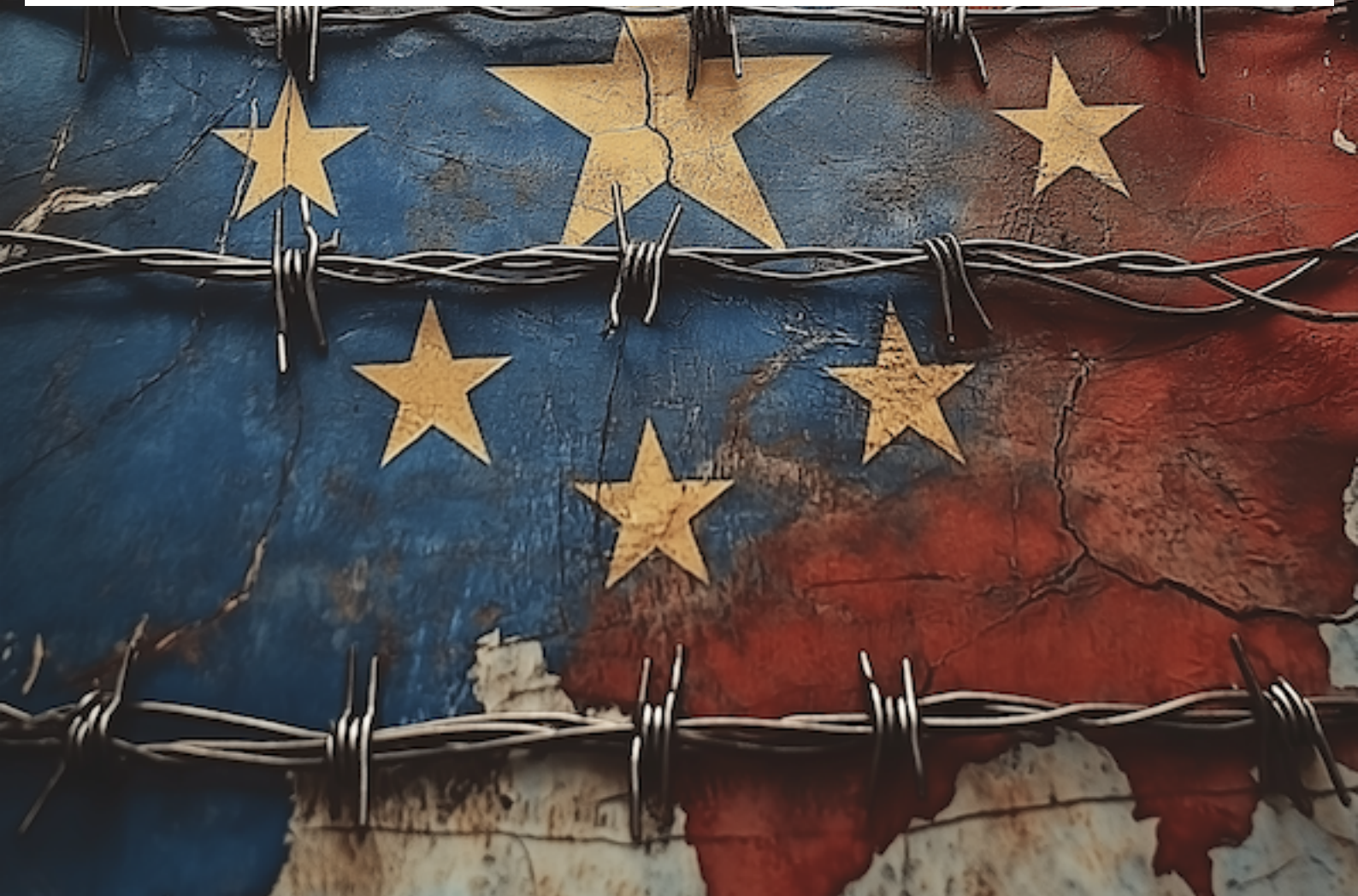
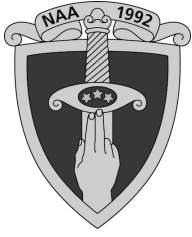


**National Defence Academy of Latvia  
Centre for Security and Strategic Research**

# **Contemporary Challenges to European Security: Neoliberalism, Democratic Backsliding, and Alliance Cohesion**





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# Contemporary Challenges to European Security: Neoliberalism, Democratic Backsliding, and Alliance Cohesion

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## Abstract

This paper examines three interconnected challenges to the cohesion and effectiveness of the Transatlantic alliance and broader Western security structures. First, it explores the impact of neoliberal economic policies on society, highlighting how they have fostered discontent with political elites and created vulnerabilities that can be exploited by external adversaries. Second, it addresses the issue of democratic backsliding, noting how diminished democratic integrity exposes Western societies to influence operations by authoritarian states and weakens their resilience. Finally, the paper considers NATO's internal dynamics, focusing on issues like burden-sharing, enlargement, and security strategies concerning Russia. The analysis underscores the fragile state of European security as it confronts pressures from both internal weaknesses and external threats. The authors conclude by emphasizing the need for policy adaptations to enhance democratic resilience, ensure economic stability, and strengthen military capabilities in an increasingly chaotic world shaped by U.S.-China competition.

## 1 Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has shattered European security. While the outcome of the war still hangs in the balance, the focus of attention has not just been on both warring parties. This is because the ability of the West to retain cohesiveness is also the subject of heated debate, because cohesion of the Transatlantic alliance matters for both assisting Ukraine and supporting vulnerable frontline allies. In this regard, NATO has faced multiple challenges. The alliance has been somewhat weakened by Russia's disinformation efforts, the rise of populism, democratic backsliding, and disagreement on the amount of military and economic assistance that should be given to Ukraine, as well as the speed at which assistance is delivered. There is agreement on helping Ukraine defend itself, but beyond that, there is much disagreement on what should be done specifically, with many of Ukraine's partners being weak on the home front. NATO's challenges are likely to be further compounded by Donald Trump's second term in the White House. Although the very existence of the Transatlantic alliance is not necessarily at risk, its cohesion is likely to be undermined by disputes across the Atlantic.

The first section discusses the effects of neoliberal economic and political policies on satisfaction with democratic and economic systems, and trust in the political realm. It shows that these policies have created internal fragilities, resulting in strategic negatives, that might be exploited by internal and external malign actors. The second section discusses the effects of democratic backsliding that has characterized almost two decades in recent world politics. As a result, democracies should learn to protect their democratic

systems from malign external interference and ready themselves for an era of power politics, which is gradually replacing the rules-based order that was a characteristic of the immediate post-Cold War era. Democracy is on the defensive, and the challenge that the West will likely face in the coming years will be to protect democracy from being undermined or even dismantled. The third section addresses NATO-related challenges. The alliance will be a vitally important instrument for protecting the community of Western states, many of which are small and medium sized. It looks at intra-NATO debates on burden-sharing, the alliance security dilemma, enlargement, engagement with the adversary, and deterrence and the defence posture vis-à-vis Russia.

The paper concludes that European security is likely to remain precarious in the coming years. European security will remain divided between Russia on the one hand, and the EU and NATO on the other hand, with a few states remaining between the main antagonists. While the combined economic and military power of the EU and NATO members should be sufficient to contain Russia, success is by no means guaranteed, because the cohesiveness of Western institutions is one of the key targets of Russia's disinformation and influence operations. While Western societies have remained resilient, decades of neoliberal policies have often resulted in public dissatisfaction with political and economic elites and their policies, opening up opportunities that can be exploited by actors such as Russia and China.

## **2 Neoliberalism and Russian Mental Warfare in the West**

By the end of the 20th century, there was an illusory reconciliation between strategy and tactics, meaning that they would be connected to policy, while in practice they were not. This disjuncture has resulted in confusion about ends. Military or tactical aims can be fixed and finite not only regarding their objective, but also at the point in time in which they may be achieved. Clausewitz (1989) believed that war's natural objective was destroying an enemy's fighting forces to subdue a country. Although at the tactical level this might be considered the end, at the political level the defeated party often considers the outcome merely as a transitory evil for which a remedy may still be found in political conditions at some later date. In other words, tactics may be fixed in time, but politics is an ongoing process, and the achievement of a political objective is not, and cannot be fixed in the same way, as a tactical one.

With the advance of new technologies in the last 50 years, especially in communication and information technologies, it became possible to expand the battlefield beyond the military spectrum. Information becomes a weapon as the target is the process of transforming information into knowledge. Since warfare's primary objective is political, the struggle for "hearts and minds" has become crucial, with the human brain becoming part of the battlefield and society one of the primary targets. As a result, today's hyper-connectivity serves as a conduit for social-engineering tools and techniques aiming to confuse the political debate and paralyzing the process of decision making.

According to Russian strategic thinkers, these measures aim to neutralize a victim state's geopolitical advantages, including its population size, economic potential, military strength, and overall capabilities, by creating an artificial crisis (Serzhantov, Smolovy, and Terentyev 2022). Since victory is achieved at the political level, the aggressor employs numerous tools in a coordinated manner to exploit all the possible vulnerabilities of the target country, achieving a synergistic effect. Consequently, the

seizure of territory is replaced by the overthrow of objectionable governments and the empowerment of loyal anti-systemic political forces, indirectly and implicitly placing the target under external control (Bartosh 2022).

This approach involves instigating crises, promoting destabilization, and fostering internal conflicts within the victim state. Additionally, it aims to cause degradation and impoverishment to stimulate political, economic, and social disintegration (Vorobyov and Kiselyov 2014). These objectives are mainly achieved by distorting reality, diverting audiences' attention to insignificant events, altering the meanings of concepts, presenting negative information, discussing irrelevant matters, and spreading outright misinformation. The goal is to steer the targeted population toward the attacker's political, social, economic, and military/tactical objectives (Ilnitsky 2022; Karavaev 2022; Vorobyov and Kiselyov 2014; Voronov 2019). To do this effectively, the attacker must understand the existing grievances within a society and shape specific actions aimed at these vulnerabilities to achieve its objectives. In other words, they exploit fragilities that already exist and are self-inflicted by the society under attack. This includes anti-systemic and populist political movements.

These have increasingly gained influence globally, reshaping political landscapes across regions. Donald Trump's election as the 45th President of the United States, Jair Bolsonaro's presidency in Brazil, Brexit and the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union, symbolize a broader rejection of globalization and traditional political institutions. In Europe, Viktor Orbán in Hungary has continued to develop a political platform based on nationalism and populism, while Poland has experienced a conservative shift, notably under the Law and Justice Party. Marine Le Pen's National Rally in France continues to challenge the political establish-

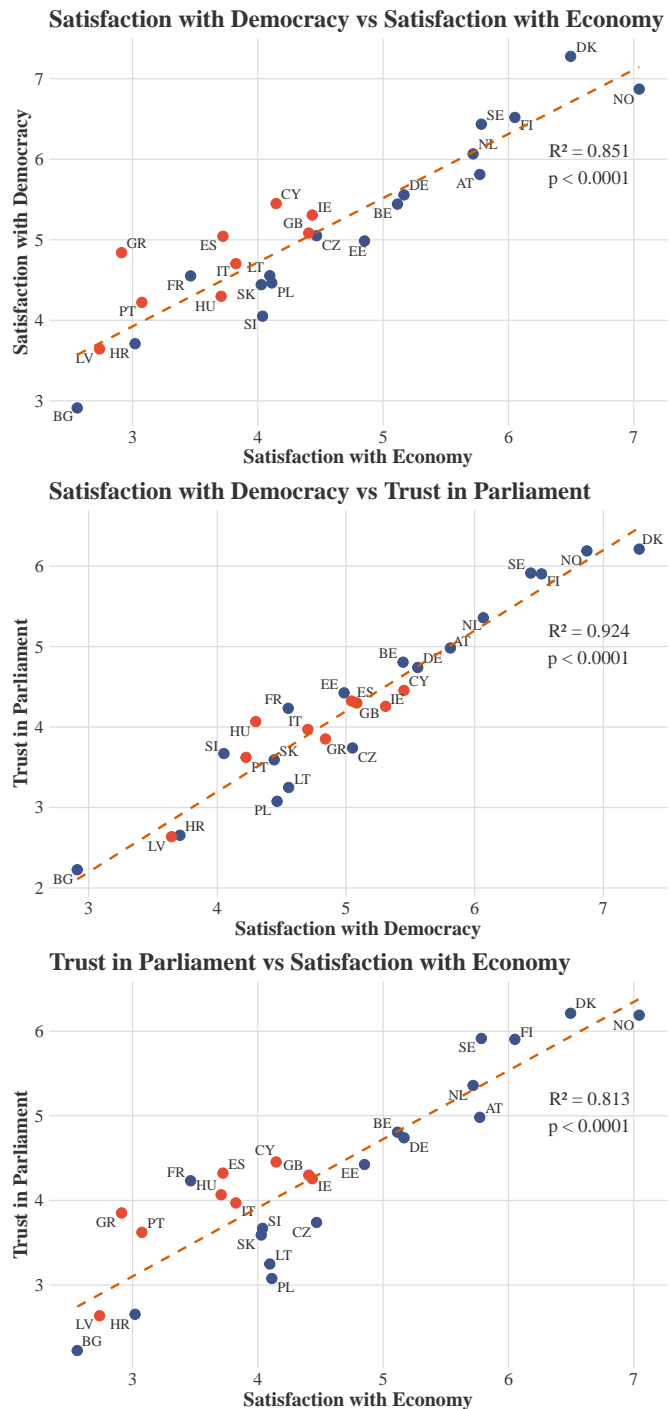


Figure 1: Relationship between satisfaction with the economy, satisfaction with democracy, and trust in Parliament. All variables range from 0 (minimum) to 10 (maximum). Countries highlighted in red are those that implemented austerity measures. Data from the European Social Survey, Waves 1-10, N = 368,946.

ment, while in Germany, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) has made significant electoral gains, particularly in the former East Germany, where anti-immigration sentiments and disillusionment with mainstream politics are prevalent. At the same time, Austria's Freedom Party (FPÖ) and Italy's League have grown in influence, as a result of growing concerns over immigration and economic inequality. In the Netherlands, the far-right Party for Freedom (PVV) has gained momentum. Indeed, data shows that there is a solid relationship between satisfaction with the economy, satisfaction with democracy, and trust in the Parliament.

As Figure 1 shows, satisfaction with the economy is a strong predictor for satisfaction with democracy ( $R^2 = 0.851$ ) and trust in the Parliament ( $R^2 = 0.813$ ), while satisfaction with democracy has a very high correlation with trust in Parliament ( $R^2 = 0.924$ ). Trust in Parliament can be used as a proxy variable for trust in the political system of a country, thus for political legitimacy (Anderson and Tverdova 2003; Chang and Chu 2006; Christensen, Yamamoto, and Aoyagi 2020; Marien and Hooghe 2011; Kim and Voorhees 2011; Mishler and Rose 1997; Newton 2009), which can be defined as "(...) assessment of the degree of congruence, or lack of it, between a given system of power and the beliefs, values and expectations that provide its justification" (Hetherington 1998, 791). It is interesting to note that, in general, countries that implemented austerity measures (highlighted in red) tend to show lower levels of satisfaction with the economy and democracy, and low trust in their parliaments.

Neoliberalism, the current mainstream economic and political ideology in the West, originated in the first half of the 20th century in the works of Ludwig von Mises, Carl Schmitt and Friedrich von Hayek, and was further developed in the second half by Milton Friedman. One of its main postulates is the claim that neoliberal capitalism is a necessary condition for political freedom.<sup>1</sup> With extreme individualism being one of Friedman neoliberalism's main features, people are defined as *homo economicus*, rational agents driven solely by the pursuit of self-interest and utility maximization in a process that rewards merit and punishes inefficiency.<sup>2</sup> As there is a belief that the market delivers the best allocation of resources possible, the government must have a limited role and reconsider how they deliver public services (Friedman 2002). This perspective often disregards systemic inequalities, diminishing a government's responsibility for addressing social issues.

Therefore, Friedman considered social welfare programs to be misguided and inefficient, and social security unfair; any sort of anti-cyclical economic policies or similar measures to reduce the effects of crises in the society to be pernicious and against individual liberty.<sup>3</sup> His theories emphasize efficiency and freedom with the main principles

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<sup>1</sup>It is interesting to note that Azevedo et al (2019) found that economic conservatism and support for neoliberal economic views are closely tied to right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance, system justification, and gender-specific justification.

<sup>2</sup>The concept of *homo economicus*, central to neoliberal thought, presents individuals as purely rational agents driven solely by the pursuit of self-interest and utility maximization. In this context, 'utility' is understood as a general measure of satisfaction or preference fulfilment, which is mathematically represented to capture varying levels of well-being or satisfaction (Jevons 1866). Léon Walras took these ideas further with his "calculus of pleasure and pain" which emphasized the rational behaviour of individuals aiming to maximize utility and minimize costs (Walras 2022), with the main variable determining a person's utility being consumption (Varian 2010). Therefore, it oversimplifies human motivations and neglects the social, cultural, and psychological factors that influence well-being and satisfaction with life.

<sup>3</sup>Although Friedman advocated for minimal government intervention, he supported the implementation of negative income tax as a more efficient alternative to traditional welfare programs. He argued that, in this way, individuals would have the freedom to allocate their financial resources as they see fit. As a result, his emphasis on personal responsibility meant that if individuals chose not to allocate their support to essential needs like healthcare and



guiding economic policy being a free market, individualism and self-regulation, promotion of competition, globalization and free trade with a focus on monetary policy and inflation over employment (Vargas 2023).

These policies have led to several unintended negative outcomes, such as increased inequality, reduced access to essential services, and the reduction of safety nets for the population in the countries that adopted them. The literature criticizing neoliberalism posits that its economic and social policies created fragilities that contributed to the financial crisis of 2007–2008, the offshoring of wealth and power, deindustrialization, the gradual decline of public health and education systems, youth unemployment and, ultimately, the rise of anti-systemic political movements (Eichengreen 2020; Prasad 2006; Wolf 2024). Figure 2 shows data for some of these issues.

Indeed, the West's share of global output (A) had decreased from 62.9% to 45.9% by 2023. This shift is largely due to the relocation of manufacturing to Asia, particularly China, and the resulting economic development in that region. However, the West's GDP still grew considerably in real terms (B), indicating that Asia's rise did not necessarily come at the expense of the West. It is important to note that from 1990 onwards, the volatility of the West's economy also increased, as graph B shows. In other words, economic growth was accompanied by minor and major crises that affected society in different ways. Since the 1990s, average real wages (C) have increased in the countries of the former Warsaw Pact, but have declined in Anglo-Saxon countries and the Eurozone periphery. In the Eurozone core, wages saw a slight rise, while non-EU advanced economies, non-EU Nordic countries, EU Nordic countries, and the United States experienced more substantial wage growth, with the increase being significantly higher in non-EU Nordic countries than in their EU counterparts.

Youth unemployment rates (D) remained relatively stable, but were significantly higher than the overall unemployment rate. In particular, the Eurozone periphery faced especially high youth unemployment at 21%, while other analysed groups of countries exhibited elevated rates ranging between 10% and 17%. The United States was an exception, with a youth unemployment rate of 7.9%, although this figure is still double the base unemployment rate and does not account for the significant number of young people engaged in precarious employment (Oddo et al. 2021).

The debt service relative to disposable income of households is generally low, except in non-EU Nordic countries. Moreover, it has been decreasing, with the same exception. With real wages rising, it is fair to conclude that, despite increasing interest rates, debt service is not a significant burden for most households. Finally, in the West's case, the narrative that the decline in social services like education and health provided by the government is the result of increasing interest payments due to increasing public debt, does not find support in the data. Overall, interest payments relative to expenses have been declining, the exception being the period after the 2008 financial crisis. Data from the World Bank shows that expenses with education as a percent of GDP remained flat, while expenses with health increased significantly.

Two conclusions arise from the discussion above. First, that data at the macro level does not show a dramatic reduction in society's well-being, as measured in economic terms. Second, there was a significant increase in volatility after 1990, as shown in Figure

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education, they would have to bear the consequences. This could lead to severe outcomes, such as lack of access to necessary medical treatment or proper education for those who prioritize other expenditures, raising ethical questions about the adequacy of relying solely on personal choice and market solutions for fundamental services (Vargas 2023).



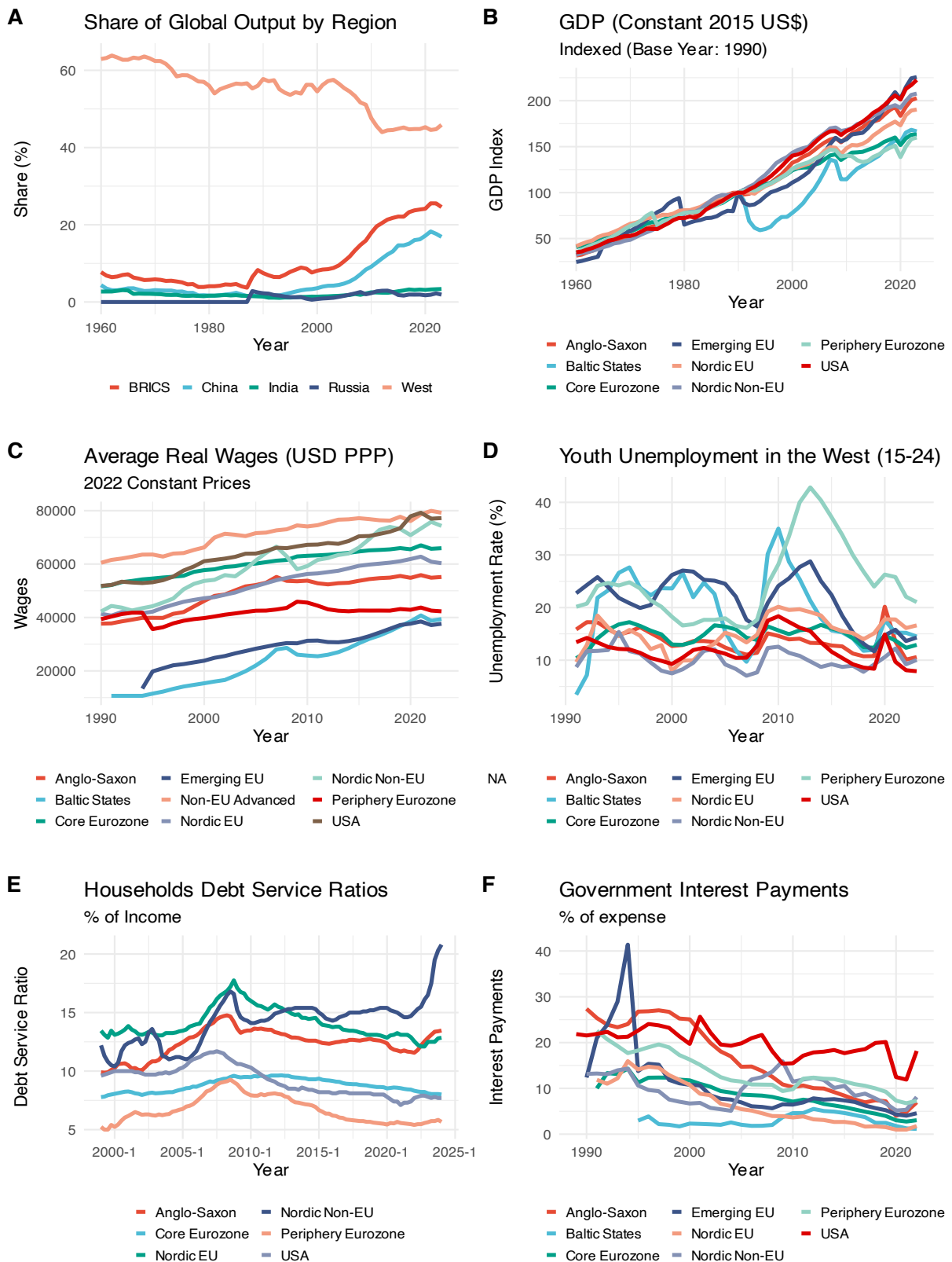


Figure 2: (A) Share of the West in the global output average, 1960-2023. Source: World Bank; (B) GDP Constant 2015 US\$, indexed 1990=100. Source: World Bank, own calculations. (C) Average real wages US\$ PPP in 2022 constant prices. Source: OECD, own calculations. (D) Youth unemployment rate (15-24). Source: World Bank, own calculations. (E) Household debt service ratios as a share of available income. Source: Bank for International Settlements, own calculations. (F) Government interest payments as a share of expenses. Source: World bank, own calculations. Anglo-Saxon Economies: CAN, GBR, AUS, NZL. Core Eurozone Economies: DEU, FRA, NLD, AUT, BEL, LUX, FIN, MLT. Periphery Eurozone Economies: ESP, ITA, PRT, GRC, IRL, CYP. Nordic EU: SWE, DNK. Nordic Non-EU: NOR, ISL. Baltic States: EST, LVA, LTU. Emerging EU: POL, HUN, BGR, ROU, CZE, HRV, SVK, SVN. Non-EU Advanced: LIE, CHE.

3 (B). Therefore, if neoliberalism is to be blamed for the rise of anti-systemic movements, including populism and political extremism, economic aspects are not enough.

That is because it is difficult to assess people’s well-being based on macroeconomic variables. Furthermore, real wages, debt service, and other economic variables do not reflect the impact of economic liberalization on the levels of economic insecurity. The implementation of Neoliberal policies in the labour market resulted in the creation of the ‘precariat’, a social class characterized by low wages, temporary contracts, freelance or gig work, a lack of security and stability in their employment, income and social protection (Standing 2011).

As shown in Figure 3 (A), most regions saw a notable increase in part-time and temporary employment. In 2020, the levels reached 17.3% in Nordic EU members, 16.7% in the Core Eurozone, 13.5% in the Periphery Eurozone, 17.3% in non-EU Nordic countries, and 24.7% in non-EU advanced economies. The exceptions were the Baltic States (5.55%) and Emerging EU member states (6.23%).

Therefore, as a result of the growing economic volatility discussed above, many people have been increasingly bearing the risks associated with adverse life events and economic fluctuations (Hacker 2004; Taylor-Gooby 2004). This is reflected in the feelings about household income (Figure 3:B). The Nordic countries, where welfare policies are still more prevalent than in other European countries, scored higher in the average feeling about household income, as the flatter lines show that the impact of crises were less significant. Together with stagnating real wages, job insecurity, and inequality, this results in frustration, while feelings of powerlessness and mistrust in institutions, further amplify this anger, leading to increased support for populist movements (Longergan and Blyth 2020; Zhirnov et al. 2024).

As the support for a specific political system is derived from its capacity to increase people’s well-being, failing to meet expectations might increase public support for autocracy (Booth and Seligson 2009; Bratton, Mattes, and Gyimah-Boadi 2004; Norris

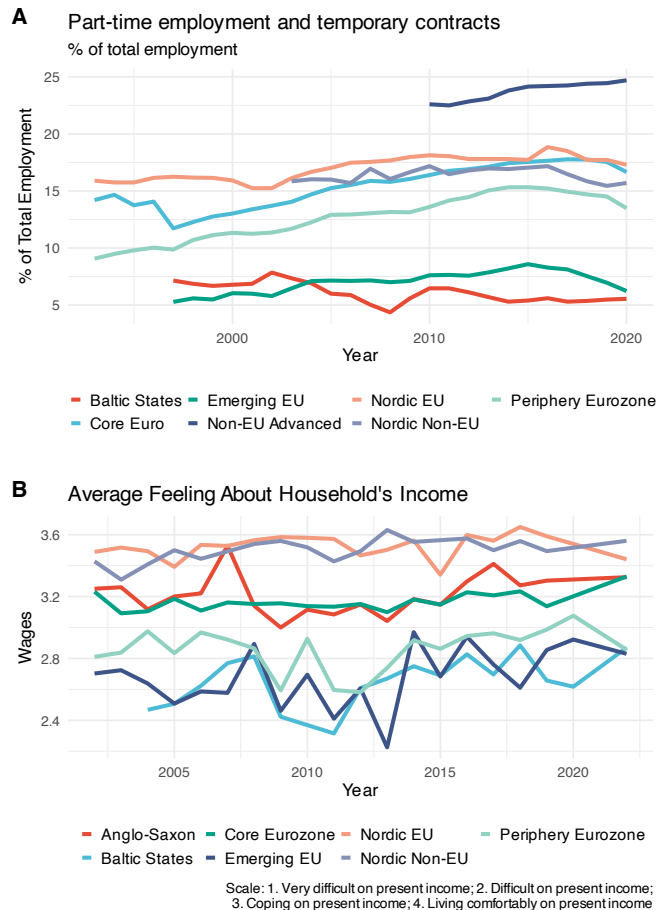


Figure 3: (A) Part-time employment and temporary contracts as percent of total employment. Source: EUROSTAT, own calculations. (B) Average feeling about a household’s income, ranging from 1(very difficult on present income) up to 4 (living comfortably on present income). Data from the European Social Survey, Waves 1-10, N = 400,721. Anglo-Saxon Economies: CAN, GBR, AUS, NZL. Core Eurozone Economies: DEU, FRA, NLD, AUT, BEL, LUX, FIN, MLT. Periphery Eurozone Economies: ESP, ITA, PRT, GRC, IRL, CYP. Nordic EU: SWE, DNK. Nordic Non-EU: NOR, ISL. Baltic States: EST, LVA, LTU. Emerging EU: POL, HUN, BGR, ROU, CZE, HRV, SVK, SVN. Non-EU Advanced: LIE, CHE.

and Inglehart 2019). As seen in Figure 4, in the West, and more specifically in European countries, the levels of satisfaction with democracy have been consistently above the levels of satisfaction with the economy and trust in the Parliament. As these levels fluctuated in the last 20 years, great volatility was seen in countries that experienced economic and political crises, especially after the 2008 financial crisis. There is a clear pattern where satisfaction with the economy critically shapes satisfaction with democracy and trust in political institutions.

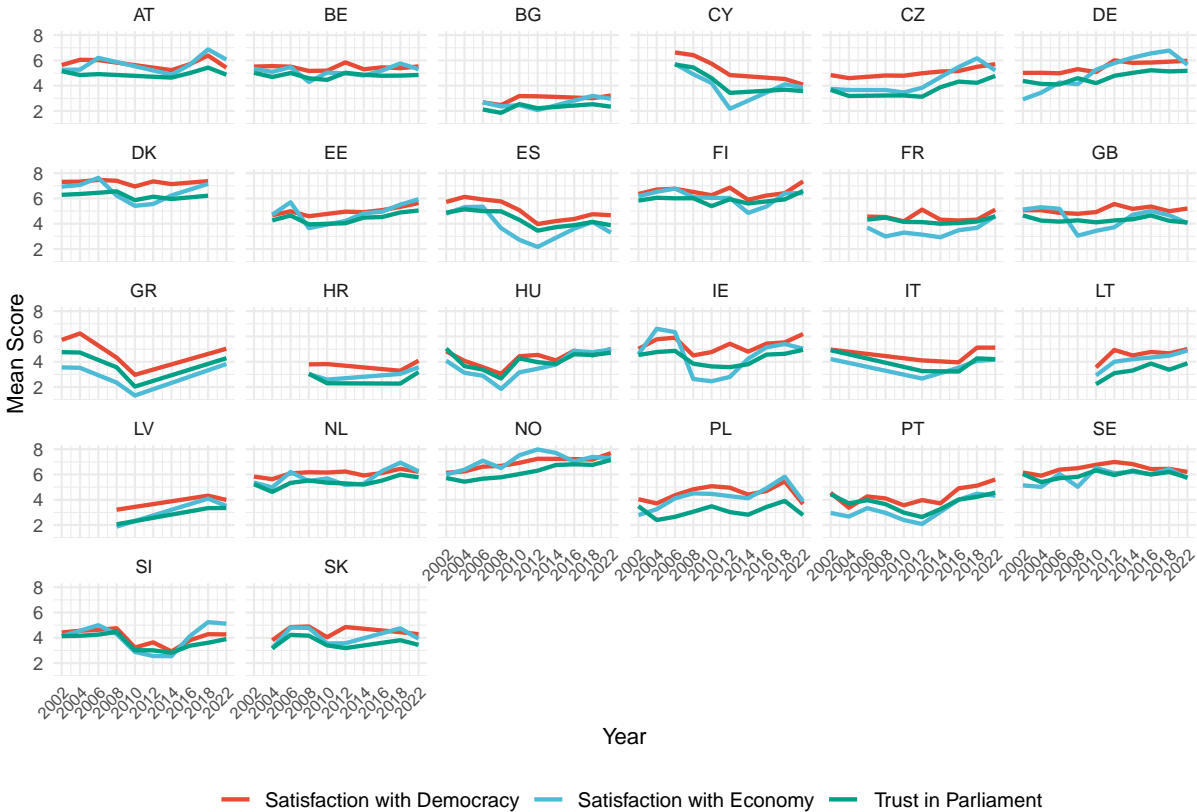


Figure 4: Mean score of satisfaction with democracy, satisfaction with economy, and trust in the Parliament 2002-2022. Data from the European Social Survey, waves 1-10, N = 368,946, own calculations.

This is the most fertile ground for Russian mental warfare, as the main political clash today is between democracy and authoritarianism and Russian cognitive/mental warfare is aimed at destroying the worldview and civilizational foundations of its opponent. The operations of malign foreign agents in the West aim to capitalize on the structural fragilities created by neoliberal ideology and policies to achieve their strategic interests. Nevertheless, data shows that Western societies are quite resilient as there is no widespread support for authoritarianism. Instead, there is an increasing demand for more direct forms of democratic participation. Thus, although Russian mental warfare has a limited reach in Europe, in general, it is of utmost importance that political leaders reconnect with society to reduce the feeling of disconnection between the government and its institutions, and the population. They must also consider how neoliberal economic and social policies affect the population. The idea that regulated oligopolistic markets to emulate competition, combined with fiscal austerity, will result in sustained economic development has no support in empirical evidence. The European Union countries which implemented austerity measures after the 2008 financial crisis of-

ten experienced stagnation and prolonged economic distress. As shown in Figure 1, satisfaction with the economy is closely linked to satisfaction with democracy.

### 3 The Russo-Ukraine war and a changing geopolitical landscape

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine is a catalyst for significant changes in global politics, including the search for a new European security architecture.<sup>4</sup> The shift in the geopolitical landscape should be put into the context of overall post-Cold War development trajectories, as the Russo-Ukraine war resulted from tensions that emerged after the dissolution of the bipolar world order. The collapse of the USSR was the victory of liberal democratic ideology over communist ideology. F. Fukuyama (1989: 4) claimed at the time: "What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government." The triumph of liberal democracy and the end of the bipolar world order led to American global dominance in international politics, often termed "liberal hegemony" (Ikenberry, 2001; Ikenberry, 2011; McKeil, 2021; Posen, 2014). It is a specific form of hierarchy, "infused with liberal characteristics" (Ikenberry, 2011: 26). However, Russia and China began to shape a multipolar world order soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1997, Russia and China adopted the "Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order" where they declared opposition to hegemony among other things: "A growing number of countries are beginning to recognize the need for mutual respect, equality and mutual advantage - but not for hegemony and power politics - and for dialogue and cooperation - but not for confrontation and conflict" (UN Digital Library, 1997). Thus, the tensions of the post-Cold War era were determined by US global dominance and the efforts of other great powers to balance it, developing and promoting the idea of a multipolar world.

For decades, Russia-Ukraine relations have been a battlefield between the efforts of the Ukrainian people to join a democratic power centre through the EU and NATO membership. This was hampered by Russia, which wanted to maintain its influence in Ukraine. Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine is the result of two decades of contradictions between Russia's foreign policy interests and democratic processes in Ukraine. The "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine in 2004 was one of the significant turning points that showed Ukraine's dissociation from Russia in terms of political culture and geopolitical orientation. Russia's motives concerning Ukraine are related to increasing geopolitical influence, maintenance of the stability of the authoritarian regime, and irredentist aspirations. In the long term, Russia exercised its influence in Ukraine with a wide range of tools - political and informational influence, the activity of special services, corruption, military force, and others. Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine in 2022 aimed for the complete consolidation of Russian influence in Ukraine; however, the resistance of the Ukrainian people and the military support of Ukraine's allies corrected Russia's plans. Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine has significantly reduced its military,

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<sup>4</sup>The concept of "European security architecture" within this strategic review is defined broadly as an overall set of principles, guidelines, institutions, and partnerships to ensure the security of the EU.

economic, diplomatic, and informational power and increased Russia's dependency on China, making it a junior partner in Sino-Russian relations (Fraser, 2024).

Russia's increasing dependency on China due to the Russo-Ukrainian war marks the transition from a unipolar world order to a bipolar one, with the United States of America and China being the two leading great powers (Avdaliani, 2023; Kupchan, 2021). The new European security architecture will develop in the context of the new bipolarity, which also means competition between democracies and authoritarian political regimes and their value systems, represented by one and the other power centre. The EU "Strategic Compass for Security and Defence" admits that "our world is becoming less free with human rights, human security and democratic values under attack – both at home and abroad. We face a competition of governance systems accompanied by a real battle of narratives" (Council of the European Union, 2022: 5). Lehne (2023) summarizes that "an international system based on democracy, rule of law, and multilateral cooperation" promoted by the West is a fading vision overtaken by "further ramping up of geopolitical competition, increasing economic protectionism and fragmentation, and a loosening of the structures of the international order." What are the implications of this geopolitical turn for Europe and its security? Three interrelated sets of ideas can be distinguished.

Democratic values and human rights are at the core of Europe's identity and global competitiveness. Therefore, limiting the influence of authoritarian states on internal processes within Europe in the long run is one area of activity crucial to ensuring Europe's security. Authoritarian states use a diverse set of tactics to undermine democratic processes in Europe such as: "disinformation, the suppression of information, the manipulation of social media platforms and their algorithms, terms and conditions, and advertising systems, cyberattacks, hack-and-leak operations to gain access to voter information and interfere with the legitimacy of the electoral process, threats against and the harassment of journalists, researchers, politicians and members of civil society organisations, covert donations and loans to political parties, campaigns favouring specific candidates, organisations and media outlets, fake or proxy media outlets and organisations, elite capture and co-optation, 'dirty' money, fake personas and identities, pressure to self-censor, the abusive exploitation of historical, religious and cultural narratives, pressure on educational and cultural institutions, taking control of critical infrastructure, pressuring foreign nationals living in the EU, the instrumentalization of migrants and espionage" (European Parliament, 2022).

Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine demonstrates its aggressive behaviour in the international arena and increases awareness of it as a European security threat. As a result, many European countries have implemented measures to reduce Russia's ability to carry out covert influence operations. A visible example at the European level is the limitation of economic cooperation and decreasing of energy dependency on Russia, which Russia could, until its full-scale warfare against Ukraine, use as a lever to achieve its interests. For example, from the second quarter of 2022 to the second quarter of 2024, EU exports to Russia declined by 59%, and imports from Russia declined by 87% (Eurostat, 2024). However, Russian aggression against neighbouring countries is a long-term problem because Russia's aggression against Ukraine arises from its strategic culture. Therefore, security risks from Russia will most likely remain even if Putin's regime ceases to exist. The attempts to frame the Russo-Ukrainian war as Putin's war imply that relations between Russia and Europe could return to their old tracks when

he is no longer in power. Such thinking poses risks to European security. Russia can use economic, information, political, and other non-military tools of influence to pursue its interests, which Europe can diminish by limiting relations with it.

The EU's relationship with China is more complex because of its instruments of influence and the security risks they pose, which are more challenging to identify. The EU-China Strategic Outlook emphasized cooperation with China (European Commission, 2019). Nevertheless, EU-China relations have become more tense since then due to the "COVID-19 pandemic (...) economic issues; limited market access in China; a lack of reciprocity for European companies; concerns over 5G security; general tensions and in particular Beijing's military threats towards Taiwan; human rights issues in China, especially in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong; and China's position on Russia's invasion of Ukraine" (Brinza et al., 2024: 1). Sabanadze, Vasselier & Wiegand (2024) emphasize that the rapprochement of Russia and China is a common threat to Europe and "specialized and separate thinking on Russia as a security threat and China as an economic competitor" does not correspond to the new situation. The paradigm of the competition between democracies and autocracies brought about by the Russo-Ukrainian war implies the need to counter the authoritarian regimes' overt and covert attempts to decrease democracies' competitiveness in terms of values, the economy, science and technology, military power, diplomacy, and other instruments of far-reaching global impact.

The second set of ideas concerns the transition from a rules-based order to power politics. The course of the Russia-Ukraine war clearly shows that Russia understands only the language of force. Therefore, strong military potential is the only effective way to deter Russia from a military attack and effectively resist its aggression in the event of an attack. The EU consists of large and small countries with different military capabilities and threat perceptions. However, a potential Russian attack on one of them would be a significant security threat to the others as well. Therefore, in the new geopolitical situation, Europe's strong military potential is a precondition for the defence of democratic values and human rights. Several principles and future directions of action are essential to build and strengthen Europe's military potential. First, it means a commitment to increased defence spending in the long run. Secondly, increased military cooperation between the EU member states will allow for more effective synergy between their various strengths, making Europe militarily stronger. Thirdly, advanced military research and innovation are prerequisites for Europe to develop weapons that are technologically superior to the enemy and thus capable of more effectively protecting the lives of European civilians, its critical infrastructure, cultural heritage, and other material values. Fourthly, a developed European defence industry will provide the necessary weapons so that the countries attacked by Russia can resist its aggression. Fifth, a comprehensive national defence system that operates on whole-of-government and whole-of-society principles will European countries' resilience in various crises, including military aggression. Finally, strong relations between the EU and the US, and the EU and NATO, form a robust democratic power centre in the circumstances of new bipolarity.

The third set of ideas marks a paradigm shift from democracy promotion to democracy safeguarding. Promoting democracy globally is one of the prerequisites of the liberal world order. This belief is rooted in the assumption that democratic countries are more inclined to follow rules and norms than use military force to achieve their political goals. Unfortunately, autocracies have learned to suppress democratic movements within their countries (Freedom House, 2023: 10). This means that in the new

bipolarity, liberal democracy is not a universal value, and democracies will coexist with authoritarian political regimes and their value systems. Europe, as a region of democratic states, will shift its focus from efforts to export democratic values to internal democracy decline (Diamond & Plattner, 2015) to be competitive with increasingly vital autocracies. Democracies have the potential to overcome these difficulties and find new and effective ways of interaction between the state and society because «although many express dissatisfaction with the way democracy is working in their country, majorities [...] believe representative democracy to be a somewhat or very good form of governance» (Wike et al., 2024).

## 4 Sources of cohesion and friction within NATO

NATO's role in European security has grown in the past decade. Although the transatlantic alliance is not a direct participant in the war that was caused by Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, it has enabled allies to provide military and economic assistance to Ukraine, without allies being overly concerned about what Russia might do to them in response. Thus, NATO membership has grown, and so has its military presence on the eastern flank of the alliance. While there is little dispute that the alliance will remain the cornerstone of the collective effort to deter Russia in Europe, this section aims to identify potential points of contention in the alliance.

In terms of substance, this section does two things. First, the subsequent analysis builds on the insights from both previous sections and acknowledges the vulnerabilities of Western societies to Russia's malign influence. NATO's efforts to deter Russia and defend against it, if that will be deemed necessary, is also a clear sign of democracy being on the backfoot in an era of democratic backsliding. Second, the analysis in this section also builds on the literature on military alliances and addresses some of the key points of contention that are characteristic in alliances. Alliances are instruments for aggregating the military capabilities of states that face similar threats. As such, they involve military cooperation between allies and some form of promise to come to each other's aid in case an ally is facing a military threat. However, even though alliances presuppose similar security interests between allies, those interests are almost never identical. Thus, it is to be expected that allies will be able to agree on certain policies and measures vis-à-vis the adversary, but allies are unlikely to be on the same page on all issues. These issues are then constantly negotiated and renegotiated by allies, as the security environment changes and requires the adjustment of current policies.

The subsequent analysis focuses on seven aspects of academic debate on military alliances: abandonment and entrapment concerns of allies, the burden-sharing issue in intra-alliance diplomacy, accepting new members in the alliance, diplomatic engagement with the adversary, the deterrence and defence posture of the alliance, agreement on specific war plans and their execution, and the interplay between domestic politics and the ability of the alliance to retain cohesion. Although each of the seven items represents a vast research area, the aim of this section is to identify key concerns in each of the seven aspects in the context of NATO and discuss their potential impact on the cohesion of the alliance, its ability to continue to play a key role in European security and to deter aggression against NATO members.

Any meaningful discussion on alliances, however, must acknowledge key academic contributions. Classic works have looked mainly at the origins of alliances (Walt 1987)



and the formation and management of alliances under multipolarity (Snyder 1997). Overall, alliances have been widely regarded as reactions to external threats. That, however, has not been the only interpretation of how alliances are formed. An alternative view regards alliances as means for restraining and controlling partners and potential adversaries (Weitsman 2004; Pressman 2012). Sometimes, alliance formation succeeds, but sometimes it does not, as negotiations between potential allies fall apart (Poast 2019). Much of the academic work has focused on the US's extensive system of alliances, built in the aftermath of World War II. Despite initial warnings against foreign entanglements (Davidson 2020), the US has built a system of alliances spanning the globe (Rapp-Hooper 2020).

The fact that military alliances have considerable implications for international security has generated much academic interest in studying various aspects of alliance functioning and behaviour. A key focus has been on clarifying the deterrent effects of military alliances, that is, whether alliances make armed conflict more or less likely (Leeds 2003; Kenwick, Vasquez, and Powers 2015). Others have focused on the extent to which alliances constrain their most powerful members (Beckley 2015). In addition, burden-sharing has been a consistent theme in discussions about alliances (Blankenship 2023; Lanoszka 2022). Although much of the literature on alliances does not have a particular focus on NATO, insights garnered from the literature are applicable to the Transatlantic alliance. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has heightened its allies' security concerns and reinvigorated debates within NATO about how to respond to the return of war in Europe.

First, Russia's aggression has impacted the perceptions of threat and the likelihood of conflict with Russia. Although NATO has gone to great lengths to reduce the possibility of a direct confrontation with Russia, there is some disagreement within the alliance between those who believe that NATO is not doing enough to help Ukraine and defend vulnerable frontline allies, such as the Baltic states, and those who believe that by doing too much the alliance would end up in a military conflict with Russia. The former fear abandonment, while the latter are concerned about entrapment in a war that could have been avoidable. The alliance has done much to alleviate the concerns of both groups by reassuring the frontline allies that they will be defended if Russia commits aggression against them and trying to keep NATO out of the war in Ukraine, to reassure those who fear entrapment. There are limits, however, as to the extent to which the allies' fears can be alleviated. The Baltic states, whose main concern over the past years has been abandonment, fear a resurgent Russia if it succeeds in defeating Ukraine. Even if Russia does not win against Ukraine in the ongoing war, it can rebuild its military and try again at some later point. Those who fear entrapment, may have concerns over the effects of military assistance to Ukraine and whether NATO states will be drawn into the war at some point. As NATO aims to project an image of strength and unity, there are few signs that the security concerns of its members are different, but its caution regarding the provision of assistance to Ukraine, and the Baltic states' calls to increase the military presence in the region, signals that the concerns over abandonment and entrapment have not disappeared.

Second, historically, a key element of intra-NATO discussions was the allies' contributions to the Transatlantic alliance, also known as the burden-sharing debate. Although this debate was often portrayed as US criticism of its European allies for not investing enough in their defence capabilities, this debate has resurfaced in recent years, albeit in

a somewhat different form. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has shocked NATO members into rapidly increasing defence spending. In 2014, only three NATO members spent at least 2 per cent of GDP on defence. That number has grown to 24 in 2024 (NATO 2024). There are several concerns though that may reinvigorate the burden-sharing debate in the coming years. To start with, higher defence spending may not be enough to provide military assistance to Ukraine and to replenish the stockpiles of European nations. The challenge though is not just to replace the capabilities and ammunition provided to Ukraine, but to go beyond where Europe was pre-war. To that end, 2 per cent of GDP would not be enough. European nations would need to sustain significantly higher levels of defence spending and capability development to become a formidable military power. Furthermore, there are considerable discrepancies across NATO members in how defence spending has grown (or is slated to grow in the coming years). Poland and the Baltic nations have gone above the 3 per cent mark, while eight members have not been able to reach the 2 per cent threshold. For now, it is expected that defence spending will grow across NATO. If that does not happen, concerns over burden-sharing may resurface in the Transatlantic alliance, especially if the US security commitment to Europe decreases. Only this time, it would be the US and the frontline nations who would be initiating the debate.

Third, NATO has grown larger since 2022, with Finland and Sweden having become the most recent members of the alliance. There was no indication before the war that both states would be willing to become NATO members at any time soon. Russia's brutal aggression (which did not go according to plan) changed that. Although NATO enlargement was relatively quick, with Finland joining the alliance on April 4, 2023, and Sweden following suit less than a year later, on March 7, 2024, it was not entirely unproblematic. Finland and Sweden applied for NATO membership together in mid-May 2022, and Finland's membership was, indeed, ratified relatively quickly. Sweden's membership, however, was held back by Turkey and Hungary and thus took longer than expected. This demonstrates that any future enlargement of the alliance cannot be taken for granted. Ukraine's NATO membership may prove to be especially contentious. Ukraine was promised NATO membership at the Vilnius Summit in July 2023, and this pledge was reiterated a year later at the Washington Summit. It is unlikely though that Ukraine will join NATO any time soon because this would require the consent of all existing members. When Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelenskyy proposed his victory plan in October 2024, which included extending an invitation to Ukraine to join NATO (President of Ukraine 2024), the reaction to that proposal was muted, and it soon became clear that about half a dozen NATO members were opposed to inviting Ukraine into the alliance – with the US and Germany being the most prominent sceptics (Politico 2024). Although it was clear that Ukraine could not join NATO while the war was still raging, it is likely that Ukraine's NATO bid could be problematic even after the war. Thus, NATO enlargement will continue to be a divisive issue in future, especially regarding Ukraine's membership in the alliance.

Fourth, diplomatic engagement with the adversary is another potentially problematic issue with which NATO must deal. On the one hand, the alliance has demonstrated remarkable unity in the face of Russia's aggression, and high-level contacts with Russia have largely ceased. Furthermore, although adopting a common policy towards Russia has been difficult, there has been remarkable consistency in pursuing this policy. For example, the economic sanctions that were imposed against Russia because of the

downing of Malaysian Airlines flight 17 in the summer of 2014 and Russia's role in the war in Ukraine's Donbas region were pursued until 2022. Much harsher sanctions were then imposed after 24th February. Leaders of several NATO member states pursued personal contacts with the Russian president, before the full-scale invasion, and right after its start. Since then, however, high-level contacts and visits have been, for the large part, suspended.

The current situation is not going to last forever though, and contacts will resume at some point. In addition, current policies towards Russia will be revised, depending on the war's outcome. This will likely generate much friction within NATO and may result in a divided alliance. Besides this, Europe has a history of reintegrating adversaries into the system of relations between European states. After all, Russia is a major European power, and its actions have consequences for European security. Engaging with Russia may offer an opportunity to shape its policies, although post-Cold War attempts to shape Russia's policies through economic engagement ultimately failed. In any case, the issue of re-engaging with Russia and whether re-engagement should be based on certain preconditions is likely to prove a divisive issue.

Fifth, the deterrence and defence posture of NATO vis-à-vis Russia on the eastern flank of the alliance has increased over the past decade. The NATO Enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) battlegroups have been deployed in Poland and the Baltic states since 2017, and the military presence of the alliance was reinforced from 2022. Furthermore, NATO's deterrence and defence posture is likely to be strengthened by the higher defence expenditures of its members, which are slated to grow in the coming years, as well as the integration of Sweden and Finland into the alliance. New NATO defence plans have been adopted and gradually implemented, as member states continue to invest in military capabilities. These measures certainly bolster the security of the Baltic states, but for the time being, Russia's focus is on defeating Ukraine. With its current difficulty in surmounting Ukraine's fierce resistance, Russia can hardly afford a military confrontation with NATO. Thus, the question remains whether NATO's military presence in frontline states will be sufficient, once the war in Ukraine is over and whether NATO will have a demonstrated ability to project its military power in the Baltic region quickly. This would deny Russia the ability to achieve a *fait accompli* in case it chooses to invade it. As Russia would continue to rebuild its military after the war in Ukraine, the Baltic states are likely to initiate a debate within NATO on the most suitable deterrence and defence posture in the Baltic region. The problem from the Baltic perspective is that the current posture is insufficient, leaving the Baltic states vulnerable vis-à-vis Russia, thus placing a disproportionate financial burden on the Baltics and conveying a signal to Russia that NATO allies are risk-averse and afraid to provoke Russia. In this case, the Baltic states would remain permanently insecure, something that would limit their economic potential by inhibiting direct foreign investment.

Sixth, alliances presuppose that states agree on specific war plans and their execution in case of war. When the Baltic states joined NATO, no specific war plans were developed to defend them against potential aggression. This began to change after the Russia-Georgia war, and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 finally prompted development on new NATO defence plans. While that is a welcome development, allies may see the conflicts as interrelated, and state behaviour during one conflict as indicative of likely behaviour during a different conflict. Although Ukraine is not a member of NATO, restrictions imposed by allies on Ukraine may be interpreted as being indicative

of potential actions by NATO allies in an actual military conflict with Russia. There have been restrictions on supplying Ukraine with certain weapons systems. In addition, restrictions have been placed on the use of some of the already delivered systems to strike military targets on Russia's territory. Germany's refusal to supply Ukraine with Taurus cruise missiles and the US's reluctance to grant Ukraine permission to use ATACM missiles to strike airfields and other military targets in Russia provide ample evidence of fear of escalation and excessive caution in helping Ukraine to defend itself. Although it may intuitively seem that there would be no restrictions and caveats in case of potential military aggression by Russia against the Baltic states (after all, the Baltic states are full-fledged NATO members), it is still likely that there would be attempts by NATO allies to control conflict escalation, which may reduce the military effectiveness of NATO's response. Thus, certain targets in Russia might be spared, making it more difficult for the Baltic states to defend themselves.

Finally, the first two sections of this paper have demonstrated the importance of domestic politics. The ability of the Euro-Atlantic nations to deter external military threats and defend against them, if necessary, largely depends on NATO's cohesiveness. Dissatisfaction with governments' economic policies and democratic backsliding may rupture NATO's cohesion because it may bring to power political forces that are not committed to defending their democratic allies and which, in fact, may view non-democracies as partners in a changing world order. The preamble of NATO's Washington Treaty (1949) includes a provision that the Parties "are determined to safeguard the freedom, common heritage and civilisation of their peoples, founded on the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law" (NATO, 1949). Thus, NATO nations were never bound together only by a common adversary, as NATO was an alliance of democracies. If NATO nations' democratic backsliding continues apace, cohesion is likely to be its first victim. Furthermore, dissatisfaction with the economic results produced by democratic regimes could be exacerbated by Russia's disinformation and covert actions. This is likely to have implications for alliance cohesion as well, because some of the allies are unlikely to rely on those allies that have been increasingly sympathetic towards authoritarian regimes and whose political systems have been influenced by authoritarian governments and disinformation. This does not necessarily spell the end of the Transatlantic alliance, but it should definitely be regarded as a call to action to defend democratic systems in NATO countries and protect them from malign influence.

## 5 Conclusion

The West is likely to face numerous challenges in the coming years. Taming Russia in response to its invasion of Ukraine should not have been as difficult as it turned out to be. After all, NATO remains the most powerful military alliance in the world, and Russia's economy is dwarfed by its Western adversaries. This, however, is exactly the point, because mustering the resources and unity needed for that purpose is a tall order. The analysis above places an emphasis on three particular challenges that are likely to inhibit the ability of the West to respond effectively to policies pursued by Russia and China: the consequences of neoliberal policies that Western governments pursued in previous decades; democratic backsliding in Western countries that will most likely produce a more inward focus as governments aim to contain the populist

and non-democratic instincts of opposition forces; and the limits to alliance solidarity within NATO that is likely to result in permanent insecurity in the frontline allies most exposed to Russia's policies.

The difficulties that the West will face in responding to revisionist powers, stem from both domestic and international processes that have unfolded in past decades. Domestically, the realization of economic and social policies based on neoliberal ideology created internal fragilities. These resulted in lower levels of satisfaction with the economic system, democracy, and lower levels of trust in the political realm. This dissatisfaction and the consequent increasing support for anti-systemic movements, including populist ones, give leverage for malign internal and external agents to engage in non-kinetic operations with the objective of subverting the current political and economic order. Therefore, it is fundamental that Western political leaders consider how their policy choices influence the population, especially in the economic realm.

This question is aggravated by the changing character of the post-Cold War world order. Today, it can be primarily characterized as two bipolar systems. One at the global level – the US and China – and another regional – Europe and Russia. Both bipolarities present persistent challenges for European security, as bipolar systems are known for the competition that they entail. The implications for European security are as follows. First, the decline of Western global dominance and the need to defend liberal democracy against other competing value systems and governance models provides preconditions for global competition between democracies and autocracies, which is one of the key traits of the new era. The ability of different political systems to provide better economic conditions and more efficient governance will determine the global appeal of democratic or authoritarian value systems. Although there is reason to believe that democracies can provide better conditions for innovation and generation of economic wealth, they face internal democracy backsliding, which is exploited by malign authoritarian actors. Thus, strengthening the commitment to democratic values within Western countries, rather than focusing on democracy promotion abroad, is of primary importance for ensuring the competitiveness of the West.

Second, the return of power politics will mean that Europe (as a combination of EU and NATO) needs solid military potential and capable armed forces suited for 21st-century warfare. To strengthen Europe militarily, European countries can supplement collective defence with comprehensive national defence principles, as is being done in Nordic countries and the Baltic States, which will increase the resilience of each European country's society. It is also critically important to develop military research and innovation and defence industries to make Europe advanced in terms of military technology and maximally self-sufficient in terms of armaments. The ability of European countries to cooperate in diverse aspects of strengthening military potential is also essential.

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