

<u>Information on Postgraduate Research Scholarship</u> <u>Ref: GBS-PhD-10-2026-4</u>			
Faculty:	Business	School	Management & Marketing
Lead Supervisor:	Vera Weghmann		
Project Title:	Can Public Services Rebuild Democracy? Public Ownership, Social Trust and the Rise of Authoritarian Structures		
Project Description:	The growing electoral success of authoritarian political movements and their appeal to "strong" leadership, exclusionary narratives and anti-democratic principles has sent shockwaves through democratic societies across the world in what is often described as a global " Neo-Authoritarianism" (Wodak, 2022). Existing explanations emphasise economic insecurity, deindustrialisation, austerity, territorial inequalities and cultural grievances. Yet one potential source of democratic resilience has received remarkably little attention: public services. Public services are among the most visible manifestations of the democratic state, shaping citizens' everyday experiences through universal access to healthcare, education, transport, housing, energy and local government. Public Services not only redistribute resources but also create shared experiences, strengthen social citizenship and embody principles of solidarity, fairness and democratic accountability. This raises an important question that this PhD study will address: can well-funded, universally accessible public services under democratic control strengthen social trust and democratic resilience, or are other dynamics increasingly overriding these effects? The question is particularly pertinent given that support for authoritarian politics has also grown in countries with comparatively strong public service systems, suggesting that the relationship between public services and democratic resilience is more complex than currently understood. Existing studies have demonstrated that welfare states can moderate support for far-right parties by reducing economic insecurity and social exclusion (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018, Stroppe 2023; Vlandas and Halikiopoulou, 2022). However, research has focused predominantly on income transfers, labour market conditions and electoral behaviour (De Kadt and Lieberman 2020; Vlandas and Halikiopoulou 2022). As Vlandas & Halikiopoulou 2022 point out surprisingly little attention has been paid to whether (and how) access to public services affects citizens' programmatic vote choices, especially where access has historically been high. Health systems, transport networks, education, housing, energy and local government services are often the most visible expressions of democracy in everyday life. When such services deteriorate, become inaccessible, or are perceived as unfair, trust in democratic institutions may erode (Vlandas & Halikiopoulou 2022; Stroppe 2023). This PhD project builds on emerging research demonstrating that public services are among the most powerful mechanisms for reducing inequality		

	(Hall 2014; Cibrario, D. and Weghmann, 202; Hall and Nguyen 2025). PSIRU research shows that public services often contribute more to equality than taxation and welfare transfers combined, particularly through the universal provision of healthcare, education and infrastructure (Hall and Nguyen 2025). Public services redistribute resources. Beyond that they create shared experiences, strengthen social citizenship and embody principles of universalism and solidarity. Moreover, public sector employment tends to generate more equal wage structures and reduce labour market inequalities. Yet despite these important findings, little research has examined whether these equalising functions translate into greater political trust and democratic resilience (Ibid). The PhD project will therefore investigate the relationship between public service accessibility, ownership structures, social trust and support for far-right politics. Particular attention will be paid to differences between publicly owned, outsourced and privatised models of service provision, as well as territorial inequalities in access to public services. The study will also examine the role of trade unions as democratic institutions that mediate relationships between citizens, workers and the state. Methodologically, the project will combine comparative political economy with case studies of selected European regions and municipalities. It will analyse patterns of public service provision, ownership, electoral behaviour and social trust, complemented by interviews with trade unionists, public service workers, local authorities, policymakers and community organisations. References: Cibrario, D. and Weghmann, V. (2021) 'Access to Quality Local Public Services for All: A Precondition to Beat Inequality'. <i>GOLD VI Working Paper Series</i>, No. 02. Barcelona: UCLG. De Kadt, Daniel, and Evan S. Lieberman. 2020. "Nuanced Accountability: Voter Responses to Service Delivery in Southern Africa." <i>British Journal of Political Science</i> 50(1): 185–215. Hall, D. and Nguyen, T.A. (2025) <i>Equality and Public Services: Beyond Consumer Spending</i>. London: Public Services International Research Unit (PSIRU), University of Greenwich. Rodríguez-Pose, A., 2018. The revenge of the places that don't matter (and what to do about it). <i>Cambridge journal of regions, economy and society</i>, 11(1), pp.189-209. Stroppe, A.K., 2023. Left behind in a public services wasteland? On the accessibility of public services and political trust. <i>Political Geography</i>, 105, p.102905.
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	Vlandas, T. and Halikiopoulou, D., 2022. Welfare state policies and far right party support: moderating 'insecurity effects' among different social groups. <i>West European Politics</i>, 45(1), pp.24-49. Wodak, R. (2022) 'Entering the "Post-Shame Era": The Rise of Illiberal Democracy, Populism and Neo-Authoritarianism in Europe', in Foster, R. and Grzyski, J. (eds.) <i>The Limits of Europe: Identities, Spaces, Values</i>. Bristol: Bristol University Press, pp. 207–227. doi:10.51952/9781529221817.ch019.
Duration:	3 years, Full-Time Study or 6 years, Part-Time Study
Bursary available (subject to satisfactory performance):	
<i>Year 1: £23,805 (UKRI 2026-27 standard rate including London Weighting)</i> <i>Years 2 & 3: In line with relevant UKRI rate</i> In addition, the successful candidate will receive a contribution to tuition fees equivalent to the university's Home rate for the duration of their scholarship. International applicants will need to pay the remainder tuition fee for the duration of their scholarship. The fee is subject to an annual increase. Partially funded by the European Federation of Public Service Unions (EPSU) and Arbeiterkammer Wien (AK Wien)	
Person Specification of Essential (E) or Desirable (D) requirements:	
Criteria:	E or D
Education and Training:	
1st Class or 2nd class, First Division (Upper Second Class) honours degree or a taught master's degree with a minimum average of 60% in all areas of assessment (UK or UK equivalent) in a relevant area to the proposed research project	E
For those whose first language is not English and/or if from a country where English is not the majority spoken language (as recognised by the UKBA), a language proficiency score of at least IELTS 6.5 (in all elements of the test) or an equivalent UK VISA and Immigration secure English Language Test is required, if your programme falls within the faculty of Engineering and Science a language proficiency score of at least IELTS 6.5 overall with a minimum of 6.0 in all elements of the test or an equivalent UK VISA and Immigration secure English Language Test is required. Unless the degree above was taught in English and obtained in a majority English speaking country, e.g. UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand, etc, as recognised by the UKBA.	E
Experience & Skills:	
Previous experience of undertaking research (e.g. undergraduate or taught master's dissertation)	E

• Previous experience of undertaking independent research (e.g. undergraduate or Master's dissertation)	E
• Demonstrable interest in political economy, public policy, public services and/or questions of social justice	E
• Excellent written and verbal communication skills	E
• Experience of qualitative and/or quantitative research method	D
• Experience of engaging with policymakers, trade unions, NGOs or civil society organisations	D
• Knowledge of a European language other than English	D
Personal Attributes:	
• Understands the fundamental differences between a taught degree and a research degree in terms of approach and personal discipline/motivation	E
• Able to, under guidance, complete independent work successfully	E
• Excellent organisational and time-management skills	E
Other Requirements:	
• This scholarship may require Academic Technology Approval Scheme approval for the successful candidate if from outside of the EU/EEA	E
• The scholarship must commence before 30 October 2026	E
Closing date for applications:	midnight UTC on 11/08/2026
For further information contact:	v.weghmann@gre.ac.uk
Making an application: Please read this information before making an application. Information on the application process is available at: https://www.gre.ac.uk/research/study/apply/application-process. Applications need to be made online via this link. No other form of application will be considered. All applications must include the following information. Applications not containing these documents will not be considered. • Scholarship Reference Number (Ref)– included in the personal statement section together with your personal statement as to why you are applying • a CV including 2 referees * • a detailed research proposal of about 1,500 words • academic qualification certificates/transcripts and IELTS/English Language certificate if you are an international applicant or if English is not your first language or you are from a country where English is not the majority spoken language as defined by the UK Border Agency * <i>*upload to the qualification section of the application form. Attachments must be a PDF format.</i> Before submitting your application, you are encouraged to liaise with the Lead Supervisor on the details above.	