



## TWIN4DEM: Strengthening democratic resilience through Digital Twins

### D6.2

### TWIN4DEM Intermediary Policy Brief

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<b>Authors</b>	Egger, Clara (EUR) Zhelyazkova, Asya (EUR)		
<b>Co-authors</b>	Magni-Berton, Raul (ICL) Camatarri, Stefano (ICL) Tonelli, Sara (FBK) Mueller, Andreas (DI) Anna, Proskurina (DI) Laura, Diosan (UBB)		
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### Executive Summary

Over the last decade, executive power grabs – also called executive aggrandisement – have driven a retreat of democracy raising concerns about Europe’s democratic resilience among scholars, policymakers and the public alike. Despite the profusion of data on many dimensions of democratic life, democracy researchers have not been able to identify the multidimensional causal pathways that trigger executive aggrandisement and weaken rule of law-based institutions. Methods traditionally used in democracy research simply cannot provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex and multidimensional causes of executive aggrandisement. TWIN4DEM ambitions to scale up the use of computational social sciences in democracy research by bringing together scholars of social sciences and humanities, computational social science, computer scientists and democratic promotion stakeholders to jointly address one of the most crucial questions in democracy scholarship: what causes democracies to decline?

Combining various advanced computational social science methods (natural language processing; data aggregation and synthesising, and dynamic simulation models) allows to uncover the drivers and implications of executive aggrandisement in a more precise manner. By prototyping the first ever digital twins of four European democratic systems (Czechia, France, Hungary and the Netherlands), TWIN4DEM develops cross-cutting tools to process and aggregate textual and non-textual data more efficiently and accurately through the simulation of policy scenarios in a participatory and inclusive environment.



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### ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Description
EU	European Union
TEU	Treaty of the European Union



### 1. Introduction

This policy brief draws recommendations from TWIN4DEM's first year of work. It presents TWIN4DEM's conceptual framework for understanding executive aggrandisement—a key mechanism through which democratic backsliding unfolds. It defines what executive aggrandisement is, explains how it happens, outlines preliminary patterns observed across our four case countries, and describes the challenges involved in detecting, modelling it, and designing a digital twin in a participatory manner. The framework serves as the foundation for the digital twins being developed and guides our tool development for democracy monitoring.

Based on the initial analysis, the brief puts forward the following recommendations to the EU Commission and policymakers:

- Recognising that executive aggrandisement is a democratic backsliding precursor requiring heightened awareness;
- Expanding EU monitoring beyond judicial independence to multi-institutional entrenchment strategies;
- Strengthening crisis-context executive action scrutiny;
- Treating aggrandisement as system-level, assessing legislatures, media, and civil society alongside executive behavior;
- Establishing coordinated data access frameworks mandating structured sharing from parliaments, courts, and platforms;
- Creating sustained multi-stakeholder validation networks.

These recommendations emphasise early detection and preventive intervention, recognising that once executive concentration reaches critical thresholds, corrective measures face substantially diminished effectiveness.

The brief is structured in three parts: Section 2 establishes our conceptual approach to executive aggrandisement, including how the process unfolds through a five-stage causal model. Section 3 discusses the challenges and opportunities for applying computational social science methods to democracy research documents; while Section 4 documents key insights based on the first focus group meetings. The concluding Section 5 outlines preliminary policy recommendations based on emerging TWIN4DEM work.



## 2. Conceptualising and mapping executive aggrandisement in Czechia, France, Hungary and the Netherlands

Within the European Union's (EU) policy framework, checks and balances are a core normative requirement of liberal democracy and the rule of law. Article 2 of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU) establishes democracy and the rule of law as foundational EU values, which the Union consistently interprets as requiring effective separation of powers, limits on executive authority, and mechanisms of accountability. This interpretation is operationalised through the European Commission's Rule of Law Framework ([Rule of law framework - European Commission](#)) and the annual Rule of Law Reports ([Annual Rule of Law Cycle - European Commission](#)), which explicitly assess the functioning of institutional checks and balances, including parliamentary scrutiny, judicial independence, constitutional review, and the role of independent oversight bodies. Article 7 TEU provides a so-called nuclear option, where the Council can suspend certain membership rights (including voting rights) of a country that shows persistent and serious risks of rule-of-law backsliding. ([Treaty on European Union \(consolidated version – 2016\)](#)). However, despite clear instances of rule-of-law breaches in a number of member states, Article 7 TEU has never been evoked. This suggests that more emphasis should be placed on preventative measures relative to sanctioning individual member states.

Taken together, EU norms do not treat checks and balances as optional institutional design choices, but as essential guarantees necessary to prevent the concentration of power and to ensure the effective protection of fundamental rights within Member States. In liberal democracies, governments are hence supposed to make and implement policy, parliaments debate and pass legislation, and courts ensure these actions comply with constitutional principles and protect fundamental rights. This institutional balance prevents any single actor from dominating the system.

**In practice, however, this balance is not static.** Governments may gradually extend their authority over areas previously controlled by other institutions. They typically do so through formally legal means—new legislation, executive decrees, or emergency measures—that can be adopted rapidly or incrementally.

This process is known as **executive aggrandisement**. Recognising and measuring it matters because it can signal early-stage democratic erosion. To track and compare executive aggrandisement across contexts, we need a clear definition of what it is, how it unfolds, and why it poses risks to democratic governance.

## 2.1 Executive Aggrandisement: TWIN4DEM definition

Contemporary democratic systems face an increasingly visible challenge: **executive aggrandisement, or the gradual expansion of executive authority at the expense of institutional checks and balances** (Bermeo 2016). Unlike earlier episodes of democratic collapse marked by coups, electoral fraud, or overt authoritarian takeovers, executive aggrandisement often unfolds through legal reforms and incremental practices that strengthen executive dominance within the constitutional framework (Maeda 2010; Laebens 2023). This makes **executive aggrandisement particularly difficult to detect and counter** because the process can appear formally legitimate while undermining the balance of power that sustains democratic governance.

TWIN4DEM conceptualises executive aggrandisement as a **zero-sum game**, whereby any rights gained by the executive are always transferred from another institution. Therefore, **executive aggrandisement involves the government expanding its power into areas that were previously under the control of other institutions**, such as parliaments, courts, subnational authorities, individuals, and international bodies.

A simple visualisation is presented in Figure 1 below. Imagine separate circles representing different institutions. As the executive's circle expands, others typically contract, redistributing authority within the democratic system.

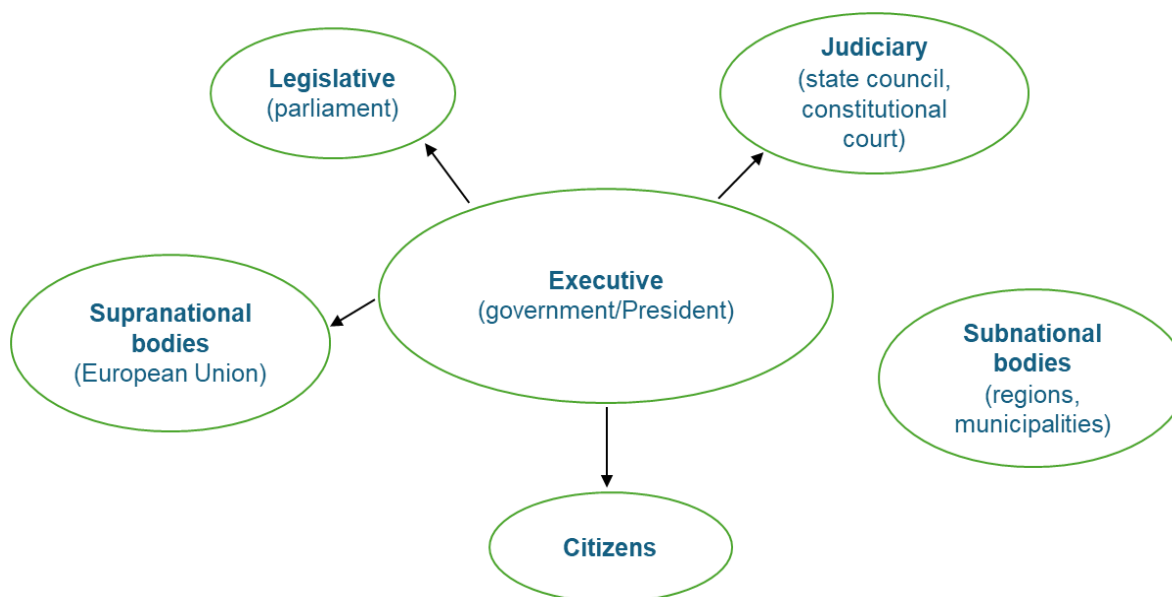


Figure 1. TWIN4DEM's conceptualisation of executive aggrandisement

TWIN4DEM's approach to executive aggrandisement adds value to existing scholarship by its ability to **clearly identify the processes through which an institution loses powers in favour of the executive, as well as the conditions under which this occurs**. This however comes at a cost: unlike mainstream approaches that focus exclusively on forms of executive aggrandisement associated with democratic backsliding, we also include reforms



that expand executive power without necessarily undermining democratic stability. In our framework, executive aggrandisement is not inherently associated with danger; rather, it constitutes a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for democratic backsliding.

Contemporary forms of executive aggrandisement have three core features:

### **It operates through legal channels**

Executive aggrandisement often operates **through formal legal channels**—legislation, executive decrees, emergency powers, or regulatory acts—rather than through open constitutional violations, which makes it simultaneously more legitimate and more difficult to challenge (Freeman, 2020). Governments invoke existing legal frameworks or amend them through procedural means, wrapping power concentration in the language of legality and administrative necessity. This formal compliance provides plausible justification and complicates resistance, since opponents must argue against measures that appear technically lawful rather than obviously illegitimate (Laebens, 2023).

### **It is typically gradual**

Executive aggrandisement unfolds **gradually rather than through dramatic ruptures**; power shifts occur incrementally through reforms that individually appear limited (Khaitan, 2019). Each step seems reasonable in isolation, often justified by efficiency, expertise, or crisis response, but their cumulative effect fundamentally alters institutional balance over time (Bermeo, 2016). This gradualism creates a **perceptual problem**: because no single reform appears threatening, the broader pattern of centralisation often goes unnoticed by legislators, courts, media, and publics until significant constitutional change has already occurred, at which point reversal becomes substantially more difficult both politically and legally.

### **Crises often accelerate the process**

Crises - such as terrorist attacks, pandemics, or economic shocks - create temporal asymmetries that favour executive action. Urgency demands an immediate response, whereas democratic safeguards necessitate slower deliberation processes. This generates structural advantages for executive power in all political systems (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019; Lowande and Gorowski, 2021). Emergency processes are therefore often strictly regulated by law to ensure that any aggrandisement of executive power that occurs during a crisis remains temporary. Despite these precautions, however, the balance of powers can be durably affected because the end of the crisis remains unclear and the executive authority is justified by promised effectiveness that is difficult to falsify (White, 2020). The transition from temporary to permanent occurs through a process whereby some exceptional enforcement tools survive and become unremarkable via administrative embedding and repetition (Head, 2016). For example, surveillance systems initially installed for counterterrorism purposes may become general law enforcement tools, and economic interventions designed for financial stability may become standard policy. Moreover, rather than facing isolated crises, modern governance is confronted with overlapping emergencies — the 'crisis portfolio effect' — where concurrent threats (e.g., climate, health, security, and economic) ensure there is always justification for the use of exceptional powers (Henig and Knight, 2023; Khulmann et al.,



2024). Although judicial review, legislative reassertion, and civil society mobilisation provide countervailing forces, democratic systems still struggle to balance the speed demanded by crises against the deliberation required for accountability (Coccia, 2021). Furthermore, each emergency leaves behind an expanded executive capacity, resetting the baseline for what constitutes normal governance (Gebrekidan, 2020).

### 2.2 What executive aggrandisement is NOT

To apply this concept effectively, it is equally important to clarify what executive aggrandisement does not include.

#### Not a coup or overt constitutional breach

**Executive aggrandisement does not involve military intervention, constitutional suspension, or explicit censorship.** It operates within—and through—the legal framework. Elections continue, parliaments convene, and courts remain formally operational. This procedural continuity is precisely what makes aggrandisement difficult to detect and counter (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019).

#### Not routine delegation

Parliaments regularly delegate authority to governments for legitimate reasons—technical regulation, implementation of national policies and EU directives, or administrative efficiency (Page, 2001; Pywell and West, 2023). **Such delegation differs fundamentally from aggrandisement: parliament retains ultimate control and can, in principle, reclaim delegated powers.** Aggrandisement involves a more permanent redistribution where the executive is no longer an “agent” of the legislature, but its master (Khaitan, 2019).

#### Not simply a strong executive

Some constitutional systems feature powerful executives by design. **executive aggrandisement is not about static distribution of power but about a dynamic process of power accumulation by the executive at the expense of other institutions** (Haggard and Kaufman, 2021). A constitutionally dominant executive that maintains stable boundaries with other institutions is not engaging in aggrandisement. The concept captures expansion, not starting position.

#### Not synonymous with authoritarianism

Authoritarian transitions encompass broader deterioration: compromised elections, restricted media freedom, weakened civil liberties, and eroded rule of law (Diamond, 2020). **Executive aggrandisement addresses a narrower question:** how power shifts between state institutions (Bermeo, 2016). The relationship matters for policy responses. Executive aggrandisement can function as both an early indicator and a causal mechanism of democratic backsliding. Some democracies experience executive aggrandisement without full authoritarian transition—the executive gains power relative to other institutions, but elections remain competitive, media stays relatively free, and civil society continues to operate. In



these cases, aggrandisement represents a warning sign that institutional safeguards are weakening, even if broader democratic functions persist.

In other contexts, executive aggrandisement serves as the primary mechanism through which democratic backsliding unfolds (Grillo et al., 2024). By concentrating power in the executive, governments can then use their enhanced authority to undermine elections (through gerrymandering, electoral law changes, or control of election administration), restrict media (via regulatory capture or financial pressure), weaken civil society (through funding restrictions or legal harassment), and hollow out the rule of law (by controlling judicial appointments and limiting court jurisdiction) (Bermeo, 2016). Hungary after 2010 and Poland after 2015 exemplify this trajectory, where initial executive aggrandisement enabled subsequent erosion across all democratic dimensions (Freeman, 2020).

**We treat executive aggrandisement as a distinct phenomenon that can, but does not necessarily, contribute to wider democratic decline.** This distinction is analytically important because it allows us to:

- **Identify risks earlier** (institutional power shifts precede broader backsliding)
- **Target interventions more precisely** (strengthening specific checks rather than general democracy promotion)
- **Assess severity more accurately** (not all executive expansion leads to authoritarianism, but all require monitoring)

### 2.3 Why executive aggrandisement matters for democratic resilience

Citizens expect governments to govern effectively, especially during crises (Landau, 2004; Gidengil et al., 2022). **The concern is not executive action per se, but action without adequate institutional checks.** When power concentrates in the executive without corresponding safeguards, the quality of democratic governance deteriorates in measurable and consequential ways.

#### 2.3.1 Erosion of institutional checks and balances

**As executive power expands, multiple accountability mechanisms weaken simultaneously. Parliaments lose meaningful influence over policy priorities, budgets, and legislative oversight** (Bolleyer and Salát, 2021). Courts face systematic constraints on judicial review—through reduced jurisdiction, delayed consultation, or post-hoc involvement only after executive decisions are already implemented and politically costly to reverse (Haggard and Tiede, 2025). Opposition parties find themselves deprived of procedural tools to scrutinize policies, propose alternatives, or delay measures for public debate (Weyland, 2025). Subnational authorities are relegated to implementing central directives with diminished autonomy over local priorities and resources (Gervasoni, 2024). International obligations related to human rights and rule-of-law commitments are sidelined, selectively reinterpreted, or openly contested when they constrain executive preferences, particularly under populist or crisis-driven centralization (Helfer, 2017).



### 2.3.2 Implications for democratic quality

**These institutional shifts weaken three fundamental pillars of democratic resilience:** accountability (fewer actors can effectively constrain executive decisions), rights protection (reduced judicial oversight and independent review), and deliberative capacity (diminished space for debate, contestation, and policy alternatives) (Bermeo, 2016). Critically, this degradation occurs even when elections continue and formal institutions remain nominally intact—making it harder for citizens, media, and policymakers to recognise the transformation until damage is substantial. Comparative data confirm this pattern is neither isolated nor theoretical. V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index, ([Liberal Democracy Index, 2024](#)) which combines measures of executive constraints, judicial independence, legislative oversight, and civil liberties, shows significant declines across multiple established democracies over the past decade, with many countries experiencing erosion in institutional safeguards even while elections remain formally competitive (Nord et al., 2025). Similarly, International IDEA's Global State of Democracy Report (2025) documents widespread weakening of checks and balances across regions, demonstrating that erosion of formal accountability mechanisms is an observable, measurable, and accelerating phenomenon globally.

### 2.3.3 Early warning value

Comparative evidence demonstrates that democratic backsliding rarely begins with dramatic constitutional ruptures but through incremental legal changes that strengthen executive control while maintaining procedural legitimacy (Khaitan, 2019; Laebens, 2023; Bessen, 2024). **Tracking executive aggrandisement therefore provides an essential early-warning mechanism**, enabling intervention before institutional imbalances become entrenched crises resistant to correction. For EU institutions specifically, this means identifying risks at stages where existing corrective measures—conditionality mechanisms, infringement procedures, peer dialogue frameworks, and budget leverage—remain politically feasible and legally effective. Once executive concentration reaches critical thresholds, these same tools face greater resistance and diminished efficacy, making early detection not merely useful but strategically necessary for protecting democratic governance across member states.

## 2.4 Preliminary patterns of executive aggrandisement identified in TWIN4DEM country cases

In an initial research phase, we examined how executive aggrandisement manifests in regulatory instruments across TWIN4DEM country cases. The case selection provides analytical variation: Hungary represents a clear case of executive concentration documented extensively in comparative scholarship; France and the Czechia constitute contested cases where executive expansion remains debated; and the Netherlands serves as a control case generally considered resistant to centralization, despite emerging domestic concerns about executive prominence. This exploratory research—which will be published as a symposium in the *International Political Science Review* in spring 2026—focuses exclusively on the formal characteristics of legislative and executive acts—their frequency, type, and originating authority—with substantive policy analysis planned for subsequent research stages. The



central hypothesis is that **executive aggrandisement should be associated with observable patterns**: increased reliance on executive decrees, growth in acts adopted under parliamentary delegation, and a rising proportion of government-initiated legislation relative to parliamentary initiatives.

### 2.4.1 Hungary: Legislative expansion under executive control

Hungary's trajectory began with Viktor Orbán's return to power in 2010, providing a clear temporal marker distinguishing periods of executive concentration from prior governance. Contrary to expectations, legislative activity increased substantially after 2010 (198 laws annually versus 137 previously), while executive decrees declined marginally (approximately 1,000 annually versus 1,003). This pattern suggests that executive aggrandisement in Hungary operates not through bypassing parliament but through controlling it—Fidesz's supermajority enables the government to channel executive preferences through formal legislation, maintaining procedural legitimacy while concentrating substantive power. This finding has significant policy implications: **monitoring executive overreach requires examining not merely the volume of decrees but the quality of parliamentary deliberation and the substantive independence of legislative action.**

### 2.4.2 France: Crisis-driven delegation and fragmentation

**France's experience illustrates how crisis events reshape executive-legislative dynamics.** The terrorist attacks of January and November 2015 triggered repeated states of emergency that expanded executive authority in ways scholars continue to debate regarding reversibility. Standard decrees were more numerous before 2015 (1,900 versus 1,700 annually), as were laws (51 versus 49 annually), yielding a declining ratio of executive to parliamentary acts. However, *ordonnances*—executive acts adopted under parliamentary enabling legislation—increased dramatically from 39 annually pre-2015 to 59 thereafter, indicating crisis-driven delegation as the primary mechanism of executive expansion. Critically, this pattern reversed after 2022 when electoral fragmentation produced France's first minority governments in recent history, sharply reducing both overall legislative activity and *ordonnances* (declining to approximately 26 annually). This reversal demonstrates that parliamentary fragmentation constrains delegated executive authority, providing an institutional check even when formal rules permit such delegation.

### 2.4.3 The Netherlands: Stability through fragmentation

The Dutch parliamentary system is characterised by a strong control of the executive over the legislative agenda. Over our study period (2010-2025), 95% of the legislative production originated from the government. However, and in contrast to other cases, the adoption of executive acts (*Algemene Maatregel van Bestuur* and *Ministeriële Regeling*) is not possible without *pre-ante* legislative authorisation. Starting in 2017, however, the Dutch Parliament has however increasingly relied on enabling laws to allow the government to act in a large variety of policy domains. Tracking the impact of these laws is particularly challenging as they do not rely on a single unified legal instrument. **While in the Netherlands, the ratio of decrees to laws has increased, we do not observe the dramatic shifts observed**



**elsewhere.** This stability likely reflects sustained parliamentary fragmentation reinforced by proportional representation, which prevents any single party from achieving the dominance necessary to facilitate systematic delegation or executive control over legislative processes.

### 2.4.4 Czech Republic: Legislative dominance in crisis management

As in the Czech constitutional setup, the independent legislative prerogatives of the government are limited to governmental ordinances (*nařízení vlády, ministerské vyhlášky*), the respective ruling coalitions employed mostly standard means during the observed period, all the way until 2020. With COVID-19 pandemic in effect, **the governmental legislative activity within the parliament expanded both in terms of volume and volatile usage of emergency means for fast-tracking new norms**, by declaring state of emergency and/or using the instrument of legislative emergency. Russian invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 had a major impact, both in terms of influx of refugees and general perception of security threat, and kept the governmental legislative proliferation in place. In 2020, the average number of law proposals initiated by the government increased by almost 100% and even though the absolute number decreased after the pandemic, proportionately, it kept growing to approximately 80% of all the registered legislative activity in 2024. Nevertheless, since the government did not expand the ordinances' production, **in the Czech case, we are observing dominance by volume, without major transgressions against due legislative process**, with emergency instruments usage tied to crisis situations and effectively checked by the Constitutional Court.

### 2.5 How executive aggrandisement unfolds: A five-stage causal process

Although national contexts vary, TWIN4DEM makes executive aggrandisement measurable and comparable across cases. By mapping both the pathways through which power shifts and the direction of authority gains and losses, the project identifies **a recurring sequence across cases and highlights where institutional safeguards can realistically interrupt this sequence and where they cannot**. This approach is original in that it does not focus on the well-known relationships between the legislature, the judiciary, and the executive, but rather on how these relationships evolve. The assumption is that, in a liberal democracy, the most important aspect is not the relative strength of the executive, but whether this strength progresses. **Understanding this sequence helps policymakers recognise aggrandisement as it develops and identify intervention points.**

#### 2.5.1 Stage 1: Executive motivation

The process begins when **governments identify areas where increased control would advance their objectives**—electoral positioning, policy preferences, or crisis response. In practice, these objectives reflect: office-related goals (staying in power, career advancement, strengthening one's institutional position), policy goals (delivering preferred reforms), and audience-related concerns (maintaining support and credibility with party actors, coalition partners, voters, and other elites). Political leaders then conduct implicit cost–benefit calculations, weighing expected gains (speed, visibility, implementation capacity, policy effectiveness) against expected costs (judicial challenges, parliamentary resistance, media criticism, public protest, international pressure, and reputational costs). Executive



aggrandisement will occur when leaders assess that expected benefits outweigh expected risks.

### 2.5.2 Stage 2: Instrument selection

Governments could choose between two pathways (or their combination):

- (a) **a legislative route** which consists of proposing laws through the national parliament. This offers greater legitimacy and deliberation but less control over outcomes and slower timelines.
- (b) **an executive route** which relies on the use of decrees, ordinances, emergency measures, ministerial orders, or regulatory acts. This route provides speed and control but risks controversy, particularly when bypassing parliamentary scrutiny.

**The choice reflects both strategic calculation and institutional constraints.** Where executives control legislative majorities, the distinction may be less meaningful; where they face opposition, executive instruments become more attractive.

### 2.5.3 Stage 3: Parliamentary response

When the legislative route is chosen, national parliaments can approve, amend, or reject proposals. Even executive measures often require subsequent parliamentary ratification or time-limited extensions. These moments represent critical decision points. **Legal attempts of executive aggrandisement can be fully approved, amended, or rejected.** Whereas amendments may constrain executive aggrandisement; rejection blocks aggrandisement in that form. Parliamentary responses signal whether institutional checks remain functional.

### 2.5.4 Stage 4: Judicial review

Courts examine whether measures comply with constitutional principles and fundamental rights. However, judicial intervention typically occurs *after* legislative adoption and implementation—a timing disadvantage with important consequences. Courts can react in three ways. They may (a) strike down provisions entirely, (b) narrow their scope through interpretation, or (c) uphold measures as constitutional. If courts fail to block or substantially limit executive expansion, enlarged powers become entrenched. **Judicial review thus serves as an essential but reactive safeguard, rarely preventing initial power grabs.**

### 2.5.5 Stage 5: Societal and international pressure

**External actors fundamentally shape the political costs executives face when concentrating power, even without possessing formal veto authority.** Media coverage and public opinion determine whether emergency measures are framed as necessary leadership during crises or dangerous executive overreach, shaping both immediate political viability and longer-term legitimacy. Civil society organisations—including NGOs, labor unions, professional associations, and advocacy networks—mobilise support or organised opposition that affects executives' political calculus about whether expanded authority is worth the contestation it provokes. International actors such as EU institutions, the Council of Europe, and foreign governments issue public warnings, launch formal procedures, or impose conditionality that raises reputational and material costs for democratic backsliding. While



these external forces lack direct veto power over executive decisions, they critically influence risk assessments by signaling whether power concentration will face sustained resistance or tacit acceptance (Rovny, 2023). When initial acts of aggrandisement encounter low resistance—weak media scrutiny, muted civil society response, absent international pressure—executives learn that the political costs of centralisation are manageable, encouraging repetition and expansion across additional policy domains. This learning process accelerates democratic erosion, as each unchallenged step establishes precedent and normalises what previously would have generated controversy, creating a reinforcing dynamic where declining resistance enables bolder subsequent moves.

### 2.6 Policy insights from cross-national analysis

**Our initial comparative research reveals three patterns with direct policy implications.**

These patterns emerged both from the theoretical model and were supported in the first round of TWIN4DEM focus group discussions with policymakers and civil society actors.

#### 2.6.1 Crises as accelerators for executive aggrandisement

Emergencies—security threats, pandemics, economic shocks—provide powerful justifications for expanding executive authority at the expense of democratic institutions. First, emergencies may increase public support for transferring extraordinary authority in the executive branch to ensure rapid decision-making. Second, emergencies benefit governments with an autocratic bent, who can actively propagate “a sense of crisis” to legitimate their leadership and the need to bypass institutional checks and balances. **Democracies become further weakened if temporary emergency powers become permanent features of the political system.** This is especially likely if emergency powers are granted without adequate restrictions, parliamentary review, or post-crisis rollback. This implies that legal restrictions, mandatory parliamentary renewals, and automatic expiration dates are not merely technical features—they are essential safeguards requiring explicit EU-level standards.

Policy makers should also try to better understand the conditions under which crises translate into executive aggrandisement. While some research suggests that crises would be a boon for governments with an autocratic bent (Gebrekidan, 2020, Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019), others argue that opportunities for executive aggrandisement during crisis may be constrained by elite and mass polarisation (Lowande and Rogowski, 2021).

#### 2.6.2 Judicial review as retrospective check is not sufficient

Based on our research and focus group discussions, **courts are not a panacea for executive aggrandisement.** First, courts intervene only after the legal instruments have been adopted by the legislature or the executive. By the time constitutional courts rule, measures expanding the authority of the executive may already have lasting consequences for the political system. The French experience illustrates this timing problem. Emergency powers introduced during the terrorism and pandemic crises were activated quickly and applied extensively in day-to-day governance before constitutional review occurred. Although the Conseil Constitutionnel imposed limits in several decisions, the executive had already



relied on these tools to structure policing, surveillance, and regulatory action, which shifted the balance of authority for a considerable period of time.

In some contexts, the limits of judicial oversight can be compounded by broader strategies that reduce the effectiveness of checks and balances. Through legal and administrative means, executive actors may have installed loyalists in key positions within the public administration, as well as through judicial appointments (Levitsky and Way, 2025). They may also have permanently weakened horizontal accountabilities by silencing alternative voices in the media and civil society. Second, executives can actively try to undermine the legitimacy of court decisions to the public by instilling distrust in the judiciary. They can manipulate the image of the courts as ineffective and slow and hinder their ability to respond efficiently to the needs of their citizens. Third, not all countries have constitutional courts that automatically assess legislative acts.

The implications from the preliminary analysis suggest that policy-makers should also invest in and emphasise preventive mechanisms (ex-ante review, mandatory impact assessments, early warning systems) in addition to retrospective correction. The Venice Commission's urgent opinion procedure and the European Commission's Rule of Law Mechanism represent steps in this direction but require strengthening.

### **2.6.3 Multiple legal pathways to executive aggrandisement**

**Our initial analysis shows that there is no single uniform legal pathway that leads to executive aggrandisement.** Indeed, executive aggrandisement can follow different legal routes, and these routes do not carry the same weight across political systems. In France, governments can combine parliamentary legislation with comparatively “fast” executive instruments (notably decrees and ordinances adopted under parliamentary authorisation), which can shift decision-making toward the executive while remaining formally lawful. The Netherlands lacks constitutional review of statutes, so constraints rely less on a constitutional veto and more on parliamentary scrutiny, coalition bargaining, and administrative-law review. In Czechia and Hungary, constitutional review exists, but whether executive initiatives translate into durable power reallocations depends heavily on political conditions, such as parliamentary majorities and the practical strength of institutional checks. Overall, similar outcomes can be pursued through different instruments. In some political systems, executive measures are subject to extensive parliamentary review, they have limited scope and duration, and can only be adopted after the enactment of parliamentary acts that clearly specify the responsibilities and constraints of any executive action. In other political systems, executive measures can be adopted independently from legislative acts and face fewer checks by parliamentary majorities. In the latter case, executive acts may be more readily used by authoritarian-inclined governments, as they are easier and faster to adopt. On the other hand, parliamentary acts hold higher legal status in all political systems and are considered more legitimate by the population. Therefore, we would expect that executives that hold legislative majority to expand their powers through parliamentary acts before or instead of resorting to executive decrees or ordinances.



### 2.6.4 Rethinking executive aggrandisement indicators

**Our interim research findings challenge simplistic assumptions about how executive power concentration manifests formally.** The relationship between executive and legislative acts does not straightforwardly indicate executive aggrandisement; indeed, where such aggrandisement clearly occurred (Hungary), laws became more numerous relative to decrees. This suggests executives may prefer controlling parliament to bypassing it, as legislative acts carry greater legitimacy and durability than decrees vulnerable to judicial review or future reversal. However, delegated executive acts adopted under parliamentary authorisation—where observable—appear strongly associated with executive expansion, particularly during crisis periods. **The critical policy question is whether such instruments remain exceptional crisis responses or become normalised governance tools.** The most significant institutional constraint identified is parliamentary fragmentation. Fragmentation limited France's post-2022 reliance on ordinances and appears to have prevented similar developments in the Netherlands entirely. Hungary's contrasting experience—where supermajority control enables channelling executive preferences through formal legislation—underscores that party system concentration, not merely formal institutional design, determines executives' capacity to aggrandise power while maintaining procedural legitimacy. For policymakers concerned with democratic safeguards, this implies that monitoring electoral system effects on parliamentary composition and tracking the normalisation of delegated legislative authority may provide more reliable early-warning indicators than simple counts of decrees versus laws. The main policy implications from this research is that assessments of executive aggrandisement should go beyond the form and type of legal instruments, but focus on the substance of legal texts. Executive measures are not necessarily a signal for aggrandisement, and their democratic implications depend on the legal system and preference constellations in the legislature.



### 3. Computational social science for democracy research: Challenges and opportunities

#### 3.1 The detection challenge and data infrastructure needs

Identifying executive aggrandisement within legislative and regulatory texts confronts fundamental analytical constraints that computational methods can partially address but not fully resolve. National legal systems produce thousands of legislative acts, decrees, and regulatory instruments annually, making manual review across multiple EU member states resource-prohibitive. The same aggrandisement mechanism—delegating parliamentary authority to ministers, restricting judicial review, centralising subnational competences—appears in diverse legal formulations across languages and constitutional traditions, **requiring sophisticated detection beyond simple keyword matching approaches** (Shen et al, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021). Moreover, whether specific provisions represent executive aggrandisement depends critically on baseline institutional arrangements; measures that would be exceptional in one constitutional system may be routine in another, demanding contextual interpretation rather than universal thresholds. Most fundamentally, executive aggrandisement unfolds incrementally over months or years, with individual provisions appearing unremarkable while their cumulative effect reshapes institutional balance, necessitating longitudinal analysis rather than snapshot assessments.

**Accurate computational detection requires comprehensive data ecosystems that current infrastructure does not consistently provide.** Essential inputs include legislative materials (initial bills, proposed amendments, committee revisions, final enacted texts), parliamentary proceedings (floor debates, committee discussions, speeches), voting records revealing support and dissent patterns, judicial responses (constitutional court decisions, administrative rulings, legal challenges), and public discourse (media coverage, social media reactions, civil society commentary and reports) **However, while all these elements are relevant for detecting and understanding executive aggrandisement, assembling complete datasets faces systematic obstacles.** First, restrictive access policies mean not all parliaments publish comprehensive records, with committee proceedings often closed and amendment documentation incomplete. Second, social media platform policies prevent systematic collection of public discourse around legislative developments, limiting measurement of societal pressure and media framing (see Section 3.2). Third, cross-national standardisation challenges arise from varying formats, languages, and digitisation levels across member states. Fourth, in order to implement effective systems that detect executive aggrandisement, a good amount of training examples (for instance, laws documenting the approval of aggrandisement initiatives) would be needed. However, the identification of such examples imply the involvement of domain experts who can label which legislative clauses transfer power between institutions, requiring a labour-intensive process and in-depth legal expertise across multiple countries and languages.



### 3.2 Barriers to access to social media data

To analyse the preferences and strategies of political agents, social media data provide invaluable information and insights. However, **researchers increasingly struggle to obtain meaningful social media data because major platforms have restricted or commercialised access to their APIs and proprietary tools.** For example, Twitter (now X) eliminated its free or affordable academic API access in 2023, making comprehensive tweet datasets prohibitively expensive and thereby stalling studies on misinformation, polarisation, and real-time event analysis. In the context of TWIN4DEM, these restrictions considerably hinder our ability to detect positions and justifications of individual political actors in relation to executive aggrandisement, as well as public responses to such attempts.

The implementation of Europe's Digital Services Act, which explicitly requires platforms to provide data access for researchers, has been promising but also slow and frustrating. One of the major reasons for the lack of progress so far has been how inadequate the various platform responses have been to date. According to the [DSA Collaboratory](#), X.com takes on average 116 days to accept applications. Out of 46 complete applications, 34 have been decided, out of which 14 have been rejected. Even when platforms grant access, researchers report broken APIs, inconsistent data returns, and arbitrary revocations of already-approved access (Seiling et al, 2025).

### 3.3 From proof-of-concept to policy tool: Digital twin development

TWIN4DEM's digital twin approach—building computational models that simulate political system dynamics—offers potential for scenario analysis and early warning but remains in development stages. The current prototype represents a simplified proof-of-concept demonstrating core functionalities while acknowledging substantial gaps before operational deployment. The model simulates how aggrandisement attempts move through a fictional political system in discrete time steps, tracing government decisions to bypass parliament through emergency decree across three institutional branches: the executive determines which legal instrument to deploy based on parliamentary strength and crisis context; the legislature decides whether to approve, amend, reject, or approve executive actions; and the judiciary reviews measures for constitutional compliance. Users can adjust parameters—government propensity toward aggrandisement, judicial independence, parliamentary cohesion, crisis intensity—to test different scenarios and observe whether aggrandisement succeeds, which institutional checks function, and how power balances shift over simulated time.

**Transitioning from this demonstrative model to a policy-relevant decision-support tool requires addressing several critical development gaps.** Real-world calibration demands training the model on actual legislative data, court decisions, and political outcomes from member states rather than hypothetical parameters. Validation against known cases must test whether the model accurately reproduces observed executive aggrandisement episodes, such as Hungary's trajectory from 2010 to 2020, establishing empirical credibility. User interface design must develop dashboards and visualisations that communicate complex findings to non-technical policy audiences in formats suitable for rapid decision-making. Integration with existing monitoring frameworks should connect the digital twin to EU



mechanisms including the Rule of Law Report, Article 7 procedures, and conditionality regimes, ensuring outputs inform rather than duplicate current processes.

**The policy value proposition is substantial but contingent on sustained development investment.** A validated digital twin could provide scenario analysis—projecting how governments with specific characteristics facing particular crises might pursue aggrandisement and identifying which institutional checks prove most vulnerable—enabling proactive rather than reactive EU responses. However, realising this potential requires three foundational investments that extend beyond current project resources. First, comprehensive data access agreements must be negotiated with national parliaments, courts, and judicial systems, potentially requiring regulatory mandates where voluntary cooperation proves insufficient. Second, platform cooperation or regulatory requirements are necessary for systematic social media data access, as current policies prevent measuring public discourse dynamics essential to understanding political constraints on executive behaviour. Third, expert annotation infrastructure must be established to build training datasets across representative cases, languages, and constitutional systems—a multi-year effort requiring coordination between computational social scientists and comparative legal scholars.

These computational methods supplement rather than replace expert legal assessment and comparative political analysis. Automated text analysis can process legislative volumes that are not feasible under manual review, flag provisions warranting closer scrutiny, and track longitudinal patterns across countries, but cannot interpret constitutional significance or political context without human expertise. The realistic timeline for operational deployment extends beyond this project's duration; early versions provide proof-of-concept for specific scenarios while foundational data infrastructure, model validation, and interface development proceed iteratively. For EU policymakers, this implies recognising that building these tools constitutes multi-year institutional development rather than immediate crisis response. Building a representative and predictive digital twin model of a political system would require long-term investments beyond the TWIN4DEM project.



## 4. Co-creating digital twin in democracy research: Insights from TWIN4DEM focus groups

Stakeholders (policy-makers, civil society and media representatives) who engaged with TWIN4DEM focus groups consistently reported finding it highly relevant to their professional work and contributed substantively from their direct experience. **Feedback emphasised two particular strengths: the clarity achieved in understanding computational models through participatory discussion, and the direct relevance of analytical frameworks to participants' ongoing work.** Critically, multiple participants noted that opportunities to reflect on democratic threats—rarely available in their regular professional contexts—represented significant added value beyond the research outputs themselves. This suggests that participatory methods in computational social science offer dual benefits: improving model validity through expert input while simultaneously providing professional development opportunities that incentivise sustained engagement. Despite positive participant experiences, recruitment faced systematic challenges that offer important lessons.

### 4.1 The perceived relevance of executive aggrandisement in some countries

The abstract nature of executive aggrandisement as a concept created scepticism among potential participants who questioned its relevance to their specific national contexts, particularly in countries not experiencing overt executive aggrandisement trends. This highlights a fundamental challenge when engaging stakeholders in comparative research. In comparative research it is crucial to analyse countries that experience executive aggrandisement, but also countries that show resilience and resistance to executive aggrandisement attempts by national leaders. At the same time, stakeholders in more resilient institutional environments may perceive the threats and risks of executive aggrandisement as less relevant and are hence less likely to participate in focus group meetings.

### 4.2 Resource, institutional, and political constraints to participation

Resource constraints and institutional distance presented notable obstacles to participation. Time scarcity among target participants—particularly media professionals and policymakers operating under demanding schedules—substantially increased both outright rejection and non-response rates.

These challenges were particularly visible in Hungary when attempting to engage policymakers. Several factors appear to have contributed to this situation. First, public officials often operate under strict procedural rules regarding participation in externally organised research activities, including focus groups. In many cases, they are not authorised to represent national-level authorities or to engage in discussions that could be interpreted as expressing an institutional position. Such formal constraints naturally limit their ability to participate.



Second, differences in policy perspectives and problem framing may have affected willingness to engage. Research projects that address sensitive or contested issues—such as democratic developments—can be perceived as politically delicate. In such contexts, participation may require careful consideration on the part of public officials, particularly when discussions are hosted by external or international actors.

Third, efforts to involve local-level policymakers, who were seen as important for broadening the range of perspectives, were constrained primarily by limited time and administrative capacity. Especially at the municipal level, heavy workloads can make participation in research-based dialogue formats difficult.

In response to these challenges, recruitment relied primarily on established professional networks to facilitate trust and feasibility. While this approach enabled some engagement, it also resulted in a limited pool of participating policymakers and relatively high non-response rates.

These dynamics raise broader methodological concerns. If policymakers operating in politically sensitive or institutionally constrained environments are less able or less inclined to participate, participatory validation formats risk under-representing precisely those contexts where empirical insight is particularly important. Addressing this challenge requires carefully designed engagement strategies that are sensitive to institutional frameworks and political context while maintaining inclusive research standards.

### **4.3 Linguistic and network biases**

Successful recruitment relied on two critical factors: linguistic accessibility and professional networks. Outreach conducted in local languages rather than English dramatically improved response rates, underscoring that truly participatory research must accommodate participants' communication preferences rather than imposing researchers' lingua franca. Linguistic accessibility is therefore not only a practical consideration but also a matter of inclusion and equitable participation.

At the same time, recruitment succeeded primarily through established connections—via project partners, partner institutions, or previously recruited participants who could vouch for the research's legitimacy and value. While these trusted networks facilitate engagement, they also risk reinforcing existing professional and institutional circles, thereby limiting the diversity of perspectives involved. Stakeholders who are less connected to established European or transnational networks may remain underrepresented.

Attracting participants beyond existing networks proved significantly more challenging, particularly when addressing time-constrained professionals unfamiliar with the project or with computational social science approaches. This does not diminish the importance of reaching such actors. On the contrary, ensuring diversity requires deliberate strategies that extend beyond established partnerships, including targeted outreach, collaboration with intermediary organisations, and sustained engagement efforts.



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These findings suggest that “cold” recruitment faces structural disadvantages. Building genuinely inclusive participatory research infrastructures therefore requires both long-term investment in institutional partnerships and trust-building *and* proactive measures to reach stakeholders outside established networks. Diversity cannot be assumed as a by-product of network-based recruitment; it must be intentionally cultivated.

### **4.4 Policy-relevant insights from TWIN4DEM focus group engagement**

These experiences highlight persistent tensions in participatory computational social science. While stakeholder engagement demonstrably improves model clarity and real-world relevance, the resource intensity of meaningful participation creates access barriers that may systematically exclude perspectives from precisely those contexts researchers most need to understand. Researchers wishing to engage societal stakeholders consider the following insights:

- Clear communication about the value of participatory engagement in computational projects during early recruitment when research designs remain fluid;
- Reducing time burdens on participants through more efficient engagement formats (e.g., online meetings)
- Building sustained research networks that enable ongoing stakeholder participation rather than extractive one-time consultations;
- Designing mitigation strategies to decrease selection bias when access barriers correlate with the phenomena under investigation.



## 5. Conclusions: Policy recommendations

Based on our preliminary research, we put forward four recommendations to the EU Commission and policy-makers.

### **1. The EU should take executive aggrandisement seriously: it is a precursor to democratic backsliding and, in some cases, full autocratisation**

Given that executive aggrandisement involves a gradual and incremental process through which elected leaders legally expand their powers, it is also easy to remain unnoticed by policy-makers. Research shows that sudden and highly visible democratic breakdowns via coups are much more rare than the systematic but incremental hollowing out of liberal-democratic checks and balances by national executives. In the past decade, countries such as Hungary have used incremental legal reforms—rather than overt extra-legal seizures of power—to erode judicial independence, dismantle media pluralism, and reshape electoral competition to entrench governing incumbents. Scholars argue that these processes constitute early signals of “democratic backsliding” and in some cases pave the way toward full autocratisation (Bermeo 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019). For the EU, the implication is that executive aggrandisement is not merely a national constitutional matter but a systemic threat that can undermine the rule of law as a shared foundational value under Article 2 TEU. This also implies actively increasing political and societal awareness of the risks of executive aggrandisement.

### **2. EU assessments of executive aggrandisement should go beyond the focus on judicial independence**

Current EU monitoring instruments—such as the Rule of Law Mechanism, Article 7 TEU procedures, and infringement actions—have primarily centered on judicial independence and impartiality and rule-of-law institutions. While judicial capture is central to executive aggrandisement, our theoretical model suggests that judicial action may not be sufficient to counter executive expansion. In Hungary, for example, the ruling party has combined judicial reforms with control of the media market (through the KESMA conglomerate), politicisation of public administration, and changes in electoral rules that systematically favour the incumbent. A narrow focus on courts therefore risks missing the cumulative “multi-institutional” strategy through which executives entrench power. Moreover, authoritarian-bent executives may use various delegitimising strategies against the judiciary to garner public support for executive aggrandisement. We therefore recommend that the Commission also evaluates early attempts of executive actors to propose legal measures that threaten to undermine democratic standards.

### **3. The EU should strengthen monitoring of executive actions in the context of external/internal threats and crisis management**

Executive aggrandisement frequently accelerates during crises—whether real, anticipated, or fabricated—because executives can justify extraordinary measures as necessary for public safety or national survival. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, governments such



as Hungary introduced emergency decrees, restricted parliamentary oversight, and extended executive discretion over public procurement and information flows (Batory 2024). While emergency powers are sometimes warranted, research shows they can be repurposed to normalise expanded executive authority long after the crisis subsides (Bjørnskov and Voigt 2022). Moreover, external threats—such as terrorism, migration pressures, or geopolitical conflict—have also been used to justify states of exception from parliamentary control or accelerated legislative procedures. The EU’s current monitoring frameworks pay insufficient attention to the informal ways in which national executives justify and defend executive aggrandisement to citizens, not just to the formal content of reforms.

#### 4. Beyond the executive: Executive aggrandisement is a system-level problem

Although described as “executive” aggrandisement, the success of power-concentrating reforms depends on enabling conditions across the entire constitutional, political, and societal ecosystem. Executives frequently rely on legislative majorities to pass institutional reforms, partisan allies within oversight institutions, and supportive actors in media and civil society to shape public narratives. In Hungary, the Fidesz government leveraged constitutional supermajorities to redesign electoral rules, packed the constitutional court with loyalists, and centralized media ownership. In Poland, the PiS government used parliamentary control and state-owned media to legitimize judicial reforms as “democratisation of the judiciary.” These dynamics illustrate that executive aggrandisement entails **systemic co-optation**, not merely executive overreach. EU monitoring therefore needs to incorporate the behaviour of legislatures, regulatory authorities, media, public administration, and political parties, as well as the role of EU-level actors (e.g., party groups within the EP) that can legitimate or shield aggrandising executives.

#### 5. Establish a coordinated data access framework for democracy research

The EU should develop a regulatory framework mandating structured data sharing from national parliaments, courts, and digital platforms specifically for democracy monitoring and research purposes. Current obstacles to computational detection of executive aggrandisement—incomplete parliamentary records, closed committee proceedings, inaccessible judicial databases, and platform restrictions on public discourse data—create systematic blind spots precisely where early warning systems are most needed. This framework should require: (a) standardised digitisation and publication protocols for legislative materials (bills, amendments, debates, votes) across all member states, with technical and financial support for parliaments requiring capacity building; (b) coordinated access to judicial databases and constitutional court rulings in machine-readable formats; and (c) regulated researcher access to platform data on political discourse, balancing privacy protections with democracy monitoring needs through institutional review mechanisms similar to those governing health research data.

This recommendation addresses the core constraint identified in both computational development and stakeholder engagement: without comprehensive, comparable data infrastructure, neither automated detection systems nor expert participatory validation can function effectively across 27 constitutional systems. The investment required is substantial



but foundational—analogue to building public health surveillance infrastructure—and creates value beyond executive aggrandisement monitoring for broader rule-of-law assessment, legislative transparency, and democratic accountability research.

### **6. Create sustained multi-stakeholder networks for participatory model validation**

Rather than ad-hoc focus group recruitment for individual research projects, the EU should fund long-term participatory networks connecting computational social scientists with practitioners (policymakers, judges, journalists, civil society organizations) across member states for ongoing democracy monitoring tool development and validation. These networks should operate through national partner institutions with established credibility, conduct engagement in local languages, and provide structured professional development opportunities (training on computational methods, cross-national policy exchange) that incentivise sustained participation despite time constraints. Critically, network design must address systematic access barriers in contexts experiencing democratic erosion by building relationships before acute crises emerge, when government officials become defensive about external scrutiny.

This addresses the methodological tension revealed in stakeholder engagement: while participatory approaches demonstrably improve computational model relevance and clarity, resource-intensive recruitment creates selection bias where perspectives from backsliding contexts—precisely those most needing monitoring—prove hardest to access. Sustained networks transform extractive one-time consultations into collaborative infrastructure, reduce communication barriers through established trust, and enable iterative model refinement based on practitioner feedback. For EU investment, this represents a shift from funding individual computational tools toward building the institutional ecosystem necessary for those tools to achieve policy relevance and cross-national validity.



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