorities. Consequently, the stated commitments to youth policy go beyond their actual implementation. The analysis also places these patterns within the broader ideological context of the parties and shows that the politicisation of youth issues is shaped not only by the electoral calendar but

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also by the parties' underlying ideological orientation. The Georgian case follows a more general pattern that can also be observed in other transition democracies. By providing valuable new data, this study will contribute to the literature on party programmes and youth policy in the post-Soviet context.

Keywords: Georgia, election programmes, youth policy, politicisation, transitional democracies

Introduction

Election programmes play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of party democracy and in political science analyses of party competition (Eder et al., 2017). In transitional democracies, however, research findings show that their dual function, communicating party priorities to voters and presenting formal political commitments, often breaks down, as parties tend to use their election manifestos strategically rather than programmatically (Edelman, 1985; Fink-Hafner, 2024). Youth policy is a clear example of this tension. Although young people make up a significant proportion of the electorate, their concerns are rarely translated into long-term political priorities (Norris, 2011; Kitanova, 2020). The case of Georgia illustrates this dynamic perfectly, and that is precisely what this article sets out to examine.

An election programme is a strategic document setting out a party's priorities, policy proposals and commitments to the electorate. Young people represent a significant and dynamic section of the electorate: if their concerns are addressed in election programmes, this can mobilise this group and lead to higher voter turnout and greater political engagement (Dalton, 2015; Small & Memmo, 2004). Furthermore, youth-oriented policies have long-term implications for social development, and by addressing issues such as education, employment and health, political parties demonstrate their commitment to future generations (Norris, 2002; Montanye, 2001; Small & Memmo, 2004). International studies also show that the challenges faced by young people, particularly with regard to political participation and activism, have had a significant influence on democratisation processes (Kitanova, 2020). However, the inclusion of youth issues in election programmes does not always lead to their actual politicisation, i.e., their transformation into substantive political priorities on the party's list of priorities. This distinction forms the central analytical focus of the present study.

Although there is extensive research in the international literature on youth participation and party politics (Petyuh et al., 2023; Rosocha, 2022; Walker & Stephenson, 2012; Tereshchenko, 2010), there have so far been few systematic analyses in Georgia of the content of party programmes from the perspective of youth issues. The unfinished process of democratic consolidation since independence in 1991, the high instability of the party system (Tavits, 2008) and the low level of political trust among young people (FES, 2023) together create a context in which parties may have strategic incentives to use youth issues in a rather symbolic manner rather than developing them programmatically. Georgia's democratic consolidation remains an ongoing process, with external assessments repeatedly highlighting institutional deficits as a key structural challenge (USAID, 2020). The state has officially recognised youth policy as a priority area through specific policy frameworks (Government of Georgia, 2014). The analysis of party manifestos, particularly how youth issues are presented and what role they play in electoral strategy, remains a little-researched area, and it is precisely this gap that forms the impetus for the present study.

The theoretical framework of this article is based on rational choice theory (Shepsle & Bonchek, 2010), which conceptualises political parties as strategic actors operating within institutional frameworks and making calculated decisions to maximise voter support. This framework is complemented by the concept of symbolic politics (Edelman, 1985), which distinguishes between political rhetoric for mobilisation purposes and substantive political commitments. Together, these two frameworks form the analytical basis for examining whether youth issues in Georgian party manifestos represent genuine political priorities or serve primarily as instruments of electoral communication. The theory of rational choice therefore predicts that political parties do not view youth issues as a long-term commitment, but rather as a strategic resource to be deployed when it is politically advantageous to do so under the prevailing electoral conditions.

This article addresses two interrelated research questions: 1) How did Georgian political parties address youth issues in their election programmes? And 2) How have political parties' perceptions of youth issues evolved across parliamentary electoral periods? In this respect, the Georgian case goes beyond a local analysis and contributes to broader debates in political science on the role of party manifestos in the politicisation of youth issues in transitional democracies. In particular, using Georgia as a case study, the study provides new empirical insights into the post-Soviet context. The study thus shows that, up until 2024, parties with greater voter support would pay significantly less attention to youth issues than smaller opposition parties, which runs counter to the trend observed in 2020. The analysis also situates these findings within the parties' broader ideological positioning.

Youth issues in party programmes: theoretical and comparative perspectives

The role of political parties in shaping youth policy is attracting increasing academic attention, particularly in the context of transition democracies, where the relationship between election campaigns and policy-based engagement remains a matter of debate (Petyuh et al., 2023; Rosocha, 2022; Elerian et al., 2026). Election manifestos are widely recognised not merely as technical documents, but as the primary means by which parties communicate their political vision and canvass for votes (Fink-Hafner, 2024; Kakhishvili, 2020). Beyond their electoral function, election manifestos also represent programmatic commitments that link election promises to subsequent policy, thereby strengthening democratic accountability (Thomson, 2020).

The examination of youth issues in party manifestos draws on two interrelated strands of the literature. The first concerns the strategic logic underpinning the behaviour of political parties during election campaigns. Holler and Skott (2005) argue that strategic decisions made by political parties during election campaigns can have a significant impact on election results, even if voters' preferences remain unchanged. Empirical studies from post-communist countries confirm that parties strategically prioritise issues such as youth employment and education in their election manifestos, as these have a measurable impact on voter mobilisation (Titterton & Iarskaia-Smirnova, 2024). This finding is consistent with Edelman's (1985) concept of symbolic politics, which distinguishes between political rhetoric for mobilisation purposes and substantive policy commitments.

The second approach examines the link between youth issues and democratic legitimacy and argues that taking young people's concerns into account strengthens a party's democratic credibility (Norris, 2011). However, research consistently shows that highlighting youth issues in election programmes does not necessarily lead to substantial political engagement. Baglioni, Colloca and Theiss (2015) use comparative data from Italy and Poland to show that structural difficulties such as unemployment significantly limit young people's political participation and that institutional actors play a crucial role in bridging this gap, a pattern that is further confirmed by comparative social research across Eastern Europe (Ferragina et al., 2015). These findings are relevant to the Georgian context, where low political trust among young people (FES, 2023) goes hand in hand with the formal, yet largely superficial, recognition of youth as a voter group by political parties, a group that is simultaneously portrayed as a social risk and a political resource (Zawadzki, 2012).

A more comprehensive comparative analysis shows that the patterns observed in Georgia are not an isolated case, but reflect a general regional trend. Studies from post-communist Europe consistently show that political engagement among young people remains sporadic and fragmented, including in the case of political education initiatives in Poland (Pospieszna et al., 2023). Studies from the Czech Republic show that voter support for parties is often determined not by the depth of their programmes but by the general image of the party and its leadership, which creates incentives for political engagement that is more symbolic than substantive (Vlachová, 1997).

Specific research on youth policy and party manifestos in Georgia remains scarce, which in itself represents a significant gap in the literature. Zurabashvili (2022) analyses the position of young people within political parties and their access to party politics, and identifies the lack of a results-oriented youth policy as a key factor in low levels of political trust. Recent studies by the Georgian Institute of Politics confirm this picture: Kandelaki (2024) notes that during the 2020 election campaign, only 38% of young people in Georgia were familiar with the content of the parties' election manifestos, and that young people's involvement in the parties is largely of a formal nature and limited to technical tasks. The Georgian Institute of Politics (2020) also identifies the lack of youth-oriented components in the parties' election programmes as a structural weakness of the Georgian electoral process. The studies examined confirm that the politicisation of youth issues in the programmes of Georgian political parties remains superficial and occasional, thereby providing an empirical and theoretical basis for the research questions addressed in this study.

Methodology

This study is based on a mixed-methods research design that combines quantitative content analysis with qualitative discourse analysis. Mixed-methods research is widely regarded as an effective strategy for capturing both the breadth and depth of empirical phenomena (Lune & Berg, 2017, p. 357). In this study, the quantitative results were incorporated into the thematic coding process, whilst the qualitative data facilitated the interpretation of statistical patterns within the context of party discourse. Quantitative analysis makes it possible to assess the frequency and extent to which youth issues appear in party manifestos, whilst qualitative analysis allows for an assessment of whether this presence reflects meaningful political engagement or primarily serves a rhetorical function. This study also adopts a case-study approach and regards Georgia not as an isolated case, but as a representative example of a more general pattern observable in the post-Soviet transitional democracies.

The empirical data consists of the election programmes of the political parties that took part in the 2024 Georgian parliamentary elections; these form the primary unit of analysis. The sample comprises six political parties and party alliances that submitted official election manifestos. Five of these exceeded the 5% threshold, whilst one party, although it did not reach the threshold, received around 5% of the vote and was, therefore, included in the analysis as a relevant political actor. The 2024 election programmes varied considerably in length and structure, ranging from a one-page document (United National Movement) to 35 pages (Coalition Strong Georgia), with an average length of approximately 16 pages across the five parties for which a page-based document was available. Only Gakharia for Georgia and Coalition Strong Georgia contained sections specifically devoted to youth policy, comprising two pages of a 31-page document and one page of a 35-page document respectively; the remaining programmes included youth-related content within broader thematic categories, mostly in the form of bullet points, without detailed information. Two parties, Georgian Dream and Girchi, did not publish official election programmes; their materials were taken from pre-election presentations and the parties' websites respectively, and coded using the same analytical framework as the other documents.

Data from previous parliamentary elections (2008, 2012, 2016, 2020) are used for comparative purposes to identify trends in the consideration of youth issues across election cycles. The election manifestos are sourced from primary sources: the official websites of the respective parties and the website of the Central Election Commission of Georgia, which ensures the reliability and authenticity of the material used. Secondary sources, including national and international reports on the challenges facing young people in Georgia (FES, 2023; Youth Agency, 2020), serve both as contextual background and as an independent benchmark against which the parties' policy responses are measured, a comparison that is central to addressing the first research question. Furthermore, comparative literature on youth policy in transition democracies is drawn upon to situate the findings within a broader regional context.

Key terms such as "youth", "students" and "future generation", as well as references to the 18–29 age group, were defined as the primary units of analysis. The thematic categories presented in the article were identified using an inductive, context-oriented approach with MAXQDA, with the data filtered through a lens strictly focused on young people. This approach reflects both the internal structural components of the programmes and specific age groups, such as students or the future generation. If a topic related to more than one area, it was assigned to the most appropriate category; e.g., housing subsidies were classified under "Economy/Unemployment". The parties analysed were selected through a purposive, criterion-based sampling strategy, based on their electoral threshold status (see: Methodology, Sample). Within each selected manifesto, a multi-stage coding procedure was then used to identify and extract all relevant passages. The thematic analysis was conducted according to the framework developed by Braun and Clarke, which encompasses the identification, coding and systematisation of themes within the empirical data (Braun & Clarke, 2008). In addition, critical discourse analysis (Keller, 2013, p. 61) was employed as a supplementary level of interpretation, with a focus on processes of meaning-making and legitimation in political texts. This method made it possible to assess whether the language used reflects a genuine programmatic commitment or primarily serves a mobilisation function.

The quantitative content analysis was carried out using MAXQDA, which served as the primary tool for both quantitative and qualitative analysis: it enabled the coding, segmentation, categorisation, and visualisation of text data, as well as the identification of relationships between thematic categories. Statistical calculations, including chi-square tests and correlation analyses, were carried out in R Studio to examine the relationship between the frequency of youth-related content and election cycles. All coding was carried out by a single researcher, and the data were organised and structured in Microsoft Excel prior to analysis.

The Georgian context: youth challenges and party responses

Young people constitute a demographically significant but increasingly vulnerable group within Georgian society (FES, 2023). Georgia's democratisation following the collapse of the Soviet Union took place gradually, with political parties becoming key players in election campaigns and political representation (Kukava, 2022; Matsaberidze, 2019). Their establishment was not only an expression of political engagement, but also a necessary stage in institutional consolidation (Aldrich, 1995). The 2024 parliamentary elections were contested by five main parties and coalitions, whose electoral results and parliamentary composition are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Electoral results and youth representation in the 2024 Georgian parliamentary elections

Party/Coalition	**Vote Share (%)**	**Seats**	**MPs aged 35 or under (n)**	**MPs aged 35 or under (% within party)**	**Political Orientation***
Georgian Dream	53.93	89	12	13.5	Centre-left (economic); right-wing (social-cultural)
Coalition for Change (Gvaramia, Melia, Girchi-More Freedom, Droa)	11.03	19	7	36.8	Centrism; right-centrism
United National Movement (UNM)	10.17	16	1	6.3	Right-centrism (Liberalism)
Coalition Strong Georgia (Lelo, For the People, Freedom Square)	8.81	14	3	21.4	Centre to centre-left (Liberalism, Pro-Europeanism)
Gakharia for Georgia	7.78	12	2	16.7	Centre to centre-left (Social democratic)
Total	**91.72**	**150**	**25**	**16.7**	

Source: Central Election Commission of Georgia (2024); Parliament of Georgia (2024);
*For the detailed analysis of parties' political position, see Figure 1 below.

Notes:
1. Political party Girchi stood as an independent party, received around 3% of the vote and thus failed to clear the 5% threshold; it is, therefore, not represented in parliament and not listed in this table, though it was included in the programme analysis (see: Methodology).
2. The age of one member of the Coalition for Change (G. Butikashvili, born around 1991) could not be verified with certainty and is based on an estimate.
3. The first 12 MPs from Gakharia for Georgia resigned their seats in protest against the election result, three of them aged 35 or younger; the data relates exclusively to the second list, which subsequently entered parliament with 12 MPs;
4. MPs aged 35 or younger are defined as those born in 1989 or later, calculated as of the 2024 parliamentary elections (October 26, 2024).
5. The total share of the vote (91.72%) takes into account only parties that cleared the 5% threshold; the remaining 8.28% was distributed amongst parties that did not enter parliament, including Girchi (3%).

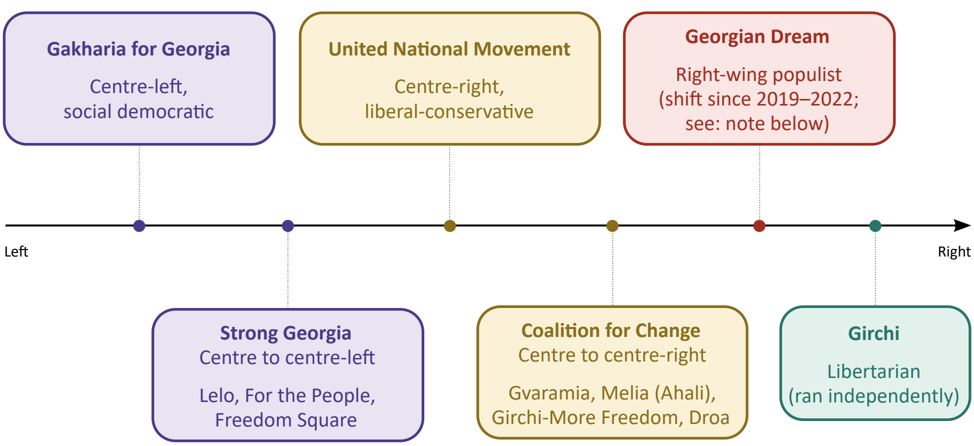
The 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia took place on October 26, 2024. Of a total of 3,508,294 registered voters, 2,111,834 took part in the election, representing a turnout of 60.2% (Central Election Commission of Georgia, 2024). Table 1 shows the five parties and coalitions that cleared the 5% threshold and secured representation in parliament, together with details of their share of the vote and the proportion of MPs aged 35 or younger within each parliamentary group. Across all five parties, 25 out of 150 MPs (16.7%) were aged 35 or under at the time of the election (Parliament of Georgia, 2024). However, this overall figure masks significant differences between the parties. The Coalition for Change, which received 11.03% of the vote, had the highest proportion of young MPs (36.8%). The ruling Georgian Dream party, despite securing 53.93% of the vote and the largest share of seats, had a significantly lower proportion (13.5%). "Coalition Strong Georgia" (8.81%) had 21.4%, whilst Gakharia for Georgia (7.78%) stood at 16.7%. The United National Movement party had the lowest proportion of young MPs (6.3%).

These data further suggest that MPs aged 35 or under, whilst present across all five parliamentary groups, do not appear to reflect a substantial commitment to youth issues: parties with a higher proportion of young MPs do not necessarily give greater priority to youth policy in their election programmes (see: Figure 2).

It should be noted that the results of the 2024 parliamentary elections were contested by opposition groups amidst large-scale protests (Al Jazeera, 2024). Three of the five parliamentary groups – Coalition for Change, the United National Movement and Coalition Strong Georgia – refused to recognise the results as legitimate and, as a form of boycott, requested that the Central Election Commission declare their electoral lists invalid rather than take up their seats (OC Media, 2024). Gakharia for Georgia, however, decided not to withdraw its party list and consequently entered parliament in October 2025 with a second list of 12 MPs (DFWatch, 2025).

This contested aftermath reflects a broader pattern of polarisation in the Georgian party system, one that is closely tied to parties' ideological and geopolitical positioning, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Political orientation of parties and coalitions in the 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia; positions are illustrative, based on the academic literature cited, not a strict economic policy scale



Sources: Wheatley (2019), Kakhishvili (2021), Imerlishvili (2022), Caliskan (2023), Caprile (2024), Tabatadze & Khuroshvili (2026), Matsaberidze (2026).

A defining feature of the Georgian party system is the lack of classical left-right ideological diversity; voter-party linkages are instead shaped by clientelism and personal leadership authority, a legacy of late Soviet-era patrimonial structures (Kitschelt, 1995; Wheatley, 2019). Foreign policy, rather than socio-economic programmes, has consequently become the primary axis of competition, with parties defined chiefly by their stance towards Russia and the West (Kakhishvili, 2021; Imerlishvili, 2022). This explains the positioning shown in Figure 1: although Georgian Dream's economic framework has largely mirrored that of the UNM since 2012, when Georgian Dream replaced the UNM in government following parliamentary elections (Caprile, 2024), its post-2019 turn towards sovereigntist and Euro-sceptic rhetoric reflects a geopolitical rather than economic realignment, reframing EU integration around tradition and resistance to external pressure (Tabatadze & Khuroshvili, 2026). Matsaberidze (2026) interprets this shift as a deliberate strategy to draw a value-based boundary with Brussels while aligning Georgian Dream with populist-conservative currents within the EU itself. Caliskan (2023) similarly characterises the rivalry between GD and UNM as a polarised contest in which the winner takes all, and which tends to exacerbate the decline of democracy rather than being based on substantive ideological differences.

Beyond these two poles, the smaller parties and coalitions occupy more clearly defined ideological positions, though they remain secondary to the dominant geopolitical axis. Girchi retains a consistent right-libertarian orientation centred on deregulation and individual freedom (Girchi.com, 2024), while Coalition for Change and Coalition Strong Georgia present themselves as pro-European liberal and social-liberal blocs respectively, uniting parties with varied domestic priorities under a shared commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration (Caprile, 2024). Gakharia for Georgia positions itself as a centre to centre-left technocratic alternative to both major parties. Despite these internal distinctions, all opposition formations are ultimately unified less by a coherent domestic platform than by their shared rejection of Georgian Dream's foreign policy direction (Gvineria et al., 2024).

As the analysis shows, geopolitical positions are the decisive factor in the ideological orientation of Georgian political parties, whilst social and economic challenges are perceived as less decisive for their political positioning against this backdrop. In contrast, research findings confirm the existence of such challenges within various social groups, which was analysed in this study on the basis of the parties' policy priorities. According to data from the National Statistics Office of Georgia, the proportion of 18- to 29-year-olds in the total population has been falling steadily from 17.4% in 2008 to 12.9% in 2024, a trend closely linked to migration and population decline (Geostat, 2024b). At the same time, young people in Georgia remain a numerically significant voter group, and their mobilisation continues to be a strategic factor for parties during election campaigns (FES, 2016, p. 64). Understanding the socio-economic conditions under which young people live is, therefore, essential in order to assess whether party manifestos genuinely address their needs or merely mention them in passing.

The employment situation is one of the most pressing challenges facing young people in Georgia. The unemployment rate amongst young people aged 18 to 29 fluctuated between 35 and 37% from 2008 to 2013, gradually fell to around 25% by 2019, and then rose sharply again to 37.5% in 2021 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, before falling back to around 29% in 2022-2023 (Geostat, 2024a). These rates are consistently higher than the general unemployment rate, suggesting structural barriers in the Georgian labour market that disproportionately affect young people. This trend has also been confirmed by studies in Poland, Ukraine, and Moldova (Męcina, 2014; Petyuh et al., 2023).

Access to high-quality education and healthcare represents a further dimension of the disadvantages faced by young people in Georgia. Although education is generally recognised as a priority, significant inequalities persist between urban and rural areas (FES, 2023, p. 5). In the healthcare sector, 61% of young people find access problematic, with cost cited as the main barrier (Youth Agency, 2020, p. 10). A similar divide is evident in sport: 82% consider it important, yet most do not participate regularly due to time and financial constraints (FES, 2021, p. 17). This shortfall is not limited to Georgia, it rather reflects a structural feature of transition democracies in the broader sense (Veselý et al., 2016; Tavits, 2008).

Young people's trust in politics and their civic engagement in Georgia are significantly shaped by these socio-economic conditions. Studies consistently show that young people have little trust in political institutions: 79% state that they do not trust political parties, and only 20% consider political engagement to be important (FES, 2023, pp. 9–10). Although many people follow political developments, they consciously distance themselves from formal participation, partly due to a sense of hopelessness regarding the direction in which the country is heading (FES, 2021, p. 35; Bastianon, 2018). Survey data attribute this low level of engagement to several factors: 41% cite a lack of interest in politics, 22% point to election campaigns that do not appeal to them, and 16% cite the lack of young politicians and youth parties (Rondeli Foundation, 2021, pp. 7–9). This disengagement has also been observed in other post-Soviet contexts, where young people mobilise in times of crisis but otherwise have little trust in parties and institutions (Nikolayenko, 2007).

A study carried out in Georgia confirms that 38% of young people consider the content of election programmes to be important in shaping their decision (FES, 2016, p. 64). This points to genuine potential for mobilisation, although the limited attention that parties pay to youth issues in practice forms the empirical basis for the first research question of this study: how, and to what extent, do Georgian political parties address youth issues in their election programmes? This question is analysed and discussed in detail in the following sections.

The scope and distribution of youth issues across party programmes

A quantitative analysis of the election platforms of Georgian political parties shows that youth issues have received only limited and inconsistent attention in party platforms across the election cycles examined. As shown in Table 2, the total number of youth-related code points across all parties rose significantly between 2008 and 2020, from 15 code points in 2008 to 127 code points in 2020, before falling sharply to 75 code points in 2024. This rise and fall is not consistent with a stable policy priority, but suggests that attention to youth issues tends to respond to specific political and socio-economic conditions rather than reflecting a long-term commitment to youth policy.

Table 2. Programmes of political parties, parliamentary elections of Georgia

	2008	%	2012	%	2016	%	2020	%	2024	%
Education	8	53.3	34	45.3	33	55.9	51	40.1	25	34.2
Economics/ Unemployment	1	6.6	18	24	7	11.8	19	15	17	22.7
Healthcare	0	0	5	6.6	3	5	4	3.1	3	4.0
Participation	0	0	4	5.3	1	1.7	10	7.9	6	8.0
Sports, Culture, Entertainment	3	20	5	6.6	6	10	17	13.3	7	9.3
Other	3	20	9	12	9	15.2	26	20.5	17	22.7
Total codes:	**15**	**100%**	**75**	**100%**	**59**	**100%**	**127**	**100%**	**75**	**100%**

The thematic categories were derived inductively from the coded material. The Education section includes references to the infrastructure of schools and higher education institutions, scholarships, vocational training, and curriculum reforms. The Economy/Unemployment section covers employment programmes, support for young people's entrepreneurship and housing-related financial assistance such as rent subsidies, as well as explicit references to unemployment. The Healthcare section is limited almost exclusively to access to medical services and youth-specific health programmes. The Participation section includes references to the representation of young people within political party structures and general social integration. The Sport and Culture section covers sports infrastructure, cultural programmes, and leisure activities for young people. The Other category covers topics such as emigration, compulsory military service, drug policy, demographic issues, and vulnerable groups that do not fit into the aforementioned categories.

Education consistently dominates youth-related content across all electoral cycles. In 2008, education accounted for 53.3% of all youth-related codes, and while this proportion fluctuated over subsequent cycles, it remained the single largest category throughout the period under review, accounting for 34.2% of codes in 2024 (see: Table 2). The sharpest increase was recorded between 2008 and 2012, when references to education rose by 325%, coinciding with a period of significant economic hardship and high youth unemployment in Georgia (see: Table 3). This suggests that education is treated by parties as a strategic rather than a structural priority, mobilised in response to socioeconomic pressures rather than developed as a coherent long-term policy agenda. By 2024, references to education had declined by 50.98% compared to 2020, despite the fact that education remains one of the most frequently cited concerns among young people in Georgia (FES, 2023). This discrepancy between the documented needs of young people and the programmatic attention devoted to education by parties is itself significant, suggesting that the inclusion of education in party programmes is more consistent with electoral logic than with a sustained response to youth needs.

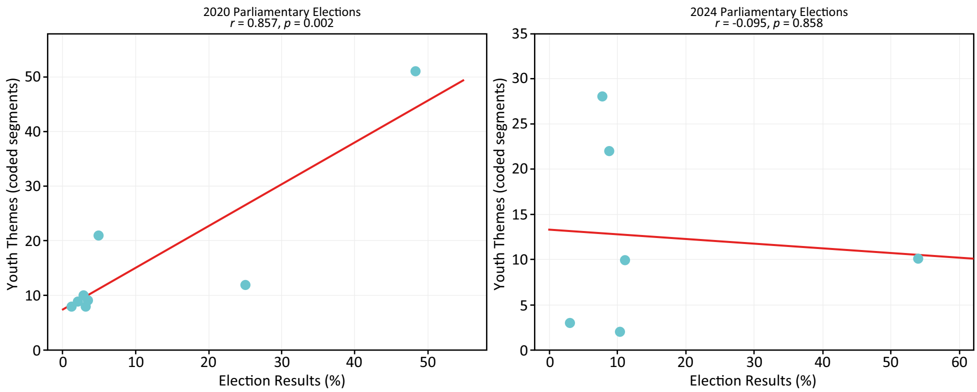
Table 3. Percentage growth rates for youth-related topics (2008–2024)

Year	Education %	Economics/ Unemployment %	Healthcare %	Participation %	Sports, Culture, Entertainment %	Other %
2012	325	1700.00	N/A	N/A	66.67	200
2016	-2.94	-61.11	-40	-75	20	0
2020	54.55	171.43	33.33	900	183.33	188.89
2024	-50.98	-10.5	-25	-40	-58.82	-38.46

Note: Values represent the percentage change in coded segments relative to the previous electoral cycle. Positive values indicate an increase, negative values a decrease, and N/A denotes categories with zero codes in the preceding cycle.

The Economy and Unemployment category underwent significant fluctuations over the course of the election cycles: In response to the global financial crisis, it rose by 1,700% between 2008 and 2012 (from 1 to 18 coded segments), decreased by 61.11% in 2016, rose again by 171.43% in 2020, and decreased by 10.5% in 2024 (see: Table 3). These fluctuations are noteworthy because youth unemployment remained consistently high throughout the entire period, fluctuating between 25 and 37% (Geostat, 2024); the parties' reduced focus on economic issues in 2016 and 2024, despite persistently high unemployment, indicates that such issues are shaped more by crisis situations and election cycles than by stable political commitments. Table 3 shows a similar pattern in the other categories: although the individual figures fluctuate considerably, they evolve in synchrony – they rose together in 2012 and 2020 and declined together in 2016 and 2024. This could suggest that the extent of youth-related content depends more on a general logic of voter mobilisation than on category-specific considerations, although a consistent response to general page restrictions across several election cycles cannot be ruled out. The consistent dominance of the Education category across all election cycles further supports this argument and suggests that education operates more as a routine rhetorical device than as a strategically prioritised policy area. This is consistent with Edelman's (1985) observation that symbolic political promises gain intensity during election campaigns and recede into the background once the need to mobilise voters no longer exists.

Figure 2. Correlation between election results and youth-related content in party programmes (2020 and 2024 Parliamentary Elections)

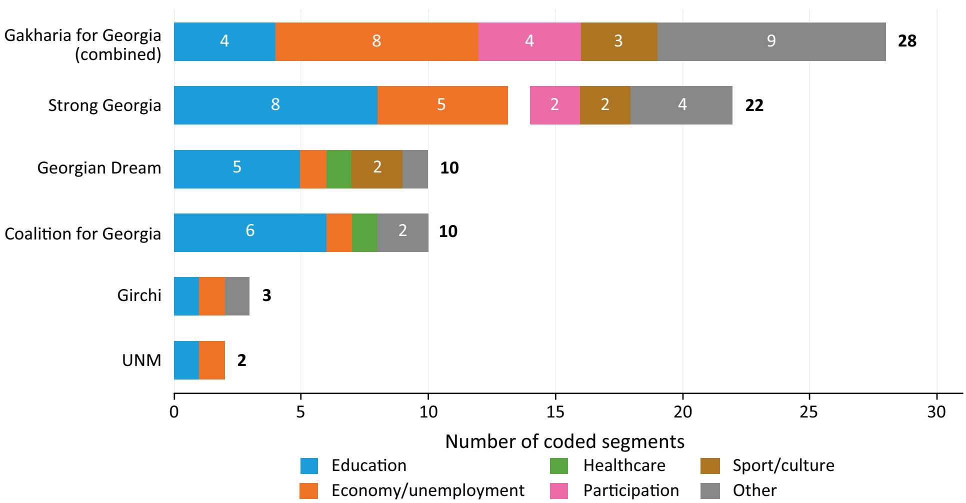


Source: Calculated by the author using R Studio.

The Pearson correlation analysis shown in Figure 2 reveals a clear difference between the election cycles. In 2020, a strong and statistically significant positive correlation was found between election results and youth-related content across the nine parties and coalitions that contested that election (r = 0.857, p = 0.002), suggesting that parties with higher voter support paid more attention to youth issues. By 2024, however, when only six parties and coalitions contested the election, this relationship had broken down: the correlation was close to zero and not statistically significant (r = -0.095, p = 0.858). For example, Georgian Dream secured 53.93% of the vote but produced only 10 segments coded as youth-related, whilst Gakharia for Georgia, with 7.78% of the vote, generated 28 segments. This shift may indicate a broader move away from using youth issues to mobilise voters among the largest parties, with opposition parties instead using the topic to reinforce their political identity; given the small number of parties involved, however, this remains a pattern observed in this dataset rather than a generalisable trend.

Healthcare, civic engagement, sport, and culture consistently play only a minor role in party manifestos, even though these areas are of great importance to young people in Georgia. Healthcare reached its highest proportion in 2012 at 6.6%, but by 2024 accounted for only 4.0% of youth-related sections in the manifestos, a 25% decline compared with 2020 (see: Tables 2 and 3). This discrepancy is significant: 61% of young people in Georgia describe access to healthcare as problematic (Youth Agency, 2020). Sport and entertainment followed a similarly erratic trend: whilst this category had accounted for 20% of the codes in 2008, this share fell to 6.6% in 2012, rose again in 2020, and then fell dramatically by 58.82% in 2024 (see: Table 3). Civil society and political participation recorded the most dramatic increase within an election cycle in the dataset, rising by 900% in 2020 (from 1 to 10 coded segments) (see: Table 3), which likely reflects the increased political mobilisation of young people during the political crisis of that period. By 2024, however, this figure had fallen again by 40%, reinforcing the pattern of a more episodic than sustained engagement with youth issues in party programmes. The Other category covers topics that cropped up sporadically between 2008 and 2024, such as compulsory military service, emigration, drug policy and demographic issues. Emigration is repeatedly addressed not as an isolated problem, but in the context of economic precariousness: unemployment and emigration are often discussed in the same context, as, e.g., in the Coalition Strong Georgia programmes, which state: "Our young people face great difficulties in finding employment, which is why many of them leave the country" (Coalition Strong Georgia, 2024). In 2024, this category was also expanded to include environmental policy, measures against gambling and the protection of vulnerable young people.

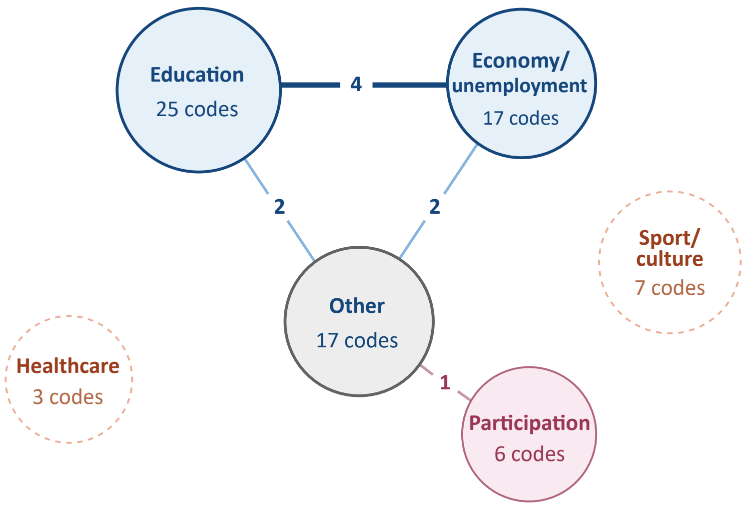
Figure 3. Youth-related thematic coded segments by political party, 2024 election programmes



Note: Bars show the number of MAXQDA-coded segments per thematic category for each party's 2024 election programme. Gakharia for Georgia combines its general election programme and the separate policy document issued by its youth organisation.

There are significant differences in the distribution of thematic categories across the individual parties in 2024. Figure 3 shows the number of segments of each party's 2024 election manifesto coded using MAXQDA, broken down by thematic category. Coalition Strong Georgia covered the broadest spectrum of topics, with at least one coded segment in all six categories, followed by Georgian Dream and Gakharia for Georgia (five categories each, with the latter featured in two documents), Coalition for Change (four categories), Girchi (three categories) and the United National Movement, which covered the narrowest range of topics (two categories). In terms of total volume, Gakharia for Georgia had the highest number of coded segments (28), followed by Coalition Strong Georgia (22), whilst the United National Movement and Girchi generated significantly fewer (two and three respectively). In total, 75 coded segments were identified across all party manifestos, with Georgian Dream focusing its youth-related content primarily on education, whilst healthcare and civic participation were largely neglected. In contrast, Gakharia for Georgia demonstrates the broadest engagement in the Other category (gambling, migration, minorities and vulnerable groups, drugs policy, environmental protection) and places greater emphasis on participation (youth engagement in social and political processes) than any other party. This diversity of thematic categories is largely attributable to electoral strategies and voter mobilisation, rather than to ideological differences. For instance, even ideologically opposed parties such as Girchi and Gakharia for Georgia devote completely different levels of attention to youth issues, without there being any clear ideological justification for this difference.

Figure 4. Co-occurrence matrix of thematic codes across party election programmes (2024 parliamentary elections)



Note*:* The line thickness reflects the number of coded segments in which two thematic categories occur together. Dotted outlines indicate categories for which no joint occurrences were recorded.

The co-occurrence network shown in Figure 4 reveals three analytically significant patterns that illustrate which topics tend to be discussed together and which are treated in isolation. Firstly, the strongest link is between education and unemployment, with four joint mentions recorded in the party manifestos. A typical example is the pledge that “the state’s social and economic policy should pay particular attention to young people, as well as to their education and employment” (Gakharia for Georgia, 2024), with both commitments being summarised in a single sentence rather than being treated as separate policy areas. This could suggest that, within this limited range of contexts, there is a tendency to view education more as a means of integration into the labour market than as a social or civic value in its own right, a pattern that has also been documented in other Central and Eastern European contexts (Theiss, 2006).

Secondly, the topic of healthcare does not appear in conjunction with any other thematic categories, an isolation that suggests healthcare is treated as a completely separate issue, which is reflected in the fact that it is mentioned in party manifestos in a largely symbolic manner, rather than forming part of a holistic political vision.

Thirdly, civil society and political participation appear together with another category on only one occasion: here, the promise to support the "integration of young people into the socio-cultural and economic life of the country" (Gakharia for Georgia, 2024) was framed both as participation and as a broader, undifferentiated commitment to vulnerable groups. The parties do not conceptually link youth participation to other key policy areas such as education or employment, but instead incorporate it into general formulations on social inclusion. Ultimately, this fragmentation, viewed through Hart's (1992) analytical approach, points to a lack of coherent logic in how youth policy is conceptually linked across Georgian party programmes. Instead, it appears to be a collection of disjointed rhetorical gestures.

The symbolic function of youth policy in electoral competition

The quantitative patterns identified in the previous section, in particular the synchronous fluctuations in thematic categories across election cycles and the reversal of the correlation between electoral success and youth-related content between 2020 and 2024, raise a further question: What language do Georgian political parties actually use when addressing youth issues, and does this language reflect genuine political intentions or does it primarily serve rhetorical purposes? To investigate this, discourse analysis is used to examine how the parties employ language to shape the main themes identified through MAXQDA coding. Whilst the thematic analysis highlights which issues are addressed and how frequently this occurs, the discourse analysis examines the nature of these commitments in greater depth. Specifically, the study explored whether party promises reflect concrete commitments or merely serve as rhetorical gestures, and whether young people are viewed as active participants or as passive beneficiaries of politics.

Drawing on Edelman's (1985) concept of symbolic politics, which distinguishes between rhetorical gestures and substantive political commitments, as well as Hart's (1992) framework of youth participation, which distinguishes between symbolic and genuine forms of youth empowerment, the following discourse analysis examines whether Georgian party manifestos reflect genuine political intentions or primarily serve a rhetorical purpose. The central argument is that Georgian party manifestos largely fall into the category of symbolic measures: young people are frequently cited as a priority, yet the commitments made on their behalf rarely go beyond symbolic recognition.

This pattern is most evident in the education sector. All six parties addressed the issue of education in their 2024 election manifestos, but the depth and specificity of their commitments varied considerably. Georgian Dream highlighted the fourfold increase in education spending since 2012 and proposed further infrastructure investment, including the expansion of the International University of Kutaisi and a new campus for Tbilisi Technical University near Rustavi (Georgian Dream, 2024). However, unfulfilled promises from previous election cycles raise questions regarding the credibility of these new commitments. In contrast, the opposition parties presented a variety of initiatives: Coalition Strong Georgia proposed paid internships and regional IT schools, whilst the Coalition for Change introduced the Knowledge Piggy

Bank and funding for elite degree programmes in Global Studies. Meanwhile, the UNM focused on student accommodation and rent subsidies (UNM, 2024), Girchi proposed the abolition of standardised national exams (Girchi.com), and Gakharia for Georgia linked education to regional development through vocational training centres and modern halls of residence. Table 4 summarises the key education-related commitments and thematic priorities of each party.

Table 4. Party education policy commitments in the 2024 parliamentary elections

Political Party	Focus on education policy	Specific topics
Georgian Dream	Infrastructural and long-term reforms	Construction of universities and vocational schools, expansion of Kutaisi International University, and quality improvement through reforms.
Coalition Strong Georgia	Innovative skills and internships	Paid internships for graduates, IT schools in the regions, programming and robotics training, and student exchange programmes.
Coalition for Change	Financial accessibility and social equality	Knowledge Piggy Bank financing system, student housing, support for disadvantaged students, full financing for students enrolled at the best foreign universities.
UNM	Selective solution to social problems	Housing and rent subsidies for students in need.
Girchi	Systemic change and university autonomy	Cancellation of standardised national examinations, and establishment of admission rules for students by universities.
Gakharia for Georgia	Social and regional integration of education	Student housing at state universities, regional expansion of vocational schools, and reducing youth migration.

In all programmes, budgetary frameworks, timetables, and accountability mechanisms were rarely defined in specific terms. Education thus operates more as a symbolic gesture than as a vehicle for tangible change, with those involved identifying problems without offering credible solutions (Hart, 1992).

The picture is similar when it comes to the employment situation. In the run-up to the 2024 elections, Georgian Dream highlighted the fall in the unemployment rate from 26.7% in 2012 to 13.7% in 2024 and predicted a further drop to 4% by 2028. Opposition parties proposed various initiatives: Coalition Strong Georgia advocated paid internships as part of a “First Job” programme and tax exemptions, the UNM promised regional employment offices, Girchi advocated a deregulated labour market to promote self-employment (Girchi.com), and Gakharia for Georgia proposed subsidised salaries for university graduates. Despite these initiatives, the party programmes consistently failed to address the structural causes of youth unemployment, such as informal labour markets, regional inequalities and out-migration, suggesting that these commitments function more as rhetorical placeholders than as evolving political strategies (Edelman, 1985). The absence of gender-specific strategies is also striking, given that young women in Georgia face disproportionately high barriers to entering the labour market (UN Women, 2022).

The gap between rhetoric and action is most evident when it comes to civic and political engagement. The Coalition Strong Georgia presented the creation of a new, youth-led political force as a central element of its vision. Similarly, Gakharia for Georgia regarded the involvement of young people as essential for democratic development and proposed the institutional strengthening of youth organisations. However, no party committed to legally binding mechanisms such as quotas on candidate lists or structured mentoring programmes. Hart's (1992) framework for youth participation is illuminating here: Georgian party programmes largely assign youth advisory roles without granting them decision-making authority. Gakharia for Georgia, e.g., views participation primarily from a financial rather than an institutional perspective: "strengthening their engagement in politics, whereby the state will establish appropriate mechanisms to fund young people's ideas and initiatives" (Gakharia for Georgia, 2024), whilst issues of representation and decision-making authority are not addressed. This is consistent with the findings of Krouwel and van Elfrinkhof (2014), who argue that young people are often used as symbolic figures in election campaigns but are excluded from the actual work of government. The fact that youth participation features in only two of the six programmes examined further underscores their marginal status in Georgian electoral politics. The Georgian Dream party's programme for 2024 is also revealing: youth-related issues are presented primarily in terms of past successes rather than future commitments, thereby positioning young people as beneficiaries of measures already implemented rather than as active participants in democratic life (Hart, 1992).

The areas of healthcare and sport receive significantly less attention in the party manifestos, and where they do feature, the subject is treated in similarly general terms. Georgian Dream cited the fivefold increase in access to medical services as one of its most important achievements, whilst Coalition Strong Georgia linked the issue of health with environmental policy and the Coalition for Change focused on paid specialist training for young doctors. In the area of sport and culture, Georgian Dream promised a financial investment of 2 billion GEL to expand sports infrastructure, by presenting the issue primarily as a matter of national well-being rather than as a policy specifically aimed at young people: "Sport is not just about top-level performance, but also about the health of the nation, the health of our fellow citizens and a healthy lifestyle" (Georgian Dream, 2024). The Coalition Strong Georgia emphasised broad access to sports facilities as a means of promoting social integration. As Bessant (2004) argues, cultural policy often serves more as a vehicle for the construction of national identity than for the empowerment of young people, particularly when it is detached from participatory frameworks (European Union, 2018). Comparative studies of sports policy in post-Soviet contexts also highlight the gap between state investment and the infrastructure available to young people (Rauch & Kropyvnytska, 2025; Smith & Green, 2005). The absence of monitoring mechanisms, accessibility targets and considerations of regional equity suggests that these commitments are based more on political rhetoric than on actionable policy measures.

Table 5. Ideological orientation of parties' and coalitions' youth policy in the 2024 parliamentary election programmes

Party / coalition	Coded segments (n)	Dominant discursive markers in youth-related segments	Inferred ideological orientation of youth policy	Officially declared political position
Girchi	3	Tax cuts and abolition of the unified national exams and of mandatory military service; all three segments reduce the role of the state in young people's lives.	Right-wing (Libertarianism)	Right-wing (Libertarianism)
United National Movement (UNM)	2*	Both coded segments concern housing support: subsidised rent and provision of student dormitories.	Centre to left*	Right-centrism (Liberalism)
Georgian Dream	10	State-funded infrastructure and statistic-led achievements (campus construction, funding multipliers); delivered in a top-down register with no reference to youth participation.	Centre (statist-paternalistic)	Centre-left (economic); right-wing (socio-cultural)
Coalition for Change	10	Funding guarantees framed around individual merit and competition (top-50 universities, dormitory ownership transferred to private use).	Centre to centre-right (Liberal-meritocratic)	Centre to centre-right (Liberalism, Pro-Europeanism)
Coalition Strong Georgia	22	Combines a participatory framing (youth leadership, integration into the public sector) with support for entrepreneurship and tax relief, alongside a critical, opposition-mobilising tone toward the ruling party.	Centre (Social-liberal)	Centre to centre-left (Liberalism, Pro-Europeanism)
Gakharia for Georgia	28	Intergenerational solidarity, integration of vulnerable groups, environmental sustainability, and regulatory prevention (gambling, drug policy); women's economic empowerment.	Centre to left (Social-democratic)	Centre to centre-left (Social democratic)

* The UNM's limited youth-related content ($n=2$) reflects the marginal treatment of youth issues in its 2024 programme; its centre-left positioning, therefore, cannot be generalised as the party's broader ideological orientation.

Note: The final column reflects an inductive orientation derived from youth-related segments coded in MAXQDA, rather than the parties' general ideology reported in the literature. For each 2024 programme, these segments were analysed collectively and classified based on their underlying values and policy instruments (e.g., state provision, market competition, redistribution, deregulation, or participation). Consequently, they were mapped onto a dedicated left-right scale focused specifically on youth policy.

An analysis of youth policy in the election programmes of Georgia's six main political parties for the 2024 elections shows that, in most cases, the ideological orientation of the youth-related content largely reflects the parties' officially stated positions (Table 5). Gakharia for Georgia and the Coalition Strong Georgia had the highest number of coded segments, which were predominantly focused on participatory and redistributive language, consistent with their centre-left and social-liberal profiles. The most notable exception is Georgian Dream, which, despite its centrist position, portrays youth policy almost exclusively as a top-down, state-led initiative and formulates its commitments as institutional objectives: "Our aim is to increase the number of students to 20,000" (Georgian Dream, 2024) – a formulation that positions young people as recipients of state benefits rather than as active participants. Girchi and United National Movement recorded the lowest number of contributions, which in itself could indicate an ideologically consistent downplaying of the state's role in youth issues, although given the small sample size, this should be regarded merely as an indication. Overall, these patterns suggest that, whilst the ideological orientation and discursive practice of Georgian parties largely coincide, the importance attached to youth issues depends more on strategic electoral positioning than on firm ideological commitments, a trend further reinforced by the fact that, in most programmes, youth-related pledges are presented without any financial basis or concrete implementation mechanisms.

An overarching pattern emerges from the overall discourse analysis. Young people are frequently referred to in symbolic language: terms such as "youth support", "innovative education" and "future generation" appear in all programmes, yet are not matched by corresponding political mechanisms. The thematic coding confirms that regional inequalities, mental health, migration and political alienation receive only limited attention, suggesting a reluctance to address structural youth issues. Within a critical discourse framework, these manifestos function more as strategic communication tools than as vehicles for meaningful reform, reinforcing the notion that youth issues are treated as peripheral rather than central to policymaking (Edelman, 1985). This is not unique to Georgia. Research from the Czech Republic, Estonia, and Poland confirms that youth policy in transition democracies is generally only sporadically politicised and rarely implemented at the level of public policy (Veselý et al., 2016; Tavits, 2008). This finding is consistent with the general pattern identified in this study, according to which youth policy in democracies undergoing transition tends to follow electoral cycles and rarely constitutes a long-term political priority.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine how Georgian political parties have addressed youth issues in their election manifestos and how their perceptions of these issues have evolved across parliamentary electoral periods. The results of both the quantitative and qualitative analyses provide a clear and consistent answer to both research questions. Although youth issues are present in party manifestos, their inclusion is sporadic, thematically narrow in scope, and rarely accompanied by concrete implementation mechanisms, budgetary frameworks or accountability structures.

The theoretical framework on which this study is based provides a good explanation for these findings. The theory of rational decision-making (Shepsle & Bonchek, 2010) explains the parties' selective and cyclical engagement with youth issues: they engage with youth-related issues when this is advantageous from an electoral tactics' perspective, and scale back this engagement when other priorities take precedence. Edelman's (1985) concept of symbolic politics explains the qualitative dimension: terms such as "future generation" and "youth support" serve as rhetorical acknowledgements without any substantive commitment, whilst youth unemployment is portrayed more as a driver of out-migration than as a political challenge in its own right; participation is discussed in financial rather than institutional terms; and sport is embedded in a national narrative that marginalises young people. Hart's (1992) "ladder of participation" similarly shows that Georgian political parties consistently assign young people advisory rather than decision-making roles. This is also evident in the age composition of the 11th Georgian Parliament, which shows no consistent correlation with the parties' focus on youth issues: the Coalition for Change had the highest proportion of young MPs despite modest coverage of youth policy, whilst Georgian Dream had the lowest proportion despite the most extensive coverage, indicating that the inclusion of youth issues is determined more by strategic considerations than by the age composition of parliamentary representatives. This logic also explains the general cyclical pattern observed between 2008 and 2024, including the shift between 2020 and 2024 from a tool used across the political spectrum to a strategy pursued primarily by opposition parties.

The comparative nature of the findings further supports this argument. The cyclical fluctuations in youth-related issues throughout the electoral cycles from 2008 to 2024, the dominance of education and employment at the expense of healthcare, participation and mental health, and the fragmented treatment of youth issues in party manifestos all confirm patterns that have also been documented in other post-communist contexts. Studies from the Czech Republic, Estonia, Poland, and Ukraine confirm that youth policy in transition democracies is rarely institutionalised and is generally politicised only on an ad interim basis as part of broader electoral strategies, extending to specific policy domains such as healthcare access for vulnerable groups (Neugebauer et al., 2025). The Georgian case follows this trend and also provides systematic empirical evidence from a post-Soviet context, where such evidence has hitherto been limited. These findings support the arguments of Veselý et al. (2016) and Nalbandov (2014), who link this pattern to the structural tendency of parties in transitional democracies to prioritise short-term electoral gains over long-term policy development.

The discourse analysis reveals clear differences between the party programmes: Gakharia for Georgia stood out for its relatively comprehensive youth agenda, whilst Georgian Dream focused more on highlighting past successes. The Coalition for Change introduced innovative concepts such as the "Knowledge Piggy Bank", and Coalition Strong Georgia proposed specific measures such as paid internships as part of the "First Job" initiative. These differences suggest that, whilst a pattern of symbolic politicisation can be observed overall, some parties demonstrate greater programmatic ambitions than others, a nuance that future research could explore further through a longitudinal study by examining whether election promises are translated into policy after the elections. These differences are generally consistent with the parties' core ideological positioning, which further underpins the politicisation thesis put forward in this study. However, this consistency is not absolute: at least one of the major parties approaches youth issues in a way that deviates from its stated ideological profile. This suggests that ideology alone cannot fully explain the politicisation of youth issues in Georgia, where party competition revolves primarily around geopolitical rather than socio-economic dividing lines (Kitschelt, 1995; Wheatley, 2019). As there is no clear left-right divide, strategic electoral calculations, therefore, remain a more decisive factor.

At the same time, these findings partly call into question certain assumptions in the existing literature. Tavits (2008), e.g., argues that the instability of the party system leads to weak political engagement across all policy areas; however, this study shows that this is not universally true: some parties, such as Gakharia for Georgia, pursue relatively comprehensive policy approaches. Thomson's (2020) thesis that election manifestos represent genuine political commitments is also not supported by the findings in Georgia, as implementation mechanisms are consistently absent from election manifestos. Whilst youth policy follows the expected pattern of episodic and symbolic engagement, the data also reveal significant differences between parties and thematic categories. Even Edelman's (1985) concept of symbolic politics, whilst accurately reflecting the prevailing pattern, does not fully explain cases in which parties introduce genuinely innovative policy concepts. Future research should, therefore, examine the conditions under which rhetorical innovation translates into substantive policy change, and those under which it remains purely symbolic.

The study has several limitations. As the official manifestos of Georgian Dream and Girchi were not available, alternative materials had to be used, which limits direct comparisons with the other four parties. Furthermore, the analysis focuses primarily on the 2024 election cycle, with earlier election cycles serving more as a comparative context than as the main subject of the analysis. A related limitation concerns sample size: only two coded segments were available from the United National Movement, which limits the possibility of generalising about its ideological positioning. Future research could extend this framework to a broader spectrum of parties and election cycles and supplement it with interviews with party representatives.

The broader conclusion of this study is that the politicisation of youth issues in Georgian party manifestos is not simply a reflection of the parties' indifference towards young people. Rather, it is the result of a rational calculation within a specific institutional and electoral context in which the votes of young people are not yet decisive, trust in the parties is low, and voters do not consistently reward policy depth. To counteract this, not only are changes in the parties' behaviour required, but also more comprehensive reforms are mandatory to strengthen young people's political participation, improve political education and create institutional mechanisms that hold the parties to account for their policy commitments.

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