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- **CRISIS OF GOVERNANCE**
- **TOOLS OF AUTOCRATIZATION**
- **DEMOCRATIC RESPONSE**

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REGIMES

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PLEBISCITE ENGINEERING AND AUTOCRATISATION IN THE POST-SOVIET REGION

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Technical University Dortmund

It is widely recognised that top-down constitutional referendums in post-Soviet states reinforce the president's power, at the expense of other branches of government. This article examines referendum engineering as a factor that undermines the balance of power, establishes a constitutional basis for long-lasting autocracies, and promotes authoritarian learning. It argues that the success of such referendums results from persistent strategic efforts by autocrats in their power struggles, often involving the manipulation of procedural structures. Identifying early legal shifts towards autocracy is especially crucial for responding to the process of autocratisation.

Introduction

The process of autocratisation has previously been thoroughly studied. Unlike in hereditary monarchies like those of Saudi Arabia or the Kingdom of Eswatini, which have their own legitimacy, in other types of political regimes leaders seek to establish a status quo in which they consolidate power and avoid accountability. Scholars identify different stages of autocratisation, evaluate potential leadership changes, and examine the factors that sustain autocracies, even after a leader is replaced.

This article, based on the evidence from the post-Soviet countries, examines what role top-down referendums play in power struggles, and confirms the widespread thesis that in the logic of autocracies' survival, referendums are an essential component of legitimising their claims to power, and that plebiscites are "more dispersed within an authoritarian regime, but not because they are a democratic reflex, but because they are a show of strength."[1] But for some time, referendums have ceased to be proposals to answer a question which has been posed, and have become a legalistic tool that fits into the practice of autocratic legalism[2]. Decisions are made through them that immediately become part of legislation, usually within constitutions themselves, which pushes parliaments onto the back burner in preparing and adopting decisions related to constitutional changes which are designed to consolidate a certain level of power distribution.

L. Scheppele notes that "the new autocrats come to power not with bullets but with laws. They attack the institutions of liberal constitutionalism with constitutional amendments. They carefully preserve the

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1   A. Penadés, S. Velasco, Plebiscites: a tool for dictatorship, *European Political Science Review, 14*(1), 2022, p. 75.

2   K.L. Scheppele, Autocratic Legalism, *University of Chicago Law Review*, 2018, Vol. 85: Iss. 2, Article 2.

shell of the prior liberal state — the same institutions, the same ceremonies, an overall appearance of rights protection — but in the meantime they hollow out its moral core."[3] Although the initial political conditions of all post-Soviet states were far from constituting liberal democracies, most of them, at different stages, went through periods of autocratisation or resistance to it, and at various points, their leaders actively sought to remain in office or to create conditions for the transfer of power within the family, as in Azerbaijan. The construction of such pragmatic actions was achieved, among other things, through managed referendums.

One may ask: What role have the rules played in carrying out successful referendums? I argue that these rules have been eroded at various stages, to ensure guaranteed outcomes through top-down referendums, driven by autocrats' attempts to avoid repetition of their own or their neighbours' prior failed experiences, and that this aligns with the concept of autocratic learning.[4]

The Main Tools of Autocratisation

Generally, the tactics of autocratisation are extensively discussed in the literature, which has been expanding rapidly since the 1960s.

Researchers from the V-Dem project demonstrate, based on broad empirical data, that democratic regression occurs through three stages: backsliding, the breakdown of democracy, and finally autocratisation[5].

They note that the latter is "the antipode of democratisation – as a matter of degree that can happen in both democracies and autocracies."[6] It means that autocratisation also occurs within autocracies. This thesis is evidenced by developments in many post-Soviet countries. When examining the status of countries in the post-Soviet region (excluding the Baltic states) as presented by the V-Dem project, we can see that all but one (Armenia) began the new era in 1990 at the level of 'autocracy', whether full or electoral[7]. At the same time, each of these countries followed its own path in regime transformations. Some, like Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, sought to exit the state of autocracies or the 'grey zone'; others, such as Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, which were already autocracies, aimed to consolidate this type of regime and embed it in their constitutions.

As of 2024, the experts classified two post-Soviet countries, Armenia and Moldova, as electoral democracies. Three countries, Belarus, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, are considered closed autocracies, while the remaining seven, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Ukraine, are classified as electoral autocracies.[8] Additionally, both Armenia and Moldova have historically experienced periods of autocratisation that lasted for extended periods.

The current assessment of Ukraine as an electoral autocracy is likely due to the

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3   *Ibid.*, p. 582.

4   *S.G. Hall, T. Ambrosio, Authoritarian learning: A conceptual overview, East European Politics*, 2017, 33:2.

5   A. Lührmann, S.I. Lindberg, A third wave of autocratization is here: what is new about it? *Democratization, 26*(7) 2019, p. 1098.

6   *Ibid*.

7   See: M. Nord, D. Altman, F. Angiolillo, T. Fernandes, A.G. God, and S.I. Lindberg. *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?* University of Gothenburg. March 2025: 52. Typology is demonstrated in A. Lührmann, M. Tannenberg, S. Lindberg, Regimes of the World (RoW): Opening New Avenues for the Comparative Study of Political Regimes, *Politics and Governance, 2018, 6*(1): 60-77.

8   *Ibid*.

decline in the protection of rights and freedoms under the imposition of martial law. Because of Russia's large-scale attack in 2022, Ukraine has had to limit its commitments to the provision of full civil liberties and political rights. However, within these justified and acceptable restrictions, the concern about preventing autocracy has become more acute.

Politically-Driven Referendums in the Post-Soviet Region

Johan Gerschewski[9] developed a concept that explains the survival mechanisms of autocracies across various subtypes. It includes popular legitimation, the co-optation of key elites, and the suppression of potential dissenters, since autocracies, as he demonstrates, face threats from three sources – the people, the elites, and the opposition. Moreover, he argues that it is precisely legitimation that adds stability to autocracies. As the literature shows, post-Soviet autocracies rely on all three pillars.[10] It is well known that referendums play a significant role in what Gerschewski refers to as popular legitimation in post-Soviet countries. It should be noted that none of the referendums are of the bottom-up type, which is considered a genuine referendum and accepted in many modern democracies. All referendums in the post-Soviet space have been orchestrated by the ruling elites to fight for power. Experts assert that "the erosion of democracy often begins with political elites pushing the boundaries of their power, and that – consistent with the drift-to-danger model. Like frogs in a pan of slowly heating water, those who protect democracy often fail to see the risks to the system until it is almost too late."[11]

> **All referendums in the post-Soviet space have been orchestrated by the ruling elites to fight for power.**

After examining the path to autocratisation in post-Soviet countries, we can see that the legitimisation of the status quo through top-down referendums was used across the board. Based on the questions posed in national referendums and the outcomes of the referendum decisions, it can be argued that out of 53 referendums held over nearly a quarter of a century, from 1990 to 2024 inclusive[12], seven were referendums on declaring independence, while the remaining forty-six served purposes such as:

- legitimising the seizure of power and obtaining 'popular consent' for the expansion of the leadership powers;

- bypassing parliamentary control, whereby any expansion of the leader's powers could not be missed;

- institutionalising the seizure of power and establishing a new constitutional system of checks and balances.

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9   J. Gerschewski, *The three pillars of stability: legitimation, repression, and co-optation in autocratic regimes,* "Democratization", 20(1), 2013, p. 19; J. Gerschewski. *The Two Logics of Autocratic Rule.* Cambridge University Press 2023

10 In particular, see: P. G. Roeder, *Varieties of Post-Soviet Authoritarian Regimes*, "Post-Soviet Affairs", 10(1), 1994, pp.61–101; A. Fruhstorfer, *Referendums and Autocratization: Explaining Constitutional Referendums in the Post-Soviet Space,* p. 157-180 [in:] A. Richard, R. Stacey (eds), "The Limits and Legitimacy of Referendums", Oxford, 2022; T. Lankina, A. Libman, A. Obydenkova, *Authoritarian and Democratic Diffusion in Post-Communist Regions,* "Comparative Political Studies" 2016, Vol. 49(12) 1599 –1629;

11 C.M. Abels, K.J.A. Huttunen, R. Hertwig, S. Lewandowsky, *Dodging the autocratic bullet: enlisting behavioural science to arrest democratic backsliding*, "Behavioural Public Policy", 1–28, 2024. doi:10.1017/bpp.2024.43

12 Here, I only consider nationwide referendums within each country.

In each of the post-Soviet countries, between one and five top-down referendums were held, and in Kyrgyzstan, ten.

Autocrats see it as vital to demonstrate 'popular support' and 'public approval.' Although some of these referendums were legally binding, meaning that the constitutions required a referendum for amendments or they were presented as a people's initiative, they still contributed to the political process in terms of contents and objectives.

The main types of questions posed to the 'people's vote' concerned the approval of autocratisation mechanisms and included, but were not limited to, the following:

- Lifting the limit on serving more than two terms in office – Belarus 2004, Alexander Lukashenko; Azerbaijan 2008, Ilham Aliyev; Tajikistan 2016, Emomali Rahmon.

- 'Zeroing out'[13] the presidential term[14] – Belarus 1996, Alexander Lukashenko; Tajikistan 2003, Emomali Rahmon; Russia 2020, Vladimir Putin; Uzbekistan 2023, Shavkat Mirziyoyev.

- Reviewing the age of candidacy for office – Tajikistan 2016, Emomali Rahmon.

- Vote of confidence in the president – Azerbaijan 1993, Abulfaz Elchibey, or vote of confidence in the parliament[15] – Ukraine 2000, Leonid Kuchma.

- Switching from a mixed electoral vote to a plural one – Azerbaijan 2002, Heydar Aliyev.

- Removing parliament's role in making decisions about government formation, the 'rule of the people' principle, and the subjugation of parliament – Kyrgyzstan 1996, Askar Akayev.

- Extension of the presidential term in office – Turkmenistan 1994, Saparmurad Niyazov; Kazakhstan 1995, Nursultan Nazarbayev; Russia 2008, Vladimir Putin; Azerbaijan 2016, Ilham Aliyev; Uzbekistan 2023, Shavkat Mirziyoyev.

- Reducing the number of seats in parliament sharply – Ukraine 2000, Leonid Kuchma; Georgia 2003, Eduard Shevardnadze.

- Postponement of the deadlines for the presidential or parliamentary elections – Georgia 2008, Mikheil Saakashvili.

- Reforming the parliament from a single chamber to a bicameral system – Belarus 1996, Alexander Lukashenko; Tajikistan 1999, Emomali Rahmon; Ukraine 2000, Leonid Kuchma; Uzbekistan 2002, Islam Karimov.

- Authority granted to the president to dissolve parliament – Belarus 1995, Alexander Lukashenko.

- Redistribution of power between the president and the government – Armenia 2005, Robert Kocharian; Azerbaijan 2016, Ilkham Aliev.

- Cancellation of presidential elections from the date specified by the constitution – Turkmenistan 1994, Saparmurad Niyazov; Kazakhstan 1995, Nursultan Nazarbayev.

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13 Sometimes authors equate the removal of the restriction on standing for office more than twice in a row with 'resetting the terms' or 'zeroing the terms', but these are different legal mechanisms. 'Resetting the terms' occurs when a legal act, usually a constitution, comes into force, initiating a new 'political chronology' and nullifying previous facts. Meanwhile, the restriction on standing for election after two terms can still be included in the constitution.

14 Decisions regarding the start of new time limits were also made by constitutional courts, thereby contributing to the process of autocratisation. For example, in Kyrgyzstan, the constitutional court in 1998 allowed Askar Akayev, who by that time had already held the position twice, in 1991 and 1995, to run again for the presidency.

15 The referendum results were not implemented for political reasons. The 'failure' of the 2000 referendum in Ukraine served as a lesson for some autocracies seeking to avoid a similar outcome.

The list of issues resolved highlights the significance of referendums in the process of autocratisation. Each of these referendums aligns with the three-stage typology of autocratisation outlined by Bálint Magyar, and Bálint Madlovics, which illustrates the political development of post-communist countries as follows: autocratic attempt, autocratic breakthrough, and autocratic consolidation[16]. Each one served a purpose corresponding to its respective stage of autocratisation. Here, we will examine the case of Belarus, which clearly demonstrates that the referendums held led to a shift in the system of power in favour of the president, and that they conform to the researchers' suggested model of autocratisation.

Example of Belarusian Autocratisation through a Referendum

Belarus has held four referendums.

The autocratic attempt

The first referendum, on 14th May 1995, included four questions, one of which concerned granting Alexander Lukashenko, who had become president in 1994, the power to dissolve the parliament. The remaining questions aimed to approve his policies. "<…> 4. Do you agree with the need to make changes to the constitution of the Republic of Belarus, which provide for the possibility of early termination of the powers of the Supreme Council by the President of the Republic of Belarus in cases of systematic or gross violation of the constitution?"[17] Unlike the first three binding questions, the fourth question was marked as consultative.

The autocratic breakthrough

The course and results of the referendum on 24th November 1996 demonstrated the political weight and influence of the president. Four questions from the head of state and three from the parliament were put on the referendum. In particular, both branches of power sought to gain support for their respective amendments to the Constitution, adopted two years earlier. The head of state called on voters "<…> 2. To adopt the 1994 Constitution of the Republic of Belarus with amendments and additions (new version of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus) proposed by the President of the Republic of Belarus, A. G. Lukashenko," while the deputies of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Belarus called on them "1. To adopt the 1994 Constitution of the Republic of Belarus with amendments and additions proposed by the deputies of the communist and agrarian factions."[18]

The main differences between them concerned the distribution of power. The 1994 constitution established a semi-presidential system, with significant parliamentary control, while Lukashenko

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16 B. Magyar, B. Madlovics, *A Concise Field Guide to Post-Communist Regimes: Actors, Institutions, and Dynamics*, Central European University Press: Budapest–New York 2022, p. 99.

17 *Протокол Центральной комиссии Республики Беларусь по выборам и проведению республиканских референдумов об итогах голосования на республиканском референдуме, проведенном 14 мая 2014 г. в соответствии с постановлением Верховного Совета Республики Беларусь от 13 апреля 1995 г. № 3728-XII* (Protocol of the Central Commission of the Republic of Belarus on Elections and Holding of Republican Referendums on the results of voting at the republican referendum held on 14 May 2014, in accordance with the Resolution of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Belarus of 13 April 1995 No. 3728-XII), https://www.rec.gov.by

18 *Протокол Центральной комиссии Республики Беларусь по выборам и проведению республиканских референдумов "О результатах голосования на республиканском референдуме, проведенном 24 ноября 1996 года, в соответствии с Постановлением Верховного Совета Республики Беларусь от 6 сентября 1996 года № 578-XIII"* (On the results of the vote in the republican referendum held on November 24, 1996, in accordance with Resolution No. 578-XIII of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Belarus dated September 6, 1996), the Minutes of the Central Commission of the Republic of Belarus for Elections and Conducting Republican Referendums, https://www.rec.gov.by

sought to transform it into a super-presidential model, and the deputies aimed to move towards a parliamentary republic. Another, no less important, aspect of this process concerned the source of law. While the parliamentary side insisted on adherence to parliamentary procedures, Lukashenko portrayed the referendum as an expression of the people's will. The referendum's decision not just constituted a disagreement with the then elected parliament but marked the final break with the existing political system and a transition to a new system of power distribution. As a result of the referendum, the current parliament was dissolved, as the president was granted such authority. A bicameral parliament replaced the unicameral one. The presidential powers were significantly expanded, extending to the appointment of the Attorney General, as well as members of the National Bank's management, part of the Central Election Commission, the Constitutional Court, and other higher courts, and the leadership of the Control Chamber. The prior procedure for approving key ministers was eliminated. Lukashenko also gained the authority to call referendums, which previously was the prerogative of the parliament. While the previous two referendums required parliamentary approval, the next one was called by presidential decree. The assumption of powers to call a referendum also strengthened Lukashenko's influence.

The autocratic consolidation

On October 17th, 2004, the third referendum was approved, allowing Lukashenko to run for a third term. Furthermore, the question included two issues, the combination of which, in itself, violated the rules of logic and

> **The 1994 constitution established a semi-presidential system, with significant parliamentary control, while Lukashenko sought to transform it into a super-presidential model, and the deputies aimed to move towards a parliamentary republic**

created a situation of manipulation: "Do you permit the first President of the Republic of Belarus, A. G. Lukashenko, to participate as a candidate in the presidential elections of the Republic of Belarus, and do you accept the first part of Article 81 of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus in the following wording: 'The President shall be elected for five years directly by the people of the Republic of Belarus on the basis of universal, free, equal, and direct suffrage by secret ballot'?"[19]

The autocratic consolidation

One question was put to the vote on 27th February 2022 – "Do you agree with the amendments and additions to the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus?"[20] The referendum constitutionalised the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, which existed as a civil-political platform and, for example, actively promoted Lukashenko's position in the 1996 referendum. It became the highest representative body of the people's power in the Republic of Belarus. It was granted a range of powers over personnel appointment, control, and supervision, thereby weakening the role of the parliament. The decisions of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, which stands at the apex of the vertical axis of power led by

19 *Указ Президента Республики Беларусь 7 сентября 2004 г. N 431 г. Минск. "О назначении республиканского референдума" (On the calling of a national referendum.* The President of the Republic of Belarus Decree of 7 September 2004 N 431 Minsk), https://www.rec.gov.by

20 *Указ Президента Республики Беларусь 20 января 2022 г. N 14 г. Минск. "О назначении республиканского референдума" (On the calling of a national referendum.* The President of the Republic of Belarus Decree of 20 January 2022 N 14 Minsk), https://www.rec.gov.by

the president, are binding. After Lukashenko took office for a seventh consecutive term in January 2025, he centralised political power in his own hands which had grown over his thirty years in the presidency, and he now controls most political decisions.[21]

The Construction of Referendum Rules

What role have referendum rules had in the success of these referendums? The rules for conducting referendums were subject to the same eroding of power as other mechanisms of checks and balances. "With the rise of autocratic legalism, we are witnessing new political technologies designed to accomplish the goals of autocracy without its usual tell-tale signs"[22], states Scheppele. In addition to influencing the appointment of members to the national electoral commission, and controlling and displacing information from various sources through active propaganda, the leaders also focused on factors that made decision-making easier and more straightforward.

First and foremost, this concerns control over the conduct of the referendum. The leaders sought either to usurp the authority to call referendums or at least to manage the timing of their conduct. As a legacy of Soviet times, referendums were at first called by the republican supreme councils. Early laws on referendums adopted in the new states still contained such a provision, but this authority was gradually transferred entirely or partially to the president. Nuances

> **The rules for conducting referendums were subject to the same eroding of power as other mechanisms of checks and balances**

depended on the subject of the referendum. For example, according to the constitution of 1996 in Ukraine, and this provision remains unchanged, the parliament calls referendums on issues related to changing Ukraine's territorial borders, while the president calls a nationwide referendum on amendments to the Constitution of Ukraine and also proclaims an all-Ukrainian referendum on a popular initiative.[23] In Azerbaijan, it was initially envisaged that the parliament would call referendums. From 1995 onwards, it was established that only the president could submit questions for constitutional amendments to a referendum, leaving the parliament with a residual role. In Kyrgyzstan, in 1991, a referendum was called by the parliament; in 1993, by both the parliament and the president; and in 1996, solely by the president.[24] Such a transfer of authority to the president in calling a referendum has occurred in Belarus: from the parliament in 1991 to the president in 1996; and in Russia: from the parliament in 1991 to the president in 1993.

The next option is adopting a new constitution or amending the constitution. In Kyrgyzstan, in 1993, amendments to the constitution were made by the parliament, and in 1996 – by a referendum.

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21 Why the need for autocratic consolidation occurs is explained by V. Silitski, "Veteran leaders of former Soviet Republics <…> directly attribute the downfall of their Georgian, Ukrainian, and Kyrgyz counterparts not only to activities orchestrated by the international democracy-promotion community, but also to the inherent weaknesses of unconsolidated authoritarian regimes." See V. Silitski, *Preempting Democracy: The Case of Belarus,* "Journal of Democracy", Vol. 16(4), October 2005, p. 84.

22 K.L. Scheppele, Autocratic Legalism, "University of Chicago Law Review", 2018, Vol. 85: Iss. 2, Article 2, p. 582.

23 *Constitution of Ukraine as of 1996 with amendments as of 03 September 2019,* article 85, paragraph 2, and article 106, paragraph 6, https://zakon.rada.gov.ua

24 Since 2007, the president has been required to secure the support of at least two-thirds of parliament in order to hold a referendum. This process reflects the intense political struggle that has characterised Kyrgyzstan's political developments.

An important point to consider is a reduction or elimination of the turnout requirements for the referendum's validity. While in the early 1990s, the rules set a rather high voter turnout threshold for the referendum to be considered valid, later on, there were 'simplifications', either lowering this threshold or removing it altogether. For example, in Kyrgyzstan, the turnout threshold for a referendum in 1991 was a majority of registered voters (50%+1), whereas in 2016 the threshold was set at 30%+1, based on the ballot papers. Turkmenistan set a 50%+1 turnout threshold in 1993, which was abolished in 2012.

> **An important point to consider is a reduction or elimination of the turnout requirements for the referendum's validity**

An example of neutralising such requirements was the initiative in Ukraine. In the early years of Ukraine's independence, referendums on constitutional (politically significant) processes, such as the early termination of the powers of parliament or the president, required a qualified majority in the turnout (2/3). In 2012, a government controlled by president V. Yanukovych passed a law that removed the threshold for turnout and simultaneously enabled the adoption of a new constitution via referendum without parliamentary participation. In 2021, a 50% threshold necessary for any referendum to take place was reinstated.

The next challenge is lowering the decision-making threshold. It matters whether this is based on the votes of the majority of voters under majority turnout conditions, or simply on the votes of the majority of participants.

The procedure for reviewing referendum decisions, if it remains within the bounds of current legitimacy, is crucial – not least for the stability of those decisions. Depending on the country's choice, it can last from 1-2 years up to 'the next referendum'.

It appears paradoxical that the easing of requirements for referendums, including those for adopting or amending the constitution, persists even in countries where a high degree of autocratic consolidation has been achieved and where threats from political elites or social movements have been eradicated. However, some adjustments were made in Uzbekistan in 2001, in Russia in 2004, and in Turkmenistan in 2012. This is because leaders (of autocracies) prefer to keep such an unambiguous tool for resolving internal political conflicts available, and to base adjustments on their experience in implementing it. For instance, the failure to implement decisions from various referendums in Moldova in 1999 and 2010, in Ukraine in 2000, and in Armenia in 2015, is among the reasons why autocrats tend to approve already prepared decisions rather than hold consultative referendums. These phenomena exemplify the practice of authoritarian learning, which is "a process in which authoritarian regimes adopt survival strategies based upon the prior successes and failures of other governments"[25]. Natasha Lindstaedt states that "Authoritarian elites learn how to counter pro-democracy diffusion and adapt, making their regimes more resilient."[26]

25 S.G.F. Hall, T. Ambrosio, *Authoritarian learning: A conceptual overview*, "East European Politics", 2017, 33:2, p. 143. On the unsuccessful attempt at autocratisation during the presidency of V. Yanukovych in Ukraine, see.: T. Ambrosio, *The fall of Yanukovych: structural and political constraints to implementing authoritarian learning*, "East European Politics", 2017, 33:2.

26 N. Lindstaedt, *Authoritarian Diffusion,* [in:] J.J. van den Bosch, N. Lindstaedt (eds.), *Encyclopedia Tyrannica: A Research Guide to Authoritarianism, ibidem*-Verlag: Hannover – Stuttgart 2025, p. 643.

Conclusion

Even though most post-Soviet countries, apart from the Baltic states and with the exception of Armenia, are classified by researchers as autocracies in varying degrees at the initial stage of state-building, they have, within these parameters, undergone their own process of autocratisation.

In countries where top-down referendums were planned but either not held or their results were not enforced, the process of autocratisation paused at that point (Armenia/Moldova/Georgia/Ukraine).

Top-down referendums were essential to this process. They were actively employed, and often played a decisive role in confirming the legitimacy of the status quo established by leaders, at specific moments in the power struggle. Even if referendums were binding, their purpose was to promote autocratisation.

> **In countries where top-down referendums were planned but either not held or their results were not enforced, the process of autocratisation paused at that point (Armenia/Moldova/Georgia/Ukraine)**

Referendums were most common in countries with higher degrees of political conflict (Kyrgyzstan/Belarus). In countries where elite consolidation occurred early in state-building (such as Turkmenistan), there was no need to resort to referendums to resolve conflicts. Nonetheless, the development of referendum rules continued even in such countries. This can be explained by leaders' desire to avoid difficulties in managing to conduct 'successful' referendums whenever necessary.

Attempts to make referendums a fool proof means of decision-making, with few exceptions, have occurred in all post-Soviet countries for more than a third of a century. These have included mechanisms such as controlling when the referendum is announced by the head of state, lowering, or ignoring the turnout threshold for the referendum to be valid, and reducing the number of votes needed to make a decision. Although in autocracies, civil liberties and political rights are not fully observed, elections and referendums are held; however, there is a need for rules that ensure the smooth operation of referendums with minimal obstacles. This process in the region can be explained by the practice of 'authoritarian learning'.

The difficulty of revising referendum decisions makes a significant contribution to the 'survival of autocracies.' This aspect should be taken into account when considering their longevity.

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REBUILDING THE RULES-BASED ORDER: HOW DEMOCRACIES SHOULD RESPOND

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This article examines the deepening crisis of the international rules-based order, amid the resurgence of authoritarian regimes and the weakening of multilateral institutions. It investigates the ideological foundations and structural changes in modern autocracy, the internal decline of democratic governance, and the limited enforcement power of international law. Using Ukraine's experience as a case study, it argues that democracies need to adopt strategic, proportionate, and legally grounded responses to authoritarian threats. The study suggests a three-stage framework for democratic intervention: a justification and proportionality test; highlighting targeted sanctions and legal accountability; public diplomacy as a vital tool to strengthen global stability.

Introduction

The international rules-based order, established after World War II, is facing its deepest crisis in decades, according to some scholars[1]. The erosion of international customs, the weakening of multilateral institutions such as the UN, ICC, and Red Cross, and the assertive rise of autocratic regimes, have all undermined global security. Indeed, global security is under threat; however, it was the sovereign will of states and their consensus that led to the creation of the UN in the first place, with all its competencies and, consequently, its effectiveness drawbacks. The UN members have become hostages of their own rules within the organisation.

The full-scale military aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, coordinated offensive activities among states such as Russia, Iran, and North Korea, and the growing influence of populism in both developed and developing countries, reveal the fragility of democratic systems. In this context, democratic responses to authoritarian challenges must be strategic, proportionate, and legally grounded. Ukraine's experience provides an illustration of how diplomacy, legal instruments, and public communication can reinforce the rules-based international order, amidst global democratic regression.

This paper explores how democratic states can respond to the empowerment

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1   For example: 1) Michael Glennon, *The New Interventionism: The Search for a Just International Law,* Foreign Affairs, May/June 1999; 2) Ruth Wedgwood, *NATO's Campaign in Yugoslavia*, American Journal of International Law,1999; 3) Arugay, A.A., *The Rules-Based International Order Under Siege.* Asian Politics & Policy, 17: e70034, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.70034

of autocratic regimes, by examining three interrelated dimensions: the ideological roots of modern authoritarianism, the internal and external regression of democratic governance, and the strategic tools available for democracies to restore resilience.

The Ideological and Structural Roots of Modern Authoritarianism

The 2020s have witnessed a marked rise in the assertiveness of authoritarian regimes, posing complex challenges to the international legal order. Instances such as Russia's aggression against Ukraine, China's economic coercion, Belarus's suppression of political opposition, and North Korea's nuclear provocations illustrate the multifaceted threats these regimes present.

> **democratic responses to authoritarian challenges must be strategic, proportionate, and legally grounded**

Authoritarian regimes are not inherently illegal, nor do they automatically violate international law. However, it is generally understood that when power is concentrated in the hands of a single individual (group), the space for dissent diminishes, and as a result, the rights of people to be treated equally across different social groups are gradually neglected.

The concept of authoritarianism has evolved since Linz's 1964 definition of them as "political systems with limited, not responsible political pluralism; without elaborate and guiding ideology (but with distinctive mentalities); without intensive nor extensive political mobilisation, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones."[2] However, throughout the years, authoritarianism remained a residual category, including a variety of non-totalitarian dictatorial regimes (e.g. Singapore under the People's Action Party (PAP) dominance, and Egypt under Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011)).

Modern authoritarian regimes distinguish themselves from their predecessors through the use of controlled electoral legitimacy: rulers gain and renew mandates via elections that appear competitive, with opposition parties participating but structurally disadvantaged. Political pluralism is formally maintained through registered parties and selective media openness, allowing for limited dissent while safeguarding the ruling narrative. Coercion persists, but operates subtly, visible only during crises when state control is directly challenged. Unlike traditional military-backed regimes (e.g. Myanmar, Pakistan, Chile under Pinochet (1973–1990)), today's authoritarian governments rest on civilian dominance, with the armed forces serving as instruments rather than partners of power. Their legitimacy stems not from ideology or fear, but from a blend of performance-based governance, managed nationalism, and the illusion of choice. This adaptive model enables some of the regimes to consolidate authority without overt repression. Consequently, the line between the old democracy and new authoritarianism has become quite blurred, reshaping global political mechanisms.

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2   J.J. Linz, *An Authoritarian Regime: Spain,* [in:] E. Allardt, Y. Littunen (eds.), Cleavages, Ideologies and Party Systems: Contributions to Comparative Political Sociology, Helsinki 1964, pp. 291–341.

New authoritarianism may enjoy the support of the majority, but as long as it does not respect the rule of law, it cannot be considered a democracy, even an 'illiberal' one.[3] Understanding contemporary autocracy requires an analysis of its ideological underpinnings and structural mechanisms. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (Sweden) measures the following: Representation, Rights, Rule of Law, and Participation.[4] However, these categories rarely indicate the willingness of a government to improve citizens' lives; more often, they reflect cultural norms and the mechanisms leaders use to maintain control.

In 2025, North Korea is the country which shows the lowest democratic indicators, with representation at **1.8**, rights at **1.3**, rule of law at **1.3**, and participation at 0.3. Russia's scores are higher, but it is still designated as authoritarian, registering 2.8 in representation, 2.8 in rights, 2.8 in rule of law, and 2.3 in participation. China records 3.1 for both representation and rights, 3.4 for rule of law, and 2.4 for participation. Iran shows similar figures, with representation at 2.9, rights at 2.9, rule of law at 3.4, and participation at 2.9. Across all four countries, the statistics indicate consistently low democratic performance, with North Korea at the bottom and China and Iran scoring slightly higher but still within the range of authoritarian countries.[5]

To illustrate the diversity of contemporary authoritarianism, this section examines four regimes that represent distinct autocratic models — religious-theocratic (Iran), party-authoritarian (China), oligarchic-personalist (Russia), and hereditary-totalitarian (North Korea).

Case Studies of Autocratic Systems:

- **Iran** functions as an autocratic system because genuine political authority is concentrated in the hands of an unelected Supreme Leader and the bodies under his control, such as the Guardian Council and the Revolutionary Guard. These institutions can veto legislation, disqualify electoral candidates, and override the decisions of elected officials, thereby limiting meaningful political pluralism. Although the legal system is based on Shia Islamic jurisprudence, it is the *centralised and non-accountable structure of power*. While some Iranian measures may appear extreme to Western observers, they are regarded domestically as customary and legitimate. As former Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ruhollah Khomeini said: "Islam is politics, or it is nothing".[6]

- **China** enforces communist ideology through a party-led authoritarian model. Political control is reinforced by technological dominance, cyber-surveillance, and strict regulation of civil society.

- **Russia** operates as an autocratic system, because political power is concentrated in the presidency and security services, while formal institutions function largely under executive control. Although some oligarchic networks remain influential, the defining features of authoritarianism

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3 J.J. Wiatr, *New Authoritarianism: Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century,* 2019, pp. 169–181.

4 *The Global State of Democracy 2025: Democracy on the Move,* International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2025, https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/2025-09/global-state-of-democracy-2025-democracy-on-the-move_0.pdf

5 *The Global State of Democracy 2025: Democracy on the Move,* International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2025, https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/2025-09/global-state-of-democracy-2025-democracy-on-the-move_0.pdf

6 Walt, Stephen M., *The Iranian Revolution.* in Revolution and War, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013, pp. 210-268, https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801470011-006

in Russia are the systematic repression of political opposition, the criminalisation of dissent, and the widespread arrests of individuals who criticise the government or oppose the so-called 'special military operation.' Courts and legal procedures continue to exist, but the rule of law is routinely subordinated to political directives.

- **North Korea** remains an absolute autocracy, where power is concentrated in the hands of a dictator, and political legitimacy is derived from a tightly controlled narrative of national survival and historical destiny.

What these examples illustrate is that the rights and institutions recognised internationally may differ dramatically from those afforded domestically. No universally enforceable code of human rights exists. Many countries are signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), its people are entitled to decent treatment under the Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War (1949) and the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1950)[78]; but interpretations are shaped by culture, religion, and economic realities, which in turn determine who is punished or conversely who is protected. What is craved for is just an aspiration, until there is an enforcement mechanism. For instance, expecting Iran to fully embrace liberal freedoms of religion or sexual orientation is unrealistic, given the centrality of Shia Islam to its governance identity, just as expecting France to abandon 'liberty, equality, fraternity' would be absurd.[9]

The Crisis of Democratic Governance

Democracies are not immune to regression. Internal fatigue, scepticism towards globalisation, and the distrust of elites create fertile ground for authoritarianism. Citizens who perceive the future as uncertain often withdraw from political participation, creating conditions for controlled democracy or soft dictatorship.

It should be recognised that in the modern world, we no longer encounter only what is now fashionably called *spin dictatorships* — we also face what might be termed spin democracies (e.g. Hungary under Viktor Orbán, or Azerbaijan under Ilham Aliyev). Over the next two decades, the boundary between these two models of governance is likely to become increasingly blurred.

> *Democracies are not immune to regression. Internal fatigue, scepticism towards globalisation, and the distrust of elites create fertile ground for authoritarianism*

Both spin dictatorships and spin democracies rely on a kaleidoscopic round of appeals and narratives designed to sustain public engagement. Most autocrats whose power is based on fear employ ideology as their binding force, complemented by rituals of loyalty. They insist on a singular, collective truth — one that must be accepted, and

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7   United Nations. *Geneva convention relative to the protection of civilian persons in time of war of 12 August 1949.* Treaty Series 75(973): 287–417, 1950, https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%2075/v75.pdf

8   Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, 4 November 1950, Europ.T.S. No. 5; 213 U.N.T.S. 221.

9   T. Marshall, *The Power of Geography: Ten Maps That Reveal the Future of Our World*, Elliott & Thompson: London 2021, p.73.

when necessary, enforced through coercion or terror. Systems built on such foundations appear to be omnipresent yet remain inherently fragile: a single unpunished expression of dissent or 'incorrect' thought can expose a fracture in the regime's armour. The true danger lies not in the revelation of the dictator's falsehoods, but in the public confirmation of those lies without them facing any consequences — a moment that reveals weakness rather than power.[10]

> **Both spin dictatorships and spin democracies rely on a kaleidoscopic round of appeals and narratives designed to sustain public engagement**

In democracies, by contrast, the exposure of inefficiency does not signify defeat. Instead, it triggers renewal — the articulation of new goals, the presentation of new programmes, and the mobilisation of new human and material resources to achieve them. Interestingly, authoritarian leaders sometimes attempt to imitate this democratic self-correction by publicly reprimanding subordinates or staging displays of supposed internal reform. Yet, experience shows that without a genuine mechanism of accountability and consent, such imitations rarely sustain themselves beyond a few years. In the absence of coercive machinery, spin-dictators dissolve under the weight of their own artificiality.

Autocratic tendencies have been evident in certain constitutionally declared democracies. For example:

- Hungary: Constitutional amendments have curtailed judicial independence and media freedom under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.
- Turkey: President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has used counterterrorism as a justification to purge the opposition and centralise power.
- The Philippines: President Rodrigo Duterte weakened institutions and restructured the legal framework to consolidate authority.
- Russia: Constitutional changes in 2020 allow almost indefinite presidential tenure, and override international treaties.

This demonstrates a paradox: democratic systems must maintain compromise and consensus between government, citizens, and the executive, yet modernisation and political development often threaten entrenched autocrats. Economic growth, education, and technology provide tools for citizen empowerment, but authoritarian regimes adapt to their circumstances by leveraging these same elements to consolidate power.

Technological control exemplifies this adaptation. Xi Jinping's vision of the 'Chinese Dream' binds modernisation to political authority[11]. The US 'chip choke' in 2020 highlighted the fusion of national security, digital sovereignty, and global trade. Authoritarian states weaponise technology as means for surveillance, control over supply chains, and cyber operations, extending their power without conventional military engagement.

Democratic resilience depends not only on institutions but on trust in the efficacy of political participation. Populism,

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10 S. Guriev, D. Treisman, *Spin Dictators: The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century,* Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2022, p. 128.

11 "中央网络安全和信息化领导小组第一次会议召开" [The First Meeting of the Central Network Security and Informatisation Leading Group Was Held], "中央政府门户网站" [Central Government Portal], 27.02.2014, http://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2014-02/27/content_2625036.htm

polarisation, and systemic insecurity weaken this trust, creating a psychological and social environment conducive to authoritarianism. Ukraine's defence against Russian aggression offers a counterpoint, demonstrating that motivated inhabitants, supported by robust democratic institutions, can resist autocratic encroachment, and thus uphold international law.

It is essential to understand the circumstances in which a state is regarded as posing a threat under international law. This provides the context for the concept of declarative justice, whereby legal recognition and normative authority operate in the absence of coercive measures.

Declarative Justice: Law Without Coercion

Taking into account the previous research by this article's author of the issue of international state responsibility, it is considered that any modern regime, regardless of its political nature, becomes the one posing a threat to another subject of international relations under one of three common conditions[12].

First, when it evolves into a security threat to another state or a group of states — either through the potential use of its own armed forces or by allowing foreign military formations to use its territory for manoeuvres (*security reasons*).

Second, when it achieves rapid economic growth by expanding production and exports to the point of creating unfair competition, compelling others to cut prices, seek alternative means of market influence, or resort to dumping practices; when it attracts foreign investment without establishing clear mechanisms for guaranteeing those

investments and no interest is paid to investors (economic reasons).

Third, when it begins to exert ideological or political influence beyond its borders — through propaganda, disinformation campaigns, manipulation of electoral processes, or by supporting loyal political movements abroad — thus undermining the sovereignty and internal stability of other states (*political and ideological reasons*).

> **Democratic resilience depends not only on institutions but on trust in the efficacy of political participation.**

Human rights violations are not among the common triggers for international intervention. Nevertheless, they often provoke a strong international response, expressed through declarations. This omission itself reveals an important theoretical insight: that massive or systemic human rights violations within authoritarian regimes, taken alone, rarely serve as the decisive cause for external interference or regime change. A disclaimer must therefore be made: human rights violations are not exclusive to autocracies. Even democratic systems may face isolated or structural infringements upon human rights. However, autocratic regimes are notorious for their systematic, deliberate, and prolonged breaches of fundamental human rights — often institutionalised within their political and legal frameworks.

The contemporary reality suggests that human rights have become an auxiliary precondition for interventions, rather than an independent, sufficient basis for them.

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12 Deineko, D. *Responsibility of states for breach of erga omnes obligations by omission. Accountability of Belarus for genocide of Ukrainians.* Law herald. Responsibility of states for breach of erga omnes obligations by omission, 2022, http://yurvisnyk.in.ua/v2_2022/29.pdf

Violations of human rights are often used as a rhetorical or legal justification for actions that, under international law, may otherwise constitute *wrongful acts* of states — ranging from unilateral sanctions to military interventions framed as 'humanitarian acts.'

From a legal standpoint, states and individuals can be held accountable for such violations:

- States may be brought before the *International Court of Justice (ICJ)* for breaches of international human rights treaties;

- Individual leaders may be prosecuted by the *International Criminal Court (ICC)* for crimes against humanity, genocide, or war crimes.

Human rights conventions are unique among international treaties because they establish objective standards for individual protection, not merely for reciprocal obligations between states. The protection of human rights lies at the heart *of jus cogens* — peremptory norms, from which no derogation is permitted. Therefore, a state's suspension or withdrawal from a human rights treaty cannot occur abruptly; it follows a comprehensive procedure. Such treaties are designed to ensure continuity and to prevent states from escaping accountability for violations. For instance, under Article 21 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), a state party's denunciation "*shall take effect one year after the date of receipt of the notification by the Secretary-General,*" preventing abrupt evasion of responsibilities. [13]

A recent example underscores this principle: in Ukraine v. Russian Federation (2024), the International Court of Justice found that Russia violated its obligations under Article 2(1)(a) and Article 5(e)(v) of CERD, through the discriminatory implementation of its educational system in occupied Crimea, particularly with respect to schooling in the Ukrainian language (para. 370)[14].

It must therefore be emphasised that the function of international law is fundamentally normative: it establishes responsibility, determines wrongful acts, and identifies individuals or states as violators. Its purpose is to recognise and declare guilt under law, not to physically enforce punishment or 'put a person behind bars' in the technical sense. This distinction is crucial to understanding both the power and the limitations of international justice, when reacting to the autocratic regime's actions.

Strategic Responses: Rethinking 'Democratic Intervention'

From the author's perspective, intervention in autocratic systems requires a careful, three-stage strategic approach — with the clear understanding that the term *Democratic Intervention* herein refers exclusively to non-military, law-based, and non-lethal instruments of influence. It presumes diplomacy over force, persuasion over coercion, and the rule of law over the rule of arms.

Therefore, two questions arise. First, should democracies intervene? The mere existence of an autocratic regime does not

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13 United Nations. *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.* Treaty Series, 660, 195, 1966, https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20660/volume-660-I-9464-English.pdf

14 *Case Concerning Application of the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism and of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (Ukraine v. Russian Federation),* International Court of Justice, 2017, https://www.icj-cij.org/case/166

justify external action. Democracies lack a unilateral mandate to impose political structures in a situation where international obligations are respected and domestic legitimacy exists. Intervention becomes necessary only when a regime violates international law — through aggression, systematic human rights violations, or sponsorship of terrorism.

> ❝ *The mere existence of an autocratic regime does not justify external action. Democracies lack a unilateral mandate to impose political structures in a situation where international obligations are respected and domestic legitimacy exists*

The second question is, to what extent should intervention occur? Intervention must be proportional and coordinated, balancing enforcement with the avoidance of harm to the greatest share of the labour force, not the decision-makers. History demonstrates the failure of collective sanctions, which disproportionately punish the population, while leaving the elites untouched, as seen in the cases of Lebanon and Iran. Democratic intervention should prioritise precision and enforceability.

Any external intervention in authoritarian regimes must be guided by a clear understanding of its potential consequences. Actions taken without a careful assessment of the cause-and-effect relationship between the resources used and the results achieved risk undermining long-term strategic objectives.

So How Should Democracies Intervene? On a larger scale, democratic responses to autocracy, if justified, should focus on targeted, strategic measures:

1. Personalised (smart) sanctions: Through asset freezing, travel bans, and financial restrictions directed at individuals responsible for violations. Precedents include the Saddam Hussein regime, where individual accountability proved more effective than broad embargoes.[15]

2. Sanctions on state-controlled enterprises: Limiting access to strategic materials and dual-use technologies can weaken authoritarian regimes reliant on external inputs, from imports such as military equipment or semiconductor supply chains.

3. Information and education initiatives: Soft-power campaigns can be devised to target civil society, especially young and educated populations, to foster a desire for political participation and material improvement. Unlike coercive measures, these initiatives empower citizens to advocate for accountability from within.

On the national level, conflicts are often less acute because domestic law generally lacks mechanisms for international enforcement. However, under international law, compliance with one treaty while violating another may trigger state responsibility. The principle *of lex posteriori derogat lex priori* (Article 30 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties) addresses the resolution of conflicting treaties in sequence[16]. Yet, when it was codified, the scale of multilateral treaty networks was much smaller, and it did not account for the growing complexity

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15 Resolution 1483 (2003), adopted by the UN Security Council at its 4761st meeting, 22.05.2003, para. 23, https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/495555?ln=en&v=pdf

16 *Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties*, United Nations, 1969, https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/conventions/1_1_1969.pdf

of overlapping obligations. Consequently, states cannot evade responsibility for entering into successive treaties that contradict each other.

> **The military aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, which began in 2014, has revealed both the fragility and the resilience of the rule-based international system**

A practical solution requires adherence to Article 103 of the UN Charter, which establishes the primacy of the Charter over conflicting international agreements[17]. Although Article 103 is often criticised for its limited scope — it does not fully regulate conflicts arising from multiple treaties on different subjects — it underscores the principle of hierarchy in international law. Complementary provisions exist in Article 53 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, which codifies jus cogens norms as peremptory rules binding on all states. Respect for these norms provides a legal and moral anchor to resolve treaty conflicts and maintain coherence in international legal obligations.

The military aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, which began in 2014, has revealed both the fragility and the resilience of the rule-based international system. Despite the long-standing criticism of the UN Charter's structural limitations — particularly the constraints of Articles 51 and 52 on collective defence and regional arrangements — international law remains a living mechanism of accountability rather than a powerless declaration.

Ukraine's objectives of achieving a just and lasting peace require national consolidation and interagency coordination, as well as sustained engagement with its international partners. Several of these objectives fall most directly within the operational capabilities of core state institutions responsible for foreign policy, legal affairs, and national security. De facto, actions against an authoritarian aggressor can include:

Increasing Pressure on the Aggressor. The application of diplomatic, economic, and political measures is central to constraining an authoritarian aggressor. Through coordinated efforts across the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Office of the Prosecutor General, and other relevant agencies, Ukraine can maintain and expand the system of international sanctions. Engagement in multilateral forums — including the EU, UN, OSCE, etc. — allows for the introduction of new restrictive measures, prevents their erosion, and ensures their alignment with those of partner states. Targeted personal sanctions against individuals responsible for aggression, human rights violations, or the use of propaganda, serve as a key instrument, with verified data, legal assessments, and diplomatic advocacy reinforcing their precision and legitimacy.

Pursuing Accountability for the Aggressor. Legal and diplomatic instruments converge in efforts to uphold international law and secure justice. Coordinated action among foreign policy, justice, and prosecutorial institutions allows Ukraine to support hybrid judicial mechanisms, universal jurisdiction approaches, and other legal pathways in partner countries. Such initiatives ensure that violations of international law are prosecuted, even in the face of political inertia

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17 *Charter of the United Nations,* 1945, https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text

at the intergovernmental level, reaffirming the principle that impunity cannot coexist with a rules-based international order.

In rebuilding the rule-based order, democracies must strengthen mechanisms to ensure compliance, not only with individual treaties but with the overall hierarchy of international norms. This requires both legal codification and robust enforcement measures, ensuring that conflicting interests — whether economic, environmental, or security-related — do not undermine the predictability and legitimacy of international law.

Effective intervention also requires robust enforcement mechanisms. Hybrid tribunals, national courts applying universal jurisdiction, and civil society oversight can supplement intergovernmental inertia, ensuring that international law maintains both moral and practical authority. Ukraine's resistance underscores the importance of such multidimensional strategies: legal, economic, technological, and societal measures must converge, to uphold the rule-based order.

Modern technological resilience constitutes an emerging pillar of democratic strategy. Hence, democracies should reduce dependency on authoritarian suppliers in critical sectors, including semiconductors, telecommunications, and rare-earth minerals; promote cyber governance norms aligned with transparency and human rights, and foster partnerships with trusted states, to protect digital infrastructure from manipulation or coercion.

Conclusion

The increasing assertiveness of autocratic regimes in the 2020s demands a structured, strategic approach by democratic states. The framework proposed here offers responses to three questions:

1. Whether intervention is justified. Democracies should intervene only when autocracies violate international law or engage in aggression. Mere differences in the ideology of governance do not justify coercion.

2. To what extent intervention should occur. Responses must be proportional, focusing on precise instruments that avoid harming civilian populations. Emphasis ought to be on broad embargoes and indiscriminate sanctions.

3. How democracies should act. Targeted personal sanctions against elites and restrictions on state-controlled companies, complemented by information campaigns and civil-society support, provide the most efficient means of exerting influence. Reducing dependency on authoritarian states' suppliers in critical sectors, and building coalitions of like-minded states are also important.

> **Ultimately, the framework of international law underscores a critical distinction: its primary role is to define responsibility, establish norms, and declare wrongdoing, rather than to physically enforce punishment**

This approach combines strategic precision with normative legitimacy. By targeting decision-makers and systemic vulnerabilities, while empowering citizens and civil society, democracies can uphold the rule-based international order without overreach. History demonstrates that personalised measures, coordinated enforcement, and investment in social and technological resilience, offer sustainable pathways for countering autocracy.

Ultimately, the framework of international law underscores a critical distinction: its primary role is to define responsibility, establish norms, and declare wrongdoing, rather than to physically enforce punishment. This highlights both the power and inherent limitations of legal instruments in addressing modern threats posed by authoritarian and aggressive regimes.

The study of international state responsibility demonstrates that modern regimes — regardless of their political system — pose threats to other states primarily through security aggression, economic dominance, or ideological and political influence.

Ultimately, democracies should recognise that intervention is not merely a matter of ideology, but of strategic enforcement, credibility, and long-term societal impact. Ukraine's resistance exemplifies the effectiveness of coordinated, multi-layered strategies that blend legal accountability, economic pressure, and citizen empowerment. By applying these principles globally, democracies can counter authoritarian influence, reinforce international norms, and restore trust in governance — securing both national and international stability in an era defined by autocratic resurgence.

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SECURITY VERSUS PROSPERITY: THE FALSE DILEMMA ERODING GEORGIA'S DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE

Ana Mikautadze
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Once regarded as a frontrunner of the Eastern Partnership, Georgia is today sliding into authoritarianism, despite immense public support for European integration. This article explores the paradox of a pro-European society tolerating this democratic backsliding. It argues that a combination of internal and external factors has reshaped public priorities from democracy building to security. Russian propaganda, amplified by the War in Ukraine, has successfully triggered deep-rooted fears of war within Georgian society, enabling the ruling Georgian Dream party to use these narratives and patronage networks to consolidate power. This article highlights the risks this process poses to Georgia's European future.

From Frontrunner to a Crossroads: Georgia's Political Trajectory

The history of modern Georgia spans just 34 years, but it has seen remarkable and turbulent developments in that short span of time. The country regained independence in 1991, shortly before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. A democratically elected government came to power, but the transition was extremely challenging, since Georgia's economy had been heavily integrated into the Soviet system, and its collapse caused hyperinflation, shortages, and a severe economic downturn, which resulted in a quick downturn in living standards. Weak state institutions and public discontent fuelled political tensions, particularly between supporters of President Zviad Gamsakhurdia and his opponents, which escalated into a violent civil war and a coup d'état. At the same time, with substantial Russian involvement, the war in Abkhazia erupted in 1992. As a result, Georgia lost control over the region, and around 270,000 people were forced to flee their homes and became internally displaced. Back then, Georgia could be depicted as a failed state[1]. This nearly chaotic situation lasted until the mid-1990s, but even the following period was very difficult in terms of economic development and social security.

In 1999, Georgia became a member of the Council of Europe, at which assembly, Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania highlighted Georgia's European identity for the first time, stating: "I am Georgian, and therefore, I am European."[2] Since then, and especially

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1 Zaza Bibilashvili, *20 Years of Georgia's Rose Revolution,* Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, 2023, https://www.freiheit.org/east-and-southeast-europe/20-years-georgias-rose-revolution

2 Georgian Prime-Minister, Zurab Zhvania's speech at the assembly of Council of Europe in 1999, when Georgia became the 41st member of the organisation can be found here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4KX1IVvrHg

after the Rose Revolution in 2003, the Georgian nation-building process has centred around the idea that the country should return to Europe, where it belongs. The new government, led by President Mikheil Saakashvili (United National Movement Party) launched a series of profound social, economic, and judicial reforms, aimed at undermining deeply rooted corruption and strengthening public institutions. Cooperation with the EU and NATO intensified, and new formats of partnership with both institutions were established, supporting Georgia in its state transformation through financial assistance and the sharing of expertise. During this period, Georgia became a front-runner not only in terms of the South Caucasus but also within the broader framework of the Eastern Partnership.[3]

As Georgia's Western partnerships deepened, Russia, still viewing the country as within its sphere of influence, undertook disruptive measures, including several gas supply cuts, restricting exports such as wine, and seriously damaging country's economy; and also deporting Georgian citizens from Russia. Despite these pressures, Georgia maintained its pro-Western foreign policy, sought new markets, and diversified energy imports. In August 2008, as a result of the five-day Russia-Georgia war, Georgia lost control over the Samachablo region, resulting in 80,000 additional internally displaced persons.[4]

> **As Georgia's Western partnerships deepened, Russia, still viewing the country as within its sphere of influence, undertook disruptive measures**

Despite maintaining a pro-Western foreign policy, the government began to suppress opposition parties, the independent media, and NGOs, continuously violating human rights and the rule of law, and shifting from a path of democratisation towards a more authoritarian trajectory, while creating internal turmoil in the country.[5] This situation was further amplified by the global economic crisis and its impact on Georgia's economy.[6] There was an unsuccessful attempt to change the government in 2007, but at that time, opposition groups failed to consolidate and achieve tangible results. In 2012, however, with the support of oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili, who had accumulated his wealth in Russia, the major opposition forces united under the Georgian Dream coalition, and won the parliamentary elections with 54.9% of the vote.[7] This marked the first peaceful transfer of power through elections in Georgia's history – a significant step forward in the democracy consolidation process.

The first few years after the elections were characterised by successful cooperation with the Western institutions, particularly

3   European Parliament Research Service (EPRS), *At a Glance* (EPRS_ATA(2025)772849), 2025,
    https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2025/772849/EPRS_ATA(2025)772849_EN.pdf

4   *Revised figures push number in Georgia displaced to 192,000,* "UNHCR News", 12.09.2008,
    https://www.unhcr.org/news/revised-figures-push-number-georgia-displaced-192000

5   Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2012: Georgia,* 2012,
    https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2012/country-chapters/georgia

6   Maia Otarashvili, *Georgia and the Global Economic Crisis,* "FPRI – Recent Findings: Eurasia", May 2013,
    https://www.fpri.org/research/eurasia/recent-findings/georgia-global-econ-crisis/

7   *Elections in 2012,* "IPU PARLINE database: Georgia (Sakartvelos Parlamenti)", 2012,
    https://data.ipu.org/election-summary/HTML/2119_12.htm

with the EU. In 2014, Georgia signed the Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU, and from 2017 the EU granted to Georgian citizens freedom of movement within the Schengen area. This was an important step forward in EU-Georgia relations, facilitating access to the European market and promoting the smoother integration of Georgia into the EU economy. In 2018, Georgia introduced amendments into the constitution, and added Article 78 on integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures, which formally reaffirmed the country's aspiration towards EU and NATO membership.[8]

While the Georgian government demonstrated willingness to implement technical reforms to align with EU standards, it remained reluctant to undertake profound structural changes, aiming to strengthen local governance, public institutions, the judiciary system and to fight high-level corruption. Moreover, instead of encouraging dialogue with civil society, the government only formally communicated with the latter, or in most cases simply excluded and even demonised it[9]. At the same time, it pursued a so-called 'appeasement policy' towards Russia, seeking to balance relations between the West and its northern neighbour, even though Russia continued its occupation of Georgian territories. After Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Georgian Dream government refused to join international sanctions against the aggressor, calling it Tbilisi's "pragmatic policy"[10]

As the Russian-Ukrainian war intensified, and confusion grew within Western societies, the Georgian government began pursuing a regime consolidation agenda, marginalising civil society, and further fragmenting the opposition. In 2023, they attempted to adopt the Law on Transparency of Foreign Funding, modelled after a Russian 2012 law, which would have labelled NGOs and independent media outlets receiving foreign funding as 'foreign agents.' This move faced strong public opposition, with tens of thousands of Georgians protesting on Rustaveli Avenue, the main street in Tbilisi, ultimately forcing the ruling party to withdraw the bill.

> **While the Georgian government demonstrated willingness to implement technical reforms to align with EU standards, it remained reluctant to undertake profound structural changes, aiming to strengthen local governance**

In 2024, it reintroduced a more detailed and comprehensive version of the law, manipulated the parliamentary elections, and even announced its intention to halt EU accession negotiations — despite Georgia being granted candidate status in 2023 (even though the country did not fulfil the 12 preconditions, the so called '12 priorities set by the EU'). Since October 2024, protests in Tbilisi and other major cities have been ongoing, demanding new parliamentary

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8   *Constitution of Georgia*, "Constitutional Court of Georgia", 2018 edition, https://www.constcourt.ge/en/court/legislation/constitution-text

9   Transparency International Georgia, *Government's Coordinated Attack on Civil Society Harms Democracy in Georgia,* Transparency International Georgia, 28.10.2022, https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/governments-coordinated-attack-civil-society-harms-democracy-georgia

10 Joshua Kucera, *Georgia says it won't join international sanctions against Russia,* Eurasianet, 25.02.2022, https://eurasianet.org/georgia-says-it-wont-join-international-sanctions-against-russia,

elections and the resumption of EU accession talks. However, the government has intensified its suppressive measures, and as the protests have weakened, introduced new penalties and legislation aimed at curbing dissent and clearing the ground for its agenda, encountering relatively little resistance from the broader public[11].

When Fatigue Meets Manipulation: Public Opinion and Hybrid Influence

To understand the peculiarity of the current stance of Georgian society, it is useful to examine polling data from 2009 to 2023, which reveal how attitudes and perceptions towards the European Union have evolved. As mentioned earlier, the project of Georgian national identity building has long been centred on the idea of Europeanness. Georgians have widely believed that rapprochement with the EU would have a positive impact on the country's democratisation, economic development, institutional strengthening, rule of law, and living standards.

Europe in general, and the EU in particular, were recognised as Georgia's key international partners. Some Georgians even viewed potential EU accession as a means to restore the country's territorial integrity. Even in 2009, when EU–Georgia relations remained within the framework of the Eastern Partnership, and when the EU itself was experiencing enlargement fatigue, 88% of the Georgian population expressed positive or neutral attitudes towards the EU, while only 3% perceived it negatively.[12] Supporters of Georgia's EU membership primarily associated it with economic prosperity, national security, and the restoration of territorial integrity.[13]

> **Georgians have widely believed that rapprochement with the EU would have a positive impact on the country's democratisation, economic development, institutional strengthening, rule of law, and living standards**

However, the trend has slightly changed since the signing of the Association Agreement and DCFTA with the EU in 2014, after which many Georgians expected immediate, tangible improvements in their daily lives, while the EU appeared to be a slow-moving and bureaucratically ineffective partner. Additionally, the EU's limited response to Russia's aggression in Crimea raised doubts about its credibility and its commitment to regional security. This period was also marked by the rise of pro-Russian conservative actors, like the Alliance of the Patriots of Georgia and media channels like TV Obieqtivi and Alt-Info, which were persistently trying to demonise the EU, and to deeply damage its reputation with false narratives – claiming that the EU demanded that Georgians abandon their traditions and Orthodox Christian values, adopt LGBTQ+-supporting legislation, and strongly promote non-traditional lifestyles[14].

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11 See for example, Caucasus Barometer data 2024, which shows that 69% of Georgian Society treats Russia as the number one enemy of Georgia, 2024, https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2024ge/MAINENEM/ and the same year's data show that 70% of the population support Georgia's EU membership, https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2024ge/EUSUPP/

12 *EUPERC, Caucasus Barometer: Survey Data (2009–2023),* https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/eu_ge/EUPERC/

13 *EUHLPIMP, Caucasus Barometer: Survey Data (2009–2023), h*ttps://caucasusbarometer.org/en/eu_ge/EUHLPIMP/

14 Media Development Foundation (MDF), *Anti-Western Propaganda in Georgia,* Media Development Foundation, 2017, https://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/89/file/eng/AntiWest-2017-ENG.pdf

Since 2017, the situation has been gradually changing. The introduction of visa-free travel to the Schengen Area served as a visible symbol of integration, restoring optimism and reinforcing trust in the EU. Cooperation over educational, cultural, and youth programmes expanded, while EU financial assistance (amounting to roughly 938.4 million euro between 2014 and 2020) further deepened engagement. As a result, public support for the EU rebounded, reaching 44% in 2017, and continuing to rise in the following years, signalling that despite the abovementioned temporary fatigue and disinformation efforts, the European orientation remains deeply rooted within Georgian society, but the problems still remain.

Even the 2025 Eurobarometer study shows that only 37% of the population are well or very well informed about the European Union, while others have only general or limited knowledge. Accordingly, they might have false expectations from the EU (e.g. that the EU has the possibility to solve all the socio-economic and security problems Georgia faces), and when these expectations are not met, they can easily become a target for manipulation. This can explain the decline in the view of the EU as a very or fairly positive actor over the last two years, from 54% to 43%.[15]

On the other hand, the informational methods and tools used in the Russian hybrid war have been refined and become increasingly context-tailored in Georgia, resulting in deeper collision and confusion within society. Russian disinformation campaigns have become largely oriented towards ultra-nationalistic narratives, portraying Georgians as exceptional people, who have nothing to learn from their Western partners, whose history and culture are so rich that no other countries/organisations have the right to interfere in their affairs or offer them any advice.

> *Russian disinformation campaigns have become largely oriented towards ultra-nationalistic narratives, portraying Georgians as exceptional people, who have nothing to learn from their Western partners*

Russia is targeting the segment of society which still experiences nostalgia for the Soviet era, due to the false impression of higher standards of living or their better social status in the Soviet past. Russia is continuously seeking to distort perceptions of the Soviet Union. Moreover, it attempts to exaggerate the role and status of Georgians within the ex-USSR, and some groups of Georgian society (mainly people in their mid-fifties and above) believe that they were well-treated under Soviet rule, and therefore think that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a bad thing for the country.[16] These false narratives, coupled with anti-Western messages about the EU, claiming that they are demanding that Georgians abandon their traditions and Orthodox Christian values and embrace an LGBTQ+ lifestyle, have been relatively successful from a propaganda standpoint. However, they have not gained widespread

15 *Annual Surveys 2023 & 2025: Georgia,* "EU Neighbours East", 2023–2025, https://euneighboureast.eu/news/publications/annual-survey-2023-georgia/; https://euneighboureast.eu/news/publications/annual-survey-2025-georgia/

16 Caucasus Barometer, *"USSR Dissolution-by Age Group 2019",* CRRC Georgia, 2019, https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2019ge/USSRDISS-by-AGEGROUP/

support, especially among the younger generations, who remain strongly in favour of Georgia's EU membership[17].

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the hybrid strategy was once again modified, now casting the West as a traitor. Shortly after the beginning of the war, Russian propagandists started promoting the narratives that Ukraine had been 'abandoned by the West' and was fighting alone, that the West and particularly Europeans solely care about their own well-being and would rather sacrifice Ukraine than give up their privileges. There was a hidden message behind this narrative, aimed at war-fatigue in Georgian society: "If the West abandons Ukraine, it will abandon you even more easily in the face of Russian aggression."

Another important line in terms of anti-Western disinformation narratives is accusing the West and Ukraine of attempting to draw Georgia into the war by opening up a 'second front' against Russia. This narrative echoes the position of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), and has been successfully exploited by the GD government, to justify its decision not to join in with the anti-Russian sanctions. According to Sergey Naryshkin, head of the SVR, the West has been pressuring the Georgian government into a military conflict with Russia, in order to relieve pressure on Ukraine and further exhaust the strength of the Russian military[18]. These narratives were further strengthened when the EU did not grant Georgia candidate status along with Ukraine and Moldova in June 2022. The Russian propagandists directly linked this decision to Georgia's refusal to 'open a second front', and portrayed it as a punishment for non-obedience. The overall aim of this narrative was to convince the population of the country that the West wants to drag Georgia into a war.[19]

> **the government officials were repeatedly pushing the 'second front' conspiracy theories in their speeches, to deflect public criticism and shift blame onto the EU for their own failures**

Not only the propagandists, but also the government officials were repeatedly pushing the 'second front' conspiracy theories in their speeches, to deflect public criticism and shift blame onto the EU for their own failures. For example, Prime Minister of Georgia Irakli Garibashvili said on July 29th, 2022 that "...despite many attempts, provocations, and direct calls, our team avoided the biggest danger that could happen to our people and our country, which is war."[20] This was not an isolated incident. The government has repeatedly used this propagandistic message to indirectly discredit the West, and particularly the EU, in the eyes of the Georgian public.

17 Caucasus Barometer. *"EU Membership Support by Age Groups 2024"* CRRC Georgia, 2024 https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2024ge/EUSUPP-by-AGEGROUP/

18 *West tries to persuade Tbilisi to open 'second front' against Russia — intelligence chief,* TASS, 4.04.2023, https://tass.com/society/1599071

19 T. Chikhladze, S. Shiukashvili, *Pro-Russian Disinformation Narratives in Georgia Since Russia's Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine,* "Caucasus Analytical Digest", 2023, https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-94107-8

20 *PM: Despite Provocations, Our Team Avoided Biggest Danger, War,* "Georgia Today," 29.07.2022, https://georgiatoday.ge/pm-despite-provocations-our-team-avoided-biggest-danger-war/

2024 Parliamentary Elections: Emergence of the False Dilemma

"Say No to War, choose Peace" was the main slogan of the GD party during the 2024 Parliamentary elections in Georgia. Even this slogan alone illustrates how masterfully the Georgian Dream manipulated the fear of war, to mobilise the populace into voting for them. It portrayed the country's foreign policy as peace-oriented, and the position of the GD government as the sole guarantor of national security, subtly and covertly pointing out that the process of European integration could lead to open confrontation with Russia, and ultimately result in war. Their main goal was to create a false dilemma, 'Security vs. Eurointegration', which was driven by the unsubstantiated claim that the EU and the West sought to open a second front in Georgia, so as to undermine Russia and force it to divert military resources from Ukraine.

To further deepen fear within the society, which was already targeted by the 'second front' narratives, the GD used controversial banners, later adapted into video clips, following the consistent principle: on one side were the images of war-torn Ukraine, with the crossed out electoral ballot numbers of the four opposition parties which were most likely to enter Parliament – Coalition for Change (4), Unity-UNM (5), Strong Georgia (9), and Gakharia For Georgia (25) – as if they were associated with war, and on the other side were the images of a prosperous Georgia, emphasising that it was at peace under GD rule, with the GD's ballot number (41) highlighted.[21] These visual aids served as a chilling warning, with the hidden message being: "This is what happens when a country follows the West's guidance and opens a front against Russia."

> **" GD has even co-opted the Georgian Orthodox Church, one of the country's most trusted institutions, increasing its state budget allocation to over GEL 60 million in 2024, to promote their pre-election messages**

At the same time, GD was using all other mechanisms at its disposal to mobilise more votes in support of it, like bribing and intimidating voters, especially those who work in the public institutions or receive public assistance from the state (the latest data show that the number of recipients of social assistance in Georgia totals 696,359 people[22], around 19% of the entire population). GD has even co-opted the Georgian Orthodox Church, one of the country's most trusted institutions, increasing its state budget allocation to over GEL 60 million in 2024, to promote their pre-election messages and 'peace and security' narrative. The party was actively using loyal media outlets and social media, including so-called 'troll factories'[23] to deepen social rifts, and influence undecided voters, who were already confused by the contradictory

21 S. Kincha, *Georgian Dream Launches Campaign Ads Using Images of War-Torn Ukraine,* "OC Media", 26.09.2024, https://oc-media.org/georgian-dream-launches-campaign-ads-using-images-of-war-torn-ukraine/

22 "საარჩევნო შემწეობის მიმღებთა რაოდენობა 700 ათასს აღწევს – რამდენი ადამიანი ითხოვს სახელმწიფო დახმარებას?" [*The number of social assistance recipients reaches 700,000 – how many people request state support?*], Resonance Daily, 07.02.2025, https://www.resonancedaily.com/index.php?id_rub=4&id_artc=221685

23 Irakli Jgharkava, *Why It Matters: Georgia's Troll Scandal Explained,* Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, 20.12.2019, https://gfsis.org/en/why-it-matters-georgias-troll-scandal-explained-2/

narratives coming from the ruling party, the opposition, the media, and various social groupings[24].

Georgian Dream has also managed to lower public trust in opposition parties, intentionally aligning each party leader with the previous government, labelling them as 'Natsis' (a term commonly used in Georgia to refer to the representatives of the United National Movement), and stressing the point of how unbearable the nine-year-long governance under Natsi rule had been. On the other side, the opposition remained deeply fragmented, uniting only under the umbrella of four separate coalitions. Although their pre-election messages were mostly identical, mutual distrust and fear of being labelled as a Natsi led each coalition to pursue its own strategy.

> **the EU has not managed to give a coordinated response to the current crisis in Georgia**

To address the 'Security vs. Eurointegration' dilemma, imposed by GD, the opposition parties tried to reframe it as 'The EU vs. Russia', emphasising the social and economic benefits, high standards of democracy and human rights protection associated with the EU, contrasted with the poor standards of living, decadence and authoritarian rule associated with Russia. They deliberately avoided addressing the security aspect of the government-imposed dilemma, to prevent drawing further attention to this false narrative, and sparking deeper discussion on this issue. However, for society, having experienced several devastating internal conflicts and wars within the last 30 years, and still trying to recover from that trauma, there was no viable argument which could counterbalance the appeal of the security argument. Thus, GD managed to cultivate a deep-seated fear, on this fertile ground and, despite becoming oppressive and openly non-democratic, it gradually created a public environment that accepts or at least cohabitates with the authoritarian regime, while maintaining a pretence of following its own European path.

The EU Misses its Opportunity

While the Georgian government took every measure to distort the EU's image and deepen anti-Western sentiment, by introducing legislation to suppress critical voices in civil society and the independent media, imprisoning hundreds of protesters, and building new partnerships with China and the UAE to replace EU investments and also to consolidate control, the EU's responses remained limited and largely belated. Its actions amounted mostly to mere rhetoric, with no substantial measures attached. This passivity was interpreted by the Georgian Dream government as permission to intensify its repression and dismantle what remained of the opposition.

While some EU member states took their own targeted measures, including travel bans and financial restrictions on GD officials, state-backed businessmen, judges, and media-owners, the EU has not managed to give a coordinated response to the current crisis in Georgia. In January 2025, it imposed travel restrictions on the holders of diplomatic passports, but this was just a symbolic act, because these citizens could use their ordinary passports for visa-free travel within the Schengen area.

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24 "სოციალური მედიის მონიტორინგის პირველი შუალედური ანგარიში *(First Interim Report on Social Media Monitoring)*," ISFED, 2024, https://www.isfed.ge/geo/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringi/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringis-pirveli-shualeduri-angarishi-27-agvisto-20-seqtemberi?ref=oc-media.org

The EU failed to impose economic sanctions in July 2025, due to internal contradictions. Brussels's inability to agree on the sanctions have led GD to intensify their anti-EU narratives, and even to blame the EU ambassador for the attempted coup d'état on October 4th, 2025. The absence of meaningful accountability reinforces GD's authority. "Its strategy appears clear: to exhaust the patience of the EU and other Western partners until 'Georgia fatigue' sets in — a situation where street protests fade and Brussels accepts authoritarian consolidation as a fait accompli."[25]

> *Since USAID withdrew, and the government-imposed legislation to limit international funding (even on the individual level), most of these organisations have been barely functional*

Another problem in Georgia is the gradual disappearance of civil society agents. Georgian NGOs, think tanks and independent media outlets were previously largely dependent on international donor funding. Since USAID withdrew, and the government-imposed legislation to limit international funding (even on the individual level), most of these organisations have been barely functional; the major ones are paralysed, due to frozen bank accounts, and regional CSOs are shutting down. Their demand for help remains unanswered by the EU, unable to establish the legal framework to support the civil society.

Currently, the EU is on the brink. If it continues to overlook authoritarian consolidation in Georgia and remains reactive rather than proactive, it risks permanently damaging its reputation as a normative power in the region. 'Letting Georgia go' would signal the failure of the EU's democratisation agenda, and could encourage other authoritarian powers in its neighbourhood.

Policy Recommendations for the EU

Since the crisis in Georgia represents a systemic failure of the EU to reassert itself as a normative power in the region, restore its reputation, halt, or even reverse authoritarian consolidation not only in Georgia, but inside and in the near neighbourhood of the EU, it must develop a well-thought out and structured strategy, which includes the following steps:

- Address its own institutional inertia, and find ways to overcome fragmentation: with the ongoing enlargement and internal diversification, the existing decision-making mechanisms have proven obsolete, resulting in slow and belated responses to the crises in the neighbourhood. To effectively regain its normative power, the EU must become rapid and flexible, and consider reforming or circumventing the unanimity rule. Besides, prioritising this reform could divert the focus from other urgent crises, but in the long run these reforms will serve the EU's empowerment.

- The EU's rhetoric must be replaced by effective, targeted sanctions, capable of delivering tangible results and undermining authoritarian consolidation. These could be related with economic sanctions or suspension of the visa-free regime for government officials, the representatives of propaganda media outlets and state-loyal or -patronised businesses which support political repression and the authoritarian agenda in Georgia.

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25 Chkhikvadze, Vano, *Rowing Nowhere Will Surely Sink Georgian Democracy.* GEOpolitics, Issue №23, October 2025, https://politicsgeo.com/rowing-nowhere-will-surely-sink-georgian-democracy/

> **The EU's rhetoric must be replaced by effective, targeted sanctions, capable of delivering tangible results and undermining authoritarian consolidation**

- Empower Civil Society: since the civil society is the backbone of its support in the country, the EU has to act flexibly and develop context-tailored strategies, to restore funding to the Georgian CSOs and the independent media. Delaying action risks leaving the sector without representation, weakening, or even undermining the EU's democratisation agenda in Georgia. On the other hand, circumventing Georgian legislation to restore funding would be seized upon as evidence of foreign interference by the government, but still the diplomatic risk that this carries is minimal. The ruling party has already exhausted its range of anti-EU rhetoric, repeatedly and repetitively portraying the EU as an actor attempting to interfere in Georgia's domestic policy. As a result, the marginal diplomatic cost is negligible, since there is little left that could further deteriorate the EU's relationship with the current government.

- Improve strategic communication and address the problem of information asymmetry: the knowledge gap about the EU, its institutions, its scope, and capacity may further fuel anti-EU narratives and manipulate Georgian society. The EU must also highlight its already supported and financed projects in Georgia, to increase public awareness of the potential losses associated with abandoning the path to European integration.

- Promote educational and exchange programmes: Education remains one of the few areas where the EU can continue working without direct confrontation with the Georgian Government. The EU should leverage this soft power tool, to enable more of the Georgian youth to experience the EU, understand its core values, and explore the idea of European identity. Thus, the EU can cultivate another backbone of influence within Georgian society.

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THE TRAITS, PITFALLS AND LIMITS OF AUTOCRACY IN MYANMAR

Dr Olga Rusova

Why do autocratic regimes appear so resilient, sometimes even expanding their influence, and yet remain so brittle when confronted with internal or external shocks? What explains their rise and where are the limits of their power? These questions will be addressed, using the experience of Myanmar, where recent developments provide a striking case of the seeming durability and deep vulnerabilities of authoritarian governance. It will be shown how a military junta maintains power by means of violence and public control, however being weakened by economic collapse, social resistance, and a persistent crisis of legitimacy.

The Global Context of Autocratic Resurgence

The most recently completed decade will be remembered as one of the most controversial and paradoxical in human history. Liberal democracy, once seen as the dominant ideology that was supposed to mark the "end of history,"[1] failed to prove its efficacy, gradually crumbling under the global surge of authoritarian rule.[2]

Regimes in Moscow, Pyongyang, and beyond sought to strengthen their cooperation in the face of what they describe as 'Western domination'. This dynamic was particularly visible at the latest Shanghai Cooperation Organisation summit (31 August – 01 September, 2025, in Tianjin, China), where China, Russia, India (classified as an 'electoral autocracy' according to V-Dem Institute), Central and South East Asian states –

Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Indonesia, and Malaysia (the last two described as having weak civil-liberties scores even while being 'flawed democracies') reaffirmed their shared interests.

> **"** *Regimes in Moscow, Pyongyang, and beyond sought to strengthen their cooperation in the face of what they describe as 'Western domination'*

Authoritarian regimes, despite their assertive rhetoric, are far from being invincible. Their consolidation is often less a sign of strength than of fragility, an attempt to safeguard themselves against both internal dissent and external pressure. Economic downturns, mass

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1   F. Fukuyama, *The End of History?,* "The National Interest" (essay), 1989, p.3.

2   Y. Gorokhovskaia, C. Grothe, *Freedom in the World 2025. The Uphill Battle to Safeguard Rights,* Freedom House, *February* 2025, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/FITW_World2025digitalN.pdf, and V-Dem Institute, *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?,* University of Gothenburg, March 2025, https://www.v-dem.net/documents/60/V-dem-dr__2025_lowres.pdf

uprisings, and natural disasters frequently expose the structural weaknesses that lie beneath the surface of autocratic stability. Above all, the overriding imperative for such regimes remains the survival of their ruling elites.[3]

Myanmar's Descent into Military Rule

Since the military coup of the 1st February 2021, Myanmar has been plunged into turmoil: mass protests, brutal crackdowns, civil war, and economic collapse. Despite its military superiority and outward control, the junta has never secured unquestioned authority. Reliance on repression, and failure to respond to humanitarian crises, make its rule unstable, trapping the country in a cycle of revolution and counter-revolution. The current rebellion is also diverse, including the Three Brotherhood Alliance – a coalition of armed ethnic groups (the Arakan Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army), which launched a major offensive in 2023, together with long-standing forces such as the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), and the Karenni National Progressive Party. This fragmentation hinders a unified response to the junta's violence, and shifts the dynamics of the civil war.

Myanmar's lack of unity is historical. Profound ethnic, religious, and regional divisions have shaped its statehood. The Bamar majority dominates politically and culturally, while minorities such as the Shan, Karen, Kachin, Mon, Chin, and Rakhine maintain distinct identities, languages, and traditions, often leading to tension. British colonial rule deepened these divides, by governing the central lowland and frontier regions separately, fostering mistrust. After independence was gained in 1948, unfulfilled promises of federal autonomy triggered the armed insurgencies that continue today. The failure to build an inclusive national identity fuelled cycles of authoritarianism, as successive military regimes claimed sole authority, to preserve territorial integrity.

> **Myanmar's lack of unity is historical. Profound ethnic, religious, and regional divisions have shaped its statehood**

Religious differences, especially between the Buddhist majority and Christian and Muslim minorities further fragment society. Marginalisation and the persecution of groups like the Rohingya underscore contested questions of belonging and citizenship. The absence of a shared national compact has repeatedly undermined democratisation, federalism, and peace-building.

The military regimes that controlled Myanmar from 1962 to 2011 established a highly centralised system. As one of the justifications given for military rule was the need to prevent the breakup of Myanmar, so federalism (as a possible step towards secession) was viewed with suspicion. With the political transition initiated in 2010, federalism ceased to be a taboo subject, but power nonetheless remained centralised under the 2008

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3   B. Bueno de Mesquita, A. Smith, R.M. Siverson, J. D. Morrow, *The Logic of Political Survival,* Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology 2003, p. 40.

Constitution.[4] The next decade of limited democratic reforms 2011-2021 (the release of political prisoners, an easing of censorship, the legalization of trade unions, initial ceasefires with armed ethnic groups, etc.) was rather precarious. After nearly fifty years of direct military rule, the generals had reluctantly opened up a political space that allowed opposition figures like Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) to participate in elections. The 2015 victory of the NLD was historic, raising hopes that Myanmar could finally transition towards democracy. But the military, known locally as the Tatmadaw, never fully relinquished control. The 2008 Constitution, drafted under military supervision, guaranteed the army 25% of parliamentary seats, along with control over key ministries such as those of defence, border, and home affairs. This arrangement meant that even during the years of relative openness, the military maintained the ultimate veto.

> **The junta retained formal control over the state apparatus, yet its authority failed to extend nationwide**

By 2020, the NLD's second landslide victory threatened the military's entrenched power. For Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing, facing imminent retirement and possible accountability for human rights abuses, the 2021 coup was as much as anything a means of survival and an assertion of dominance. It triggered mass nationwide protests. Civil servants launched a Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), paralysing the bureaucracy, while ethnic minority groups intensified their armed struggles. The junta responded with arrests, torture, and executions, prompting the UN to describe their actions as crimes against humanity. Unlike in previous decades, this wave of violence did not succeed in pacifying the population. The opposition reorganised, forming the National Unity Government (NUG) in exile, which sought recognition as the legitimate representative of the Myanmar people.

International isolation followed swiftly. The Western governments imposed sanctions, froze assets, and cut off development assistance. However, Myanmar did not collapse entirely, as it managed to retain relationships with other autocracies. China, while cautious, maintained economic ties and influence along the border. Russia stepped in as a major arms supplier. The country's ASEAN neighbours were divided between condemnation and 'non-interference.' Limited external support allowed the junta to survive but not thrive: neither Beijing nor Moscow sought to stabilise Myanmar, treating it as a partner of convenience, while avoiding broader international isolation for themselves (especially in case of Russia, after the launch of the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022).

An Entrenched but Brittle Regime

By early 2024, the situation in Myanmar had settled into a grim stalemate. The junta retained formal control over the state apparatus, yet its authority failed to extend nationwide. In areas held by the resistance forces, parallel administrations emerged. The economy contracted sharply, millions were displaced, and the incidence of poverty soared.

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4   Htet Min Lwin, *Federalism at the Forefront of Myanmar's Revolution*, "Kyoto Review of Southeast Asia", no. 31, September 2021, https://kyotoreview.org/ issue-31/federalism-at-the-forefront-of-myanmars-revolution/

For the generals, ruling Myanmar became a balancing act: to use enough force to retain control, but avoid a collapse that could open the door to a total defeat. In this sense, Myanmar epitomised the paradox of autocracy: the ability to seize and maintain authority, but the inability to govern effectively or respond to deeper societal needs. Geddes provides a finding: that the military regime is the most unstable and fragile authoritarian regime type[5], and a couple of follow-up studies confirm her argument – military regimes have a shorter lifespan than other forms of autocratic rule and are likely to democratise.[6] Why, then, has Myanmar's military endured so long? The answer lies in a complex interplay of factors, shaping every dimension of public life.

> **The core of the junta's authority lies in its monopoly on organised violence**

At first glance, the regime appears immovable. It controls the capital city, Naypyidaw, the key institutions, and an army that has dominated politics since independence. It commands resources, regulates borders, and has decades of experience of suppressing dissent. The military is self-contained and self-reliant, and has developed a long-standing organisational culture that advances "an abiding sense of the wrongs perpetrated against Burma" and "the myth of an almost superhuman dedication necessary to preserve the nation against over-whelming odds".[7] Despite this apparent strength, the bottom line is sometimes more about the ability to build a certain image than to fit the reality on the ground.

1. Monopoly on Violence

The core of the junta's authority lies in its monopoly on organised violence. The Tatmadaw is one of Southeast Asia's largest standing armies, with an estimated 300,000 active personnel.[8] It controls heavy weaponry, air power, and access to foreign arms supplies — particularly from Russia, Belarus, and China. Unlike the fragmented resistance movement, the military operates under a strict hierarchy, with orders emanating from Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing. For now, loyalty within the officer corps has largely held, giving the junta a centralised capacity to direct nationwide campaigns.

Airpower has been decisive. It includes 26 MiG-29s, 18 Yak-130s, and Mi-24 and Mi-17 helicopters from Russia. It also operates FTC-2000G fighters, K-8W trainers, and Y-8 transport aircraft from China. The Myanmar Air Force officially inducted the first two (Russian) Su-30SMEs into service in December 2022, followed by the second pair in December 2023, and the final two

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5   B. Geddes, *Paradigms and sand castles: theory building and research design in comparative politics,* The University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor 2003, p. 32.

6   B. Geddes, J. Wright, E. Frantz, *Autocratic Breakdown and Regime Transitions: A New Data Set,* "Perspectives on Politics", no. 12(2), June 2014, p. 326.

7   T. Lee, *Assessing the Myanmar Junta's Grip on Power,* "Institute of Defense and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU", 15.02.2024, https://rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/idss/ip24018-assessing-the-myanmar-juntas-grip-on-power/

8   A. Selth, *Myanmar's military numbers,* "Lowy Institute", 17.02.2022, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/myanmar-s-military-numbers

were commissioned in December 2024.[9] With this aerial strength, and with the use of drones, the army bombs resistance strongholds, and civilian areas, retaining control of urban centres and key economic corridors.

2. Instruments of Repression

Beyond military might, the junta has perfected a system of repression to suffocate dissent. Security forces have carried out mass arrests of activists, journalists, teachers, and anyone suspected of supporting the resistance. Torture, enforced disappearances, and summary executions have become routine.

Censorship is all-pervasive. Independent media outlets have been shut down or forced into exile. By the end of 2024, Myanmar had the third-highest number of imprisoned journalists in the world, after China and Israel.[10] Foreign broadcasters serving audiences in Myanmar include the BBC, Voice of America, and US-backed Radio Free Asia.[11] The state television channel, and newspapers (like Global New Light of Myanmar) broadcast propaganda that portrays the military as the guardian of national unity. Internet blackouts and surveillance restrict communication among dissidents. Fear also remains a powerful weapon. Even when people no longer believe in the junta's legitimacy, they may be too frightened to voice opposition openly. This climate of intimidation provides the regime with a semblance of stability.

3. Control of Economic Lifelines

Autocratic regimes often survive not by delivering prosperity but by monopolising resources. Myanmar's junta has followed this pattern. It controls access to lucrative sectors such as natural gas, jade, timber, and rare earth minerals. Revenues from these industries, though diminished by sanctions, provide a financial lifeline.

> **Independent media outlets have been shut down or forced into exile**

Smuggling and illicit trade also sustain the regime. Cross-border networks with China and Thailand allow the military to bypass international sanctions. These networks benefit not only the junta, but also the local elites and business partners who profit from the shadow economy, creating a vested interest in the regime's survival.

Additionally, the Tatmadaw has long maintained its own sprawling conglomerates, such as Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL) and Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC). Since the conflict curtails business activity, and disrupts trade, the economic interests of Myanmar's elite have suffered, mostly hit by the imposed sanctions. But at the same time these enterprises grant the military direct

9 *Russia completes delivery of six Su-30SME fighters to Myanmar for counter-insurgency operations,* "Global Defense News", 6.01.2025, https://www. armyrecognition.com/news/aerospace-news/2025/russia-completes-delivery-of-six-su-30sme-fighters-to-myanmar-for-counter-insurgency-operations

10 A. Getz, *In record year, China, Israel, and Myanmar are world's leading jailers of journalists,* "Committee to Protect Journalists", 16.01.2025, https://cpj.org/special-reports/in-record-year-china-israel-and-myanmar-are-worlds-leading-jailers-of-journalists/

11 *Myanmar media guide,* "BBC News Asia", 19.05.2023, https://www.bbc.com/ news/world-asia-pacific-12991727

access to revenues and patronage networks, insulating it from economic collapse in ways that civilian governments cannot replicate.

4. Experiencing Financial Hardships and Humanitarian Crises

If the military might be the regime's strongest card, the economy is its weakest one. Since the coup, Myanmar's economy has contracted sharply. Foreign investment has fled, trade has been disrupted, and sanctions have cut the junta off from international finance. The local currency, the kyat, has lost significant value, triggering inflation that hits ordinary citizens. Fuel shortages are common, and power blackouts affect major cities. Food insecurity has worsened, with millions pushed into poverty.

Besides, the reliance on illicit trade: jade smuggling, narcotics, scam centres (online transnational fraud operations, linked to criminal activities) and cross-border contraband – keeps the generals afloat but corrodes state institutions. For ordinary citizens, economic misery translates into anger at the regime, eliminating whatever passive acceptance might once have existed.

Myanmar's trade initially rebounded in 2022, thanks to all-time high exports. However, this bounce was short-lived, and trade fell again in 2023. Exports declined by about USD 4 billion, and imports by about USD 1 billion. This was partly due to heightened conflict, including trade-related disruptions caused by the ongoing Operation 1027 rebel offensive, and global trends.[12] The World Bank's Myanmar Economic Monitor (MEM) projects a 2.5 % contraction in GDP in the fiscal year 2025/26.[13] But the Senior General Min Aung Hlaing has dismissed the World Bank's forecast, speaking at an economic coordination meeting held at the SAC (State Administration Council) office in Naypyidaw on the 2nd of July, 2025. He insisted that the international institution's calculations did not reflect the country's true potential, emphasising the fact that economic improvement is possible through collective effort. Also addressing recent reports of rising poverty levels, the general pinpointed two main causes: business failures and the impact of natural disasters.[14]

> **If the military might be the regime's strongest card, the economy is its weakest one**

The latter phenomenon carries particular importance in the case of Myanmar, which faced a powerful earthquake in March 2025, as a litmus test for whether the military could fulfil the most basic function – safeguarding its citizens. Autocracies are often judged by their ability to manage crises. While democracies derive legitimacy from elections and accountability, authoritarian regimes rely on performance – the promise of stability, order, and protection. For Myanmar's junta, the earthquake was precisely such a test of competence, and the generals failed it.

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12 J. Bissinger, *Challenges and Priorities for Myanmar's Conflicted Economy,* "Fulcrum: Analysis on Southeast Asia", 11.03.2025, https://fulcrum.sg/ challenges-and-priorities-for-myanmars-conflicted-economy/

13 Press release, *Earthquake compounds Myanmar's economic challenges,* "World Bank Group", 12.06.2025, https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/ 2025/06/12/earthquake-compounds-myanmar-s-economic-challenges

14 *Min Aung Hlaing rejects World Bank's economic forecast for Myanmar,* "The Nation Thailand, 05.07.2025, https://www.nationthailand.com/blogs/news/ asean/40052159

This humanitarian catastrophe came as a further layer atop an existing political crisis. Instead of mobilising relief swiftly and transparently, the junta militarised aid distribution, while soldiers were dispatched not only to deliver supplies but also to monitor gatherings, and to suppress dissent. The generals feared that international organisations might empower the opposition, or expose the scale of devastation, so they limited access to the hardest-hit regions. Meanwhile, the Three Brotherhood Alliance declared a unilateral pause in hostilities. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing stated that he would persist in attacking groups that had declared a ceasefire, despite their efforts to facilitate relief in earthquake-affected areas.[15] But being aware of the real situation on the ground, the SAC finally announced a temporary ceasefire from 2nd April to 22nd April 2025, which was then repeatedly violated.

> **Instead of mobilising relief swiftly and transparently, the junta militarised aid distribution, while soldiers were dispatched not only to deliver supplies but also to monitor gatherings, and to suppress dissent**

Under the pretext of coordinating reconstruction efforts, the military junta accelerated its offensives, yet no decisive gains followed. But what the earthquake did alter was the military's capability. Damage to ammunitions factories and supply chains pushed the junta towards a heavier reliance on airpower. So, as for the moment, the conflict in Myanmar ranks third globally for the number of drone events recorded by ACLED, only behind Ukraine and Russia.[16]

Legitimacy Lost, Recognition Sought

Perhaps the most fundamental weakness of the junta is its utter lack of legitimacy. Unlike other authoritarian governments that cloak themselves in ideology, populism, or economic development, Myanmar's military has almost nothing to offer in exchange.

The 2020 general election, widely judged to be free and fair, gave the NLD a clear mandate. By overturning that result, the generals destroyed the existing social contract. Former supporters started to view them as usurpers. So, even the symbolic public trust should have been returned in kind if the military regime wanted to hold onto power. For this reason, the Myanmar leadership has started to plan another general election, which has been repeatedly delayed due to the struggle against the growing insurgency that controls much of the country. This renewed push comes amid a boost in the morality of the military, slight battlefield gains, and support from the regime's autocratic partners, mostly from Beijing, Moscow, and Minsk.

At ASEAN's Six-Country Informal Consultation on Myanmar (19th December 2024, Bangkok), Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Than Swe outlined the junta's 2025 election roadmap. Opposition forces, including the ethnic armies and the NUG, rejected it as illegitimate. China, however, has pressured its Southeast Asian neighbours to accept the junta's election as a

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15 *Myanmar's military leader states that he will continue attacking groups despite their ceasefire declaration,* "Mizzima: News from Myanmar", 04.04.2024, https://eng.mizzima.com/2025/04/04/20995

16 Su Mon, *The war from the sky: How drone warfare is shaping the conflict in Myanmar,* "ACLED Report", 01.07.2025, https://acleddata.com/report/war-sky-how-drone-warfare-shaping-conflict-myanmar

quick solution[17] and a tool to 'legitimise' it on the regional scale, as well as to avoid any further international blockade and sanctions. Beijing's endorsement of the junta's plan reflects its broader strategic calculus: stabilising Myanmar under military control secures China's economic corridors, shields its border provinces from prolonged conflict, and ensures a compliant partner in the region. On the other hand, for ASEAN states already fatigued by the protracted crisis, the embracing of an election designed by the junta risks normalising impunity and weakening their own commitments to democratic principles. It also signals that powerful actors can dictate the terms of regional crisis management, side-lining both the Myanmar people and the broader international efforts to restore legitimate governance.

> **Internationally, the generals aim to create diplomatic ambiguity: supplying enough procedural mimicry to allow certain states to justify re-engagement, by creating a favourable legal ground**

The junta formally ended the state of emergency on 31st July 2025, triggering a constitutional requirement to hold elections within six months, now scheduled for 28th December 2025. New laws now criminalise 'undermining the election,' allowing harsh punishments for speech, protest, or publications deemed disruptive. The Union Election Commission is fully controlled by the military; civilian oversight has been dismantled.[18] The census remains incomplete, opposition parties are banned, and their leaders imprisoned. Under such conditions, elections risk deepening the conflict rather than resolving it. Many citizens will likely boycott or be unable to vote, and international recognition will be uneven. Nevertheless, the junta aims to transform de facto rule into de jure acceptance. Even if pro-military parties prevail, governance challenges like civil war, humanitarian crises, and economic collapse will persist.

It is clear that the generals seek to 'return to the official status' more than to genuinely re-establish democratic governance. While on paper there is a framework for legitimate elections, they have become a tool of the counterinsurgency: governance by registration, mapping, and coercive order. Internationally, the generals aim to create diplomatic ambiguity: supplying enough procedural mimicry to allow certain states to justify re-engagement, by creating a favourable legal ground. In short, the junta's planned elections represent not a transition from dictatorship, but a recalibration within it: an effort to cloak intimidation in the language of consent.

From Nobel Peace Prize to International Court of Justice

Myanmar's political trajectory from the long-awaited democratic transition to renewed military dictatorship is one of the most striking reversals in recent history. Once hailed as a success story of peaceful democratisation, symbolised by Aung San Suu Kyi's *1991 Nobel Peace Prize* – the country's gradual erosion of democratic norms culminated in the *2021 coup d'état*, returning power to the generals, and abolishing a decade of progress.

17 Nyein Chan Aye, *China-backed election raises fears of 'negative peace' in Myanmar,* "Voice of America", 01.01.2025, https://www.voanews.com/a/china-backed-election-raises-fears-of-negative-peace-in-myanmar/7921313.html

18 Myo Pyae, *How the Myanmar Junta's Election Laws Are Stifling Dissent Ahead of Polls,* "Irrawaddy", 08.10.2025, https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/politics/how-the-myanmar-juntas-election-laws-are-stifling-dissent-ahead-of-polls.html

This decline was not sudden. It reflected a deeper degradation of institutional checks, moral credibility, and civilian control, in which both domestic compromises and international complacency played crucial roles. The symbolic distance between Myanmar's Nobel moment and its appearance before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for alleged genocide encapsulates the collapse of the very ideals that once defined its democratic experiment. Although inside Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi remains a deeply respected figure for many pro-democracy supporters – once revered, but later discredited, and now again persecuted – she embodies the cyclical tragedy of Myanmar's politics.

> **Western governments, captivated by the image of reconciliation, mistook form for substance**

The transition in the 2010s, often praised as a triumph of dialogue over dictatorship, was structurally flawed, and in fact turned out to be a colossus on legs of clay. Civil-military relations were never institutionalised; they rested on the balance in personal terms between Suu Kyi's prestige and the army's entrenched use of force. Thus, the transition created a hybrid regime, not a democracy, dependent on the goodwill of the military and the moral capital of its civilian leadership. So, when the National League for Democracy defended the military's operations at the ICJ, Myanmar's democratic project lost its principled foundation. This episode normalised exclusion, militarised nationalism, and discredited the country internationally. In such a way, the similar mechanisms that justified repression in Rakhine later enabled the junta in 2021 – as a continuum of impunity rather than a rupture with the past.

Western governments, captivated by the image of reconciliation, mistook form for substance. Sanctions were lifted, investments flowed in, and diplomatic recognition grew, even as democratic backsliding accelerated. International actors equated elections with democracy, and moral leadership with institutional strength. In doing so, they failed to anticipate how easily the military could reclaim control once civilian legitimacy faltered. When the military seized power in 2021, it merely confirmed the fact that the framework built around one leader and one army proved inherently unsustainable. On the contrary, these are the key features of totalitarian rule.

Myanmar's case is a stark warning for fragile democracies worldwide that symbolic legitimacy, however luminous, cannot substitute for the strong architecture of democratic resilience. As for the prestige of the Nobel Prize, it does not vary depending on whether its holder comes from a democratic or an autocratic state; what matters is the substance of their contribution, not the political system they represent. The most important factor is that the award cannot become the embodiment of populist, self-promotional politics, seeking validation through global recognition.

Myanmar as a Case Study of the Limits of Autocracy

For the democratic world, Myanmar underscores two key lessons. *First*, authoritarian fortitude should not be taken for stability; and *secondly*, an adopted long-term approach that prioritises supporting civil society, local governance, and economic sanctions against Myanmar, has achieved mixed results. In policy terms, Myanmar showcases the fact that sustained international pressure, combined with targeted humanitarian aid, can help to create the conditions for eventual political transition. But the situation in Myanmar

was addressed by almost ignoring the global context of this perplexing issue. The junta's reliance on external actors – such as China and Russia for military assistance, nuclear cooperation (for instance, in 2023 Myanmar's junta established a 'Nuclear Technology and Information Centre' in collaboration with Russian Rosatom State Corp. in Yangon; in 2025 Russia and Myanmar signed an intergovernmental agreement to build a small modular reactor on Myanmar territory), and financial support – increased as Western countries withdrew from the Burmese market, and the opposition successfully launched Operation 1027 in 2023.

> **The isolation of Myanmar's generals only deepened their dependence on fellow autocracies, which were pursuing their own regional interests**

The isolation of Myanmar's generals only deepened their dependence on fellow autocracies, which were pursuing their own regional interests. At the same time, the new geopolitical reality is one where fake elections, the illegal occupation of territories and severe violations of basic human rights have become a sort of 'normality', while the democracies have been stepping back to avoid further escalation. That only appeases the aggressors and demonstrates to potential ones where the new 'red lines' are drawn.

The struggle between democracy and autocracy, fuelled by hybrid warfare, is now even more perilous than it was during the Cold War. The struggle against the junta in

Myanmar in particular should pursue both internal and external goals. Firstly, it must come about not only through immediate pressure, but sustained engagement with civil society, the independent media, and diaspora networks. Secondly, the coherence of policy tools matters. Fragmented or inconsistent sanctions risk enabling authoritarian adaptation, while well-coordinated international measures that target the military's revenue streams can constrain the regime's capacity to sustain repression.

Thirdly, value-based diplomacy remains crucial. Democracies must resist the temptation of pragmatic normalisation with illegitimate regimes under the guise of 'stability', which in the long run only legitimises violence and undermines democratic credibility globally. As for Myanmar and its closest partners, the West must focus on the joint efforts to degrade the coalition's ability to project authoritative power and subvert rules-based order, as well as to shrink its political and economic space. This is a contest of capabilities, legitimacy, and influence, not merely of arms. So, the application of sanctions to all SAC-controlled entities, including banks, and blocking its access to billions of dollars of the State of Myanmar's foreign exchange reserves, can be as efficient as banning the direct and indirect supply, sale, transfer (including transit and transhipment), provision of insurance and reinsurance, and brokering of aviation fuel to Myanmar.[19]

Thus, a reassessment of the international strategy towards Myanmar is required; otherwise the continuing conflict and cross-border humanitarian spill-overs will be constantly challenging the sustainability of the whole region of South East Asia. In

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19 Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar, *Banking on the Death Trade: How Banks and Governments Enable the Military Junta in Myanmar,* "Human Rights Council", the 56th session, 18 June – 12 July 2025, https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/banking-death-trade-how-banks-and-governments-enable-military-junta-myanmar-special-rapporteur-situation-human-rights-myanmar-ahrc56crp7

theoretical terms, Myanmar exemplifies the dual nature of authoritarianism: its deceptive steadiness masks deep structural vulnerability that becomes visible only when international and domestic pressures converge. The case highlights the fact that the fragmented or reactive policies of democratic actors tend to reinforce, rather than compromise authoritarian resilience. A more integrated and context-sensitive approach, which combines economic, informational, and institutional instruments, is necessary not only for the restoration of Myanmar's prospects for democratic transition, but also for opening broader debates on how the international community can effectively respond to authoritarian consolidation in the 21st century.

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WHY DEMOCRACIES MUST LEARN FROM AUTOCRACIES TO WIN

Maryna Karlevits
Advisor to a Member of Parliament

The real danger for democracies today is not based on autocracies becoming stronger, but from their reactive posture, slow consensus-building, and failure to communicate clearly and timely with their citizens. Autocracies exploit these weaknesses by shaping narratives and spreading their influence, creating an appearance of greater strength and unity. Yet the core issue is not that autocratic regimes are inherently more powerful or superior, but that democracies often underestimate their adversaries' resolve, misinterpret their intentions, and fail to fully leverage their own strengths to counter them effectively. This article examines the tools available, necessary reforms, policy shifts, and mindset changes Europe must adopt to confront these challenges.

Crisis of Democracy?

As Sir Winston Churchill once said in an address to the House of Commons in 1947, "No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."[1] Today it is almost impossible to imagine any average democratic state without regular elections at all levels, freedom of speech, freedom of movement, or any of the core features of a modern democratic state. Yet the more developed democracies become, the more easily they tend to take democracy for granted, and forget the origins of the democracy they are enjoying today. A democracy is built on a solid foundation of rights and institutions. But no matter how solid the foundation is, at some point it needs renovation, upkeep, and renewal.

Is democracy in crisis? Yes, but not because the system is inherently flawed. For decades, conferences, think tanks and academia have been warning about a 'democratic backsliding,'[2] 'rise of authoritarianism' or 'democracy's decline,'[3] yet no-one has not come any closer to implementing any of the suggested ideas. The diversity of ideas and beliefs is, obviously, one of the main benefits of democracy, but without the ability to act decisively, this portrays democracy as too cautious, consensus-driven, and constrained by electoral cycles that reward short-term promises over long-term strategy.

1   Churchill, W. (1947, November 11). *Commons Debate on Parliament Bill*, vol. 444, cc. 206–207. Hansard, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1947/nov/11/parliament-bill

2   Gilliard, A., Democracy in the shadow of the global rise in authoritarian populism. Carr-Ryan Commentary. Harvard Kennedy School. 6.02.2025, https://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/carr-ryan/our-work/carr-ryan-commentary/democracy-shadow-global-rise-authoritarian-populism

3   Brands, H., *Global democracy is failing and Trump may kill it.* Bloomberg Opinion. 28.09.2025, https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/features/2025-09-28/global-democracy-is-failing-and-trump-may-kill-it

Democracy is often framed as primarily a values-based system – grounded in freedom, human rights, and the rule of law.[4] However, it is frequently overlooked that these values emerged as consequences of deeper, more fundamental needs: security, stability, and a predictable international environment.

> « **Is democracy in crisis?**
> **Yes, but not because the**
> **system is inherently flawed**

But democracy is not a moral-based, but a power-based project, and there are many examples of this in history. In the aftermath of World War II, the United States provided a large amount of support for Europe through the Marshall Plan, not purely out of a desire to spread democracy, or solely to aid European reconstruction, but with the strategic aim of securing a stable bloc capable of resisting Soviet expansionism. Similarly, in the post 9/11 era, although the promotion of democracy was used as a justification for US involvement in the Middle East, the primary focus was on counterterrorism, and maintaining regional stability, to prevent threats to US security.

Earlier examples can be found in times of decolonisation, and the British Empire's transition into the Commonwealth, where the building of institutions, and using democratic mechanisms were essential for establishing secure and stable post-colonial governments, aligned with overall Commonwealth interests. Finally, the whole European Union project is founded on the desire to be surrounded by predictable and reliable partners, rather than constant rivals. Democratic tools, such as strong institutions, and freedom of goods, services, people, and capital, form the core foundations of the EU today, serving both normative and pragmatic goals.

But why are the autocracies on the rise? According to the 2024 V-Dem report, the global trend towards increased authoritarianism is deeply concerning.[5] While the specific causes vary, at its core this shift stems from fundamental human needs for stability and security. Many democracies today struggle with economic challenges and widespread frustration over their governments' inability to effectively address pressing issues such as migration, corruption, and institutional instability. In contrast, autocratic regimes often present quick and simple solutions to these complex problems, which can appear highly appealing to populations seeking immediate relief. They amplify this appeal through emotionally charged, easy-to-digest messaging, widespread propaganda, and disinformation campaigns — all designed to undermine democratic values and erode the legitimacy of democratic institutions.[6]

4   Kajsa Ollongren, *Keynote speech at Brussels International Democracy Day Conference*, European External Action Service, 18.09.2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/key-note-speech-brussels-international-democracy-day-conference_en; *Remarks by President Biden on democracy and freedom — Normandy, France,* The White House, 7.06.2024, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2024/06/07/remarks-by-president-biden-on-democracy-and-freedom-normandy-france/; Heilbrunn, J., *Merkel makes first major speech as Germany's chancellor*. The New York Times, 30.11.2005, https://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/30/international/europe/merkel-makes-first-major-speech-as-germanys-chancellor.html

5   Nord, M., Altman, D., Angiolillo, F., Fernandes, T., Good God, A., & Lindberg, S. I., *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?* V-Dem Institute, 2025, https://www.v-dem.net/documents/54/v-dem_dr_2025_lowres_v1.pdf

6   *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America,* The White House, p. 14, 18.12.2017, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf

To overcome the current crisis, democracies must learn from autocracies' effective powers of communication by clearly linking core democratic values — such as freedom, transparency, and accountability — to tangible benefits people experience on a daily basis. For instance, freedom means personal autonomy and the ability to express dissent without fear of imprisonment, unlike in Belarus or other autocratic states, where people are imprisoned just for speaking up. Transparency translates into a better infrastructure, government accountability, and real opportunities to change leadership when citizens are dissatisfied. By connecting these values to people's concrete well-being — security from arbitrary power, reliable services, and meaningful participation — democracies can counter the simplistic, emotionally charged messages autocracies use to offer 'quick fixes', and thus can regain public trust.

> **To overcome the current crisis, democracies must learn from autocracies' effective powers of communication by clearly linking core democratic values**

Democracies should embrace creativity and use out-of-the-box thinking when it comes to shaping narratives and reaching out to their audiences. Very few are interested in official statements or reactions to any event within two days: people expect to have clear and quick reactions. They also expect the government to speak their language and in simple terms, which is the consequence of the social media predilection for doomscrolling which also leads to a short-term attention span. A good example of effective communication is the current White House strategy, which breaks the mould of conventional official messaging. While its contents may provoke mixed reactions, it achieves a crucial goal: that of engaging a broad and diverse audience, sparking conversation, and ensuring the message is noticed and shared.[7]

Reaching the audience means going where they are already to be found. Today's youth, for instance, spend significant amounts of time on platforms like TikTok, X, Threads, and Instagram. Democracies must adopt these channels actively, producing contents tailored to their unique formats and cultures. Simply criticising or dismissing these platforms as useless cedes the ground to adversaries who exploit them without restraint.

Information as a Tool of Warfare

We are living in times when those who control the narratives also influence policies and people. Media and social media platforms now control people's views and moods, they are able to influence what people think and how they vote. Shaping narratives is one of the most important aspects of today's politics. It seems like it is also one of the factors most underestimated by democratic states, and in this environment, autocratic regimes have thrived.

Social media today appeals strongly to emotions and makes it easier to manipulate public opinion, spread misinformation, and deepen divisions. There are many examples in recent history of how social media has largely influenced public opinion and affected policies and decisions. Take the

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7   Disclaimer: It is important to state that the author of the article discusses here not the contents of any social media posts or videos, but the communication strategy as a whole, the use of viral trends and popular news and events to deliver the message to their audience.

case of rail sabotage in Poland in November 2025: soon after the incident, several media voices amplified the narrative, claiming that "42% of analysed online comments blamed Ukrainians for sabotage"[8], thereby fuelling anti-Ukrainian sentiments in Poland. Later analysis showed why this claim is likely inaccurate: it did not account for bot activity, did not follow any methodical survey, and, in fact, there was no survey at all.[9] However, in today's fast-paced information environment, people are more likely to remember the simple, emotional accusation than the carefully checked and nuanced facts.

> **Democracies invest heavily in media literacy workshops, fact-checking, and 'information hygiene.' These efforts matter, but remain largely reactive**

Similarly, Russian troll farms influenced the Brexit vote by spreading misinformation and hate speech towards religious minorities, migrants, and in general about all the supposedly negative aspects of EU membership for the UK.[10] In 2025, Russia also tried to influence elections in Moldova, by spreading propaganda and intimidating voters with the possibility of war if they voted for the pro-European president and party.[11] In Georgia, unable to achieve full military conquest, Moscow shifted focus to

politically destabilising the country through disinformation. After realising that it is unable to achieve its goals through military means, Russia has also been developing and implementing its plan to influence the Ukrainian people through information campaigns. It is not only targeting Ukrainians to destabilise situation inside the country, but is also spreading such disinformation among Ukraine's partners, trying to weaken support for the country.

Democracies invest heavily in media literacy workshops, fact-checking, and 'information hygiene.' These efforts matter, but remain largely reactive. Meanwhile, autocracies make use of emotions, with short, memorable messages that spread faster than any fact-check. Simply debunking falsehoods or funding counter-propaganda cannot match the autocracies that pour billions into influence operations, treating information as a strategic weapon.

Democracies must move beyond merely reacting to circumstances, and start shaping their own compelling narratives. Effective communication is not just about accuracy — it is about emotional resonance. Autocracies succeed because they craft simple, powerful stories that connect quickly with the populace. Democracies must learn to speak clearly, respond swiftly, and adapt to the age of short attention spans. For example, when a Russian official account on X tried to romanticise the Soviet past and justify the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine did not

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8   Polityka w Sieci [@Polityka_wSieci], 3.06.2025; Incydent uszkodzone torowisko w rejonie miejscowości Życzyn, 17.11.2025, https://x.com/Polityka_wSieci/status/1990324227090559282

9   Pifer, S., *Analysis: Rail sabotage reveals how hybrid pressure on Poland is mounting,* Kyiv Post, 19.11.2025, https://www.kyivpost.com/post/64498

10 Booth, R., Weaver, M., Hern, A., Smith, S., & Walker, S., *Russia used hundreds of fake accounts to tweet about Brexit, data shows,* The Guardian, 14.11.2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/14/how-400-russia-run-fake-accounts-posted-bogus-brexit-tweets

11 Sydorenko, S., *From paid voters to Romania-lovers: who's helping the Kremlin hack Moldova's elections?* European Pravda, 23.09.2025, https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/eng/articles/2025/09/23/7220846/; Krychkovska, U., *Moldova uncovers Russian voter bribery scheme via app,* European Pravda, 4.08.2025, https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/eng/news/2025/08/4/7217265/; Secrieru, S., *Moldova warns Russia will try to influence voters across Europe*, European Pravda, 4.08.2025, https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/eng/news/2025/08/4/7217245/

respond with a long legal explanation. Instead, its official account replied with just three words: "Toxic ex here."[12] This short, relatable message instantly exposed the attempts at manipulation and made the propaganda look absurd — showing that sometimes the most effective response is not to shift the entire narrative, but to deliver a sharp, concise message which people immediately understand.

More broadly, democracies should invest in developing compelling narratives that unite rather than divide, emphasise shared values and aspirations, and counter falsehoods with both truth and emotional appeal. They must train public officials and spokespersons to communicate authentically and responsively, recognising the fact that in today's media environment, silence or dullness cedes influence to louder, more aggressive voices.

Strategic Foresight, Political Will, and Reducing Dependence

Autocracies enjoy the luxury of being unconstrained by electoral cycles, a freedom that democratic states simply cannot afford. This allows authoritarian regimes to plan confidently over decades, knowing their strategies will remain consistent, regardless of political changes. China's Belt and Road Initiative exemplifies this multi-decade strategic vision, with a gradual reshaping of global trade and influence. Similarly, Russia did not decide to invade Ukraine overnight; its plans were years in the making, coupled with contingency strategies to destabilise Ukraine politically and socially, if military conquest proved elusive. Democracies must learn three key lessons from these realities.

First, prioritise long-term planning. While election cycles will always influence democratic governance, certain priorities — such as national security, defence, and fundamental resilience — must transcend the brevity of political seasons. No matter how prosperous or content a country is, all of that becomes irrelevant if it faces military aggression. Democracies need to institutionalise strategic planning mechanisms which guarantee that core interests are continuously protected, regardless of electoral outcomes. Although democracies often have grand strategies and long-term plans, their effectiveness is frequently undermined by short-term political considerations, and insufficient readiness in defence and security. In contrast, autocracies benefit from the ability to plan far ahead and act decisively — a critical advantage that democratic states should learn from when facing persistent and evolving threats.

> *Autocracies succeed because they craft simple, powerful stories that connect quickly with the populace*

Second, avoid misinterpreting threats. It is important not to ignore or misinterpret the threat, and to plan accordingly and immediately. In 2008, Russian President Vladimir Putin was very clear about his intentions and plans, when he announced that NATO's expansion would be perceived as a direct threat to Russia.[13] Later that year, Russia attacked Georgia. Russia has been

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12 Ukraine [@Ukraine], *[toxic ex here* [Tweet]. X, 18.06.2020, https://x.com/Ukraine/status/1275391304181125121

13 Booth, A. D., *Putin Warns NATO Over Expansion.* The Guardian, 4.04.2008, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/apr/04/nato.russia

named as a security threat since 2014-2015,[14] after its attempted annexation of Crimea,[15] and Ukrainian authorities were warning that this was not the end of Russian aggression.[16] Clearly, the reaction of Ukraine's allies was slower and weaker than expected.

Europe's reactive approach to security and defence highlights the dangers of short-termism. The initial shock following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 exposed deep vulnerabilities. Even by 2025, Europe continues to struggle with adapting and developing its defense strategy to meet current challenges. This failure to anticipate and prepare reveals a broader democratic weakness: the difficulty of maintaining continuity in strategy amid changing governments and shifting political priorities.

Third, reduce strategic dependence. Sanctions on Russia were imposed incrementally, giving it time to adapt and restructure its economy, to withstand the harsher measures by 2022. This delayed response allowed Russia to prepare its economy for a prolonged period of conflict and sanctions.[17] Similarly, lifting sanctions on Iran under the JCPOA[18] implementation inadvertently enabled Tehran to expand its military capabilities, including drone and missile technology now used in Russia's war against Ukraine.

Yet, when it comes to democracies, European allies seem to have been shocked when the US in 2025 decided to distance itself from the security and defence policies in place in Europe. It was clearly seen in the mood of the audience during the Munich Security Conference, after US Vice President JD Vance's speech.[19] While the decision may be debated from a US perspective, it unmistakably revealed Europe's lack of readiness to act independently of its traditional major ally.

Democracies — especially in Europe — must pursue greater strategic autonomy, not only in terms of adversaries but also from long-standing partners. Europe's heavy reliance on the United States for its security can hinder timely decision-making and undermine self-reliance. Building stronger autonomous defence capabilities and diversifying alliances will boost resilience, reducing vulnerability to external pressure and unexpected geopolitical shifts.

Conclusion

Today democracy is in crisis and faces critical threats. It is challenged not only by external threats but also by its own internal vulnerabilities. Autocracies are on the rise, particularly, because they see a lack of decisiveness and proactivity from democracies. While democratic values of

14 *Obama White House National Security Strategy,* The White House, 2015, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf

15 *UN General Assembly — Resolution 68/262* (Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity of Ukraine), United Nations General Assembly, 27.03.2014, https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/68/262

16 *Ukraine Statement to the 71st Session of the UN General Assembly,* Permanent Mission of Ukraine to the UN, 2016, https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/71/71_ua_en_24.pdf

17 Bergmann, M. Out of Stock: *The Global Security Implications of Critical Resource Shortages*, CSIS Commentary, Center for Strategic and International Studies, April, 2023, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-04/230414_Bergmann_Out_Stock.pdf?VersionId=6jfHCP0c13bbmh9bw4Yy2wbpjNnfeJi8

18 U.S. State Department, *Iran: Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), 2017,* https://2009-2017.state.gov/e/eb/tfs/spi/iran/jcpoa/

19 Munich Security Conference, *Selected Key Speeches, Volume II, 2025,* https://securityconference.org/assets/02_Dokumente/01_Publikationen/2025/Selected_Key_Speeches_Vol._II/MSC_Speeches_2025_Vol2_Ansicht_gekürzt.pdf

freedom, transparency, and accountability remain essential, they must be clearly connected to the tangible benefits that people in democracies experience daily, but do not appreciate sufficiently. Democracies must also recognise that information is not merely a marketplace of ideas but a battlefield where narratives shape power.

Learning from autocratic adversaries does not mean abandoning democratic values. Rather, it means adopting their strategic rigour, investing in effective communication, and planning with foresight and resilience. If democracies fail to adapt, the spectre of autocratic strength will become reality — not because autocracies are invincible, but because democracies have allowed hesitation and division to undermine their own foundations. The time to act decisively is now.

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RIGHT-WING POLITICIANS AND THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR: BETWEEN POPULISM AND NATIONAL INTERESTS

Dr Hanna Shelest
UA: Ukraine Analytica

The response towards Russian aggression against Ukraine and further European involvement has presented the whole spectrum of reactions from right-wing politicians. In this article, we will try to answer what determines the choices of right-wing parties in their foreign policy agenda, and, in particular, regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war and when populism prevails over national interests, or what drives their increased cooperation with Moscow.

The last decade, characterised by the rise of the right-wing and far-right politicians in Europe, has witnessed several serious crises that could define the future of the European continent. The crisis of Atlanticism, Brexit, the migration crisis, and the Russian-Ukrainian war, have all cried out for a unified position and necessitated hard political choices for European political parties on the entire spectrum of opinion.

There can be numerous reasons for the rise of right-wing ideology in Europe, which is likely to remain a trend for a number of years. The crisis of democracy. No major changes in politics for a long time. A conservative flashback. The latest economic and migrant crises. An increase in nationalistic sentiments as a response to EU regulations. Or simply an internal, domestic political rivalry that makes the parties search for their niche position, and a response to the populist ideas.

If the migration crisis or their position regarding the EU as an institution have followed the general ideological line of such parties, the response towards the Russian aggression against Ukraine and further European involvement in the war have presented the whole spectrum of reactions from right-wing politicians. The Hungarian accommodation for the Moscow position contrasts with the Italian full support for Ukraine. Marine Le Pen's breaking ties with the Kremlin contrasts with Alice Weidel's embrace of Russian politicians. So, what determines the choices of right-wing parties in their foreign policy agenda, and, in particular, regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war? When does populism prevail over national interests, or what drives their increased cooperation with Moscow?

The right-wing political map of Europe is diverse both geographically and ideologically, as well as in terms of their level of influence over decision-making or discourse-shaping in their respective countries, and at the European Parliament level. Conservative-right, radical right political parties, Nazis, and extreme-right groups – all of these create a patchy picture that also has a significant local context in each case. This paper does

not aim to analyse the full spectrum of right-wing ideology in Europe, but to concentrate on those who have had the highest political influence or the ability to influence a decision-making process regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war.

European Right-wing Political Mapping

In June 2024, 720 members of the European Parliament were elected. Far-right political parties secured a significant number of seats, improving their positions; however, this was not as much as some had anticipated. While Italy, France and Germany saw significant gains for the far right, the picture across the rest of the EU was more nuanced. Far-right parties only came first in five countries, and second or third in another five, predominantly at the expense of liberal and green parties.[1] As a result, they received a total of 156 seats, held by Patriots, European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and Identity and Democracy (ID) Groups. Still, the competition for political leadership in Europe and disagreements regarding approaches on different issues, including over Russia's policy, did not allow the right wing to create a single group in the European Parliament.

If we speak about the national level, by 2024 the far right has been part of governing coalitions in Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, Italy, Hungary, and Croatia, and actually won the elections in Austria[2]. In Portugal and Slovakia, the far right increased their vote share significantly in recent national elections.[3] Poland, Belgium, France, and Germany have right-wing parties among their main parliamentary forces.

Such a rise in right-wing sentiment among voters cannot be considered a coincidence or a temporary phenomenon, as we can observe both the normalisation of the far-right, the adoption of some of their rhetoric by centrist parties, and the rejuvenation of their voters. According to 2024 research, 32% of the French National Front voters, 25% of the Portuguese Chega, 14.5% of the German AfD, and 32% of the Belgium Vlaams voters belong to the youth category.[4]

> **Such a rise in right-wing sentiment among voters cannot be considered a coincidence or a temporary phenomenon, as we can observe both the normalisation of the far-right, the adoption of some of their rhetoric by centrist parties, and the rejuvenation of their voters**

The radical right has raised its game, by disrupting EU unity and blocking EU-level initiatives in the past. To a considerable extent, this trend is due to countries led by radical-right parties, in particular Hungary, which is responsible for the largest number of blockages in EU foreign policy-making. Vetoes by radical-right governments can articulate strong disagreement over policy,

1   Armida van Rij, Tim Benton, Creon Butler, *How will gains by the far right affect the European Parliament and EU?* Chatham House, 11.06.2024, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/06/how-will-gains-far-right-affect-european-parliament-and-eu

2   *Austria's Freedom Party secures first far-right national election win since World War II*, CNN, 30.09.2024, https://edition.cnn.com/2024/09/29/europe/austria-election-results-freedom-party-intl-hnk/index.html

3   Armida van Rij, Tim Benton, Creon Butler, *How will gains by the far right affect the European Parliament and EU?* Chatham House, 11.06.2024, https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/06/how-will-gains-far-right-affect-european-parliament-and-eu

4   Yasmeen Serhan, *How Europe's Far-Right Parties Are Winning Over Young Voters*, Time, 18.06.2024, https://time.com/6989622/france-eu-europe-far-right-elections/

but they can also be employed as leverage to promote other, unrelated objectives — as Hungary showed through its veto of EU financial support for Ukraine.[5]

> « **Before 2022, many of the right-wing parties found similarities in their agendas, and with the one Moscow promoted – strong leadership, light authoritarianism, anti-gender, anti-LGBT, anti-migrant, anti-vaccination, anti-EU**

However, focusing on a far-right surge wrongly implies that the European far-right parties are a unified front when, in fact, the far-right has so far shown very low levels of cohesion, and a limited capacity for cooperation.[6] Considering the patchy picture of the right-wing parties' policies towards Ukraine, the question that arises is – what drives their perceptions and attitudes towards Ukraine, which factors influence their choice – ideology, money, national historical experience, or does it simply depend on the leader's choice?

Inconsistency of Ideology or Coincidence with the Russian agenda?

In theory, right-wing political parties should have supported Ukraine because it is fighting for its sovereignty and nationhood; exactly the motives that the right's ideology supports. However, in reality, within the last ten years, and especially since 2022, the right-wing parties have been divided into three main categories: those which strongly supported Ukraine and condemned Russia, those which allied themselves with Moscow or at least looked for excuses for their actions, and those which pretended to be neutral under the pretext that the most important matter for the national interests of their states was not to be dragged into war. Parties such as the FPÖ (in Austria), FN (in France), and Ataka (in Bulgaria) enjoy close links with Moscow; they believe that European countries should give more credence to Russia's concerns; and the FN's foreign policy programme in particular contains a proposal for the creation of a trilateral alliance between Paris, Berlin, and Moscow[7].

Similarities of Agenda

Before 2022, many of the right-wing parties found similarities in their agendas, and with the one Moscow promoted – strong leadership, light authoritarianism, anti-gender, anti-LGBT, anti-migrant, anti-vaccination, anti-EU. Most of the far-right parties are also anti-Western and anti-liberal, while Russia is associated with the so-called 'traditional values' that resonate with their voters as well. Still, the closer to Russia (geographically) the countries were, the less eager they were to support Russian foreign policy aspirations and vision, as their past experience (both of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union) influenced them and allowed for clearer recognition of Moscow's intentions.

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5   Rosa Balfour and Stefan Lehne, ed. *Charting the Radical Right's Influence on EU Foreign Policy,* Carnegie Endowment, 18.04.2024, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/04/charting-the-radical-rights-influence-on-eu-foreign-policy?lang=en

6   Ivan Krastev, Mark Leonard, *A new political map: Getting the European Parliament election right*, ECFR, 21.03.2024, https://ecfr.eu/publication/getting-the-european-parliament-election-right/

7   *Russophile Populism,* The European Center for Populism Studies, https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/russophile-populism/

According to Yehuda Ben-Hur Levy,[8] the right-wing populist parties disagree on many foreign policy issues. They range from anti-American to pro-American, from Russophile to Russosceptic, and from isolationist to internationalist. But they are united on some points, notably Euroscepticism. Under such conditions, the researchers often raise the question of whether it is primarily pro-Russian or anti-American sentiments that actually drive the far-right when Russia is chosen just to be the opposite of the US.

One of the important aspects to consider in the far-right political parties' reaction towards the Russian-Ukrainian war is the indirect effect of their policies. Their positions towards the European Union or NATO themselves, or their anti-American stance, are those factors that should be taken into account. It is not always a choice between Russia or Ukraine that drives their decisions. The strong anti-EU position may lead to the ultimate decision not to support EU sanctions or the allocation of money to support for Ukraine, while anti-American sentiments might be what leads to the search for a partnership with Russia as an alternative, a third approach.

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, the online discourse of far-right groups in Eastern European regions has also altered. The analysis conducted by Deina Venckunaite and Connor Rees has revealed that pre-conflict, Nazism was one of the defining themes present in online in-group communications. Post-conflict, these defining themes have shifted towards nationalism.[9]

One of the reasons for this could be a self-reflection process by at least some of the followers, as the Russians' historical image as anti-Nazis strongly contradicted their soldiers' behaviour in the occupied territories, and the statements of their leaders.

Positions regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war

The primary dissonance between the right-wing politicians and the Russian leadership lies within the domestic-foreign policy axis. Despite their having similarities in domestic discourse, where anti-Western sentiments are also present, in terms of foreign policy, they face a dilemma, as defending a nation's sovereignty and fatherland is also among their core ideological baselines – so this principle naturally leads them to support Ukraine versus Russia.

According to Carnegie research,[10] the main right-wing parties in Europe can be divided into three groups, with pro-Russian, anti-Russian, and inconsistent positions towards Russia:

- Anti-Russian:
  - Spain, Party Name: Vox. Opposed to Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and supportive of military aid to Kyiv.
  - Italy, Party Name: Brothers of Italy (FdI). Sympathetic towards Russia until its 2022 invasion of Ukraine; it then distanced itself from Moscow and adopted a strong stance in support of Ukraine, backing sanctions against Moscow and military support to Kyiv.

8 Yehuda Ben-Hur Levy, *The Undiplomats: Right-wing populists and their foreign policies,* Centre for European Reform, August 2015, https://www.cer.eu/sites/default/files/publications/attachments/pdf/2015/pb_ybl_undiplo_21aug15-11804.pdf

9 Deina Venckunaite, Connor Rees and Dr. Lella Nouri, *A Move from Nazism to Nationalism: Changes in Far-Right Online Discourse Post-Ukraine Conflict,* Global Network of Extremism and Technology, 14.08.2023, https://gnet-research.org/2023/08/14/a-move-from-nazism-to-nationalism-changes-in-far-right-online-discourse-post-ukraine-conflict/

10 Rosa Balfour and Stefan Lehne, ed. *Charting the Radical Right's Influence on EU Foreign Policy,* Carnegie Endowment, 18.04.2024, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/04/charting-the-radical-rights-influence-on-eu-foreign-policy?lang=en

- Poland, Party Name: Law and Justice (PiS). Supportive of Ukraine after Russia's 2022 invasion and provided military supplies; critical of Poland's Western partners for allowing Russia to invade Ukraine.

- Estonia, Party Name: Conservative People's Party of Estonia (EKRE). Opposed to Russia; strongly critical of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and supportive of aid for Ukraine.

- Finland, Party Name: Finns Party. Vocal against Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine; supportive of sanctions against Moscow and in favour of aiding Ukraine.

- Sweden, Party Name: Sweden Democrats (SD). Hostile towards Russia.

- Inconsistent:

  - France, Party Name: National Rally (RN). Supportive of close ties with Russia but moderated its outlook after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine; opposed to sanctions and in favour of dialogue with Moscow.

  - Netherlands, Party Name: Party for Freedom (PVV). Initially critical of Russia but later praised Putin as an ally against Muslim immigration; after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, condemned Russia, and supported Ukraine.

- Pro-Russian:

  - Germany, Party Name: Alternative for Germany (AfD). Opposed to EU sanctions on Russia and in favour of dialogue with Moscow.

  - Austria, Party Name: Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). Sympathetic to Russia's policies and opposed to EU sanctions against Moscow; supportive of a

> **Russia has cultivated equally active relations with far-left and far-right political groups in Europe, using each of them, respectively, depending on the messages Moscow needs to promote**

diplomatic approach to Russia's war in Ukraine. In addition to the regular rhetoric, the Austrian Freedom Party is also highly critical of Western military aid to Ukraine and wants to bow out of the European Sky Shield Initiative, a missile defence project launched by Germany[11].

- Slovakia, Party Name: Slovak National Party (SNS). Supportive of Russia; refrained from labelling the country the aggressor in the war in Ukraine; critical of EU sanctions on Russia and campaigned to stop weapons supplies to Ukraine.

- Hungary, Party Name: Fidesz. Sympathetic towards Russia and opposed to EU sanctions against Moscow; have regular contacts with Moscow.

- Bulgaria. Party Name: Revival. Sympathetic towards Russia; calls for Bulgaria's neutrality in Russia's war against Ukraine.

What is interesting is that at a certain point in the war, left-wing political parties became more challenging than the right-wing ones. As the left predominantly does not believe in war, so the prevailing mood was in favour of Ukrainian surrender. For years, Russia has cultivated equally active relations with far-left and far-right political groups in Europe,

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11 *Austria's Freedom Party secures first far-right national election win since World War II,* CNN, 30.09.2024, https://edition.cnn.com/2024/09/29/europe/austria-election-results-freedom-party-intl-hnk/index.html

using each of them, respectively, depending on the messages Moscow needs to promote at that particular time.

The danger arose when right- and left-wing political leaders became united in their positions towards their respective governments, which could be strongly pro-Ukrainian, as in the French case. The left and right insisted that it was beneficial to cooperate with Russia, as it could result in a stable security architecture in Europe, and who really cares about Ukraine? Such rhetoric, in addition to the necessity of stopping the military support and spending for Ukraine, was explained as the need to concentrate on domestic issues, and it also led to extreme positions. Another argument in this basket is that Ukraine cannot win the war, so we need to search for a compromise. To reach a compromise, the government should stop supplying weapons to Ukraine.

At the same time, one can notice discrepancies regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war among right-wing politicians within one country (an example is the opposite positions taken up by Meloni's Brothers of Italy and Salvini's Lega) and even inside one political party.

The Alternative for Germany (AfD) has been struggling to adopt a single position. While the party's national leaders, such as chairman Tino Chrupalla, joined in with the condemnation of the Russian invasion when it began, influential regional figures have been much more equivocal.[12] One of the reasons for this is that they saw this war as falling within Putin's narrative of a war between NATO and Russia, where Ukraine is only a victim or a puppet.

In Portugal, when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Chega backed Kyiv. In early 2021, the leader of the Chega party, Andre Ventura, called for harsher sanctions against Russia in light of the ongoing Russian provocation in the Donbas and the annexation of Crimea, demanding that they be applied to the entire economy rather than only to individual Russians[13]. On the day of the 2022 invasion, Ventura 'unreservedly' denounced Putin's aggression in Parliament, urging Portugal to do "everything in its power, militarily and sanctions-wise [against Russia]".[14] The Chega leader's position was not initially supported unanimously within his party, and some members characterised the invasion as a legitimate reaction to "NATO encirclement of Russia", and accused Ukraine's president of "siding with avowed Nazis", which was a Russian narrative promoted to justify a war.[15]

The Positions of Extremist Groups

The most challenging situation to deal with arose among the radical far-right or extremist groups. Most of them are not represented in mainstream politics, but they may influence societal discourse and be very active online. Moreover, their members are usually more ideologically coherent and less opportunistic.

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12 Ben Knight, *Germany's far-right split by Russia-Ukraine war,* DW, 28.03.2022, https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-far-right-split-by-russia-ukraine-war/a-61283065

13 Assembleia da República. Diário da Assembleia da República I Série –Número 48 (XIV Legislatura 2rd Sessão Legislativa (2020-2021)). 3.03.2021, https://app.parlamento.pt/webutils/docs/DAR-I-048.pdf

14 Afonso, Biscaia & Salgado, Susana. *The Ukraine-Russia war and the Far Right in Portugal: Minimal impacts on the rising populist Chega party,* In: The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-wing Populism in Europe. (eds). Gilles Ivaldi and Emilia Zankina. European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS). Brussels. 4.03.2023, https://doi.org/10.55271/rp0026 https://www.populismstudies.org/the-ukraine-russia-war-and-the-far-right-in-portugal-minimal-impacts-on-the-rising-populist-chega-party/

15 Malhado, A. *Os defensores de Putin no Chega.* Sábado. 22.06.2022, https://www.sabado.pt/portugal/detalhe/os-defensores-de-putin-no-chega

According to research on the online activities of the far-right groups at the beginning of the war (March 2022) [16], these actors looked at the conflict in Ukraine from the perspective of how the crisis could serve and reinforce their own localised interests and aspirations for political violence at home. Many far-right extremist actors support Russia, while some support Ukraine, and others are entirely agnostic to the outcome of the conflict. Those who supported Russia in the first days also shared the so-called anti-globalist discourse, which they considered was present in Russia's professed reasons to start the war. Russian leadership statements that they were standing up against the unipolar world (read the world where the US dominates) mirror far-right groups' ideas, including those conspiracy theories of world shadow governance, etc., which have been popular among average supporters of those groups.

Researchers who have tracked Germany's neo-Nazi scene have noted that Germany's far-right organisations were struggling to agree on a position on Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the beginning of the war. While some groups sided with Russia's anti-NATO authoritarian leader, others showed solidarity with what they considered the far-right 'Azov Battalion' in Ukraine.[17] Partially, what made some of these groups more pro-Ukrainian was their consideration of Ukraine as European and Ukrainians as 'white', versus their negative sentiments towards ongoing waves of migration into Europe from other continents. So, they saw Ukraine as a nation of white people with the right to self-determination. On top of that, Germany's extreme right has often envied the strength of Ukraine's far-right movement with its paramilitary organisations.[18]

> **Many far-right extremist actors support Russia, while some support Ukraine, and others are entirely agnostic to the outcome of the conflict**

Moscow has long cultivated links with different parts of Europe's right-wing, from mainstream politicians to proscribed terrorists[19]. For example, the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), an international far-right group which was listed as a specially designated terrorist organisation by the United States in April 2020, provided training centres in St. Petersburg for Swedish, German, Slovakian, Finnish, and Danish right-wing radicals, some of whom later joined the fighting in Ukraine on the Russian side[20].

Austria is a unique case when it comes to relations between the political far-right and Russia. These contacts go far back in time

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16 Stephanie Foggett, Mollie Saltskog, Colin Clarke, *How Are Putin's Far-Right Fans in The West Reacting to His War?* 18.03.2022, https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/how-are-putins-far-right-fans-in-the-west-reacting-to-his-war/

17 Ben Knight, *Germany's far-right split by Russia-Ukraine war,* DW, 28.03.2022, https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-far-right-split-by-russia-ukraine-war/a-61283065

18 Ben Knight, *Germany's far-right split by Russia-Ukraine war,* DW, 28.03.2022, https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-far-right-split-by-russia-ukraine-war/a-61283065

19 Robyn Dixon, *Inside white-supremacist Russian Imperial Movement, designated foreign terrorist organization by U.S. State Department,* Washington Post, 13.04.2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-white-supremacist-terrorism-us/2020/04/11/255a9762-7a75-11ea-a311-adb1344719a9_story.html

20 Raffaello Pantucci, *Russia's Far-Right Campaign in Europe*, Lawfare, 9.04.2023, https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/russias-far-right-campaign-europe

and have been developed over the years, not only by far-right parties but also by the centrists. Still, the Austrian Freedom Party is the first party to have an official bond and agreement on future cooperation on a vast array of topics with the United Russia Party. The FPÖ's pact with the United Russia Party was the result of a deliberate pro-Russian trend in the party's leadership dating back to 2007.[21] Russia often aims to support rising parties or marginal opposition groups with the hope (and often financial support) of bringing them to power one day.

Financial Support Helps with Ideology

The far-right political parties' connections with Russia have been known about for quite a long time, with more and more investigations opening up, either regarding individual politicians or the entire political parties. Some tried to break off this relationship after 2022, while others continued with it. For many, this connection has not been purely ideological but rather a 'friendship with benefits' – financial benefits.

Russia has long been accused of funding populist radical right parties in Europe, from the French Front National and Italian Lega to Austria's FPÖ and Hungary's Jobbik. Russia has also created some open ties with anti-EU parties, inviting their leaders to various conferences and symposia organised by the Kremlin's close associates.[22] Such ties between the Kremlin and the European populist radical right have grown stronger over the last decade, reflecting what has been deemed by Andrey Makaruychev as a 'marriage of convenience'. As Shekhovtsov suggests, Moscow has begun to support particular populist radical right political forces to gain leverage in European politics and undermine the liberal democratic consensus in the West.[23]

> **Russia has long been accused of funding populist radical right parties in Europe, from the French Front National and Italian Lega to Austria's FPÖ and Hungary's Jobbik**

In 2014, the most famous and closely investigated case of the Russian financing of European political parties was instigated. If most of the other investigated cases were concerned with bribery and shadow financing, the contract by First Czech-Russian Bank in Moscow that lent the National Front of Marine Le Pen 9.4 million euros at an interest rate of 6 per cent per year in 2014 was 'official' but not publicly announced[24]. It was acknowledged only after a media investigation, while Marine Le Pen was justifying the Russian illegal annexation of Crimea, and calling for France to leave the EU.

21 Fabian Schmid, Bernhard Weidinger, Peter Kreko, *Russian Connections of the Austrian Far-Right.* Political Capital, 2017, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/382076631_Russian_Connections_of_the_Austrian_Far-Right

22 Gilles Ivaldi, Emilia Zankina (Dir.). *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-Wing Populism in Europe.* European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS), 372 p., 2023, https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04024156

23 Quoted from: Gilles Ivaldi, Emilia Zankina (Dir.). *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-Wing Populism in Europe.* European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS), 372 p., 2023, https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04024156

24 Paul Sonne, *A Russian bank gave Marine Le Pen's party a loan. Then weird things began happening.* The Washington Post. 27.12.2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/a-russian-bank-gave-marine-le-pens-party-a-loan-then-weird-things-began-happening/2018/12/27/960c7906-d320-11e8-a275-81c671a50422_story.html

Another example is the Italian political party Lega, whose representatives, according to the Insider investigation, travelled to Moscow in search of financing from Kremlin-connected sources in 2018, along with details of a proposal to launder $65 million in support for the Italian party through an oil trading scheme, in which an officer from the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB)'s Fifth Service, which has the mandate to disrupt democracies abroad participated.[25] And if Le Pen needed to search for legitimate excuses for her 'loan', perceiving the negative consequences for her political career, Italian politicians on the other hand continued this practice.

Is the Right-Wing Ideology the Problem, or is it the Populism of the Far Right?

In the last few decades, right-wing ideology has seen more and more intersection with populist rhetoric. While the definition of populism presents two optics – anti-establishment or opportunistic – it still presents its main idea as the desire to represent the point of view of the 'street'. In the case of the right-wing parties in Europe and their reactions to the Russia-Ukraine war, it resulted in a cognitive imbalance, as their voters' sentiments were often in conflict with their parties' general ideology.

In Europe, the term 'right-wing' populism is used to describe groups, politicians and political parties that are generally known for their opposition to immigration, especially of people from the Islamic world, and for

Euroscepticism. It is also associated with ideologies such as anti-environmentalism, neo-nationalism, anti-globalisation, nativism, and economic protectionism.[26]

Despite the rise in right-wing parties' ratings, their voters are more opportunistic and can potentially change the party in case their leaders do not respond to their concerns. According to an Insa survey conducted at the request of Bild, 40% of the AfD voters can imagine themselves voting for the leftist Die Linke party. This is not surprising, considering that their position regarding migration or relations with Moscow is similar.[27] Such a background has made a lot of right-wing politicians more acceptable to the general position of their voters.

For example, in the Netherlands, there is a societal consensus regarding the Russian aggression in Ukraine, which has been hugely determined by the MH17 incident in 2014, when Russia shot down an aeroplane with hundreds of Dutch passengers aboard. So, Ukrainians in the Netherlands are perceived solely as victims of the Russian aggression. Thus, despite anti-immigrant rhetoric or other similar sentiments, the far-right Party for Freedom (PVV) signed a governmental coalition agreement that included a continuation of political, military, and financial support to Ukraine.[28]

In 2014, most populist radical right-wing European parties justified Russia's annexation of Crimea by adopting the Kremlin's rhetoric and strong criticism of the Ukrainian state. In so doing, they parroted Kremlin talking

25 Michael Weiss, Christo Grozev, Roman Dobrokhotov, *How the FSB tried to buy an Italian political party,* The Insider, 6.02.2024, https://theins.ru/en/politics/268921

26 *Right-Wing Populism,* European Centre for Populism Studies, https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/right-wing-populism/

27 *Wagenknecht-Wumms!* Bild, 21.10.2023, https://www.bild.de/bild-plus/politik/inland/politik-inland/exklusive-umfrage-so-viele-wuerden-sie-waehlen-wagenknecht-wumms-85822232.bild.html

28 *Дар'я Мещерякова,* З ультраправими, але не проти України: чому "уряд Вілдерса" не зробить Нідерланди проросійськими, Європейська правда, 20.05.2024, https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/articles/2024/05/20/7186348/

points about the so-called 'reunification' of Crimea with Russia through the supposed self-determination of the 'people of Crimea', as expressed in the Crimean referendum of March 16th, 2014.[29] This can be partially explained by the low intensity of the conflict, low interest among the voters, and a weak response from the European governments, so that the right-wing leaders have followed their general line of relations with Moscow and mutual support.

After the outbreak of the war in 2022, far-right populists came under fire for their pro-Russia positions and their previous sympathy for Vladimir Putin. As a result, their responses, and interpretations of the reasons for the war varied. Cross-national analysis revealed that radical right-wing populist parties have varied in the set of arguments and rhetoric that they have employed since the Russian invasion, in an attempt to sustain their electoral appeal and maintain credibility with voters, by evading accusations of sympathy for Russia.[30]

Also, for many right-wing politicians, with the war's continuation, it has been more difficult to support Russia politically, as the discourse has been shifting to the idea that it is not a Ukrainian but a European war, hence threats to the national security of many European countries are real, not hypothetical. As national security and protection have always been among the priorities of the right-wing parties, it is difficult to be seen to encourage the source of the main threat or to discourage

NATO as a defensive alliance. Under such circumstances, even the most pro-Russian politicians, if not actually moving to Russia (as in the case of Austrian ex-minister Kneissl),[31] shifted their opposition to the centre, rejecting openly anti-NATO and pro-Russian rhetoric, but encouraging so-called appeals for peace, or doubting the necessity to prolong providing military support to Ukraine.

Both Giorgia Meloni of Brothers of Italy and Marine Le Pen of France's National Rally have moderated their parties' most extreme policies in recent years, in an attempt to increase their acceptability among voters. For example, in its programme for the 2024 European election, France's National Rally said that "Russia [was] violating international law and provoking a revision of the international order."[32]

> **After the outbreak of the war in 2022, far-right populists came under fire for their pro-Russia positions and their previous sympathy for Vladimir Putin**

However, some experts consider that much of this 'moderating' and detoxification is down to communication strategies.[33] Liana Fix of the Council on Foreign Relations said that the National Rally is "not so pro-Russian

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29 Gilles Ivaldi, Emilia Zankina (Dir.). *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-Wing Populism in Europe.* European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS), 372 p., 2023, https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04024156

30 Gilles Ivaldi, Emilia Zankina (Dir.). *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-Wing Populism in Europe.* European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS), 372 p., 2023, https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04024156

31 Steve Rosenberg, *Karin Kneissl, the Austrian ex-minister who moved to Russia,* BBC, 7.12.2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67624834

32 Giorgio Leali and Laura Kayali, *French far right pulls manifesto that included controversial Russia, NATO plans,* Politico, 17.06.2024, https://www.politico.eu/article/france-far-right-manifesto-russia-nato-national-rally/

33 Anchal Vohra, *How the European Parliament helps normalize the far right,* 24.08.2024, https://www.dw.com/en/how-the-european-parliament-helps-normalize-the-far-right/a-69923698

as they were in the past," but the shift could be partly about appealing to voters rather than a real change in policy.[34]

This may be true for the French, but not as conclusive for the Italians. Meloni, prior to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, was in favour of better relations with Russia, and supported lifting sanctions on the Russian Federation in 2014[35]. In 2021, she even wrote that Russia under Putin defended European values and a Christian identity.[36] This statement is a clear reflection of the similarities in domestic agendas that have united Russia and right-wing politicians for years. However, in 2022, Meloni strongly condemned the invasion and pledged to keep sending arms to Ukraine[37], becoming the biggest proponent of military aid and diplomatic support for Ukraine. In September 2022, she said that Russia's annexation of four partially occupied provinces in south-eastern Ukraine has "no legal and political value".

Portugal's Chega, Germany's AfD, the Danish People's Party, the Dutch PVV and Belgium's VB have similarly distanced themselves from Putin, and openly criticised his actions. To the East, Romania's AUR, most Croatian Radical Right parties, as well as Lithuanian outfits, have taken critical positions towards Putin and the invasion.[38]

Moreover, none of the political parties have openly allied with Russia. Those whom we consider pro-Russian have chosen the path of blaming the West's actions that 'provoked' the war or called on their supporters and opponents to understand Russian ambitions and actions, but all have condemned the fact of the illegal invasion, accepting Russia as an aggressor. The reason was that even if the 'liberal order' is something many right-wingers may oppose, the concept of a 'rules-based order' is one that is clearly ingrained in the right's ideology. Thus, by violating dozens of international conventions and breaching the sovereignty of the independent state, Russia could not guarantee that right-wing voters would be in favour of their political leaders continuing the dialogue with Moscow as before.

Conclusions

While analysing right-wing political parties and their representatives, we usually concentrate mainly on their ability to win elections and their chances of becoming part of the government. Nevertheless, no less important should be an understanding of their ability to be a disruptive force that does not need to be in a government (so as not to take responsibility) but that can impact public and political discourse, therefore influencing the decision-making process and making liberal or centrist parties change their positions regarding the most pressing issues for society.

The 'Russian-Ukrainian' test presented a challenge for most right-wing politicians, as it resulted not only in difficult choices

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34 Brad Dress, *Far-right victories in EU elections imperil Ukraine support,* The Hill, 06.11.24,
    https://thehill.com/policy/international/4716927-far-right-eu-elections-ukraine/

35 Ludovica Meacci, *Italy's Right Is Torn on Ukraine but United on China.* Foreign Policy, 27.09.2022,
    https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/27/italy-china-russia-right/

36 Roberto Saviano, *Giorgia Meloni is a danger to Italy and the rest of Europe.* The Guardian. 24.09.2022,
    https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2022/sep/24/giorgia-meloni-is-a-danger-to-italy-and-the-rest-of-europe-far-right

37 Ashleigh Furlong, *Italy's Meloni: Right-wing government is 'nothing to fear".* Politico Europe. 23.07.2022,
    https://www.politico.eu/article/italys-meloni-right-wing-government-is-nothing-to-fear/

38 Gilles Ivaldi, Emilia Zankina (Dir.). *The Impacts of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Right-Wing Populism in Europe.*
    European Center for Populism Studies (ECPS), 372 p., 2023, https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04024156

caused by the necessity of responding to voters' views, but also required the questioning of the ideological bases versus established political partnerships. As analysis demonstrates, the similarities in the domestic agendas that united different political parties with Russia before 2022 were overshadowed by the inability to back Russian foreign policy and its security stance. Conservative and populist views appeared alongside adherence to the rule-based order and the national security agenda, where NATO (as opposed to the EU) is seen as an important element.

> **❝ Conservative and populist views appeared alongside adherence to the rule-based order and the national security agenda, where NATO (as opposed to the EU) is seen as an important element.**

If Ukraine's original idea of full European integration, its preferred choice, expressed extensively during the Revolution of Dignity in 2014, could not attract the support of the right-wing politicians, as most of them in fact propagate an anti-Brussels agenda, so the defence of the state from the external aggressor and the call to restore Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity found a resonance both in the minds and on the political agenda of the right-wing parties. Still, the question remains about the diversity of responses to the Russian aggression and the European responses to it. The inconsistent positions of those who rejected aggression but called for the lifting of sanctions or for starting negotiations instead of military support, could be partially explained by their domestic priorities. But their open support for Russia and its agenda, blaming the West exclusively, cannot be explained away by ideological beliefs only. The geographical approach is also not helpful as an explanation, seeing as the pro-Russian position of some Bulgarian, Slovakian, and Hungarian politicians, who had prior experience of Moscow's dominance, did not serve as a safeguard from their supporting the current Kremlin policy.

The patchy picture of the right-wing politicians' approaches towards the Russian-Ukrainian war, together with their increased presence in both the European Parliament and the national parliaments of various European states, demand a better understanding of their motivations, the logic of their decision-making, and their possibilities for opportunistic approaches towards the Russian-Ukrainian war in particular.

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