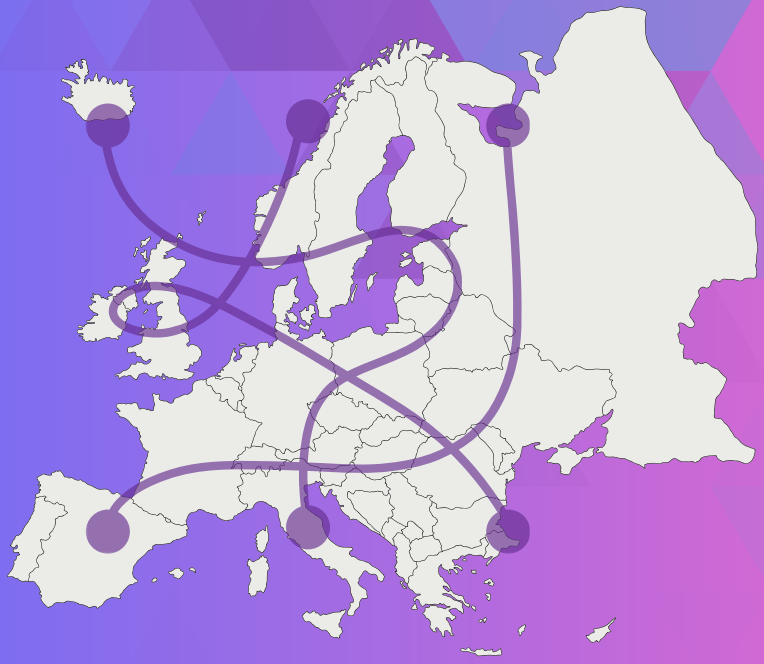
Responding
to Crises in Europe

Editor: Lucie Tungul



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Europe at a Crossroads: Security, Democracy, and Resilience. An Instroduction

Lucie Tungul

The chapters collected in this volume were written against the backdrop of an accelerating crisis in the European security order. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 did not simply alter the parameters of conventional military deterrence; it exposed structural vulnerabilities across democratic governance, economic supply chains, information ecosystems, and the architecture of international cooperation that had accumulated over more than three decades of post-Cold War complacency. The contributors to this volume approach these challenges from distinct disciplinary and national vantage points, yet a common thread runs through their analyses: the conviction that the European response to this moment will be shaped not only by military capacity or institutional design, but by the quality of democratic governance and civic resilience at every level of political life.

The volume is organised around three broad and overlapping concerns. The first is the challenge of containing Russian aggression through sustained international cooperation — militarily, economically, digitally, and diplomatically. The second is the internal dimension of democratic resilience: the capacity of European states and societies to withstand hybrid threats, information manipulation, and the erosion of political norms, whether imported from abroad or generated from within. The third is the question of reconstruction and integration — how Ukraine, its municipalities, and its civic institutions can emerge from war in a form that sustains the democratic gains of the post-Maidan decade while addressing the structural inequalities that the conflict has both revealed and deepened.

Together, the chapters resist easy optimism. They document remarkable instances of resilience — in Ukrainian hromadas, in Moldova's electoral institutions, in the Baltic states' accumulated experience of hybrid defence, and in the Nordic countries' institutionalised total defence models — while insisting that these achievements remain fragile and conditional. They also register the costs of strategic failure: the diplomatic incoherence that preceded the 2022 invasion, the democratic erosion visible in the United States with direct implications for Europe, and the persistent gaps in Europe's capacity to act collectively in its own defence. Read together, they constitute both a diagnostic account of the present moment and a set of arguments about the institutional, political, and civic investments that the coming years will demand.

Overview of the Chapters

The volume opens with Sebastian Schäffer's chapter on international cooperation and European strategic autonomy. Schäffer argues that containing Russia has become inseparable from a sustained, institutionalised framework that integrates economic deterrence, military and defence cooperation, counter-hybrid instruments, democratic resilience, EU enlargement and digital sovereignty. Examining the evolution of these frameworks since 2022, he assesses both their achievements and their remaining vulnerabilities, with particular attention to the EU's sanctions regime, NATO–EU cooperation, and the growing importance of strategic autonomy amid transatlantic uncertainty under President Trump's second administration. Moldova's 2025 parliamentary elections are examined as a case study demonstrating how well-coordinated international support can translate into domestic democratic resilience under conditions of intense foreign interference. The chapter's central argument — that EU enlargement is not a peripheral policy choice but a core element of Europe's security architecture — sets a conceptual tone that recurs across the volume.

Teodor Žukas examines the diplomatic record of the six months preceding Russia's full-scale invasion, tracing the sequence of miscalculations, strategic ambiguities, and missed opportunities that characterised Western diplomacy from the publication of Putin's July 2021 essay through to 24 February 2022. His analysis is deliberately diagnostic: Western diplomacy did not fail for want of engagement, but because it was fragmented, insufficiently credible, and strategically incoherent. The repeated emphasis on what the West would not do — rather than on cultivating deliberate strategic ambiguity — reduced rather than enhanced deterrence. The chapter draws operational lessons for future diplomacy with Russia, arguing that the present period of hybrid pressure against NATO's eastern flank may represent a renewed preparatory phase requiring credible, proactive deterrence grounded in demonstrated political resolve.

Ondřej Filipec turns to the hybrid threat environment along the EU's eastern borders, drawing on the accumulated experience of the Baltic states and Moldova to derive transferable lessons for Czechia and other exposed European countries. Analysing specific cases — the Russian shadow fleet in the Baltic Sea, the weaponisation of migration at the Polish-Belarusian border, drone incursions into NATO airspace, and Russian electoral interference in Moldova — he identifies patterns of hybrid aggression and the multi-layered responses that have proved most effective. The chapter argues for a transition from reactive to proactive deterrence, emphasising the importance of multi-domain resilience, regional cooperation, and cost-effective countermeasures that do not exhaust institutional resources or compromise democratic values in the process.

Peter Hefele and George Dimakos examine the concept of total defence and its applicability across different democratic contexts in Europe. Using Sweden and Finland as benchmark cases — where

total defence is a permanent organising principle of the state, embedded in multi-annual parliamentary resolutions and legally binding frameworks that span peacetime, crisis, and wartime — they develop a four-layer analytical framework covering strategic, governance, operational, and societal dimensions. Greece is examined as an adaptation case, illustrating both the potential and the limits of transferring the Nordic model to a different institutional and cultural setting. Where the Nordic countries achieve coherence across all four dimensions through whole-of-government coordination, public-private integration, and high levels of civic participation, Greece's approach remains predominantly contingency-based and event-driven, with civil-military coordination activated during emergencies rather than maintained continuously. The chapter identifies democratic anchoring — civilian oversight, proportionality, transparency, and respect for fundamental rights — as a non-negotiable precondition for any sustainable total defence model and closes with recommendations for improving European coordination without displacing the national and local systems that give preparedness its legitimacy.

Laurynas Peluritis contributes a philosophically grounded analysis of the relationship between collective memory, historical truth, and political manipulation. Drawing on the work of Maurice Halbwachs and Astrid Erll, he argues that the postmodern turn in historiography — while democratising in intent — created a vulnerability that Russian propaganda has systematically exploited. By instrumentalising nostalgia, promoting 'alternative facts', and weaponising the inherent selectivity of collective memory, Russian state actors have been able to advance historical revisionism and undermine the moral legitimacy of independent statehood across Central and Eastern Europe. The chapter calls for a return to normative standards and scientific factuality in public policy and historical education as a necessary defence against the strategic distortion of the past.

Gábor Berczeli's chapter on Ukraine's municipal democracy offers a detailed account of how decentralisation reform, launched after Maidan in 2014, built an institutional foundation that proved critical to Ukraine's wartime resilience. Drawing on extensive field experience and training work with Ukrainian councillors and municipal officials, Berczeli traces the reform's enabling conditions — political opening, civic activism, international support, and the entry of a new generation of practitioners into local governance — alongside its persistent vulnerabilities, including elite capture, transparency deficits, and incomplete legislative frameworks. The chapter then examines the war's disruptions: the emergence of parallel civil-military administrations, fiscal recentralisation, deepening regional disparities between west and east, and the demographic and cultural losses that threaten the viability of entire communities. It concludes with a set of conditions and recommendations for a reconstruction process that builds on the decentralisation legacy rather than abandoning it under the pressures of emergency governance.

Werner Fasslabend and Christoph Schwarz examine Austria's policy of permanent neutrality in the context of a fundamentally transformed European security environment. Tracing neutrality's Cold War origins as both a prerequisite for sovereignty and a functional instrument of diplomatic security, they assess how the structural conditions that once sustained this model have been eroded by European integration, the end of bipolarity, and the resurgence of great-power rivalry. With Austria now surrounded almost entirely by EU and NATO member states, and with its security increasingly embedded in collective European frameworks from which it remains institutionally excluded, the authors argue that the central challenge is not whether neutrality should be retained — public and political sentiment makes abandonment unrealistic in the foreseeable future — but how it can be credibly reconciled with Austria's obligations and interests within Europe's collective security architecture.

Dalibor Roháč offers a sober assessment of democratic erosion in the United States and its implications for Europe. Documenting the structural weaknesses in American governance — a hollowed-out Congress, intensified partisan polarisation, the erosion of institutional norms — that preceded and enabled Trump's second administration, he argues that the changes now underway represent a qualitative turning point rather than a temporary aberration. The chapter examines Trump's challenges to procedural democracy, the transformation of the U.S. information ecosystem, and the shift toward a narrowly predatory approach to international affairs that has damaged long-standing partnerships and alliances. For Europe, the implications are direct: the uncertainty surrounding U.S. security commitments demands accelerated investment in autonomous European defence and strategic culture, while the American example of democratic backsliding carries urgent lessons about the vulnerabilities that must be addressed at home.

Šárka Waisová maps the evolution of the European Union's policy on critical raw materials (CRMs), analysing how the intersection of decarbonisation demands, digital transition, and geopolitical competition has elevated CRM supply security to a strategic priority. Tracing the development of EU legislation from the 2008 Raw Materials Initiative to the 2024 Critical Raw Materials Act, she assesses the range of instruments — regulatory frameworks, multilateral partnerships, investment promotion, skills development, and information sharing — that the EU has deployed to reduce strategic dependencies. The chapter identifies persistent gaps: insufficient domestic geological exploration, underdeveloped secondary resource mapping, inadequate real-time monitoring capacity, and structural difficulties in accessing finance for long-lead mining investments. Together, these challenges underline that supply security for the green and digital transition remains an unresolved strategic vulnerability.

The volume closes with Panagiotis Kakolyris's study of Nea Demokratia's sustained electoral dominance in Greece under Kyriakos Mitsotakis. Read alongside the volume's other contributions, the Greek case offers a counterpoint of institutional stabilisation: a mainstream centre-right party that survived the sovereign debt crisis without electoral collapse, rebuilt public trust through technocratic governance and measurable policy delivery, and demonstrated that post-populist normalisation is achievable when programmatic credibility replaces emotional mobilisation as the primary source of political legitimacy. The chapter argues that the Greek model — centred on reform momentum, digital state transformation, and the management of overlapping crises — carries broader lessons for European democracies seeking to resist fragmentation and rebuild civic confidence in institutions.

A Note on Perspective

The chapters that follow do not speak with a single voice. They were written from different national and disciplinary perspectives, and reflect genuine disagreements over emphasis, strategy, and the appropriate balance between security imperatives and democratic norms. What unites them is a shared commitment to analytical honesty about the challenges Europe faces, and a conviction that durable responses to those challenges will require not only institutional capacity but the renewal of democratic legitimacy from the local level upward. It is in this spirit that the volume is offered to readers.

Containing Russia: International Cooperation, Enlargement and Europe's Strategic Autonomy

Sebastian Schäffer

Summary: Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and its subsequent escalation of hybrid activities across Europe have fundamentally altered the logic of European security. Containing Russia has become inseparable from sustained and institutionalised international cooperation that links economic deterrence, military and defence integration, counter-hybrid instruments, democratic resilience, EU enlargement and digital sovereignty. This chapter analyses how these cooperative frameworks have evolved since 2022 and assesses their effectiveness and the remaining vulnerabilities as of early 2026. It focuses on the European Union's sanctions regime, NATO–EU cooperation, United States security assistance to Ukraine under President Trump's second administration and the growing importance of European strategic autonomy. Moldova's 2025 parliamentary elections are examined as a case study demonstrating how international cooperation can be translated into domestic resilience under conditions involving intense foreign interference. The chapter argues that EU enlargement is not a peripheral policy choice but a core element of Europe's security architecture and that digital autonomy has become indispensable for safeguarding democratic processes. While international cooperation has produced a credible containment framework, its sustainability depends on closing enforcement gaps, preparing EU societies for enlargement ratification and accelerating joint investments in defence and digital capacity.

Keywords: international cooperation, EU enlargement, hybrid threats, strategic autonomy, digital sovereignty

Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a watershed moment for the European security order. The war has never been confined to conventional military operations. It has been accompanied, from its very outset, by a comprehensive hybrid campaign aimed at weakening democratic institutions, polarising societies and undermining trust in Western alliances below the threshold of open conflict (Hybrid CoE, 2018). Cyberattacks, sabotage of the critical infrastructure, foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) and the instrumentalisation of migration form a coherent strategy designed to exploit internal vulnerabilities within European states.

By 2024 and 2025, incidents such as disruptions of undersea cables and energy infrastructure in the Baltic Sea region underlined the extent to which Russia is prepared to test Europe's resilience across multiple domains (CEPA, 2025). These actions reinforced the understanding that security can no longer be addressed through national responses alone but requires sustained international cooperation that integrates economic, military, political and societal instruments (European Commission, 2025b).

The parliamentary elections held in Moldova in September 2025 illustrate both the severity of this challenge and the potential for effective resistance. According to Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)/ Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the elections were "competitive and well run" but "marred by serious concerns" including cyberattacks, illegal foreign funding and disinformation (OSCE/ODIHR, 2025). Despite these pressures, pro-European forces retained power, confirming that resilience is not an abstract concept but a political outcome shaped by preparation, institutional reform and international support (Al Jazeera, 2025). Moldova therefore provides an instructive example for states exposed to Russian pressure, particularly EU enlargement candidates.

EU enlargement needs to be understood as a security policy in its own right. It is not a reward granted at the end of a reform process but a mechanism for extending stability, resilience and deterrence across the continent, this being a position increasingly shared by analysts and policymakers (European Commission, 2025b). This chapter examines how strategic international cooperation contributes to containing Russia, where existing approaches remain insufficient and why European strategic autonomy has become more urgent amid transatlantic uncertainty and the experience of missed opportunities during the Biden administration, now compounded by President Trump's second term (US Department of State, 2025).

Economic Containment Through Sanctions and Financial Cooperation

Economic containment has been one of the most visible and coordinated elements of the international response to Russia's aggression. Since 2022, the European Union has adopted 19 packages of sanctions against Russia, constituting one of the most comprehensive restrictive regimes in modern history (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025). Coordinated closely with G7 partners, these measures target Russia's energy revenues, financial sector, military-industrial supply chains and the individuals responsible for both the war against Ukraine and associated hybrid activities (Transparency International EU, 2025).

Key instruments include the oil price cap, exclusions from the SWIFT financial messaging system, export controls on dual-use technologies and the freezing of around €300 billion in Russian central

bank assets (European Commission, 2025a). As of early 2026, these measures have significantly constrained Russia's fiscal space and technological capacity, forcing a greater reliance on a growing "shadow fleet" of more than 400 vessels, parallel imports and third-country intermediaries, particularly in Asia and the Middle East (K&L Gates, 2025; Institut Jacques Delors, 2024; SUERF, 2025). The decision to channel proceeds from immobilised Russian assets into large-scale financial support for Ukraine, thereby linking sanctions enforcement directly to the defence and resilience of a partner under attack, has been a notable innovation (European Commission, 2025a).

Sanctions remain, however, vulnerable to circumvention. Parallel import schemes and continued supplies of critical components via third countries undermine the overall effectiveness (Institut Jacques Delors, 2024; SUERF, 2025). Addressing these gaps requires deeper international cooperation in customs enforcement, financial intelligence sharing and the use of secondary sanctions against persistent enablers, as well as engagement with key actors in the Global South (Institut Jacques Delors, 2024; Transparency International EU, 2025). Sanctions policy must therefore be understood as a dynamic and cooperative process rather than a static legal framework.

Apart from external circumvention, internal political fragmentation within the European Union has emerged as a growing constraint on the effectiveness of sanctions. Governments led by Viktor Orbán in Hungary and, more recently, Robert Fico in Slovakia have repeatedly questioned, delayed or diluted common EU positions on sanctions, financial assistance to Ukraine and broader Russia policy. These actions do not necessarily amount to formal vetoes in every instance, but do weaken the credibility, predictability and speed of EU decision-making, which are critical for effective deterrence (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025). The return of Andrej Babiš to executive power in Czechia has raised similar concerns, given his past scepticism toward sanctions and preference for transactional approaches to EU governance.

From a strategic perspective, this form of internal obstruction represents a hybrid vulnerability in its own right. Russia has consistently sought to exploit unanimity requirements and domestic political incentives within EU Member States in order to fragment collective responses. When sanctions are perceived as negotiable or reversible due to internal dissent, their deterrent effect diminishes. International cooperation must therefore address not only external enforcement but also internal cohesion. Proposals such as greater use of qualified majority voting in sanctions-related implementation, clearer conditionality linked to EU funds and structured coordination among pro-sanctions coalitions within the Council merit serious consideration (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025). Without mechanisms to contain internal spoilers, even the most sophisticated sanctions face risks being undermined from within, weakening Europe's overall containment strategy.

Sanctions policy importantly interacts with longer-term structural strategies such as EU enlargement and regional connectivity initiatives. Investments in energy diversification, transport corridors and market integration reduce structural dependencies on Russian infrastructure and leverage (Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2024). Economic cooperation therefore supports not only short-term containment but also long-term resilience.

Military and Defence Cooperation

Military and defence cooperation has remained indispensable to containing Russian aggression and stabilising the European security environment. As of 2026, United States security assistance to Ukraine has reached unprecedented levels, encompassing advanced weapon systems, training programmes and intelligence support. Under President Trump's second administration, however, this assistance has become more conditional (US Department of State, 2025).

European states have responded by expanding bilateral contributions and strengthening EU-level instruments. NATO has reinforced its eastern flank through enlarged multinational formations and higher readiness levels, as set out in the 2023 Vilnius Summit Communiqué, restoring credible deterrence against further escalation (NATO, 2023). Coordination formats such as the Ramstein group have evolved into durable platforms that align military support, industrial planning and strategic messaging among key partners (US Department of State, 2025).

These developments underline both the strength and the limits of current cooperation. Although collective action has prevented Russian military breakthroughs and enabled Ukraine to regain and hold significant territory, Europe's dependence on external suppliers for critical capabilities remains a structural vulnerability (NATO, 2023). During the Biden administration, opportunities for deeper transatlantic cooperation on defence innovation – joint investments in ammunition production, co-development of air and missile defence systems and structured artificial intelligence (AI) governance for military applications – were only partially realised. The resulting gaps have amplified the urgency of building a more autonomous European defence industrial base.

Strategic autonomy in this context does not imply disengagement from the United States but instead denotes a more balanced partnership in which Europe can sustain its own security commitments and support partners such as Ukraine regardless of political shifts in Washington. The EU's emerging defence initiatives, including joint procurement schemes and the European Defence Industrial Strategy, must therefore be embedded in a broader cooperative framework that integrates NATO planning while building genuinely European capacities.

Countering Hybrid Threats Through International Cooperation

Hybrid threats have become a defining feature of Russia's approach toward Europe. Institutional responses have improved substantially since 2022, particularly through enhanced cooperation between the EU, NATO and national authorities (CEPA, 2025; Rest Journal, 2025). EU–NATO cooperation has deepened following the 2023 Joint Declaration, which structured collaboration across domains such as cyber defence, disinformation, critical infrastructure protection and emerging technologies (Council of the European Union, 2023; Rest Journal, 2025). Rapid alert mechanisms and coordinated attribution efforts have disrupted several influence operations targeting electoral processes across Europe, including campaigns linked to the so-called Doppelgänger operation which cloned media websites to spread pro-Russian narratives.

Despite these advances, the hybrid threat landscape continues to evolve. AI has increased the scale and sophistication of disinformation, enabling the rapid generation of deep-fake audio and video content that can be diffused through fragmented social media ecosystems (Hybrid CoE, 2018). Domestic actors increasingly serve as amplifiers of foreign narratives, blurring the line between foreign and domestic information manipulation. These trends highlight the limits of reactive measures and reinforce the need for preventive strategies rooted in institutional trust, media literacy and transparent public communication. International cooperation remains essential for pooling expertise, sharing intelligence and establishing shared standards for platform accountability and information integrity.

Moldova's Parliamentary Elections as a Model of Cooperative Resilience

Moldova's parliamentary elections in September 2025 provide a concrete illustration of how international cooperation can be translated into democratic resilience. Faced with extensive external interference – illegal funding channels, coordinated disinformation campaigns and cyber operations – Moldovan authorities combined domestic reforms with targeted international support.

According to OSCE/ODIHR, the elections were competitive and voters had a genuine choice, but the campaign was "marred by widespread allegations of vote-buying and the misuse of administrative resources, as well as cyberattacks and disinformation," much of it traced to pro-Russian networks (OSCE/ODIHR, 2025). Investigations revealed that more than 138,000 citizens, roughly ten per cent of the active electorate, had received illicit payments through accounts at Russia's Promsvyazbank, and two political parties suspected of acting as vehicles for Russian interests were banned shortly before election day (OSCE/ODIHR, 2025; Al Jazeera, 2025). Moldovan authorities, supported by international partners, also took unprecedented steps to contain these threats.

EU macro-financial assistance strengthened institutional capacity and helped cushion socio-economic vulnerabilities that could be exploited by populist narratives (European Commission, 2025b). United States-backed cybersecurity training enhanced the ability of state institutions to respond to digital threats, while hybrid threat exercises familiarised officials with potential interference scenarios (US Department of State, 2025). Election observation missions and real-time monitoring by civil society organisations, including independent media and fact-checking initiatives, played a crucial role in exposing false narratives and preserving voter confidence.

The Moldovan case demonstrates that resilience is not a passive condition but the outcome of deliberate investment and cooperation. For EU enlargement candidates, it offers a practical template: embedding resilience measures before accession reduces vulnerability, strengthens democratic legitimacy and increases the credibility of the enlargement process itself (OSCE/ODIHR, 2025; European Commission, 2025b). Moldova illustrates how a small, exposed state can leverage international partnerships to withstand multifaceted pressure, turning a likely target into a testbed for cooperative defence of democracy.

EU Enlargement as a Core Element of European Security

EU enlargement toward Ukraine, Moldova and the Western Balkans constitutes a central pillar of Europe's long-term strategy to contain Russian revisionism and stabilise its neighbourhood. From a security perspective, enlargement reduces geopolitical grey zones that Moscow has historically exploited through military pressure, energy leverage and hybrid interference (European Commission, 2025b). Extending the EU's legal order, regulatory frameworks and political conditionality transforms vulnerable borderlands into structured spaces of predictability and resilience.

From a critical standpoint, enlargement is frequently challenged on three grounds: institutional overstretch, decision-making paralysis and limited public support within existing Member States. Each of these objections warrants careful engagement. Claims of overstretch often overlook the historical record of enlargement as a catalyst for institutional adaptation rather than decline. Previous rounds increased the Union's external leverage and contributed to democratic consolidation in Central and Eastern Europe, despite occasional setbacks. Concerns about paralysis frequently conflate political contestation with structural incapacity. While unanimity requirements undeniably create vulnerabilities, they also underline the importance of preparing enlargement as a security policy that commands democratic legitimacy, rather than as a technocratic project disconnected from public debate (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025).

Public scepticism toward enlargement is frequently articulated through fears of migration, fiscal transfers and governance deficits. Addressing these concerns requires reframing of enlargement as a preventive security investment. The costs of non-enlargement, measured in instability, crisis management and military deterrence, consistently exceed the costs of integration, as seen in the repeated need for ad hoc financial and security support to fragile neighbours. Enlargement therefore functions as upstream security spending that reduces downstream exposure to conflict and coercion.

International cooperation is essential to operationalising this logic. Pre-accession instruments, macro-financial assistance and security cooperation need to be explicitely aligned with resilience benchmarks, including judicial independence, anti-corruption capacity and protection against hybrid threats. Ukraine's experience with specialised anti-corruption institutions and Moldova's election resilience demonstrate how targeted international support can accelerate reform while strengthening security credibility (OSCE/ODIHR, 2025; European Commission, 2025b). A further critique concerns the alleged risk of importing instability into the Union. This argument neglects the stabilising effect of conditionality and phased integration. Although enlargement does not eliminate risk, it does manage it collectively. By embedding candidate countries in EU legal, economic and digital frameworks, prior to accession, the Union reduces rather than amplifies systemic vulnerabilities.

Finally, enlargement must be situated within the broader context of transatlantic uncertainty. As United States policy becomes less predictable during President Trump's second term, the EU's ability to shape its own security environment grows in importance (US Department of State, 2025). Enlargement expands the Union's strategic depth, demographic base and economic scale, strengthening its capacity to act autonomously while remaining a credible partner within NATO (NATO, 2023; European Commission, 2025b). Enlargement is therefore not an alternative to international cooperation but one of its most durable institutional expressions.

Digital Autonomy and Strategic Cooperation

Digital dependency has emerged as a critical vulnerability in Europe's security architecture. The politicisation of major U.S. based technology platforms and the weakening of content moderation standards have highlighted the risks associated with external control over digital public spaces. The EU's regulatory response through the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Artificial Intelligence Act represents an important step toward platform accountability, transparency and risk mitigation (European Commission, 2024). Regulation alone, however, is insufficient. Strategic cooperation is required to build sovereign digital infrastructure, including European cloud services, secure data ecosystems and open-source intelligence tools that do not depend on providers subject to foreign

political or commercial pressures. Reducing dependency enhances Europe's ability to act collectively and defend democratic processes without being constrained by decisions taken in Washington, Silicon Valley or elsewhere.

Digital autonomy also intersects closely with enlargement. Extending EU digital standards to candidate countries creates a common regulatory and technological space that strengthens resilience across the continent (European Commission, 2025b). Moldova's experience demonstrates how alignment with EU regulations on data protection, cybersecurity and platform governance can yield immediate security benefits when combined with targeted international support (OSCE/ODIHR, 2025). Embedding DSA and AI Act requirements into pre-accession frameworks will help establish a pan-European digital firewall against disinformation, cyberattacks and foreign information manipulation.

Conclusion

Strategic international cooperation has significantly constrained Russia's ability to translate military aggression and hybrid pressure into decisive political gains. Sanctions have weakened the war economy, military support has stabilised the front-line and counter-hybrid cooperation has improved institutional resilience across Europe (CEPA, 2025; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025). Moldova's experience and renewed momentum on EU enlargement illustrate how layered cooperation can transform vulnerability into a strategic advantage (OSCE/ODIHR, 2025; European Commission, 2025b). By integrating economic, military, political and digital instruments, Europe has constructed a credible, if still incomplete, framework of containment.

These achievements remain fragile. Sanctions evasion, transatlantic uncertainty and domestic resistance to enlargement pose genuine risks, while digital dependency continues to undermine democratic resilience (SUERF, 2025; Transparency International EU, 2025). The central task for Europe is therefore to consolidate cooperation into durable structures, embed enlargement within national security narratives and accelerate strategic autonomy in the defence and digital domains. Containment is not merely a temporary response but a long-term project that depends on sustained international cooperation and public support.

Recommendations

- Accelerate EU enlargement by integrating resilience benchmarks and sustained public communication, framing accession as a security investment. Link macro-financial and pre-accession funds to measurable progress on anti-corruption, judicial independence, and hybrid threat preparedness, while clearly communicating enlargement's security dividends to EU citizens.

- Strengthen sanctions enforcement through deeper cooperation on customs, financial intelligence, and secondary measures against circumvention. Prioritise joint shadow fleet monitoring, harmonised export controls, and coordinated outreach to intermediary third countries.
- Deepen EU–NATO cooperation on hybrid threats via joint training, rapid attribution, and shared technological standards. Regular exercises, common threat assessments, and interoperable cyber-response frameworks should serve to close institutional coordination gaps.
- Invest in European defence and digital autonomy to reduce external vulnerabilities. Scale up defence industrial capacity, support sovereign cloud and data initiatives such as Gaia-X, and prioritise EU-developed open-source intelligence and AI tools.
- Apply Moldova's resilience lessons to other enlargement candidates through coordinated EU, transatlantic, and civil society action. Establish election resilience programmes, integrate OSCE/ODIHR recommendations, and back independent media and fact-checkers to replicate Moldova's cooperative approach.

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How (Not) to Deal with Russia: Western Diplomacy and Deterrence on the Eve of the War of 2022

Teodoras Žukas

Summary: The period between the publication of Putin's essay *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians* in July 2021 and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, represents one of the defining moments of 21st-century history. These six months were marked by Russia's massive military build-up, escalating rhetoric, ultimatums, pivotal decisions in the West, such as the termination of the Nord Stream II project, and intensive diplomacy between Russia and the West. In hindsight, it is clear that diplomacy failed: Russia launched a war of aggression against Ukraine, and the West was unable to deter it. With Russia's ambitions toward its neighbours not only showing no signs of abating but in fact increasing, the West must prepare for a prolonged period of tense diplomatic relations, ongoing military threats, and provocations against NATO countries. This era of permanent regional insecurity requires the West to both rhetorically and strategically deter any future Russian attempts to target countries on NATO's eastern flank. This chapter will examine the key diplomatic moments between July 2021 and 24 February 2022, analyse the critical mistakes made by Western capitals, and offer strategic lessons and recommendations to inform current and future diplomacy vis-à-vis Russia.

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, deterrence, diplomacy, NATO, the West

Introduction

Several periods have been described as "pre-war" in twentieth-century history. Each was shaped by distinctive circumstances: the assassination, crisis, and intense diplomatic activity of the summer of 1914; the negotiations, threats, pacts, and eventual aggression of the final weeks of summer 1939. In a similar sense, the years 2021–2022 can already be considered historical. Writing in early 2026, we live in a world already very different from 2021. The six months from the publication of Vladimir Putin's essay *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians in July 2021* (Putin, 2021), and the start of the large-scale invasion on 24 February 2022, were marked by Russia's massive military build-up, escalating rhetoric, ultimatums, pivotal decisions in the West, and intensive diplomacy. From one angle, it is clear that diplomacy, or one could say deterrence, failed, as Russia started the war. This endeavour aims to recall the period between Putin's essay and 24 February 2022, with particular emphasis on Western diplomacy vis-à-vis Russia, and the prescriptive goal of learning from

the mistakes that were made. The author argues that the West should be prepared for a new period of this kind of build-up, this time directed towards NATO countries on the Eastern flank, marked by both military escalation, ultimatums, and provocations. Russia's current hybrid attacks against NATO countries "most likely" represent the so-called "zero-phase" conditions, preparing for a potential future attack (ISW, 2025). Effective diplomacy and deterrence will therefore very likely be needed.

Framework and Geneva

When discussing the origins of major events in modern history, it is standard to frame the narrative around a particular point in time. The traditional story of the Great War often begins with Prussia's victory over France in 1871, the formation of the Entente Cordiale in 1904, or Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905. In the case of 2022, analyses vary: some trace the origins to the collapse of the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1991, others to Vladimir Putin's rise to the presidency in 2000, or to other so-called points of no return. Common reference points include the 2004 Orange Revolution, Putin's 2005 State of the Nation speech calling the USSR's collapse "the major geopolitical disaster of the century" (Putin, 2005), the 2008 invasion of Georgia and the NATO Bucharest Summit, the 2013 Maidan protests, and the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the attack in Donbas.

All of these, and many more events, of still recent history are crucial. None of these events alone, however, predetermined the full-scale invasion of 2022. The agency was still there. The agency in Ukraine — to make its decisions about the country's future. The agency in Russia, under Putin and his immediate circle, to unleash this war of aggression. Finally, the agency in the West — to conduct diplomacy that could have altered the arrangement of power in Ukraine, Russia and the wider region. The fundamental premise is therefore that Russia's full-scale invasion was conditioned by hundreds of decisions in Moscow, Kyiv, and many Western capitals.

In March 2021, the Russian Armed Forces began a massive military exercise, one of the largest in decades. Significant contingents were redeployed from Siberia and the Eastern Caucasus to Voronezh and Crimea, respectively (Muzyrka, 2022). Military drills of this kind were not unusual in themselves; what set this exercise apart was its scale. Notably, Russia's official rhetoric did not change, did not become more aggressive in any significant way and was consistent with what had been heard before. As the global COVID-19 situation began to ease, Joe Biden and Putin met in Geneva on 16 June 2021. Their first and only meeting as presidents proved far less remarkable than expected. Both described it as constructive, and contentious issues such as Ukraine and NATO's so-called "expansion" were not central to the agenda.

From the Essay to the Ultimatum

The change in Russia's rhetoric—sudden, striking, and unmistakably assertive—arrived with the publication of Putin's essay in mid-July 2021, signalling a new and more confrontational posture. The red light went on in Langley, Virginia. The essay was immediately flagged by the CIA as marking the start of a dangerous new phase in Kremlin thinking (Matthews, 2023). Putin explicitly stated, in the article, that there is no country called Ukraine. In his view, Ukraine is a historical anomaly, and its true sovereignty exists only in partnership, i.e., in union, with Russia. This was unprecedented. Not necessarily in content — Putin had previously questioned Ukraine's statehood — but in form. To put such a carefully articulated argument in writing, openly denying the very right of another country to exist, was something entirely new, even for Putin.

The period of the summer of 2021 in Europe was marked by the upcoming shift, when Germany's Angel Merkel was about to be leaving office after 16 years of chancellorship. Merkel was undoubtedly one of the main people behind Europe's attempt to build stable, integrated relations with Russia, even after Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 (Lough, 2021) Merkel met Putin in Moscow in August 2021. The leitmotif of Putin's comments after the meeting with the Chancellor was that Ukraine was not following the Minsk agreements, and that the Kyiv government had essentially withdrawn from the aim of a "peaceful settlement" (Roberts, 2022). It was Putin's first public statement on Ukraine after the publication of the essay. Retrospectively, it is hard not to see a pattern which started from the summer of 2021.

It later became clear that October 2021 marked a critical threshold. Due to deep penetration by U.S. intelligence into legal, security, political, and intelligence circles within Russia, the CIA was able to assess and convey to U.S. political and military leadership that Russia was preparing to invade Ukraine. During the CIA Director William J. Burns' subsequent visit to Moscow and his discussions with Putin, Burns concluded that Putin had not yet made an irreversible decision to launch the attack. The prevailing assessment within the U.S. government, however, was that an invasion was highly likely (Washington Post, 2022).

The meeting can be viewed as paradigmatic for subsequent diplomatic efforts. It was determined that the core principles of U.S. political posture were formulated during this meeting, this being one that senior U.S. leadership continued to uphold until the invasion. It rested on four key principles: 1. No direct U.S./NATO military confrontation with Russia; 2. Containment of the war within the geographic boundaries of Ukraine; 3. Preservation of NATO unity; 4. Empowerment of Ukraine by providing it with the means to defend itself (Washington Post, 2022).

The internal logic of this framework, however, was fundamentally flawed. While it is understandable

that the U.S. was unwilling to extend full-scale military support to Ukraine, the prioritisation of these principles was problematic. The fourth point should have been paramount. In the absence of a viable Ukrainian state, the likelihood of a subsequent confrontation between Russia and NATO would have increased significantly. Under such circumstances, the geographic scope of the conflict would almost certainly have expanded, undermining both the objective of containment and the cohesion of NATO itself. The collapse of Ukraine would have also radically destabilised NATO's eastern flank, as Russia would then directly border not only Estonia and Latvia, Lithuania and Poland via Kaliningrad, but also Romania, Hungary, and Slovakia, placing the alliance's unity and regional security under severe strain. Some Western analysts recognised the risks inherent in this cautious stance. Keir Giles of Chatham House concluded that this type of Western posture—relying on otherwise accurate intelligence assessments of Russia's plans, but fundamentally retreating from serious kinetic deterrence and support for Ukraine—amounted, in effect, to saying: "We know what you are going to do, but we will do nothing about it" (Giles, 2025).

The situation continued to accumulate in December 2021. The rhetoric by Russian leaders continued to mount pressure on the West, when on 1 December, Putin stated that the threat to Russia's Western border was growing as a result of the NATO military infrastructure becoming closer to Russia (Military Times, 2021). That same day, after a meeting of NATO's foreign ministers in Riga, General Secretary Stoltenberg stated that "any future Russian aggression [on Ukraine] would come at a high price, and have serious political and economic consequences for Russia" (Stoltenberg, 2021). The following day, Lavrov, while in Sweden, announced that Russia would soon present its proposals on halting NATO's eastward expansion, as, according to Lavrov, "absolutely unacceptable was the transformation of our neighbours into a bridgehead for confrontation" (Roberts, 2022).

After a formally neutral meeting between Lavrov and Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, the State Department press release stated that "the United States and our allies are prepared to impose significant costs" (Blinken, 2021) if Russia were to move into Ukraine. This pattern of discourse continued up to the war itself, with Russia repeatedly raising alarms about so-called "NATO expansion," while the U.S. and its allies responded with broad and often indistinct threats of economic and political consequences. At the time of the Blinken-Lavrov meeting, both leaders referred to the upcoming conversation between Biden and Putin, which took place on 7 December 2021, via video conference. Apart from all the courteous language on the need to deepen the dialogue, Russia stated that "it is NATO that is making dangerous attempts to conquer Ukrainian territory and is building up its military potential at our borders," while the U.S. stated that in case of Russian escalation, the U.S. was ready to implement measures that were not implemented after Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014

(Sanger and Crowley, 2021). Fundamentally, in the comments after the talk, Putin announced that Russia would soon make a proposal "to address" the problem of NATO deployments on the Eastern Flank. Notably, none of the parties at the time and later were willing to speak in terms of "war" or "invasion." Instead, the euphemism "escalation" was consistently used, although, as we now know, U.S. intelligence had an understanding of the scope of Russia's intentions (Washington Post, 2022).

Few in the West anticipated what was about to unfold. On 17 December, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) published two draft treaties to NATO and the U.S. proposing limits on NATO activities in Europe. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov added that it was unacceptable that the U.S. and NATO continue to "aggressively escalate the security situation" and that is "extremely dangerous" (Deutsche Welle, 2021). The level of Russia's demands was astonishing: in essence, Russia's proposed agreements sought to impose a fundamental revision of the post–Cold War European security order. The core demands included a legally binding halt to NATO enlargement—most notably excluding Ukraine—alongside a rollback of NATO's military presence to its pre-1997 configuration. The proposal suggested restricting U.S. and NATO force deployments near Russia's borders through bans on intermediate-range missiles, limitations on strategic military activities, and prohibitions on forward-deployed nuclear weapons. Collectively, these proposals amounted to the recognition of a Russian sphere of influence and a significant curtailment of NATO's freedom of action in Eastern Europe (Pifer, 2021). One senior source in London at the time described the documents as "fantastical" (Matthews, 2023).

The initial reaction in the West was one of shock, accompanied by a reaffirmation of the previously stated position that decisions regarding NATO's development rest with the alliance itself. The demand to halt NATO enlargement was rejected, with NATO reaffirming that Russia had no veto on NATO's development within the alliance and restating its open-door policy. Secretary General Stoltenberg stated that talks with Russia have to, first and foremost, address NATO's security concerns and include Ukraine, while the U.S. stated that regarding Ukraine, it continued to support the "nothing about you without you" (Al Jazeera, 2021) principle. Importantly, there were no joint statements at the time by the most important NATO leaders to jointly reject the ultimatum.

During the Biden-Putin call on 30 December, one of the last conversations they would ever have, Putin repeated to Biden that the draft treaties represent Russia's fundamental approach vis-à-vis Europe's security. The White House, after the meeting, commented that the President made clear "that the United States and its allies and partners will respond decisively if Russia further invades Ukraine" (BBC, 2021). It is highly probable that Russia never expected NATO to accept the ultimatum; rather, it appears to have been intended as a justificatory instrument — effectively, a *casus belli*. Crucially, the ultimatum has never been revoked and therefore remains, in effect, on the table.

The Threshold

By January 2022, the U.S. appeared to increasingly accept that Russia would not revoke its decision to invade Ukraine. U.S. diplomacy, at this stage, entered a phase dominated by messaging on the invocation of severe sanctions. Throughout January, Washington emphasised the economic costs Russia would face in the event of an invasion, while simultaneously beginning the evacuation of U.S. embassy personnel from Kyiv. Intelligence assessments complicated, however, Western diplomatic unity. While U.S. intelligence services consistently warned that a Russian invasion was imminent, on which British and Baltic states' intelligence agreed, the major European actors—Germany and France—remained sceptical. This scepticism, shaped by memories of earlier U.S. intelligence failures—from Iraq in 2003 to Afghanistan in 2021—undermined Western cohesion and exposed a lack of consensus toward Moscow at a critical moment.

A particularly damaging episode occurred on 19 January 2022, when President Biden suggested that a "minor incursion" by Russia might trigger a different Western response than a full-scale invasion (CNN, 2022). Although quickly clarified, the statement introduced unhelpful ambiguity at precisely the moment when clarity was essential (BBC, 2022). It reflected a misreading of the strategic context and was later widely interpreted as a diplomatic misstep in Washington. Biden also vaguely suggested at the time that Ukraine's future relationship with NATO could be discussed with Russia, further reinforcing the perception of Western indefiniteness. The U.S. consequently tried to harden its position. On 21 January, Secretary of State Blinken warned Lavrov in closed talks that an invasion would prompt rapid and devastating sanctions, isolate Russia internationally, and cripple its economy. Crucially, Blinken, reportedly, also emphasised that the West would provide Ukraine with "massive military assistance" (Washington Post, 2022)—a phrase used explicitly at this level for the first time.

Within Western strategic circles, influential voices continued to debate whether diplomacy could still avert war. On 25 January, during a UK Defence Committee hearing, James Sherr of the International Centre for Defence and Security in Tallinn, argued that although a Russian invasion was highly probable, strong military signalling and increased support for Ukraine could still dissuade Moscow. Assessments like this indicated that some experts within Western policy circles believed that intensive military assistance to Ukraine might alter Russia's strategic calculations (Sherr, 2022).

By early February, however, Western governments increasingly accepted that war was very likely. The U.S. was soon followed by others in urging their citizens to leave Ukraine. As sanctions threats appeared ineffective, Western diplomacy shifted toward reassurance—particularly efforts to emphasise that the conflict would not escalate into a direct NATO–Russia war. NATO simultaneously

reinforced its Eastern Flank. By mid-February, U.S. troop numbers in Europe had risen to 100,000, up from 76,000, with significant increases in airborne units and naval deployments (EP Think-tank, 2022). These moves suggested the anticipation of a rapid Ukrainian defeat and also potential follow-on risks to NATO territory.

In the final weeks before the invasion, U.S. officials repeatedly emphasised not what they would do, but what they would not: crucially, that no American troops would fight in Ukraine. While intended to draw a clear line between defending NATO territory and direct intervention in Ukraine, this repeated focus on restraint very likely signalled to Moscow the boundaries of Western resolve, potentially lowering Russian perceived risks of launching the invasion. Indeed, later experts argued that a central driver of Russia's decision to invade was Putin's conviction that the West—especially the United States—would refrain from military intervention, coupled with his expectation that Ukraine would rapidly collapse (Giles, 2024).

Diplomatic display, nevertheless, continued. On 12 February 2022, following a video conference with President Macron, Kremlin claimed that the West showed no willingness to accommodate Russia's security interests (Euronews, 2022). Prime Minister Boris Johnson, in contrast, after a talk with Putin, warned publicly of catastrophic sanctions and further NATO troop deployments (Guardian, 2022). President Biden's warnings during this final period appeared comparatively restrained, with Nord Stream 2 emerging as the most concrete measure that could harm Russia, although the project was already politically moribund (NBC, 2022).

Macron's call with Putin on 20 February proved both revealing and, in hindsight, somewhat macabre. In his characteristic statesmanlike, Napoleonic—or perhaps more Talleyrand-like—manner, Macron engaged with Putin, ultimately reaching a point where Putin ambiguously suggested he would instruct his staff to discuss de-escalation. Macron was momentarily triumphant (Guardian, 2022). It was a bluff, however, and a sign of the misperceptions held by some Western leaders in the final days prior to the full-scale invasion. Similarly, after Russia formally recognised the separatist entities in Donetsk and Luhansk, Chancellor Olaf Scholz framed the move primarily as a breach of the Minsk agreements, and not as a final step before the invasion. Finally, on 24 February 2022, 5:30 a.m. Moscow time, Putin announced the launch of a "special military operation" (BBC, 2022), Minutes later, explosions were reported across Ukraine.

Conclusion

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine marked a historical rupture that, only months earlier, still appeared nearly unimaginable—the first major interstate war of conquest in Europe since 1945. In

the months preceding the invasion, diplomacy was not absent; on the contrary, it was intense and sustained. Yet it ultimately failed. This failure should not be dismissed as inevitable, nor excused by claims that "everything possible was done". A critical assessment is necessary, not a consolatory one. Western diplomacy did not fail due to a lack of engagement, but because it was fragmented, ambiguous, and strategically incoherent. Understood in the sense articulated by Robert McNamara, effective deterrence means an actual will and capacity to retaliate. This kind of deterrence had eroded long before 2021. This erosion was structural and cumulative, not a product of a single government or administration. While the West possessed overwhelming military, economic, and political means to impose severe costs on Russia, it failed to convince Moscow that it was prepared to use them.

Western signalling, especially by the U.S., was primarily characterised by excessive clarity about what would not be done, rather than credible ambiguity about what would follow a Russian invasion. This undermined deterrence rather than strengthening it. As it was put at the time of the build-up by James Sherr, the U.S. president should have said publicly: "The United States would not agree to sit idly by and watch Ukraine being destroyed." A statement of this kind would have sent Russia a deliberately ambiguous signal about the potential drastic consequences of its actions. Insufficient coordination between the United States and Europe, combined with divergent national approaches and personal diplomacy, prevented, however, the emergence of a unified strategic posture capable of altering Russia's calculus.

The war also exposed a deeper and more uncomfortable truth. Ukraine's resistance did not simply defend its own sovereignty—it prevented a far greater geopolitical catastrophe. Had Russia succeeded, the consequences for European security, NATO's credibility, and the global order would have been profound. This would be both due to Russia's advance toward NATO's southeastern European borders and the dangerous precedent it would have set for other rogue states attempting to redraw borders by force. This reality reinforces a long-standing observation, which has nearly become a mantra today, noted by Astolphe de Custine in his La Russie en 1839, that Russia "respects force, because force is the only argument her rulers understand." (de Custine, 1967). Any future diplomacy with Russia has to begin from this premise. Without credible deterrence grounded in tangible capabilities and political resolve, diplomacy risks being performative rather than preventive.

Recommendations

- Rebuild Europe's credible deterrence through concrete defensive measures, particularly on NATO's eastern flank and in support of non-NATO partners, recognising that Russia respects a demonstrated strength.

- Shift from reactive to proactive deterrence, clearly establishing red lines while avoiding capitulation to nuclear intimidation or escalation rhetoric.
- Restore strategic ambiguity toward Russia, refraining from publicly defining self-imposed limitations and instead reinforcing strategic uncertainty for Russia.
- Strengthen unity and coordination within the West, especially between the United States and Europe, to ensure a coherent strategic posture, consistent messaging, and shared contingency planning vis-à-vis Russia.

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Countering Russian Hybrid Warfare in the Baltic Region and Beyond: Lessons Learned

Ondřej Filipec

Summary: In recent years, the Russian Federation has intensified its hostile hybrid activities aimed at destabilising target countries and advancing its revisionist ambitions. Historically and geopolitically, Russian hybrid warfare has been particularly aggressive along the eastern borders of the European Union, this being manifested in various forms: from shadow fleets operating in the Baltic Sea and the weaponisation of migration at the Polish-Belarusian border, to disinformation campaigns undermining information ecosystems and drone incursions testing NATO's integrity. Electoral interference is a growing concern, having been notably observed in Moldova, where Russian actors have sought to manipulate democratic processes and influence political outcomes through covert funding, media manipulation and cyber operations. As a result, the Baltic states and Moldova have accumulated valuable experience that may offer strategic insights for other countries facing similar threats. The main objective of this chapter is to provide a deeper understanding of Russian hybrid operations and identify key lessons learned that could inform effective countermeasures elsewhere.

Keywords*:* hybrid warfare, hybrid threats, electoral interference, migration, Baltic

Introduction

In ancient Rome, the start of war was a ritual conducted by priests from the collegium of *Fetials* who were responsible for ensuring that the war was just (*bellum iustum*) and religiously legitimate. In doing so, *Fetials* first recited the demands (*postulata*) and if rejected by the enemy, the older priest (*pater patratus*) declared war after 33 days by throwing a spear onto the enemy's territory (see Santangelo, 2008, p. 86). Similar rituals also existed in different cultures, such as India (Mahabharata) or China, with the concept of "heaven's mandate", which gave a spiritual and ethical dimension to the war. Contemporary customs of war rely, of course, on legal and diplomatic formality (e. g. the Third Hague Convention of 1907 "relative to the Opening of Hostilities") requiring official announcement before the hostility (Article 1). The very last known example of a declaration of war is from 4 June 1942, when the USA declared war on the Nazi allies, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Romania (US Senate, 2025). Since that time, a formal declaration of war is usually absent, having been replaced by a resolution on the use of force. But what if the war is conducted by a different means, not matching the

intensity of a regular military conflict and exploiting the opportunities provided by the "grey zone" located somewhere between "cold" and "regular" war?

There is an ongoing debate as to what "hybrid warfare" amounts to, as there is no universally accepted definition of the concept, nor even agreement whether hybrid warfare constitutes a new category or is merely "old wine in a new bottle". For the purposes of this chapter, the term "hybrid warfare" is defined based on certain characteristics that are widely shared in academia, and some that are being debated. *First*, hybridity refers mainly to a blend of military and non-military tools (Weissmann, 2021) or conventional military force with non-kinetic means, including cyber attacks, disinformation and propaganda campaigns, economic pressure or political subversion. This may serve to create ambiguity and complicate the traditional defence responses of a targeted country.

Second, the ambiguity and the challenge of attribution constitute a major issue in hybrid warfare, as actions are often designed and conducted below the threshold of open conflict, which makes it hard to attribute responsibility. The use of proxies, deniable actors and covert operations creates a complicated environment, which delays or prevents retaliation (Rauta, 2020). This environment is characterised as a "grey zone": a space in which international law or norms are unclear or unenforceable, or a place where the attackers misuse the vulnerabilities of democracies.

Third, the attribution is also problematic, due to the multiplicity of the attackers' goals. Hybrid warfare rarely pursues a single objective, as the goals involve multiple objectives at the same time with political, economic and psychological effects (Schroefl and Kaufman, 2014). Moreover, some damage is difficult to measure, undermining trust in political institutions, shaping narratives and influencing public opinions, and weakening societal resilience and cohesion. These might sometimes be more valuable than destroying a factory or ammunition depot.

This is related to the *fourth* feature: hybrid warfare often targets civilian domains, including the civil infrastructure or the information environment (Denov, 2025). Public opinion therefore becomes the primary battleground and every hybrid operation usually has a propagandistic dimension as civilian populations are becoming both potential targets and destructive tools (e. g. during elections or referenda).

Finally, hybrid warfare is strongly asymmetrical with a high degree of adaptability (Weissmann, 2019; Weissmann et al., 2021). Low-cost tools such as troll farms or bots, websites stimulating migration flows, or low-cost drones initiating security alerts cause high-cost responses from adversaries. A hybrid battlefield therefore allows for large-scale manoeuvring and excuses on the part of the attacker, making it easy to keep the target in a costly defensive position.

This chapter is primarily about the experience of the Baltic countries and Moldova in facing Russian hybrid warfare attacks. It briefly analyses the individual attacks and attempts to derive an experience that is applicable to Czechia and other European countries, which are facing a Russian hybrid warfare strategy. The cases related to shadow fleet, drone incursions, weaponised migration, or electoral interference are explored below, followed by a short debate on possible measures and strategies to mitigate the impact on hybrid warfare. The main aim is to provide transferable experience which could be used as a policy recommendation.

The Shadow Fleet in the Baltic Sea

The term "shadow fleet" in the Baltic Sea refers to hundreds of ageing, poorly regulated, and equipped oil and gas tankers that Russia uses to evade EU sanctions by transporting crude oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) under false flags, using spoofed automatic identification system (AIS) signals or non-transparent ownership structures. These vessels often disable tracking systems, change names or flags, and operate without proper insurance (see, for example, Miętkiewicz, 2025). Apart from the environmental risks, the ships are used to evade sanctions, can be used (and are confirmed to be used) for sabotage of underwater infrastructures, and are, of course, a danger to sea traffic due to the high risk of collision. As of October 2025, the EU has sanctioned over 550 vessels belonging to the shadow fleet (Prime Minister of Greece, 2025), and recently Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are pushing for legal tools that allow for seizure of stateless or falsely flagged vessels. Finland recently detained the Eagle S, which is suspected of participating in cable sabotage (Euronews, 2025). EU states from the Baltic region have begun to cooperate further (Nordic-Baltic Eight), developing cooperation in maritime surveillance, intelligence sharing and stricter inspections. NATO also launched a permanent operation to monitor shadow fleet activity and protect the undersea infrastructure (NATO, 2025). As discussed above, states have solved this problem strategically, including responses related to defence, security, and environmental agencies, not just as a maritime issue. They have developed national and regional legal tools to deal with stateless and falsely flagged vessels, imposing liability on uninsured tankers. Regional cooperation, including satellite monitoring and joint intelligence sharing, has been the key. This implies a need for multi-domain resilience and cooperation among interested actors.

The Polish-Belarus Border Crisis

Starting in 2021, Belarus, with Russian backing, deliberately facilitated the arrival of migrants from the Middle East and Africa. Migrants were granted a visa and given organised transport to

Minsk, then directly to the EU borders of Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia with the aim of causing a humanitarian crisis and destabilising (or compromising) Poland and the EU. In other words, migration was "weaponised" to increase negotiation capital by means of physical pressure (thousands of migrants, including women and children). This was aimed at compromising EU values by denial of entry or violence against migrants, and information warfare, depicting the "decadent" EU and hostile Poland violating human rights (Filipec, 2022). This scenario also tested the EU and Poland's integrity, tested NATO and EU response-crisis mechanisms and exploited the very sensitive topic of migration in order to polarise societies.

Poland opted for a relatively rapid solution by deploying fifteen thousand troops, intensifying surveillance and intelligence sharing, and launching a build-up of a 418 km-long physical barrier. Border patrols were hardened to avoid violent incursions, as some migrants were armed with clubs, knives or other weapons. It also introduced a 60 km deep buffer zone to restrict access and prevent smuggling or sabotage (DW, 2024). Finally, it temporarily suspended the right to asylum for those crossing from Belarus, arguing that EU law has been weaponised.

This serves as a lesson that states should view migration not only as a humanitarian issue, but as a hybrid tool. If one accepts that Poland reacted pragmatically, it can be deduced that resilience is a multi-layered combination of physical, legal, and information measures that can lead to a temporary or "transitionary" period required for adaptation. Regional coordination and measures, taken to address possible escalation are also of great importance.

Drone Incursion

Several countries experienced drone incursions in 2025. This occurred in Romania, Denmark and Germany (where drones disrupted airports) and in Belgium and the Baltic states, where drones were observed near military bases causing airport closure, and in Estonia, where three Russian MIG-31 violated their airspace, before being intercepted by Italian F-35s. These violations of state sovereignty are a serious threat to air traffic but also a sign of testing reactions. The most significant case is associated, in all probability, with Poland and the incidents of 9-10 September 2025, when 19-23 Russian drones entered Polish airspace during a massive Russian strike on Ukraine. As a result, several airports were closed (notably Warsaw, Lublin and Rzeszów) and one house was destroyed in Wyryki-Wola. Poland reacted swiftly by deploying F-16s, Dutch F-35s, German Patriot batteries and Italian AWACS, and also invoked Article 4 of the Washington Treaty, enabling consultations on security threats within NATO. The organisation consequently launched Operation Eastern Sentry for enhanced air policing and surveillance (Bukowski, 2025). The drone incursion was seen as a hybrid provocation to test NATO reaction time and unity.

The experience with Russian drones led to the realisation that despite being labelled by the attacker as a "not-intentional", "lacking motive" or "no-evidence" (LBC, 2025), there is no to little space for "random" events occurring within the framework of hybrid warfare, and the drone incursion may be viewed as part of a broader hybrid campaign. It also demonstrated the cost-ineffectiveness of NATO's reaction, as the use of extremely expensive patriot missiles on fighter jets to deter low-cost drones is inappropriate. The reaction did reveal, however, the possible advantages of multi-national air defence networks sharing common rules of engagement, and the situation led to clarification concerning the borderline between Article 4 and Article 5.

Electoral Interference in Moldova

Moldova experienced massive Russian interference in the 2024 presidential elections and referendum, including vote buying, cyberattacks, disinformation and espionage and diaspora polling stations, which were conducted in favour of the Kremlin-backed oligarch Ilan Șor, who financed campaigns and protests. Parliamentary elections took place a year later in 2025 in which Russia allegedly spent over 100 million EUR on illicit financing, disinformation and destabilisation of the country, including various plots (Sandu, 2025).

The hybrid measures contained disinformation and propaganda coordinated via social media and cloned websites (Doppelganger operations) and proxy media to erode trust in institutions. This was accompanied by thousands of cyberattacks on the electoral infrastructure and government systems. Cases of vote buying, illicit campaign or financing through offshore networks and the oligarch-controlled party were consequently recorded (OSCE, 2025). During the process, there were frequent changes to the electoral law, which possibly undermined trust in the process, along with attempts to infiltrate state institutions with loyalists in order to influence the electoral administration. The Russian hybrid campaign targeted the diaspora, as there are approximately 1.5 million Moldovans living abroad, while exploiting fear with false bomb alerts, ethnic polarisation, and regional divides (Transdniestria and Gagauzia) in order to demonstrate or weaken the pro-European consensus (see Guardian, 2025).

During the elections, Moldova manifested a high level of resilience, backed by monitoring missions and hybrid rapid response teams deployed by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the EU and the U.S. The case of Moldova serves as a reminder that electoral security is not only a technical issue, but also a societal one, depending on media literacy, transparent campaigning and a strong civil society. The changing of electoral laws may be counterproductive as stability and enforceability, including mechanisms to crack down on foreign influence (funding), are

the key. Cooperation with other actors, including respected international organisations, is of great importance for strengthening transparency.

Discussion

The above explored hybrid scenarios have evoked a debate about how to address the hostile acts of the Russian Federation. The first and truly crucial question is whether these "new means" or traditional hostile tactics, adapted to the digital and globalised era, are marked by interdependence and relative peace? There are, on the one hand, cyberattacks, artificial intelligence (AI)-driven disinformation, or drone incursions which represent capabilities that were not involved in the previous forms of warfare and suggest the changing nature of the technological dimension. Modern hybrid tactics also exploit global economic interdependence, this being unique for the previous era. Hybrid warfare, on the other hand, should be understood in some sort of historic continuity, as propaganda, sabotage or covert influence have existed for centuries, and the digital sphere is only a structure, not the medium or the essence. The strategic logic remains similarly unchanged: to weaken the enemy, this being similar to the Cold War-era subversion. Modern technological countermeasures should be combined in order to create an effective strategy to combat hybrid warfare.

The second question concerns how the resilience should be structured. Is it a multi-layered (legal, technical, societal) vs. purely military issue, and as such, should it be treated accordingly? This also has implications for regional and international cooperation (NATO, EU, OSCE). Hybrid warfare has legal, informational, and societal targets and solely military solutions would not be able to address disinformation or electoral interference. Regional cooperation aimed at multi-domain resilience also fosters NATO-EU-OSCE synergy and allows for the use of complementary tools. A strong military posture raises the risk of escalation, increasing the cost, which might reduce incentives for hybrid provocations. Moreover, overcomplicating resilience with multiple layers may dilute focus, become costly, and lead to slow progress, which is contradictory to the flexibility of hybrid warfare. Resilience has to be multi-layered, balancing complexity and speed of action in order to avoid a slow reaction.

There is also the question of how to address cost-effectiveness and proportionality of responses (e. g. how to counter low-cost hybrid tools without exhausting resources or how to effectively deal with hostile acts without undermining democratic values). There is no doubt that it is essential to avoid draining of resources and that the use of Patriot missiles against cheap drones is not a sustainable practice to meet the threat level. Overreaction may also undermine the very principles worth defending. There are also arguments related to credibility and deterrence. Costly measures can also signal determination, unity, and resolve, providing the necessary deterrence for future aggression.

Ignoring low-cost attacks due to the "high price" in countering them may also be a sign of weakness which invites escalation. It is of essence to invest in cheaper countermeasures (anti-drone systems, cyber-defence) while maintaining signals of determination.

Conclusion

Hybrid warfare has become a new standard in relations between countries sharing the eastern border of the EU and the Russian Federation and it is unlikely that this situation will change. Although the countries have obtained new experiences, they still maintain a defensive position that may signal vulnerability and weakness, inviting escalation and further "testing" their vulnerabilities. The Russian art of hybrid warfare, testing various layers of resilience, is a good opportunity to improve institutions and mechanisms, although it may represent an existential threat. This is especially valid for the countries of Eastern Europe or the Balkans, which are facing structural challenges including weak government institutions, weak civil society, corruption, etc, which may prove to be obstacles in building a state resilient to hybrid attacks. A certain sign of optimism was provided by Moldova, which although it experienced and sustained a large-scale hybrid attack during the 2025 parliamentary elections, proved to be remarkable for the mobilisation of civil society and for its pro-European victory. This small victory should not lead, however, to disillusionment and underestimation of hybrid warfare. It is, on the contrary, evidence that hybrid warlords are extremely creative in terms of subversive attacks, and it is very much appropriate to ask where and how the attack will occur next time.

Recommendations:

- All hybrid acts should be responded to with all available means, and be paid back, while respecting the principle of proportionality in order to avoid signs of weakness and invite further escalation.
- It is essential to foster a multi-layered resilience which balances the involvement and responsibility of actors while avoiding overcomplicating processes, which might dilute focus and become costly due to slow decision-making, this being contradictory to the flexibility of hybrid warfare.
- While maintaining regional cooperation seems to be a key aspect, it is essential to work on changing the paradigm from a reactive response to hybrid warfare to proactive behaviour which predicts and mitigates potential future campaigns through effective deterrence. The very first step is to acknowledge hybrid warfare as the present state of affairs and comprehend hybrid acts in their full complexity.

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The Total Defence Model: Lessons for Civil–Military Preparedness in Democratic Europe

Peter Hefele and George (Georgios) Dimakos

Summary: This article examines how the concept of total defence can strengthen civil–military preparedness in Europe. It argues that Europe's deteriorating security environment — shaped by Russia's war against Ukraine, hybrid threats, cyberattacks, disinformation, and natural disasters — has exposed the weaknesses of traditional crisis-management systems. Total defence is now re-emerging as a framework that integrates military capabilities, civilian institutions, private-sector actors, and societal resilience. The authors propose a four-layer analytical framework: strategic, governance, operational, and societal. They compare Sweden and Finland as the most advanced benchmark cases. These two countries present advanced models where total defence is embedded in long-term strategy, supported by clear legal frameworks, regular exercises, strong public–private cooperation, and high levels of societal trust and civic preparedness. By contrast, Greece has strong military readiness but still lacks a fully integrated total defence model. Its preparedness system, as in many other European countries, remains more reactive, crisis-driven, and compartmentalised, with weaker coordination across civilian sectors and limited societal participation. This comparative analysis shows that successful total defence depends less on threat (perception) alone than on institutional coherence, clear responsibilities, democratic legitimacy, and public trust. The most important point is to embed whole-of-society preparedness in everyday governance while keeping it firmly under democratic control.

Keywords: total defence, civil–military preparedness, societal resilience, hybrid threats, Sweden, Finland, Greece

Introduction

It could be argued that Europe, in the last four years, has not undergone a more profound transformation in its security environment since the Second World War. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, persistent hybrid operations targeting European infrastructures and democratic processes, and increasingly frequent natural disasters have exposed the growing fragility of European societies. Short- and long-term crises have exposed the limits of traditional crisis-management systems and revealed how unprepared state and private actors are to face traditional, but increasingly new, threats affecting all subsystems of society. In this evolving risk landscape, the concept of *total*

defence has gained renewed political attention after decades of being forgotten following the end of the Cold War. *The idea of total defence, hereby, aims to enhance the capabilities of the whole of society by integrating civilian capacities, military structures, and societal resilience.*

Long institutionalised in the Nordic states, Switzerland, and several Baltic countries, the concept is now spreading into political debates in Central and Southern Europe, where it is being integrated into new and effective models of resilience. Those efforts include ensuring the continuity of democratic governance, protecting critical societal functions under stress, and fostering cooperation between the state and the private sector. (Rongved, 2025; Lazarou and Politis Lamprou, 2025). There is a broad consensus in politics and society that contemporary threats are multidimensional and that responses require approaches and instruments that defy operating in "silos", e.g., relying solely on military instruments. Cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, disruptions to the energy supply, pandemics, and natural disasters demonstrate that societal resilience is as central to security as traditional defence capabilities. Recent EU initiatives — including the Strategic Compass (Council of the European Union) and the Hybrid Resilience Strategy (European Commission – Joint Research Centre, 2025) — underscore this point: that civil–military cooperation, robust critical infrastructure protection, secure supply chains, and informed and mobilised populations are essential components of European security. Total defence provides a conceptual framework for these requirements, yet its interpretation and implementation vary widely across Member States.

In our chapter, we present a conceptual framework for analysing the status quo and plans for total defence in selected European Member States. As points of reference, we take the aforementioned concepts of the European Union and the Nordic countries, particularly Sweden and Finland, which are the most advanced in this respect. We then look into the case of Greece. This comparison will illustrate both the progress made so far and the limits of implementing total defence across different democratic contexts. Recommendations will close our contribution.

The Concept of Total Defence

To better approach a complex phenomenon such as total defence, we can distinguish *four analytical layers:* strategic, governance, operational, and societal.

Strategic: Sharing a Common Perspective

Among Member States, there are different understandings of how military defence, resilience, and civil protection relate to each other and are integrated at the strategic level. As the cases of the Nordic countries show, any successful implementation essentially depends on a shared perception

of threats, a consensus-oriented political culture, and the degree of immediate exposure to regional or geopolitical risks. In other Member States, total defence is less comprehensive, often limited to strengthening civil protection, enhancing crisis coordination, or improving the collaboration between civilian agencies and the armed forces (Engberg, 2025).

Governance: Between Centralisation and Networks

These strategic differences are reflected in a wide variety of governance mechanisms across the European Union, from highly centralised state structures to decentralised and network-oriented models. Legal frameworks and integrated planning and coordination processes determine the effective level of civil–military preparedness and the responsibilities of state agencies and private actors. Despite continuous efforts by the EU and NATO, e.g., through the EU Civil Protection Mechanism (European Commission, 2025) and the Alliance's Baseline Requirements for National Resilience (Hoogensen Gjørv and Holshek, 2025), considerable fragmentation persists across Europe in how responsibilities are allocated and exercised by different line ministries, regional and local authorities, and the private sector.

Operational: Getting Prepared

The operational dimension makes things even more complicated and diverse. Protection of vital infrastructure, cyber resilience, strategic communication, supply chain continuity, training and exercises, and population-level readiness measures are all included in total defence, which broadens the definition of preparedness. Currently, many European states are re-evaluating or revitalising early-warning capabilities, shelter and evacuation plans, volunteer networks, and stockpile systems. Due to the substantial involvement of private-sector actors, who operate a large share of Europe's vital infrastructure, new methods of public-private collaboration, information exchange, and cooperative emergency planning are needed.

Societal: Trust and Legitimacy

In democratic societies, the societal dimension is of utmost importance for any defence approach. Public trust in institutions, attitudes towards the role of the military, civic engagement, and cultural attitudes – they all shape the legitimacy and effectiveness of resilience policies. While Nordic societies show high levels of public participation and acceptance of preparedness responsibilities, other European societies still remain sceptical toward such expectations (EuroNews, 2024). Moreover,

in pursuing total-defence concepts, all measures have to be firmly anchored in democratic norms, such as civilian control, proportionality, transparency, and the protection of fundamental rights as a prerequisite for building sustainable resilience.

Methodological Approach Note and Case Study Selection

The following analysis is organised around a four-layer framework and based on selected case studies across the EU Member States. Sweden and Finland are examined jointly as the benchmark cases due to (1) the institutionalised total defence models embedded (2) in their democratic systems. The other case study is Greece, which we examined as an adaptation case. The analysis draws on official strategies, legal frameworks, institutional arrangements, and publicly available policy documents. The objective is to identify distinguishing features and illustrate both the transferability and the limits of total defence across democratic contexts.

Benchmark Cases: Sweden and Finland

Strategic Layer

In Sweden and Finland, total defence is a central organising principle of national security, as both countries have conceptualised it as a continuous objective of the state spanning from peacetime to crisis, and from crisis to wartime. This strategic continuity is reflected in the fact that the total defence objectives are embedded in multi-annual parliamentary defence resolutions and security strategies that extend well beyond electoral cycles, thereby reinforcing institutional ownership (Government Offices of Sweden, 2024; Security Committee of Finland, 2022; Prime Minister's Office of Finland, 2023; Engberg, 2025).

Threat perceptions are also shared across the political spectrum and across the institutional landscape of the countries, providing the needed political consensus. This consensus is key to the policy's continuity and the public's perception of ownership. Recent data additionally show that the public broadly shares the institutional view that Russia (and, to a certain extent, China and Iran) is the main security threat to both countries (European Security After Ukraine: Public Opinion Survey, 2023–2024; NATO Public Opinion Survey, 2023). Both the military and civilians accept the necessity of being constantly in a state of preparedness and that policies need to be proactive, not reactive. This strategic clarity creates a stable reference point for governance arrangements, operational planning, and societal engagement, distinguishing the Nordic approaches from crisis-driven models which prioritise short-term responses over systemic, forward-looking resilience.

Governance Layer

Sweden and Finland's governance structures underpin the concept of total defence and are characterised by central strategic coordination with decentralised implementation. This first characteristic encompasses two main design principles: whole-of-government and whole-society coordination. The whole-of-government principle holds that every part of the national and regional administrations and agencies has a clear and distinct role. Centralised strategic coordination is handled at the national level by the country's political leadership, while preparedness responsibilities are distributed across ministries, specialised agencies, regional authorities, and private actors. This design principle embeds preparedness across the administrative system rather than concentrating it within a single authority.

The existence of clear and binding legal frameworks, which formalise roles and responsibilities related to total defence, are a defining feature. In Sweden, total defence governance is anchored in legislation such as the *Civil Protection Act* (SFS 2025, p. 1077.) and the Act on Total Defence and Heightened Alert 2019, p. 880, complemented by government decrees and parliamentary defence resolutions. Most notably, the *Defence Resolution 2025–2030* represents the most substantial reinforcement of total defence since the Cold War, institutionalising preparedness obligations across public authorities, municipalities, and key societal sectors *(e.g.* healthcare, energy supply, financial services, etc) (Government Offices of Sweden, 2024; MSB, 2023). Finland follows a comparable model through its legally embedded *Comprehensive Security Model*, which assigns preparedness responsibilities across the state administration, the economy, and civil society, ensuring coherence (Prime Minister's Office of Finland, 2023). Finally, public–private cooperation constitutes a third characteristic of total defence governance in both countries. Private actors own and operate large parts of critical infrastructure and essential services. They are therefore formally integrated into preparedness planning. In Sweden, authorities, such as the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, coordinate with private-sector operators (e.g. finance, energy, telecommunications, transport, and food supply) based on the principle that private actors also bear responsibility for national preparedness (MSB, 2023). In Finland, the concept of Security of Supply (*Huoltovarmuus*) institutionalises this logic by requiring key companies, particularly in telecommunications, energy, food, healthcare, and information technology, to contribute to societal resilience through continuity planning, material reserves, and preparedness for wartime conditions (Security Committee of Finland, 2022; Prime Minister's Office of Finland, 2023).

Operational Layer

Total defence is operationalised through a continuity-driven model of preparedness. The rationale is that the essential societal functions have to remain available during crises and wartime. As previously mentioned, preparedness is embedded in peacetime administration. Civil–military coordination, critical infrastructure protection, continuity planning, stockpiling, cyber security, and crisis communication are treated as standing operational obligations (Government Offices of Sweden, 2024; Security Committee of Finland, 2022). Mandatory large-scale exercises are enforcing operational integration. Regular training is the main operational instrument used to check the level of preparedness, expose potential systemic failures, stress decision-making during moments of high pressure and uncertainty, and promote alignment across critical sectors (energy, telecommunications, etc.). Finland follows the same logic when it comes to exercises under the Security Strategy for Society. Lessons identified through exercises and real-world incidents are systematically fed back into updated plans and procedures, reinforcing an iterative learning approach to operational preparedness. (Government Offices of Sweden, 2024; Christie and Berzina, 2022).

Societal Layer

In Sweden and Finland, citizens are viewed as actors in preparedness and a certain level of individual readiness is expected. Individual readiness encompasses a set of preparations, information awareness, and certain behaviour under stress. In both countries, the public views individual readiness as a legitimate duty (Ristikangas, 2023) largely due to strong institutional trust and civic responsibility. (Security Committee of Finland, 2022; Government Offices of Sweden, 2024). Direct state communication is instrumental to sustaining societal engagement. In Sweden, nationwide guidance such as *If Crisis or War Comes*, coordinated by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, provides practical instructions for households (MSB, 2018; MSB, 2023). Finland follows a comparable approach through communication embedded in its *Security Strategy for Society*, integrating psychological resilience and citizen conduct into preparedness planning. Certain aspects of psychological resilience and citizen conduct have been embedded into preparedness planning (Prime Minister's Office of Finland, 2023). In both cases, societal mobilisation remains subject to civilian control (Government Offices of Sweden, 2024; Lazarou and Politis Lamprou, 2025).

Case Study: Greece

Strategic Layer

The Greek national security strategy has placed military defence at its centre and has been mainly shaped by long-standing tensions with Turkey (USADEFEA, 2025). National security documents highlight the strategy's main goals: military deterrence, territorial integrity, and military readiness. Greece's national strategy has remained relatively unchanged over recent decades and is anchored in a strong political consensus concerning the necessity of military readiness. Continuity of defence policy (no matter the political orientation of the party or parties in government) is also supported by the public, which shares the institutional perception of threat (Dokos and Kollias, 2013). The Greek electorate considers military readiness a top priority and supports efforts to enhance the country's military capabilities (Hellenic Republic, 2020). Preparedness in Greece is framed in a contingency-based response model, which activates specific response mechanisms for specific threats and crises. Total defence in Greece is not a permanent characteristic of governance. This is apart from military policy, crisis management policy, civil protection policy, and resilience policy, which exist but are considered secondary and only reactive. In addition, it is evident that all these policies remain compartmentalised and are not integrated into any total defence model similar to those of the Nordic countries. This absence of a total defence model is reflected in the country's strategic documents (Rongved, 2025).

Governance Layer

In Greece, preparedness is managed through central control but with uneven coordination in practice. Strategic authority sits at the national level, and responsibility for preparedness and crisis response is spread across ministries, agencies, and regional authorities. Coordination across these levels tends to be activated only during emergencies and crises (General Secretariat for Civil Protection, 2021; OECD, 2022). Roles and responsibilities related to preparedness are only partly set out in the law. Civil protection legislation primarily focuses on an emergency response, while duties related to continuity planning and long-term readiness are less clearly defined. As a result, cooperation across public authorities often depends on informal coordination (Lazarou and Politis Lamprou, 2025). Cooperation with the private sector remains limited and outside the legal framework. Private companies own and operate most critical infrastructure and essential services, however, their roles and responsibilities in the event of a crisis remain undefined. These private companies engage in crises in an uncoordinated way, often based on improvisation (OECD, 2022; European Commission, 2023).

Operational Layer

Operational preparedness is largely triggered by events rather than maintained continuously. The armed forces remain highly prepared for deterrence and escalation, and civilian preparedness focuses mainly on responding to specific emergencies. Civil protection authorities have extensive experience in dealing with natural disasters, but there is no evidence of a wider system designed to keep essential services running during prolonged or consecutive crises (General Secretariat for Civil Protection, 2021; Rongved, 2025). Coordination across sectors is limited in practice. Large exercises that regularly bring together the different actors of total defence are rare. As a result, cooperation across areas such as energy, transport, telecommunications, healthcare, and logistics is usually tested during real crises rather than through routine preparation. Learning, therefore, occurs under pressure, making it harder to build stable working habits over time (OECD, 2022; Lazarou and Politis Lamprou, 2025).

Societal Layer

Societal preparedness is influenced by strong trust in the armed forces and low expectations of civilian involvement beyond following instructions during emergencies (Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy, 2024). Citizens are mainly seen as people to be protected rather than as active contributors to preparedness. This reflects a security culture in which defence is viewed as a task primarily for the state and the military. Public messages on preparedness focus mostly on natural disasters and short-term emergencies. Authorities guide evacuation, personal safety, and immediate response through digital systems. Authorities do not, however, provide further information on prolonged crises, societal resilience, or preparation for such events.

Historical sensitivities around the role of the military and state authority, especially in light of the Junta (1967-1974), have produced a prominent political culture in Greece that continues to shape how far societal mobilisation can go (Hellenic Foundation for European & Foreign Policy, 2024). Broad public involvement under a defence label is approached with caution, and preparedness is not based on civic participation. This limits how deep and durable societal resilience can become and underscores the gap between high military readiness and rather low societal preparedness.

Conclusion

The comparison between the three cases, Finland, Sweden and Greece, demonstrates that total defence is shaped primarily by institutional coherence and strategic and organisational clarity and less by the threat perception. In Nordic countries, total defence is a permanent organising principle of the state. All four dimensions of total defence reinforce one another and extend beyond immediate

crises. Clarity of roles and responsibilities, coordination and regular exercises together with clear communication and civic engagement ensure that the state can sustain prolonged crises. In Greece, total defence and preparedness are conceptualised in a different way. There is political consensus and long-term planning, while civic engagement is considered secondary. The system is mainly crisis-response based and operational practices are event-driven. Greece has elements of total defence but has not adopted a complete total defence model itself.

Recommendations

- Keep total defence firmly grounded in democratic rules: preparedness measures should always remain under civilian leadership, under parliamentary oversight, and in accordance with respect for basic rights. Only if total defence is presented as a way to protect—not restrict—democracy, can it rely on public confidence and acceptance.
- Treat preparedness as an everyday responsibility, not just a crisis response: being prepared should be part of normal government work, not something activated only when a crisis hits. This makes systems more reliable over time, is more efficient and reduces the need for improvised solutions under pressure.
- Make public–private cooperation on critical infrastructure more explicit: since essential services are mostly run by private companies, their role in preparedness needs to be clearly defined in advance. Clear expectations and regular cooperation work better than relying on last-minute coordination during emergencies.
- Improve European coordination without taking control away from Member States: existing European frameworks can help countries work more effectively together and avoid duplication, especially during cross-border crises. Preparedness should stay rooted in national systems that reflect local realities and capacities.
- Involve citizens through trust and clear information, not mobilisation rhetoric: people are more willing to prepare when they understand what is expected of them and why it matters. Clear guidance and honest communication strengthen resilience without creating fear or undermining democratic norms.

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Political Problems with Historical Memory

Laurynas Peluritis

Summary: The paper examines the transition in historiography from objective "grand narratives" to subjective concepts of collective and cultural memory, arguing that while this shift democratised discourse, it simultaneously created a "post-truth" vulnerability. Drawing on the theories of Maurice Halbwachs, it distinguishes between formal history, which seeks universal facts, and collective memory, which is a selective social construct oriented towards present-day identity formation. The research highlights how the inherent relativity of memory has been weaponised by Russian propaganda to promote a reality in which "nothing is true, and everything is possible". By instrumentalising nostalgia and using "alternative facts", such actors undermine and manipulate traumatic events, erasing authentic historical evidence. Ultimately, the chapter calls for a return to normativity and scientific factuality in public policy to protect democratic values against the strategic distortion of the past.

Keywords: historical memory, collective memory, post-truth, postmodernism

Introduction

Immediately after the countries in Central and Eastern Europe liberated themselves from the so-called socialist bloc or direct Soviet occupation in 1989–1991, they faced the challenge of re-establishing their political and national identities, overcoming past historical trauma, and reinstating national historical narratives. Recalling the liberal-communitarian debate of the late twentieth century, it can now be safely assumed that the modern liberal-democratic nation-state is not only based on a constitutional contract between the state and the individual, but also a historical-political community that encompasses several generations. As Edmund Burke put it, society is a partnership of the dead, the living, and the unborn (Burke, 1987, p. 85). Questions of past historical trauma and identity consequently played an essential role in the political transformations of this region. Restoration of identity is particularly evident in the implementation of decommunisation policies, such as the removal of Soviet-era monuments and the renaming of public spaces to cleanse the landscape of symbols of occupation. In addition, although in different ways, most states have established national memory institutions whose task is to analyse totalitarian regimes, "commemorate" their victims and heroes, and sometimes open the archives of the secret police, carry out lustration to vet state officials, and document the historical traumas of the twentieth century.

This return to the stage of world history and opening to the ever more globalised world coincided with significant intellectual tendencies. The postmodern turn, in which grand narratives, national identities, and traditional hierarchies were questioned, was already well established in academia and beginning to gain broader recognition outside it. In historiography, postmodernists emphasised the recognition of marginalised voices and the subjective and interpretive nature of historical studies and writing (Tholfsen, 1999, pp. 203–222). The experiences of two world wars, totalitarian regimes, and mass atrocities quite rightly brought a scepticism towards the modernist Enlightenment vision, romantic nationalism, religious traditions, figures of authority, and grand ideological projects.

In place of the grand narratives, as Jean-François Lyotard described them – *grands récits* (Lyotard, 1984, pp. 31–38) – several counter-concepts emerged that aimed to reframe attitudes towards the historical past, its studies, and current interpretations. Discourses on places of memory (Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*), cultural and collective memory were introduced instead of grand national narratives and histories (Nora, 1984–1993). Remembering, interpretations, and emotional connection became as significant as, if not more significant than, facts and truths about the past. This offered a general democratisation of historical discussions and narratives and opened up many important avenues in historical research: the history of everyday life and society, micro-history, the critique and study of how historiography employs literary tropes and devices, as does Hayden White in *Metahistory* (1973), how ideology and politics shape historiography. This intellectual reaction and critique, however, also had its price. This new approach to history was quickly adopted (and distorted by) politicians. Political control of public remembrance and national and historical memory through legal prescription, research funding, and similar methods is widely practised even in democratic states today. Nevertheless, the problem here is different: memory is not a fact. Since memory lends itself to relativity, it also lends itself to manipulation by force (at least on a conceptual level).

A relativisation of the past, brought about by the normative pluralism of historical discourse, consequently opened the door for malign actors. Historical revisionism, oriented towards the rehabilitation of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, gained a foothold not through facts but through historical nostalgia and nostalgia-based political narratives. In the context of the current Russian aggression against Ukraine, this is more evident than ever. The weaponisation of memory and historical narratives, the use of nostalgia for propaganda and political manipulation, outlined not only the limits but also the dangers of the postmodernist critique. The literature on this is ever-growing, with studies addressing topics such as Russian information warfare, memory laws, and the weaponisation of postmodernism (Krēķis, 2015, pp. 92–115; Moskwa, 2024, pp. 105–121; Craik, 2019). Indeed, narratives about the "good old days", based solely on subjective memory, can quickly

become political. There is a reason why Russian internet trolls disseminate Soviet nostalgia about "free" healthcare and flats, cheap so-called "doctors' sausage"[1], and tasty ice cream.

It is also no coincidence that Russian propagandists and political actors embraced postmodern ideas. An unofficial motto, captured by Peter Pomerantsev, is "nothing is true, and everything is possible" (Pomerantsev, 2015). As the Ukrainian intellectual Roman Cherevko summarised: "Russia can parasitise on the postmodern mentality and instrumentalise the concept of post-truth. Any nonsense can be presented as 'alternative facts': hey, look, there is no absolute truth, how about believing OUR truth? That is one way to understand how Russian media and politicians can promulgate outright lies, fakes, and nonsense with a straight face. It is all about their interpretation of postmodernity as a schizophrenic world where nothing is true, and everything is permitted" (Cherevko, 2022).

In the face of this challenge, it is important to re-evaluate how post-authoritarian memory has been confronted in the Central and Eastern European region, not by legitimising nostalgic voices, but by changing the concepts. Just as individual memory can be unreliable, collective memory is vague. A similar weaponisation of nostalgic memory for an idealised past also became apparent during the Brexit campaign. Thus, this paper aims to show how concepts of memory (collective, cultural, historical, etc.) are problematic both theoretically and politically. First, the importance of memory as a concept in philosophy and historiography will be examined through the work of Maurice Halbwachs and Astrid Erll, followed by a concise pragmatic critique. Collective memory here is used as an umbrella concept encompassing historical, cultural, and other kinds of "memories".

Why Memory Matters

Very often, we take useful concepts for granted and give little thought to reflecting upon them. Susan Sontag once wrote, "Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as collective memory – part of the same family of spurious notions as collective guilt. However, there is collective instruction […] all memory is individual, unreproducible – it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds"(Sontag, 2003, pp. 85–86). This "stipulating" of importance is precisely what allows malign actors to replace historical truth with strategic narratives. Sontag, of course, reflected the problem that there is no direct analogy between individual and group memory. There is no analogous faculty in a group that can be found in an individual. If the concept is based on analogy and metaphor of individual memory, then it fails to give clarity or heuristic value (where is it located, how can it be accessed, what and how does it "remember" or "forget"?).

1 A popular variety of boiled sausage in Russia and the former Soviet republics, a sort of low-fat bologna. Ed. note.

The forerunners of modern psychology, anthropology, and cognitive science, as well as the philosophers who preceded them, have explored the role of memory in human thought and self-awareness in various ways. Attempts to grasp and conceptualise the generalised experiences of particular communities have emerged, first of all, with the modern development of historical consciousness and the new social thought: Charles de Montesquieu wrote about the spirit of the law (*esprit des lois*), Voltaire reflected on the spirit of the ages and of the nations, and Johann Gottfried Herder, in a similar vein, the spirit of the nation or the folk (*Volksgeist*) (Meinecke, 1972, pp. 54–143, 295–361).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the problem of the relationship between the individual and collective consciousness was also prominent in sociology (Émile Durkheim) and in the study of psychology and psychoanalysis (most notably in the work of Gustave Le Bon, Sigmund Freud, and Carl Jung) (Hughes, 1958, pp. 67–160). They began to view memory not only as establishing and maintaining personal or community identities (Durkheim dealt with the *conscience collective*, referring in particular to primitive communities), but also as a problematic domain (above all through traumatic experiences, repressed memories), while Jung's theory of the collective unconscious (*kollektives Unbewusstes*) and archetypes attempted to demonstrate the fundamental relationship between individual and group memory, that the experience of past generations does not entirely disappear but persists and is reflected in the psyche of later generations, structuring their experience. Contemporary psychology continues to analyse the phenomenon of collective trauma, although with fewer ontological presuppositions. The need for such concepts is clear – it is impossible to explain society, collective action, and social ontology solely from the perspective of the individual.

Memory and History

The study of memory in historical context emerged as a significant trend at the end of the twentieth century, with the so-called "memory boom". Memory became a problem and an object of research, driven both by the traumatic experiences of the twentieth century (in particular the Second World War and the Holocaust) and by the need to find ways of talking about the various identities of individuals and communities in society (and the critique of the very idea of identity itself). The conceptual foundations for this research were laid, however, even earlier: Maurice Halbwachs first formulated the concepts of collective and historical memory in the 1920s, making a clear distinction between the two while also demonstrating their relationship to individual memory (Halbwachs, 1980, pp. 22–49). From Halbwachs' point of view, individual memory, especially historical and cultural self-understanding, is not entirely separate from or limited to personal experience but is influenced by the social context.

Halbwachs was one of the first to argue that society's view of the past is determined by how we deal with the present, and that collective memory is the reconstruction of the past in the light of the present. According to Halbwachs, collective memory is not a mystical group-think, but a socially constructed phenomenon. There are as many collective memories as there are groups or social institutions in society: social classes, families, associations, corporations, armies, and trade unions all have distinctive memories constructed by these groups over time. As Halbwachs argues, it is not groups or institutions that remember; it is individuals who do. Individuals are located in a specific group context, and it is this context that determines what and how individuals remember. Without social interactions, it is impossible to discover meaningful elements; therefore, memory is born in a group, a collective. Individual and collective memories are linked; individual memory results from collective memory, while collective memory derives from individual experiences. Changes in one's group associations can alter individual memory (Halbwachs, 1980, pp. 14–24, 54–87).

Second, collective memory can be understood as the creation of a shared past, shaped by shared communication, media, or institutions within social groups or cultural communities. Thus, the specific rendering of the past in the present creates collective memory, or, as Halbwachs argues, tradition is created through public communication about the past. Historical memory reaches a person through some form of media (textual or visual). Historical memory can also be kept alive through the commemoration of historical events, i.e., through the periodic cultivation of remembrance. However, Halbwachs also emphasised the distinction between history and memory. History is universal and is concerned with the past as such. According to Halbwachs, collective memory is opposed to history. Collective memory is oriented towards the group's needs and interests in the present and thus exists in a highly selective and reconstructive manner. The essential task of collective memory is identity formation (Halbwachs, 1980, pp. 78–86).

Halbwachs' insight into the selectivity of memory and its dependence on the interests of the present group helps us better understand the paradox of the evaluation of the poet Salomėja Nėris's in Lithuania. Although the facts show that she played an active role in legitimising the Soviet occupation of 1940, travelling with left-wing intellectuals to Moscow to bring "Stalin's Sun" and assist with the acceptance of Soviet-occupied Lithuania into the Soviet Union. After 1990, part of society, even those who had experienced Soviet repression, tended to justify her as a "talented interwar poet". This confirms that in collective memory, the continuity of identity often becomes more important than the analysis of the actual past; this was further reinforced by the education system, which presented her works in a highly selective manner, neutralising her role and presenting her as a victim of circumstances or a repentant martyr (Kučinskienė, Šeina and Vasiliauskas, 2024, pp. 68–104).

Drawing on Halbwachs, one can clearly distinguish between memory and history. This is easy to do analytically, but in socio-cultural and political practice, it is much harder, where they are too often conflated. The exact mechanisms of selective memory observed in local debates are exploited on a geopolitical scale by the Russian Federation. The relativity and particularity of historical memory are what give rise to political manipulation, and Russian Federation state propaganda strategists seem aware of this. For example, 9 May celebrations (known in Russia as "Victory Day in the Great Patriotic War") are not used to commemorate a historical event but rather as a symbol of imperial territory, aimed at perpetuating the myth of "liberation" (even though, in Eastern and Central Europe, one occupation replaced another). The conflation between pseudo-historical remembering and actual historical events is thus helpful in the exercise of political legitimisation of militarism, exceptionalism, imperialism, chauvinism, and warmongering. The fact that this use of historical memory by Russia is counter-historical is also evident in the repressive actions it takes. Russia began utilising state apparatus to erase the authentic memory of the victims of Soviet crimes (e.g., by restricting the activities of "Memorial" or Lithuanian "Mission Siberia", which tried to commemorate Soviet political prisoners or exiled Lithuanians to Siberia).

Culture and Memory

A similar approach to Halbwachs was later developed in the field of cultural memory (most notably by Jan and Aleida Assmann). Aleida Assmann wrote extensively on the necessity of these memory concepts: "The term collective memory [...] is an umbrella term for different formats of memory that need to be further distinguished, such as family memory, interactive group memory, and social, political, national, and cultural memory […]. The manifestations of political and cultural memory, on the other hand, are radically different in that they are grounded on the more durable carriers of external symbols and representations" (Assmann, 2008, p. 55). As Astrid Erll argues, no memory is ever purely individual but is always shaped by collective contexts. From the people we live with and the media we use, we acquire schemas that help us remember the past and encode new experiences. Our memories are often triggered and shaped by external factors, from friends' conversations to books and places. In short, we remember in sociocultural contexts. Cultural memory, according to Erll, "refers to the symbolic order, media, institutions, and practices by which social groups construct a shared past" (Erll, 2008, pp. 4–5). She argues that, although at an analytical level it is possible to distinguish between two forms of cultural memory, in practice the cognitive and socio-medial layers of memory are constantly interacting. Social and cultural contexts shape individual memories, but it is the specific individuals who have to actualise the general cultural memory: "Without such actualisations, monuments, rituals, and books are nothing but dead material, failing to have any impact in societies" (Erll, 2008, p. 5).

Political practice demonstrates how these concepts are problematic yet essential for us to understand. The modern political identity in a democratic nation-state relies heavily on shared historical narratives (the *demos* being not only a political, but also a historically, culturally, geographically, and/or linguistically connected community). It is no coincidence that Russia used historical mythologies to legitimise its current aggressive political agendas (the most notable example is Putin's 2021 article *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*[2]). In all countries formerly occupied by the Soviet Union, freedom fighters have consistently been primary targets of propaganda. During the Soviet occupation, they were depicted as "traitors" or "fascists" in order to conform to the state-enforced grand narrative. Paradoxically, the propagation of these pseudo-historical claims intensified after these countries gained independence. By presenting pseudo-historical accounts as "alternative facts", Russian narratives leverage the subjective and identity-oriented nature of collective memory to bypass documented historical evidence. This is particularly visible in the weaponisation of divisive and traumatic past events, such as the Holocaust. By manipulating local histories of collaboration, propaganda attempts to paint national liberation movements as inherently linked to Nazism. This effectively utilises historical trauma to undermine the moral legitimacy of contemporary independence and the statehood of these nations.

Does collective or historical memory offer something that public discourse, narrative, or remembrance fail to provide? The complexity of the issue is significantly deeper, raising fundamental questions of social ontology and intersubjectivity. A central conceptual challenge remains: how to adequately characterise shared, intersubjective experiences in their intersection with individual memory. The intellectual tradition of memory studies seeks to address these issues. Nevertheless, it has its shortcomings, however, especially when confronting democratic and aggressive authoritarian states.

Conclusion

Memory has more to do with the present, sentiments, and, often, imagination rather than facts. Memory can be relative, memory can be manipulated, memory can be misremembered, memory can hide the past, and mislead. The postmodern turn, while intellectually liberating, created a vulnerability by relativising the past. This highlights a fundamental tension: history seeks truths, whereas collective memory is highly selective and oriented towards identity formation. Russia has weaponised nostalgia and historical narratives – both for export and inner audiences. This challenge can only be answered by a renewed dedication to truthfulness. Being idle or just mirroring similar propaganda tactics (albeit

2 See chapter by Žukas in this volume.

with humanistic values) both seem to be dangerous alternatives. Here, we are not only faced with an imperialistic and aggressive existential opponent but also with a challenge to our core values. What we need now, though, is a return to normativity that would not deny the importance of factuality. Not everything is true, not everything is allowed.

Recommendations

- In public policy, it is important to emphasise that collective memory is a subjective "instruction", so decisions about state symbols should be based on historical truth rather than sentiment or ideology.
- Past traumatic events need to be addressed with factual precision and moral clarity.
- Funding for historical research and remembrance should move from ideological to scientific criteria.

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Democracy's Local Frontlines: Municipal Resilience in Ukraine

Gabor Berczeli

Summary: Democracy in Ukraine is not only defended on the battlefield, but it is also fought in municipal councils, town halls, and village assemblies. Since the start of Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukraine's local leaders have kept communities functioning under extraordinary pressure, including evacuating citizens, organising aid, restoring services, and preserving a sense of democratic legitimacy in wartime. Their resilience builds on a decade of EU-supported decentralisation reforms that empowered municipalities with greater autonomy, resources, and responsibility. These reforms emerged from an earlier political vacuum: as oligarchic dominance and an ineffective central state eroded public trust, local activists entered municipal politics — a terrain previously neglected due to its limited influence and financial insignificance. Their engagement restored civic legitimacy at the local level. Today, Ukraine's local democracy constitutes a frontline of both national survival and European integration.

Keywords: Ukraine, decentralisation, recentralisation, disparities, participation, resilience, reform

Introduction

Ukraine's local democracy endures as a vital frontline against invasion, combining pre-war reforms with wartime adaptation. This article examines the enabling factors and impacts of decentralisation since 2014, alongside the war's disruptions to municipal viability from 2022 onward. It argues that while reforms have built resilience, growing regional disparities and fiscal pressures threaten local self-governance unless systematically addressed in reconstruction. Yet caution against over-romanticising local leadership is warranted: decentralisation has in places enabled elite capture, entrenching incumbent mayors and local businessmen (Bader, 2021). Corruption risks remain significant, and an 80% non-compliance rate with transparency legislation undermines institutional trust more corrosively than wartime conditions alone (Levona and Jarábik, 2025).

These challenges may nonetheless be understood as growing pains. Targeted training by international partners and local experts, stronger enforcement mechanisms, and procurement support can help close these gaps. The decentralisation reform process itself remains incomplete, as evidenced by two competing bills before the Verkhovna Rada — draft laws №4298 (2020) and №13124 (2025) — the latter introducing prefectural oversight of operational legality. Municipal resilience is ultimately fragile

and conditional: where civil society and accountability mechanisms are strong, decentralisation has demonstrably improved responsiveness. Where they remain weak, post-war reform must prioritise institutional safeguards over the further devolution of powers.

Background: Local Government as a Vehicle for Reform

Ukraine inherited a Soviet-style centralised system characterised by weak, underfunded local councils in which appointed administrators held greater authority than elected representatives, and which were frequently captured by oligarchic interests. Despite several earlier reform attempts that stalled for lack of political will, the Euromaidan uprising of 2014 finally created the conditions for change. The subsequent reform agenda had three distinct roots: domestic expectations for improved local governance, alignment with EU standards and development models, and pressure to address regional tensions alongside Russian demands for federalisation (Dudley, 2019).

In the early stage, opportunity met demand. With modest budgets, dependence on central transfers, and limited political prestige, municipal council seats held little appeal for established actors — unlike administrative or national office. This opened space for a cohort of local activists, energised during and after Maidan, who secured a substantial share of mandates. Their ranks included many women, aided by the introduction of gender quotas in the 2015 municipal elections, which incentivised parties meeting established benchmarks (Kliuzhev et al., 2021). While these newcomers brought civic legitimacy and civil society skills, they frequently lacked institutional experience.

This implementation gap became apparent when the Robert Schuman Institute, principally in partnership with the Kyiv-based Institute of Political Education (IPO), delivered capacity-building training to over 2,000 councillors from across Ukraine. A majority, often years into their mandates, remained unclear about their competences and powers under decentralisation legislation. It was therefore no coincidence that international partners — including the EU, the U-LEAD with Europe programme[3], and USAID's DOBRE programme[4] — invested considerably in expertise transfer, planning support, and civil society inclusion. Estimates at the time suggested that up to 200,000 officeholders required awareness-raising on the reforms and their own competences, representing a substantial implementation gap in need of systematic attention.[5]

3 The programme is a multi-donor action operating in all 24 regions of Ukraine to strengthen municipalities in their work. Ed. note.

4 Decentralization Offering Better Results and Efficiency" (DOBRE), was a nine-year program, implemented by Global Communities and funded by the United States Agency for International Development. It ended 30 September 2025. Ed. note.

5 This figure comprised approximately 45,000 elected councillors and mayors, alongside a further 155,000 municipal administration members. In: European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations (ENEMO), 2020.

The 2014–2020 Decentralisation Design

The Ministry for Development of Communities and Territories of Ukraine bears responsibility for regional policy, decentralisation reform, and reconstruction, overseeing the broader political process. Key legislation enabled the initially voluntary creation of Amalgamated Territorial Communities (hromadas), provided fiscal stimulus through a 60% share of personal income tax revenues, and devolved responsibility for social services — including education, healthcare, and welfare — previously administered at the mid-level. These measures empowered communities long neglected under prior regimes and reorganised the local tier to improve viability, resource efficiency, and service delivery. The model's effectiveness, however, is contingent on capable administration, active local economic development, and a functional rule of law sufficient to sustain independent revenue collection.

Enabling Factors for Reform Success

Post-Maidan politics provided strong top-level support for reform from both the presidency and government. Many prominent figures from expert, opinion-leader, and activist circles had conspicuously failed to convert their public prominence into national political careers. The new environment nonetheless created openings for capable practitioners in the second echelons of the administration and within influential, internationally supported civil society organisations such as the Reanimation Package of Reforms coalition. Capable young practitioners were able to make substantial contributions across levels of governance — figures such as Ivan Lukeria advanced multi-level governance work through U-LEAD or accelerated digitalisation reform as Deputy Minister for Development of Communities and Territories. Political educators and early elected officials such as Oleksandr Solontay of Uzhhorod contributed to drafting territorial development strategies for dozens of new communities, including major cities, and co-authored the Local Democracy Law. EU, Council of Europe, and broader international support were readily available in this optimistic climate. Civic activism drove institutional change, with activists assuming municipal roles that carried genuine democratic legitimacy. By the time of the full-scale invasion in 2022, many were serving second or third mandates, having accumulated experience, social capital, and the foundations of new institutional cultures. Local elections grew increasingly competitive, and service delivery improved, generating public trust — though research suggests that perceived ownership and peer trust among residents weighed more heavily than measurable performance gains (Arends et al., 2023). Rural amalgamation nonetheless exposed persistent viability concerns addressed further below.

The Immediate Impact of War on Local Governance

The most direct administrative consequence was the emergence of two parallel local government systems. Alongside the reformed hromadas, martial law prompted the creation of civil-military administrations in frontline and liberated regions, affecting 207 of Ukraine's 1,469 hromadas (Darkovich and Rabinovych, 2025). Although civilian leadership — typically former mayors or deputy mayors — has been retained in most of these cases, council activity has been suspended. Governed by a defence logic prioritising operational effectiveness, aid delivery, and security, these administrations tend toward centralisation and are consequently more susceptible to non-transparent practices, including various forms of corruption. The establishment of civil-military administrations has not always been confined to strategic necessity alone. In several cases, the continued functioning of councils became simply impossible as members fled, were killed, mobilised, or otherwise rendered unavailable by the war. Without a quorum, such councils could neither take decisions nor hold new elections, precluded by both constitutional constraints and security considerations. A further distinct category comprises military administrations established for Russian-occupied hromadas, operating from nearby towns. These bodies perform functions related to internally displaced persons (IDPs), humanitarian aid, intelligence gathering, and post-war planning (Darkovich and Rabinovych, 2025).

Re-centralisation is occurring through other channels as well. Reconstruction funding from international donors remains concentrated at the central government level. In budgetary terms, the redirection of personal income tax revenues from military personnel to the central government since 2023 represents a further erosion of municipal fiscal autonomy. Where local economies are unable to generate sufficient revenue for services or damage recovery, dependence on — and control from — Kyiv is effectively revived. Frontline municipalities face acute service delivery challenges, while hinterland settlements have confronted unrealistic expectations given infrastructure ill-suited to absorbing significantly expanded displaced populations. Not all such influxes are sustainable: the relatively secure but predominantly rural Zakarpattia region, for instance, faces mounting pressure through economic sectoral realignment, overstretched utilities, and local tensions surrounding wind energy projects that are transforming the region's landscape and ecology in response to new energy demands.

Resilience Through Civic and Local Adaptation

Municipalities organised evacuations, delivered aid, and maintained essential services and infrastructure under considerable strain. Civic networks filled critical gaps, sustaining institutional legitimacy in the process. A study by the Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD)

identified a small but statistically significant correlation between local authorities' emergency preparedness and their commitment to participatory governance and active NGO engagement (Keudel et al., 2024). Examples from training exercises similarly revealed municipal innovation under pressure: attracting new investors to industrial parks for additional revenue, rebuilding central heating systems to utilise locally available timber, and developing prefabricated housing designs for rapid replacement of damaged property. This is not intended as a valorisation of decentralised crisis management, but rather as an illustration of a genuinely multi-layered response. Notably, 86% of hromadas identify community cohesion as a core institutional task, with a comparable share reporting a strategic emphasis on inclusivity — an approach that yields benefits for both legitimacy and practical problem-solving (Keudel et al., 2024, p. 22).

Successful municipalities in the cited study tended to establish physical community crisis centres providing access to utilities, food supplies, meeting space, and emergency planning information. The digital domain also featured prominently in hromada crisis functions, encompassing emergency notifications, community social media platforms, fundraising, coordination tools, chatbots, and broader citizen and business engagement. Most assessed and stockpiled critical resources and conducted preparedness drills. Digital capability gaps remain significant, however: data backup constitutes a near-universal vulnerability, IT security deficiencies frequently go unaddressed, and a digital divide across social groups presents persistent challenges. Recognised but difficult to resolve issues include the meaningful engagement of internally displaced persons and the management of stress, burnout, and broader mental health concerns among both staff and communities.

Tension persists, however, between security imperatives and democratic norms at the local level, as hard-won decentralisation reforms are suspended and community self-organisation takes precedence over established procedures. Resilience depends heavily on trust and civic buy-in, yet at the intersection of transparency, accountability, and modern administrative standards, even well-intentioned initiatives can founder. One telling example involves our[6] programme alumna who successfully designed and implemented a psychiatric rehabilitation facility for veterans in her hromada. The international partner's funding was fully and appropriately utilised, yielding a functional facility — yet she faces criminal proceedings for failure to observe public procurement regulations. The first-responder civic mindset that enabled rapid, effective action in crisis conditions is insufficient for recovery at scale within the public institutional domain.

6 Author works for the Robert Schumann Institute. Ed. Note.

Wartime Disparities and the Erosion of Municipal Viability

The invasion has deepened a pre-existing demographic crisis while widening regional disparities between western Ukraine and Kyiv on one hand, and the rest of the country on the other. It has accelerated displacement in a country already contending with long-term population decline. Ukraine's last official census recorded a population of 48.46 million in 2001; by 2019 this had fallen to an estimated 37.29 million, excluding occupied territories, with up to a further 10 million displaced as a direct consequence of the war (Kasiyan, 2025). To contextualise the scale of depopulation, this represents nearly four times the displacement rate recorded during the Croatian War of Independence of 1991–95. Many refugees and internally displaced persons do not intend to return: actual returns from abroad have stabilised at below 30%, while the intention to return among the internally displaced has fallen steadily, currently standing at 73% (International Organization for Migration, 2024). Internal displacement from the east and south is further concentrating population in western cities and the capital.

This concentration places severe pressure on infrastructure and municipal services — Uzhhorod, for instance, absorbed a population increase of 30–50% above its pre-war baseline. The displacement is not confined to people: businesses have relocated as well, with Kyiv reporting that 39% of municipal revenues derive from such relocations, and GDP growth effects estimated at up to 14%. Defence industries and building materials production have naturally gravitated toward safer regions. Per capita income in the west has grown by 15–20%, not because of organic economic development but as a reflection of concentrated business relocation and labour scarcity. This western boom is further evidenced by a 28% rise in job vacancies in Lviv, where 60% of businesses report difficulty recruiting at the required skill level. Simultaneously, local economies — and with them local revenues — have collapsed in eastern regions, with business volumes declining by 70% and tax receipts falling by 45% in 2023–2024. This pronounced regional disparity, resulting from the combined effects of economic collapse and relocation, is examined in detail by Levona and Jarábik (2025).

A third dimension of community loss deserves mention: the erosion of identity through the destruction or abandonment of Ukraine's tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Wide swathes of rural areas are left with ageing, impoverished populations who have long served as custodians of folkloric traditions, artisanal crafts, archaic rural ways of life, and fragile built heritage. These traditions face literal extinction, prompting urgent last-minute anthropological collection and preservation initiatives such as the Polyphony Project (www.polyphonyproject.com). It is worth recalling that the consolidation of settlements into single hromadas — initially voluntary, subsequently mandated — was partly conceived as a response to precisely these viability challenges. If eastern and southern rural areas are to avoid wholesale hollowing-out, reconstruction planning must address their deep-

rooted structural problems strategically and sustainably, challenges now further compounded by the wartime displacement of young to middle-aged women and children.

Fiscal Pressures and Service Strain Undermining Local Autonomy

The economic damage of war has caused municipal revenues to plunge: local taxes have fallen by 45% and central government transfers by 25% relative to 2022 levels (Levona and Jarábik, 2025, p. 4). Resource-constrained municipalities are increasingly pushed toward ad hoc solutions at the expense of systemic planning. Frontline hromadas bear the harshest burden and exemplify the growing fiscal dependence on Kyiv, even as the absolute value of transfers has diminished. This re-centralisation is undermining the reform achievements of the 2014–2022 period. The trajectory was not always downward: in the early stages of the war, municipalities received a significant fiscal boost from personal income tax revenues generated by military personnel registered in their areas. This revenue stream was, however, redirected to the central budget from the beginning of 2023.

Education and childcare represent a major expenditure item for municipalities and function as a critical community anchor. The displacement of children — both internally and abroad — has created redundant capacity, while ensuring adequate teaching and childcare conditions under wartime constraints, from shelter provision to energy supply, imposes additional costs on already shrinking budgets. Inadequate provision damages local social infrastructure and restricts access to essential services. District heating subsidies present a further acute fiscal burden, particularly through the harshest winter of the war and amid sustained attacks on energy infrastructure. Private sector investment in this domain remains unrealistic, even setting aside wartime risks, given an unfavourable regulatory framework and the preconditions for network modernisation required to attract it.

The overall contraction of fiscal space further deepens local authorities' dependence on state transfers and central administration. Beyond immediate financial pressures, the scale of the reconstruction challenge is daunting: Team Europe has mobilised over €150 billion since the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022, while total reconstruction needs are estimated at over €500 billion, with housing, transport, and energy infrastructure representing the largest cost items (World Bank et al., 2026). Authorities face a serious challenge of absorption capacity, and a genuine risk that this support fails to translate into effective investment — whether through mismanagement or misuse — with the consequent erosion of trust in the Ukrainian state and its governance institutions.

Human resource constraints are equally severe. Estimates from the Ukrainian Ministry of Economy and the International Labour Organization (ILO) suggest a shortfall of between 4.5 and 8.6 million

workers required for effective reconstruction and economic recovery (International Organization for Migration, 2024). The shortage of skilled labour is already contributing to suboptimal business operations across sectors, including but not limited to agriculture, and represents a critical gap for any vision of innovative reconstruction. Mobilisation and refugee outflows are the immediate drivers, compounding a longer-term demographic decline that the war has significantly accelerated.

Pathways to Post-War Decentralisation Completion

From a constitutional standpoint, martial law must be lifted before any constitutional reform or elections can proceed, including amendments pertaining to local self-government and territorial organisation. It is nonetheless possible to advance through ordinary legislation to address EU conditionalities and complete the executive oversight component of decentralisation reform. Two attempts have been made to do so. The more ambitious and comprehensive bill №4298 (2021) envisioned a wholesale rewrite of the Law on Local Authorities, introducing a prefecture-type state oversight mechanism whereby oblast and rayon administrations would assume responsibility for coordinating territorial state bodies and supervising both the legality and quality of hromada acts.

This was superseded last year by a substantially different proposal, bill №13124, designed to bridge the divide between proponents of municipal autonomy and advocates of stronger central oversight. Rather than rewriting existing legislation, it unblocks EU funds by improving current rules within a narrower legality-check scope acceptable to the Association of Ukrainian Cities. A third outstanding issue concerns the role of local authorities in planning and implementing credible and sustainable reconstruction, including access to international donor funds and loans. Hromada-led recovery commands broad support among experts and donors alike. Over the past four years, small-scale local recovery projects have predominated by necessity over large-scale infrastructure investment, generating a credible track record in the process. Municipalities have demonstrated capacity for strategic community development, building consultative and participatory frameworks that are well placed to underpin the sense of ownership and trust essential to durable reconstruction.

Conclusion

Decentralisation reform has been widely lauded by Ukraine's international partners as one of the principal achievements of its three decades of post-independence transformation, and its completion will constitute one of the most critical early post-war priorities. The impact of the war will nonetheless necessitate deliberate measures to address regional cohesion. The historical identity cleavage has eased considerably as a result of the full-scale invasion, with marked declines

in Russian ethnic and linguistic self-identification. Meanwhile, the displacement of both population and economic activity has rendered many eastern and southern rural areas effectively unviable.

Security, wealth, and demographic potential remain concentrated in western urban centres and an increasingly overburdened capital, placing mounting pressure on other municipalities and hromadas to develop compelling and tailored reconstruction plans. Any degree of demographic and economic reversal is not merely a question of rural survival but a broader challenge for national development and EU integration. Sustainability and innovation must be substantive imperatives rather than planning rhetoric, representing the genuine keys to addressing labour and skills deficits and restoring revenue-generating productive capacity — prerequisites for reclaiming devolved competences from the centre. Decentralisation's legacy equips Ukraine's local frontlines for both survival and integration. The heirs of the 2014 reforms must now counter deepening disparities if democratic resilience is to be sustained.

Recommendations

- Resuming the decentralisation agenda with content carefully updated for post-war reconstruction and recovery, ensuring all regions and settlements have a meaningful role in shaping their futures.
- Realistic data — encompassing population figures alongside sociological and economic indicators — must underpin all planning.
- Decentralisation of donor funding will be essential, enabling local governments to play a substantive role and improve delivery efficiency across all regions, with particular attention to the east and south.
- Building trust among donors and private investors requires municipalities and regions to demonstrate functioning transparency, accountability, and anti-corruption frameworks.
- Preserving state and stability must not come at the expense of rule of law and governance standards, if a credible EU integration perspective is to be maintained.
- Drawing on lessons from post-war reconstruction in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina could benefit decision-makers and inform a staged approach to EU accession goals.

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Neutrality and Security

Werner Fasslabend and Christoph Schwarz

Summary: Austria's policy of permanent neutrality has historically been a cornerstone of its foreign and security policy identity. Emerging from the geopolitical circumstances of the Cold War, neutrality functioned both as a prerequisite for the restoration of sovereignty in 1955 and as a strategic instrument that allowed Austria to act as intermediary between the Western and Eastern blocs. This role enabled Austria to derive security in principle from diplomatic relevance rather than military deterrence. However, the structural conditions that once sustained this model have fundamentally changed. European integration, the end of bipolarity, and the resurgence of great-power rivalry have transformed Austria's strategic environment. Today, Austria's security is increasingly embedded within European frameworks, particularly the European Union, while the central institutional structure of European defence remains NATO, from which Austria is excluded. The paper argues that the key challenge is not whether neutrality should be maintained, as public and thus political sentiment would not permit such a step in the foreseeable future, but how it can be credibly reconciled with Austria's participation in collective European security and defence structures.

Keywords: Austrian neutrality, European security, EU Common Security and Defence Policy, NATO, strategic environment, great-power rivalry, collective security, Cold War, security policy, European integration

Introduction

Austria's policy of permanent neutrality has long occupied a central place in Austria's foreign and security policy self-understanding. Originally embedded in the geopolitical conditions of the Cold War, neutrality was widely regarded as both a prerequisite for the restoration of sovereignty and a functional instrument of security in a divided Europe. Since then, however, the political and strategic environment in which Austrian neutrality operates has undergone a profound transformation. European integration, the end of bipolarity, and the re-emergence of a great-power rivalry have progressively altered the assumptions that once underpinned neutrality's security rationale. This chapter traces the evolution of Austrian neutrality from its Cold War origins to the present, examining how its function, meaning, and practical implications have shifted over time and assessing whether neutrality can still serve as a viable foundation for Austria's security policy within an increasingly contested European security order.

Cold War Neutrality

Between the end of the Second World War in 1945 and the signing of the Austrian State Treaty in 1955, Austria had been divided into four occupation zones between the Allied Powers. Accepting the Soviet demand of "permanent neutrality" in order to regain national sovereignty was not solely the product of diplomatic ingenuity, which became decisive only in the final phase of the negotiations, but rather of Austria's highly specific geopolitical position at the interface between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. During a brief phase of détente between East and West, this constellation enabled Austria, as the only successor state of the former Habsburg Monarchy, to avoid occupation by the Soviet Union as well as by the three Western Allied powers and to regain full sovereignty over its entire national territory. The withdrawal of occupying forces following the conclusion of the State Treaty and the declaration of neutrality produced strategic consequences that extended far beyond Austria itself. Combined with Switzerland's long-standing neutrality, Austria's "neutralisation" created a continuous buffer along the northern Alpine arc, stretching from the Jura Mountains to the Carpathians and forming a de facto barrier at the centre of the European continent. For the Soviet Union, this configuration offered the advantage of separating the Federal Republic of Germany from Italy and, from a military-strategic perspective, of dividing NATO's northern and southern theatres, substantially complicating force redeployment across the Alps. For the Western powers, the effective denial of the Upper Danube valley from Pressburg to Passau likewise impeded the prospect of a rapid Soviet advance into southern Germany.

For Austria, it can be regarded as largely uncontested that it benefited to a significant extent from its neutral status during the period between the adoption of permanent neutrality in 1955 and the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s. Within this geopolitical setting, neutrality enabled Austria to assume a distinctive role in the international system, one that extended far beyond the natural sphere of influence of a country of its size, as Henry Kissinger once observed (Dachs and Gerlich, 2005). As a front-line state positioned between East and West, Austria became a valued mediator and bridge-builder for both sides of the Iron Curtain, a role that was further institutionalised through the hosting of major international organisations in Vienna, including the United Nations (UN) and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) in Europe. Strategically leveraged as an instrument of foreign policy, neutrality thus allowed Austria and its representatives to exert influence on the international stage disproportionate to the country's material capabilities. The economic dividend of this position was likewise substantial. Relative to its population size, Austria ranked among the three largest recipients of American post-war reconstruction aid and became firmly embedded in the economic architecture of the West (Petritsch, 2015), while cooperative arrangements with the Soviet Union, such as the gas import agreement concluded in 1968, also contributed significantly to Austria's rise into the ranks of the world's wealthiest industrialised states (Lechner, 2023).

Post-Cold War Neutrality

The end of the Cold War, Austria's accession to the European Union in 1995, and the subsequent eastern enlargements of both the EU and NATO fundamentally altered the political environment in and around Austria. Within a remarkably short period of time, Austria moved from being a buffer and contact zone between antagonistic power blocs to the centre of a largely peaceful and increasingly integrated Europe, almost exclusively surrounded by EU and NATO member states. The bipolar order of the Cold War, characterised by persistent tension and mutual deterrence, gave way to a phase of U.S. dominated unipolarity in which the proclaimed "end of history" appeared, at least temporarily, within reach. In the euphoria following the perceived triumph of liberal democracy over autocracy and communism, security policy concerns increasingly receded into the background. What followed was a growing Europeanisation of Austrian foreign, security, and defence policy, in the course of which neutrality lost much of its former strategic distinctiveness and was gradually supplemented by the principle of solidarity embedded in EU membership (Senn, 2023).

This transformation briefly opened a window of political fluidity and strategic opportunity. By the late 1990s, NATO membership appeared, at least in principle, to be a conceivable option within Austria's domestic political landscape. Leading figures within the Austrian People's Party signalled openness to accession, the Freedom Party, then the largest opposition force, submitted the first parliamentary motion explicitly advocating NATO membership, and influential actors within the Social Democratic Party also expressed support, suggesting that the qualified majority required for constitutional amendment – necessary to abolish neutrality – appeared within reach (Jungwirth, 2024). This moment, however, proved short-lived. The collapse of the grand coalition in 2000 marked an abrupt end to these considerations, which have since lacked any realistic prospect of revival. A critical and sustained engagement with questions of international politics – and in particular with Austria's evolving role within it – increasingly appeared redundant against the background of EU membership and the rapid normalisation of Europe's post-Cold War order. This contributed to a gradual impoverishment of political and societal discourse on Austria's strategic orientation in international security affairs over the past three decades.

Had the international system remained frozen at the turn of the millennium and had Francis Fukuyama's proclaimed "end of history" indeed materialised, this development might not have carried significant consequences (Fukuyama, 1989). It must be acknowledged, however, that the arc of global history does not appear to be bending inexorably towards a world in which values such as democracy, human rights, and peaceful coexistence among states are universally shared. On the contrary, it is becoming increasingly evident that revisionist forces seeking to undermine precisely these values and to rewrite the rules of international relations are not only on the rise but

have already consolidated power in several of the world's most powerful states, including the United States, China, and Russia. These developments suggest that the international system is undergoing a profound structural transformation rather than a temporary disruption. The world is once again at risk of reverting to spheres of influence dominated by Great Powers, in which the fate and security of small- and middle-sized countries rests on their ability to either bandwagon or band together.

For Austria, these developments raise an increasingly urgent question concerning its long-term orientation in European and international affairs and, in particular, its foreign and security policy self-conception. What is certain is that Austria embarked on the path of European integration with its accession to the EU in 1995. The fact that this path has fundamentally transformed the structure of Austria's foreign, security, and defence policy, as well as Austria's place in the global order, has, however, not yet fully registered among large segments of society. Neutrality has instead been elevated to the status of a largely uncontested element of political consensus, with sustained public debate about its continued purpose or necessary adaptation often being curtailed before it can meaningfully unfold (Die Presse, 2022). Austria's strategic environment has also become markedly more demanding. In an era in which security concerns increasingly shape not only European but global politics more broadly, Austria is confronted with a growing tension between its international legal status as a permanently neutral state and the practical requirements arising from EU membership and from its geostrategic position at the centre of the continent. Located only a few hundred kilometres from acute and persistent crisis regions such as Ukraine, the Kaliningrad Oblast, Bosnia, or Kosovo, Austria finds itself in close proximity to multiple fault lines of contemporary European security. Under these conditions, the maintenance of the existing foreign and security policy status quo appears increasingly insufficient, both to ensure Austria's own security and to enable it to exercise the stabilising and agenda-setting role that is possible and, arguably, necessary in Central Europe and Europe at large. Whether Austria can continue to rely on inherited assumptions about neutrality without subjecting its function to critical reassessment within an integrated and contested European security order must therefore be examined with renewed urgency.

Neutrality as a Security Policy

During the Cold War, Austrian neutrality was widely conceived not merely as a legal status requiring abstention from alliance structures but as a core instrument of security policy. In other words, foreign and security policy was by and large a function of the country's neutrality policy. In a strategic environment structured by two rival alliance systems, security was expected to be provided less through military deterrence – as would be traditionally assumed and even constitutionally mandated by Austrian neutrality law – and more through the political utility that neutrality was able to generate

in the international system. The central premise was that Austria could reduce the risk of coercion or encroachment by becoming valuable to both blocs as a predictable, stabilising, and diplomatically serviceable actor (Senn, 2023). In line with this logic, security was derived from a form of political indispensability, meaning that state survival was linked to Austria's capacity to perform functions that neither NATO nor the Warsaw Pact could easily replicate within their own alliance logics.

The concept of an "active neutrality policy," particularly associated with Austria's foreign policy in the 1970s, translated this premise into an explicit security narrative. Neutrality was not framed as passive abstention but as a continuous diplomatic practice that sought to maintain credibility, manage perceptions, and widen Austria's room for manoeuvre in international politics. By positioning itself as a mediator and interlocutor, Austria aimed to mitigate the structural vulnerability of being located at a geopolitical fault line. The bridging function between the blocs was thus understood as a security contribution in its own right, one that complemented and perhaps even outweighed military preparedness. Bruno Kreisky[7] articulated this security rationale with particular clarity in his 1971 government declaration, noting that he had "no intention of diminishing the importance of national defence when asserting, on behalf of the Federal Government, that Austria's neutrality and security in peacetime were best ensured through a successful foreign policy" (Kicker, 2002). In analytical terms, the claim diplomatic performance was in itself a central security asset. A neutral Austria perceived as reliable, useful, and internationally engaged could raise the political costs of pressure from either side and, at the same time, increase the incentives to respect its autonomy. This approach implicitly treated visibility, credibility, and mediation capacity as elements of national defence, in the sense that they contributed to strategic insulation. It also helps explain why neutrality, in the Cold War context as well as up to this day, could be narrated domestically as a cornerstone of national security. The promise was not that Austria could ward off a great power militarily, but that it could make itself difficult to disregard in international affairs, thereby anchoring its survival in the stabilising role that neutrality made possible during the Cold War.

The Situation Today

In the contemporary European security environment, the structural conditions that once made neutrality appear as a distinct national instrument of security policy have changed fundamentally. Austria is no longer located at the interface of two antagonistic blocs whose mutual restraint could be reinforced through a credible bridging role. Austria's security is instead embedded within the political and institutional order of the European Union, and its security is increasingly generated through

7 Bruno Kreisky was an Austrian social democratic politician who served as foreign minister from 1959 to 1966 and as chancellor from 1970 to 1983. Ed. note.

continental frameworks rather than through a strictly national logic of insulation. This shift is explicitly reflected in Austria's current strategic doctrine, which defines national security as "intrinsically linked to the security of Europe" and identifies "the EU as the central framework for Austrian security policy" (Bundeskanzleramt, 2024). This embeddedness, however, has to be understood in conjunction with the institutional reality of European defence. While Austria's security strategy emphasises an active and solidaristic participation in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), including the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), the most consequential security and defence policy debates and decisions in Europe continue to take place within the framework of NATO. In light of the continuing relevance of the United States' nuclear umbrella and the absence of fully credible military leadership and operational capacity at the EU-level, NATO is likely to remain the central security architecture of the continent in the foreseeable future. Any substantial shift in European security policy away from NATO towards EU institutions appears unrealistic, however, even in the wake of recent political frictions within the Alliance. At most, a gradual Europeanisation of NATO, accompanied in parallel by incremental advances in EU foreign and security policy, can be expected.

For Austria, this creates a structural tension at the heart of its contemporary security policy. On the one hand, Austria's security is no longer produced through its role as mediator and buffer zone between competing power centres, but through contributions to the resilience, coherence, and credibility of the European security order of which Austria is a part. On the other hand, Austria remains formally excluded from the central institution that continues to shape the strategic parameters of European defence. Following the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO, Austria now finds itself in an increasingly marginal position. Within the European Union, only a small group of peripheral island states – Ireland, Cyprus, and Malta – remain outside the Alliance, while NATO members now constitute 96% of the entire population of the EU (NATO, 2026). Austria's ability to influence core European security policy developments is therefore substantially limited. While it may seek information on agendas and outcomes, it lacks meaningful access to deliberative and decision-making processes, resulting in an effective influence that stands in stark contrast to Austria's geographical position and security exposure at the centre of the continent.

This institutional asymmetry becomes particularly consequential in light of the nature of contemporary security threats. These are increasingly systemic and transboundary, targeting European infrastructure, political and societal cohesion, economic resilience, and the integrity of the rules-based order. In such an environment, abstention is not a cost-free posture. A stance of minimal involvement can weaken collective responses and thereby indirectly reduce Austria's own security. Directional pressures on Europe's security architecture further sharpen this dilemma. From the East, Russia's war against Ukraine has demonstrated the renewed use of military force to revise borders and erode

core norms, while Russia's hybrid activities continue to undermine cohesion within Europe. From the West, transatlantic reliability can no longer be treated as an unchanging constant, as debates over U.S. commitments and burden-sharing illustrate. At the same time, China's increasingly assertive foreign policy exerts growing pressure on Europe across economic, technological, and security domains. Within this setting, neutrality as security policy can no longer plausibly be anchored in the promise of standing apart. Its contemporary credibility instead depends on how it is reconciled with a reality in which Austria's security is inseparable from Europe's capacity to act collectively, even as the institutional centre of gravity of European defence remains located outside the European Union. Neutrality, under these conditions, must be assessed not only in legal or normative terms, but in relation to the structural constraints and asymmetries that shape Austria's ability to contribute to and influence the European security order.

The Road Ahead

In the present strategic context, the prospect of Austria abandoning its policy of permanent neutrality appears highly unlikely. Neutrality remains deeply embedded in public sentiment and continues to enjoy a broad political consensus. Opinion surveys consistently show that a substantial majority of Austrians regard neutrality as a defining element of national identity and foreign policy, with support levels regularly exceeding 70% (Senn and Eder, 2025). Public opposition to NATO membership remains equally robust, with successive polls indicating clear majorities rejecting accession and favouring the preservation of Austria's neutral status (Ibid.). This societal disposition is mirrored across the political spectrum. In the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Austrian Chancellor and the leadership of all the major parties reaffirmed neutrality's continued relevance, effectively foreclosing any meaningful institutional debate about its further development, let alone its abandonment (Die Presse, 2022). These patterns suggest that neutrality is not merely a residual legacy of the Cold War, but a durable and widely shared point of reference in Austria's national security identity.

The persistence of neutrality does not necessarily imply restraint in collective security efforts in Europe, nor does it preclude an active and responsible role within the EU's security and defence framework. Historically, Austrian neutrality has coexisted with substantial international engagement, including participation in UN- as well as EU-led missions, and there is scope for this pattern to continue. The introduction of Article 23(j) into the Austrian Constitution in the wake of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2010 provided the legal basis for substantial engagement, effectively allowing for the suspension of Austrian neutrality within the framework of the CFSP (Jandl, 2022). Austria may consequently participate in the Petersberg tasks, contribute militarily to collective defence under

Article 42(7) of the Treaty on the European Union, as well as be actively involved in initiatives such as the European Peace Facility, the European Defence Agency, the European Defence Fund, and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), among others. In other words, any constitutional constraints on Austria's participation in EU defence initiatives and frameworks have been removed. Thus, under the existing constitutional framework, Austria is legally enabled to provide meaningful and comprehensive contributions to European security and defence.

The central tension in Austria is therefore not one of legal incompatibility, but of asymmetrical solidarity. While public attitudes tend to endorse enhanced European collective security in the abstract, they remain markedly reluctant when such commitments imply reciprocal obligations, material burdens, or the possibility of Austrian force deployment under mutual defence scenarios (BMLV, 2025). While 85% of Austrians expect military assistance from other EU Member States in the event of an attack, for example, only 40% support Austria providing indirect military support in return, and merely 20% endorse direct Austrian military involvement (Senn and Eder, 2025). What therefore requires reconsideration is less the formal policy of neutrality itself than the manner in which Austria engages with its own security identity and translates it into practice. Over much of the post-Cold War period, developments in European integration – particularly in the fields of security and defence – have unfolded largely at the margins of public awareness. This has contributed to a disconnect between the strategic demands of Austria's security environment and societal understandings of how neutrality interacts with EU solidarity, institutional interdependence, and collective resilience. Regardless of their strategic preferences, Austrian political representatives therefore remain structurally constrained by public attitudes that limit the domestic legitimacy of more far-reaching commitments in European security and defence. Addressing this gap will require substantially more engagement and political leadership, including clearer public communication about the implications of European security cooperation and Austria's role within it.

Within these constraints, a number of strategic orientations follow. Austria's security interests point towards a continued engagement within the European Union, including efforts to shape norms and practices in common foreign, security, and defence policy. The institutional asymmetry created by Austria's exclusion from NATO also cannot be ignored. While formal membership remains politically excluded, the pursuit of closer and more systematic forms of consultation and informal inclusion – along the lines of arrangements enjoyed by non-member partners prior to accession – appears increasingly relevant if Austria is to avoid further marginalisation in European security debates. Finally, Austria's geographical position underscores the importance of intensified cooperation with neighbouring Central European states. Regional formats and initiatives provide an additional avenue through which Austria can contribute to stability and resilience in its immediate strategic environment,

reinforcing the insight that Austrian security is inseparable from the security of Central Europe as a whole. Taken together, these considerations suggest that the central challenge facing Austria is not so much whether neutrality should be retained, but how it can be credibly aligned with an active, solidaristic, and institutionally embedded role in European security. Strengthening public awareness of the strategic realities confronting Europe, and of the forms of collective action they necessitate, will be essential if Austria is to reconcile its long-standing tradition of neutrality with a coherent and effective contribution to continental security in the twenty-first century.

Recommendations

- Austria should clarify and publicly articulate a modernised doctrine of neutrality that reconciles its constitutional status with its obligations and opportunities within EU security and defence policy, accompanied by sustained public engagement to strengthen domestic legitimacy for a more active European role.
- Austria should assume a more proactive and shaping role within EU security frameworks, including capability initiatives, to demonstrate that neutrality is compatible with substantive European solidarity.
- Short of NATO membership, Austria should institutionalise closer consultation and interoperability arrangements with the Alliance to mitigate strategic marginalisation and enhance situational awareness.
- Austria should intensify structured regional security cooperation in Central Europe, recognising that its national security is inseparable from the stability and resilience of its immediate neighbourhood.

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Democracy Under Threat: America's Lessons for Europe

Dalibor Roháč

Summary: The chapter discusses the ongoing crisis of democracy in the United States and its implications for Europe. It highlights structural weaknesses in American governance, such as a weakened Congress and political parties, intensified polarisation and the erosion of political norms. Trump's second term represents a qualitative turning point, marked by challenges to procedural democracy, political violence and the use of state power against opponents. The United States has also embraced a narrowly self-interested, predatory approach to international affairs, damaging long-standing partnerships and alliances. As a result, Europe faces new uncertainties regarding U.S. security commitments and has to adapt by strengthening its own defence and strategic culture. The chapter also discusses the transformation of the information ecosystem, with social media amplifying polarisation and undermining trust. It emphasises that institutions are only as strong as the individuals who lead them, urging both elites and ordinary citizens to resist authoritarianism. Europe needs to draw lessons from America's democratic decline, build resilience against similar threats and recommit to liberal democratic principles.

Keywords: democratic erosion, polarisation, transatlantic relations, social media

Introduction

Categorised by the Economist Intelligence Unit as a "flawed democracy" since 2016, the United States continued its downward trajectory in the first year of the second Trump administration (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2025). Some of the problems plaguing America's governance are structural and predate Donald Trump's descent on his golden escalator in June 2015. Congress has been increasingly weak and hollowed out for years, replacing the standard legislative process with last-minute omnibus bills – or with the fiat of executive orders (Carmines and Fowler, 2017). Political parties in the United States have similarly become institutionally weaker (Stasi, 2018) while, at the same time, partisan polarisation has intensified and became more bitter (Iyengar et al., 2019). These kinds of trends continued both in the first Trump term, which itself provided a stress test of U.S. political institutions, and during the Biden presidency. Trump's return to power in 2025, however, has been a significant break both in America's domestic politics, demolishing many assumptions held about the exercise of power in the United States, and in America's global role, whose basic contours long commanded a broad cross-party consensus that does not exist any longer.

Trump's re-election at home represents a direct challenge to procedural democracy and legitimacy of elections. This is not necessarily because Trump did not win legitimately in 2024 (he did) but because denial of the outcome of the 2020 election is now an integral part of his and the GOP's platform, raising doubts about peaceful transfers of power in the future. Trump has also brought violence into the forefront of American politics – first, by pardoning the perpetrators of the January 6 assault on the Capitol on the first day of his presidency (Parloff, 2025); then by removing Secret Service protection from some of his opponents (Holland, 2025); and finally by unleashing lawless violence against U.S. citizens by agents of the federal government in cities such as Minneapolis. Trump has not shied away from using the criminal justice system against his political opponents, including members of Congress (Slodysko, Tucker and Richer, 2025), or the Chair of the Federal Reserve[8] (Mena, 2026). The first weeks of his presidency were marked by a massive, and typically lawless, effort to shutter agencies of the federal government through the so-called DOGE[9]. By means of tools of regulatory and antitrust policy and with threats of frivolous lawsuits, Trump has sought to assert control over parts of the media market – most prominently cable news outlets such as CBS, ABC and CNN. Trump has also consolidated control over large social media platforms – X, Meta, as well as TikTok. Finally, the Trump administration has been involved in extraordinary instances of corruption and conflicts of interest, which would be career-ending for any other politician in the United States (Center for American Progress, 2026).

Those developments are not a matter of indifference for America's allies in Europe. Together with domestic turmoil, America's role in global affairs has been shifting, defying long-standing assumptions about the nation's interests, motivations and forms of operating on the international stage. Consistent with Trump's rhetoric dating back to the 1980s, the administration has signalled that it expects European countries to bear the brunt of the burden of conventional deterrence in Europe. Similarly, Indo-Pacific allies have been disturbed by the uncertain character of U.S. security commitments. The new National Security and National Defense Strategies (NSS, NDS) emphasise America's pre-eminent role in the Western hemisphere, in a revival of a version of the Monroe doctrine (Executive Office of the President, 2025; U.S. Department of Defense, 2026). For Europeans in particular, the fact that the NSS downplays the threat posed by Russia, prioritising a future "strategic stability" between Washington and Moscow instead (Executive Office of the President, 2025, p. 27), while suggesting that the United States should assist nationalist and Eurosceptic forces on the continent, is alarming (p. 26). Consistent with that outlook, Trump has sought to accommodate Russia in Ukraine, urging Kyiv to make territorial concessions and ruling out Ukraine's accession to NATO.

8 The Federal Reserve is the central bank of the United States. Ed. note.
9 The Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, was a federal initiative established by President Donald Trump in an executive order dated Jan. 20, 2025. Ed. note.

While the United States has disengaged from and defunded a number of multilateral bodies in which it previously played an active role, it has acquired a distinctly active, muscular posture in the pursuit of narrow geopolitical and economic aims. Ukraine, for example, was effectively coerced into promising to "repay" earlier U.S. assistance in the form of granting privileged access to U.S. companies to extract rare earth minerals. In the early days of 2026, the Trump administration decapitated the regime of Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela. Instead of seeking democratisation, the remainder of the regime was allowed to remain in place – at the price of allowing the United States to "take the oil". Tariffs or threats thereof were used to extract trade and economic concessions from U.S. allies, including the EU, Japan and the UK. The administration also used the same tactics, unsuccessfully, to force Denmark to hand over Greenland to the United States.

The experiences of other countries, which have suffered from democratic erosion, suggests that the changes that the United States has undergone will be difficult to reverse. U.S. allies in Europe, who have depended on the United States for security guarantees and strategic guidance, would do well to make lasting adjustments to how they approach their relationship with the United States. The most important among the needed changes is building European defence capabilities and a shared strategic culture. No less important, as this chapter emphasises, is to break the old, long-lasting habit of treating the United States as an overwhelmingly benign force in international affairs—and strengthening the resilience of European democracies against the same kind of democratic backsliding currently witnessed by the United States.

Not Your Father's America

In Trump's first term, it was reasonable for European allies to treat the administration's excesses as an aberration. Apart from the president's inflammatory rhetoric and domestic scandals, the first Trump presidency may have appeared as a largely conventional Republican administration – cutting tax rates and pursuing economic deregulation at home, providing lethal aid to Ukraine, and encouraging allies to increase defence spending. It could also be argued that Trump's election in 2016 was an accident, or an artefact of a race against a distinctly unpopular opponent.

It is much more difficult to arrive at a similar judgment at this point with the awareness that Trump was re-elected with a comfortable margin in 2024 – and also knowing that his popular support has not collapsed as he has pursued some of the most divisive items on his policy agenda. Whether Europe likes it or not, the U.S. president reflects a political force, likely to shape American public life for years to come. In addition, Europe found itself at a dead end in terms of the dominant strategy it has used to manage its relationship with Trump. The mix of "transactionalism" – seeking to identify

"deal"' that the U.S. president could present as political wins – and outright flattery has not stabilised U.S. Europe relations, nor has it prevented the anti-European drift within the Republican party. This is epitomised by figures such as J.D. Vance, Elbridge Colby, and others, and has only accelerated since the days of the first Trump administration.

NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte calling Trump "daddy" and the humiliating trade deal that the European Commission acquiesced to in the summer of 2025 were the high-water marks of this approach. Through the trade deal, the EU accepted substantial 10-percent tariffs on its exports to the United States and made pledges of increased investment in the U.S. economy, worth $600 billion, in addition to purchases of $750 billion worth of U.S. energy commodities. The latter commitments may seem vacuous, as the EU as a collective body cannot promise to "invest" in the United States nor make purchases of liquefied natural gas (LNG) or oil (European Commission, 2025b).

The deal itself, however, and Trump's threat to abandon it in the early weeks of 2026 represent a tectonic shift in the U.S.-Europe alliance. Throughout its post-war history, its partners viewed the United States as a fundamentally new kind of global superpower: one that was neither predatory nor seeking domination for its own sake. While Russia and China may have had control over their client states and the nations that subjugated by brute force, the United States had *real friends*, at least until now. Europeans, the Japanese, and the Koreans have thus generally welcomed and sought U.S. leadership, instead of having it imposed on them as in the case of imperial systems of the past.

The voluntary system of international cooperation, imperfect as it was, has now come to resemble a system of quasi-colonial extortion. The threat to impose a further 10-percent (and eventually higher) tariffs on European exports to the United States unless Denmark hands over Greenland was extraordinary, without any precedent in the post-war history of the transatlantic relationship. Initially dismissed as a joke, Trump's rhetoric was unrelenting and increasingly aggressive, culminating with the threat of tariffs, as well as an earlier threat of using military force, articulated in a very brute form by the White House deputy chief of staff (Lotz, 2026). Europe's response was more assertive, however, this time. Several countries made small, symbolic troop deployments to Greenland – not with the intention of fighting off an American invasion but rather to increase the political price Trump would have to pay if he did proceed with a forcible takeover (Smialek and Nierenberg, 2026). France's Emmanuel Macron, usually keen to engage Trump, made the decision to snub him at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

Some Danish pension funds began divesting from U.S. debt, citing poor economic fundamentals (Harring, 2026).

The initial move was modest, but European financial institutions hold over $3 trillion in treasuries, or 40 percent of all holdings overseas, in addition to trillions of other U.S. securities. Ahead of the European Council meeting on Thursday night, the EU was readying to deploy its "bazooka", the so-called anti-coercion instrument, for the first time, originally devised to counter Chinese economic extortion. In light of turbulences on the financial markets, Trump backed off his threats, citing an unspecified (and likely non-existent or trivial) framework agreement with Denmark. Striking and novel as the situation is, European leaders ought to think about the transatlantic relationship in terms of power – of Europe's vulnerabilities and sources of dependency on the United States and of Europe's sources of leverage over the U.S. administration. The aim, of course, is not to accelerate a transatlantic divorce but simply to ensure that Europe can respond effectively to the types of behaviour that previously characterised Europe's adversaries, but which have now crept into the behaviour of the current U.S. administration. A basic precondition for success, of course, is building Europe's own defences, independent of the United States.

The Information Ecosystem Has Changed Dramatically

Trump's warfare against the media and the effects of oligarch control over outlets such as CBS and the Washington Post have captured imaginations. These traditional media outlets are less relevant than ever before, as they suffer from declining viewership and subscription. The far more important challenge to democracy, in the United States and Europe, is the rise of social media as the main vehicle providing political information to voters, and the lack of transparency about the algorithms that guide people's information diets. The shared challenge to democracy, on both sides of the Atlantic, is the question of how successfully it can adapt to the new, online forms of diffusing political information.

The impact of new information ecosystems is notoriously difficult to trace in rigorous terms, but it seems to go beyond the well-known challenges of disinformation and Russian-funded propaganda (Zhuravskaya, Petrova and Enikolopov, 2020). By seeking to maximise engagement and time spent on platforms, algorithm designers have every incentive to prioritise divisive, emotionally salient content, which may reinforce polarisation, extremist politics and erode trust in political systems. Since algorithms are black boxes to outside observers, it is difficult to assess whether they might also be manipulated to directly help specific candidates ahead of elections or promote specific political causes. Following the attacks on 7 October, TikTok became a cesspool of anti-Israel and antisemitic content (Fox, 2024), likely pushed by U.S. adversaries to foment division in the United States (Adkins, 2023). In an unrelated development, when justifying his efforts to reverse the congressional mandate ban on TikTok, Trump was explicit in touting his "good experience" with the platform in the 2024 election (Shapero, 2025).

Unlike the United States, Europe has explicit legislation that requires large tech companies to remove illegal content and police hate speech, misinformation, political advertising, etc. Given the size of the EU's market, the "Brussels effect" is real: when confronted with the prospect of hefty fines (up to 6 per cent of global turnover), large platforms had reasons to comply. The EU's DSA has also set up a dedicated organisation to investigate the nature and risks of algorithms underpinning different platforms (European Centre for Algorithmic Transparency, ECAT) and has imposed a requirement for very large platforms to share their data with authorities for that purpose (European Commission, 2025a).[10] The enforcement of existing rules, however, has been uneven and in fact stunted by fears of tensions with Washington as influential figures in the U.S. administration have framed the enforcement of social media regulations as a threat to free speech and vowed forceful retaliation (Atkinson, 2025).

Setting effective and legitimate guardrails for social media, however, seems to be a necessary condition for establishing European democracies on a firmer footing. In doing so, Europe would do America a service – some platforms would adapt their global behaviour, including to the United States, to conform to the rules governing the EU market. The European example, if successful, would be powerful and would strengthen the hands of those who are seeking to impose limitations on large platforms and the central role that they play in public and political life in the United States.

Institutions Are Only as Good as the Individuals Who Run Them

Social scientific research focused on democratic decline, or "backsliding", typically investigates the strength of political and legal institutions, or other measurable attributes of democratic societies, in the hope of identifying patterns that shed light on when democratic erosion becomes likely, or how it can be reversed. The United States has therefore exhibited major vulnerabilities for an extended period. On the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index, the country fell nine places between 2016 and 2025 (World Justice Project, 2026). The strength and capacity of Congress have been in decline for years, setting the stage for its current near-irrelevance (Kosar and Drutman, 2020). Partisan polarisation has been increasing, contributing to a zero-sum, "us versus them" mentality hindering compromise and social cohesion.

The first year of Trump's second term also puts in stark relief a different dimension of the authoritarian challenge: the role of individuals, their responsibility and their civic courage. Very early on, some of the wealthiest people on the planet, titans of the tech industry, decided to accommodate Trump rather than defy him. Similarly, a number of law firms, which had previously represented clients and positions unfriendly to Trump – Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison were among

10 European authorities are currently scrutinising the algorithms used in X and the changes implemented under Elon Musk's ownership.

the prominent ones — capitulated to pressure in the early days of the Trump administration, offering free services and other forms of compensation – a move that was not rewarded by the marketplace (Khardori, 2025). Prominent universities – Columbia, Northwestern, and University of Virginia – struck agreements with the administration under the fear of losing federal funding, arguably making compromises on academic freedom.

In the political realm, members of Congress have not risen to the occasion. Many of Trump's key policy moves – "emergency" tariffs, DOGE, military action in Venezuela or threats against Denmark – could have been easily neutralised by congressional action, which was not forthcoming. Congress could have initiated another package of assistance to Ukraine, denied federal funding to increasingly lawless behaviour by immigration enforcement authorities, and scrutinised administration officials involved in open acts of corruption. Congressional Democrats have also displayed inhibitions as they continued to view Trump through the prism of normal democratic politics, instead of treating Trump as a unique, existential threat. The caution, attributable perhaps to political prudence, is hard to square with the frequent rhetorical framing of Trump as a threat to democracy and American values. It is reasonable to expect voters to eventually notice the dissonance and to punish what they will see as politicians' hypocrisy.

The story of institutional resistance to Trump is not one of unmitigated failure. On numerous occasions, the judiciary has pushed back effectively – and thus far, the administration has been compliant with court decisions. The Supreme Court may have displayed a degree of caution in its decisions, both about the cases it has chosen to hear and in its final rulings, reflecting an unwillingness to confront Trump head on. This has arguably been in response to the threat invoked by Vice President Vance who suggested that the administration could choose not to comply with its decisions.

There are other stories of courage. Catholic bishops have pushed against the cruelty of Trump's deportations regime. The chair of the Federal Reserve, Jerome Powell, stood defiant as the administration brought a criminal lawsuit against him. It has been, however, mostly ordinary Americans who have behaved more impressively than the nation's elites. The federal raid of Minneapolis, supposedly focused on removing illegal migrants, came to a halt in the face of broad-based popular resistance and the killings of two U.S. citizens, Renee Good and Alex Pretti – rather than because of actions by elected officials or elites.

Effective resistance against authoritarianism requires, of course, both broad popular mobilisation *and* elites that can organise, provide leadership, guidance and lead the pushback. The American example, however, should serve as a warning against learned helplessness, both at the elite and at the popular level. Individual actions and individual courage have consequences. Those facing de-democratisation in other countries should never succumb to the idea – usually propped by such

anti-democratic regimes – that they are alone and that their resistance puts them at odds with an overwhelming majority of their fellow citizens.

Conclusion

There is no question that the ongoing democratic decline in the United States has profound implications for the transatlantic partnership and for Europe. The most pressing issue is the uncertainty around the U.S. commitment to European security and Washington's own perceptions of its interests in Europe. In NSS, the administration appears to commit to policies that would strengthen nationalist and anti-EU forces, in an ideological and practical clash with Europe's long-standing political structures and interests.

The most important element of Europe's response has to do with building capacity to defend itself and its ability to forge partnerships, without the United States if necessary, with other like-minded nations to defend its vital interests. The increasingly predatory behaviour by Washington justifies a highly circumspect approach, instead of accommodation and patience motivated by the hope that the current turn in U.S. politics is merely transitory. Europeans would also do well to study the American example, learn from its mistakes and avoid their repetition across the EU. Central among those is "taming", in a broad sense, the wild and turbulent online information ecosystem surrounding democracies. What is no less important, however, is an effort to foster a society-wide recommitment to the principles of liberal democracy and a shared understanding of the threats thereof, to ensure that European polities have sufficient antibodies to confront the authoritarian challenge when it arises at home.

Recommendations

- Build autonomous European defence capacity and forge partnerships with like-minded nations capable of defending Europe's vital interests independently of the United States if necessary.
- Adopt a circumspect rather than accommodating approach to Washington, recognising that the current trajectory of U.S. policy may not be transitory.
- Study the American experience of democratic erosion as a cautionary model and take active steps to prevent its replication within EU Member States.
- Regulate the online information ecosystem in ways that reduce polarisation and disinformation without compromising democratic freedoms.

- Foster a society-wide recommitment to liberal democratic principles and build shared public awareness of the threats to democracy, strengthening European societies' capacity to resist authoritarian pressures from within and without.

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Critical Raw Materials: Policy, Rules, Institutions and Management in the European Union

Šárka Waisová

Summary: Decarbonisation and the development of the digital economy reduce demand for fossil fuels but increase demand for green minerals. Certain green minerals are as scarce, however, as some fossil fuels. Recent evidence indicates that shortages or disruptions in the supply of green minerals are not hypothetical threats and that the risk of supply disruption is extremely high in several critical raw material (CRM) value chains. The EU is becoming one of the largest consumers of CRM, alongside China and the U.S. The EU, however, has minimal CRM resources of its own and relies heavily on imports. The aim of this chapter is to map, analyse and assess what the EU is doing to minimise dependencies and vulnerabilities at different stages of the CRM value chain, and to identify issues and future challenges in the field of the EU's CRM policy.

Keywords: Critical Raw Materials; EU; CRM's value chain

Introduction

Many countries around the world are transitioning to green and digital economies. In order for this transition to be possible, fundamental changes have to take place across many sectors. Decarbonisation and the development of the digital economy reduce the demand for fossil fuels but increase the demand for so-called green minerals. These minerals are considered essential for producing equipment for a zero-emissions industry and transportation sector and include e.g. copper, silicon metal, and lithium (IEA, 2025). Certain green minerals are as scarce, however, as some fossil fuels. Several factors contribute to their scarcity, including growing demand (copper), outpacing production (lithium), infrequent and unevenly distributed deposits (REE or cobalt), transport bottlenecks (natural graphite) and policy decisions limiting extraction or trade (see IRENA, 2023, and IEA, 2025 for more). Recent evidence indicates that shortages or disruptions in the supply of green minerals are not hypothetical threats and that the risk of supply disruption is extremely high in several critical raw material (CRM) value chains. Examples include China's decision to halt rare earth element exports to Japan in 2010 (Bradsher, 2010); the Democratic Republic of the Congo's (DRC) decision to temporarily halt exports of unprocessed cobalt in 2022 to encourage the purchasing companies and countries to build processing capacity in the DRC; and China's decision to impose export restrictions on natural

graphite in autumn 2023 to control the supply of critical minerals in response to challenges to its global manufacturing dominance (Lieu and Patton, 2023).

The importance paired with scarcity has led to the use of the term Critical Raw Materials (CRMs) for some of the green raw materials. The term "CRMs" is used in the EU for materials that are important for the green and digital transition and for defence and space applications that are economically and strategically important for the economy, have high supply risks and lack (viable) substitutes (CRMA, 2024) (see below). The EU has declared that it will reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 90% by 2040 (European Parliament, 2026). It is undergoing a fundamental energy transformation, decarbonising industry, transportation and heating. The EU is becoming one of the largest consumers of green CRM, alongside China and the U.S. The EU's increased CRM consumption over the last three years is also linked to the conflict in Ukraine as the military industry is a significant CRM consumer. The EU has minimal CRM resources, however, of its own and relies heavily on imports (IEA, 2025; CRMA 2024). As the factors for determining criticality are subjective and site-specific, many countries have developed their own list of CRMs.[11] Governments and companies have been consequently developing various initiatives and have taken measures to ensure a secure supply of CRMs.

Goals and Scope

The EU has lacked, for a longer period of time, a mechanism to address both short and long-term disruptions in the CRM value chain. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the EU's first experiences with CRM as a coercive tool, the European Commission and several EU Member States have developed several political and legal instruments and policies to manage resources and increase the resilience of CRM supply chains. The aim of this chapter is to map, analyse and assess what the EU is doing to minimise dependencies and vulnerabilities at different stages of the CRM value chain, and identify issues and future challenges in the field of the EU's CRM policy.

The following section explores how CRM is defined in EU legislation and consequently discusses the history of CRM in the EU agenda, when and under what circumstances CRM policy started to emerge and what prompted the Commission to legislate on the obligation of the EU and Member States to develop the CRM value chain. The third part analyses the measures and practices that the EU has employed so far to strengthen the resilience of the CRM value chain and ensure its secure supply to the EU. Finally, there is a discussion of the gaps in the EU's CRM agenda and the challenges that both future Presidencies and future Commissions will need to address.

11 At the time of writing, 52 countries have their own CRM list. Compare the IEA database of CRM: policies: www.iea.org/policies?topic[0]=Critical Minerals.

The EU Definition of CRM and the EU Objectives for the CRM Value Chain

The definition and current list of critical and strategic raw materials (Table 1) is contained in the Regulation Establishing a Framework for Ensuring a Secure and Sustainable Supply of Critical Raw Materials (Regulation EU 2024/1252). The recital of the Regulation (para. 2 of the Recital) states that critical raw materials "are needed at the beginning of many industrial value chains and are often indispensable inputs for a wide set of strategic sectors including renewable energy, the digital industry, and the aerospace and defence sectors. … Strategic raw materials should contain raw materials that are of high strategic importance for the functioning of the internal market, taking into account their use in strategic technologies underpinning the green and digital transitions or for defence or aerospace applications, that are characterized by a potentially significant gap between global supply and projected demand, and for which an increase in production is relatively difficult" (CRMA, para. 6 of the Recital). Strategic raw materials are materials "that score among the highest in terms of strategic importance, forecasted demand growth and difficulty of increasing production" (CRMA, Article 3, para. 2). These criteria are assessed on the basis of the methodology set out in the Regulation, Section 2 of Annex I. The list of strategic raw materials itself is set out in Section 1 of Annex I and comprises 17 raw materials. Critical raw materials are then a broader group (34 items in total) which includes both strategic raw materials and "raw materials that meet or exceed a threshold of 1 for risk of supply disruption and a threshold of 2.8 for economic importance" (CRMA, Article 4, Annexes I and II).[12]

In addition to the list of critical and strategic raw materials, the Regulation also contains common EU objectives and obligations for Member States. It states, inter alia, that the objectives are "to establish a common Union framework that ensures access to a secure and sustainable supply of critical raw materials and that preserves the Union's economic resilience and open strategic autonomy" (CRMA, para. 4 of the Recital). The Regulation set minimum targets for Member States to achieve by 2030: The EU should increase the exploitation of its own geological resources of strategic raw materials and build up the capacity to extract the raw materials needed to produce at least 10% of the Union's consumption of strategic raw materials, as well as increase its processing capacity and be able to process at least 40% of its annual consumption of strategic raw materials. The Union's recycling capacity should be able to produce at least 25% of its annual aggregate consumption of strategic raw materials, and by 2030 the Union should not be dependent on a single third country for more than 65% of its supply of any strategic raw material (CRMA, para. 11 and 12 of the Recital and Article 5).

12 A precise methodology for determining the list of critical raw materials has been developed by the Joint Research Center. The calculation methodology has changed once since 2011, in 2017, when the Commission highlighted that these are the raw materials needed to reduce emissions and meet decarbonisation targets. The methodology relies on two key parameters: 1) the economic importance of the raw material and its (ir)substitutability, and 2) the risks of supply disruption of the raw material. Additional information regarding the methodology can be found in the background report published in 2020 (European Commission, Study on the EU's list of Critical Raw Materials – Final Report).

History of EU Critical Raw Minerals Agenda

The history of the European debate on critical raw minerals goes back to the year 2000, but the first EU action to assess CRM was the EU Raw Materials Initiative of 2008. The initiative set out a strategy to reduce dependency on non-energy raw materials. The first list of critical raw materials at the EU level was published in 2011 (Table 1). Since then, the list has been updated every three years. The 2011 assessment identified 14 CRMs, in 2014 the list included 20 CRMs, in 2017 the list included 27 CRMs, in 2020 the list reached 30 CRMs, and the latest list was published as part of the 2024 Critical Raw Materials Act and included 34 CRMs. All evaluations of CRMs and their lists, produced between 2011 and 2020, were non-binding and were produced as a basis for debate among EU Member States. The situation changed between 2020 and 2022. CRMs became the key to enabling European industry to achieve the EU's policy goals, the green and digital transition and the strengthening of the EU's resilience and strategic autonomy. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the US Inflation Reduction Act and China's rising business expansion into the African raw materials market pushed the EU to change the level of thinking about CRMs, and in April 2024, the European Parliament adopted the Regulation establishing a framework for ensuring secure and sustainable supply of critical raw materials. The law serves as the basis for defining the list of CRMs for the EU, updating the list of CRMs to 34 and set up the EU goals for building a sustainable and resilient CRM value chain for EU industry.

Table 1: Historical Development of the EU List of Critical Raw Materials[13]

	2011	2014	2017	2020	2023
Antimony	◙	◙	◙	◙	◙
Arsenic					◙
Baryte			◙	◙	◙
Bauxite				◙	◙
Beryllium	◙	◙	◙	◙	◙
Bismuth			◙	◙	◙
Boron/Borate		◙	◙	◙	◙
Chromium		◙			
Cobalt	◙	◙	◙	◙	◙
Coking coal		◙	◙	◙	◙
Copper					◙
Feldspar					◙
Fluorspar	◙	◙	◙	◙	◙
Gallium	◙	◙	◙	◙	◙
Germanium	◙	◙	◙	◙	◙
Hafnium			◙	◙	◙
Helium			◙		◙
Heavy REE[3]	◙	◙	◙	◙	◙
Indium	◙	◙	◙	◙	

	2011	2014	2017	2020	2023
Lithium				◙	◙
Light REE[1]	◙	◙	◙	◙	◙
Magnesite		◙			
Magnesium	◙	◙	◙	◙	◙
Manganese					◙
Graphite	◙	◙	◙	◙	◙
Natural rubber			◙	◙	
Nickel					◙
Niobium	◙	◙	◙	◙	◙
PGM[2]	◙	◙	◙	◙	◙
Phosphate rock		◙	◙	◙	◙
Phosphorus			◙	◙	◙
Scandium			◙	◙	◙
Silicon metal		◙	◙	◙	◙
Strontium				◙	◙
Tantalum	◙		◙	◙	◙
Titanium metal				◙	◙
Tungsten	◙	◙	◙	◙	◙
Vanadium			◙	◙	◙

Source: Critical Raw Materials Act, Appendix 1 and Appendix II

EU Policy, Rules, Institutions and Management of the CRM Value Chain

In the last decade, important efforts have been underway to address the EU's strategic dependencies at various stages of the CRM value chain. The EU's policies and actions can be divided into several groups, depending on what is at the core of the measure and activity. In this section, I will analyse the existing groups of policies and map each group by presenting the specific steps the EU has taken to build a secure and diversified CRM value chain. The policies and other measures that have been adopted by the EU can be divided into the following groups (the actions and initiatives that are

13 Raw materials that are considered strategic under the Critical Raw Materials Act are marked in grey.

included in each of these groups are not exhaustive, but we do list the most important steps that have been taken).

Assessment of CRM Stocks, Possible Geological Deposits, Extraction and Processing Capacities, and Coordination of National Efforts to Develop All Stages of the CRM Value Chain from Extraction to Recycling

Since 2020, several foresight studies, such as the JRC's 2020 CRM Foresight Study, the JRC's 2023 Supply Chain Analysis and Materials Demand Forecast in Strategic Technologies and Sectors in the EU have been completed and published. One of the latest projects is the creation of the Geological Service for Europe. This project aims to develop pan-European data and an information service with a special focus on CRM (www.geologicalservice.eu).

The Development of Strategies

In 2020, the Commission presented an Action Plan on CRM with the aim of developing resilient value chains for the EU industrial ecosystem. The Action Plan aimed to strengthen the resilience of value chains for EU industrial ecosystems, reduce the EU's dependence on CRM imports through recycling, reuse and resource efficiency, and diversify sources from third countries. Several strategies were updated, such as the Industrial Strategy (COM(2021)250) that highlighted the importance of a better understanding of the EU's strategic dependencies, how they may evolve in the future and the extent to which they create vulnerabilities for the EU. Also relevant in this context is the Commission's Foresight Report on "Shaping and securing the EU's open strategic autonomy by 2040 and beyond". Finally, the new EU Circular Economy Action Plan was published by the Commission in March 2020. The plan includes specific targets for CRM recycling, based on the idea that recycling can reduce pressure on natural resources, reduce emissions and create new business opportunities and high- local jobs.

The Development of Institutions

The original CRM policy did not include the creation of dedicated institutions. It is gradually becoming apparent, however, that it is appropriate to create shared EU platforms in some areas. The EU gained this insight when it decided to abandon Russia as a natural gas supplier and launched a joint EU demand aggregation system. This system was later formalised in the Gas Package. The Commission's positive experience with natural gas demand aggregation led it to establish the EU Energy and Raw Material Platform (2025). The Platform offers solutions to collect demand, and

supply offers from companies and provides aggregation and matchmaking services, potentially leading to joint purchasing for a wide range of energy-related products and strategic raw materials.

Legal and Regulatory Protection

For decades, there was no regulatory framework for creating a sustainable CRM value chain in Europe. The situation changed in 2024 when two regulations were published: The Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA), which aims to secure a sustainable supply of CRMs for European industry and eliminate import dependency on a single country, and the Net-Zero Industry Act (NZIA), which aims to enhance the capabilities and competitiveness of European manufacturing of net-zero technologies.

Formation of Multilateral Coalitions and Partnerships

The EU has joined the Minerals Security Partnership, a group of countries (excluding China) that seeks to develop diverse and sustainable CRM supply chains. In 2020, the European Raw Material Alliance (ERMA) was established. Since 2021, the EU has established a CRM partnership with e.g. Canada (2021), Ukraine (2021), Kazakhstan (2022) and Namibia (2022). The partnerships and trade agreements with other countries, that contain a dedicated raw material chapter, are under negotiation. These coalitions and partnerships focus on joint capacity building in CRM research and development, agreements to prevent disruption of CRM value chains, and the building of joint processing capabilities. EU countries also cooperate within the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), which developed a classification system for the entire CRM value chain. They also cooperate within the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which prepared recommendations to ensure secure CRM supplies (Kowalski and Legendre, 2023).

Support For New Educational Capacities to Provide Skills and Skilled Talents for New Green and Digital Jobs and Research and Innovation

One of the first steps taken by the EC to develop CRM education was the creation of the European Innovation Partnership on Raw Materials in 2012. This was followed by the establishment of the Horizon program, the Joint Research Centre, which is responsible for CRM foresight reports and, based on the Net-Zero Industry Act adopted in 2024, so-called NZIA academies. The role of the NZIA Academies will be to develop learning content and programmes together with industry to ensure sufficient skills and workforce in the value chain. In 2024, the Commission launched the first of a series of EU academies, the European Solar Academy.

Information Sharing Within the EU and with Non-EU Partners

Information sharing amounts to helping policy makers make informed decisions, to respond effectively to various types of challenges, to improve service delivery or to manage existing resources. Information sharing about CRM across the EU and with EU partners brings benefits, such as the sharing of information, to other areas of human activity. The European Commission has so far developed several CRM information sharing systems. These are in particular the DG GROW CRMs webpage, and the Raw Materials Information System website of the Joint Research Centre.

Promoting Investments into Various Stages of the CRM Value Chain

The EU needs to de-risk the ambitions of the European private sector to invest in the CRM value chain outside the EU and to better support European companies to invest in securing access to CRM. To this end, the Commission has launched the Global Gateway Initiative as the main instrument to mobilise billions of euros to increase European investment in energy, transport and industrial capacity in non-EU countries, in particular in resource-rich African countries.

Conclusion

In this brief chapter, we outlined why and how the EU's CRM agenda has evolved. We also presented sets of measures and tools adopted or developed by the European Commission, Member States, and EU partners to strengthen the resilience and sustainability of CRM value chains. Despite the significant progress the EU has made in developing the CRM agenda, several persistent challenges and gaps remain to be addressed by future Presidencies and Commissions.

Recommendations

- The EU as a whole, as well as most of the Member States, are not fully exploiting their domestic potential for CRM extraction, processing and recycling. While countries such as the USA or China have identified potential domestic CRM deposits and begun to explore the richness of the deposits (IEA, 2025), most European countries are lagging behind in exploration, which is a prerequisite for any mining. The slow growth of expenditure on geological exploration is an indicator of the European approach (SWD [2023] 161 final: 16). There is little will within the EU to develop the deposits or increase CRM production. Public opposition to projects with potential environmental impacts is usually the reason for this development. However, even if Member States could overcome public opposition, it would take approximately one to two decades to open a new deposit and begin mining.

- The EU as well as Member states should improve their understanding of secondary resources as potential sources of CRMs. Despite having taken initial steps in recycling and developing the economy of secondary sources, the EU should undertake research on how data on waste and recycled materials is classified and carry out detailed mapping of CRM supply chains to determine if recycling can make a significant contribution to the EU CRM supply.
- Lack of systematic monitoring of the CRM value chain and preparedness for disruptions to the value chain. The EC developed the Criticality Assessment to periodically review the global CRM production situation, including EU imports and exports and recycling rates. Only a few of the governments at the Member State level have established, however, institutions to monitor the supply of critical raw materials to industry. Currently, no monitoring system has the operational capacity to monitor markets in real time; all the systems rely on path dependency and statistics from two or three years ago.
- Difficulties in accessing finance. European banks are under public pressure to avoid supporting mining companies, which are generally perceived as representing fossil fuel and non-environmental industries. In addition, the mining industry has a number of specific characteristics, one of which is the long-term nature of the investment, with more than 10 years elapsing between the start of geological exploration and the opening of a mine or the start of production. In addition to various permits, the opening of a mine requires the construction of the necessary surrounding transportation and other infrastructures. Therefore, investment in geological exploration and mining is a profitable investment in the medium term at the earliest.

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Electoral Resilience and Strategic Governance – The Case of Nea Demokratia in Greece

Panagiotis Kakolyris

Summary: The political dominance of Nea Demokratia (ND) under Kyriakos Mitsotakis has been reflected not only in the strong results of the 2019 and 2023 national elections, but also in regional and European Parliament elections, as well as in its sustained leadership advantage in public opinion polls ahead of the 2027 national elections. This chapter examines the structural foundations of this dominance, focusing on electoral resilience, governance performance and long-term political strategy. The Greek case provides broader insights into how mainstream parties can rebuild public trust, govern effectively and remain electorally competitive after prolonged economic and political crises. More broadly, it demonstrates how democratic systems can respond to political fragmentation, populism and nationalist far-right pressures through consistent policy delivery, pragmatic reformism and credible institutional governance. By addressing both macroeconomic stability and citizens' everyday realities, the Greek experience illustrates how performance-based legitimacy can reduce polarisation, strengthen democratic confidence and support the long-term stability of the European integration project.

Keywords: electoral resilience, technocratic governance, centre-right politics, populism, Greece, political communication, Mitsotakis, Nea Demokratia

Introduction

The transformation of European party systems over the past decade has been marked by increasing political fragmentation, the rise of anti-system movements, and the erosion of traditional forms of political representation. Southern European democracies were particularly affected, as the sovereign debt crisis not only disrupted economic stability but also challenged the legitimacy of mainstream political actors and institutions. Greece became one of the most emblematic cases of this broader European phenomenon, experiencing both the collapse of long-standing party alignments and the rapid rise of populist political mobilisation. The Greek case is equally important, however, for understanding the limits of populist political cycles and the potential reconfiguration of mainstream political dominance after prolonged crisis. Rather than following a linear path of political fragmentation, Greece has demonstrated a partial re-stabilisation of its party system, centred around the reassertion of programmatic governance, policy credibility and institutional continuity. This shift raises broader questions about whether post-crisis European democracies are entering a phase of political normalisation, and under what conditions mainstream parties can rebuild durable electoral coalitions.

Within this context, the electoral rout of Nea Demokratia (ND) represents a critical case for analysing how centre-right parties can transition from opposition recovery to long-term governing dominance. The party's dual electoral victories in 2019 and 2023 provide an opportunity to examine how leadership strategy, policy performance, organisational continuity and communication innovation can interact to produce sustained electoral resilience in a post-crisis political environment.

This chapter treats the Greek case not only as a national development but also as a contribution to wider European debates on the post-populist era, technocratic legitimacy and the future of mainstream parties in fragmented systems. The key question is not just why ND won, but how it turned anti-populist fatigue into a stable governing mandate built on performance, competence and renewed trust—shifting political competition away from ideological polarisation and towards credibility in governance.

The End of Illusions: From Populist Promise to Governance Credibility

The 2019 national elections marked a critical turning point in Greek politics. After four and a half years in power, the Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA a left-wing party that rose to power during the sovereign debt crisis on an anti-austerity platform) faced growing voter fatigue stemming from economic pressures, policy ineffectiveness and the gradual erosion of its anti-austerity narrative. The collision between an idealised political vision and the constraints of governing reality, combined with the absence of a sufficiently coherent policy plan and experienced governing personnel, significantly undermined the credibility of the self-described "first time left-wing government" in the eyes of voters. The over-taxation of the middle class, in particular, played a decisive role in shifting electoral preferences, as households and small businesses bore the brunt of fiscal adjustment. Equally damaging was the perception of political inconsistency. The gap between SYRIZA's radical promises in 2015 (such as the reversal of austerity without fiscal compensation, public sector expansion, wage and pension increases and unilateral debt restructuring) and its eventual acceptance of bailout conditionality weakened its credibility as a viable alternative governing force. While some policy choices were presented as unavoidable, they nevertheless eroded the party's claim to moral and political distinctiveness. The traumatic period surrounding the 2015 referendum and the extreme uncertainty experienced by the country were gradually internalised by citizens as a defining political experience. Over time, this period came to be associated with the risks and potential destabilising consequences of populist governance, shaping voter perceptions in the years that followed.

Nea Demokratia capitalised on this environment by positioning itself as the antithesis of populism. Under the leadership of Kyriakos Mitsotakis, ND articulated a narrative centred on reform, institutional seriousness, policy credibility and economic realism. The 2019 campaign emphasised lower taxation, investment attraction, job creation and the restoration of an effective and predictable state. These objectives were framed not as

ideological preferences but as practical policy necessities. ND's electoral strategy constituted in this respect a direct response to populist political mobilisation, replacing emotional polarisation with logic and a promise of competent, stable and results-oriented governance.

Strategic Repositioning and Leadership Under Kyriakos Mitsotakis

A key factor behind New Democracy's electoral recovery was its strategic repositioning towards political synthesis, moving beyond traditional partisan exclusions and creating space for the integration of personalities that transcended the party's previous political boundaries. These were individuals who had already demonstrated effectiveness, credibility and institutional authority. Their inclusion in government did not dilute ND's ideological core, but instead enriched it, strengthening the party's social footprint and expanding its political reach. ND consequently evolved into a party capable of enlarging its political mass and reinforcing what could be described as "attractive political gravity" within society. This process of political opening and ideological recalibration began with Kyriakos Mitsotakis' election as party leader in 2016. It allowed ND to appeal not only to its traditional electoral base but also to moderate voters who had become politically disoriented or disillusioned, yet remained deeply concerned about the country's overall trajectory and the potential consequences of political toxicity or the dominance of political extremes.

Leadership style played a central role in this transformation. Mitsotakis cultivated the image of a technocratic, results-oriented leader, drawing on his administrative background and emphasising meritocracy, efficiency and accountability. His personal credibility reinforced the party's broader reformist message and helped differentiate ND from both populist narratives and clientelist political traditions.

Communication discipline was equally important. ND's messaging remained consistent across platforms, avoiding internal contradictions and maintaining a strong focus on governance capacity and policy delivery. This coherence enhanced voter perceptions of its seriousness and readiness to govern, contributing decisively to the 2019 electoral outcome (ND 39.85% with a majority of 158/300 seats, SYRIZA 31.53%, KINAL[14] 8.10%). The campaign also introduced smaller-scale public gatherings such as townhall meetings, allowing for more direct interaction with citizens, better understanding of social sentiment, and the projection of a more human-centred political message. Together, these strategic, organisational and communication choices contributed to ND's electoral victory in 2019 and paved the way for a new political chapter in Greece, centred on governance credibility, political stability and long-term reform orientation.

14 The Movement for Change (Kinima Allagis, KINAL) is a Greek centre-left political alliance established in 2018 through the merger of PASOK and several smaller centre-left parties and movements, aiming to unify and represent the social-democratic and reformist centre-left in Greece's contemporary party system. Ed. note.

Governance Performance, 2019–2023: Delivering Credibility

Beyond macroeconomic recovery, New Democracy's governance record increasingly engaged with policy challenges carrying both national and European significance. During the 2019–2023 period, Greece recorded growth rates above the EU average, unemployment declined substantially, and foreign direct investment increased,[15] reinforcing perceptions of economic normalisation and restoring international investor confidence. The improvement in sovereign credit ratings, the successful exit from enhanced surveillance mechanisms and the strengthened fiscal credibility of the country further contributed to the perception that Greece had transitioned from being a systemic risk within the Eurozone to becoming a stable and predictable economic partner.

The government also navigated a series of overlapping crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the energy shock following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and recurrent natural disasters linked to climate change. Rather than undermining political authority, crisis management reinforced the image of administrative competence and strategic coordination. The ability to combine European-level coordination with nationally tailored policy responses allowed the government to frame crisis management not as reactive damage control, but as an extension of governance capacity. In this sense, crisis governance became a source of political legitimacy rather than decay.

Digital governance reforms represented another cornerstone of this transformation. The rapid expansion of e-government services fundamentally reshaped the relationship between citizens and the state. Within a few years, the Greek digital state moved from being considered a negative example to becoming a reference point for reform among several European administrations. The citizen–state relationship became more balanced, transparent, and service-oriented, reducing bureaucratic dependency and opportunities for clientelist mediation.

The reform of pension administration was a particularly illustrative case. For decades, pension allocation delays had symbolised structural state inefficiency, with citizens often waiting two to three years after retirement to receive their pensions. Through a combination of digitalisation, administrative restructuring and targeted policy intervention, waiting times were reduced to a matter of weeks. This reform demonstrated the government's willingness to move beyond conventional policy approaches that had repeatedly failed in the past. Instead, it applied innovative, problem-solving-oriented methods that delivered measurable and socially visible results.

Greece also successfully managed hybrid pressure linked to migration flows, particularly during periods when Turkey attempted to instrumentalise migration pressure towards the Greek—and effectively European—borders. Through a combination of operational preparedness, diplomatic coordination and European-level

15 Greece recorded a GDP growth of 8.4% in 2021 and 5.6% in 2022, followed by approximately 2% growth in 2023, reflecting strong post-pandemic recovery dynamics. Over the same period, unemployment declined from 17.3% in 2019 to 14.7% in 2021, 12.4% in 2022, and 11.1% in 2023. Net foreign direct investment inflows continued to increase, reaching €4.8 billion in 2023 and €7 billion in 2024, indicating strong investment momentum (Enterprise Greece).

cooperation, Greece reinforced the protection of the EU's external borders, positioning itself as a front-line state contributing to broader European security and migration management.

Taken together, these policy outcomes reinforced a governance model centred on effectiveness, credibility and measurable delivery. Rather than relying primarily on ideological positioning, the government built political legitimacy through demonstrable policy outcomes affecting both macroeconomic performance and citizens' everyday experience of the state. This dual focus proved central in shaping voter perceptions and consolidating the link between governance performance and electoral resilience.

The 2023 Elections: Consolidating Leadership and Stability

During the 2023 elections, the campaign narrative focused less on promises of change and more on continuity, stability and progress. Kyriakos Mitsotakis framed the election as a choice between a proven governing trajectory and uncertainty, a message that resonated strongly in a society still shaped by the collective memory of economic crisis and political instability. The fragmentation and strategic ambiguity of the opposition also reinforced New Democracy's advantage, as no credible alternative governing party emerged.

The party also adopted innovative communication practices. The communication team capitalised on emerging platforms such as TikTok to reach non-traditional ND voters and younger audiences who had appeared politically disengaged. This strategy helped soften Mitsotakis' public image, presenting a more approachable and relatable leadership profile while maintaining institutional credibility. Importantly, ND's appeal extended beyond traditional partisan loyalty. Its success reflected a broader alignment between voter expectations and governance outcomes, with competence, predictability and policy delivery outweighing ideological confrontation.

The election result (ND 40.79% - 146 seats, SYRIZA 17.83% PASOK-KINAL 11.84%) confirmed ND's political dominance and transformed its victory into a strong governing mandate, reinforced by a broader climate of political trust and performance-based political evaluation. Entering its second term, despite the prosperity achieved during ND's tenure, the government faced two pressing challenges with clear European dimensions: inflation and the rising cost of living, particularly in food prices and housing. While inflationary pressures were largely exogenous (linked to global supply disruptions, the energy crisis, and broader European economic conditions) their social impact brought everyday economic insecurity back to the centre of political debate.

Housing, in particular, emerged as a strategic policy priority. The Mitsotakis government developed a broad and multi-layered policy mix aimed at addressing affordability constraints, especially for younger generations and middle-income households. This approach combined the mobilisation of European funds to provide targeted incentives and subsidies with innovative public–private partnership schemes designed to expand

housing supply, in line with OECD policy recommendations on housing affordability. This shift signalled a transition from short-term relief measures to structurally sustainable policy solutions. The elevation of housing to a central governmental concern also illustrated the importance of the "return of politics", reinforced by technocratic tools and policy design capable of addressing complex social challenges.

Within the same framework, the government increased the minimum wage and reduced labour-related contributions in order to strengthen real disposable income and mitigate the social pressures created not only by inflation and housing costs but also by the social adjustment costs associated with rapid economic growth and structural transformation. Another major challenge during the early phase of the second term was the fight against tax evasion, a long-standing structural weakness of the Greek economy.

The digital interconnection of cash registers and Point of Sale (POS) systems with the central tax administration represented a major structural reform. The policy initially generated controversy, with resistance often expressed through concerns about operational feasibility and compliance costs, while also reflecting broader tensions linked to efforts to reduce tax avoidance. The reform proved highly effective, however, linking transactions directly to real-time taxation, reducing opportunities for tax concealment, and limiting the informal economy, which historically accounted for a significant share of economic activity in Greece. By delivering measurable and socially visible outcomes, the reform strengthened performance-based legitimacy, reinforcing public perceptions that state institutions can produce fair, efficient and enforceable policy results.

Greece also leveraged energy policy as a geopolitical instrument. Through investments in energy infrastructure, diversification of supply routes and strengthened regional energy cooperation, Greece reinforced its role as an emerging energy hub for Europe. This strategy enhanced both national energy security and Greece's strategic importance within the European energy architecture.

A particular emphasis was also placed on sustaining foreign direct investment inflows. The transformation of the Hellenic Corporation of Assets and Participations into the Hellenic Growthfund, originally established during the crisis period as a debt-servicing mechanism, was a characteristic example. With public debt repayment proceeding faster than initially projected, the fund evolved into a development-oriented instrument focusing on national growth, infrastructure development, innovation ecosystems and investment facilitation. Growthfund now plays an active role in co-financing strategic projects, including major technological and innovation initiatives such as the AI Factory "Pharos", which is among the first Artificial Intelligence factory infrastructures being developed in Europe. This evolution reflects a broader shift from crisis-era asset management to proactive state-led development strategy.

As a result, opinion polls during ND's seventh year in office consistently indicated that, despite inevitable mid-term political wear, the party remained by far the dominant political force. ND's polling figures were approximately double those of the second party, while the combined support of the second and third parties

did not exceed that of ND. Kyriakos Mitsotakis also continued to be rated as the most suitable candidate for Prime Minister compared to all other party leaders, reinforcing the personal leadership dimension of ND's political dominance.

Synthesis: Electoral Behaviour and Political Normalisation

Taken together, the 2019 and 2023 victories illustrate a broader process of political normalisation in Greece. This is further illuminated by a longer-term perspective: Nea Demokratia was the only major party that survived the economic crisis without experiencing electoral collapse. Unlike other pillars of the pre-crisis party system, ND avoided political marginalisation during the bailout years, maintaining a stable core of electoral support. This resilience points to the party's deep social roots and organisational solidity, which later enabled its strategic renewal and electoral recovery. Electoral behaviour shifted away from protest voting and towards performance-based evaluation. Technocratic governance and policy credibility replaced populist mobilisation as the primary sources of legitimacy. This normalisation process has also been reinforced by historical continuity. The Mitsotakis government has become the longest-serving centre-right government since the restoration of democracy in 1974, underscoring both the political significance and the durability of its governing model. Despite the natural fatigue associated with prolonged incumbency, the government has continued to produce policy solutions, sustain reform momentum, and shift attention from macroeconomic indicators—where performance has been widely acknowledged—to the micro-level of everyday life.

The creation of the position of Vice-President of the Government, aimed at improving coordination, accelerating problem-solving and enhancing policy delivery, has been key institutional adjustment reflecting this emphasis. This move signalled a governance model focused on effectiveness and coherence rather than political symbolism.

Conclusion

Nea Demokratia's consecutive victories have not been isolated electoral events but have been part of a structural transformation in Greek politics. They demonstrate how a mainstream party can recover, govern effectively and sustain electoral support in the aftermath of an extended crisis. The Greek case highlights the centrality of strategic moderation, institutional stability and communication coherence in rebuilding democratic legitimacy.

From the perspective of contemporary political theory, the Greek case illustrates a shift from "mobilisation politics" to performance-based legitimacy and valence competition: citizens increasingly reward perceived competence, predictability and delivery rather than polarising ideological narratives. This is a core dynamic

of post-populist normalisation, in which programmatic governance regains primacy over anti-system protest.

Public opinion trends suggest that citizens continue to hold expectations of the current government, a factor of decisive importance as Greece approaches the 2027 elections, coinciding with the country's assumption of the European Presidency. The capacity to manage social pressures linked to inflation and housing, while maintaining reform momentum and governance effectiveness, will be critical in shaping the next electoral cycle.

For the European Union, the Greek success story carries a wider strategic meaning. In an era marked by fragmentation, democratic fatigue and the resurgence of nationalist extremism, the sustainability of European integration will depend not only on institutional architecture but on governments' capacity to deliver security, opportunity and social cohesion. Only governments with such a profile can therefore provide the European Union with the necessary momentum under the current circumstances.

Greece demonstrates how a member state can move from crisis stigma to governance credibility, and how democratic legitimacy can be rebuilt through reforms that are both technically sound and socially intelligible. This model of clear vision and effective planning can strengthen Europe's resilience against anti-system politics by anchoring the European project in tangible improvements in citizens' everyday lives and renewed democratic trust.

Recommendations

- Invest in technocratic capacity and policy delivery as core sources of political legitimacy.
- Strengthen political inclusion by broadening electoral appeal beyond traditional partisan divides.
- Prioritise institutional stability and long-term policy continuity to rebuild public trust.
- Integrate digital governance reforms to enhance state efficiency and citizen experience.
- Adopt "intellemo" communication strategies that balance rational competence with emotional resonance.

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