

Defeating illiberalism from a liberal perspective:

Lessons from Poland, Hungary, and Germany

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**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN
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INTRODUCTION

In Europe, liberal democracies are under constant threat from illiberal, and populist forces. They are getting increasingly good at undermining liberal values, and entrenching their influence by weakening checks and balances, pluralism, and individual rights, and rule of law. Liberals can learn from the mistakes of Hungary and Poland, both cases of democratic backsliding, but also best practices at defeating illiberalism. Germany faces its own challenge from the far right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and a weakening liberal voter base for the Free Democratic Party (FDP). This study analyses insights from Central and Eastern Europe, and draws lessons for liberal parties.

The analysis shows that illiberalism operates via a recognisable “playbook”: capturing the state and its institutions, taking over or intimidating media, weaponizing social policy and economic injustices, and redefining national identity against internal and external enemies based on the model of Carl Schmitt. Yet liberal actors are not powerless. The Polish opposition’s victory in 2023, the landslide victory of Tisza in Hungary, and the persistence of pro-rule of law groups across Europe demonstrate that broad coalitions, value based messaging combined with credible economic offers, and strategic use of European rule of law instruments can contain and in some cases reverse illiberal tendencies.

For liberal parties in the Renew Europe family, and particularly for Germany’s FDP and allied liberal actors the key lessons are: do not allow illiberals to define liberalism, invest in civic and political education, build strategic but principled alliances, root liberal narratives in everyday economic realities, and use all levels (EU, national, subnational) to defend the rule of law and pluralism. The study concludes with a concrete set of best practices for liberal actors facing AfD’s rise and the fragmentation of the German party system.

Why illiberalism is topical

Illiberalism refers to political projects that maintain the formal structure of democracy, elections, constitutions, parliaments. It is undermining liberal checks and balances, such as the rule of law, separation of powers, minority rights, and media pluralism. In Central Europe this has often taken the form of democratically elected governments which use legal reforms to concentrate power and weaken independent oversight. Rather than openly abolishing elections, they create a system in which an opposition victory is theoretically possible, albeit very difficult.

Scholars describe an illiberal strategy in which governing parties in Hungary and Poland, among others, have dismantled the rule of law, eroded checks and balances concentrating power in the hands of strong leaders, curtailed civil liberties, captured or politicized state institutions, and tilted the electoral playing field in favour of incumbents. Freedom House¹

¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary>

and other monitors have documented a pronounced decline in democratic quality in these countries, with Hungary reclassified as only “partly free”.

HOW ILLIBERALISM WORK

Defining illiberal democracy and competitive authoritarianism

The term “illiberal democracy” gained attention in Central Europe by Viktor Orbán in his infamous 2014 speech². The term describes regimes where electoral competition persists but liberal constraints are hollowed out. Such regimes are perceived as cases of “competitive authoritarianism”³, in which incumbents enjoy systematic advantages and routinely abuse state resources. However opposition parties still contest elections and sometimes win.

Analyses of Hungary and Poland highlight several mechanisms of backsliding: constitutional overhauls that entrench ruling parties, politicisation of judicial appointments, restructuring of media oversight to favour pro-government outlets, and gerrymandering or electoral-law changes that penalize disunited opposition. The illiberal reforms are justified by illiberal leaders as being the popular, majority choice, with due legal mechanism passing the reforms. Illiberal leaders claim to restore “sovereignty” or “the will of the people” while systematically reducing pluralism.

The “illiberal playbook”

Recent research outlines an “illiberal playbook” including the following practices: forging, bending, and breaking liberal norms⁴. Illiberal governments in Hungary and Poland, among others, have:

Captured oversight institutions by changing appointment rules, lowering retirement ages, or packing courts and independent agencies with loyalists, tilted the electoral field via changes in district boundaries, campaign finance rules, thresholds, and media majority, favouring incumbents, controlled the media through state advertising, friendly ownership, and regulatory harassment of independent outlets, weaponised social policy (e.g. family benefits, pensions) and EU funds to build loyal clientele, redefined national identity around cultural homogeneity, traditional gender roles, and against external and internal threats such as migrants, LGBTQ+ people, and “Brussels elites”.

This is not unique to Hungary or Poland, scholars and think tanks note similar patterns in other Visegrád countries and beyond, though with varying depth and durability of illiberal turns. For liberals, understanding the tactics is a prerequisite for designing effective counter-strategies.

Russia’s role

Russia, and NATO are facing each other in a new cold war, where hybrid warfare is a constant reality. Disinformation campaigns, attacks on European infrastructure in cyber attacks or damaging data cables, as well as undermining liberal values and unity are key elements of Russian influencing campaigns.

² <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp>

³ <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/the-new-competitive-authoritarianism/>

⁴ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/perspectives-on-politics/article/forging-bending-and-breaking-enacting-the-illiberal-playbook-in-hungary-and-poland/3DD83EDB9BA4D3DA72DC4F77A8F0686A>

Illiberal politicians prove useful allies in furthering Russian agenda⁵. With the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 this has become more apparent. Fidesz in Hungary vetoes sanctions on Russia for instance, and illiberal politicians oppose European projects. The Hungarian state sponsored media has spread Russian disinformation, in an attempt to help the reelection of Orbán⁶.

Russia has a long history of supporting or utilizing radical parties on both ends of the spectrum. The increase of illiberal tendencies in Europe, that undermine liberal democracies clearly benefit Putin. Fighting illiberals by ostracizing illiberal parties, which enjoy an increasing support by voters can also help Russia, as the Kremlin propaganda machine can claim how hypocritical the west is by attempting to silence voices.

As such liberal efforts against illiberalism are not just a value based project to strengthen liberal values, but also have security implications. Stopping and defeating illiberals would be a strategic victory against Russian hybrid warfare attacks and influencing campaigns.

Liberal weaknesses: analysis from CEE

Liberal think tanks in the region have also identified structural weaknesses which made liberal parties vulnerable.

In a conference by Republikon on “Liberalism under the Pressure of Illiberalism”⁷ focusing on the Visegrád countries, Polish and Hungarian liberals pointed out the main problems: lack of devoted, strategic party leadership, weak organisational structures and resources, absence of clear liberal programmes, and ineffective communication campaigns. In Poland, liberalism carries negative connotations, pushing politicians to avoid explicit liberal branding or to adopt populist tactics, while in Hungary the term “(neo)liberal” has become a political insult used by both government and opposition.

Republikon’s discussions of “Liberalism in illiberal times”⁸ stressed further that liberal actors in Hungary allowed Fidesz to define what “liberalism” meant for the public, instead of voicing their own compelling narrative. Liberal organisations often lacked a social vision and focused narrowly on calling society to account for liberal values, rather than linking those values to citizens’ everyday concerns and wishes.

These analyses are central to crafting best practices: defeating illiberalism requires not only opposing the illiberal playbook, but also remedying liberal parties’ own organisational and communicative deficits.

POLAND: ILLIBERALISM AND THE WAY OUT

PiS’s illiberal turn

The Law and Justice party (PiS) came to power in 2015 and used its parliamentary majority to systematically weaken checks and balances, particularly in the judiciary and public media. Reforms to the National Council of the Judiciary and the Constitutional Tribunal undermined judicial independence, while changes in media law politicised the public broadcaster TVP and turned it into a vehicle for government propaganda.

⁵ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21599165.2024.2420967>

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2026/mar/31/viktor-orban-us-russian-support-hungary-iran-war-voters>

⁷ <https://4liberty.eu/liberalism-under-pressure-of-illiberalism/>

⁸ <https://en.republikon.hu/events/25-04-15-report-liberalism-in-illiberal-times.aspx>

PiS combined conservative cultural politics, often using homophobic and xenophobic rhetoric, with redistributive social programmes. Examples include the “500+” child benefit, constructing itself as a defender of “ordinary Poles” against corrupt liberal elites and foreign interests. This mix of right and left policies, reinforced by nationalist narratives around sovereignty and identity, helped PiS maintain high support despite EU criticism and domestic protests.

Civil society mobilisation and opposition learning

Poland also saw robust civic resistance. The Committee for the Defence of Democracy (KOD) emerged as a broad citizens’ movement defending judicial independence and media freedom. Opposition politicians, mainstream media, and KOD increasingly cooperated, framing politics as a clash between an antidemocratic PiS and a prodemocratic, pro-rule of law camp.

Protests against media restrictions in parliament and attempts to further constrain courts helped to polarise the political field around democratic norms. Liberal and centrist actors, including parties later associated with the Civic Coalition (KO), drew on this mobilisation to build a narrative of “restoring democracy” rather than merely returning to the pre-PiS status quo.

Analysts emphasised that pluralism within the opposition was and are both a challenge and an asset⁹: multiple parties could represent diverse liberal and centrist views, but needed to coordinate around defence of the rule of law and Atlantic orientation. Polish experts also acknowledged weaknesses in liberal party organisation and communication. The absence of clearly articulated liberal programmes and strong leaders capable of inspiring trust beyond urban strongholds were such.

The 2023 election and lessons for liberals

In the October 2023 election, PiS remained the largest single party but lost its parliamentary majority, as an opposition alliance led by Donald Tusk’s Civic Coalition, the Third Way, and the Left secured a combined majority of seats. Voter turnout reached an extraordinary 74.4 percent, underscoring the depth of mobilisation against PiS’s illiberal governance.

There are several factors contributing to this outcome:

Unified narrative: Opposition parties, despite programmatic differences, converged on a central message of restoring the rule of law and democratic norms (“de-PiSification”).

Narrative framing: While PiS used fear-based, anti-LGBTQ and xenophobic narratives, the opposition emphasised hopeful visions of a democratic, European Poland, selectively criticizing PiS without amplifying its polarizing frames.

Civic pressure: Activists and civic movements pushed parties to cooperate rather than compete destructively, making fragmentation politically costly.

Strategic coalition: The Third Way coalition provided a moderate conservative option for wavering PiS voters and those sceptical of Tusk, while still aligning against illiberalism.

Poland serves as a good example for liberal parties in showing the importance of broad alliances centred on democratic restoration, the mobilisation of civil society as a watchdog and coalition builder, and the need to embed liberal values in positive narratives rather than theoretical values that do not directly affect people in the short term.

HUNGARY: FROM THE WORST PRACTICE TO THE BEST

⁹ <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/democracy-after-illiberalism-a-warning-from-poland/>

Fidesz's illiberal system

Hungary is widely seen as the EU's archetypal case of democratic backsliding. After regaining power with a two-thirds parliamentary majority in 2010, Viktor Orbán's Fidesz-KDNP coalition enacted a new constitution and a series of cardinal laws that reshaped the judiciary, media oversight bodies, electoral rules, and subnational governance.

Research on Hungary's backsliding highlights how these reforms, though formally legal, undermined liberal safeguards: lowering judicial retirement ages to replace judges, restructuring the Constitutional Court, centralizing media regulation under government-loyal bodies, and redesigning electoral districts in ways favourable to Fidesz. At the same time, Fidesz expanded patronage networks through control of public procurement, state-dependent business elites, and targeted social policies, creating clientelistic dependencies in many regions.

Subnational-level studies show that Fidesz also constrained local opposition by limiting opportunities for contestation in municipal councils, reducing independent oversight of local authorities, and weakening local media and ombuds institutions. These strategies cumulatively produced what some authors call a "diminished democracy" or hybrid regime, where elections occur but are neither fully free nor fair.

Liberal marginalisation

In contrast to Poland, liberal parties in Hungary have been severely marginalised. Analyses around the "Liberalism under the pressure of illiberalism" conference¹⁰ by Republikon point to several causes.

First, Hungarian liberalism historically bundled liberal, social democratic, and conservative elements into a single formation (SZDSZ), creating what participants called a "liberal paradox": a heterogeneous party whose internal value base was only weakly liberal in a strict sense. Surveys of early SZDSZ members show that only a small minority consistently chose clearly liberal positions on both human rights and economic questions.

Second, liberalism became symbolically associated with the painful market reforms and social divides of the 1990s, allowing Fidesz to turn "liberal" into a pejorative label, blaming it for national problems. Younger generations often avoid the label entirely, preferring "progressive" even when they hold substantively liberal views.

Third, liberal parties and organisations struggled to build mass membership and local structures beyond Budapest, limiting their ability to mobilise outside urban centres. Opposition parties often failed to open their ranks to new members or to engage small-town voters whose primary concerns centre on economic security and access to public services rather than value based issues.

Finally, liberal actors did not invest enough in defining liberalism in positive, contextualised terms, allowing Fidesz to present "liberal" as elitist, anti-national, and disconnected from ordinary people's worries. This narrative vacuum made it easier for illiberal propaganda to portray liberalism as foreign-imposed and culturally alien. People also defined themselves as liberal even though not in fact holding liberal values, as a way of opposing Fidesz, as the governing party used the label on critics of Orbán.¹¹

¹⁰ <https://4liberty.eu/liberalism-under-pressure-of-illiberalism/>

¹¹ <https://www.republikon.hu/media/123765/liberalizmus-elemzes.pdf>

Opposition attempts and new openings

Opposition parties attempted to counter Fidesz's dominance by forming a broad electoral alliance for the 2022 parliamentary elections, holding open primaries to select a joint prime-ministerial candidate and single-member district nominees. These primaries were seen as a democratic innovation and means to galvanise voters around a united opposition. However, the alliance failed to unseat Fidesz, partly because the playing field was heavily skewed, and partly due to internal ideological tensions and communication missteps.

In 2024 however, a new party, Tisza emerged. Its leader, Péter Magyar was a long time Fidesz insider, who, according to him had enough of the governing party's scandals, and formed a new party. It began rising steadily in popularity, and in the end defeated Fidesz at the general elections on April 2026, gaining a supermajority in the parliament.

This blow to illiberalism from a single party showed that no matter how tilted the playing field is there is always a roadmap that can defeat illiberalism. In the case of Tisza, the recipe for victory had several steps: first defeating the old opposition, who Tisza perceived as a hindrance to victory, by fragmenting opposition votes. Tisza also recognized that Fidesz has power over the media, so in order to get their messages to people they cannot rely on mainstream media, and focused heavily on social media, where the party did very well, communicating to different target audiences. The party also recognised the importance of personal communications, and the leader of the party, Péter Magyar toured the country constantly and went to small villages which were neglected by political frontliners.

Tisza managed to build coalitions with several demographics, offering an alternative narrative to Fidesz's as well as offering solutions to current problems. They targeted youth and the elderly, urban and rural people, rich and poor alike, and managed to unite Hungary against Orbán.

Youth was a demographic given up on by many parties as too hard to engage. Tisza however successfully mobilized the youth vote in their favour. Short videos, memes, influencers, events, and targeted messaging were used by Tisza to talk to young people, and encourage them to vote, giving them agency and hope. Tisza was very successful in reaching out to youth, something many parties fail in

The opposition victory was also aided by an inherent problem in illiberalism: the ruling party losing touch with the common people, failing to listen to their voices, and despite vast amount of finances, and the utilization of taxpayer's money and good data gathering infrastructure, after a while due to illiberal leaders having to serve oligarchs there will be a gap in reality and communication. The propaganda media will be believed even by illiberal politicians and politicians have to get so entangled in lies that it will be decoupled from the everyday problem of people. Fidesz for example campaigned by focusing on foreign policy issues, Orbán's good relations with Trump, and an imagined threat from the EU and Ukraine, which some might have believed but did not feel this in their everyday lives, whereas economic structural problems were a day to day reality for voters. Tisza addressed these issues and thus was more successful in communicating credible things to voters.

Tisza pledged to rebuild liberal democracy, and the party's leader and current Hungarian prime minister, Péter Magyar described himself as a conservative-liberal, however as the party is not fully liberal, more liberal voices are needed in Hungary to promote liberal values. Regardless, Tisza's victory served as a good example in defeating illiberalism.

Lessons for liberals in Hungary

Hungary offers several cautionary lessons and partial inspirations for liberal actors:

- A fragmented oppositions which cannot unite make illiberalism worse

- Do not give in to wistful thinking, deferring responsibilities with the narratives that “it was impossible to win, the opposition would have won in a normal situation”, and start playing with the rules that are the reality.
- Find alternative media sources to propaganda media, such as social media
- Focus on personal connections, going and engaging with ostracized and sidelined people such as in small villages, even with those that do not share the same values or views.
- If there is no pragmatic way of building coalitions with other parties sideline them and build coalitions with voters.

GERMANY: THE DECLINE OF LIBERALISM

Political realignment and AfD's surge

Germany has experienced significant political turbulence despite it being thought of as a bastion of liberal democracy. The far-right AfD, founded in 2013, has gradually transformed from a Eurosceptic protest party into a radical right-wing force with strongholds in eastern Länder. Polling and electoral results since 2023 show AfD consistently securing around or above 20 percent of the vote nationally, with even higher scores regionally.

In the snap federal election of February 2025, AfD achieved about 20.8 percent of the vote and became the second-largest party in the Bundestag, while the centre-right CDU/CSU bloc topped the poll with around 28–29 percent. The centre-left SPD and the Greens declined compared to earlier peaks, and the left-wing camp fragmented further with the rise of the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance and a partial recovery of Die Linke.

AfD's rise is driven by a combination of factors: dissatisfaction with immigration and asylum policies, economic anxieties about inflation and energy prices, regional disparities between east and west, and a broader disillusionment with the perceived “cartel” of mainstream parties. Despite being monitored by domestic intelligence services and classified as right-wing extremist in some states, AfD's core electorate remains largely unmoved by such warnings.

FDP's electoral decline

The liberal FDP a key member of the Renew Europe family and traditionally associated with market-oriented liberalism and civil liberties, has struggled in this environment. After entering the so-called “traffic light” coalition with SPD and Greens in 2021, the party faced internal and external tensions over fiscal policy, climate measures, and economic reforms.

Opinion surveys and the 2025 federal election indicate a marked erosion of FDP support. In some polls prior to the election, the party hovered around or below the 5 percent threshold required for Bundestag representation, and in the 2025 snap election it ultimately failed to reenter parliament with around 4-5 percent of the vote. Analyses attribute this decline to perceptions of inconsistency, the difficulty of reconciling fiscal orthodoxy with coalition compromises, and competition from both union-friendly conservatives and economically liberal but culturally conservative voters drawn to AfD or the CDU's rightward shift¹².

¹² <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-neoliberal-fdp-no-chance-for-a-comeback/a-75847475>

FNF and other liberal organisations have warned¹³ that the weakening of the FDP undermines liberal influence over German policy and European debates, and have emphasised the need to renew liberal narratives and organisational capacities.

Societal responses and debates on how to deal with AfD

German society is deeply divided over how to confront AfD. Surveys show that roughly two-thirds of Germans see AfD's strength as a threat to democracy and the rule of law, yet opinions differ sharply on whether the party should be legally banned. While many SPD and Green supporters favour exploring a ban, FDP voters and those of some other parties are largely opposed, worried about martyring AfD and restricting political competition.

At the same time, local and national-level initiatives seek to contain AfD politically rather than juridically: maintaining a "firewall" against coalition cooperation, exposing extremist networks and financing, and mobilizing civil society against racism and antisemitism. Liberal actors argue that defending liberal democracy requires both principled non-cooperation with extremist forces and credible policy responses to the grievances that fuel their support.

WHAT LIBERALS CAN LEARN FROM POLAND AND HUNGARY

Common patterns and different outcomes

Hungary, Poland, and Germany illustrate different stages and configurations of the struggle between liberal democracy and illiberal projects. Hungary demonstrates how quickly a dominant party can build an entrenched illiberal system when it controls constitutional levers and faces a fragmented opposition. Poland shows that even after years of backsliding, coordinated opposition and civic mobilisation can dislodge an illiberal incumbent, albeit without guaranteeing rapid institutional restoration. In Hungary it took a new party, with a charismatic leader to first defeat the old opposition, build coalitions with voters, and offer credible counternarratives to the propaganda media. In Germany, in turn, shows how illiberal forces can grow within a still-liberal system, exploiting policy failures and cultural anxieties without yet capturing the state.

The comparison suggests that liberals must adapt strategies based on context:

In entrenched illiberal regimes (Hungary), liberals need long-term coalition-building, local governance experiments, and international leverage (e.g. EU conditionality) to create openings.

In backsliding but competitive democracies (Poland pre-2023), liberals can focus on alliance-building around rule-of-law restoration and electoral strategies that maximise representation of the plural anti-illiberal majority.

In still liberal but polarised systems (Germany), liberals must prevent illiberals from normalizing extremist positions, while offering convincing responses to economic and cultural concerns.

Organisational lessons from Poland and Hungary

Liberal and centrist actors in Poland, underscore the importance of organisational renewal: recruiting committed leaders, building professional campaign machinery, and clarifying

¹³ <https://libmod.de/en/internationale-konferenz-rethinking-liberalism-challenges-to-liberalism-in-turbulent-times/>

liberal programmes. Weak structures and under-financing, particularly in smaller parties, made it difficult to reach beyond core urban electorates.

In Hungary, Tisza essentially sidelined liberal parties, and absorbed their voters. However liberal parties must regain popularity to promote liberal values as opposed to a big-tant value system of the current government. Liberals should learn from the successful communication of Tisza, daring to go and argue with people they disagree with even in the remotest village. The case of Hungary showed that the cordon sanitaire doesn't work. liberals can gain a larger legitimacy than other parties, as was the case of Fidesz, and by not talking to radicalised people there is no chance of understanding and in turn convincing them-

For German liberals, these lessons translate into the need for a renewed focus on membership-based organisation, presence in structurally weak regions, and closer collaboration with liberal civil-society organisations and think tanks that can provide expertise and credibility.

Be better communicators

Illiberals have successfully framed liberalism as elitist, cosmopolitan, and indifferent to “ordinary people”, while presenting themselves as defenders of the nation and social protection. Liberal actors often responded with technocratic or purely rights-based language that failed to connect emotionally or materially with voters’ concerns.

In Poland, the opposition’s eventual success rested partly on reframing: offering a hopeful story of a democratic, European Poland that could be both socially caring and institutionally fair, without ceding patriotic symbolism to PiS. In Hungary, liberal and progressive actors argue that the immediate task is not to build a pure liberal party, but to foster functional cooperation among opposition forces and to develop narratives that link rule-of-law issues to concrete injustices such as corruption, poor public services, and economic precarity.

For German liberals, this implies the need to connect liberal principles, rule of law, individual rights, open society, market economy, with tangible proposals on housing, energy, pensions, and regional development, while reclaiming concepts like “security”, “solidarity”, and “nation” from illiberal appropriation.

Rely on the EU

A further cross-country lesson concerns the role of the EU. Studies on confronting illiberalism argue that EU instruments such as infringement procedures, Article 7 proceedings, and especially the rule-of-law conditionality mechanism linking EU funds to basic democratic standards, can create incentives for reforms or at least limit illiberal excesses.

In practice, the EU has used these tools unevenly. Against Hungary, the European Commission triggered the conditionality mechanism in 2022, leading to the suspension of a substantial share of cohesion funds until remedial measures were proposed, while Poland faced fines over judicial reforms and rule-of-law disputes. Sustained pressure, coupled with support for independent media, NGOs, and local governments, is more effective than purely intergovernmental shaming.

Liberal parties in Renew Europe can leverage their influence in EU institutions to strengthen such tools, while building cross-border networks of liberal actors. They can also showcase successful liberal governance in municipalities and regions.

BEST PRACTICES

Key strategies

Based on the cases of Poland, Hungary, and Germany, several strategic principles emerge for liberal parties in the Renew Europe family:

Defend liberal democracy without imitating illiberalism: Illiberal actors often claim that liberal elites are hypocritical or anti-democratic; liberals must therefore avoid shortcuts that compromise due process or pluralism, even when restricting extremist actors.

Combine value based principles with economic credibility: Liberal values must be articulated clearly, but always linked to policies that improve everyday life (e.g. education, healthcare, digital infrastructure, climate transition with fairness).

Invest in organisational depth and local presence: Strong central messaging is insufficient without rooted local structures capable of listening to and mobilizing communities.

Build broad, issue-based alliances: Coalitions for the rule of law, anti-corruption, and European integration should include actors beyond the liberal family, provided basic democratic commitments are shared.

Use structural opportunities: Use municipal, regional, national, and EU arenas to demonstrate liberal governance and to counteract illiberal narratives.

Organisational recommendations for German liberals

For liberal parties in Germany, especially the FDP and other Renew-aligned actors, the following organisational steps are advisable in light of Polish and Hungarian experiences:

- Rebuild membership and local chapters in structurally weak regions, particularly in eastern Germany, learning from Fidesz's and PiS's attention to local networks, as well as Tisza's but putting them in the service of open, participatory politics.
- Strengthen ties with liberal think tanks and foundations to integrate policy expertise and comparative lessons into party strategy and training.
- Develop candidate schools and leadership programmes that select and mentor local leaders committed to liberal values and capable of communicating across economic divides.
- Promote internal democracy and openness to activists and civic movements, avoiding closed, professionalised party cultures that alienate younger generations.

Narrative and communication strategies against AfD

To address AfD's rise without reinforcing its frames, liberal parties can adopt several communication strategies inspired by CEE lessons:

Reclaim the language of protection and security: Emphasise how liberal rule of law, independent courts, and free media protect citizens from power, corruption, and abuses, rather than presenting these institutions only as guardians of values people might not agree with.

Introduce immigration and diversity debates with concrete solutions: Acknowledge citizens' concerns about integration, housing, and social cohesion, while offering evidence-based policies and rejecting scapegoating and conspiracy narratives.

Use positive national narratives: As in Poland, show liberal visions as patriotic, committed to Germany's constitutional identity, social market economy, and European leadership, rather than ceding national symbols to the far right.

Avoid moralistic lecturing: While calling out racism and extremism is necessary, messaging should also seek to win back persuadable voters by addressing material grievances and offering respect, not disdain.

Amplify local success stories: Highlight municipalities and regions where liberal policies have delivered better governance, innovation, and social inclusion as concrete counters to AfD's dystopian narratives.

Coalition politics and “cordon sanitaire”

Experiences from Hungary and Poland show that attempts by mainstream parties to co-opt illiberal narratives or to flirt with far-right alliances often legitimise these actors and accelerate democratic backsliding. Liberal foundations and parties, including FNF and the FDP, have taken clear stances against cooperation with AfD and similar forces.

For Renew-aligned parties in Germany, the following practices are advisable:

- Maintain a strict non-cooperation line with AfD at all levels of government, framing this not as exclusion of voters but as a defence of constitutional order.
- Engage in cross-party pro-democracy initiatives with CDU/CSU, SPD, and Greens where appropriate, particularly on safeguarding electoral integrity, judicial independence, and media pluralism.
- Avoid tactical brinkmanship that risks empowering AfD (for example, government collapses or polarizing manoeuvres that create openings for protest voting), mindful of how institutional crises were exploited by illiberals elsewhere.

Using EU and international instruments

Renew Europe's position in the European Parliament and the Committee of the Regions provides leverage for defending liberal democracy across member states. German liberals, in cooperation with CEE partners, can:

- Support robust rule-of-law conditionality and monitoring, ensuring that EU funds are tied to judicial independence, anti-corruption safeguards, and media pluralism, as recommended by policy studies on confronting illiberalism in Hungary and Poland.
- Channel EU resources to independent media and civil society in backsliding states, reinforcing domestic support for democracy.
- Promote cross-border liberal networks, allowing exchange of strategies, campaign tools, and research among liberal parties and NGOs.

Specific recommendations for FDP and German Renew actors

Recommendations for German liberal parties include:

- Reframe liberalism in accessible terms: Communicate liberal values as guarantees of fair opportunities, protection against arbitrary power, and enablers of innovation and social mobility, avoiding jargon.
- Prioritize economic fairness within a liberal framework: Advocate for policies that combine fiscal responsibility with targeted investment in education, digital infrastructure, and green transition, emphasizing fairness and future-oriented opportunities.
- Invest heavily in eastern Germany: Develop long-term programmes (not only electoral campaigns) to address deindustrialisation, demographic change, and feelings of neglect, using local liberal success stories and partnerships with municipal actors.

- Strengthen youth outreach and political education: Expand civic education that explains liberal democracy, counters disinformation, and invites young people into liberal activism.
- Engage with youth more, finding ways of communications, messages, and topics that resonate well with them. Radicals also focus on youth engagement, with accurate problem statements for them but illiberal solutions. Liberals should also find the problems youth face and provide pragmatic, liberal solutions.
- Coordinate with European liberal partners: Use Renew Europe structures to share experiences from Poland's opposition victory and Hungary's ongoing struggles, integrating those lessons into German strategy documents and training.

CONCLUSION

Illiberalism in Europe is an organic phenomenon exacerbated by ostracised people and Russian influence, but it can be countered. It is the product of deliberate strategies, ideological, organisational, and institutional, deployed by parties that seek majoritarian power without liberal checks and balances. Liberal actors must therefore respond with equally deliberate strategies and unity that renew the appeal and effectiveness of liberal democracy.

The cases of Poland, Hungary, and Germany show that liberal responses cannot be purely defensive. They must offer compelling narratives of national and European renewal, rooted in both values and material improvements; they must rebuild parties as participatory, locally embedded organisations; and they must mobilise the capacities of the EU to support domestic democrats.

For liberal parties in the Renew Europe group, and for German liberals confronting AfD's rise and FDP's challenges, the central message from CEE experience is clear: liberals can contain and even reverse, but only if liberals leave their current stagnating positions, act pragmatically, speak with clarity and empathy, and build alliances that bridge social divides while holding firm on core democratic principles.