Battle for Democracy in the Digital Age

Edited by
Lucie Tungul

campus TIVOLI

Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies

TOPAZ

This is a joint publication of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, TOPAZ and Campus Tivoli. This publication receives funding from the European Parliament. The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, TOPAZ, Campus Tivoli and the European Parliament assume no responsibility for facts or opinions expressed in this publication or any subsequent use of the information contained therein. Sole responsibility lies on the author of the publication.

Contact:

©TOPAZ
Opletalova 1603/57
11000 Praha 1
Czechia

For more information please visit: https://www.thinktopaz.cz
https://www.martenscentre.eu/
https://campus-tivoli.at

The draft chapters were submitted by January 31, 2025. The processing of the publication was concluded in March 2025.

Reviewed by: Jakub Charvát, Metropolitan University Prague, Czechia
Sandra Pasarić, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, Belgium
Mathias Weiß, Campus Tivoli, Austria

ISBN: 978-80-88350-51-4

Project Partners

TOPAZ is the official think tank of the TOP 09 political party. Our aim is to help cultivate public space, to be an incubator of new ideas, and to name the main social and political problems and offer solutions to them. With the help of our academic team, and in collaboration with experts and politicians, we actively formulate innovative approaches and visions for modern and responsible politics. We organise public debates, conferences, and seminars and publish analyses, studies, and policy papers. Only an educated society can be resilient to threats. Therefore, we organise roundtables and educational events for professionals and the public, as well as seminars for new and experienced politicians.

The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (WMCES) was established in 2007 as the political foundation and official think tank of the European People's Party (EPP). The Martens Centre has four main goals: advancing centre-right thought, contributing to the formulation of EU and national policies, serving as a framework for national political foundations and academics and stimulating public debate about the EU. It promotes a pan-European mind-set based on centre-right, Christian-Democrat, conservative and like-minded political values.

Campus Tivoli is the leading conservative think tank in Austria focusing on political education and research. Campus Tivoli is committed to fulfilling the role of a meeting place and discourse medium for both national and international experts and representatives from various fields of policy-making, politics, science and research and diplomacy. A dense programme of activities such as panel discussions, workshops, conferences and public lectures as well as regular publications is aimed at informing and involving the public.

Contents

Contributors

Ladislav Cabada is Professor of Political Science and Czechoslovak and Czech History, guarantor of the Political Science Study Programme (MA, PhD) at the Metropolitan University Prague. He currently works as a trustee within the Executive Committee of European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR). His research covers political systems in East-Central Europe – mainly political institutions, protagonists, political culture and regionalism – Europeanisation processes, and political anthropology.

Peter Hefele is an economist and economic historian by profession and served many years in Asia-Pacific for Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. He became Policy director of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies, the official think tank of the European People's Party (EPP) in January 2022. His main fields of expertise are international and developing policies, Asian-European relations, and energy security and climate change.

Jack Herndon is a programme manager on the Countering Foreign Authoritarian Influence team at the International Republican Institute. He works on projects that facilitate exchange between the United States and Europe on policies that counter the malign influence of the Chinese Communist Party and increase the resilience of democracies. He has a Master's degree in International Economics and International Relations from Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies and an undergraduate degree from the University of California, Los Angeles.

Ahmed Mansour is a psychologist and author from Berlin. Born in 1976 in Kfar Saba, he holds both Israeli and German citizenship. In 2018, Mansour founded an initiative for promoting democracy and preventing extremism, which implements various projects in the fields of education, integration, and within correctional facilities. He is also a dedicated advocate against antisemitism. In 2015, his book *Generation Allah: Why We Need to Rethink the Fight Against Religious Extremism* was published, followed *by Straight Talk on Integration – Against False Tolerance and Scaremongering* (2018), and *Solidarity! Against Racism, Antisemitism, and Hate* (2020). His fourth book, *Operation Allah* (S. Fischer Verlag) was published in 2022, and he co-authored *Tension Fields: Life in Germany* (with Josef Schuster, Herder Verlag 2024). He has received numerous awards, including the Carl von Ossietzky Prize for Contemporary History and Politics, the Human Rights Award from the Gerhart and Renate Baum Foundation, and the Federal Cross of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany. In 2022, the Faculty of Theology at the University of Basel awarded him an honorary doctorate.

Dalibor Roháč is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), where he studies political economy of the European Union; a research associate at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies in Brussels; and author of *In Defense of Globalism* (Rowman and Littlefield, October 2019). His previous book, *Towards an Imperfect Union: A Conservative Case for the EU* (Rowman and Littlefield), was included on Foreign Affairs magazine's list of best books of 2016. He has written about European affairs for The Washington Post, The New York Times, Financial Times, The Wall Street Journal, Foreign Affairs, and many other outlets. He has appeared on news outlets including BBC, Bloomberg Television, Fox News, and Fox Business. He holds a PhD in political economy from King's College London, master's degrees from Oxford University and George Mason University, and an undergraduate degree in economics from Charles University in Prague.

Zdeněk Rod is Assistant Professor at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, Department of Politics and International Relations, as well as at CEVRO University in Prague, Department of Security Studies, and Co-Director of the Centre for Security Consulting in Prague. He has been a member of the TOPAZ Academic Council since 2023. His research focuses on International Relations and Security Studies. With a strong publication record, he has authored and co-authored numerous academic and policy articles. His expertise also extends to active participation in national and international research projects.

Sebastian Schäffer is Director of the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM), a regional think tank based in Vienna. He also serves as Secretary General of the Danube Rectors' Conference (DRC), a network of almost 70 universities in the wider Danube Region. In 2011, this Munich-born political scientist founded SSC Europe, a competence network for Seminars, Simulations and Consulting. Schäffer has held several positions as a lecturer and research fellow at universities and institutions in Germany, where he also earned two master's degrees. His areas of expertise include European integration, EU enlargement and future scenarios. He is the author of more than 100 articles and papers, and has written as well as edited several books, among them Ukraine in Central and Eastern Europe.

Malwina Talik is a Research Associate at the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe, where she focuses on democratic resilience, migration and asylum (especially instrumentalized migration), gender equality and current developments in CEE (particularly Austria and Poland). She previously worked at the Polish Academy of Sciences and the Polish Embassy in Vienna. Talik holds a joint M.A. degree in Global Studies and History from the University of Leipzig and the University of Vienna. She completed exchange semesters at Eötvös Loránd University, Fudan University, and a research internship at the EU Delegation to Ethiopia. Talik has further enhanced her expertise through summer programs in Peace Research and Democratic Resilience at the University of Oslo.

She is also a former OSCE/UNODA Fellow for Peace and Security and current fellow at Casimir Pulaski Foundation

Lucie Tungul graduated from Miami University, Ohio (International Relations), and Palacky University in Olomouc (Politics and European studies). She worked as assistant professor at Fatih University, Istanbul, and Palacky University, Olomouc. Her areas of interest are European integration with a special focus on Europeanization, democratization, EU decision making processes, Euroscepticism, migration processes and identity discourses. She is currently the Head of Research at TOPAZ and assistant professor at the Department of Politics and Social Sciences, Law Faculty, Palacky University. Her most recent publication is *Europeanisation and Eurasianism in Turkey and Ukraine. Balancing between Integration and Autonomy* (Routledge 2025).

Garvan Walshe is a civic entrepreneur and founder of Article7 – Intelligence for Democrats, co-founder of Unhack Democracy and a Research Associate for the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies.

Foreword

Europe is facing a period of unprecedented challenges. The democratic values on which our civilisation is built are being systematically undermined by hybrid threats, foreign interference and a loss of public trust in political institutions. The security environment is changing fundamentally - not only as a result of Russian aggression against Ukraine, but also with the growing technological competition with authoritarian regimes such as China.

Security is not just about defending national borders anymore. It also means protecting the information space, the trust of citizens, academic freedom and the integrity of our institutions. That is why I consider the connection between security policy, science and research and European cooperation absolutely crucial. We need a unified, value-based and technologically sovereign response in Europe - Europe not just capable of responding to threats, but also of shaping the future.

As a former Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic and the current Minister for Science, Research and Innovation, I am acutely aware that defending democracy is not the sole responsibility of the armed forces. It is a challenge that calls for concerted action of scientists, politicians, educators, and civil society.

This publication makes a valuable contribution to this shared endeavour. It analyses the growing influence of disinformation, social polarisation, technological dependence and external power interference. Yet it does not stop at identifying threats. Each chapter provides concrete suggestions and strategies to enhance the resilience of our democratic systems - from strengthening strategic communication, to youth engagement, and Europe's technological sovereignty in Europe. I believe it will not only stimulate expert debate, but also and above all a call to action. At a time of mounting threats, we need more than debate - we need the courage to act.

Marek Ženíšek

Minister for Science, Research and Innovation of the Czech Republic

Former Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies
of the Parliament of the Czech Republic

Introduction: Democratic Challenges in an Era of Geopolitical Competition and the Digital World:

Lucie Tungul

Democracy faces a range of threats today. The United States is gradually moving away from the liberal model towards authoritarianism, while Russia is actively seeking to weaken democratic institutions and strengthen its geopolitical influence. Russia's strategy is aimed at systematically undermining transatlantic ties and marginalising US influence in Europe, which would allow it to strengthen its position and limit the influence of democratic forces. Democratic states in Europe have long underestimated, however, these risks and are often not prepared to respond adequately, leading to indecision and an inability to effectively counter new threats. Thus far, they have merely stood still.

In addition to the traditional geopolitical risks, we also must address new challenges posed by the digital world. Social media platforms and other digital channels can be sources of democratisation of public space, but can also be used to spread disinformation and manipulate public opinion. Cyber-attacks, Internet silencing and online espionage are used by state and non-state bodies and require appropriate responses and strategies to defend democratic institutions.

Against this backdrop, the nature of geopolitical competition between the European Union (EU) and Russia, in their shared neighbourhood, is changing. Both the EU and Russia seek to influence the political and economic direction of neighbouring states, but do so through fundamentally different approaches. The EU exerts the weight of its authority and calls for the promotion of democratisation, emphasising economic liberalisation, integration with European markets and the development of the rule of law in the process (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005; Börzel 2015). In contrast, Russia relies on force and coercion, using increasing energy dependence, economic pressure and security threats to maintain influence (Tolstrup 2009; Obydenkova and Libman 2015).

The European Model

As mentioned above, the EU seeks to influence events in its neighbourhood through the appeal of its model. Its ability to bring about changes, that are in line with European interests, rests on the legitimacy and credibility of European engagement beyond its borders and on voluntary submission to European influence (Lake 2010). In contrast to economic or military *coercion*, a power relationship based on the *authority* of the superior entity enforces compliance with commitments by the subordinate

entity through offered benefits and mutually accepted norms. In the case of the European Union, this process has been known as Europeanisation.

Europeanisation promotes the legal and institutional convergence of third countries with the EU, using for example trade and association agreements, in some cases the prospect of candidacy status and subsequently the opening of accession negotiations. The highest form of "reward" is full EU membership (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005; Börzel and Lebanidze 2017). The central principle of Europeanisation is the principle of conditionality, which operates on the basis of incentives such as access to the European market, the provision of financial assistance and security guarantees, or sanctions, which include trade restrictions, suspension of agreements, or diplomatic isolation (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2011). The underlying assumption is that the target countries will voluntarily submit to the European regime, as the advantages outweigh the disadvantages of EU convergence (Featherstone and Kazamias 2014).

Europeanisation thus represents a particular form of external interference, whereby states voluntarily submit to EU norms, laws and policies (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005). This process is driven by two interrelated mechanisms that the authors (Levitsky and Way 2006) have termed *linkage* and *leverage*. They define linkage as a dense network of economic, political, and social ties between the EU and the target states - including trade, investment, diplomatic relations, migration, education, cultural exchanges, and civil society networks (Levitsky and Way 2005; Delcour and Wolczuk 2015). The increasing density of these linkages leads to a growing interdependence with the EU, in which European governance models are transferred and internalised to third countries, thereby strengthening the EU's ability to influence the direction of reform policies in the target states.

The concept of leverage describes, in contrast, the ability of the EU to enforce compliance with set conditions through coercion (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2011). The impact of coercion is most effective when there is already a complementarily strong linkage that ensures that the target states are significantly affected by the short and long-term costs of possible non-compliance with EU conditions and their concern about the impact of possible losses outweighs the potential benefits of leaving the European orientation (Levitsky and Way 2006).

The EU's credibility as a partner and its consistent and predictable behaviour are crucial to the success of Europeanisation. If the EU fails to act in a consistent and predictable manner, the EU's influence on target countries weakens - as when member states have failed to find a common position on cases of democratic backsliding in not only an EU candidate but also member states (Börzel 2015). Inconsistency or even paralysis, reinforced by enlargement fatigue and internal divisions among the EU member states, undermine the EU's credibility and consequently its influence inside and outside the EU (Ademmer and Börzel 2013; Youngs 2017).

The Russian Model

While research on external governance has previously focused mainly on Western countries, and then in the case of Europe on EU conditionality, scholarly attention has over time shifted to non-democratic external bodies as well, in particular Russia.[1] Authors have examined the methods and strategies that Russia has developed to counter Western influence and expand its power. The results of these studies show how Russia exploits the historical economic and political dependence of countries in its vicinity to expand its sphere of influence. Russia differs fundamentally from the European Union in the methods it uses to achieve its objectives. The primary goal is to escalate the vulnerability of third countries and exacerbate the risks (or the perception of them) that a country would face if its priorities no longer correspond with Russian interests (Ademmer, Delcour, and Wolczuk 2016). While also building linkages, Russia's primary tool is leverage (*coercion*).

Russia considers the post-Soviet space as its "imperial lands" and bases its power dynamics primarily on domination hierarchy. It uses a wide range of coercive mechanisms, from long-term political interference in internal affairs (support for anti-Western groups and direct support for pro-Russian candidates, threats against democratic candidates and politicians, support for secessionism, PR actions on Russian television or financial and non-financial assistance in election campaigns) to economic (energy monopoly, trade embargoes, subsidies, loan and debt repayments) and military pressure (military alliances, threats and interventions) (Tolstrup 2009b; Obydenkova and Libman 2019).

Ambrosio (2007) divides Russia's external strategies in the post-Soviet space into three approaches: strengthening illiberal regimes (e.g., Belarus, where Lukashenko sought integration with Russia to prevent democratisation), undermining democratising regimes (e.g., Ukraine), and enforcing authoritarian norms internationally - illiberal leaders learn from each other, provide rhetorical support, and coordinate actions against the opposition. In contrast, Tolstrup (2009) categorises the Russian approach into a policy of *managed stability*, which Russia applies to states whose leaders are sympathetic to Russia, such as Belarus, in order to discourage them from pursuing a pro-European path. In states that have already embarked on the path of Western integration, such as Ukraine and Moldova, it applies a policy of *managed instability*, thereby fuelling their economic and political volatility. In doing so, it reduces public confidence in the Western orientation and, at the same time, the credibility of these countries in the eyes of European leaders and the European public, and thus the EU's willingness to engage with the country and support pro-European reforms (Ambrosio 2007; Tolstrup 2009; Delcour and Wolczuk 2015; Obydenkova and Libman 2015). In both cases, Russia's political, economic, and military pressure is complemented by its soft power: strengthening

1 See, for example, Burnell 2006, 2010; Nygren 2007; Tolstrup 2009a, 2014a, 2014b; Wilson and Popescu 2009; Burnell and Schlumberger 2010; Dangerfield 2011; Bogolomov and Lytvynenko 2012; Vanderhill 2012; Langbein 2015; Ademmer, Delcour and Wolczuk 2016; Buzogány 2016; Obydenkova and Libman 2019; Dragneva and Hartwell 2022; Obydenkova 2022; Shyrokykh 2022; Tosun and Shyrokykh 2022

historical, linguistic, and cultural ties with its neighbours and the Russian diaspora, while spreading and reinforcing narratives of European moral and value decay, economic stagnation, and political fragmentation, thus weakening the appeal of the European model (Öniş and Kutlay 2019).

The outcome of the clash between the two competing paradigms of Europe and Russia depends on both internal and external factors. The domestic environment always plays a decisive role, however, as the success of the strategy depends on the willingness of the domestic elites to submit to European or Russian influence (Levitsky and Way 2006). Another determining element is the nature of economic interdependence, as trade, investment and financial ties fundamentally influence the policy decisions of the target states (Casier 2020). The final factor is the geopolitical situation, including regional conflicts, security concerns, and other international pressures that affect the dynamics of the relationship (Obydenkova and Libman 2019).

In assessing the impact of external bodies on the domestic political environment, it is of crucial essence to overcome the simplistic notion that democratic external bodies inherently promote democratisation, while illiberal bodies necessarily promote authoritarianism (Tolstrup 2009; Wolff and Spanger 2013; Obydenkova and Libman 2015). Promoting democracy or authoritarianism can have unintended consequences and sometimes reinforce the very forces they seek to counter (Way 2005; Burnell 2006; Levitsky and Way 2006; Risse and Babayan 2015; Mikecz 2020). Putin's strategy of managed instability in Ukraine has inadvertently strengthened, for example, pro-Western forces; the Euromaidan protests were not a direct product of Europeanisation but rather a reaction to domestic manifestations of authoritarianism and Russian imperial influence. The resilience of the pro-reform Ukrainian public and civil society eventually led the EU to become more actively involved in supporting democratisation. We must therefore approach the assessment of external governance and mingling with a critical eye and with an awareness of its limits, whether by democratic or non-democratic regimes.

The outcome will always depend on the domestic constellation. In both democratising and authoritarian regimes, ruling elites prioritise their own political survival and respond strategically to external stimuli (Bush 2015) - engaging with external bodies to either strengthen their domestic position or to garner support for political change. These contacts may also be self-initiated, without being initiated by a third party.

Having said that, Russia undoubtedly poses an increasing threat to Europe. By interfering in European politics, supporting extremist and populist movements and exploiting social divisions, it seeks to weaken the internal cohesion of the EU and its member states. It also aims to undermine the credibility of democratic institutions. Moscow is using hybrid warfare, including cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns and financial support for Eurosceptic and populist parties, to polarise

European society. The aim is to stir up internal divisions that distract from broader geopolitical threats, exacerbating the already growing risks of polarisation and instability.

Book Structure

This book offers a detailed exploration of the challenges facing contemporary European democracies. *Ladislav Cabada* discusses the significant shift in trust from traditional political institutions and examines the increasing ideological and affective polarisation within Western democracies. His analysis not only outlines the main causes of this growing polarisation but also explores potential strategies for reversing these trends. *Ahmad Mansour* addresses the psychological underpinnings of extremism and radicalisation, noting how personal insecurities and social media's echo chambers contribute to the rise of radical ideologies. His work focuses on how these processes affect adolescents, impairing their empathy and dialogue capabilities, and emphasises the need for understanding and intervention at the psychological level. The following chapter by *Peter Hefele* also focuses on European youth, analysing their political attitudes and pointing out a disturbing trend of polarisation among young voters. He highlights the socio-economic disparities and shifting values that are pushing young men towards populist right-wing parties and discusses strategies for re-engaging this demographic with democratic values through targeted policies and educational initiatives. Concerning populism and polarisation, *Garvan Walshe* questions the response of mainstream political parties to the rise of populism and suggests a re-evaluation of political tactics and styles. He advocates a more charismatic and inclusive approach to politics that reinforces the value of democratic institutions and the importance of civil society in sustaining democracy.

The remaining chapters adopt a more global perspective. *Dalibor Roháč* explores the impact of social media on European democracies and the business models of digital platforms that prioritise engagement over quality discourse. He argues for robust policy changes to mitigate the divisive effects of algorithm-driven content distribution. *Sebastian Schäffer* and *Malwina Talik* analyse how Russian disinformation campaigns are specifically targeting voter behaviour in Central and Eastern Europe to destabilise and polarise societies. Their work highlights the ongoing risks and suggests strategies for countering such influences in sensitive geopolitical regions. Final chapters focus on China. *Jack Herndon* examines the escalating biotechnological competition between the United States and China, emphasising its profound implications for national security and global dominance. He calls for a robust response from democratic nations, urging them to accelerate their own biotechnological advancements and implement strategies to counter China's growing influence in this critical field. *Zdeněk Rod* then specifically focuses on China's political and economic interference within the Visegrad Group, unpacking the complex relationships and strategic responses of these nations. He

assesses the balance between economic opportunities and geopolitical caution, influenced by broader EU and global dynamics.

The chapters in this book provide concrete recommendations on how to strengthen Europe's democratic resilience and strategic capacity to resist internal and external destabilising efforts. By comprehensively addressing these issues, this volume aims to contribute to the ongoing debate on safeguarding European democracy and stability in an era of increasing geopolitical competition.

Bibliography:

Ademmer, Esther, and Tanja A. Börzel. 2013. "Migration, Energy and Good Governance in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood." *Europe-Asia Studies* 65 (4): 581–608. https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2013.766038.

Ademmer, Esther, Laure Delcour, and Kataryna Wolczuk. 2016. "Beyond Geopolitics: Exploring the Impact of the EU and Russia in the 'Contested Neighborhood.'" *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 57 (1): 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2016.1183221.

Ambrosio, Thomas. 2007. "Insulating Russia from a Colour Revolution: How the Kremlin Resists Regional Democratic Trends." *Democratization* 14 (2): 232–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340701245736.

Börzel, Tanja A. 2015. "The Noble West and the Dirty Rest? Western Democracy Promoters and Illiberal Regional Powers." *Democratization* 22 (3): 519–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2014.1000312.

Börzel, Tanja A., and Bidzina Lebanidze. 2017. "'The Transformative Power of Europe' Beyond Enlargement: The EU's Performance in Promoting Democracy in Its Neighbourhood." *East European Politics* 33 (1): 17–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2017.1280473.

Burnell, Peter. 2006. "Promoting Democracy Backwards." 28. Madrid.

Bush, Sarah Sunn. 2015. *The Taming of Democracy Assistance*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107706934.

Casier, Tom. 2020. "Not on Speaking Terms, but Business as Usual: The Ambiguous Coexistence of Conflict and Cooperation in EU–Russia Relations." *East European Politics* 36 (4): 529–43. https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2020.1756784.

Delcour, Laure, and Kataryna Wolczuk. 2015. "Spoiler or Facilitator of Democratization?: Russia's Role in Georgia and Ukraine." *Democratization* 22 (3): 459–78. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2014.996135.

Lavenex, Sandra, and Frank Schimmelfennig. 2011. "EU Democracy Promotion in the Neighbourhood: From Leverage to Governance?" *Democratization* 18 (4): 885–909. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2011.584730.

Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan Way. 2005. “International Linkage and Democratization.” *Journal of Democracy* 16 (3): 20–34. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2005.0048.

Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. 2006. “Linkage versus Leverage. Rethinking the International Dimension of Regime Change.” *Comparative Politics* 38 (4): 379. https://doi.org/10.2307/20434008.

Mikecz, Dániel. 2020. “Civil Society as a Counterbalance to Democratic Backlash? The Civil Society Master Frame and Discursive Opportunities of Politically Active Civil Organizations in Hungary.” *Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 28 (1): 45–59. https://doi.org/10.1080/25739638.2020.1812940.

Obydenkova, Anastassia, and Alexander Libman. 2015. *Autocratic and Democratic External Influences in Post-Soviet Eurasia*. London: Routledge.

Öniş, Ziya, and Mustafa Kutlay. 2019. “Global Shifts and the Limits of the EU’s Transformative Power in the European Periphery: Comparative Perspectives from Hungary and Turkey.” *Government and Opposition* 54 (2): 226–53. https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1017/gov.2017.16.

Risse, Thomas, and Nelli Babayan. 2015. “Democracy Promotion and the Challenges of Illiberal Regional Powers: Introduction to the Special Issue.” *Democratization* 22 (3): 381–99. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2014.997716.

Schimmelfennig, Frank, and Ulrich Sedelmeier. 2005. *The Europeanization of Central and Eastern Europe*. Ithaca: Cornell University Pres.

Tolstrup, Jakob. 2009. “Studying a Negative External Actor: Russia’s Management of Stability and Instability in the ‘Near Abroad.’” *Democratization* 16 (5): 922–44. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510340903162101.

Way, Lucan A. 2005. “Authoritarian State Building and the Sources of Regime Competitiveness in the Fourth Wave: The Cases of Belarus, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine.” *World Politics* 57 (2): 231–61. https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.2005.0018.

Wolff, Jonas, and Hans-Joachim Spanger. 2013. “Democracy Promoters’ Conflicting Objectives. The Research Agenda.” In *The Comparative International Politics of Democracy Promotion*, edited by Jonas Wolff, Hans-Joachim Spanger, and Hans-Jürgen Puhle, 3–37. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315889870.

Youngs, Richard. 2017. *Europe’s Eastern Crisis*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316344033.

(Dis)trust in Political Institutions and Long-term Polarising Trends in the European Environment

Ladislav Cabada

Summary: One of the significant attributes of the current rise in illiberal sentiments and protagonists in Western democracies is the erosion of trust in political and other institutions. Trust is being increasingly transferred from institutions to closed communities, social bubbles or new leaders who build their charisma on a combination of media presentation and political entrepreneurship. Thus, among political elites and within societies, ideological polarisation is giving way to affective polarisation, which in some cases displays sectarian features. In our analysis, we present both the main causes of the growing polarisation and the possibilities for overcoming this trend.

Keywords: trust; distrust; polarisation; affective polarisation

Introduction

The post-war stabilisation of Western liberal democracies was based on a centrifugal model of party systems and social interaction, i.e. on the principle of reducing polarisation and building barriers - educational and socialising, media, political and, if necessary, legal - against anti-liberal and extreme political protagonists. Over the last two decades, however, it is apparent that the importance of long-standing partisan predispositions of electoral preferences and voter cleavages has been declining. This has resulted, among other things, in the growing prominence of issue-based voting as opposed to the formerly predominant class-based voting, but also in increasing political polarisation. Party competition is changing accordingly. Since this trend has become relatively intense, there is a need to pay more attention to the broader social changes that have led to this development.

In our chapter, we briefly analyse the changes in the basic characteristics and trends of political polarisation, linking them partially to another key issue - which may represent both the trigger and the effect of polarisation - i.e., (dis)trust in political and other institutions.

(Post)modernisation as a Key Impulse for Intensifying Polarisation?

A stabilising element of modern democratic systems is the pursuit of consensus among rival social groups. This constitutes the basis of the welfare state (social reconciliation), with decentralised decision-making based on multi-level governance (easing tensions between centres and peripheries, or

urban and rural regions) or neocorporatistism (key corporations as partners of the state). The stability of the liberal-democratic welfare state is also ensured by the acknowledgement that key socio-political cleavages, with their structural, cultural and organisational dimensions, are as important and durable as other sources of conflict (Sass and Kuhnle 2023, 189).

Social scientists agree that Western societies have been undergoing a process of value adaptation since the 1960s. Inglehart (1997) described this process as a "silent revolution" that has resulted in the postmodernisation of societies. This transformation represented a major trigger for the disruption or weakening of petrified cleavages and initiated a process of greater individualisation of electoral and, more generally, political behaviour. Together with other important factors - in particular the transformation of political communication tools and means - this process has heralded the emergence of greater volatility, a decline in political party membership, the weakening of links between political parties and their affiliated social organisations, the emergence of new social movements, etc.

The impulses stemming from Western democracies and (part of) their societal transition to a postmodern understanding of statehood, society and politics have also fundamentally influenced the construction of identity and polarisation. New social movements and newly framed issues and political priorities include: the environmental agenda, feminism and, more recently, broader gender issues, integration (including migration and multiculturalism), the democratisation of foreign and security policy, which entered the social debate and was at the same time exposed to much greater social scrutiny, and many others. All these differences naturally lead to polarisation in the form of widening differences between partisan, ideological or income groups. Polarisation involves a variety of single as well as collective issues that become prominent due to political cleavages. Such polarisation at both elite and public levels leads, on the one hand, to destabilisation of the political and legal environment and, on the other, to a weakening of trust in political institutions and politics as such.

Dominance of the Economic or Cultural Dimension?

In their analysis of polarisation that accompanies the debate on climate change and adaptation policies, Antonio and Brulle (2011, 198) highlight a set of so-called non-modernisation theories. They emphasise that this is only one dimension of a broader and more general polarisation that can be seen in the tension between the modern welfare nation-state and the postmodern globalising state and society. This paradigmatic conflict can be understood, among other things, as advocating the ideal of a small state or as promoting the perception of a state (or of a transnational protagonist taking over part of its role) as a powerful regulatory and caring actor. Although the neo-modernisation theory favours an economic/rational approach to polarisation, one should not fail to notice that it also mentions other dimensions, explicitly linking changes in the fabric of Western democracies to cultural changes, i.e., values.

In this sense, the current debate about the motives behind new forms of polarisation may include both advocates of primarily economically based discontent among large social groups and those who favour more culturally based explanations. These studies focus primarily on the rise of illiberal tendencies in contemporary democracies, the hybridisation of democratic political systems, the strengthening of radical and far-right political parties, anti-integrationist attitudes in the European environment, and nationalism. These and other sub-polarising impulses are very often integrated under the term populism, which is sometimes supplemented with various adjectives (e.g., right-wing, illiberal, authoritarian, anti-European, etc.) and which manifests itself not only at the national but also at the European and even global level (Söderbaum et al. 2021).

In addition to party and more generally political polarisation, we currently observe a growing polarisation in relation to other, mainly "non-political" institutions, such as science, education, media, etc., and also in relation to institutions directly linked to politics, such as the army, police, health, religion and the judiciary. Value debates often address institutions that produce knowledge and information (media, science, education) and institutions that enforce norms (justice, police, military) on opposite sides of the debate. "The rise of talk radio, then cable television, and more recently the Internet and the twenty-four-hour news cycle have amplified these political identifications and debates" (Brady and Kent 2022, 60).

These findings confirm the assumption that the economic and socio-cultural drivers of polarisation cannot be decoupled but are interrelated and complex. Affective polarisation adds another element to the mix - the highly subjective perception of one's status, including categories of success, and not only in economic terms. The causes of deepening polarisation and de-democratisation are much more complex, however, including important cultural factors concentrated in the axiological split between "liberals" and "neoliberals". As Tucker (2020, 137) points out, "All the countries where neo-illiberals won democratic elections . . . were theoretically too rich to have had such challenges to democracy."

In the tradition of major cycles in economic, political or social development, he observes an anti-democratic and anti-liberal wave accompanied by growing polarisation and deepening distrust as a set of partial incidents integrated into the general phenomenon of democratic backsliding. He highlights the snowball effect of populist neoliberalism, which has awakened "passionate archaic demons" and an "atavistic mechanism" in the form of a "vicious circle of economic decline, the breakdown of trade and mobility, and economic and political hostility" (Tucker 2020, 131). In this situation, clear socio-economic class demarcations disappear and a more complex set of determinants that politically identify individuals come into play.

From Ideological to Affective Polarisation

When political scientists talk about polarisation and its binary nature, they often distinguish between "good" and "bad" polarisation. In this sense, Kopecký et al. (2022) distinguish between "normal/ideological" and "affective" polarisation. Similarly, Schmitt (2019, 2) considers a risk too high, too low or even absent of polarisation. Thus, both too high polarisation and its absence are risks. The former case often leads to unstable governments, legislative deadlocks, populism and strong social polarisation, including the rise of anti-systemic forces (which perfectly describes the current Czech situation). What is particularly worrying is that extreme and persistent polarisation can ultimately mean the collapse of a democratic system. Conversely, too little polarisation can reveal dysfunctional competition, where voters do not have a sufficient and competitive choice.

Elites, and not only political elites, play a significant role in reinforcing polarisation. This occurs, on the one hand, by emphasising the irreconcilable positions of different political protagonists and ideologies and generally questioning the government's credibility; they mobilise citizens to become more active. The extremising vocabulary and labelling of the political opponent as "the enemy" leads, on the other hand, to the breakdown of the pro-democratic consensus and to the perception of politics not as a space for finding good solutions, but as a gladiatorial arena in which there is no win-win strategy, but only a zero-sum game.

Affective polarisation must be considered one of the key processes in the development of contemporary Western democracies. It is based on a strong psychologically motivated trust towards members of one's group (in-group identity) and, in contrast, strong distrust of out-group members. In the case of bipartisanship, it is usually a situation in which trust in members of one's own group (party), as well as distrust in representatives of the opposite camp/party, significantly or almost completely suppresses rational argumentation. Even in multipartyism, typical for continental party systems, one of the prominent manifestations of affective polarisation, however, is the division of society into two "irreconcilable" camps. As Wagner (2021) has shown in his recent analysis, "the size of parties matters for levels of affective polarisation. Hence, a citizen's perception of the political system is more effectively polarised if they feel negatively towards a large competitor than if they dislike a minor party."

In this sense, the presence of a strong protest, radical, or even anti-system party with a tendency to divide society into two antagonistic groups in a populist way represents a significant impulse to intensify polarisation, including distrust in state and political institutions. Supporters of this party distrust institutions because they are not controlled by their favourite party, and opponents of this party distrust institutions if this party comes to power. The distrust of the two antagonistic political camps is thus not only related to their perceptions of each other but more generally to their a priori perception of the government exercised by their political opponents as untrustworthy in the event of their electoral defeat.

One should not omit, however, a critical analysis of the (new or social) media. The possibility of choosing as a source of information the media whose presentation corresponds to our subjective perception has reached a qualitatively new level of "parallel societies" thanks to the existence of social or even "alternative" media and the construction of highly polarised social bubbles. Tucker (2020, 58-61) refers to social media as an instrument of unmediated politics. "New information technologies, mostly social media, dismantled the barriers to direct communications from leader to followers. Social media reconstructed the ancient public square in cyberspace, thereby weakening the power of the press to constrain politics." Furthermore, "the populist media gives narrative form to the passions, most notably fear" (Tucker 2020, 61). Fear is naturally one of the most important sources of emotional and irrational judgment, i.e., a source of affective polarisation.

Conclusion: How to Find a New Pro-Democratic Societal Consensus?

As has been shown above, current polarisation represents a complex process associated with a significant transformation of socio-economic attributes, identities and social structures in (post)modern society. Traditional political parties are not always able to effectively absorb new impulses and at the same time aggregate them into shared agendas representing coherent social groups. Gethin (2021) focuses on the positioning of political parties on two axes – "economic-distributive" and "socio-cultural" - and shows that the configuration of these two dimensions of political conflict and the divergence of income and education are closely related phenomena.

An important finding is that different age cohorts (generations) manifest significant differences in their preference for one of the axes or dimensions: while older voters with lower education continue to vote along class lines and thus support the left, social democratic and green parties attract an increasing share of young voters with higher education. The shift in the educational distribution was highest among non-religious voters and men, although it also occurred in other sub-groups. One can also observe a "resistance" to social progress in older generations.

The changes in polarisation, or rather in the strength and importance of the various cleavages in Western democratic societies, have not been dramatic and rapid over the last 70 years, but rather evolutionary. Postmodernisation, or rather neo-modernisation, coupled with the empowerment of the educated middle class, has been an impetus to weaken the traditional class divide. Indeed, traditional left parties responded to this by moving to new topics such as inclusion, protection of minorities, etc., and if they did not do so, faced competition from the Greens or, for example, the Pirate Parties.

As far as the political centre-right is concerned, it either sticks to liberal-conservative positions and moves closer to the centre, tends to slow down, stop or even return/revise, i.e., de-globalise, or insti-

gates a cultural counter-revolution in response to the new problems arising from post-modernisation, which are in stark contrast to the social conservatism of the "old" working class. This cultural counter-revolution has also become the basis for the rise of the populist right. It is this development that many analyses presented above identify as the key polarising factor in contemporary Western-style democracies.

Overcoming the affective polarisation and returning to ideological polarisation is, however, a major challenge for democratic political protagonists. Recent research (Wagner & Praprotnik, 2024) suggests that an important tool for mitigating polarisation is primarily reduced tensions between political parties, i.e., depolarisation at the level of political elites. Cooperation between rival parties, for example, a coalition, plays a key role in reducing affective polarisation in society.

Recommendations:

- Weaken affective polarisation in our own presentation and focus on instruments of social cohesion based on a democratic clash of interests.
- Seek ways to work with political opponents to build a new political consensus.
- Strengthen trust in political and non-political institutions, including an active fight against disinformation.
- Actively seek ways to regulate social media, such as linking content to registered user identity.

Bibliography:

Antonio, Robert J., and Robert J. Brulle. 2011. "The Unbearable Lightness of Politics: Climate Change Denial and Political Polarization." *The Sociological Quarterly* 52 (2): 195–202. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.2011.01199.x.

Brady, Henry E., and Thomas B. Kent. 2022. "Fifty Years of Declining Confidence & Increasing Polarization in Trust in American Institutions." *Daedalus* 151 (4): 43–66. https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01943.

Gethin, A. et al. 2021. *Political Cleavages and Social Inequalities: A Study of Fifty Democracies, 1948–2020*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Inglehart, Ronald. 1997. *Modernization and Postmodernization. Cultural, Economic and Political Change in 43 Societies*. Princeton University Press.

Kopecký, Petr, Jan-Hinrik Meyer-Sahling, and Maria Spirova. 2022. "(Extreme) Political Polarization and Party Patronage." *Irish Political Studies* 37 (2): 218–43. https://doi.org/10.1080/07907184.2022.2045143.

Sass, Katharina, and Stein Kuhnle. 2023. "The Gender Cleavage: Updating Rokkanian Theory for the Twenty-First Century." *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 30 (1): 188–210. https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxac003.

Schmitt, Johannes. 2019. *Mechanismen Der Polarisierung von Parteiensystemen. Ideologische Dynamiken in Kontext Noc Angebot, Nachfrage Und Institutionellen Rahmbedingungen*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

Söderbaum, Fredrik, Kilian Spandler, and Agnese Pacciardi. 2021. *Contestations of the Liberal International Order. A Populist Script of Regional Cooperation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tucker, Aviezer. 2020. *Democracy Against Liberalism. Its Rise and Fall*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Wagner, Markus. 2021. "Affective Polarization in Multiparty Systems." *Electoral Studies* 69 (February):102199. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102199.

Wagner, Markus, and Katrin Praprotnik. 2024. "Affective Polarization and Coalition Signals." *Political Science Research and Methods* 12 (2): 336–53. https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2023.33.

Hate, Self-Esteem, and Extremism: The Psychological Foundations of Radicalisation

Ahmad Mansour

Summary: Extremism and radicalisation are born out of deep hatred which has its roots in a lack of self-esteem, and early traumatic experiences. People with an unstable identity seek security in radical ideologies that offer simple enemy stereotypes and – what appear to be – solutions. The digital world heightens this process: social media create echo chambers that foster polarisation and reduce ambiguity tolerance. Adolescents, who become radicalised online, lose their capabilities for dialogue and empathy. The following chapter focuses on both the causes and mechanisms of political radicalisation, and demonstrates concrete, targeted measures for its prevention.

Keywords: extremism, radicalisation, identity crisis, social media influence, prevention strategies

Introduction

"I hate that!" How often have I already heard that? How often have I said that myself? We use the words "hate" or "hatred" all the time, but they are usually confused with a feeling of anger. Hate is a feeling, however, of extreme dislike and rejection of other individuals, groups, or institutions. Hate is an intense form of destructive aggression and the strongest negative emotion that exists.

In his series of books *Seele und Gesundheit*, Michael Depner (2020), a specialist in psychiatry and psychotherapy, writes: "In contrast to anger, hatred does not just counter threats and then subside. It sets off in pursuit. It incites." And:

> While angry persons recognise themselves as being valuable and are therefore fundamentally out to preserve themselves and their values, people who hate, accept their own damage. Rather than preserving their own values, they attempt to diminish the values of others – in the most extreme case, by destroying them, and accepting their own destruction in the process. While any healthy person can become angry under certain circumstances without harming his or her health, hatred is quite clearly a psychopathological phenomenon. It not only harms the victim. It also always harms the perpetrator more than it could be of benefit. (Depner 2020)

Hatred is always a reaction and there is always a cause for it. We are not born with hatred. Children can, for example, feel anger but not yet hate. The fundamental prerequisite for hate is a low level of self-esteem. Depner (2020) writes:

> If one feels threatened, one reacts with fear or aggression in order to repulse this threat…If one is sure of one's values, this doesn't go beyond anger. If one is lacking in a feeling of self-esteem, one becomes lost in hate. […] Even if it ultimately wants to protect something – the honour or freedom of those who fall prey to it – it remains fundamentally destructive. This has to do with a psychological condition underlying it: a lack of, or fragile, self-esteem.

The roots of low self-esteem can be found in childhood. We are the products of our upbringing. Only when we become aware of – and understand – the harm we can do to our children when we prevent them from having a healthy development, will we be able to understand hate.

I am referring here to physical and psychological harm. I am referring to sexual abuse by fathers and mothers. I am referring to families in which the relationship between the parents is based on reciprocal contempt and deceit, resulting in the violation of the fundamental trust of children and, as a result, leading to massive damage being done to their self-esteem. I am referring to families in which, sooner or later, the children identify with their aggressor in order to protect themselves mentally from their brutality and contempt, to survive.

At some point, they will resort to violence themselves – violence that they had previously experienced personally. I am referring to families in which girls are considered less valuable solely due to their sex. I am referring to families in which children only receive recognition when they are obedient, when they perform well. I am referring to families in which children are repeatedly told: "You can do that, you can manage" but are never asked if "that" is what they also want. I am also referring to children who grow up with a god that only wants to humiliate, punish, and destroy. These insults and injuries that occur during childhood, the fear of personal annihilation, and the suppression of their own needs and desires, are the cause of this destructive hatred. That is where the roots lie, and that is where we can also find possible therapy for a better society.

People act out of hate and its destructiveness because they are afraid of themselves, of their emptiness and insignificance. They want to marginalise and humiliate others so that they do not have to concentrate on themselves because they do not have a stable identity and are lacking any feeling of self-esteem. They follow ideologies, gods, and leaders and hope to gain significance in this way. They believe a lie because they cannot bear the truth. One can look at the biography of any assassin: they never had the opportunity to develop a feeling of self-esteem in their childhood. With their terror, they project what they experienced – or did not receive – in their childhood on their victims.

Parents create the foundation for this pathology. Terrorism develops in the relationship between parents and their children. Children, who are loved unconditionally, who can develop a fundamental sense of trust, and are given sufficient space for self-realisation, will not hate. They will not blindly

follow any form of destructive violence. The only solution to reduce hate is, therefore, to give children back their childhood. Fostering and developing a feeling of self-esteem must be just as important for parents as providing nourishment and guaranteeing safety.

A low level of self-esteem does not automatically of course lead to hate. There are also people with a lack of self-esteem who never hate. Hate – and, as a result, radicalisation, and violence – can only develop when the lack of self-esteem comes into contact with specific prejudices and ideologies, when it is channelled. Only then! That is why I warn against considering these people as psychologically ill, even though hate is a psychopathological phenomenon. This would not only downplay the consequences of their behaviour but also prevent an intense investigation of the ideologies behind this hatred.

The categorisation of people into groups, and the debasement of other groups with the goal of upgrading oneself or one's own group, forms the foundation of an extremist ideology. Regardless of whether we are discussing Islamists, the Grey Wolves,[2] nationalists, right- or left radicals, each ideology always has a simple view of the world. We – the members of my group – are good, superior, and know the truth. The others – a homogeneous enemy group – are usually evil or inferior.

Is there a solution? A remedy? Yes: self-esteem, morality, and compassion – for others, but first and foremost, for ourselves. We only have to (be able to) learn these things. Hatred not only develops, however, in the direct social environment or in childhood – social and technological developments also contribute to people becoming more susceptible to extremist ideologies. The digital world plays a decisive role in this respect. While emotional damage and lacking self-esteem lay the foundation for hatred, the Internet offers a space in which this hate can be increased without control. Social media have fundamentally changed how we communicate and receive information – and that has wide-ranging consequences, especially for children and adolescents.

Lost Empathy, Dwindling Ambiguity Tolerance: How Social Media and Digital Isolation Radicalise Children and Adolescents

The generation of children and adolescents who are growing up with social media today are facing a challenge that was never so present: the capability of being able to deal with contradiction and ambiguity – ambiguity tolerance. The increase in digitalisation, increased by the isolation experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, has also led to a measurable decrease in empathy. The two developments reinforce each other reciprocally and create an environment in which polarisation, radicalisation, and threats to democracy flourish.

2 Grey Wolves is a Turkish far-right political movement and the youth wing of the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). Ed. Note.

Empathy Loss Through Digital Communication

Empathy develops through genuine interpersonal interaction. Children learn to understand emotions by observing the facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language of the people around them. What happens, however, when a decreasing number of these real encounters takes place? The COVID-19 measures dramatically accelerated this development. Social contacts were reduced to a minimum for months on end, schools were closed, and leisure time activities became impossible. Children and adolescents spent more time in front of monitors than with people – and this is precisely where a dangerous process began: virtual communication by way of social media, chats, and video games replaced direct contact without ever being able to simulate it completely.

Digital communication is often short, emotionless, and abbreviated. A "LOL" replaces genuine laughter, a "like" sincere interest. Conveying emotions by way of a text or emojis is, however, not the same as a real conversation. Studies show that children and adolescents, who mostly communicate digitally, have difficulties in interpreting non-verbal signals and develop less empathy for others. Simultaneously, the anonymity of the Internet leads to a dissolution of social behaviour: because there are no immediate consequences, insults, hateful commentaries, and verbal attacks have become everyday affairs. Without looking directly into the eyes of the other person, it becomes easier to dehumanise them – a mechanism that continues in the real world.

Ambiguity Tolerance: The Lost Capability of Being Able to Bear Contradiction

Social media live from intensification. Their algorithm is designed to keep the users on the platform for as long as possible (see also Roháč in this volume, ed. note) – and that is achieved most effectively through polarisation. There are hardly any shades of grey in social networks. Opinions are separated into clearly divided camps: good or evil, true or false, pro or contra. Children and adolescents grow up in a digital environment that leaves little space for ambiguity. They no longer learn that there can be several perspectives on a problem or that the truth is often complex. Instead, they become accustomed to a worldview that hardly leaves any room for nuances. This lack of ambiguity tolerance becomes especially apparent in social debates. Contradiction is no longer seen as being part of a discourse but as an attack. Whoever represents a different opinion is no longer considered a dialogue partner but an opponent. Especially problematic is the following: children and adolescents who grow up in this kind of environment are more susceptible to radical ideologies. Extremism – regardless of which kind – functions on precisely this principle: a clear differentiation between "we" and "them", "good" and "evil". A person who does not develop the capability of accepting ambiguities looks for simple answers – and frequently finds them in radical ideologies.

From Isolation to Radicalisation: The Dangerous Chain of the Digital World

The combination of a loss of empathy and a lack of ambiguity tolerance creates the perfect environment for the radicalisation of children and adolescents who grow up on social media, and soon learn that loud, extreme positions are given more attention than differentiated opinions. The mechanisms go, however, even further.

1. Isolation and digital withdrawal - during the pandemic, children were forced to – almost completely – lead their social life online. Many had a challenging time finding their way back into the real world. The habit of carrying out conflicts by way of messages, or withdrawing into digital groups, remained.

2. Echo chambers and filter bubbles - social media only reinforce what one believes in the first place. Algorithms assure that the user mainly sees contents that confirm their existing opinions. In this way, isolated groups are formed in which extreme opinions are strengthened.

3. Diminishing discussion culture - a person who has never learned to accept contradiction does not react to counterarguments with reflection but with rejection or aggression. Discussions develop into verbal battles, and opinions become identity issues.

4. Radicalisation as an *ersatz* identity[3] - extreme ideologies offer simple solutions; especially, for adolescents with a desire to belong. A person who does not feel understood by society can find a new identity in radical groups – whether they be political, religious, or other extremist movements.

What Has to Change

Digitalisation is not bad *per se*, but its influence on children and adolescents must be seen critically. Specifically focused measures are needed to combat a decline in empathy and dwindling ambiguity tolerance.

- More real social interaction: children should learn how to solve conflicts themselves, recognise emotions, and tolerate differences of opinion at an early age. Schools should provide spaces for debate in which controversies can be used as a possibility for learning.
- Conscious dealing with social media: parents and teachers must make adolescents more sensitive to the way algorithms work, and how they increase polarisation. Critical thinking is a key competence in the digital world.
- Promoting ambiguity tolerance: children have to learn that there is rarely only one right answer.

3 An „ersatz identity“ refers to a substitute or replacement identity that is often considered inferior to the original, typically adopted due to disconnection or alienation from one‘s true self or heritage. Ed. note.

Role plays philosophical discussions, and debating clubs can help foster the ability to deal with contradictions.

- Accept digital responsibility: platforms must be held more accountable for not rewarding hate and polarisation. The users must also learn, however, to critically question their own digital world.

Conclusion: Democracy Needs Empathy and Ambiguity Tolerance

The greatest threat facing an open society is not the existence of extreme positions, but the incapability of dealing with them. Children and adolescents who grow up in a world dominated by thinking in black and white lose their ability to enter into a dialogue. A person who has no empathy for a different perspective and who only sees contradiction as an attack is susceptible to radicalisation. This makes the challenge for the future clear. The digital world must become a place that is not only consumed but also reflected on. Only in this way can it be prevented that a generation grows up which is incapable of dealing with the complexity of reality. To counter loss of empathy, and the radicalisation of children and adolescents, I present the following prevention strategies.

Recommendations:

- Empathy training in schools - fostering empathy can take place in specific training programmes in schools. Programmes of this kind aim at strengthening the emotional intelligence of students and improving their ability to understand the perspectives of others and feel empathy. Ed Kirwan[4] developed, for example, a successful ten-week programme for children with the target of reducing social unrest and intensifying a sense of togetherness.
- Strengthening ambiguity tolerance - ambiguity tolerance describes the ability of constructively dealing with ambivalences and insecurities. This competence is essential for the functioning of a pluralist and diverse society. Improving ambiguity tolerance can take place in school by way of discussions about complex matters, role plays, and the analysis of various perspectives. Approaches of this kind will help students accept ambiguities and increase their reflective capabilities.
- Informing parents - parents play a decisive role in preventing radicalisation. Informative programmes can teach them to recognise signs of radicalisation and react to them in an appropriate manner. In addition, parents should be informed about the way social media function, and about the dangers lurking there in order to be able to better support and protect their children.

4 Ed Kirwan is the founder of Empathy Week and Empathy Studios. His businesses use film to develop the skill of empathy in individuals. Ed. note.

- Development of dissemination of counter-narratives - it is important to counter extreme contents in the digital space through the development and dissemination of counter-narratives. Narratives of this kind can deconstruct extremist messages and offer alternative perspectives. Projects such as the national *Jugend* und *Medien* platform (https://www.jugendundmedien.ch) have shown that the development of prevention contents on the web can be an effective method for preventing radicalisation.
- Improving media competence - fostering media competence is central for prevention in the digital sphere. Young people should learn how to identify serious sources, recognise fake news, and question extremist contents. Critical media education plays a role in strengthening resilience to extremist content and promotes reflective user behaviour.

Bibliography:

Depner, Michael 2020. *Seele und Gesundheit: Band 3 Existenzielle Grundlagen*. BoD – Books on Demand.

A Generation of Extremists? Values and Political Attitudes of European Youth

Peter Hefele

Summary: Recent studies highlight a growing political polarisation among young voters, particularly young men, in Europe and the Americas. The 2024 European elections revealed an increasing tendency for young men to support right-wing populist parties, while young women predominantly vote for liberal or leftist parties. This trend reflects a broader shift in values, with young men gravitating toward traditional ideals and feelings of being disconnected from society, while young women embrace progressive and emancipatory values. Socio-economic factors, such as income inequality and structural changes in education and employment systems, disproportionately affect young men, fostering a sense of being left behind. Research shows that young people are pessimistic about their future, with many perceiving a loss of control over their lives. Right-wing populist parties exploit these sentiments by offering simple, dichotomous narratives of "us" vs "them." Meanwhile, centrist democratic forces have struggled to address this unique challenge. To counter this trend, recommendations include addressing economic concerns through targeted policies, bridging educational gaps, engaging youth in political processes, promoting gender and intergenerational equality, and fostering openness and cohesion in society. These measures aim to restore hope and prevent the further alienation of the younger generation from democratic values.

Keywords: youth, European Union, populism, democracy, generations

Introduction

It is only recently that the political orientation and voting behaviour of young people, particularly young men, have received more attention in political science and public debate (Reeves 2024; Sinus Institutes 2024), despite psychologists and educational experts having warned for years about the dramatic challenges they face, not only in Western societies. COVID-19 was the last blow to this generation (Hefele 2023). With a younger electorate flocking to right and left-wing populist parties across Europe and the Americas, it appears that the ballots have finally woken up the political elite.

It is arguably too simplistic, however, to label at least parts of the young generation as right-wing radicals. Why are young men seduced by populist parties? Why have moderate political forces failed to acknowledge the unique combination of difficulties they are confronted with, and provide convincing

solutions? This text examines empirical evidence on political opinions and voting behaviour among Europe's youth, as well as debate several causes for this behaviour. In the last chapter, we discuss whether there is an immediate answer and what moderate democratic parties may do to recover young people's trust.

A Gloomy Reality

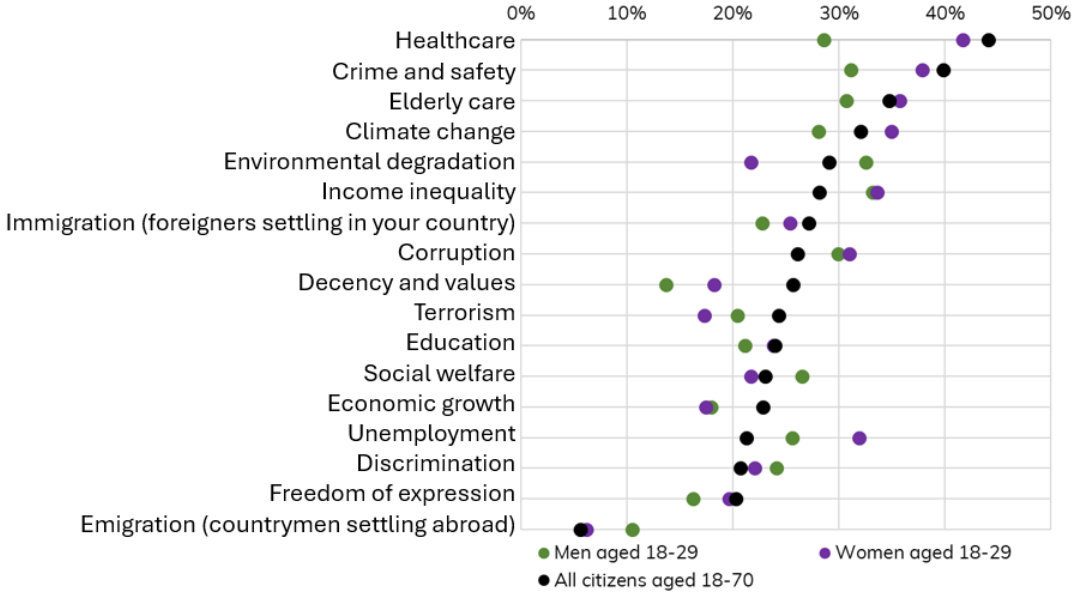
The most recent European elections in 2024 confirmed the decade-long left and right-wing polarisation trends (Baget 2024) across the political spectrum and gender, as well as a significant increase in young voters for populist options, and in some cases extremist, right-wing ones. In countries such as France, Germany or Spain (Marsh and Escritt 2024), young voters have significantly contributed to the rise of right-wing nationalist parties, such as *Rassemblement National* (RN), *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) or VOX (Spain). Among those voters, political polarisation also took place between genders (Yerushalmy 2024). Young males, in a global trend, have become an electoral stronghold for conservative positions, while the majority ofmost young women continue to vote for liberal, green, or leftist parties. These electoral results (Griera 2024) match the findings of previous empirical surveys, which indicated a fundamental shift in value orientation (Karaca 2024) during the last decade. This trend is prominent in the European Union's "old" member states but less so in Central and Eastern European countries.

Several studies have consistently found that young people, especially between 18 and 29, are increasingly expressing pessimism and unhappiness (Sinus Institut 2024). As voting behaviours show, these changes have enormous ramifications for European political systems (Emanuele and Marino 2024). The feeling of being left behindsocial exclusion, of disorientation, and of lack of leadership figures are among the key causes of their disentanglement from political/societal engagement, polarisation and the rise of radical right and left anti-establishment movements. Changing attitudes of young males towards right-wing populist parties has raised concerns about losing (part of) a generation's adherence to democracy. These findings also call into question the traditional knowledge of a left-leaning, progressive youth.There are a number of socio-economic explanations (Bale and Kaltwasser 2021). The transformation of individual value orientation into voting behaviour is indeed more complex. Other factors, such as national political culture and the role of constitutional and party systems, have a relevant influence. Assessing one's value orientation has been shown, however, to be a fairly reliable predictor of voting behaviour over time. The findings are significant not only for a better understanding of society's "sub currents". They provide policymakers with concrete information for political intervention, as values are critical in developing and communicating political narratives and goals, as well as promoting social cohesion.

Looking into the Values and Expectations of Young Europeans

What unites right-wing political parties is their promise of simple explanations and solutions based on a dichotomic view of "we" vs "them": people vs elites; natives vs migrants; national vs globalised economy (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). As we live in an age of unprecedented complexity and rapid "reconfiguration" of our socio-economic systems – from an ageing society to the effects of AI on employment and value-creation – each segment of society faces quite a different set of challenges. Burdens and changes are not equally distributed, however, or the resources to cope with them. Figure 1 shows that, e.g., unemployment and income inequality rank much higher among young Europeans' concerns than in the general population.

Figure. 1: Major Concerns of European Citizens



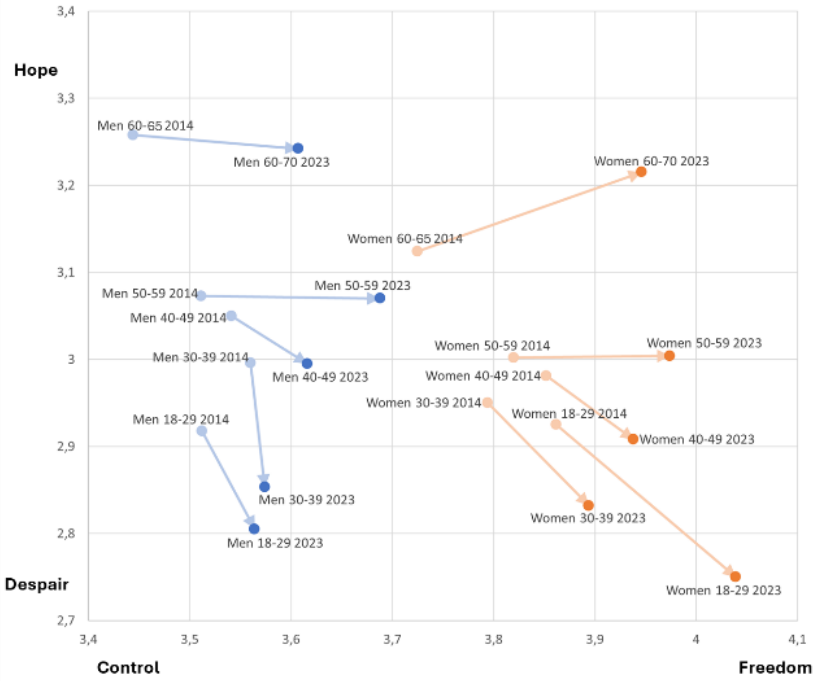
Source: Hefele, Lampert and Papadongonas 2025.

If we want to understand voting decisions, we have to current situation of people with their expectations and hopes of the future. Do they see themselves as "agents" of their own lives, or rather as having lost control? Do they believe that external forces, such as the state or authoritarian leaders, will provide solutions or that the individual or society are capable of doing so?

In a study commissioned by Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (Hefele et al. 2025), citizens' attitudes, in particular young ones, were analysed along two major dimensions: (a) hope and despair, which represent how people see their individual and collective future; and (b) freedom and control, indicating different perspectives of individual and social responsibility, political organisation and forms of participation .

The results (see Fig. 2) show a widening gap between gender and age cohorts in both dimensions. There is an overall decline in optimism and hope (dimension a) for the future (with the exception of the age group between 55 and 70). This loss of hope, however, is most significant among younger citizens. A quite different development can be observed in the second dimension on control and freedom (dimension b). Women across all ages show a much higher degree of aspiration towards freedom and self-determination. This value is highest among the youngest females. These findings are in line with other research results in the field of education and employment.

Figure 2: Developments in Seven EU Member States and the UK Between 2014 and 2023



Source: Hefele, Lampert and Papadongonas 2025.

Only in recent years has attention shifted towards the disadvantages experienced by boys and young men in the education and employment systems (Zimbardo and Coulombe 2016). In addition to age and gender, education level and employment (opportunities) are two other strong explanatory factors for identity-building. This sentiment translates into feelings of belonging to a society and motivation for active societal and political engagement.

Several factors have created a less favourable environment for the development of young men compared to the past, while political and economic changes have opened up new opportunities for women. Among them, structural changes in the global economy have led to a massive job crisis for less-qualified industrial male workers. Similar developments of young males' exclusion can be found in the education sector (UNESCO 2022).

This fatal combination of deteriorating quality of life, loss of hope and agency can explain the shift of young men towards more conservative, control-oriented attitudes. It is the relative development of opportunities and loss of positions between women and men that has provided right-wing populist parties with a new market of young male voters, catering for their search for stronger traditional values, orientation on role models of the past and alternative explanations and visions of society.

Feelings of decline and despair are much less significant, yet not completely unseen, among younger women. It is also worth mentioning that the older generation has coped much better with these massive transformations over the last decades. This indicates how crucial access to mental and material resources accumulated over one's lifetime is.

Conclusion

Democratic, centrist forces have apparently underestimated the demand for orientation and vision among the young generation, in particular young men. This generation is not lost for democracy, however, as even a majority of young men are still moving towards liberal values. The increasing attractiveness of populist right-wing parties hints, however, at severe structural weaknesses in the socio-economic model, as well as in the core political processes of Western democracies.

Economic uncertainty has undermined trust and the sense of a fair chance of participation. Modernisation processes come with individual and cohort experiences of alienation and unbalanced burdens. Our education and employment systems are not well prepared to enhance the resilience of the young generation, which also remains an intergenerational responsibility.

The role of strong political leadership should not be underestimated. Open, liberal societies, in particular, also need strong and visionary leadership, too. The conclusion cannot involve dismantling the emancipation process. A more nuanced, gender and aged-focus approach in policy design and implementation is necessary.

Recommendations:

- Addressing the economic concerns of the younger generation: the deteriorating economic conditions in many Western societies explain the declining hope among the young generation, particularly young men. In addition to improving the requirements for economic recovery and entrepreneurship, the specific mix of difficulties confronting young women and men requires a more focused and gender-specific response.
- Bridging the education gap - the difficulties in entering and remaining in the labour market can be linked to structural flaws in the educational system. The education level, and the disparity between highly educated and less educated people, is thus a second crucial factor determining political attitudes and how people are susceptible to populist narratives. Young men, in particular, demand a far more customised approach to education.
- Engaging the young generation and tapping into their motivations - the feeling of no longer being a part of society, and a lack of orientation and collective vision is common among the younger generation. It is therefore the responsibility of moderate political parties to tap into their challenges and motivations in order to prevent them from turning to more radical political alternatives'.
- Promoting gender and intergenerational equality - despite taking the young generation's unique issues more seriously, persistent economic inequality, be it based on gender or age, remains an unsolved issue. To restore a positive attitude toward the future, politics and society also have to transcend generational boundaries, as these challenges can only be addressed collectively.
- Fostering openness and egalitarianism - even if parts of the young generation are shifting toward right populism, the political answer should not be to revert to conventional or even reactionary models of the past. Support for an open and cohesive society can only be maintained, however, if economic and financial opportunities for the young generation are created.

Bibliography:

Baget, Jesús Palomar I. 2024. "2024 European Elections: Who Are Young Europeans Voting For?" *Conversation*, 2024. https://theconversation.com/2024-european-elections-who-are-young-europeans-voting-for-232058.

Bale, T., and C. Kaltwasser. 2021. *Riding the Populist Wave. Europe's Mainstream in Crisis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Eatwell, Roger, and Matthew Goodwin. 2018. *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*. London: Pelican.

Emanuele, Vincenzo, and Bruno Marino. 2024. “Party System Ideological Polarization in Western Europe: Data, Trends, Drivers, and Links with Other Key Party System Properties (1945–2021).” *Political Research Exchange* 6 (1). https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2024.2399095.

Griera, Max. 2024. “How Did Europeans Vote in EU Elections? Estimations per Age and Gender.” *Euractiv*, October 1, 2024. https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/how-did-europeans-vote-in-eu-elections-results-per-age-and-gender/.

Hefele, Peter. 2023. “Learning Loss and Educational Inequalities in Europe: How Is Europe Overcoming the Impact of the Pandemic.” *KAS Panorama*, no. 1 (January). https://www.kas.de/documents/288143/21897256/Panorama_2022_02_ESD_v5e_Hefele.pdf/f505bf19-57af-dc15-907e-5c38fb10cec4?t=1671430414501.

Hefele, Lampert, and Papadongonas. 2025. “Gaining Insights into the Gender Gap and Orientations of Young European Citizens: An Analysis of Longitudinal Glocalities Survey Data From Eight European Countries.” https://www.kas.de/documents/288143/21897256/Panorama_2022_02_ESD_v5e_Hefele.pdf/f505bf19-57af-dc15-907e-5c38fb10cec4?t=1671430414501.

Karaca, Melis. 2024. “Trend Report Polarization.” Trend Report Polarization. 2024. https://glocalities.com/reports/trend-report-polarization.

Marsh, Sarah, and Thomas Escritt. 2024. “German Far-Right Makes Strong Gains in EU Vote, Ruling Parties Suffer.” *Reuters*, June 9, 2024. . https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/germanys-far-right-makes-strong-gains-eu-vote-despite-scandals-2024-06-09/.

Reeves, Richard V. 2024. *Of Boys and Men Why the Modern Male Is Struggling, Why It Matters, and What to Do about It*. Brookings Institution Press.

Sinus Institut. 2024. “Wie Ticken Jugendliche 2024?” 5. SINUS-Jugendstudie. December 6, 2024. https://www.sinus-institut.de/media-center/studien/wie-ticken-jugendliche-2024.

UNESCO. 2022. “Boys’ Disengagement from Education.” 2022. https://www.unesco.org/en/gender-equality/education/boys.

Yerushalmy, Jonathan. 2024. “What’s Behind the Global Political Divide Between Young Men and Women?” *Guardian*, November 24, 2024. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/nov/14/us-election-donald-trump-voters-gender-race-data.

Zimbardo, Philip, and Nikita D. Coulombe. 2016. *Man Disconnected: How the Digital Age Is Changing Young Men Foereve*. Random House.

It's the Agency, Stupid. How to Outmanoeuvre Populists

Garvan Walshe

Summary: A common response to the success populists have had in the last decades has been to try and copy their policies, which has ended up squeezing mainstream parties of the centre-right and centre-left. But what if opponents of populism focused on updating their political style instead? This article considers the matter on four dimensions: charismatic versus programmatic legitimation; the role of political office; the social construction of knowledge and evidence; and agency in civil society. It provides recommendations for how opponents of populism should update their tactics by focusing more on charismatic leadership, defending institutions as the product of the past democratic decisions that established, developing more inclusive communication of scientific evidence, and for civil society to be more assertive in defending fundamental democratic institutions.

Keywords: populism, charismatic leadership, political communication, civil society, polyarchy

Introduction

A leader who presents himself as the people's guardian against the elite despite being educated at the country's most exclusive school;[5] who divides the electorate into supporters and traitors; who rails against foreign interference while receiving support from friendly foreign powers;[6] who insists his own wealth will protect himself from corruption while awarding his own, or his family's, companies' government contracts,[7] who runs a lavish campaign while declaring zero election expenses: all these, and many more have been termed populist. . Without getting into a debate about what specifically populism is or is not (Mudde 2004), it should not be controversial to conclude that this past decade has been a good one for populist leaders. Debate rages between those who think it principally a response to the financial crisis (Galston 2020), or immigration flows (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018), or others for whom it is the result of social media and Kremlin interference (Applebaum 2020). The phenomenon is so widespread that whatever one's field of expertise, some of it appears to give rise to populism. In this article, I shall avoid focusing on populism's causes and instead look at its style.

This is particularly relevant for those of us on the centre-right interested in confronting a populism that also considers itself right-wing. Unlike left-wing opponents of right-wing populists, we might

5 Boris Johnson, Prime Minister of the UK, was educated at Eton.

6 Peter Pellegrini, who was interviewed by Hungarian state TV, controlled by Viktor Orbán, and received by Hungarian-speaking Slovaks, during the official blackout period of the presidential campaign in 2024 https://x.com/MartonTompos/status/1775912910381867094?mx=2%5D)

7 Donald Trump is perhaps the most egregious example, but Ricardo Martinelli of Panama, whose children have been indicted in the United States on money-laundering charges is another.

agree with aspects of the populists' apparent agenda and believe that immigration should be reduced, the environmental regulations put too heavy a burden on business, or that post-colonial guilt animates far more of Western foreign policy than is warranted, particularly in countries that remember imperial armies suppressing their freedom less than sixty years ago.

Even someone on the liberal end of the centre right, like me, recognises it would be unwise to surrender so much right-wing territory to populists. Believers in robust border control, for example, ought to have someone to vote for who does not also want to eliminate constitutional checks and balances or peddle conspiracy theories about vaccines. Deciding where to compete with populist on ideology, and where to focus on tactics, methods, competence and corruption, is an important matter of judgement.

And it is in responding to these tactics, rather than questions of substance alone, where non-populists have struggled. They have done so across four dimensions: the legitimisation of leadership, the idea of political office, the social construction of knowledge and the nature of civil society. They have underplayed the emotional and charismatic elements of political leadership in electoral politics, preferring technocratic arguments for governing; they struggle to defend institutional arrangements as outcomes of democratic processes, and fail to contest the populists' distinction between plenipotentiary elected, and weak unelected officials; respond in flat-footed fashion to populists' attempts to redefine political language in their favour; while themselves compartmentalising the work of civil society in a way that prevents opposition parties, non-governmental organisations and the media from working together to defend democratic institutions.

Charisma vs Programmes

When considered as a style of politics rather than as an ideology, a central feature of populism is the importance given to the link between a charismatic leader and the mass of the people to the detriment of intermediating institutions. Populism is held up by both defenders and opponents as the opposite to rule by technocrats, be they out-of-touch elites (according to the populists) or experts grounded in reality and immune to the charms of emotional politics (their opponents). Yet, charismatic leadership has been part of legitimation in democratic politics for as long as records of democratic practice exist.

A charismatic view of legitimation involves elections transferring legitimacy from the people to the leader's person, who enjoys personal discretion about how it is put to use. A leader, whether populist or not, with such legitimacy enjoys the freedom to u-turn on policies, replace subordinates, change their allies, and even reverse their positions outright, without suffering a political cost. Thus, Viktor Orbán evolved from an anti-Communist dissident to the Kremlin's strongest supporter inside the European Union; or Nixon switched US recognition from Taiwan to the People's Republic of China.

This contrasts with a programmatic attitude where voters legitimise parties ; or in presidential systems, individuals, because they are committed to particular policy programmes. Politicians whose power is legitimised in this way struggle to depart from the lines they are expected to uphold. Edmund Burke's dismissal by the voters of Bristol — he argued they had elected him to exercise his judgement on their behalf, rather than do what his voters wanted — is perhaps the most famous, although the Spanish centrist party *Ciudadanos* suffered a more recent collapse in 2019 when it refused a coalition government with the centre-left Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), and opted for new elections instead in which it tried and failed to replace the *Partido Popular* as the leading force on the centre-right. Around half of *Ciudadanos*'s voters, who wanted it to break the mould of Spanish politics, deserted it after it became clear it was playing the same game as the older parties.

The method by which voters grant leaders authority should be distinguished from their behaviour in office. Barack Obama campaigned as a charismatic leader but did not govern as a populist. Tunisia's Kais Saied governs as a populist despite having no personal charisma, and Britain's 2017 election gave voters a contest between two uncharismatic leaders who could be considered populists: Labour's Jeremy Corbyn, whose programme was populist in the sense that it appealed to simplistic sentiment and was unlikely to achieve its stated aims; while his opponent Theresa May was also quite populist in governing style (her first Party Conference speech in 2017 condemned "citizen[s] of the world" as "citizens of nowhere") despite lacking personal charisma.

Just as uncharismatic leaders can resort to a populist political style, non-populist politicians should understand the role of charismatic leadership in building a connection with the voters. Emotionally intelligent storytelling is essential for building a connection with the people and non-populist politicians should not be afraid to use it. The difference between populist and democratic government actually lies elsewhere: in the elected politician's exercise of political office and relationship to institutions, and their attitude to knowledge and evidence.

Law and Office

Writing on the social network X, US Vice President JD Vance asserted that "When a president is elected by the people and then does what he promised what to do, that's democracy. When a president is thwarted by unelected bureaucrats, that's oligarchy," (@JDVance Account, 2/2/2025) presenting the classic populist position that the powers of the elected official are limited by their statements to the electorate (or personal judgement), rather than the law of the land.

This is rather different from what we might call a "Republican" tradition that goes back to the early modern concept of magistracy,[8] and perhaps most influentially expressed by James Harrington in *The Commonwealth of Oceana*, "the main question seems to be how a commonwealth comes to be an empire of laws and not of men (Harrington 1992)" Harrington's idea was carried into the American constitutional system by John Adams (Adams 1776).

This tradition sees public offices, whether filled by election or appointment, as having defined powers, determined by law. Insofar as these laws are themselves made by a democratic legislature, or constituent process these constraints themselves have democratic legitimacy. Far from exercising oligarchic power, unelected bureaucrats exercise specific powers delegated to them by a democratic legislative process. Their roles are the codification of previous democratic decisions.

Even in parliamentary systems where the same person may fill both roles, it does not mean they can act outside the powers of the office they hold as, for example, a government minister. To act differently, they would need to change the law first. This is a distinction that Orbán erased systematically in Hungary. Having won a 2/3 constitution-changing parliamentary majority in 2010, he refashioned the state to eliminate the independence of public service media, make civil servants easy to sack (their constitutionally mandated severance pay was taxed at 99%), and attacked civil society by politicising the issues on which they campaigned; unused to the scrutiny they withdrew.

Over time, both media and civil society have become more resilient, but the effect of the initial attack weakened opposition and left ample space for corruption.[9] He made no secret of this mission. His then new government's Declaration of National Cooperation prefigured Vance, claiming that "In constitutional democracies representatives elected by the people exercise power" and what should be termed a "new social contract…the System of National Cooperation" would be his government's mission to "enforce" (Office of the National Assembly 2010). Under this doctrine, power flows up to the government at the moment of election, and the government is then given a wide range of powers to organise society (including changing the rules to make it easier to win next time). The democratic decisions that existed previously are simply overridden by a new majority, as though every election were a revolution.

Language and Legitimacy

Thirdly, populists have understood that knowledge in societies is constructed not derived from objective external sources. As if taking postmodernist critiques of modern liberal society as instructions

8 Calvin provides a useful account in Chapter XX of *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (John Calvin 1989).

9 Ironically, Hungarian politics is now being convulsed by a new movement, the Tisza party led by the ex-husband of the former Fidesz Justice Minister Judit Varga, who has been able to inspire a huge following among those left out of Fidesz's "system of national cooperation" but also alienated by the traditional alternatives who are still associated in many people's minds with the old Communist-era nomenklatura.

(Lyotard 1987), they have sought to redefine political concepts and use power to make their adoption part of a test of allegiance towards their movement. Thus Viktor Orbán adapted the phrase "illiberal democracy" (it is actually Fareed Zakaria's and comes from his 1997 article in *Foreign Affairs* "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy" (Zakaria 1997); Orbán does not credit Zakaria, although Zakaria used Vladimir Mečiar's nearby Slovakia as an example) or the first Trump Administration began referring to "alternative facts." Like the postmodernists, they understood that knowledge can be shaped by political power. Unlike the postmodernists, for whom it was a critique of positivist ideas that knowledge could be discovered, as it was independent of the human institutions needed to discover it, the populists apply it in practice to build alliances and prepare their propaganda.

The attempt to defend previous norms by means of fact checking has had limited success because facts have been presented as objective and delivered by authority figures. Thus, during the COVID-19 pandemic, instructions were offered by a statement that "the science says" and presented as objective fact rather than the scientific community's best understanding of a fast-evolving situation. This in the end undermined efforts to win support for public health measures like social distancing, masking, and, in the end vaccines. Accusing supporters of populism of ignorance and populists of conveying misinformation did not work. They have successfully undermined the "modern" conveyance of authoritative information because their account of knowledge being a socially constructed process is accurate. Responding to this by arguments from scientific authority thus does not work and is instead often presented by the populists themselves as censorship. What is needed is much deeper education about the scientific process of knowledge formation, and for politicians to move beyond appeals to expert authority in justifying their policies.

This itself requires a more subtle understanding of the interplay between state, politics and civil society than is usually understood by depoliticisation of public institutions, media and economic production. If such depoliticisation is needed as a first step in the transition from one-party dictatorship, it can also create too tidy a separation between state and society that leaves populist space to capture public institutions.

Professionalism and Polyarchy

One conception of this more subtly organised society is that known as "polyarchy". This was the term coined by Robert Dahl (1972) to describe a democratic society in which power was dispersed between formal legal institutions as well as other social entities like markets, interest groups, media organisations, technocratic bodies, churches, and social associations of all kinds. There is a sense in which all these groups take part in ruling and are impelled by their own agency in pursuing their interests in society.

We can contrast it with what we might call a professionally segmented idea of democracy. This is an extension of the concept of independence that can be traced to Kant's *What is Enlightenment*. There Kant makes a distinction between the public and private use of reason quite different from ordinary usage today: he argues that in one's public capacity it is "the use of which one makes of it as a scholar before the entire public of the world of readers" whereas private is "that which one may make of it in a certain civil post or office with which he is entrusted" (Kant 1996).

When acting in this "private" capacity or, "professional" to be clearer to the modern reader, a person is limited in their speech and action by obligations deriving from their role. In Kant's day, under Frederick the Great, the role was defined by the King, but the roles can be assigned, or be taken upon by people themselves in freer polities too: civil servants are understood to carry out policy determined by the elected government, universities can insulate themselves from politics by dedicating themselves to academic inquiry; civil society organisations concentrate on providing help to members of society rather than arguing for political change; journalists report on politics but do not take part in it.

One can imagine a neat but reasonably pluralistic system in which elected politicians instruct officials to make policy; the political debate is discussed through public service media by politically impartial journalists; civil society organisations stay out of direct politics, and make their case through the political parties, official consultations, and universities and research institutes provide a background of evidence against which public policy is assessed. Media, universities and civil society receive a significant amount of funding from the state. Such a professionalised system seems to be what the European Commission had in mind when it argued that its grants to environmental organisations should be used for implementing environmental work and not advocating green policy change (Gros and Guillot 2024).

This distinction is a good deal fuzzier in reality: Yascha Mounck for instance has criticised journalists for allowing their political preferences to show in shielding Joe Biden and Kamala Harris from scrutiny (Mounk 2024); and the *British Yes, Minister* makes superb comedy out of the ambiguities in the relationship between the political and civil service elements of government.

Yet inaccuracy through over-tidiness is not the biggest weakness of this model. It is rather that it is an extremely top-down vision of democracy in which ultimate agency belongs to the political elite, which sets the rules of the game, and everyone else is in fact limited to an advisory role and is thus vulnerable to two types of capture. The first is technocratic capture where advice is sought from a limited group of experts, debated against an established body of evidence, and policy debate conducted in narrow terms. The system closes in on itself and succumbs to group-think.

The second is political capture by an insurgent populist movement that seizes institutions, as happened in Hungary, where, Orban argued: "we must break with liberal principles and methods of

social organisation, and in general with the liberal understanding of society" (Hungarian government 2014) where social institutions, used to working through formal channels find themselves shut out of all influence, find themselves shut out of any way of bringing about change or defending their own interests.

Conclusion

Populists exploited a decay of political debate that concentrated on technical policy differences, at the expense of a connection between the representatives and the people; a lack of moral defence of institutions of government, an excessively apolitical sense of what civil society should be; and an unsubtle idea of truth as an argument from scientific authority.

Responding to populism involves learning from some of their success: not in adopting their content but understanding that their tactics are in many ways better suited for the contemporary political environment. All have one thing in common: basing politics around the understanding that citizens in our democracies should be treated as active participants in governance rather than people who are governed on the authority of technocratic expertise. They have agency. That means expending effort on finding and training good communicators who can work across the range now required: from traditional broadcast media, through more informal social media, and directly in person; developing an emotionally and historically resonant defence of liberal democracy and the rule of law; seeing politics as part of civil society and civil society as rightly concerned with the defence of basic political institutions; and taking the plunge to accept that knowledge in society is socially constructed: that arguments from scientific authority are not sufficient and that people need to be brought into this process, even in areas where the reality is complex and technical. Communicating modern governance in a way people are able to understand may be difficult, but it is a task we must master if liberal democratic politics is to survive the populist assault. Populists have won significant success in recent elections by deploying political tactics and style that have long been part of democratic debate. Non-populist politicians and civil society should learn not from their policies — which do not work — but from some of their tactics in order to outmanoeuvre them.

Recommendations:

- Return to the charismatic mode of leadership, adapted, of course to particular political circumstances and cultures. The charismatic building of trust individuals is an essential part of representative democracy. Elected politicians, after all, represent people, as well as being vectors of support for politic ideas. Political parties and civil society movements should train their leaders in the techniques of charismatic leadership and select for charismatic talent.
- They should nevertheless recognise the role for technocratic governance in public life. The charismatic connection with the voters may legitimate power, but it does not give them absolute authority. In a liberal democracy, people are elected to specific political officers with roles defined by democratically elected legislatures and constituent processes.
- This limitation of roles should apply only to people who have roles in the state: it should not apply to society generally. Outside public office, people should be free to define their own roles and take control of their own political voice. Political parties, opinionated media, and civil society organisations taking political stances are part of civil society, not opposed to it.
- People should be brought into a more inclusive process for explaining the scientific understanding of our complex world that goes beyond assertions of what "the science says". The scientific process is also human one, and its imperfections are part of it, as they are of any social institution.

Bibliography:

Adams, John. 1776. "Thoughts on Government." Founders Archives. 1776. https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-04-02-0026-0004.

Applebaum, Anne. 2020. *Twilight of Democracy*. New York: Doubleday.

Eatwell, Roger, an Matthew Goodwin. 2018. *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*. London: Pelican.

Galston, William A. 2020. *Anti-Pluralism: The Populist Threat to Liberal Democracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Gros, Marianne, and Louise Guillot. 2024. "Commission Tells NGOs EU Money Is Not for Lobbying." *Politico*, November 28, 2024. https://www.politico.eu/article/european-commission-ngos-lobbying-environmental-advocacy-green-funds-life-program/.

Harrington, James. 1992. *Harrington: "The Commonwealth of Oceana" and "A System of Politics*. Edited by J. G. A. Pocock. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hungarian government. 2014. “Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s Speech at the 25th Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp.” July 30, 2014. https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-25th-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp.

John Calvin. 1989. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Kant, Immanuel. 1996. *Practical Philosophy*. Edited by Mary J. Gregor. Vol. 49. Cambridge University Press.

Lyotard, Jean-François. 1987. *La Condición Postmodern: Informe Sobre El Saber*. Madrid: Cátedra.

Mounk, Yascha. 2024. “Dear Journalists: Stop Trying to Save Democracy.” *Persuasion*, November 28, 2024. https://www.persuasion.community/p/dear-journalists-stop-trying-to-save.

Office of the National Assembly. 2010. “Declaration of National Cooperation.” May 22, 2010. https://www.parlament.hu/irom39/00047/00047_e.pdf.

Zakaria, Fareed. 1997. “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy.” *Foreign Affairs*, November 1, 1997. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/rise-illiberal-democracy.

Social Media and the Future of European Democracy

Dalibor Roháč

Summary: This essay discusses the challenge posed to European democracies by the rise of social media and algorithmic content. Far from opening up the public square to important new voices and democratising the public debate, social media's business model – focused on maximising "engagement" and time spent on platforms – has fuelled the rise of a new, destructive form of politics. The problem will not be solved by improved "moderation" or "fact-checking" but rather by confronting the in-built features of online platforms, most notably their algorithms. A variety of policy options are available to European policy-makers above and beyond the current regulatory regime, including a blanket ban on free algorithmically recommended content.

Keywords: social media, populism, democracy, algorithmic content, moderation, Digital Services Act

Introduction

Shortly before Donald Trump's inauguration, the entrepreneur and venture capitalist Peter Thiel published an extraordinary opinion piece in the *Financial Times*. In it, he called for a great "unveiling," or *apokálypsis*, of the "ancient régime's secrets." Writing in a distinctly conspiratorial tone, Thiel invokes a collusion between the US government and "media organisations, bureaucracies, universities and government-funded NGOs" aimed at censoring and covering up truth – from Jeffrey Epstein's suicide to the origins of COVID-19. "Can we believe that a Brazilian judge banned X without American backing," Thiel asks a paragraph later, and "were we complicit in Australia's recent legislation requiring age verification for social media users, the beginning of the end of Internet anonymity?" (Thiel 2025).

Sixty years since the publication of Richard Hofstadter's eponymous essay on the paranoid style of American politics (Hofstadter 2021), the challenge has only become more pronounced, cross-partisan and cross-ideological – and transatlantic. In the first round of Romania's presidential election, cancelled because of Russian interference and campaign finance violations, Călin Georgescu recorded a stunning success, after a campaign of conspiracy mongering. Georgescu earlier expressed scepticism about the moon landing, criticised Caesarean births as "breaking the divine thread," and suggested that carbonated drinks contain nanochips (Dumitru 2024). According to a Globsec poll, meanwhile, 60 percent of Slovaks believe that 9/11 was planned and perpetrated by the US government, not by Al-Qaida (Lipka 2024).

Democracies on both sides of the Atlantic face numerous challenges but none of them seems more significant than the ongoing breakdown in our shared sense of reality. Without a common understanding of basic facts, it is hard to sustain not only the political norms that underpin democratic societies but political pluralism at large. Many explanations have been offered for the current state of affairs, including a well-deserved decline of trust in experts, inequality, slow economic growth and a rise in cost of living, immigration, and other areas. Arguably, however, none has been more important than the radical transformation of information ecosystems across the world, powered by the advent of social media. Instead of shared sources of trusted information – TV stations or newspapers – the Internet and social media offer an information buffet to suit every taste. The resulting fragmentation has provided an opening to our adversaries – Russia, China, and even Iran – to conduct information operations that further destabilise our politics.

Existing efforts to counter these developments – particularly in the form of fact checking – have had limited success and fuelled a backlash, particularly in the United States. While regulation of social media platforms can be a major source of friction in the transatlantic relationship, it would be unwise for the European Union (EU) to follow the American example. If anything, the challenge requires a bolder approach, including a possible ban on algorithmic content recommendations on such platforms.

What We Know and We Do Not Know

It is fair to say that there is a significant degree of uncertainty about the economic, social, and psychological ramifications of our new information environment. For one, social media with their algorithmically targeted advertising have been an important driver of innovation and start-up activity. Facebook ads in particular appear responsible for the proliferation of businesses, many of them unicorns, which market their products or services to niche audiences. In the past, their business models would either not have been feasible or would have required costly brokers or intermediaries. Online advertising has also provided a new way of assessing the effectiveness of advertising – including through the use, somewhat controversial, of "cookies" and other tracking software. By this means, the advertising budgets of companies are spent more efficiently, resulting in a better overall allocation of capital (Gilbert 2024). Free online services, available worldwide, also generate value to users, although the latter is notoriously difficult to measure. One influential attempt to estimate the aggregate consumer surplus derived from Facebook, relying on choice experiments, arrived at a range between 0.05 and 0.11 percentage points of overall income in the United States ((Brynjolfsson et al. 2019).

The idea, however, that the services offered by social media platforms are an unalloyed good is not uncontroversial, especially in light of anecdotal evidence about the mental health crisis affecting

the younger generation (Haidt 2014). Allowing for the possibility that individuals might experience negative utility from not being part of a social media platform that is popular, it is possible – and indeed congruent with some survey research -- that such platforms are "traps", with much of the measured welfare gains being simple artefacts of their wide use, preventing individuals from leaving even though they themselves might experience negative utility from being present there (Bursztyn et al. 2023). This possibility is consistent with the emerging recognition in psychology that "excessive use of the Internet exhibits the same criteria that mark other substance and behavioural addictions," corroborated further by the activation of the same areas of the brain present in other addictions as well as the use of the same molecular (dopaminergic) pathways (Bhargava and Velasquez 2021).

The impact of social media on individuals' information diets is also difficult to track. The evidence for one common idea – namely information bubbles – is limited. In fact, social media consumption may in some cases make users' information diets more varied than they would be otherwise (Eady et al. 2019). In the 2016 presidential election in the United States, the impact of Russian-sponsored ads on Facebook was heavily concentrated among users who already strongly identified as Republicans and who were on the receiving ends of heavily one-sided information diets. The election of Donald Trump was therefore not a result of Russian interference (Eady et al. 2019). Another study, focused on the effectiveness of Russian war propaganda, concludes that while "receiving news via YouTube, Facebook, or TikTok is also associated with greater belief in Russian narrative," the effect is weaker than the role played by the pre-existing "conspiratorial mindset" of individuals (Zilinsky et al. 2024).

The experience of Trump's election, of Brexit, and of the seeming success of Russian propaganda has nevertheless helped frame the debate in terms of fighting misinformation. They have provided impetus for increased fact-checking and moderation efforts by some social media platforms, some of it accelerated by the EU's adoption of the Digital Services Act (DSA), which imposes a number of responsibilities on social media platforms.

This development is understandable. Nefarious actors, including Russia, have also been using social media in their information operations. Fact-checking and explicit moderation policies have, however, their limits. Most importantly, the spreading of explicit falsehoods is only one technique, among many, available to bad faith actors in the information space. Russian propaganda about Ukraine, for example, leverages a number of claims that are true or debatable, although largely irrelevant – the idea that Russian statehood and orthodoxy can be traced back to Kyivan Rus, the fact that a large number of Russian speakers live in regions of Eastern Ukraine or in Crimea, or indeed that control over Crimea was transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Rrepublic by Nikita Khrushchev. A moderation policy, or a form of social media regulation, that focuses pedantically on facts or truthfulness risks losing sight of the bigger picture.

In addition, the experience of the United States shows that fact-checking itself can fuel a political backlash. Inevitably, any moderation policy will involve false positives. It is plausible that fact-checkers suffer from ideological biases, as do the algorithms used for moderation. From the origins of COVID-19 to the climate debate, there have been contrarian voices who claim, rightly or wrongly, to have been "censored" or "silenced" by online platforms, despite making good-faith arguments on social media, which were, at a minimum, debatable (Pielke 2025). The cultural salience of the First Amendment to the US Constitution has further helped turn the controversy into a putative free-speech issue, despite the fact that freedom of speech in no way entails an entitlement to enjoy the benefits of a far-reaching, privately owned, mass communications platform.

The Inadequacy of Existing Regulatory Frameworks

In the United States, a key point of contention is the application of Section 230 of the Communications Act of 1934 to social media platforms, through the so-called Communications Decency Act of 1996. The statute provides immunity for providers of online computer services with respect to third-party content generated by its users and gives them wide latitude to remove content that they find objectionable. Understandably, more recent legislation and case law has denied such protections to online platforms that were knowingly designed to facilitate criminal behaviour, most notably sex trafficking and other forms of organised crime. Yet, beyond questions of simple criminal liability, Section 230 has been seen as controversial both on the left and the right (Lecher 2019). Defenders of the status quo point out that imposing full liability for content on platforms, rather than on individual content creators, may render further functioning of these platforms impossible.

That is essentially, however, what the EU has attempted to do in its DSA: burden large tech companies with requirements to remove illegal content and police rules on hate speech, misinformation, political advertising, etc. Given the size of the EU's market, the "Brussels effect" is real: when confronted with the prospect of hefty fines (up to 6 percent of global turnover), large platforms have good reasons to comply. There are downside risks, however – most importantly a regulatory divergence of the transatlantic space and the resulting costs of compliance for businesses. It is not enviable for the EU to be in a position to regulate platforms, which are disproportionately originating in the United States, without being itself a fertile ground for innovation and scaling up of online businesses. Apart from the already existing fragmentation of the single European market, which remains far less integrated than the US one, the layer of European rules surrounding online platforms is not helping. Even compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), adopted earlier in pursuit of a less ambitious policy end, namely protecting users' privacy, costs businesses between €20 thousand and €1 million, depending on their size and exposure (Irwin 2023). Uncertainty over the future path of

EU regulation has already dissuaded some tech giants from rolling out services in the EU, which are already available to US-based customers (Weatherbed 2024).

The weaknesses of DSA as a tool for preventing politically destabilising uses of social media, are manifold. First, its classification of "very large online platforms" applies to vastly different businesses – from PornHub to Booking.com – for some of which third-party content may not even be central (e.g. Amazon). At the same time, it discounts the impact of smaller platforms that may emerge over time – or those that may play a more fundamental role shaping the political conversation, despite their small size. More fundamentally, the nature of "illegal content," just like the preoccupation with misinformation and fact-checking, misses the mark, whatever exact definitions the EU and its member states may settle on. The informational challenge posed by social media to democracy is not about legality of specific forms of speech per se, or their accuracy, but rather the underlying mechanisms of social media, designed to maximise engagement and time spent on platforms. In addition to being potentially addictive, they seem to favour political information, claims, and framing of problems that are bombastic, emotionally salient, and thus providing dopamine hits. Conspiracy theories, racist comments, lies, or "illegal content" predate social media – "if it bleeds, it leads" has been a principle of news content for a very long time. What makes online platforms troubling is that they succeed in hooking individuals on content that may be damaging for them individually – hence the proliferation of anxiety and other mental health problems among young people – and which arguably skews the political conversation in a clickbait-oriented, often hysterical direction.

Alternatives to Regulation

This paper does not attempt to provide definitive solutions to the transformative effect of social media on political conversations across developed democracies. Past experience with breakthroughs in communication technologies – from the printing press to the radio and television broadcasting – suggests that the downstream effects of such changes on culture, society, and politics can be deep and transformative. There is little to indicate that the advent of social media platforms, the resulting "democratisation" of content, and the disappearance of traditional editorial guardrails would not have a similarly profound effect on political conversations across the West.[10] The simultaneous emergence of disruptive, polarising politics in vastly different societies is also difficult to explain without making reference to one factor that has been common to all: namely the emergence of social media platforms with their algorithmically provided content.

One need not be a Luddite to recognise that while large online platforms generate important gains, there may be a reason for tempering the basic mechanism underpinning their business models: an effort

10 For an influential early version of the argument, see Gurin (2018)..

to catch and hold our attention. Specifically, policymakers may ask platforms to disable algorithmic content recommendations in users' feeds in favour of simple chronological ones. Users' data could still be used to target advertising – and thus deliver much of the actual economic gains produced by the platforms. In contrast, the "for you" feeds appear solely to suck users into spending hours on the platforms and drag them down the rabbit holes of increasingly polarising or conspiratorial content (Paz 2024). While notoriously non-transparent, not all algorithms seem equally troubling – recommended content on LinkedIn seems, at least anecdotally to do less harm than what is on offer on TikTok and X. The EU's DSA has set up a dedicated organisation to investigate the nature and risks of algorithms underpinning different platforms (European Centre for Algorithmic Transparency, ECAT) and has imposed a requirement for very large platforms to share their data with authorities for that purpose.[11]

It may well be time for the EU to move beyond that step and act alone if need be. It is not obvious that algorithmic content recommendations are central to the benefits generated by social media, economic and otherwise. If the intuition underlying this essay is correct, however, they are central to the harms produced by them, while also being massively helpful to the platforms' business models. Social media platforms are not the first product or service to generate consumer benefits while also imposing wider societal harms. Every country has a number of policies restricting access and use of addictive and mind-altering substances – banning them altogether or subjecting them to strict regulation and taxation. While binging on social media content may not bring one into an early grave, the wider societal harms are becoming harder to deny – and warrant policy action.

Focusing on algorithms, as opposed to the content itself, would neutralise claims about supposed "censorship". Just as freedom of speech does not entail the individual right to have their writings published in a newspaper of record, freedom of speech is not freedom to use a megaphone to spread one's ideas to more people. Most of us would dislike living in a world in which everyone was given a powerful megaphone to get their point across to an audience. Algorithms are akin to megaphones, only with a much larger reach and likely addictive. It would be a perfectly reasonable move for policymakers, enjoying democratic legitimacy, to determine that *nobody* should be holding an algorithmic "megaphone" while talking – or that the use of such "megaphones" and their technical properties be subject to strict conditions to minimise harm.

The spectrum of policy options is broad. On the one end, as Francis Fukuyama and co-authors suggest, regulators may require large platforms to allow the installation of third-party "middleware" that would provide a competitive alternative to the in-built, non-transparent, algorithms offered by

11 As of now, European authorities are scrutinising the algorithms used in X and the changes implemented under Elon Musk's ownership (European Commission, 2025).

the platforms (Fukuyama et al. 2020). It is unclear, however, whether a market-based, competitive approach addresses the dopamine-driven and possibly addictive nature of algorithms built to maximise engagement. If not, a more heavy-handed approach, including a possible ban on free algorithmic content might become necessary.

Conclusion

The idea of a ban on algorithmic content recommendations may seem to be a sweeping, highly consequential prescription. It is a tentative one, however, suggesting a direction in which experts and policymakers ought to be looking instead of presenting a ready-made solution. It is apparent that simply more fact-checking and tighter moderation policies are not going to mitigate the destructive effect of social media on our political conversation, especially in an age when we can expect a collusion between leading platforms and the Trump administration, plausibly directed at future destabilisation of European politics.

Recommendations:

- Urgently consider placing restrictions on algorithmic content recommendations on social media platforms, small and large.
- De-emphasise fact-checking and fighting factual "dis-" and "mis-information" as the main tools for addressing the existing crisis engendered by social media platforms.
- Be ready to act even in the face of an unfriendly US administration.

Bibliography:

Bhargava, Vikram R., and Manuel Velasquez. 2021. "Ethics of the Attention Economy: The Problem of Social Media Addiction." *Business Ethics Quarterly* 31 (3): 321–59. https://doi.org/10.1017/beq.2020.32.

Brynjolfsson, Erik, Avinash Collis, W. Erwin Diewert, Felix Eggers, and Kevin Fox. 2019. "GDP-B: Accounting for the Value of New and Free Goods in the Digital Economy." Cambridge, MA. https://doi.org/10.3386/w25695.

Bursztyn, Leonardo, Rafael Jimenez-Duran, Christopher Roth, and Benjamin R Handel. 2023. "Product Market Traps: The Case of Social Media." https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/product-market-traps-case-social-media.

Dumitru, Adrian. 2024. "Călin Georgescu, Hallucinating. How He Met Another Species 'Not Human at All' and What He Thinks about the Pyramids and the First Step on the Moon." *Antena 2 CNN*, November 26, 2024. https://www.antena3.ro/politica/alegeri-prezidentiale-2024/calin-georgescu-halucinant-cum-s-a-intalnit-cu-o-alta-specie-in-niciun-caz-umana-si-ce-crede-despre-piramide-si-primul-pas-pe-luna-728764.html.

Eady, Gregory, Jonathan Nagler, Andy Guess, Jan Zilinsky, and Joshua A. Tucker. 2019. "How Many People Live in Political Bubbles on Social Media? Evidence From Linked Survey and Twitter Data." *Sage Open* 9 (1). https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019832705.

European Commission. 2025. "Commission Addresses Additional Investigatory Measures to X in the Ongoing Proceedings under the Digital Services Act." January 17, 2025. https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/news/commission-addresses-additional-investigatory-measures-x-ongoing-proceedings-under-digital-services.

Fukuyama, Francis, Barak Richman, Ashish Goel, Roberta R. Katz, A. Douglas Melamed, and Marietje Schaake. 2020. *Middleware for Dominant Digital Platforms: A Technological Solution to a Threat to Democracy*. Stanford: Cyber Policy Centre. https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/cpc-middleware_ff_v2.pdf.

Gilbert, Sam. 2024. "Twenty Years of Facebook: How Has It Shaped Economies Around the World?" *Economics Observatory*, December 16, 2024. https://www.economicsobservatory.com/twenty-years-of-facebook-how-has-it-shaped-economies-around-the-world.

Gurri, Martin. 2018. *The Revolt of the Public and the Crisis of Authority in the New Millennium*. . San Francisco, CA: Stripe Press.

Haidt, Jonathan. 2014. *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*. New York: Penguin: Random House.

Hofstadter, Richard. 2021. "The Paranoid Style in American Politics." *Harper's Magazine*, March 23, 2021. https://harpers.org/archive/1964/11/the-paranoid-style-in-american-politics/.

Irwin, Luke. 2023. "How Much Does GDPR Compliance Cost in 2023?" May 10, 2023. https://www.itgovernance.eu/blog/en/how-much-does-gdpr-compliance-cost-in-2020.

Lecher, Colin. 2019. "Both Parties Are Mad about a Proposal for Federal Anti-Bias Certification." *Verge*, June 10, 2019. https://www.theverge.com/2019/6/20/18692829/section-230-hawley-bill-response-anti-bias-certification.

Lipka, Roman. 2024. “Slováci Veria Hoaxom Viac Ako Iné Národy. Prečo Je to Tak?” *VEDA NA DOSAH*, February 6, 2024. https://vedanadosah.cvtisr.sk/ludia/sociologia/slovaci-veria-hoaxom-viac-ako-ine-narody-preco-je-to-tak.

Paz, Christian. 2024. “Is Tiktok Breaking Young Voters’ Brains?” *VOX*, June 5, 2024. https://www.vox.com/353689/is-tiktok-breaking-young-voters-brains.

Pielke, Roger. 2025. “Goodbye and Good Riddance to Meta Fact-Checking,” January 15, 2025. https://www.bostonglobe.com/2025/01/15/opinion/meta-fact-checking/.

Thiel, Peter. 2025. “A Time for Truth and Reconciliation.” *Financial Times*, January 10, 2025. https://www.ft.com/content/a46cb128-1f74-4621-ab0b-242a76583105.

Weatherbed, Jess. 2024. “Meta Won’t Release Its Multimodal Llama AI Model in the EU.” *Verge*, July 18, 2024. https://www.theverge.com/2024/7/18/24201041/meta-multimodal-llama-ai-model-launch-eu-regulations.

Zilinsky, Jan, Yannis Theocharis, Franziska Pradel, Marina Tulin, Claes de Vreese, Toril Aalberg, Ana Sofía Cardenal, et al. 2024. “Justifying an Invasion: When Is Disinformation Successful?” *Political Communication* 41 (6): 965–86. https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2024.2352483.

A Digital Battlefield: How Russian Disinformation Influences Voter Behaviour in Central and Eastern Europe

Sebastian Schäffer and Malwina Talik

Summary: Russian disinformation has emerged as a significant challenge, aiming to manipulate voter behaviour and undermine trust in democracy. This interference began long before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as exemplified by the 2016 US elections, but has intensified since 2022. Central and Eastern Europe, due to their proximity to Russia, are of special interest to the Kremlin, which translates into numerous disinformation campaigns aimed at destabilising and polarising societies. Well-documented cases include interference in EU elections 2024, as well as elections in Romania, Moldova, and Croatia. This paper analyses these cases, provides an outlook on other potential targets in Central and Eastern Europe, and highlights new challenges arising from the rapid development of technology and the influence of social media platform owners on their algorithms.

Keywords: FIMI, elections, disinformation, CEE, Russia

Introduction

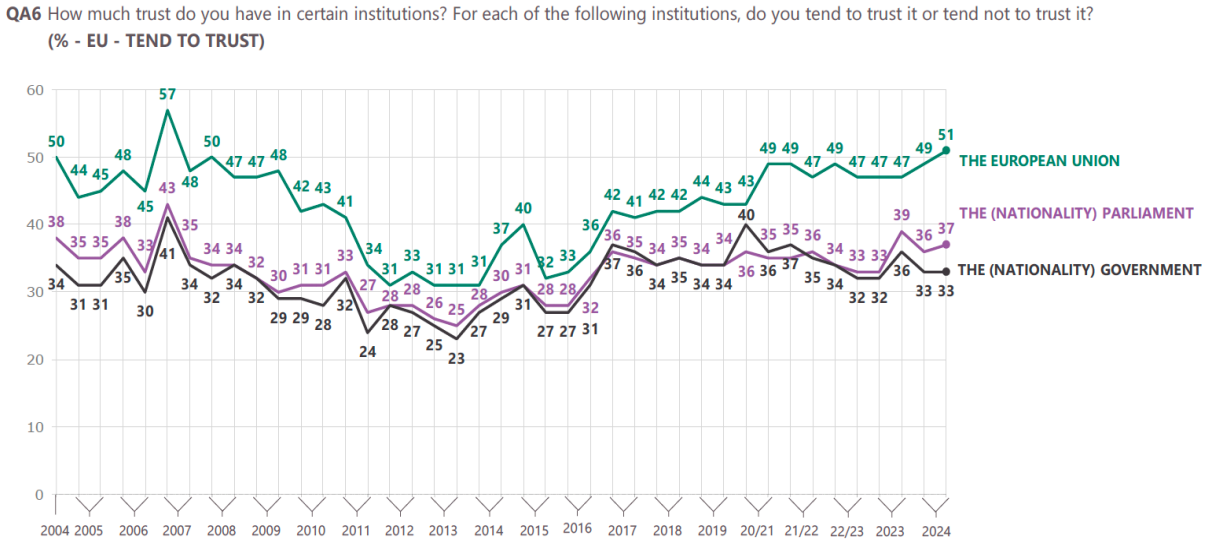
The rapid proliferation of digital technologies has transformed political landscapes across the globe, offering platforms for direct communication and engagement with voters as well as citizen mobilisation. This digital revolution has also brought unprecedented challenges, however, among them the rise of disinformation campaigns and FIMI: foreign information manipulation and interference. In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), Russian disinformation has emerged as a significant challenge, which can influence voter behaviour and interfere with or even undermine democratic processes. Russia's interference in the region is not, however, a new phenomenon.

Influencing who is head of state or government has a long and notorious tradition which dates back to the Cold War-era. This included not only propaganda strategies, which have currently evolved into sophisticated strategies leveraging modern technology, but even extortion and bribery. One of the most prolific cases is certainly the constructive vote of no confidence against the German Chancellor Willy Brandt in 1972. East German State Security (which was receiving their orders from Moscow) deemed the Social Democratic Chancellor better for the regime than the contesting Rainer Barzel from the Christian Democrats. Barzel lacked two votes for it to pass; after German reunification, access to files from the Ministry for State Security revealed the bribing of at least two members

of parliament (Bundesbeauftragter für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der Ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik 2013, 265).

The tactic currently remains the same, but with new means. In the contemporary CEE, these efforts primarily aim to destabilise governments, sow mistrust in institutions, and weaken the region's ties with Western alliances such as the European Union (EU) and NATO. Russian disinformation primarily seeks to polarise societies by amplifying divisive issues such as migration, minority rights, and historical disputes. By exploiting societal divisions, cultural narratives, and historical grievances, it discourages voter turnout, and boosts support for populist or Eurosceptic candidates who align with Russia's strategic interests. Russian disinformation campaigns target not only political preferences, but also the broader public's confidence in democratic systems. At least within the EU this has not yet affected the trust in national parliaments as well as governments and the EU itself. Over the past 20 years it has fluctuated, but has ultimately remained more or less the same:

Figure 1: How Much Trust Do You Have in Certain Institutions?



Source: European Commission 2024, 11.

Understanding the dynamics of Russian disinformation and its influence on voter behaviour in CEE is critical for safeguarding the region's democratic integrity. This article provides an overview

of the online disinformation mechanisms in CEE, their psychological and social effects. By shedding light on this digital battlefield, we aim to contribute to the resilience of democratic institutions in the face of growing external threats.

This paper looks at three presidential elections in CEE, which took place within just a couple of weeks at the end of 2024: in Moldova, Romania, and Croatia. In all cases, a varying degree of Russian influence and manipulation was observed. In addition to these elections, Moldova also held a referendum on enshrining the goal of European integration in its constitution, while in Romania parliamentary elections took place in between the two rounds of presidential elections. It is not only the proximity in the "super election year" of 2024 that makes these cases especially interesting, but also the nature and the degree of the influence. This paper also analyzes future challenges to CEE, among them the upcoming presidential elections in Poland.

How Voter's Online Data is Used to Affect Their Voting Behaviour

A range of political stakeholders have applied various methods of influencing voters' behaviour in democratic countries, but the emergence of social media has created entirely new avenues and capabilities. By virtue of being free of charge, social media platforms are easily accessible, but in exchange, the platforms collect what has become one of the most valuable resources of our time: data. This data is then used – but also misused – to better target paid advertisements and curate content that users are likely to engage with, encouraging them to spend more time on the platform. Each user is shown a different content, based on their online behaviour and interests. This feature has transformed social media platforms into profitable tools not only for private companies seeking to maximise profits, but also for various stakeholders aiming to exploit data to influence the outcomes of democratic elections and referenda. What might have seemed like the plot of a science fiction novel a decade ago has materialised as one of the most pressing challenges to democracy—and in none other than one of the world's oldest modern democracies.

The Mueller Report, published by the US Department of Justice in 2019, proves how Russia exploited social media platforms to influence the outcome of the nation's elections in 2016. The operation known as "Project Lakhta" aimed at aiding Donald Trump's victory and discrediting Hillary Clinton who, according to polls, seemed set to win. This does not mean that Trump was consciously collaborating with Russia. The goal was to destabilise the USA, paving the way to victory for a politically inexperienced and notorious businessman, which played into Russian interests. Russian intelligence started implementing its plan years before by creating troll farms and thousands of fake accounts representing polarising positions, who then created groups aimed at various voter clusters, shared fabricated and fake information under the guise of regular users, and created discord ahead

of elections. By the time the candidates were known, they already had their structures and networks in place and could be used in a social media campaign, run by the Russia-based company Internet Research Agency. The rest is history. This case of the US elections demonstrates that Russian electoral interference, as an element of hybrid warfare, did not begin with the Russian invasion of Ukraine but dates to a time when relations were not officially strained.

A similar dynamic could have been observed in the UK ahead of the Brexit referendum. Cambridge Analytica, a private company hired by the LeaveEU campaign, obtained data of 2.7 million Europeans (Monteleone 2019) without their consent. While the interference into the 2016 US elections represents a clear case of *foreign information manipulation and interference* (FIMI), the British case shows how the interference can also come from within, when domestic politicians hire private companies to spread disinformation (*domestic information manipulation and interference*, DIMI).

Doppelgänger Polarises Ahead of The EU Elections

Russian interference into the election process began before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. and further intensified after the escalation of the war. From 2022, several European countries, including France, Germany, Poland, and Ukraine, became targets of a Russian disinformation campaign later dubbed "Doppelgänger" (Chawryło 2024), which was detected by EUDisinfoLab. The timing was no coincidence; the campaign aimed to weaken support for Ukraine by internally destabilising European countries and polarising their societies. Users encountered polarising content spreading false information that appeared to be published on platforms of reputable media outlets. In reality, these were "doppelgängers" of legitimate websites, with URLs that differed only slightly. The campaign accelerated around the EU elections, raising suspicions that it may have been a testing ground for influencing future electoral contexts: "From 4 to 28 June 2024 1,366 accounts published 1,366 pro-Russian posts to third-party content. The pattern was found in German, French, English, Italian, Polish and Ukrainian. According to X data, the combined views of these posts reached over 4.66 million by the end of June" (Counter Disinformation Network 2024, 3).

In each country, the narrative aimed to exploit issues that could become contentious, with the overall aim of criticising EU governments and Ukraine. In Poland, for example, the campaign aimed to discredit Polish politicians, presenting them as puppets of foreign powers acting against the interests of their own country and economy, with narratives emphasising that Polish interests were being neglected by the EU. These messages reinforced populist slogans. The posts were not overtly pro-Russian, suggesting that the trolls were aware such content would be easily identified as propaganda in a Russia-sceptical country like Poland. Instead, they sought to instill suspicion towards Ukrainians.

Recent Elections in CEE: Moldova, Romania, and Croatia

Moldova

Moldovan president Maia Sandu and her Party of Action and Solidarity (*Partidul Acțiune și Solidaritate*, PAS) have certainly achieved more for the European integration of the Eastern European country than any previous government, including the ones that claimed to be pro-European. While certain challenges like corruption and the lack of independence of the judiciary remain, not only did Chișinău receive candidate status in June 2022 (a decision taken by the European Commission, which was heavily influenced by the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine), but negotiations for EU membership even began in December 2023.

This move towards the EU cannot have been to the liking of the Kremlin. Located between Romania and Ukraine, Moldova was formerly part of the Soviet Union and has been in the Russian sphere of influence since its independence in 1991. The ensuing civil war was frozen a year after it started but is still not resolved today; in the de facto state of Transnistria, which is internationally not recognised, the Russian army is present even now, allowing the Kremlin to continue exerting a strong influence on society.

An earlier period of approximation to the European Union – especially in the framework of the Eastern Partnership, like visa liberalisation and the signing of an Association Agreement in 2014 – was preceded and followed by sanctions on the agricultural sector as well as interference by Moscow, which subsequently led to the election of a pro-Russian president in 2016. Igor Dodon defeated Maia Sandu in the second round and his Party of Socialists (*Partidul Socialiștilor din Republica Moldova*, PSRM) also won the parliamentary elections in 2019, but failed to obtain a majority. Ironically, he made Sandu Prime Minister (who was toppled after only a couple of months by a vote of no confidence) and lost the presidential election against her a year later.

To prevent this back and forth – two steps towards European integration and one step back to the Kremlin's sphere of influence – Sandu wanted to hold a referendum enshrining the goal of EU membership into the constitution, making it easier for future governments to ratify the accession treaty. She wanted to align the referendum with the first round of the presidential election, a wish granted by the parliament, in which PAS has held an absolute majority since the 2021 snap elections. On 20 October 2024, Moldovans headed to the polls to elect their next president and vote in a referendum on the country's future EU integration. Holding a referendum on such a complex and multifaceted issue brings, however, its own risks. History provides cautionary tales: both the failed Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe and Brexit illustrate how a simplistic yes-no vote can dangerously oversimplify nuanced debates.

In Moldova's case, the referendum also narrowed the political discourse. With no viable pro-EU alternative among the other presidential candidates, the choice effectively became a binary one: support the referendum and Sandu, or align with opposition parties like PSRM, which actually called for a boycott. The debate over Moldova's EU integration was reduced to a stark choice between right and wrong, depending on one's perspective.

This dynamic also opened the door to disinformation campaigns. Reports indicate that up to €150 million (European Pravda and Martyniuk 2024) was spent on social media campaigns, propaganda videos, and efforts to destabilise the country. Investigations (Ziarul de Gardă 2024) revealed that Ilan Shor, a pro-Russian oligarch in exile, funneled approximately €15 million to buy votes. This interference mirrored earlier Kremlin tactics, such as those seen in the UK's Brexit campaign.

For a country of just 2.5 million people, these efforts highlighted Moscow's unease about Moldova's European trajectory. Among pro-European Moldovans, particularly in Chișinău, anxiety was palpable in the days leading up to the vote. The referendum's narrow victory validated those fears. A negative outcome would not have halted EU accession outright but would have complicated the path forward by failing to enshrine EU membership as a constitutional goal.

While the diaspora saved not only the European future of Moldova but also secured Sandu's second term as president (although the boycott by PSRM might actually have tipped the scale in the referendum), the case was very different in the Romanian presidential elections later that year, a neighbouring country with a shared language.

Romania

In the initial round held on 24 November, far-right candidate Călin Georgescu secured approximately 23% of the vote, leading the race. He was set to face centrist liberal Elena Lasconi, who garnered 19.18%, in a runoff scheduled for 8 December.

The Romanian Constitutional Court annulled (McGrath 2024) the first-round results, however, on 6 December, following allegations of Russian interference aimed at bolstering Georgescu's campaign, especially on TikTok. Following a negative appeal at the European Court of Human Rights, the election was rescheduled for May 2025 (Ilie 2025).

Current polls show that Georgescu would now receive even as much as 38%. Amongst other things, he is a vocal critic of NATO and has praised Vladimir Putin; yet 87.5% of Romanians see the security alliance and the EU as the right political and military orientation of the country, while less than 5% would look towards Russia. This clearly indicates that the rise in support for

Georgescu is not necessarily related to his policies but rather due to frustration with the current government and the judiciary, implying a move from FIMI to DIMI, albeit unintended.

Croatia

Another peculiar case was the presidential election in Croatia. While the interference from Pro-Russian, anti-EU, and anti-NATO bot networks has been confirmed (Centre for Information Resilience 2025), the question remains as to why this was done, as the supported candidate and incumbent president Zoran Milanović overwhelmingly won the second round with 75% and came close to an absolute majority already in the first round. Croatia's case also demonstrates that in the current geopolitical climate, Russia takes no risks and does not refrain from disinformation campaigns even in countries where a pro-Russian candidate is certain to win.

Looking Ahead

Countries across CEE are watching carefully for Russian interference into the electoral process, as little doubt remains that other elections will become the next digital battlefields. One of them is Poland's presidential elections, scheduled for 18 May and 1 June. Like Romania, Poland is a NATO frontline state, crucial in providing logistical and political support for Ukraine. This makes it a target: "Poland is not engaged in a cold war with Russia. We are in a state of active cyberwar with Putin's regime," emphasised Krzysztof Gawkowski, Polish Vice-Minister of Digital Affairs (Polska Agencja Prasowa 2024). According to Gawkowski, Russian military intelligence has established a unit specialising in provoking incidents in European cyberspace (Polska Agencja Prasowa 2024).

There is a great deal at stake in the elections, and once again, they may decide whether Poland will be able to rebuild resilient democratic structures, or if the tug of war between the president and government continues. Poland becomes a country that has been overturning the "illiberal" tide. After eight years of democratic backlash and an anti-EU narrative under the Law and Justice-led government, the country is now on course to undo the illiberal reforms. A presidential victory plays a crucial part, as the current president, Andrzej Duda, loyal to the previous government, can hinder considerable changes through his veto. Having a weaker state bordering Ukraine would benefit Russia and increase its influence and psychological warfare. In the last presidential elections, less than half a million voters decided the fate of the elections out of over 20 million who cast a vote (Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza 2020). Demobilising voters may be one of the goals of Russian disinformation. "Operation Doppelgänger" is considered a "rehearsal" ahead of the presidential elections, especially because most posts were published after the European Parliament election campaign, thus testing voters' emotions at a time when attention to electoral disinformation may have been lowered.

The additional challenge in Poland is the high number of users for whom social media constitutes a primary source of information: 52.9%, whereas the global average is only 34.2% (Kuśmierek 2024). This makes the Poles more susceptible to FIMI and DIMI. The discourse in these campaigns will not focus on promoting a pro-Russian stance, as Polish society has traditionally been very critical of the Kremlin's politics. It will instead aim at exploiting existing topics like immigration as a threat, dissatisfaction with the current government, and contentious issues between Poland and Ukraine such as history or agricultural crops.

While in most cases, the influence is most successful in a yes-no decision like a vote of (no) confidence, referendum or first-past-the-post as well as in plurality electoral systems, it has recently been used in proportional representative systems as well. The outcome here is overtly less disruptive but instead plays more of a long game, destabilising the political system and undermining trust in institutions, even achieving a blocking minority or gaining access to positions in the parliament as well as committees, like vice presidents or chairs.

The European Parliamentary elections serve as one example, where the Patriots for Europe fraction is the third largest and could even surpass the Social Democrats as the second biggest, if there were not a split between the Eurosceptic and far-right parties that are fragmented over three fractions. The elections to the German Bundestag may be the next example. Here the amplifying of the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), by well-known figures such as Elon Musk, might not make them the strongest party (like their Austrian friends from the FPÖ achieved in 2024), but might give them the second most deputies in the parliament.

This would not only grant access to more positions but could also influence the appointment of judges in the Constitutional Court. It could, however, even go further than that: current polls show a majority for a coalition with the Christian Democrats. While Friedrich Merz, their lead chancellor candidate, has always excluded working together with the AfD, this position recently appears to have softened, especially after a knife attack killing two people (including a two-year-old child) by an asylum seeker with psychological problems (Reuters 2025). Such cases, as tragic as they are, are being amplified not only in the political discourse, but also on social media.

Tip of the Iceberg?

While certain incidents of disinformation and influence have been exposed and analysed, many cases go unnoticed or, even when observed, efforts to combat disinformation often seem futile. The scope and tactics behind gendered disinformation campaigns, which discredit female politicians as easier targets facing many more challenges in politics, especially in more conservative and traditional

societies, still require closer scrutiny. One such case may be Slovakia's former president Zuzana Čaputová, who decided against running for the second term due to smear campaigns against her and her family, despite polls favouring her as a winner.

The EU and most of its CEE member states have been taking action against disinformation.

While raising awareness is a crucial first step, governments and their bureaucracies face significant challenges in keeping up with rapidly evolving technologies, the interests of tech giants, and seemingly well-orchestrated and highly targeted disinformation campaigns. The EU has been taking steps since the major cases of interference were made public. The results of these efforts include the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), a significant hub of various stakeholders to join efforts in combating disinformation. The EU also makes efforts to regulate online platforms and force them to take action in case of disinformation or illegal content, examples being the Digital Service Act (DSA) adopted in 2022 or the AI Act from 2024.

The awareness of possible online threats faces new challenges, which are less digital in nature. The case of X, former Twitter, exemplifies how its new owner, Elon Musk, politicised a primary online platform for journalists and politicians, abandoned fact-checking, and used the algorithm to reflect his political agenda. It remains debatable whether Trump would have become president without Russian interference in 2016, or if he would have won again in 2024 without Musk and X. Consciously or not, Musk's behaviour benefits the Kremlin, weakening its current largest political and economic opponent.

Musk does not stop there; he does not hide his eagerness to interfere in the politics of countries and support their far-right parties, as the case of "Only AfD can save Germany" shows. Musk's behaviour and Trump's victory set a hazardous trend in motion: Meta's owner Mark Zuckerberg announced that fact-checking will also be abandoned due to the "partiality" of fact-checkers. The question remains open as to why fact-checkers cannot be trained to improve their skills, rather than banning fact-checking altogether. This development heralds a slippery slope for the spread of fake news and FIMI as well as DIMI.

Conclusion

The various cases of disinformation and influence come down to one question: what needs to be done to preserve democratic integrity? The frustrating aspect of democracies is that they are inherently slow. Indeed, this is what distinguishes them from autocracies, where there is no need to work out a compromise, as decisions are taken by one single person or circle. While not much has

been achieved since 2016 in the fight against disinformation and election interference, the technology has developed in the meantime and the geopolitical situation does not promote a higher scrutiny of social media platforms. Yes, the means are different: instead of utilising data points collected from a social media network, an entire platform has been bought and is employed to influence elections. While it is always easier to learn from failures and avoid repetition in the future – the German Basic Law, its Constitution, being a direct reaction to the weaknesses of the Weimar Republic (Deutsche Welle 2019) – there is a dire need to anticipate the challenges that our democratic system and society will face from future technologies and developments. Sectors and institutions must draw increasingly on strategic foresight. As bleak as the situation might seem, however, we must not despair. Feeling helpless, hopeless or even powerless is the goal of authoritarian regimes. Let us therefore not make their work even easier but instead focus on what is necessary to counter division: empathy for the weaker parts of society, the courage to stand up against division and personal connections, who can help us navigate the digital battlefield.

Recommendations:

- Continue enhancing new media literacy at every stage of life. Media literacy is not a one-time act, but a continuous process as technology evolves constantly and at a high pace. It is crucial to include it not only as a significant and practice-oriented subject in school curricula or in the education of pensioners, but also to find avenues to make it part of obligatory training for employees. Despite CEE and EU societies being better educated than previous generations, new media literacy is often given too little importance and attention – with dramatic consequences. Raising awareness about Russia's interference and goals is also an important additional factor.
- Support fact-checking platforms and qualitative journalism financially and politically. The number of fact-checking platforms and NGOs have multiplied in CEE in response to disinformation campaigns. The challenge of insufficient financing remains, however, which limits their capabilities (some media can afford trained fact-checkers; in most other cases, the responsibility remains with journalists who are often already under time pressure) and makes them vulnerable to backlash against their activities, risking the abandonment of fact-checking altogether instead of further training. Instead, efforts should be made to grant the qualitative sources of information the authority they deserve.
- Punish the spreading of fake news and misinformation; do not normalise fake news in political and public discourse. Spreading fake information did not begin with social media, but dates back to ancient history. Online platforms only mirror and amplify the impact of misinformation present

in public life. The challenge is when people of authority and public figures, including elected politicians, deliberately use misinformation for political gains. Such cases more often than not go unpunished, with court trials labelled as "censorship".

- Support the EU Digital Act and the creation of EU platforms. The EU is often blamed of only regulating, while other global players innovate. The potential to bridge that gap lies, however, in the digital realm. The goal has to be to find a melange between safe-guarding and innovating (social) media platforms to offer digital services that provide advantages while at the same time not undermining democratic values.

Bibliography:

Bundesbeauftragter für die Unterlagen des Staatssicherheitsdienstes der Ehemaligen Deutschen Demokratischen Republik. 2013. "Der Deutsche Bundestag Bis 1989 in Den Akten Des Ministeriums Für Staatssicherheit MfS Der DDR: Gutachten Für Den Deutschen Bundestag Gemäß Paragraph 37(3) Des Stasi-Unterlagen-Gesetzes." Berlin. https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/194612/908293f3091b29b9f8de716238348cc1/gutachten-data.pdf.

Chawryło, Katarzyna. 2024. "Doppelgänger" – Schemat Rosyjskiej Operacji Wpływu Przeciwko Zachodowi." https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2024-09-13/doppelganger-schemat-rosyjskiej-operacji-wplywu-przeciwko-zachodowi.

Deutsche Welle. 2019. "The German Constitution: Putting People First," May 22, 2019. https://www.dw.com/en/the-german-constitution-putting-people-first/a-48824174.

European Pravda, and Yevheniia Martyniuk. 2024. "Inside Russia's €150 Million Propaganda Blitz to Undermine Moldova's EU Path." *Euromaidan Press*, 2024. https://euromaidanpress.com/2024/10/09/inside-russias-e-150-million-propaganda-blitz-to-undermine-moldovas-eu-path/.

Ilie, Luiza. 2025. "European Court Rejects Romanian Far-Right Presidential Candidate's Election Appeal." *Reuters*, January 21, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/romanian-far-right-presidential-candidate-leads-polls-ahead-may-vote-2025-01-21/.

Kuśmierek, Malwina. 2024. "Skąd Polacy Czerpią Wiedzę o Świecie?" (Where Do Poles Get Their Knowledge about the World?)." https://spidersweb.pl/2024/02/raport-meltwater-polska-swiat-internet.html.

McGrath, Stephen. 2024. "Romania's Top Court Annuls First Round of Presidential Vote Won by Far-Right Candidate." *Associated Press*, December 6, 2024. https://apnews.com/article/romania-election-president-georgescu-court-585e8f8f3ce7013951f5c7cf4054179b.

Monteleone, Shara. 2019. “Artificial Intelligence, Data Protection and Elections.” https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2019/637952/EPRS_ATA(2019)637952_EN.pdf.

Państwowa Komisja Wyborcza. 2020. “Wybory Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej w 2020 r,.” 2020. https://prezydent20200628.pkw.gov.pl/prezydent20200628/.

Polska Agencja Prasowa. 2024. “Polska Jest w Stanie Zimnej Wojny Cybernetycznej z Rosją.” May 15, 2024. . https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/krzysztof-gawkowski-polska-jest-w-stanie-zimnej-wojny-cybernetycznej-z-rosja.

Reuters. 2025. “Two Killed in German Park in Stabbing Attack; Afghan Suspect Arrested,” January 23, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/suspect-arrested-after-two-killed-knife-attack-german-park-2025-01-22/.

Ziarul de Gardă. 2024. “Serving Moscow: Three Months among Shor’s ‘Slaves’. ZdG Undercover Investigation.” *Ziarul de Gardă*, October 15, 2024. https://www.zdg.md/en/serving-moscow-three-months-among-shors-slaves-zdg-undercover-investigation/.

Biotechnology: The Struggle for DNA and Dominance

Jack Herndon

Summary: Biotechnology is a new frontier of technological competition. Biotechnology has broad applicability, including dual-use and military applications. It also has profound moral and ethical consequences. The country that dominates biotechnology will define the rules and norms of how this technology can be used. People's Republic of China (PRC) has prioritised biotechnology since 2016 aiming to become a "biotechnology superpower" and leverages significant state support to expand its capacity in genomic sequencing while collecting genomic data from around the world. PRC's Military-Civil Fusion and national intelligence laws pose the risk that data and capital from democratic countries may also facilitate the development of PRC biotechnology with military applications. Democracies must act quickly to address the non-market practices of PRC, strengthen protections of genomic data, and prevent public funds from facilitating the growth of PRC biotechnology companies.

Keywords: biotechnology; BGI; genomics; technological competition; US-China

Introduction

In his opening statement at a hearing organised by the China Select Committee, Ranking Member Raja Krishnamoorti held up a large printout of Captain America, saying that China is in the process of developing "super soldiers" (Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party 2024). It is easy to dismiss developments in US policy towards China as alarmist. With the speed at which AI is developing, however, combined with a deeper understanding of the human genome, the development of biotechnology with military applications, or "super-soldiers" for lack of a better term, appears less out of reach.

Biotechnology stands at an inflection point where recent advances in artificial intelligence are making way for rapid developments in biotech industries and expanding their potential economic and military applications. It is a new battleground in technological competition between the United States and China, a focal point in an escalating trade war (MOFCOM 2025), and an emerging point of concern in national security (National Counterintelligence and Security Center 2021). The competition in biotechnology extends beyond economic and military considerations. It involves altering life at its most fundamental level, raising profound ethical and moral questions. Whichever nation or group of nations emerges as the leader will ultimately set the standards and norms for how these technologies are employed.

China wants to become a "biotechnology superpower" (生物技术强国) (Ministry of Science and Technology of the People's Republic of China. 2017) and has exhibited alarming behaviour in its pursuit of data and development of these capabilities: from forced harvesting of genetic data from repressed ethnic minorities within China (Hawkins 2023), to the harvesting of genetic data from unwitting pregnant women around the world (Needham and Baldwin 2021). In its application, PRC military strategists muse about the possibility of "specific ethnic genetic attacks" (Kania and VornDick 2019).

PRC is actively creating new chokepoints in biotechnology that will exacerbate strategic dependence and provide new avenues of coercive economic leverage. The PRC already dominates the production of pharmaceutical ingredients (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission 2019) and has consolidated the global supply of non-human primates that are essential for any new drug to be approved for commercial use (National Association for Biomedical Research 2021; Boggan 2021). Beijing has made genomics a national priority, treating genetic data as the driver for the development of new biotechnology applications, much like the use of data as a driver for the development of artificial intelligence systems. It has built the largest repository of genetic data in the world and has supercharged the international operations of its national champions to collect or acquire data abroad (Puglisi and Rask 2024).

Democratic countries cannot afford to lose this competition. The PRC government is not guided by the values of individual freedom, liberty and human dignity, nor should we expect these liberal principles to provide guardrails to the PRC government's pursuit and application of biotechnology. Democracies need to "run faster and kick shins" – facilitate the development of their own industries and cripple the efforts of PRC to dominate biotechnology. Genomics, as a critical gateway and potential chokepoint to the development of biotechnology, should be the focal point of this endeavour before PRC-based companies consolidate global market share past the point of no return (Puglisi and Rask 2024).

The United States government has already taken strong steps to boost American biotechnology (Office of Science and Technology Policy 2024) and limit the ability of PRC-based or owned genomics companies to access US technology (Bureau of Industry and Security 2023). Even more has been proposed to limit their ability to operate in the United States and benefit from public funds (H.R. 8333 2024) or access the genetic data of American citizens (U.S. Congress. Senate, 2023). The United States has also explicitly identified the national security challenges that biotechnology developments in China pose and introduced measures to fast-track the development and integration of biotechnology into national defence (National Security Commission on Emerging Biotechnology 2024; National Counterintelligence and Security Center 2021).

In Europe, despite documented cases of harvesting genetic data from pregnant European women (Needham and Baldwin 2021), genetic sequencing of the population of Hungary (BGI Genomics 2022), or the wholesale of European genetic data to companies known to cooperate with the People's Liberation Army (Cheung, Hope, and Mattis 2024), concerns have remained primarily economic (European Commission 2024a), while addressing threats have largely fallen through administrative cracks.

The EU needs to both "run faster" with industrial policies, and "kick shins" by addressing the PRC's non-market practices and curtailing its efforts to collect genetic data of EU citizens. This will require a mix of both EU and member-state level initiatives.

What Is Biotechnology

Biotechnology, although often seen as a cutting-edge field, has been around for thousands of years—beer brewing is an early example. What's new is the extent to which we can manipulate or even create biological products and processes, with applications ranging from healthcare to defence. A major focus is genomics, the study of how genes are codified and expressed. Just as AI development relies on vast amounts of data, advancements in genomics depend on the collection and analysis of genetic data, fueling breakthroughs in personalised medicine and biosecurity. The fusion of AI and biotechnology (AIxBIO) is accelerating progress in these areas, making genomics a competitive frontier with economic, healthcare, and national security implications.

Genomics plays a foundational role in biotechnology because it enables scientists to decode the building blocks of life, leading to innovations across medicine, agriculture, and synthetic biology. At the heart of genomics is genetic sequencing, a process that reads the order of DNA or RNA, providing the blueprint for understanding how genes function, evolve, and interact with the environment. Genetic sequencing serves as a gateway to major discoveries, from identifying disease markers for early diagnosis to engineering microbes for biofuel production.

China's Biotechnology Ambitions and Strategies

Some CCP officials muse that the dominance of biotechnology industries will pave the way for PRC's pre-eminence in the 21st century: "As Europe won the 19th century using industry, and the United States won the 20th using information technology, so China will win the 21st using biology" (Carlson and Wehbring, 2020). China seized the initiative in 2016 when the development of biotechnology was included in the 13th Five-Year Plan (State Council of the People's Republic of China 2016).

Beijing has focused its efforts in the area of genomics: the study of how genes are coded and

expressed. According to Anna Puglisi at CSET, the country that dominates in genomics will be able to "control the development of next-generation medical technologies, research standards and norms, and future genomics applications" (Puglisi and Rask 2024).

To feed the data-intensive endeavour, PRC has significantly expanded its national capacity in DNA sequencing technology and services (Schuerger and Puglisi 2024). PRC has supercharged the development of the Beijing Genomics Institute (BGI), which is rapidly expanding its operations overseas (Puglisi and Rask 2024; BGI Genomics 2024a). BGI "is the world's leading integrated solutions provider of precision medicine, now serving customers in more than 100 countries, involving over 2,300 medical institutions" (BGI Genomics 2025a). The growth trajectory of BGI Group closely resembles the development of Huawei, which leveraged significant state support to consolidate the market in PRC before shifting focus to international markets (Puglisi and Rask 2024). Their development has not reached a point of no return; the revenue derived from international sales is a fraction of their overall income and there remains competition from both American and European firms. The level of state support of BGI's growth threatens, however, to undercut international competitors with unfair trade practices and prevent competition or new market entries.

Concerns

Non-Market Practices and Economic Coercion

In several industries, the PRC has cultivated economic interconnectedness, using state support to undercut international competitors and induce strategic dependence (IRI 2024). This strategy inextricably entangles the global economy with PRC, expands its influence, and insulates it from economic retaliation by being able to induce paralyzing damage to economies around the world. This is the case in rare-earth minerals processing for the manufacturing of solar panels, batteries, semiconductors (e.g. germanium and gallium) and many more. Demonstrated by the disruption caused during the COVID-19 pandemic, PRC occupies a position of dominance in the production of pharmaceutical ingredients (U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission 2019) and medical goods and has threatened to withhold supply in response to criticism (Buncombe 2020).

PRC also dominates in little-known areas which are bottlenecks to the production of new intellectual property, such as dominance over the global supply of non-human primates necessary for medical trials. The decision to ban exports of wildlife, ostensibly to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus (Xinhua News Agency 2020), forced more companies to conduct trials in the PRC (Boggan 2021; National Association for Biomedical Research 2021). This dominance can be used to force knowledge transfer or industrial espionage from international corporations to the PRC by requiring them to

conduct their trials in PRC. The same strategy can be applied to DNA sequencing. Dominance over DNA sequencing and related services will make Beijing the gatekeeper to the broader bioeconomy.

> When the rest of the world's research institutions rely on Chinese companies for sequencing, it gives Chinese entities—and the Chinese government—access to not only worldwide genomic data, but also the world's biotech research ideas, putting the foundation of global biotech research at risk of IP theft, exploitation, and manipulation. (Puglisi and Rask 2024)

Norm-Setting Power

Competition in the field of biotechnology has significant moral and ethical consequences. To quote Dr. Jason Kelly of Gingko Bioworks,

> Technology isn't neutral." Our values and biases are embedded in the technologies we make, in the applications we consider, and in the ways we address problems. We embrace the complexity of determining how our beliefs are reflected in design decisions, how to direct our platform towards solving the most important challenges, and how to approach our projects and partners with care both today and into the future. (Kelly 2024)

What does it mean if a communist and avowedly atheist country, with a marred human rights record including a history of forced abortions (Chai 2011), forced sterilisation (Zenz 2020), and a fixation on "raising population quality" (NDRC 2021)[12], gains pre-eminence in an area where it may soon be possible to rewrite and reprogram the genetic code of human beings?

The Chinese Communist Party claims "democracy" as one of twelve core socialist values among "freedom", "equality", and "justice", which are, if not entirely distorted, subordinate to the Party's statist goal of National Rejuvenation (China Daily 2012). What, then, will provide guardrails to its application of biotechnologies?

Human Rights Violations

Some indications of the values that may guide PRC's application of biotechnology are evident in its pursuit of data. The government has been collecting genetic data from ethnic minorities that have been subject to surveillance and mass internment (Human Rights Watch 2017). BGI has collected up to 18 million samples of genetic data in the Xinjiang region. The collection of genetic data has been conducted supposedly to aid anti-terrorism efforts by helping to identify suspects in certain cases. Anti-terrorism has been the PRC government's justification for its broad "re-education" campaign,

12 Chapter 45 Implementation of the National Strategy for Actively Addressing Population Ageing.

with the incarceration of over one-million ethnic Uyghurs who have been subject to forced labour and forced abortions (Mendick 2019). The government engineered the drop in fertility of the ethnic Uyghur population (Zenz 2020).

While participation in the data collection was supposedly voluntary, one journal rescinded a publication that used genetic data collected in Xinjiang because it did not meet ethical standards in collection processes (Davidson 2023).

Data Harvesting and By-passing Regulations

PRC genomics companies collect genetic data from around the world. BGI previously purchased Complete Genomics in 2012, following a CFIUS review, acquiring troves of American genomic data (U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission 2012). Wuxi NextCODE, an affiliate to Wuxi Apptec that has a long history of cooperation with the PLA (Cheung, Hope, and Mattis 2024), acquired Genomics Medicine Ireland (GMI) in 2018, acquiring data of "hundreds of thousands" of Irish DNA samples (Keenan 2018).

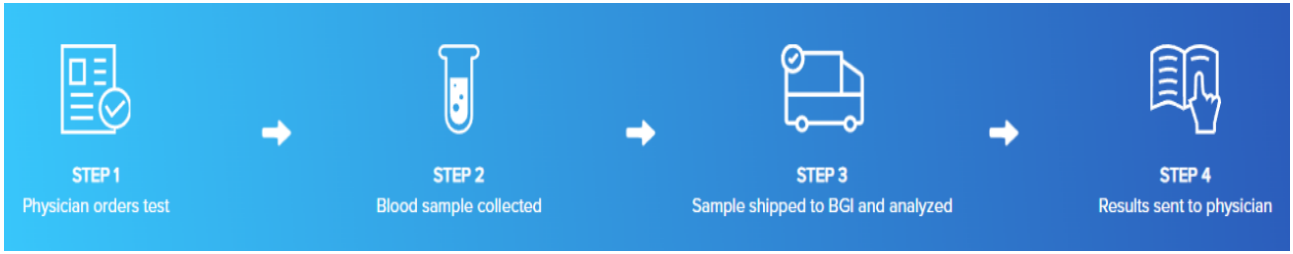
During the COVID-19 pandemic, BGI established footholds in many countries by building portable laboratories called "fire-eye labs" (火眼) to supplement local testing capacity (Dou and Cadell 2023). As of 2023, Fire-Eye labs were established in more than 20 countries on four continents (BGI Genomics 2024b). The technology deployed in these labs is also capable of sequencing the genetic code of humans.

More than eight million women have taken BGI's low-cost prenatal test (NIFTY) globally, which is now sold in over 100 countries, including in the EU (Needham and Baldwin 2021; BGI Genomics 2025c). Blood samples collected locally from the test are sent to a BGI facility to be processed (BGI Genomics 2025b). Leftover blood samples are stored and reanalysed (Needham and Baldwin 2021). According to Reuters, the samples collected also capture genetic information about the mother, as well as personal details and data collected from the prenatal tests which have been kept in the PRC government-funded gene database. Despite claims that it does not store information from women from outside of mainland China, Reuters found that genetic data of women who have taken the NIFTY test from outside of the PRC were stored in the government-funded China National GeneBank.

Even in cases where there is no direct collaboration with BGI, the use of BGI equipment and services exposes sensitive data to third parties in the PRC. BGI claims that personally identifiable information is removed by the client before samples are sent to BGI, and these samples are sequenced locally (BGI Group 2024). The Genomic Map project in Poland outsourced DNA sequencing to

the Bialystock-based Central Europe Genomics Center sp. z o.o, which used BGI's technology (Plucinska 2021). The Polish Academy of Sciences estimates that "100,000 complete Polish genomes may already be in 'Far Eastern' laboratories".

Figure 1 NIFTY Test Workflow



Source: BGI Genomics 2025c.

Dual-Use Research and Military Applications

The collection of genetic samples to detect pathogens or birth defects seems innocuous in and of itself. It is the PRC's policies of Military-Civil Fusion (U.S. Department of State 2020) and the National Intelligence Law (中华人民共和国国家情报法) (China Law Translate 2017) that opens the door to more nefarious uses for the harvested data. The Military-Civil Fusion strategy merges public and private industries to enable the military modernisation of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to dominate the next Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) (International Security Advisory Board 2024). This complicates all international transactions with PRC's private sector, especially those that handle genomic data, as all PRC entities are compelled to cooperate with PRC's intelligence services or contribute to the technological development of the PLA.

While patients do sign consent forms and privacy agreements that govern how their genetic data can be used by BGI, this does not preclude BGI's compliance with the aforementioned PRC government policies. The privacy policy on BGI's NIFTY test website says data collected can be shared when it is "directly relevant to national security or national defense security" in China (Needham and Baldwin 2021). BGI claims that the PRC government has never requested access to BGI's data, but it is ultimately beholden to comply with the National Intelligence Law. Furthermore, with Military-Civil Fusion there is no firewall to prevent the advancements made by utilizing lawfully collected genomic data from spilling over into the development of technology with military applications.

BGI routinely cooperates with the PLA. It has conducted dozens of joint studies with the PLA

and assisted the development of treatments for hearing loss and altitude sickness in PLA soldiers (Needham and Baldwin 2021). According to Reuters, in one study BGI used a military supercomputer to re-analyse NIFTY data.

If that is not enough cause for alarm, PRC military strategists openly ponder "biology as a domain of military struggle," while authoritative textbooks published by the PLA's National Defense University explore the possibility and implications of "specific ethnic genetic attacks" (Kania and VornDick 2019). According to a US government report, PRC continues to engage in activities with potential biological weapon applications (U.S. Department of State 2020). Furthermore, "the United States cannot certify that the PRC has met its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) due to concerns regarding the PRC's research on pharmaceutical-based agents (PBAs) and toxins with potential dual-use applications" (U.S. Department of Defense 2023).

The US Response: "Run Faster and Kick Shins"

The United States' threat perception of PRC's advancements in biotechnology has sharpened significantly. The Office of the Director of National Intelligence states that "China now rivals the United States in DNA-sequencing equipment and some foundational research. Beijing's large volume of genetic data potentially positions it to lead in precision medicine and agricultural biotechnology applications" (Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2024).

The US approach to competition with PRC in the domain of biotechnology resembles its approach to semiconductors: "run faster and kick shins." It is a mix of measures to stimulate the development of the United States' bioeconomy and pre-emptively stymie the growth of PRC's national champions by cutting off access to capital, technology and data. Currently, it is a patchwork of initiatives by the executive branch and Congress, and state legislatures that lay the groundwork for a concerted and comprehensive plan of action.

Running Faster

The executive branch has taken measures to heighten public awareness of PRC's efforts to collect genetic data of US citizens and stimulate the growth of the United States' bioeconomy (National Counterintelligence and Security Center 2021). EO 14081 was a Biden administration's effort to enhance US competitiveness in biotechnology, particularly in relation to China (Executive Order 14081 2022). The order supports efforts to secure supply chains, establish international biotech standards, and reduce dependence on foreign bio-manufacturing. The order directs federal agencies to invest

in research and development, improve regulatory processes, and strengthen supply chains to reduce reliance on foreign biotech production. Following the order, federal agencies committed over $2 billion to biotech R&D, manufacturing infrastructure, and workforce programs (The White House 2022).

In 2022, the US Senate established the National Security Commission on Emerging Biotechnology (NSCEB) to provide how advancements in emerging biotechnology would affect US national security and to provide recommendations to Congress on ways to increase US capabilities (National Security Commission on Emerging Biotechnology 2024). One of the challenges in this assessment has been that biotechnology was not formalised as a sector of the US economy, to measure US capabilities relative to international competitors (Highfill and Chambers 2023). NSCEB successfully included several provisions into the National Defense Authorization Act of 2025, including requiring the executive branch to conduct an assessment of developments in the PRC and their implications to the security of the United States, and "sandboxes" to develop uses for biotechnology and artificial intelligence (AIxBio) in the Department of Defense (National Security Commission on Emerging Biotechnology 2024).

Kicking Shins

Congress and the executive focus on preventing PRC from accessing the genomic data of US citizens and preventing US capital from funding the growth of PRC competitors. Under previous administrations, PRC-based firms were allowed to access and acquire troves of American's genetic data (U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission 2012). In 2019, the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) was given expanded authority to monitor investments that risk exposing the genetic information of U.S. citizens to foreign governments, particularly when those governments might exploit that data to endanger national security" (National Security Commission on Emerging Biotechnology 2024). In 2022, through an executive order, the Biden administration further strengthened CFIUS reviews, seemingly targeting PRC-based entities according to their "third-party ties" via Military-Civil Fusion and broadening the criteria of what constituted a threat to national security (Executive Order 14083 2022). There have been additional efforts to make the protection of the genomic data of US citizens completely airtight and long lasting (U.S. Congress. Senate 2023).

> The Committee shall consider whether foreign investments in United States businesses that have access to or that store United States persons' sensitive data, including health and biological data, involve a foreign person who might take actions that threaten to impair the national security of the United States as a result of the transaction, including whether the foreign person might have relevant third-party ties that might cause the transaction to pose such a threat. (Executive Order 14083 2022).

BGI Group and its affiliates were first placed on the Commerce Department's "Entity List" in March 2023 (Bureau of Industry and Security 2023), on the grounds of "information that indicates their collection and analysis of genetic data poses a significant risk of contributing to monitoring and surveillance by the government of China, which has been utilised in the repression of ethnic minorities in China. Information also indicates that the actions of these entities concerning the collection and analysis of genetic data present a significant risk of diversion to China's military programs" (Bureau of Industry and Security 2023). Their inclusion on the entity list severely limits BGI Group and affiliate entities access to US technologies such as sequencing machines and genomic analysis software and tools. The current administration is considering new or expanded restrictions on outbound investment to China in biotechnology to further prevent US capital from facilitating the development of the PRC's biotechnology capabilities (The White House 2025).

The BIOSECURE Act, a bill introduced in its most recent form in May 2024, passed the house but not the Senate (House of Representatives 2024). The bill identified BGI Group and Wuxi Apptec as "Entities of Concern" and restricted the use of government funds to procure their goods and services, both directly by the government and any entity receiving government funds to complete a government contract. As the US government is the largest spender on health services (32%) in the United States (Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services 2024), the restrictions would have far reaching implications over the entire medical industry, as entities with government contracts would also avoid procuring services and equipment from the entities of concern to be eligible to compete for US government contracts, thus preventing US capital from facilitating their development.

While the bill did not pass the Senate before the conclusion of the 118th Congress, it still influenced market behavior and diverted capital from problematic PRC entities. In December 2024, Wuxi Apptec announced plans to sell some of its US-based operations and reported that "certain projects were delayed, or cancelled due to customers' considerations" and there was "insufficient new business wins due to the proposed U.S. legislation" (Taylor 2024; WuXi AppTec Co. 2024) .

The previous inclusion on the Entity List and the impact of this proposed legislation has been noted in Beijing, which included the US firm, Illumina, on the PRC's "Unreliable Entity List" officially because it "violated normal market trading procedures" and "adopted discriminatory measures against Chinese companies" but coincidentally announced on the same day as retaliatory tariffs against the United States (MOFCOM 2025; State Council Tariff Commission 2025).

Individual states in the United States have broad authorities to affect this issue. While foreign policy is primarily the responsibility of the federal government (per the Supremacy Clause), individual states retain significant autonomy to regulate health, safety, welfare, and insurance policies under their police powers. In the absence of federal pre-emption—particularly given that the BIOSECURE

Act did not pass the Senate—states can act faster than Congress or the federal government to restrict public procurement or the use of genetic sequencers from BGI (or any entity domiciled in or owned by a foreign adversary) within their jurisdictions to protect public safety. In a bill aimed at preventing forced organ harvesting in China by denying insurance coverage for related procedures, Idaho also banned the use of DNA sequencing technology and services provided by "foreign adversaries" (Idaho Legislature 2024). Similar legislation was introduced in Arizona (Arizona Legislature 2024).

The EU and Member States

The European Union (EU) is no stranger to industrial policies to stimulate growth in critical industries. Biotechnology is primarily viewed as an opportunity to reduce the EU's dependence on fossil fuels and as a pathway to produce new sustainable materials (European Commission 2024e). In the promotion of biotechnology, the EU is not far behind. While the EU notes biotechnology as an area prioritised by the PRC government, they have not taken direct action to address the PRC government's endeavour to develop a chokepoint in biotechnology by undercutting international competition in the area of genomic sequencing nor its alarming practice of harvesting genomic data from around the world, including from EU citizens.

In promoting biotechnology as a driver for economic growth, the EU is not far behind. Biotechnology was identified as one of ten critical technologies for the EU's economic security, and one of four where the European Commission (EC) called for a collective risk assessment (European Commission 2023b; 2023a). The initiative lays the groundwork for a potential EU Biotech Act (European Commission 2024d).

The EU and member-states have several economic statecraft tools at hand, none of which have been used to prevent PRC's dominance over a critical chokepoint in biotechnology so far. To its credit, the EU has launched multiple investigations into PRC-state non-market practices and applied counter measures in the area of electric vehicles (European Commission 2024b), electric bikes (European Commission 2025c), medical equipment (European Commission 2025b), biodiesel (European Commission 2025a) and more. The EU's Economic Security Strategy points to the Anti-Coercion Instrument as a means to counter economic coercion that may arise from strategic dependence on PRC in biotechnology (European Council 2023).

The revision to the Foreign Investment Screening mechanism, which currently protects areas involving personal data (Official Journal of the European Union L 79/1 2019), will likely include biotechnology as an additional protected sector (European Parliament 2025). The FDI screening mechanism also addresses the challenges that arise from interactions involving PRC-based entities by considering whether the "foreign investor is directly or indirectly controlled by the government, including state bodies or armed forces, of a third country, including through ownership structure

or significant funding" (Official Journal of the European Union L 79/1 2019). Enforcement of FDI screening is left, however, to member-state discretion and, in some cases, has been adopted haphazardly (White & Case LLP 2024; European Commission 2025d). A commission proposal will, if adopted, expand the EU's arsenal of trade tools to prevent the flow of goods and capital to the PRC by improving FDI screening, harmonizing export controls on dual-use goods, identifying risks in outbound investments and enhancing research security (European Commission 2024c).

The EU dual-use export controls (Official Journal of the European Union L 206/1 2021) and GDPR (European Union 2016) impose strict restrictions on exporting genetic information of European citizens to prevent misuse for military, biosecurity, or human rights violations. Dual-use controls require export licenses if genetic data or related technologies could be used for surveillance, bioweapons research, or unethical applications, with catch-all provisions restricting exports to high-risk destinations. GDPR further protects genetic data by mandating explicit consent, adequate safeguards in recipient countries, and strict compliance with EU data protection laws, ensuring that personal genetic information is not exploited for discriminatory, unethical, or security-threatening purposes. These measures are not, however, airtight. PRC-based entities can repurpose data collected lawfully and are ultimately beholden to the dictates of the PRC government.

Conclusion

The policy objective must be to ensure that companies and countries aligned with democratic ideals dominate the future of biotechnology in order to set the rules and standards on how this technology is used. Genomic sequencing capacity is the focal point of competition as a gateway, and potential chokepoint, to broader advancements in biotechnology. The EU and its member-states will need to do more than "run faster" to avoid a situation similar to the debate on 5G and Huawei, where countries are hard-pressed to find viable suppliers, independent of the control and influence of the PRC government.

To accomplish this goal, the EU and member states must first recognise the threats posed by advancement of biotechnology in the PRC. Second, the EU and member states must address the PRC's non-market practices and prevent the PRC's consolidation of a chokepoint through its domination of the global market for DNA sequencing technology and services. Third, member-states should deny strategic competitors access to data essential for the development of new biotechnology to both protect personal information and deny resources to companies embedded in the PRC's military industrial complex via Military-Civil Fusion policies.

Recommendations

- Conduct a threat assessment - some national risk assessments in Europe acknowledge PRC's efforts to collect data through licit and illicit means. These threat assessments should more explicitly identify the challenges posed by the lack of a boundary between civilian and military technological development as a result of the PRC's Military Civil Fusion, the efforts of PRC companies such as BGI to collect genetic data around the world, the musings of PRC military strategist which see "biology as a domain of military struggle". Citizens should be aware of the risks of allowing PRC companies to sequence and analyse their genetic data. Furthermore, these threat assessments should assess whether PRC companies can be trusted to handle sensitive personal information if they are ultimately beholden to the PRC National Intelligence Law.
- Address PRC subsidies - the PRC's brute force economics prevents new market entries, undercuts competitors, and positions PRC entities as the only viable option. EU subsidies investigations should take aim at the PRC's efforts to turbo charge growth in its genomic sequencing capacity before it reaches a point of no return and captures emerging markets. Failure to address PRC state support for these industries now will lead to a situation similar to Huawei and 5G where European and American cannot viably compete in the global market against the artificially low price points of PRC based companies, creating a new economic chokepoint where the PRC is the gatekeeper to scientific discoveries in biotechnology.
- Deny access - given the high potential for misuse, there should be zero risk tolerance for untrusted third parties. Similar to US states, as a matter of health and public safety, individual member-states have particular competence and capacity to affect the outcome. National governments are the largest spenders on health and can influence market behavior by restricting use of government funds from being used to purchase or use technology and services from PRC companies that 1) cannot guarantee data privacy of their citizens due to PRC domestic laws and policies and 2) may use the data directly or in secondary research in projects that collaborate with the PLA.
- Develop national strategies - parliaments should establish bodies like the NSCEB or advisory boards within government to assess national capacity, develop policies to facilitate its growth, and assess threats from abroad. A parliamentary body will empower parliament to advance the public debate, heighten awareness and prioritise biotechnology if it is neglected by governments.

Bibliography:

Arizona Legislature. 2024. *House Bill 2504: Forced Organ Harvesting; Insurance; Prohibition*. Arizona State Legislature. https://legiscan.com/AZ/text/HB2504/2024.

BGI Genomics. 2022. "BGI Genomics and the University of Pécs Launch Joint Laboratory to Accelerate Access to Genetic Testing Applications." *BGI News*, December 2, 2022. https://www.bgi.com/global/news/bgi-genomics-partners-with-university-of-pecs-to-accelerate-genetic-testing-applications-access.

———. 2024a. "BGI Genomics Unveils First Cutting-Edge Clinical Lab in Uruguay." *BGI News*, April 21, 2024. https://www.bgi.com/global/news/bgi-genomics-unveils-first-cutting-edge-clinical-lab-in-uruguay.

———. 2024b. "Seeds of Hope in Latin America: Precision Medicine in Action." *BGI News*, July 1, 2024. https://www.bgi.com/global/news/planting-seeds-of-hope-in-latam.

———. 2025a. "About BGI." 2025. https://www.bgi.com/global/company/about-bgi.

———. 2025b. "'Introduction to NIFTY®.' The NIFTY Test: Non-Invasive Prenatal Testing (NIPT)." 2025. https://www.niftytest.com/introduction-to-nifty.

———. 2025c. "The NIFTY® Test: Non-Invasive Prenatal Testing (NIPT)." 2025. https://www.niftytest.com/.

BGI Group. 2024. "BGI Group Statement Regarding the So-Called 'BIOSECURE Act.'" *BGI News*, January 31, 2024. https://en.genomics.cn/news-6880.html.

Boggan, Steve. 2021. "China's Plan for Medical Domination." *UnHerd*, February 8, 2021. https://unherd.com/2021/02/chinas-plan-for-medical-domination/.

Buncombe, Andrew. 2020. "The US and China in War of Words as Beijing Threatens to Halt Supply of Medicine Amid Coronavirus Crisis." *The Independent*, March 12, 2020. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/coronavirus-china-us-drugs-trump-rubio-china-virus-xinhua-hell-epidemic-a9400811.html.

Bureau of Industry and Security, U.S. Department of Commerce (BIS). 2023. "Additions and Revisions of Entities to the Entity List." March 6, 2023. . https://www.federalregister.gov/d/2023-04558/p-7.

Carlson, Rob, and Rik Wehbring. 2020. "Two Worlds, Two Bioeconomies: The Impacts of Decoupling US–China Trade and Technology Transfer." Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory. 2020. https://www.jhuapl.edu/assessing-us-china-technology-connections/dist/708755b762440d5a46b9bb5cbce356d9.pdf.

Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. 2024. "National Health Expenditure Fact Sheet." 2024. https://www.cms.gov/data-research/statistics-trends-and-reports/national-health-expenditure-data/nhe-fact-sheet.

Chai, Ling. 2011. "Testimony of Chai Ling, Founder, All Girls Allowed." September 22. https://chrissmith.house.gov/uploadedfiles/testimony_of_chai_ling.pdf.

Cheung, Sunny, Arran Hope, and Peter Mattis. 2024. "Red Genes: Assessing WuXi AppTec's Ties to the Party-Army-State in China." *China Brief* 24 (5).

China Daily. 2012. "Full Text of Hu's Report at 18th Party Congress," November 18, 2012. https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2012-11/18/content_29578562.htm.

China Law Translate. 2017. *National Intelligence Law of the People's Republic of China*. https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/national-intelligence-law-of-the-p-r-c-2017/.

Davidson, Helen. 2023. "Academic Paper Based on Uyghur Genetic Data Retracted Over Ethical Concerns," December 29, 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/29/academic-paper-uyghur-genetic-data-retracted-ethical-concerns.

Dou, Eva, and Cate Cadell. 2023. "China's Gene Giant Harvests Data from Millions of Women." *The Washington Post*, February 28, 2023. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2023/china-dna-sequencing-bgi-covid/.

European Commission. 2023a. "Commission Recommendation (EU) 2023/2113 of 3 October 2023 on Critical Technology Areas for the EU's Economic Security for Further Risk Assessment with Member States." Official Journal of the European Union L 2023/2113 . October 11, 2023. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L_202302113.

———. 2023b. "Commission Recommends Risk Assessments in Four Critical Technology Areas." October 3, 2023. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_4735.

———. 2024a. "Building the Future with Nature: Boosting Biotechnology and Sustainable Solutions." Press Corner. June 15, 2024. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_24_1610.

———. 2024b. "Commission Imposes Provisional Duties on Battery Electric Vehicles from China." September 15, 2024. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_3630.

———. 2024c. "Commission Proposes New Initiatives to Strengthen Economic Security." January 24, 2024. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_363.

———. 2024d. “Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2024–2029.” 2024. https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/e6cd4328-673c-4e7a-8683-f63ffb2cf648_en?filename=Political%20Guidelines%202024-2029_EN.pdf.

———. 2025a. “Commission Protects EU Biodiesel Industry from Dumped Chinese Imports.” February 11, 2025. https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-protects-eu-biodiesel-industry-dumped-chinese-imports-2025-02-11_en.

———. 2025b. “Discrimination in China’s Medical Devices Procurement Market.” February 15, 2025. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_252.

———. 2025c. “EU Extends Duties on Electric Bicycles from China.” January 24, 2025. https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-extends-duties-electric-bicycles-china-2025-01-24_en.

———. 2025d. “List of Screening Mechanisms Notified by Member States.” January 10, 2025. https://circabc.europa.eu/ui/group/be8b568f-73f3-409c-b4a4-30acfcec5283/library/7e72cdb4-65d4-4eb1-910b-bed119c45d47/details?download=true.

European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation. 2024e. “Building the Future with Nature: Boosting Biotechnology and Biomanufacturing in the EU.” March 3, 2024. https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/document/download/47554adc-dffc-411b-8cd6-b52417514cb3_en.

European Council. 2023. “ST-10919-2023-INIT.” https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10919-2023-INIT/en/pdf.

European Parliament. 2025. “Revision of the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) Screening Regulation.” European Parliament Legislative Train. January 2025. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-an-economy-that-works-for-people/file-revision-of-the-fdi-screening-regulation.

European Union. 2016. “Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the Protection of Natural Persons with Regard to the Processing of Personal Data and on the Free Movement of Such Data (General Data Protection Regulation).” 2016. . https://gdpr-info.eu/art-9-gdpr/.

Executive Order 14081. 2022. *Advancing Biotechnology and Biomanufacturing Innovation for a Sustainable, Safe, and Secure American Bioeconomy*. Federal Register 87. https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2022/09/15/2022-20167/advancing-biotechnology-and-biomanufacturing-innovation-for-a-sustainable-safe-and-secure-american.

Executive Order 14083. 2022. *Ensuring Robust Consideration of Evolving National Security Risks by the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States*. https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2022/09/20/2022-20450/ensuring-robust-consideration-of-evolving-national-security-risks-by-the-committee-on-foreign.

Hawkins, Amy. 2023. "Academic Paper Based on Uyghur Genetic Data Retracted over Ethical Concerns." *Guardian*, December 29, 2023. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/29/academic-paper-uyghur-genetic-data-retracted-ethical-concerns.

Highfill, Tina, and Matthew Chambers. 2023. "Developing a National Measure of the Economic Contributions of the Bioeconomy." https://www.bea.gov/system/files/papers/bea-bioeconomy-report.pdf.

House of Representatives. 2024. *BIOSECURE Act*. House of Representatives, U.S. Congress. https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/8333.

Human Rights Watch. 2017. "China: Minority Region Collects DNA from Millions," December. https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/12/13/china-minority-region-collects-dna-millions.

Idaho Legislature. 2024. *House Bill 670: Adds to Existing Law to Establish the End Organ Harvesting Act and to Prohibit Certain Genetic Technologies*. Idaho Legislature. https://legislature.idaho.gov/sessioninfo/2024/legislation/h0670/.

International Security Advisory Board. 2024. "Report on Biotechnology in the People's Republic of China's Military-Civil Fusion Strategy." https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/ISAB-Report-on-Biotechnology-in-the-PRC-MCF-Strategy_Final_Accessible.pdf.

IRI. 2024. "Bolstering Democratic Resilience to PRC Foreign Authoritarian Influence." https://www.iri.org/resources/bolstering-democratic-resilience-to-prc-foreign-authoritarian-influence/.

Kania, Elsa B., and Wilson VornDick. 2019. "Weaponizing Biotech: How China's Military Is Preparing for a 'New Domain of Warfare." Defense One. August 14, 2019. https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2019/08/chinas-military-pursuing-biotech/159167/.en.wikipedia.org+2defenseone.com+2en.wikipedia.org.

Keenan, Joseph. 2018. "WuXi NextCODE Acquires GMI as Part of $400M Genomics Research Push in Ireland." Fierce Biotech. November 29, 2018. https://www.fiercebiotech.com/cro/wuxinextcode-acquires-gmi-as-part-400m-genomics-research-push-ireland.

Kelly, Jason. 2024. "Written Testimony of Jason Kelly, Co-Founder and CEO, Ginkgo Bioworks." March 7. https://selectcommitteeontheccp.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/selectcommitteeontheccp.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/Testimony%20-%20Jason%20Kelly%20-%20Ginkgo%20Bioworks%20-%20Hearing%20-%20March%207%202024%20%281%29.pdf.

Mendick, Robert. 2019. "China's 'Prison City' Shows the Extent of Its Repression of Uighur Muslims." *Telegraph*, October 5, 2019. https://apnews.com/article/china-prisons-uyghurs-religion-0dd1a31f9be29d32c584543af4698955.

Ministry of Science and Technology of the People's Republic of China. 2017. "Notice on Strengthening the Management of Human Genetic Resources. ." May 24, 2017. https://www.most.gov.cn/kjbgz/201705/t20170524_132924.html.

MOFCOM. 2025. "Announcement by the Unreliable Entity List Working Mechanism on Including U.S. PVH Group and Illumina, Inc. in the Unreliable Entity List." Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China (MOFCOM). February 4, 2025. Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China (MOFCOM).

National Association for Biomedical Research. 2021. "The Implications of NHP Shortages for US Biomedical Research." February 9, 2021. https://www.nabr.org/about-nabr/news/implications-nhp-shortages-us-biomedical-research.

National Counterintelligence and Security Center. 2021. "China's Collection of Genomic and Other Healthcare Data from America: Risks to Privacy and U.S. Economic and National Security." 2021. https://www.dni.gov/files/NCSC/documents/SafeguardingOurFuture/NCSC_China_Genomics_Fact_Sheet_2021revision20210203.pdf.

National Security Commission on Emerging Biotechnology. 2024. " National Security Commission on Emerging Biotechnology Announces FY25 NDAA Biotechnology Provisions." December 18, 2024. https://www.biotech.senate.gov/press-releases/national-security-commission-on-emerging-biotechnology-announces-fy25-ndaa-biotechnology-provisions/.

Needham, Kirsty, and Clare Baldwin. 2021. "China's Gene Giant Harvests Data from Millions of Women." *Reuters*, July 7, 2021. https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/health-china-bgi-dna/.

Office of Science and Technology Policy. 2024. "Fact Sheet: Biden-Harris Administration's Actions to Advance American Biotechnology and Biomanufacturing." https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/ostp/news-updates/2024/06/25/fact-sheet-biden-harris-administrations-actions-to-advance-american-biotechnology-and-biomanufacturing/.

Office of the Director of National Intelligence. 2024. "Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community." February 5, 2024. https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2024-Unclassified-Report.pdf.

Official Journal of the European Union L 79/1. 2019. "Regulation (EU) 2019/452 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 March 2019 Establishing a Framework for the Screening of Foreign Direct Investments into the European Union." European Union. 2019. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2019/452/oj.

Official Journal of the European Union L 206/1. 2021. "Regulation (EU) 2021/821 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 May 2021 Setting Up a Union Regime for the Control of Exports, Brokering, Technical Assistance, Transit and Transfer of Dual-Use Items (Recast)." European Union. 2021. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L:2021:206:FULL&from=EN.

Plucinska, Joanna. 2021. "Exclusive: Polish Gene Project Moves to Drop Chinese Tech on Data Concerns." *Reuters*, September 22, 2021. https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/exclusive-polish-gene-project-moves-drop-chinese-tech-data-concerns-2021-09-22/.

Puglisi, Anna, and Chryssa Rask. 2024. "China, Biotechnology, and BGI: How China's Hybrid Economy Skews Competition." Center for Security and Emerging Technology. May 2024. https://cset.georgetown.edu/publication/china-biotechnology-and-bgi/.

Schuerger, Caroline, and Anna Puglisi. 2024. "The Importance of Genomic Data for China's Global Health Ambitions." In *Under the Microscope: China's Evolving Biotechnology Ecosystem*, edited by Rolland Nadège. Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research. https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/sr114_underthemicroscope_dec2024.pdf.

Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party. 2024. "Hearing on the Growing Stakes of the Bioeconomy and American National Security." March 7. https://selectcommitteeontheccp.house.gov/committee-activity/hearings/hearing-growing-stakes-bioeconomy-and-american-national-security.

State Council of the People's Republic of China. 2016. "Outline of the 13th Five-Year Plan for the National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China." March 17, 2016.

State Council Tariff Commission. 2025. "Announcement by the State Council Tariff Commission Regarding Additional Tariffs on Certain U.S. Imports." February 4, 2025.

Taylor, Phil. 2024. "Amid Biosecure Act Speculation, WuXi AppTec Sells Unit." *Pharmaphorum*, December 27, 2024. https://pharmaphorum.com/news/amid-biosecure-act-speculation-wuxi-apptec-sells-unit.

The White House. 2022. "FACT SHEET: The United States Announces New Investments and Resources to Advance President Biden's National Biotechnology and Biomanufacturing Initiative." Statements and Releases. September 14, 2022. https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/09/14/fact-sheet-the-united-states-announces-new-investments-and-resources-to-advance-president-bidens-national-biotechnology-and-biomanufacturing-initiative.

———. 2025. "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Encourages Foreign Investment While Protecting National Security." February 21, 2025. https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/02/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-encourages-foreign-investment-while-protecting-national-security/.

U.S. Congress. Senate. 2023. “Genomics Expenditures and National Security Enhancement Act of 2023.” 2023. https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/1827.

U.S. Department of Defense. 2023. “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China: Annual Report to Congress.” https://media.defense.gov/2023/Oct/19/2003323409/-1/-1/1/2023-MILITARY-AND-SECURITY-DEVELOPMENTS-INVOLVING-THE-PEOPLES-REPUBLIC-OF-CHINA.PDF.

U.S. Department of State. 2020. “What Is MCF One Pager.” June 2020. https://2017-2021.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/What-is-MCF-One-Pager.pdf.

U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. 2012. “Exhibit 99.A5Q: BGI-Shenzhen and Complete Genomics, Inc. Receive CFIUS Clearance for BGI-Shenzhen’s Proposed Acquisition of Complete Genomics, Inc.” EDGAR Database. December 28, 2012. https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1361103/000119312512518663/d459462dex99a5q.htm.

U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. 2019. “Growing U.S. Reliance on China’s Biotech and Pharmaceutical Products.” November 2019.

White & Case LLP. 2024. “Foreign Direct Investment Reviews 2024: Poland.” 2024. https://www.whitecase.com/insight-our-thinking/foreign-direct-investment-reviews-2024-poland.

WuXi AppTec Co., Ltd. 2024. “2024 Third Quarterly Report.” October 28, 2024. https://officialsite-static.wuxiapptec.com/upload/2024_THIRD_QUARTERLY_REPORT_e66a02b345.pdf.

Xinhua News Agency. 2020. “China Suspends Wildlife Trade to Curb Novel Coronavirus.” January 26, 2020. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-01/26/c_138735496.htm.

Zenz, Adrian. 2020. “China Cuts Uighur Births with IUDs, Abortion, Sterilization.” *Associated Press*, June 28, 2020. https://apnews.com/article/ap-top-news-international-news-weekend-reads-china-health-269b3de1af34e17c1941a514f78d764c.

From Promises to Perils: Unpacking China's Interference in the Visegrad Group

Zdeněk Rod

Summary: This chapter explores the multifaceted interference of China within the Visegrad Group – comprising Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary – across political, economic, cultural, and academic domains. It delves into China's strategies, including leveraging the 14+1 initiative and the Belt and Road Initiative, to expand its influence, and examines the varied responses from the Visegrad Group countries. While Hungary aligns closely with China, securing significant investments, other Visegrad Group countries remain cautious due to unmet economic promises, trade imbalances, and geopolitical concerns. It also discusses the role of Confucius Institutes and university partnerships as tools of soft power. Ultimately, the chapter argues that Visegrad Group countries are balancing economic opportunities with strategic caution, shaped by EU policies, public sentiment, and the US-China rivalry.

Keywords: Visegrad Group, V4, Central Europe, China, interference

Introduction

Since the fall of communist regimes in the early 1990s, the Visegrad Group (Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary) has maintained consistent interaction with China within the broader Central and Eastern European framework. Beijing's primary strategy to integrate the Visegrad Group into its sphere of influence has centred on economic cooperation, most notably through the China-CEEC 14+1 initiative (originally 17+1 from 2019 to 2021, reverting to 14+1 from 2022 to 2023). Launched by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2012, this initiative aimed to stimulate business and investment in the region. As explored in this chapter, however, many of China's economic promises to the Visegrad Group have fallen short of expectations (Rod 2023). Despite ambitious announcements about these initiatives' potential, the tangible benefits for the Visegrad Group have been limited, with Hungary being a notable exception. This disparity has prompted a cautious reassessment of the group's economic and strategic engagement with China over time.

China's engagement with the Visegrad Group has primarily revolved around economic cooperation, including foreign direct investments and infrastructure projects. Chinese influence extends, however, well beyond the economic sphere. Over the years, China has sought to deepen its political ties by building relationships with prominent politicians, exerting cultural influence through

Confucius Institutes[13], and fostering educational cooperation via partnerships with universities and local academics. Notably, China tends to favour a bilateral approach when dealing with individual Visegrad Group countries within its comprehensive regional strategy.

The chapter highlights that China's engagement with the Visegrad Group has primarily aimed at expanding its influence through economic cooperation, political ties, and cultural outreach. Initiatives like the 14+1 framework and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have sought to integrate Visegrad Group countries – Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary – into China's geopolitical strategy. While Hungary has embraced China's overtures, leveraging investments and infrastructure projects, other Visegrad Group nations have shown increasing caution due to unmet economic promises, trade imbalances, and security concerns.

Poland and China: From Optimism to Strategic Scepticism

Poland's relationship with Communist China, established in 1949, has undergone significant transformations, particularly since Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004. While historical ties were marginal, EU membership opened new avenues for engagement, catalysing a series of bilateral agreements and initiatives aimed at strengthening cooperation across various sectors such as infrastructure and connectivity development. China's interest in Poland surged after 2004, highlighted by Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to Warsaw. This period marked the establishment of six Confucius Institutes and research partnerships between Polish and Chinese universities (Reuters, 2021). Direct flights were introduced, and Poland attained approved destination status for Chinese tourists. Poland's inclusion in the 17+1 Framework and its signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on the BRI further underscored its strategic importance to China. In 2015, the creation of the Poland-China intergovernmental committee solidified bilateral ties (Waisová and Cabada 2022).

The 2008 global financial crisis motivated Poland to diversify its economic partnerships, viewing China as a promising addition to its portfolio (Bachulska 2020, p. 33). This momentum culminated in a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement in 2016. High-profile events like Xi Jinping's visit to Warsaw and the International Silk Road Forum showcased the potential of Sino-Polish collaboration. Polish leaders, including Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau and Prime Minister Andrzej Duda, championed these relations, with Duda envisioning Poland as a "gateway to Europe" for China (Prezydent.pl 2016).

Despite initial optimism, Sino-Polish relations have not advanced since 2016. Several factors contributed to this shift. First, economic and trade imbalances have been a significant challenge

13 Confucius Institutes are Chinese government-funded cultural and language centers established at universities around the world, aiming to promote Chinese language, culture, and soft power (Author's note).

in Sino-Polish relations. While China has become Poland's largest Asian trade partner, and Poland one of China's most important trade partners in Europe, a persistent trade deficit has strained their relationship. Over 90% of Sino-Europe freight trains pass through Poland, primarily via the port of Gdańsk. Chinese exports to Poland vastly exceed, however, Polish exports to China (Waisová and Cabada 2022, 161–62). Unfulfilled promises under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and limited access to Chinese markets for Polish manufacturers have further fuelled dissatisfaction.

Second, Poland's strategic alignment, particularly its strong security partnership with the United States, have shaped its cautious approach toward China. US influence was evident in Poland's refusal to allow Chinese companies to participate in its critical 5G infrastructure. The National Cybersecurity Act of 2020 effectively excluded Chinese firms from this sector, reflecting Poland's alignment with US security priorities (Sarek 2020; Kobierski 2022, 9).

Third, public perception of China in Poland has also shifted negatively over recent years. Unmet investment expectations and concerns about Chinese activities, such as the increasing presence of Confucius Institutes, have contributed to this change. A 2019 espionage incident involving a Huawei employee further exacerbated public distrust[14](Bachulska 2020, 43). China's rapprochement with Russia, Poland's primary security threat, has also strained relations further. By 2022, 42% of Poles viewed China negatively or neutrally (Bachulska 2022; Kobierski, 2022, 10; Waisová and Cabada 2022, 162–63).

Although Poland adheres to the One-China Principle, it has maintained pragmatic relations with Taiwan. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Poland donated 400,000 vaccines to Taiwan, highlighting its openness to economic and trade partnerships with Taipei. Taiwan ranks as Poland's seventh-largest trading partner in Asia. Poland's outreach to Taiwan reflects its search for alternatives to unmet Chinese investment promises (Polish Office in Taipei 2023).

Sino-Polish relations remain primarily economic, with limited ideological alignment. Poland continues to seek deeper cooperation, but its approach is tempered by geopolitical realities and strategic caution. China's growing ties with Russia during the Ukraine conflict further complicate this relationship, given Poland's view of Russia as a significant security threat. Despite these challenges, economic collaboration persists, with Poland retaining interest in Chinese investments and trade. The trajectory of Sino-Polish relations will depend on how Poland balances its economic ambitions with its security priorities, public sentiment, and alignment with the Euro-Atlantic partnership.

14 In January 2019, a Huawei executive and a former Polish security official working for Orange Poland were arrested in Warsaw on espionage charges. While details were undisclosed, the arrests, following Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou's detention in Canada, were seen as part of US-China strategic tensions. The case raised security concerns about Huawei in Poland, contributing to an 11% drop in its market share and loss of its top position in mobile sales (Bachulska 2020, 43).

Taiwan, Democracy, and Caution: Czechia's Changing Approach to China

Czechia's engagement with China has evolved significantly since the 1990s, reflecting shifts in political leadership, economic priorities, and public sentiment. Initially marked by scepticism due to the democratic values championed by leaders like Václav Havel, Czechia's stance softened in subsequent decades as economic opportunities were explored. The impact of the BRI in Czechia has been, however, limited.

Former President Miloš Zeman spearheaded a "restart" of Sino-Czech relations in 2014, focusing on economic benefits. His administration fostered closer ties through bilateral agreements, participation in the 16+1 platform, and promises of substantial Chinese investments. Despite high expectations, the reality fell short, with investments amounting to only a fraction of what was anticipated (Šebok and Karásková 2022; Klímová and Viktora 2023; Spurný 2022). Notable initiatives during Zeman's tenure included his association with Ye Jianming, founder of CEFC China Energy, and support for Czech billionaire Peter Kellner's business ventures in China. Scandals involving CEFC and the financial unpredictability of the Chinese market undermined, however, these efforts.

The presidency of Petr Pavel, beginning in 2023, marked a significant shift in Czechia's approach. Pavel adopted a more assertive stance on China, emphasising democratic values and human rights. His outreach to Taiwan, including a high-profile call to Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, underscored this pivot. Earlier Czech initiatives, such as visits to Taiwan by Senate President Miloš Vystrčil and other officials, had already laid the groundwork for strengthened Czech-Taiwanese relations. These moves, despite provoking criticism from Beijing, reflect Czechia's prioritisation of shared democratic principles.

In terms of technology and security, Czechia has taken a cautious approach to Chinese 5G components, aligning with Western security concerns (Spurný 2022). Public perception of China has also shifted, influenced by unmet investment promises and controversies, such as the 2019 scandal involving Chinese funding at Charles University[15] (Valášek 2019). Surveys indicate a predominantly negative view of China among Czechs, who associate the country with Communism and view its influence critically (Turcsányi and Sedláková 2020).

Trade and investment data highlight China's continued importance as a partner, but Taiwanese investments in Czechia have recently outpaced Chinese contributions. While the Czech government under Petr Fiala has signalled intentions to reassess relations with China, concrete steps remain unclear, and the future trajectory of Sino-Czech relations depends on balancing economic interests, security concerns, and the commitment to democratic causes abroad.

15 A scandal at Charles University involved academics diverting millions in sponsorship funds from China and defense companies into their private firm. Investigations revealed that faculty leadership was aware, and some officials were even paid by the firm. Despite an estimated financial loss of up to 10 million CZK, the university abandoned legal action, citing low chances of success. The controversy led to the closure of the university's China research centre, the dismissal of key academics, and heightened concerns over Chinese influence in academia (Valášek 2023).

Slovakia's Strategic Turn: From Euro-Atlantic Focus to China-Friendly Policies

Slovakia's engagement with China, like its Visegrad counterparts, has been shaped by evolving political leadership, economic considerations, and geopolitical constraints. Initial explorations of Chinese incentives in the early 2000s were limited by Slovakia's peripheral economic position and its focus on aligning with EU and US priorities. A turning point came in 2009 with Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to Bratislava, marking the first significant engagement between the two nations (Rod 2023, 277; Waisová and Cabada 2022, 164).

Under Prime Minister Robert Fico and his populist-left Smer-SD party, Slovakia pursued closer economic ties with China, overlooking potential security implications. Bilateral agreements were limited, though efforts included opening "Slovak houses" in China and appointing an ambassador in Beijing in 2016. Chinese investments in Slovakia have remained minimal, however, and the absence of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) or strategic partnership underscores the cautious nature of the relationship (Waisová and Cabada 2022, 164).

A political shift in 2020 led to a reassessment of Slovakia's approach, emphasising Euro-Atlantic partnerships and incorporating a negative stance towards China as part of its security strategy. Slovak intelligence identified Chinese attempts to penetrate the country's critical infrastructure, aligning with broader concerns about Chinese influence (Kobierski 2022, 5–6). Public perception of China remains predominantly negative, with surveys indicating that 70% of Slovaks view China unfavourably. Temporary goodwill emerged, however, during the COVID-19 pandemic when China provided healthcare aid, leading 67% of Slovaks to perceive China as offering the most significant assistance (Waisová and Cabada 2022, 164; Šimalčík 2020).

China's soft power initiatives in Slovakia include the establishment of three Confucius Institutes and attempts to acquire Slovak media, such as TV Markíza. These efforts have achieved limited success, however, reflecting the absence of strong Chinese influence in Slovak politics and society. Slovakia's lack of direct flights to China and minimal Chinese manufacturing presence further highlights the restrained nature of their economic relationship (Waisová and Cabada 2022).

The future of Sino-Slovak relations depends on Slovakia's strategic orientation. Robert Fico's recent visit to China in November 2024 signifies a notable shift in Slovakia's foreign policy, aligning more closely with Beijing. The establishment of a "strategic partnership" between Slovakia and China marks a departure from the European Union's typical stance, which views China as a partner, competitor, and systemic rival. During the visit, both nations expressed mutual support on key issues. Slovakia reaffirmed its commitment to the One China policy, explicitly opposing any interference in China's internal affairs, including matters related to Taiwan.

Additionally, Slovakia is currently not interested in addressing human rights, aligning with China's perspective. Economically, while the visit was framed as a pursuit of deeper economic ties, tangible outcomes were limited. No major new projects were announced, and the primary economic highlight was China's extension of visa-free travel for Slovak citizens – a gesture already extended to several other European nations. Despite the modest economic results, Fico's rhetoric is notably pro-China. He praised China's economic and technological advancements and supported China's stance on global issues, including the Russian Invasion of Ukraine. This approach suggests a potential future shift in Slovakia's positions within international forums, possibly refraining from supporting resolutions critical of China, especially concerning human rights (Šimalčík and Šebok 2024).

Under Robert Fico's leadership, Slovakia is likely to adopt an even more China-friendly stance, both politically and economically. While immediate economic benefits may be limited, the political alignment indicates a strategic pivot that could influence Slovakia's future engagements on European and global stages.

Orbán's Eastward Pivot: Hungary's Engagement with China

Hungary has cultivated the strongest relationship with China among the Visegrad countries, characterised by a pragmatic focus on economic cooperation, infrastructure development, and diversification (Rod, 2023; Šimalčík and Šebok 2024; Waisová and Cabada 2022). This relationship began in earnest with Hungary's EU accession in 2004, reinforced by the 2010 "Opening to the East" policy, which sought Chinese investments to address economic challenges, reduce energy dependence, and navigate its landlocked position (Paszak 2021). Hungary was also the first EU country to join China's BRI, reflecting its strategic intent to attract capital from China and Central Asia.

Infrastructure and academic collaborations have been central to Sino-Hungarian ties. Notable projects include the Budapest-Belgrade railway line and Huawei's establishment of a European supply and logistics centre in Hungary. Academic cooperation has advanced with plans to open a Fudan University campus in Budapest by 2024, intended to accommodate 6,000 students (Euronews 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Hungary showcased its pro-China orientation by including Sinopharm vaccines in its national strategy, achieving one of Europe's highest vaccination rates despite the vaccines lacking European Medicines Agency approval (Kobierski 2022).

Economic outcomes have often, however, fallen short of expectations. Chinese investments in Hungary, although increasing in recent years, have not matched early promises. By 2020, Hungarian exports to China accounted for only 1.7% of total exports, and over a dozen joint projects had failed or faced delays (Waisová and Cabada 2022). Nonetheless, by 2023, bilateral trade reached $14.52

billion, a 73% increase compared to 2013. Chinese direct investment in Hungary totalled €7.6 billion, making China Hungary's largest source of foreign investment and highlighting the potential for further economic engagement (Shimeng 2024).

Public opinion on China remains a significant obstacle. While Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's government has strengthened ties with China, viewing it as a counterbalance to the EU and US, public sentiment has been largely negative. Surveys show that Hungary perceives China as a key strategic partner at an exceptionally high rate compared to other countries in the region, with 34% selecting Beijing. In 2024, China surpassed Russia to claim second place, while Germany remains Hungary's top partner (Globsec 2024).

Hungary's relationship with China is also influenced by broader geopolitical dynamics. Orbán's government adopts a balancing diplomacy approach, maintaining open channels with China, the EU, the US, and Russia. While Hungary has supported China in the EU Council and resisted EU efforts to critic§ China's human rights record, it also seeks to manage its relationships with Western allies, reflecting Orbán's pragmatic foreign policy (Végh 2022).

President Xi Jinping's 2024 visit to Hungary, as part of a European tour, marked a significant milestone in bilateral relations. Agreements were reached on at least 16 projects, including incentives for Chinese businesses such as CATL's €7.3 billion battery plant investment, which received €800 million in Hungarian tax incentives and infrastructural support (Thorpe 2024). These developments underscore Hungary's commitment to deepening its economic ties with China, even as it faces challenges within the EU over rule-of-law concerns and structural fund allocations.

In April 2024, Hungary also secured a €1 billion loan—the largest in its history—from three Chinese banks: the China Development Bank, the Export-Import Bank of China, and the Hungarian branch of the Bank of China. This loan, which must be repaid within three years, was not publicly announced by the Hungarian government but was later confirmed by its debt management agency. The funds are intended to finance infrastructure and energy sector investments, while maintaining the public debt-to-GDP ratio within a ceiling at 28.9% (Körömi 2024).

Despite the challenges, Hungary remains the most pro-China state in the Visegrad grouping. Its pursuit of closer ties with Beijing reflects a calculated strategy to leverage Chinese investments as a counterweight to strained EU relations, while navigating the complexities of public opinion and global geopolitics. The future of Sino-Hungarian relations will depend on whether China can deliver on its investment promises and how Hungary manages its position within the EU and the broader international arena.

Conclusion

The engagement between China and the Visegrad Group reflects a nuanced and evolving relationship driven by economic aspirations and strategic alignments. While initiatives like the 14+1 and the Belt and Road Initiative aimed to integrate these nations into China's global strategy, the outcomes have been mixed. Hungary has positioned itself as the most pro-China member, benefiting from investments and infrastructure projects, while other Visegrad Group nations have approached relations with Beijing with greater caution due to unmet promises, security concerns, and trade imbalances.

Poland and Czechia have prioritised Euro-Atlantic alliances, with recent shifts emphasising democratic values and partnerships with Taiwan. Slovakia, historically less engaged with China, is showing signs of pivoting under current leadership but remains constrained by geopolitical realities and public scepticism. Hungary's proactive engagement with China, while yielding economic gains, faces challenges due to negative public sentiment and unmet expectations.

The future of China-Visegrad Group relations will depend on balancing economic opportunities with strategic caution, addressing trade imbalances, and aligning national policies with EU frameworks. The interplay of EU policies, US-China rivalry, and domestic priorities will continue to shape this multifaceted relationship.

Recommendations:

- While this view may be somewhat idealistic, the best approach would be for Visegrad countries to coordinate their policies towards China, presenting a united front. A collective strategy would bolster their negotiating power, curb Beijing's ability to exploit bilateral divisions, and enhance coherence with broader EU objectives. Rather than undermining the EU's role as a strategic and trade actor, such regional coordination could serve as a building block for a more unified and effective EU foreign policy stance. Given the current political realities – particularly Hungary's and Slovakia's growing rapprochement with China – such coordination remains, however, highly unlikely.
- Diversify economic partnerships. To reduce over-reliance on Chinese investments and trade, Visegrad nations should strengthen ties with like-minded global democratic partners such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Israel, Japan, South Korea, Australia, India, Taiwan, and ASEAN democracies like Indonesia and the Philippines. Expanding these partnerships would not only lessen economic vulnerabilities but also promote more balanced and resilient trade relationships.

- Enhance oversight of strategic investments: Due to its complexity, it is vital to implement this mechanism at the national level, as exemplified by Czechia under the auspices of the Ministry of Trade in the Petr Fiala government. This includes the implementation of stringent regulatory frameworks to monitor and control foreign investments in critical sectors such as telecommunications, energy, and infrastructure. These measures should incorporate robust investment screening mechanisms to mitigate potential security risks, particularly those associated with Chinese influence.
- Bolster public awareness and institutional resilience: Enhance transparency regarding Chinese influence campaigns through strategic communication. At the same time, bolster institutions to counter undue foreign interference – particularly in academia, media, and technology – by conducting regular training sessions that highlight the risks and vulnerabilities associated with cooperation with China.

Bibliography:

Bachulska, Alicja. 2020. 'When Beijing Met Warsaw: A Story of Continuing Courtship'. In *China's Sticks and Carrots in Central Europe: The Logic and Power of Chinese Influence*, edited by Ivana Karásková and Alicja Bachulska,):33–41. Prague: Mapinfluence.

———. 2022. 'Chinese Influence in Poland'. https://cepa.org/comprehensive-reports/chinese-influence-in-poland/.

Euronews. 2022. 'Hungary Agrees to Open Chinese University Campus in Budapest by 2024'. *Euronews*, 2 August 2022. https://www.euronews.com/2021/05/02/hungary-agrees-to-open-chinese-university-campus-in-budapest-by-2024.

Globsec. 2024. 'Globsec Trends 2024. CEE: A Brave New Region? '. Bratislava.

Klímová, Jana, and Antonín Viktora. 2023. 'Ze Slibovaných 230 Miliard Česko Získalo Jen Zlomek. Čínské Investice Nic Moc Nepřinesly, Říká Expert'. *Český Rozhlas*, 3 March 2023. https://plus.rozhlas.cz/ze-slibovanych-230-miliard-cesko-ziskalo-jen-zlomek-cinske-investice-nic-moc-8945283.

Kobierski, Łukasz. 2022. *The Role and Influence of the People's Republic of China on Visegrad Group Countries*. Warsaw: Warsaw Institute.

Körömi, Csongor. 2024. 'Hungary Quietly Takes €1B Loan from Chinese Banks'. *Politico*, 25 July 2024. https://www.politico.eu/article/budapest-hungary-took-1-billion-loan-chinese-banks-peter-szijjarto/.

Paszak, Paweł. 2021. 'Hungary's "Opening to the East" Hasn't Delivered'. https://cepa.org/article/hungarys-opening-to-the-east-hasnt-delivered/.

Polish Office in Taipei. 2023. 'Bilateral Relations'. 2023. https://poland.tw/web/taiwan/taiwan.

Prezydent.pl. 2016. 'President Duda Hopes Poland Will Become China's Gateway to Europe'. 2016. https://prezydent.pl/en/news/art,191,president-duda-hopes-poland-will-become-chinas-gateway-to-europe.html.

Rod, Zdeněk. 2023. 'The Chinese Influence in Visegrad Countries'. In *The Dragon at the Gates of Europe: Chinese Presence in the Balkans and Central-Eastern Europe*, edited by Andrea Bogoni and Brian F. G. Fabrègue. Luxembourg: Blue Europe.

Sarek, Łukasz. 2020. '5G and the Internet of Things: Chinese Companies' Inroads into 'Digital Poland'. *Sinopsis*, 1 January 2020. https://sinopsis.cz/en/sarek-5g-iot/.

Šebok, Filip, and Ivana Karásková. 2022. 'Case Study: Czech Republic'. In *China's Influence in Europe: Strategies Towards a Resilient and United EU*, edited by Katty W. Chen and Benjamin Herscovitch. Potsdam: Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom.

Shimeng, Li. 2024. 'CEIS Releases China-Hungary Investment and Cooperation Report in Budapest'. *Belt and Road Portal*, 2 May 2024. https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/0OCQGJUD.html.

Šimalčík, Matej. 2020. 'China's Inroads into Slovak Universitie'. https://ceias.eu/chinas-inroads-into-slovak-universities/.

Spurný, Jaroslav. 2022. 'Nekupujte Čínské 5G Technologie, Doporučují České Úřady', 10 January 2022. https://www.respekt.cz/komentare/nekupujte-cinske-5g-technologie-doporucuji-ceske-urady.

Thorpe, Nick. 2024. 'Hungary Opens Up to Chinese Tech Despite Protests'. *BBC News*, 27 April 2024. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-68848770.

Turcsányi, Richard Q., and Renáta Sedláková. 2020. 'Czech Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19'.

Valášek, Lukáš. 2019. 'Karlova Univerzita Propustila Akademiky, Které Platila Za Konference Čínská Ambasáda'. *Aktuálně.Cz*, 5 November 2019. https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/karlova-univerzita-propustila-akademiky-cina/r~0e3b078affd511e9b1410cc47ab5f122/.

———. 2023. 'Akademici Si „odkláněli" Miliony, Univerzita Náhle Couvá z Vymáhání''. *Seznam Zprávy*, 5 November 2023. https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-kauzy-karlova-univerzita-vycouvala-z-vymahani-milionu-po-akademicich-placenych-cinou-238657.

Végh, Zsuzsanna. 2022. ‘Alignment or Isolation: Hungary’s Foreign Policy After Its Parliamentary Election’.https://ecfr.eu/article/alignment-or-isolation-hungarys-foreign-policy-after-its-parliamentary-election/.

Waisová, Šárka, and Ladislav Cabada. 2022. ‘China’s Engagement in Central Europe: Words Speak Lauder than Actions’. *Politické Vedy* 25 (2): 151–76. https://doi.org/10.24040/politickevedy.2022.25.2.151-176.

TOPAZ
Opletalova 1603/57
11000 Praha 1
web: www.thinktopaz.cz