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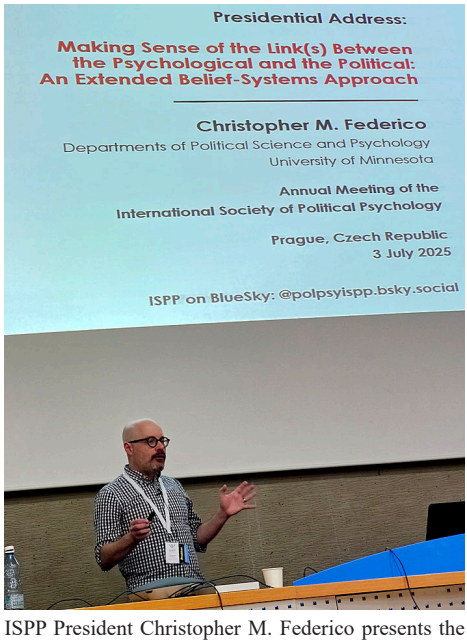
POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHOLOGY OF DEMOCRACY IN PRAGUE: REFLECTIONS ON THE LARGEST-EVER MEETING OF THE ISPP COMMUNITY



ISPP President Christopher M. Federico presents the Presidential Address

The 2025 annual scientific meeting of the ISPP (the International Society of Political Psychology) was held in Prague, the Czech Republic, from July 3 to 6. It was hosted by the School of Economics (VŠE) at its new campus conveniently located in the city center only a five-minute walk from the main railway station. Prague itself lies in the very heart of Europe and is a city of considerable cultural, historical, and political interest. Given the increasingly complex political challenges of today's world and the ongoing backsliding of democracy, it was not surprising that the conference attracted a record number of 1,015 submissions (920 accepted papers). It thus became the largest ISPP meeting since the society's founding in 1978.

In an effort to attract participants, congress organizers often repost "final calls" and sometimes are open to accommodate late comers. That was not the case here. The organizers had to evaluate hundreds of submissions and compress them into four intensive days, with 10 or 11 parallel sessions running typically from 8:30 am to after 7 pm. There were 177 sessions altogether, including a couple of virtual ones and co-called "Blitz Presentation Sessions," enabling short, focused presentations aimed at quick sharing of ideas and research. Moreover, there were plenary events: the Presidential Address by Christopher M. Federico, University of Minnesota: *Making Sense of the Link(s) Between the Psychological and the Political: An Extended Belief-Systems Approach* and two keynotes (*Fragile Identities in Politically Unstable Societies* by Anna Kende, Eötvös Loránd University, and *Psychology of Democracy: A Matter of Life and Death*, by Martina Klicperová-Baker, Czech Academy of Sciences). Furthermore, there were posters, roundtables, and ample opportunities to network and socialize.

The conference chairs (C. Farhart, X. Xu and A. de Angelis) prepared the event excellently and the overall organization was exemplary. The electronic congress program and its app were user-friendly; the program contained several alternative listings – an at-a-glance schedule, sessions by theme, sessions by day, and a practical index of participants with their affiliation and presentations including the session numbers. The venue and classrooms were easy to find and many helpful volunteers were available throughout. Sessions ran smoothly and on time, I did not notice any cancellations, technology worked flawlessly, and catering was of fine quality and plentiful. The organizers even managed to handle a force majeure event: an unprecedented blackout that struck half of the country. One possible improvement for future meetings would be to avoid scheduling thematically similar sessions in direct time conflict, which was likely a result of the rich program.

Most frequent topics - including conspiracy and polarization

Congress themes are typically selected to capture pressing issues and participants tend to engage with them when they are well chosen. This was also the case at the Prague congress, whose theme was "Social Identity, Political Conflict, and the Future of Democracy."

The most frequently discussed topics, closely aligned with the congress theme, were social identity, the psychology of democracy, and civic engagement. Intergroup relations were also highly represented, as a central subject of contemporary political psychology.

Migration was partly subsumed under these broader categories but was also addressed ex-

plicitly: while only three symposia titles mentioned migration directly, as many as 37 presentations included it in their titles. Migration thus became a recurring element in discussions of attitudes, prejudice, integration, media, language and rhetoric, ideology, well-being, rights, and policies. Inequality was named in six session titles and appeared explicitly in 21 presentations.

Another important area, climate (three symposia) and environment (two symposia), appeared somewhat sidelined by the more urgent political agenda. Nonetheless, researchers affirmed its relevance, devoting 18 presentations to climate and additional 17 to environmental issues.

Interestingly, two narrowly defined topics which were not directly prompted by the congress theme emerged as especially prominent: polarization and conspiracy. Polarization featured in the headlines of 17 sessions (10 percent of all sessions) and 37 presentations. Conspiracy appeared in the headlines of seven sessions and in as many as 42 presentation titles, the count is even higher if we add misinformation (two sessions and eight presentations), misbelief and political communication. *The frequent spontaneous appearance of polarization and conspiracy themes indicates the main pressure points that political psychologists identify in the current political climate and actively attempt to address.*

Some of the classic academic themes that traditionally occupied a prominent place in political psychology research appeared somewhat overshadowed by politically urgent issues and current events. This may signal the genuine effort of political psychologists to demonstrate their relevance and willingness to contribute to addressing today's serious crises.

The ISPP community

There are many aspects which make the ISPP not merely a professional association but a genuine community. It is distinguished by openness and collegiality.

Political psychology, despite its name, is an interdisciplinary field open to all relevant scientific disciplines, not only psychology. Scholars in political science, history, sociology, anthropology, media studies, and other domains are welcome. All members are also invited to attend the Business Meeting, an open session with ISPP officers at the annual congress.

When planning the annual meetings, a considerable effort is made to ensure affordability. In some cases, assistance can be provided to young or underprivileged participants.

ISPP strongly promotes intergenerational connections. It recognizes the contributions of its emeriti members, honors distinguished achievements across all career stages, and is particularly welcoming to young scholars. As usual, the Early Career Scholars Committee organized multiple events tailored for scholars within eight years of receiving their PhD. At the Prague conference, despite an already packed schedule, organizers prepared not only a Welcome Reception but also a Mentoring Lunch, where early-career scholars were paired with senior ISPP members for an intensive 90-minute exchange on research, professional development, and academic socialization. Other dedicated programs included the Early Career Scholars Social Hour and a workshop *How to Talk About Your Research*, aimed at developing communication skills. The roundtable *The Dissertation Is Done, Now What?* focused on publication opportunities, while *Navigating Challenges as Early Career Researchers* roundtable addressed issues of academic employment. The Awards Ceremony featured special recognition for the best dissertation, among others.

The ISPP promotes democratic values and peaceful coexistence. The Caucus of Concerned Scholars, chaired by Kristen Monroe, convened a panel on *Resilience, Recovery, and Political Trauma*, including virtual contributions from scholars unable to attend in person. Moreover, ISPP actively supports colleagues in regions affected by war and violence, with a dedicated Scholars Under Threat Committee.

Attention is given to the region hosting the annual meeting. In Prague, keynote lectures were delivered by scholars from Central Europe (Czechia and Hungary). In addition, Martina Klicperová-Baker of the Czech Academy of Sciences introduced a new workshop, *Know Your Hosts: Political Psychology of Czechs and Moravians*. The aim was not only to familiarize international participants with the local political psychology but also with the psychohistory, psychogeography, and psycholinguistics of the host country, providing deeper understanding of its culture and people. The workshop was well attended, and it is hoped that this experiment will mark the beginning of a new ISPP tradition.

Although the conference officially concluded on Sunday evening, it was followed by an annex event: a screening of the new Czech documentary *Million Moments for Democracy*. Both the director, A. Kovářová, and the main protagonist, pro-democracy activist M. Minář, took part in a discussion with the audience. They illustrated, through recent Czech history, how a small group of activists was able to mobilize hundreds of thousands of citizens in defense of democracy. The event continued ISPP's earlier tradition of screening political documentaries.

The next meeting

Although ISPP usually strives to alternate continents for its meetings, the next annual gathering will take place in Newcastle upon Tyne, England, United Kingdom (thus at least off the European continent), July 16–19, 2026. The theme of the 49th Annual Meeting will be *"Finding Common Ground in Uncertain Times."* The conference will be held under the presidency of Joanne Miller (University of Delaware, USA), with Rosario Aguilar (Newcastle University, UK), Ka-Ming (Bo) Chan (Newcastle University, UK), and Aleksander Ksiazkiewicz (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, US) serving as Program Co-chairs. The submission portal is expected to open in October 2025. All ISPP members and interested scholars are warmly invited to visit https://ispp.org/meetings/ and to take part in ISPP 2026.

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