Check for updates

Article

Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies

European View
1–12
© The Author(s) 2025
DOI: 10.1177/17816858251390923
journals.sagepub.com/home/euv
Sage

The next generations need a new social contract for European defence

Agnieszka Homańska
Head of the political cabinet of Poland's deputy prime minister and minister of foreign affairs, Poland

Wojciech Przybylski
President of the Res Publica Foundation, Editor-in-Chief of *Visegrad Insight*, Poland

Abstract

In response to escalating geopolitical threats, particularly from Russia, compounded by climate-related crises, European nations are reconsidering how to rebuild their military services by engaging the younger generations. This article argues that there is a need for a new social contract to align national defence imperatives with the socio-economic realities of Gen Z. While traditional patriotic calls resonate with older generations, younger Europeans—disconnected from the military paradigms of the past—prioritise economic stability, mental health and institutional trust. The success of defence mobilisation thus hinges on repositioning service as an opportunity for skill development, civic participation and social advancement. This article draws from Central and Eastern European experiences, particularly those of Poland, proposing a framework that links defence to dual-use innovation, voluntary engagement and tangible state support. Rebuilding trust between young people and state institutions is crucial to securing democratic legitimacy, societal cohesion and preparedness in the face of emerging hybrid threats. Mainstream parties must lead this transformation to outpace both the populists and institutional fatigue.

Keywords

Next generation, Youth, Military, Social contract, Warfare, Modernisation, Conscription

Corresponding author:
Agnieszka Homańska, Head of the political cabinet of Poland's deputy prime minister and minister of foreign affairs, Grzybowska 6/10/1009, 00-131 Warsaw, Poland.
Email: agnieszkahomanska@gmail.com

Creative Commons CC BY: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) which permits any use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage).

Introduction[1]

After nearly 20 years on pause, conscription is making a comeback in Europe—driven by Russia's aggression and mounting global threats. The invasion of Ukraine has prompted a reassessment of defence strategy, with climate shocks adding to the strain. While Russia's strategic documents emphasise defensive adaptation and opportunities for cooperation, they subtly frame climate as a battleground against Western 'hegemony' (Russia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023). Olivia Lazard (2022) at Carnegie Europe argues that Russia is exploiting climate change in its asymmetric warfare and to achieve resource dominance. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine reflects Putin's strategy to leverage climate disruptions to shift global power. Russia, benefiting from global warming, aims to control resources and create dependencies through force in a climate-destabilised world. Russia's invasion of Ukraine targets its agricultural lands (Europe's 'breadbasket') and the critical minerals (e.g. lithium and titanium) vital for the EU's Green Deal. The Russian occupation of eastern Ukraine is jeopardising Ukrainian mineral partnerships with the EU and the US, dating from 2021 and 2025, respectively. This aspect of the Russian strategy is globally important. Lazard links it to the Wagner Group's African operations, in which supply chains are being weaponised to undermine EU decarbonisation by securing control over mining sites for critical minerals (e.g. lithium and titanium) in order to disrupt the EU's economic security. In effect this is undermining the EU's Green Deal and decarbonisation efforts by creating dependencies, restricting access to the resources needed for green technologies such as batteries and renewable energy infrastructure, and exploiting climate vulnerabilities, thus enabling Russian resource dominance in a destabilised global landscape. Russia justifies its aggression with historical narratives while exploiting Western climate vulnerabilities, betting on delayed climate action. The Western focus on climate is also closely linked to geostrategy, as epitomised in British strategic culture, which is widely discussed in many policy documents (UK Parliament 2023). For instance, in 2023 Hungarian–American investor and philanthropist George Soros updated his Munich Security Conference focus on global warming to include the implications of the war for climate action (Soros 2023). Council of the European Union studies demonstrate how the Russian aggression has worsened the global food crisis (Council of the European Union 2025), while some researchers point to food supply issues as being one of the driving factors that contributed to the Arab Spring revolutions which began a decade ago (Wanat and Aarup 2022).

Countries on NATO's eastern flank—such as Poland, the Baltics, Finland and Romania—face shrinking populations and growing recruitment gaps. Further west, similar demographic decline is testing NATO's ambition to muster the will to fight and, at the same time, societal acceptance of increased military spending. Tensions are mounting against the backdrop of a necessary increase in other spending, on needs such as pensions and healthcare, due to changing demographic pyramids.

Nationalist sentiments—resurfacing across the West—are frequently embracing a militaristic mode in which 'might makes right', while mainstream parties—particularly the Christian Democrats—bear a responsibility to imbue this resurgence with values-driven moral substance. Even more importantly, such an infusion would enhance the

democratic legitimacy of European leadership. The latter is facing a paradigm shift that extends beyond NATO to the EU, with nearly all countries in the global West transitioning from a peace-ensured, globalist project to one that ties trade and regulations to robust security measures, as Trubowitz and Burgoon explain in *Geopolitics and Democracy: The Western Liberal Order from Foundation to Fracture* (2023, 87–108). They observe that today both far-left and far-right populists share strong anti-globalist sentiments, and they propose that the mainstream parties regain ground by drawing lessons from their winning strategies of the twentieth century, namely focusing on delivering prosperity through trade tied in all respects to security (military, domestic and international).

A testing ground for democratic resilience

In this context, the political and strategic considerations required on the eastern flank provide a critical sandbox for European mainstream parties to adapt their democratic strategies to real-world wargaming realities. On the one hand, the twenty-first-century challenge remains the rise of radical populists, who are gaining ground across the continent; on the other, the pressing urgency of Sino-Russian military power poses a threat to NATO and the Global West. Poland's lessons are particularly telling. Donald Tusk's security-driven narrative in the 2023 election—centred on border security, support for Ukraine, countering Russian aggression and alignment with the West—secured a coalition majority of mainstream parties, sidelining the far-right and radicals, also due to significant support from younger voters. The coalition government increased defence funding (to 4.7% of GDP, among the highest in NATO), along with social spending initiatives such as *babciowe* (grandparental leave support), demonstrating that 'bread and butter' policies can coexist with security priorities. It further bolstered its focus on prosperity, tapping into EU funds and promising to cut red tape for entrepreneurs. At the same time, this political narrative underpins Poland's ambitious militarisation target of 300,000 troops, with Tusk outlining plans in March 2025 for 500,000 trained personnel (active and reserve). However, the coalition's momentum faces uncertainty following a disappointing loss to far-right candidate Karol Nawrocki in the 2025 presidential election, with the durability of the strategy to be tested by the 2027 elections.

Other Central and Eastern European countries face similar struggles in adapting to the new geostrategic realities. The Baltic states, which have mobilised citizens for compulsory military training and army service in response to Russia's threat, share Poland's defence-oriented mindset and struggle against left- and right-wing populists, who collectively achieve up to 30% support in each of the countries. Similarly, Czechia—though not directly bordering Russia but mindful of the 1968 Soviet invasion—has been increasing its professional military service.

However, demographic constraints limit these countries' potential compared to Poland's ambitious targets. The Baltics and Czechia can only muster a fraction of Poland's planned half a million in reserve, highlighting the need for a tailored approach to mobilisation that accounts for regional differences and demographic realities.

Russia's aggression and ongoing military mobilisation, which has quickly built up army numbers despite major losses in Ukraine, has shattered complacency, reigniting conscription debates. Even though today's youth across all of Europe prioritise their daily struggles over concern for military danger—poised as they are between the heightened Russian threat perception and their own vulnerability to interference in their everyday lives (via rigged elections, social media disinformation etc.)—their attitudes lean towards defending their nations or even the European continent. The military numbers from the aforementioned Central and Eastern European countries, together with Finland's exemplary whole-of-society approach,[2] are, however, hardly enough to match the Russian army's numbers, given the completely different attitude to military service in other parts of Europe. In addition, the new generation comes with a whole set of psychological burdens from the post-Covid digital age, which must be factored into European defence posture plans.

The war in Ukraine underscores the critical importance of numerical strength: Russia's conscripts are pitted against Ukraine's motivated volunteers. Within NATO, disparities abound—Poland currently maintains over 200,000 troops with plans for 300,000, including territorial defence; Finland adheres to a comprehensive total defence paradigm; and Germany exhibits ongoing reticence. Meanwhile, a lack of youth participation (National Democratic Institute 2024) is jeopardising overall preparedness, with young people being detached from the historical legacies of the Second World War—which contrasts with Russia's strategic invocation of such narratives for mobilisation.

From Gen Z to GI Joes in Central Europe

They may sound right to the ears of the older generations, but for Gen Z, born at the turn of the century, emotional appeals to build up defence and resilience should be coupled with a new model of socio-economic incentives fit for their specific context.

Today's 18-year-old Europeans are too young to recall NATO countries suspending or abolishing compulsory military service. NATO's demilitarisation marked the culmination of the 'peace dividend' in recent Western history. Eastern flank countries, once fielding hundreds of thousands of troops trained under Warsaw Pact directives to invade Berlin on Moscow's orders, downsized their armies upon EU and NATO accession. Conscription ended in Czechia in 2004 and in Poland in 2009 (where conscripts had supplied around 300,000 troops in 1990). Germany abolished conscription in 2011, dismantling its once-formidable 500,000-strong continental force. In the same period, Russia also decreased its forces from nearly 2 million to about 1.5 million service personnel. The 'end of history' seemed assured, nurturing a generation in a markedly different world.

But for a member of Gen Z who has just entered adulthood, the military numbers and personal choices related to military service are quite abstract. Their lifetime geopolitical frame of reference includes Bulgaria and Romania's entry into the EU when they were born; the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, along with the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the global financial crisis when they were just a year old; the Lisbon Treaty's activation and Michael Jackson's death at the age of 2; Hungary's Fidesz's supermajority reshaping democracy at 3; Netflix's European launch at 4; Obama's second US term at 5; Russia's

annexation of Crimea at age 6; Brexit at 8; TikTok's debut at 9; the release of Squid Game at 12; the Covid-19 pandemic halting the world at 13; and Russia's invasion of Ukraine at 15. Many things we perceive as obvious feel surreal to those who are 18 years old or just a bit older and who are now considering putting on a military uniform.

This article argues for a new social contract—an intergenerational deal—to be established. It should take into account both the objective military needs and the realities of the social fabric of today's potential recruits. Even in Poland, which has a population of 38 million and in 2022 adopted a bill to achieve 300,000 troops by 2035—passed with the unique bipartisan support of nearly all members of Parliament—recruitment seems an uphill battle. This article explores why this challenge is so strongly linked to the next generations. While focusing on Poland, it offers observations that might be applicable in other countries. It makes recommendations on how to meet the necessary mobilisation levels while avoiding a major societal backlash that could threaten the democratic legitimacy of the mainstream parties.

Understanding the next generations

Europe's leaders are rediscovering the vocabulary of conscription—but many of its young citizens are speaking a different language. As Russia's war in Ukraine sharpens traditional security reflexes, policymakers are rushing to revisit old frameworks of national service and military readiness. However, if you want to draft a new social contract, you must begin by discarding outdated assumptions. Policies built on yesterday's certainties will not line up with today's realities.

Differentiate fear from anxiety

Russia's war in Ukraine has reawakened a continent-wide sense of vulnerability, reviving fear-based threat perceptions across Europe. But this psychological shift is uneven—filtered through the lenses of generational and regional differences. For many younger Europeans, the spectre of war ranks lower than more immediate, tangible concerns. In a 2024 survey, respondents aged 18–30 identified rising prices and the cost of living (40%) as their top priority for EU action over the next 5 years, followed by climate change and environmental protection (33%), and economic growth and job creation (31%). Close behind were calls for stronger welfare systems and improved access to healthcare (29%), according to Eurobarometer (2024). Education, housing, and even defence and security all registered as important, but for fewer than one in four respondents. In short, while hard power has returned to the continent, soft pressures still dominate the minds of its younger citizens. Clearly, young people fear not only war but also daily systemic uncertainties.

Let us now look at countries in detail: in Germany, in 2019, 46% of young people said that they were afraid of Russia (while 71% mentioned environmental pollution, 66% terrorist attacks and 65% climate change); in 2024, 81% pointed to Russia as the biggest threat (the other threats standing at, respectively, 64%, 61% and 63%) (Whittle 2024). In Poland, the young consider the most important issues to tackle to be increasing prices and the cost of living (88%), healthcare (84%) and—in third place—Russian aggression (77%) (Horonziak and Pazderski 2024, 58).

Transitioning to adulthood is a difficult process in itself: in Poland, while 77% believe youth is a time of opportunity, 70% feel stress and nearly half (49%) report deep uncertainty (Gagatek et al. 2025, 12). Fear of war is acute but external; anxiety is chronic and internal. Understanding both is key to interpreting young people's attitudes towards military service.

Modern patriotism: 'Why fight for a country that leaves me alone?'

Many young people in Europe feel abandoned by the state, and this has weakened the motivation to defend it. This issue is more complex than one may think. We can observe, on the one hand, declining trust in political leadership and traditional institutions, which breeds anti-system attitudes. On the other hand, we see a rising distrust of institutions and a shift towards individualised values, which are shaping modern civic attitudes. Look at the numbers: in Poland 65% of respondents aged 18–29 declare that in crises, they can only rely on themselves and their loved ones, while just 35% believe that they can count on support from the state. What is more, young people are unequivocal in their opinion that the government cares more about the elderly than about the young. Eighty per cent of respondents and the vast majority of voters for all parties (73%–86%) agree with this statement. Support for this statement declines with age. The cohort above 60 is more likely to believe that the government cares more about young people than older people. However, even among this group, 46% admit that the government cares more about them than about young people (Gagatek et al. 2025, 40).

Across Europe many young people no longer feel the sort of strong bond to the state that would inspire its defence. This is not mere apathy—it reflects a more complex erosion of civic trust. Disillusionment with political leadership and traditional institutions has fostered anti-systemic sentiment, while a broader cultural shift towards individualism has reshaped young citizens' expectations of the public sphere. This feeling is linked to anti-establishment voting—young people are more likely to vote for parties on either the extreme left or right of the political spectrum, as these parties seem to offer the novelty young voters find lacking in traditional parties (Cokelaere 2024). Yet, the latter are often the ones that govern. The result is a generation that feels increasingly left to fend for itself.

On the European level, when considering the possibility of a crisis, nearly half of young Europeans (aged 18–35) expect to face armed conflict, yet only around 30% would volunteer (Testoni et al. 2024, 28–30).

Civic responsibility must be earned through reciprocity—states must provide before demanding sacrifice. Instead of responding to coercion or guilt-based appeals, young people want to choose responsibility, not have it imposed upon them. Underlying this growing frustration is a material reality that politicians have failed to address meaningfully: job insecurity (Woods 2024).

The result is a worrying paradox—a generation expected to uphold democratic and security commitments yet given little reason to feel the state is invested in them. Until

that imbalance is redressed, asking young Europeans to rally around institutions they do not trust may prove a losing proposition.

It is not what it used to be: war in the era of technology

Modern warfare has transcended the physical battlefield. It now fundamentally incorporates cyber-attacks, artificial intelligence, logistics chains and information warfare—what the EU refers to as warfare in the 'fifth domain' (cyberspace). Although this complicates war theatres, it also creates new opportunities: conscription or national service could offer training in dual-use skills (e.g. cybersecurity or engineering). Today's conflicts require more than infantry—there is space for tech, education and innovation. Both governments and societies are failing to understand this. GLOBSEC (2025) reveals that among respondents from B9 countries,[3] 90% and 87% think that their governments need to build resilience and capacity in, respectively, countering cyber-attacks and disinformation.

So, what can be done? A 2024 International Centre for Defence and Security review shows that Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland have volunteer cyber conscription programmes, which encompass cyber operations, information technology support and programming, often in partnership with academia and industry. Pilot projects in Denmark train conscripts for 165–347 days in cyber defence, yielding talent deployable in both military and civilian sectors. Estonia offers extracurricular robotics and programming clubs but lacks formal 'cyber-conscript' pathways (Hurt and Somer 2024, 12–13).

There is also a need to bridge the knowledge and engagement gap. How can one become passionate about a job without knowing that it exists? Ninety per cent of young Western Europeans cannot name a single European defence company. Moreover, while they associate defence with weapons, only 20% link it to research and development or advanced tech sectors, and at least 20% do not consider companies in the defence sector to be committed to peace and conflict resolution, protecting democracy or fighting climate change (Testoni et al. 2024, 42–52). This information indicates the huge potential for reframing defence as innovation.

A reimagined readiness

To modernise national service, incorporating civil, cyber, environmental and logistical dimensions is essential. Dual-use education, such as scholarships for engineers and information technology specialists in crisis management, could bolster national research and cultivate 'cloud troops', as evidenced by Estonia's cyber conscription initiatives which take place in collaboration with private employers (Hurt and Somer 2024, 8–9). Poland's 2022 army bill exemplifies this by offering post-service educational opportunities. Moving away from conventional conscription, states should integrate civilian occupations with dual-use potential into crisis-response frameworks, fostering voluntary participation through civic recognition and expertise development, aligning with Gen Z's values of community solidarity and resilience (Braw 2025).

Education must evolve beyond traditional methods to rebuild trust in institutions. Innovative channels such as tailored social media campaigns and local ambassadors could disseminate defence literacy and preparedness, resonating with youth through a 'follow-me' approach. Drawing from regional examples, Denmark and Lithuania provide employment and educational support both during and after service, while Latvia offers free tuition to volunteers and Sweden issues transferable skills certificates. By offering clear incentives and encouraging open dialogue, governments can empower young people, ensuring national security supports democratic engagement and delivers lasting societal benefits. Here, leveraging NATO's 2025 5% pledge might be helpful as well. The spending target is divided into two categories: at least 3.5% of GDP 'based on the agreed definition of NATO defence expenditure' to 'core defence requirements', and up to 1.5% of GDP being spent on other 'defence- and security-related spending', including to '*inter alia* protect our critical infrastructure, defend our networks, ensure our civil preparedness and resilience, unleash innovation, and strengthen our defence industrial base' (NATO 2025). That 1.5% paves the way for decision-makers to invest in projects that serve society but for which it has been difficult to find funding in national budgets until now. An 'outside the box' approach is needed here as it opens up the possibility for dual-use investments to be allocated to the research and development sector or to education to create a ready and resilient civil society.

Capitalise on holiday intervals for engagement

Poland's Ministry of Defence organises complimentary, voluntary one-day Saturday training sessions accessible to individuals aged 15–65, encompassing practical exercises in marksmanship, combat techniques, survival skills and crisis response—without entailing oaths or mobilisation obligations. Approximately 28,000 Poles participated in the inaugural event, with 99% endorsing their continuation. Complementing this initiative, the 'Holidays with the Army' scheme remunerates participants (up to €1,500) for 28-day cycles, targeting those aged 18–35; it attracted over 11,000 enrollees in 2024 and is poised for expansion in 2025 (Poland, Ministry of Defence 2025; Polish Army 2025). Analogous programmes in Czechia cater to teenagers and young adults through summer camps focused on combat instruction, rifle proficiency, field tactics and survival drills, compensating completers with around €1,800 and conferring eligibility for active reserve status subject to supplementary basic training (Kravchuk 2025).

Regional frameworks should be viewed as enablers rather than hindrances. The Nordic–Baltic region, encircling the 'NATO lake' and abutting Belarus, Ukraine and Russia, has regained strategic allure. The Council of the Baltic Sea States, instituted in 1992 to advance cooperation among the Baltic Sea–adjacent nations, comprises 10 states—all aligned within NATO and the EU. Amid Russia's ostracism from such bodies, policymakers ought to accord priority to the Council of the Baltic Sea States as a non-military vehicle for collective resilience, youth involvement and cross-sectoral innovation. Its rotational presidency mechanism empowers each member to imprint its agenda; Poland, having commenced its term in July 2025, could spearhead exchanges of best practice and the formation of working groups on youth engagement in defence.

The playbook to win

It is tempting to assume that centre–right parties are naturally equipped to forge a renewed social contract—balancing stability with opportunity, and order with aspiration. But this assumption risks overlooking a deeper paradox. Precisely because these parties are so embedded in the political establishment, they may be poorly placed to credibly spearhead systemic renewal. The public appetite for change increasingly gravitates towards forces perceived as untainted by the status quo—new, anti-establishment movements that promise rupture rather than reform. And yet, it is exactly the centre–right's institutional memory, social rootedness and command of statecraft that could allow it to reclaim the initiative—if it is willing to act not as a steward of continuity, but as a credible architect of transformation. The new social contract needs to be a combination of security and personal and communal advancement.

Four pivotal recommendations

1. *Elevate national service to an aspirational paradigm.* Dispense with derogatory caricatures of military service as 'grunt' work. Forge connections with climate-response mechanisms (as delineated in the EU Preparedness Strategy), technological innovations and drone operations—positioning gamers as prospective sentinels.
2. *Position service as an integral career milestone.* Embed dual-use training as a foundational component, rather than a peripheral supplement. Safeguard resilience in the employment market by harmonising public- and private-sector contributions, drawing lessons from Ukraine's entrepreneurial military innovators. Ensure that post-service trajectories are elevated, not impeded.
3. *Harmonise 'guns and butter'.* Recast expenditure discourses by aligning NATO procurement with employment opportunities. The appreciable ascent in Rheinmetall's stock value exemplifies market enthusiasm. Introduce instruments such as defence-oriented exchange-traded investment funds to underwrite social provisions, such as childcare and educational facilities, thereby neutralising economic populists.
4. *Confront appeasers.* Avoid empty promises of globalism or unrealistic leftist ideals. Promote steadfast commitment to democratic principles. Offer targeted incentives, such as job training and educational opportunities tied to national service, to strengthen centrist support and counter the appeal of Moscow's influence.

Conclusion: it is time to formulate and execute

The exigencies of European defence necessitate a revitalised social contract, one that integrates the technological insights gleaned from Ukraine's experiences with a renewed emphasis on voluntary commitment. During the Cold War, conscription epitomised societal solidarity: young individuals fulfilled their patriotic obligations through service, the middle-aged contributed through financial support and the elderly reaped the benefits of enhanced security. However, the erosion of welfare systems has disrupted this delicate equilibrium.

The ReArm initiative, an EU framework to enhance European military readiness and resilience, emphasises fiscal priorities, often overlooking the societal trust needed to boost troop recruitment. However, effective national service can create a fair agreement, enabling young people to serve, gain skills and thrive, with society providing robust support. The alienation felt by youth in the eastern-flank countries poses a risk of escalating crises that will likely lead to recruitment shortfalls, even in Poland. Foreign players have been exploiting this possibility by manipulating information and interfering in other ways.

Therefore, to answer the question raised by this issue of the *European View*, no, this is not a lost generation, nor will the next be. The matter lies in the hands of those with the ability to act—the decision-makers. To ensure that these generations do not become lost, a new social contract is urgently needed—one that the new generation and those generations culturally and economically anchored in the twentieth century can all agree on, sign and adhere to.

Notes

1. The views expressed in this article are solely personal and do not reflect the official position of any institution, government or organisation with which the authors are affiliated.
2. As per the United Nations (2023, 10), a whole-of-society approach 'embraces both formal and informal institutions in seeking a generalized agreement across society about policy goals and the means to achieve them'. Finland is known for championing this type of leadership in its security and resilience policy.
3. Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia.

ORCID iD

Wojciech Przybylski https://orcid.org/0009-0001-3306-3126

References

Braw, E. (2025). Europe's young generation is reporting for military service like it's the Cold War. *Politico*, 30 June. https://www.politico.eu/article/military-cold-war-service-lithuania-europe-uk-germany. Accessed 30 July 2025.

Cokelaere, H. (2024). It's not just boomers, young people are voting far right too. *Politico*, 29 May. https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-young-people-right-wing-voters-far-right-politics-eu-elections-parliament/. Accessed 9 September 2025.

Council of the European Union. (2025). How the Russian invasion of Ukraine has further aggravated the global food crisis. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/how-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-has-further-aggravated-the-global-food-crisis/. Accessed 30 July 2025.

Eurobarometer. (2024). Youth survey 2024. https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3392. Accessed 30 July 2025.

Gagatek, K., Karaś, U., & Kelsz, J. (2025). *Stan Młodych 2025* [The State of Young People 2025]. Fundacja ważne sprawy. https://waznesprawy.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/stan-mlodych-2025-raport.pdf. Accessed 28 September 2025.

GLOBSEC. (2025). *GLOBSEC trends 2025: Ready for a new era?* https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/GLOBSEC%20Trends%202025_1.pdf. Accessed 3 August 2025.

Horonziak, S., & Pazderski, F. (2024). *Młodzi w Europie Środkowej. Raport z badania w Polsce* [Young people in Central Europe. Report on research in Poland]. Institute of Public Affairs. Poland. https://www.isp.org.pl/pl/publikacje/mlodzi-w-europie-srodkowej-2024-wyniki-badania-w-polsce. Accessed 28 September 2025.

Hurt, M., & Somer, J. (2021). *Cyber conscription: Estonia's digital path to resilience*. International Centre for Defence and Security. https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/ICDS_Report_Cyber_Conscription_Hurt_Somer_February_2021.pdf. Accessed 20 July 2025.

Kravchuk, V. (2025). Russia's war against Ukraine prompts Czechia to train teenagers in combat skills to strengthen national defense. *Euromaidan Press*, 10 July. https://euromaidanpress.com/2025/07/10/russias-war-against-ukraine-prompts-czechia-to-train-teenagers-in-combat-skills-to-strengthen-national-defense/. Accessed 6 August 2025.

Lazard, O. (2022). Russia's Ukraine invasion and climate change go hand in hand. *Carnegie Europe*, 4 March. https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2022/03/russias-ukraine-invasion-and-climate-change-go-hand-in-hand?lang=en. Accessed 3 August 2025.

National Democratic Institute. (2024). *Youth political participation in Central and Eastern Europe: Regional overview report*. https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI_Youth2024_Seesame_feedback_final-2%20%284%29.pdf. Accessed 20 July 2025.

NATO. (2025). *The Hague Summit declaration*. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_236705.htm. Accessed 1 August 2025.

Poland, Ministry of Defence. (2025). Trenuj z wojskiem' po raz szósty. Startuje kolejna edycja szkoleń wojskowych [Train with the military for the sixth time. The next edition of military training is about to begin]. Accessed 5 August 2025.

Polish Army. (2025). Startuje nabór na letnie szkolenia - Wakacje z wojskiem [Recruitment for summer training begins – Holidays with the army]. 12 May. https://www.wojsko-polskie.pl/zostanzolnierzem/articles/aktualnosci/startuje-nabor-na-letnie-szkolenia-wakacje-z-wojskiem/. Accessed 6 August 2025.

Russia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (2023). *The concept of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation*. https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/. Accessed 7 August 2025.

Soros, G. (2023). Updating my Munich predictions. *Project Syndicate*, 16 March. https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/climate-crisis-deepens-and-ukraine-outlook-improves-by-george-soros-2023-03. Accessed 6 August 2025.

Testoni, M., et al. (2024). *Next generation security: IE CGC NextGen survey report 2024*. Center for the Governance of Change, IE University and Airbus. November. https://static.ie.edu/CGC/Next%20Generation%20Security%20Report.pdf. Accessed 20 July 2025.

Trubowitz, P., & Burgoon, B. (2023). *Geopolitics and democracy: The Western liberal order from foundation to fracture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

UK Parliament. (2023). *First special report: Defence and climate change*. https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5804/cmselect/cmdfence/32/report.html. Accessed 1 August 2025.

United Nations. (2023). *The United Nations world water development report 2023: Partnerships and cooperation for water*. Paris: UNESCO. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000385215/PDF/384655eng.pdf.multi.nameddest=385215. Accessed 5 August 2025.

Wanat, Z., & Aarup, S. A. (2022). Ukraine: The food factor. *Politico*, 6 February. https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-the-food-factor-energy-trade-war-agriculture-market/. Accessed 5 August 2025.

Whittle, H. (2024). Young Germans fear war and poverty yet remain optimistic. *Deutsche Welle*, 15 October. https://www.dw.com/en/young-germans-fear-war-and-poverty-yet-remain-optimistic/a-70472485. Accessed 20 July 2025.

Woods, N. (2024). Why young Europeans are embracing the far right. *Voices*, Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, 28 June. https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/blog/why-young-europeans-are-embracing-far-right. Accessed 10 July 2025.

Author biographies

Agnieszka Homańska *is the head of the political cabinet of Poland's deputy prime minister and minister of foreign affairs. A linguist and political scientist, she previously worked as an analyst and fellow at Visegrad Insight and Res Publica, where, together with Wojciech Przybylski, she co-led the Europe on Edge programme.*

Wojciech Przybylski *is a political analyst, focusing on strategic foresight in EU affairs. He organises the EuropeFuture.Forum, he is the editor of* Visegrad Insight, *president of the Res Publica Foundation in Warsaw, an advisory board member for both the LSE IDEAS Ratiu Forum and the European Forum of New Ideas, and a Europe's Future Fellow at IWM—Institute of Human Sciences. He has been a guest lecturer at the Foreign Service Institute for the US government, Warsaw University and the CEU Democracy Institute. He has co-authored, among other works,* Understanding Central Europe *(Routledge, 2017),* On the Edge: Poland *(Culturescapes, 2019)* and Let's Agree on Poland *(Oxford University Press, 2025)*.