

EDITED BY MIŁOSZ HODUN



**FRAGILE  
EUROPE**

elf

**DEFENDING DEMOCRACY  
IN AN AGE OF INTERFERENCE**



# FRAGILE EUROPE



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# Foreword

DAINIUS ŽALIMAS

MEMBER OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

It is a pleasure to contribute this foreword to *Fragile Europe*, and I wish to begin by expressing my deep gratitude to the European Liberal Forum for its steadfast commitment to advancing liberal values and strengthening democracy across our continent.

Few challenges are as urgent as the one explored in the following pages. According to the V-Dem Institute, the share of the world's population living in democracies has collapsed from 51 percent in 2004 to just 28 percent in 2024. We are living in times when democracies themselves are under siege. Authoritarian regimes seek to disarm our democracies from the inside out, turning our very strengths — freedom of expression, openness, and slower, deliberative decision-making — into vulnerabilities that undermine us from within.

In moments of crisis, democracies too often trigger self-destructive mechanisms that paralyze their ability to act decisively. Authoritarian actors, meanwhile, find willing accomplices within our own societies — populist politicians, fringe media outlets, and at times even established companies and mainstream leaders — who amplify foreign narratives, whether deliberately or unwittingly. The convergence of these external pressures with internal vulnerabilities makes the threat facing democracy more complex and more dangerous than ever before.

What makes this challenge even more acute is the transformative role of technology. Artificial intelligence now allows adversaries to generate fake news at industrial scale. Sophisticated information laundering networks disguise state propaganda as grassroots content, while foreign-owned social media algorithms amplify polarising messages for profit.

Money still remains one of the most effective weapons. Authoritarian regimes pour billions into lobbying firms and media outlets to shape public debate. Scandals like Qatargate have exposed how foreign powers exploit loopholes to buy influence inside the European Parliament itself. Covert campaign donations, shell companies, and dark money networks threaten the integrity of our political processes. Economic leverage — from market access to investment threats — is used to pressure governments and corporations into silence or complicity.

The ultimate objective of these campaigns is not merely to change our policies but to weaken democracy from the inside. By sowing mistrust, deepening divisions, and undermining confidence in democratic institutions, authoritarian regimes hope to prove that democracy is ineffective and unfit for the modern world.

The good news is that we are not powerless. European Union is beginning to respond with the seriousness the situation demands. At the heart of this response is the European Democracy Shield, a comprehensive initiative designed to defend our democratic systems from foreign information manipulation and interference. It brings together a wide range of tools: strengthening election integrity, protecting candidates and political parties, building cross-border fact-checking networks, combating deepfakes, and supporting independent media.

For liberals, the task before us is bigger than merely protecting democracy from foreign meddling — it is about rebuilding liberal democracy itself as a strong, unyielding political project. Our movement is founded on the belief that freedom, openness, and the rule of law are humanity's greatest achievements.

From the trenches of Ukraine, where people are dying for their European future, to the streets of Georgia, where citizens face violence from resovietised security forces, the fight for democracy is real and existential. Even the Baltic Sea, once envisioned as a NATO lake, has become a stage for Russian sabotage — met, too often, with Western silence.

Liberal democracy must never again be mistaken for weakness. We must close the loopholes that allow foreign money to poison our politics. We must demand transparency from tech platforms. And we must forge a common front — across borders, institutions, and political families —

to ensure that Europe's destiny is shaped by its people, not by hostile powers in Moscow or Beijing.

With the United States showing signs of stepping back from its traditional role as the primary leader of the free world, Europe's responsibility has only grown. If we remain united and anchored in our liberal values, Europe can emerge from this period not diminished, but strengthened — able to serve as a vital source of freedom and democracy not only for our own citizens, but for the world as a whole.

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# Intro

## Fragile Europe and the Politics of Interference

MIŁOSZ HODUN

Europe is fragile. Eighty years have passed since the end of the Second World War — a war that tore the continent apart, erasing cities, families, and certainties. Those who remember the darkest times are still among us. Their memories remind us that peace is never given, only earned, and that fragility is not weakness, but awareness — the understanding that what we have can be lost.

Conflicts and unrest are once again visible on the European horizon. The enemies of Europe have learned to adapt: they no longer always march in with tanks. They whisper, infiltrate, and manipulate. They exploit every opportunity to pit one group against another, to sow mistrust and fear — and sometimes, their success is counted in lives lost.

The European Union was born as a peace project. Out of the rubble of war came a daring experiment: cooperation instead of domination, prosperity instead of plunder. In the decades that followed, this experiment became the most successful peace initiative in human history. By linking nations through common values, open markets, and shared institutions, the EU delivered security, freedom, and development to generations of Europeans.

But success has its own enemies. For some, the EU's achievements — liberal democracy, human rights, and the rule of law — are intolerable. For others beyond its borders, European integration became an aspiration and a dream. Those who fear this dream, who see openness as a threat and freedom as contagion, have never stopped trying to weaken it.

At first, their methods were subtle: influence operations hidden behind trade deals, disinformation disguised as opinion, corruption masquerading

as diplomacy. Today, the attacks are overt. Russia's war on Ukraine is not only an assault on a sovereign nation; it is an assault on Europe itself — on its principles, its solidarity, and its belief that nations can choose freedom over fear.

Europe is fragile. Its openness, which is its greatest strength, is also the entry point for manipulation. The same freedoms that sustain democracy — expression, association, debate — are being weaponised by those who despise them. Authoritarian regimes and their proxies inject propaganda into European discourse, exploit the transparency of our institutions, and turn diversity of opinion into division. The EU's adherence to international law and ethical governance is mocked by adversaries who face no such constraints. And the Union's unity, forged from compromise among many voices, is tested by rivals who act as one.

These adversaries are no longer limited to states. Alongside Russia stand other authoritarian powers, ideological movements, religious extremists, and even global corporations that put profit or influence above democratic responsibility. They all share a single goal: to fragment Europe, to exploit its openness, and to replace cooperation with chaos.

The answer to this is not less Europe — it is more liberal democracy. More transparency, more accountability, more civic engagement. More trust in free societies, not less. When our enemies weaponise openness, the solution is not to close ourselves off, but to strengthen the institutions that make openness possible. Authoritarian regimes thrive on division; liberal democracy thrives on trust.

Europe must act together. The challenges we face are global: cyber threats, disinformation, climate crises, energy dependencies, and wars fought in our neighbourhood but felt in our homes. No single nation can face them alone. Europe must invest seriously in its own security — not just military, but economic, informational, and social. Strategic autonomy begins with shared responsibility. And in this new, uncertain world, we must be clear-eyed: some of the countries we once saw as allies may, consciously or not, foster the agenda of our adversaries. Complacency is a luxury Europe can no longer afford.

The only lasting answer to division is unity. The only sustainable protection is cooperation. Less Europe means more vulnerability, more

dependence, more isolation. Europe's fragility must be understood not as a flaw, but as a sign of its ethical maturity — its capacity for self-criticism, transparency, and trust. In authoritarian systems, stability is enforced by fear; in Europe, it is maintained by confidence in dialogue and law. Fragility, in this sense, is the price — and the proof — of freedom.

Europe's strength lies in its ability to learn, to admit mistakes, and to evolve.

Its fragility is not the crack before collapse; it is the flexibility that prevents shattering. It is what allows innovation, solidarity, and renewal. The strength of Europe's enemies is an illusion — a brittle armour built on repression and lies. We must protect Europe. We must protect its fragility. For in this fragility lies the very essence of what makes Europe worth defending: a community built not on fear, but on trust.

This awareness of fragility is the starting point of *Fragile Europe: Foreign Interference*. The essays collected in this volume examine the many ways in which external actors exploit Europe's openness — technologically, ideologically, financially, and culturally. They do not call for fear, but for understanding: to see how interference works is to begin reclaiming the ability to resist it.

**SILVIA NADJIVAN** opens the collection with an analysis of how far-right and far-left movements have evolved into conduits for external powers. Against the backdrop of financial and political crisis, she shows how “anti-democratic parties collaborate not only with Putin's Russia but also with China”, forming part of a transnational network of disinformation and corruption. Drawing on Anne Applebaum's image of “autocracy, inc.,” Nadjivan demonstrates that Russia, China, and other illiberal actors are bound by common methods rather than ideologies. Her conclusion is clear: defending democracy requires not nostalgia but active renewal — investment in civic education, digital literacy, and democratic solidarity.

**PAVEL HAVLÍČEK** widens the lens to include interference from the United States — not in the form of covert operations, but through the influence of digital corporations and political lobbying. His case study of Czechia illustrates how U.S. tech giants and populist movements converged to frame the EU's Digital Services Act as “digital censorship.” Through this lens, transatlantic tensions emerge as a contest between market

liberalism and regulatory democracy. Havlíček insists that Europe's response must be firm but cooperative: the EU must "stay merit-based and stick to its rules and procedures," preserving its identity as a global standard-setter even amid allied friction.

**SILVIA FERNANDEZ** turns to the technological battlefield itself. In an age of artificial intelligence, deepfakes, and algorithmic manipulation, she argues that "authoritarian states can now shape narratives without boots on the ground." AI-generated disinformation, microtargeted political ads, and cross-platform coordination have made interference a structural feature of modern communication. Fernandez advocates enforceable transparency rules for political advertising, provenance tagging of synthetic media, and EU investment in forensic AI. Technology, she concludes, must become an instrument of accountability rather than a vector of manipulation.

**MALWINA TALIK** explores how social conservatism and moral panic have become tools of foreign interference. She traces the "anti-gender" movement from its roots in Vatican diplomacy and Russian soft power to its current form as a transnational campaign against liberal values. Anti-gender discourse, Talik shows, is designed to delegitimise the EU and fragment civic trust. Her prescription is equally political and ethical: "defending equality is not a cultural gesture but a strategic necessity." Protecting gender rights, she argues, is part of defending democracy itself.

**ODILIA ABREU** examines the ambivalent role of diasporas in Europe's liberal landscape. In *Exiles or Persecutors?*, she documents how Russian and Chinese diaspora networks can serve as both havens for victims and instruments of control. Through data leaks, intimidation, and consular manipulation, authoritarian states extend repression across borders. Abreu calls for a dual response: protection for exiles and transparency obligations for diaspora organisations. "Diaspora communities," she writes, "should be treated not as vulnerabilities but as partners in defending democratic values."

**RACHEL PALMA RANDLE** moves from analysis to renewal. Her chapter, *Democracy in Trouble*, argues that interference thrives where democratic credibility falters. She proposes a four-pillar framework: institutional

transparency, strong media, civic education, and accountable digital governance. Palma Randle's optimism is pragmatic — resilience is not born from fear, but from trust restored through participation. "Liberalism's strength," she writes, "is persuasion, not fear."

**CONSTANTINOS SARAVAKOS** uncovers a subtler arena of interference: European football. Gulf states, he demonstrates, use club ownership, sponsorship, and media rights to launder reputations and secure influence. Sport becomes "the new embassy," a channel through which political leverage is normalised as entertainment. His remedy is transparency — beneficial ownership disclosure, integrity rules, and ethical guidelines to separate cultural diplomacy from covert strategy.

**ELIF GÜNEY MENDERES** examines Türkiye's evolving role as both ally and agitator. Through migration diplomacy, diaspora politics, and religious networks, Ankara has learned to shape European politics from within. Yet Türkiye also acts as a necessary mediator and partner. Menderes's conclusion, "principled resilience," captures the balance Europe must strike: dialogue without dependence, openness without naïveté.

Finally, **SHUSHAN AVAGYAN**'s closing essay turns to China's strategic presence in Europe. Through investments, research collaborations, and cultural outreach, Beijing seeks not only markets but influence. Avagyan demonstrates how economic dependency and fragmented EU responses enable political leverage. Her call for action is unmistakable: collective investment screening, academic safeguards, and unified diplomacy to prevent Europe's division into client states. "Engagement without transparency," she warns, "is not partnership but exposure."

Together, these chapters depict a Europe confronted by invisible pressures — digital, ideological, economic — but also equipped with the knowledge to resist them. They show that the same openness that makes Europe fragile also makes it capable of renewal. Fragility, in this sense, is not a threat but a condition of freedom: the awareness that trust, transparency, and cooperation must be constantly defended.

We must protect Europe. We must protect its fragility. For in this fragility lies the very essence of what makes Europe worth defending: a community built not on fear, but on trust.

*Europe's fragility must be understood not as a flaw, but as a sign of its ethical maturity—its capacity for self-criticism, transparency, and trust. In authoritarian systems, stability is enforced by fear; in Europe, it is maintained by confidence in dialogue and law.*

MIŁOSZ HODUN

# Far Right and Far Left Parties as Foreign Powers' Vassals

## Liberal Counterstrategies Against Anti-Democratic Infiltration in Europe

SILVIA NADJIVAN

### Introduction — the global shift

Recent years have led to a global shift in geopolitical and geoeconomic relations. While the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and the hybrid war against Europe still continue, the “super-year of elections” 2024 brought anti-democratic and anti-European parties enormous gains in votes. The reasons for that are complex. While crises do not automatically fuel populism or authoritarian tendencies,<sup>1</sup> the recent *polycrisis* — or even *permacrisis* — marked by the simultaneous escalation of several challenges in Europe, has triggered social dissatisfaction, mistrust in mainstream political parties, disenchantment with EU technocracy, and ultimately a growing preference among voters for populist parties on both the far right and far left.

Far left populist parties were able to exploit the social discontent arising in the wake of the euro crisis and the EU bailout package including strict austerity measures since 2008. The far right on the other hand mostly profited from the so-called migration crisis in 2015, when hundreds of thousand people fled from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe due to conflicts, wars, and poverty,<sup>2</sup> while no common European asylum and migration policy was established. Moreover, the so-called

<sup>1</sup> Müller, J.W. (2016). Was ist Populismus? *Zeitschrift für Politische Theorie* 7, 2, 187–201. <https://elibrary.utb.de/doi/pdf/10.3224/zpth.v7i2.03>.

<sup>2</sup> Nadjivan, S., Geißler, K., Gruber, W. (2023). *Populistische Gefahren — liberale Gegenstrategien. Policy Brief*. Wien: NEOS Lab. <https://lab.neos.eu/thinktank/publikationen/populistische-gefahren-fuer-europa>.

COVID crisis starting in 2020 proved to be a boost for the far right that also profited from rapidly rising energy prices and high inflation rates due to Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine and consequently the EU sanctions against Russia. The brutal attack of the terror organisation Hamas on Israel in 2023 and the subsequent war in Gaza has led to further public opinion dispersion in Europe, characterised by both rising antisemitism and islamophobia.<sup>3</sup>

So, with the European Parliamentary elections in June 2024, far left and — to a greater extent — far right parties have won more seats so they can push stronger for their agenda on European level. But the conservative EPP, social-democratic S&D fraction and the liberal Renew Group, with occasional support from the Greens or EFA, still form the majority and therefore still build the "*cordon sanitaire*" against anti-European and anti-democratic threats especially from the far right. Rising authoritarianism and increasing numbers of autocracies worldwide<sup>4</sup> have, however, made the work for liberal-democratic forces in the current European Parliament and European Commission more difficult.

The main reason is that European anti-democratic parties collaborate not only with Putin's Russia but also with China. Like both autocracies Russia and China, the competitive authoritarian US-regime under Donald Trump challenges liberal democracy in Europe. Although both global powers, China and the United States, neither share the same ideology nor come close to being allies in any form, they do share competing interests in expanding their global influence, including in Europe. A new era of authoritarian, and even autocratic, politics has begun.

<sup>3</sup> Shafa, A. (2025, May 9). Gaza conflict leads to rise in antisemitism and Islamophobia. *Vision of Humanity*. <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/gaza-conflict-leads-to-rise-in-antisemitism-and-islamophobia/>.

<sup>4</sup> V-Dem (2025). Democracy Report 2025. 25 Years of Autocratization — Democracy Trumped? *University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute*. [https://www.v-dem.net/documents/60/V-dem-dr\\_\\_2025\\_lowres.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/documents/60/V-dem-dr__2025_lowres.pdf).

## Modern — Autocratic — Times

According to the historian and journalist Anne Applebaum, autocracies today show “sophisticated networks relying on kleptocratic financial structures, a complex of security services — military, paramilitary, police — and technological experts who provide surveillance, propaganda, and disinformation.”<sup>5</sup> In contrast to former autocratic regimes,<sup>6</sup> the current ones are much better connected with each other so that their business relations are much more beneficial. Consequently, there are not common ideologies that let them remain together, but rather common economic or kleptocratic interests and a boundless intent to stay in power and capture the state, its institutions and the companies therein as long as possible — just to “preserve their personal wealth and power.”<sup>7</sup>

With the help of modern technology, it has become easy for authoritarian regimes and autocracies to share the same methods and resources, such as disinformation and propaganda spread by troll farms and media networks,<sup>8</sup> and to make deals instead of politically driven cooperations following the same ideology. It is not only the same technology autocrats are sharing, but also the same enemy, namely liberal democracy, with all its components like fundamental rights, freedom of speech, checks and balances, and social cohesion in a pluralistic society. This all is embodied by the democratic world, “the West”, European Union and generally NATO, where mostly the same values are upheld as by the — mostly repressed — liberal-democratic opposition in authoritarian regimes and autocracies.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Applebaum, A. (2025). *Autocracy, Inc. The Dictators Who Want to Run the World*. London: Penguin Random House UK.

<sup>6</sup> Guriev, S., Treisman, D. (2022). *Spin Dictators. The Changing Face of Tyranny in the 21st Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Applebaum, A. (2025), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Brandstätter, H. (2025). *Putin, Trump und ihre Marionetten*. Wien: Kremayr & Scheriau, p. 151.

<sup>9</sup> Frantz, E., Kendall-Taylor, A., Wright, J. (2020, March). Digital Repression in Autocracies. *V-Dem Institute, Users Working Paper, Series 2020/27*. <https://www.v-dem.net/media/publications/digital-repression17mar.pdf>. Applebaum, A. (2025), p. 10. Brandstätter, H. (2025), p. 102.

In contrast to former autocracies like the Soviet Union, modern autocrats do not even pretend to care about human rights and pluralism. Instead, they declare hitherto universal values or at least UN Charter achievements like “civil liberties” and the “rule of law” as Western products which simply do not concern themselves.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, they aim to challenge the Western value system with their own narratives on sovereignty, national rights and priorities.

Regarding the relations among the three global players, Trump maintains loose ties with Putin, so he can easily change his mind, when appropriate. In contrast, Xi Jinping from the beginning of his presidency turned to Putin's Russia, based on a similar state socialist heritage, ideology, and finally common power interests. This means not only sharing the same technologies, but also antiliberal, anti-individualistic and collectivist attitudes as well as similar demagogic narratives against liberal democracy. The hitherto difficult relations between the two competitors China and US have become even more tense since Trump's second presidency, especially due to his erratic and arbitrary tariff policy destabilizing international trade relations with negative effects for all.<sup>11</sup> A dynamic network of interests and influences can be revealed among the three global players, while China and the US show specific characteristics in developing their new roles.

### China's newly emerging global era

After years of a tentative rapprochement through economic cooperation between the West, meaning the US together with the EU, and China, President Xi Jinping, being in office since 2012, turned the table. Against the expectation or hope of many Western politicians and scholars, increasing trade relations with China especially since the 1990s did not lead to an improvement of the human rights situation, not even to a slight democratisation process in China. The political elite, at least

<sup>10</sup> Applebaum, A. (2025), p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Clarke, J. (2025, August 27). What tariffs has Trump announced and why? *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cn93e12rypgo>.

since Xi Jinping's term as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (ccp), has shown no interest in liberal democracy as established in the Western world, not to mention individual rights and freedom, nor in international relations following a free and open world.<sup>12</sup> An originally internal document called "Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere" or "Document 9" from 2013 listed main threats for the Chinese Communist Party (ccp), *inter alia* promoting "Western Constitutional Democracy", "universal values", "civil society and "the West's idea of journalism."<sup>13</sup>

To fight such "Westernization" and, as this document negatively connoted "Colour Revolutions" in Eastern Europe since Ukrainian Maidan protests in 2014, clear autocratic recommendations can be found, concretely to "conscientiously strengthen management of the ideological battlefield."<sup>14</sup> This means totally dominating public opinion and people's mindset. The Chinese government had therefore started to use new information technologies from the beginning of their upcoming for propagandistic reasons, long before European far right and far left parties recognised the manipulative potential of social media. As a matter of fact, "The Great Firewall" of China was installed in 2006 as a domestic Internet-control system to prevent liberal-democratic ideas from spreading the country via internet. The main idea of China's so-called "internet sovereignty" concept is that every country can keep unwelcome information away from its national borders, which contradicts any principle of cyberspace in the international arena.<sup>15</sup> So, everything that might jeopardize national security, in fact the governmental autocratic position, has been banned.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Foley, J.J. (2023, November 13). China's Authoritarian Grip: How China Reinforces Social Control, Cultivates a Climate of Fear, and Minimizes Dissent. *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*. <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3587653/chinas-authoritarian-grip-how-china-reinforces-social-control-cultivates-a-clim/>.

<sup>13</sup> Applebaum, A. (2025), p. 11. ChinaFile (2013, November 8). Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation. <https://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>.

<sup>14</sup> Applebaum, A. (2025), p. 11. ChinaFile (2013, November 8).

<sup>15</sup> Foley, J.J. (2023, November 13).

<sup>16</sup> Applebaum, A. (2025), p. 67. Marpaung (2025, April 27). Made in China, but Not Free in China: Why is TikTok Restricted? *Modern Diplomacy*. <https://moderndiplomacy>.

Simultaneously, artificial intelligence (AI) technologies are developed in China for internal use and for selling to other autocracies, to enable the tracking of individuals and predicting their political or potential protest behaviour.<sup>17</sup> The EU has for years struggled with security concerns regarding China's tech giant Huawei which has been recently banned from Parliament and Commission due to a bribery scandal.<sup>18</sup> The EU candidate state Serbia is, on the contrary, well equipped with all those spying and tracking systems and has started a close military cooperation with China.<sup>19</sup> This close cooperation was decided precisely during the months of oppositional protests against corruption in Serbia, triggered by the Novi Sad train station tragedy (after Chinese-led renovation) in November 2024. One of the student protest's demands is a complete clarification of the Chinese-led renovation.<sup>20</sup>

Based on economic progress however, China's newly discovered geopolitical interest was officially declared during the Communist Party congress in 2017, when Xi Jinping proclaimed a "new era" of "great-power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics" calling for a more active role "in leading the reform of the global governance system". Since then, China's government neglects the existence of universal human rights and, on the contrary, denigrates them as a product of Western imperialism, such as democracy. Its own sovereignty and right to development are meanwhile prioritised.<sup>21</sup> A not quite autocratic but authoritarian

eu/2025/04/27/made-in-china-but-not-free-in-china-why-is-tiktok-restricted/. Politico (2025, March 17). Huawei bribery scandal: What we know so far. <https://www.politico.eu/article/huawei-bribery-scandal-eu-chinese-tech-lobby-money-lobbying/>.

<sup>17</sup> Applebaum, A. (2025), p.69. Andersen, R. (2020, September). The Panopticon is already here. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/09/china-ai-surveillance/614197/>.

<sup>18</sup> Grieria, M. (2025, March 14). Huawei banned from Parliament and Commission over bribery probe. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/huawei-banned-from-european-parliament-over-bribery-allegations/>.

<sup>19</sup> Applebaum, A. (2025), p. 70. Radio Free Europe (2025, July 30). Serbia-China Military Drills End Amid EU, US Objections. <https://www.rferl.org/a-serbia-china-military-training-eu/33487781.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Baletic, K. (2025, May 6). Student Protesters Demand Snap Elections to Counter Corruption in Serbia. *Balkan Insight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/05/06/student-protesters-demand-snap-elections-to-counter-corruption-in-serbia/>.

<sup>21</sup> Applebaum, A. (2025), p.101.

move has been taken by the us under the isolationist second Trump administration.

### The US authoritarian turnaround

After an authoritarian election campaign, President Donald Trump seems to lead the us toward a “competitive authoritarianism” system,<sup>22</sup> meaning a political system being neither a liberal democracy, nor an autocracy. The characteristics of such a system is contradictory to the us constitution, generally the guarantee for checks and balances in the us, and the erratic behaviours and arbitrary measures taken by Trump and his administration.<sup>23</sup>

Trump’s inauguration revealed “the new administration’s kleptocratic values.”<sup>24</sup> Most prominent guests standing in the first row were all the CEOs of us tech companies such as Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, and Elon Musk who for short time worked in a us government position, leading the so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE).<sup>25</sup>

Such measures can be understood as a “politzation and weaponization of government bureaucracy,”<sup>26</sup> when hitherto bureaucracy employees are fired to be replaced by loyalists. Trump is of course not the first to weaponize state institutions. His friend and possible mentor Viktor Orbán did the same in Hungary — infiltrating the state bureaucracy by loyalists — when starting his first term as Prime Minister in 2010. *Orbánism as a specific form of state capture seems to have inspired far right us Republicans and finally Trumpism.*<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the Heritage

<sup>22</sup> Levitsky, S., Way, L.A. (2025, February 11). The Path to American Authoritarianism. *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/path-american-authoritarianism-trump>.

<sup>23</sup> Levitsky, S., Way, L.A. (2025, February 11).

<sup>24</sup> Applebaum, A. (2025), XV.

<sup>25</sup> Applebaum, A. (2025), XVI. Brandstätter, H. (2025), p.147.

<sup>26</sup> Levitsky, S., Way, L.A. (2025, February 11).

<sup>27</sup> Shapiro, J., Végh, Sz. (2024, October). The Orbanisation of America: Hungary’s Lessons for Donald Trump. Policy Brief. ECFR. <https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/The-Orbanisation-of-America-Hungarys-lessons-for-Donald-Trump.pdf>.

Foundation and other right-wing groups have invested millions of dollars to build up a database with 54,000 loyalists ready to fill government positions. It was also the Heritage Foundation that not only set up “Project 2025” but also created a plan for the first 100 days of the President Trump’s second term.<sup>28</sup> Part of the autocratic playbook is to fight the liberal-democratic opposition perfidiously.

When liberal-democratic opponents occupy the media, science and civil society sector face all possible restrictions and censorship. Consequently, loyalists and government-friendly persons, organisations and companies can benefit from an environment of non-transparent governmental funding and investment.<sup>29</sup> After lots of money from the Soviet Union and later Russia flowed into Trump’s companies and real estate since the late 1980s,<sup>30</sup> it is still not completely clarified to what extent Putin financially and technologically supported Trump’s first election campaign in 2016. It is undisputable, however, that troll factories in St. Petersburg impacted US election campaigns, while Trump was the first to extensively use social media for his own election campaign.<sup>31</sup>

Parallel to an exploding global use of social media and shrinking reach of public service media, the US funding for all the American foreign broadcasters *inter alia* “Radio Free Europe” has been stopped so that the EU has jumped in to rescue non-partisan news production in

<sup>28</sup> Quinn, M. (2025, April 29). How Trump’s policies and Project 2025 proposals match up after first 100 days. *CBS News*. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-project-2025-first-100-days/>.

<sup>29</sup> Levitsky, S., Way, L.A. (2025, February 11).

<sup>30</sup> Pipilenko, D., Dessel, T. (2018, December 18). Following the Money: Trump and Russia-Linked Transactions From the Campaign to the Presidential Inauguration. *Center for American Progress (CAP)*. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/following-the-money/>. Center For American Progress Action Fund (2018, May 18). A Timeline of Trump’ Deals and Investments in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. *The Moscow Project*. <https://themoscowproject.org/explainers/a-timeline-of-trumps-deals-and-investments-in-eastern-europe-and-central-asia/index.html>. Nilsson-Julien, E. (2025, March 13). Fact check: Was Donald Trump recruited by the KGB and codenamed ‘Krasnov’? *Euronews*. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/03/13/fact-checking-online-claims-that-donald-trump-was-recruited-by-the-kgb-as-krasnov>.

<sup>31</sup> Pipilenko, D., Dessel, T. (2018, December 18). Applebaum, A. (2025), xiv-xv. Brandstätter, H. (2025), p.102.

Europe.<sup>32</sup> This may seem like a drop in the ocean since both Musk and Trump have their own social media platforms, X (former Twitter) and Truth Social, where unverified content without any quality criteria reach a broad public. Even Meta founder Mark Zuckerberg fired all fact checkers before Trump's inauguration.<sup>33</sup> And social media are those platforms which are mostly appreciated by anti-democratic forces to spread disinformation, manipulative narratives and perfidious propaganda.

### Anti-democratic intents to capture public opinion

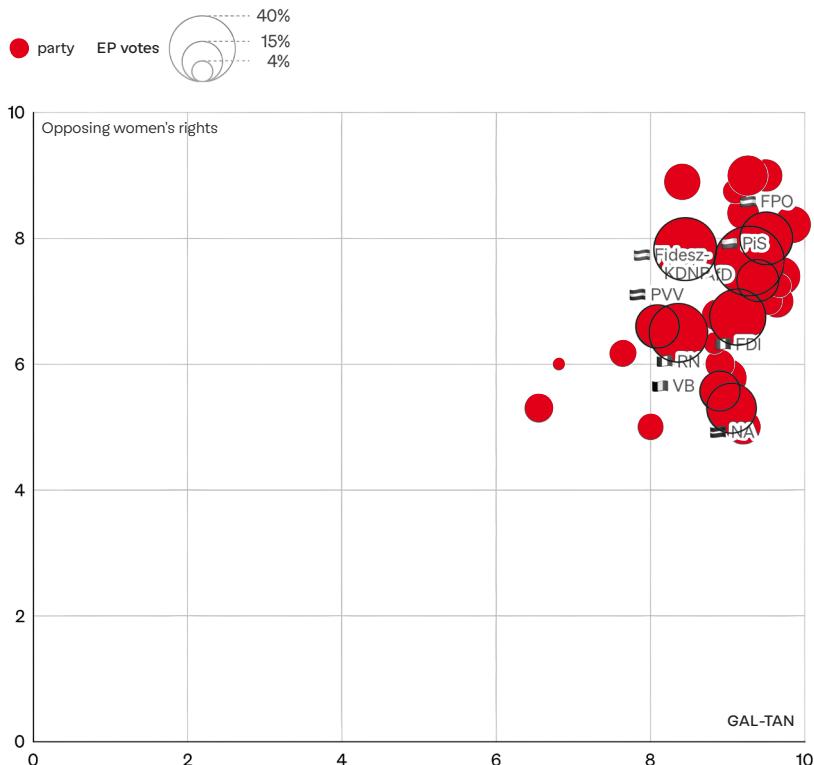
Anti-democratic, autocratic narratives draw a contrast between the imperfect yet functioning order within one's own community or state and the supposed chaos that arises when civic, women's, and LGBTQI+ rights are demanded — or worse, implemented — by the so-called "other", meaning the political enemy. Rather than merely pretending to uphold democratic values, as in the past, critics now portray democracy itself as weak in decision-making and therefore inefficient.<sup>34</sup> Autocratic narratives have the duty to either produce political apathy as in autocratic states such as China and Russia or to polarise the public through fake news in still democratic states, as in US and Europe. All strategies follow the same goal — to disrupt social cohesion and destroy any kind of liberal-democratic engagement and finally liberal democracy. When in opposition, anti-democratic, autocratic parties seek to force mistrust, resentment and social division. Useful vehicles for that are misogyny, homophobia, and xenophobia. When in power, autocrats

<sup>32</sup> Schulz, A., Levy, D., Kleis Nielsen, R. (2019). Old Educated, and Political Diverse: The Audience of Public Service News. *Reuters Institute Report*. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/old-educated-and-politically-diverse-audience-public-service-news>. Wesolowsky, T. (2025, May 21). EU throws Radio Free Europe a €5.5 million lifeline after Trump's cuts. *Euractiv*. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/eu-throws-radio-free-europe-a-e5-5-million-lifeline-after-trumps-cuts/>.

<sup>33</sup> Wagner, K., Griffin, R. (2025, January 8). Zuckerberg Pivots Harder Toward Trump as Political Wind Shift. *Bloomberg*. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-01-08/zuckerberg-lifts-us-content-guardrails-in-a-trump-friendly-shift>.

<sup>34</sup> Applebaum, A. (2025), pp. 75–77.

Figure 1: Far-Right in 2024 elected EU Parliament strongly opposes Women's rights  
Comparing attitudes to women's rights and authoritarian orientation



x-axis: GAL-TAN: 0 = green, alternative, liberal, 10 = traditional, authoritarian, nationalist;  
y-axis: position to EU integration: 1 = strongly opposes European integration, 7 = strongly supports European integration

Grafik: NEOS LabQuelle: Chapel Hill Expert Survey

aim to abolish free and fair elections. The autocratic way to state power is in modern times therefore marked by disinformation, fake news and hate speech.

Civic protest movements such as the “colour revolutions” are discredited

Figure 2: Most Far-Left parties in 2024 elected EU Parliament support Women's rights

Except for the authoritarian-oriented parties, most of the far-left care about women's rights



x-axis: GAL-TAN: 0 = green, alternative, liberal, 10 = traditional, authoritarian, nationalist;

y-axis: position to EU integration: 0 = strongly supports women's rights policies,

10 = strongly opposes women's rights policies

Grafik: NEOS LabQuelle: Chapel Hill Expert Survey

as being inauthentic, and rather ordered by foreign powers so that popular protest leaders are called “foreign puppets.”<sup>35</sup> As a matter of fact,

<sup>35</sup> Applebalum, A. (2025), p.12.

Figure 3: Far-Right in 2024 elected EU Parliament strongly opposes Women's and LGBTIQ+ rights

Comparing attitudes to women's and LGBTIQ+ rights



x-axis: LGBTIQ+ rights: 0 = strongly supports LGBTIQ+ rights policies, 10 = strongly opposes LGBTIQ+ rights policies; y-axis: women's rights: 0 = strongly supports women's rights policies, 10 = strongly opposes women's rights policies

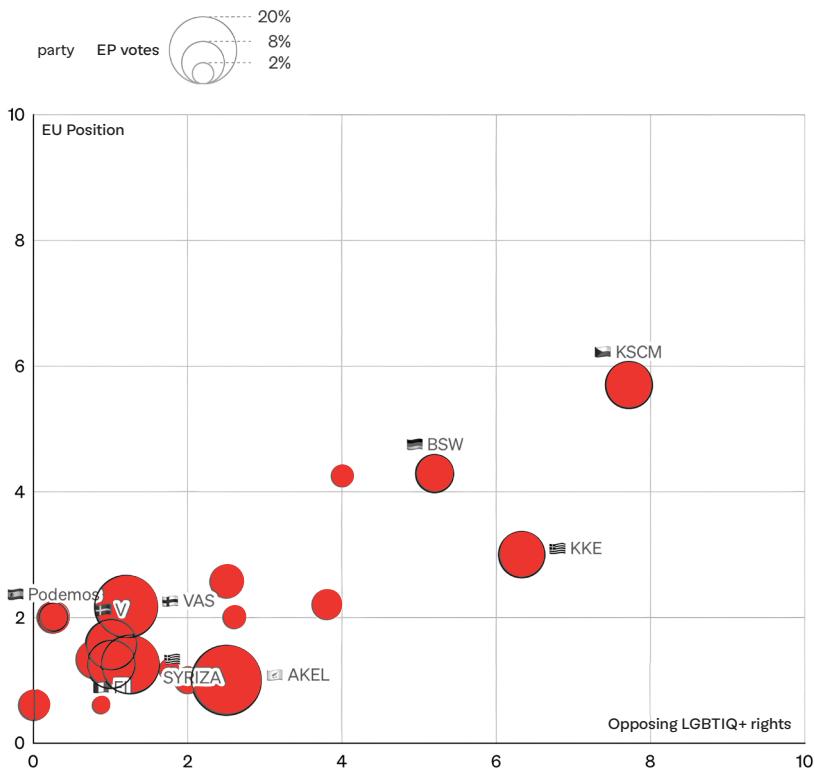
Grafik: NEOS LabQuelle: Chapel Hill Expert Survey

restrictive legislative decisions are intended to make civil society engagement almost impossible, as in Russia since 2012, in China since 2016, in Hungary since 2017, and Slovakia since 2025.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Applebaum, A. (2025), p.141. Dlhopolec, D. (2025).

Figure 4: Most Far-Left parties in 2024 elected EU Parliament care about Women's and LGBTIQ+ rights

Few show traditional orientation while not supporting progressive gender policies



x-axis: LGBTIQ+ rights: 0 = strongly supports LGBTIQ+ rights policies, 10 = strongly opposes LGBTIQ+ rights policies; y-axis: women's rights: 0 = strongly supports women's rights policies, 10 = strongly opposes women's rights policies  
Grafik: NEOS LabQuelle: Chapel Hill Expert Survey

What autocrats do not say is that they themselves use the same illegal methods they falsely accuse the liberal-democratic forces of using. These methods include subverting state order, corruption, spreading fake news and even espionage. While the liberal-democratic opposition is falsely accused of being a foreigner's puppet in autocratic states, it is first

the European far right and then far left which serve as vassals of foreign autocratic powers. So, mostly the same far right and far left politicians perform as willing prosecutors not only for Putin's hybrid war against Europe, but also as multipliers for China's anti-democratic propaganda and recently as supporters of Trump's MAGA doctrine.

In contrast to China, Trump is trying to achieve loyalty not through financial support or bribery, but rather through bullying, especially through announcing a restrictive tariff policy or to leave NATO if European defence spending might not be increased to five percent.<sup>37</sup> Following the same ideology, anti-democratic far right parties are mostly in favour of Trump and his administration. As a result, they receive support by public praise from Trump or other members of the US government. Elon Musk even invited Alice Weidel from the AfD to a livestream conversation on his platform X shortly before the Parliamentary elections in Germany.<sup>38</sup>

### European far right and far left as foreign powers' vassals

Global autocratic players have, together with European anti-democratic forces, for years prepared the ground for social division and mistrust, through infiltrating and polarising the public via disinformation and propaganda as well as through corruption. Not only exclusively, but mostly primarily anti-democratic, authoritarian parties have accepted bribes for spreading disinformation and propaganda and for acting as mouthpieces of anti-European global players.<sup>39</sup> The most prominent parties in this regard are the German AfD and Hungarian *Fidesz* that at the same time accept financial support from Russia as well as from China and maintain good contacts with the Trump administration. They

<sup>37</sup> Mc Leary, P. (2025).

<sup>38</sup> Connolly, K. (2025, January 9). Elon Musk heaps praise on AfD's Alice Weidel during live talk on X. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/jan/09/elon-musk-heaps-praise-on-afd-alice-weidel-during-live-talk-on-x>.

<sup>39</sup> Soula, E., Avgoustidis, A. (2024, July 24). Bribes and Lies: Foreign Interference in Europe in 2024. *German Marshall Fund*. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/bribes-and-lies-foreign-interference-europe-2024>.

are, however, not the only ones. The same is true for a far right Belgian politician who was collaborating with Chinese intelligence from 2019 to 2022 to “divide the US-EU relationship.”<sup>40</sup> Similarly, a scandal around the former AfD politician and MEP Maximilian Krah also revealed alleged espionage relations between the far right and the PRC.<sup>41</sup> Through disinformation campaigns, financial support and bribes, the PRC has recently started to interfere with European public. The main aim is here to disrupt the traditionally good relations among Europe and the US, to push for China-friendly positions and to silence any critique especially regarding human rights violations in China, the problematic – not autonomous – state of Hong Kong and the threatened situation of Taiwan.<sup>42</sup>

As surveys of the Political Capital Institute show, sympathetic parties can be found in the EU Parliament among two non-aligned parties, the right-populist fractions “Patriots for Europe” Group (PfP), “Europe of Sovereign Nations” Group (ESN), “European Conservatives and Reformists” (ECR), and “The Left” fraction.

#### 1. Infiltrated voting behaviour in the European Parliament

According to the in-depth research of Political Capital, anti-European as well as anti-democratic stances of the far left and especially of the far right parties often go along with a high susceptibility to the influence of autocratic global players such as Russia and China.<sup>43</sup> While the ECR with the Polish PiS and Italian FdI as the most prominent representatives will remain highly critical about Putin’s Russia and its war of aggression against Ukraine, PfP and ESN members have in the

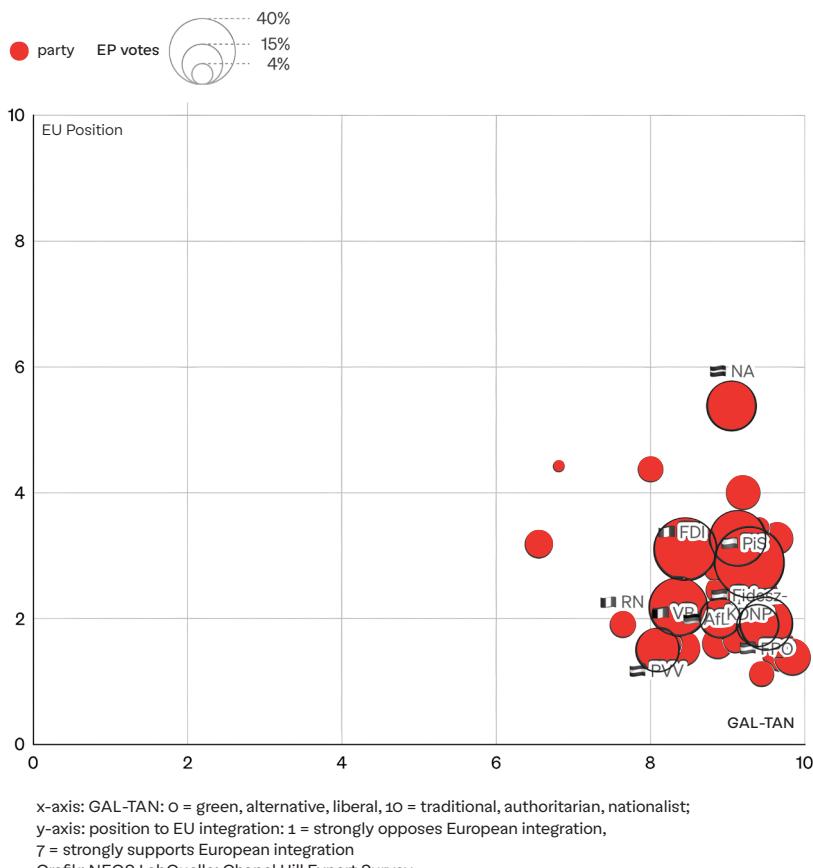
<sup>40</sup> Soula, E., Avgoustidis, A. (2024, July 24).

<sup>41</sup> Fuchs, C., Geisler, A., Steinhagen, M. (2025, May 9), Korruptionsermittlungen gegen Maximilian Krah eingeleitet. *Die Zeit*. <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2025-05/afd-politiker-maximilian-krah-soll-immunitaet-verlieren>.

<sup>42</sup> Soula, E., Avgoustidis, A. (2024, July 24).

<sup>43</sup> Political Capital (2024). *Growing influence of Russia and China in the new European Parliament?* Budapest: Political Capital. [https://politicalcapital.hu/news.php?article\\_read=1&article\\_id=3420](https://politicalcapital.hu/news.php?article_read=1&article_id=3420).

Figure 5: Far-Right in 2024 elected EU Parliament strongly opposes EU integration  
Comparing attitudes to European integration and authoritarian orientation

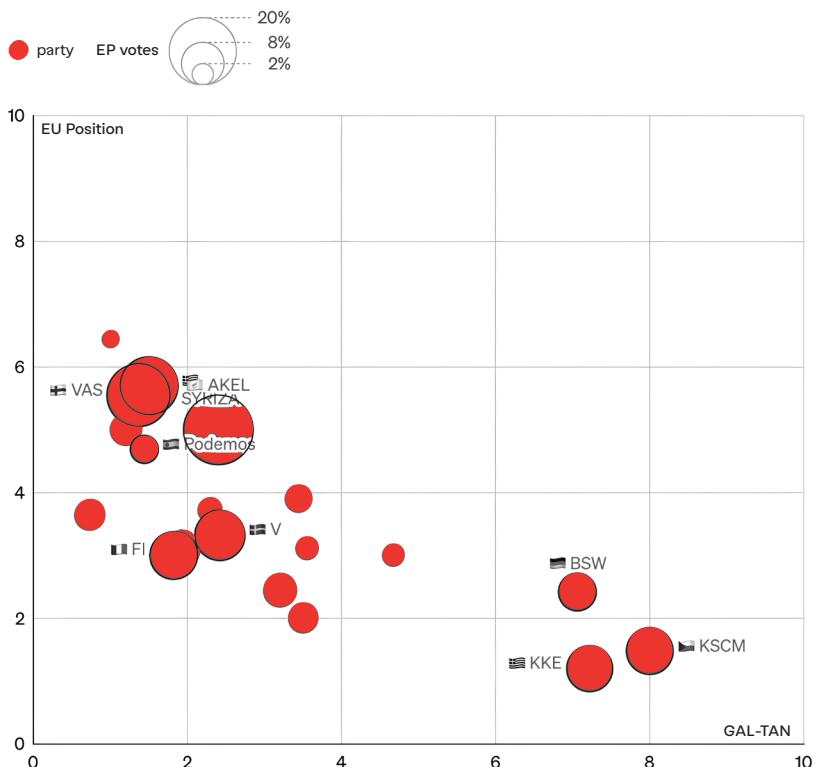


past concluded cooperation agreements with the Kremlin or even received financial support.<sup>44</sup> The PFE with the French *Rassemblement Na-*

<sup>44</sup> Nadjivan, S., Geißler, K., Gruber, W. (2023). *Populistische Gefahren – liberale Gegenstrategien. Policy Brief*. Wien: NEOS Lab. <https://lab.neos.eu/thinktank/publikationen/populistische-gefahren-fuer-europa>.

Figure 6: Far-Left in 2024 elected EU Parliament is ideologically fragmented and divided on EU integration

Contradictory attitudes to European integration and GAL-TAN orientation



x-axis: GAL-TAN: 0 = green, alternative, liberal, 10 = traditional, authoritarian, nationalist;

y-axis: position to EU integration: 1 = strongly opposes European integration,

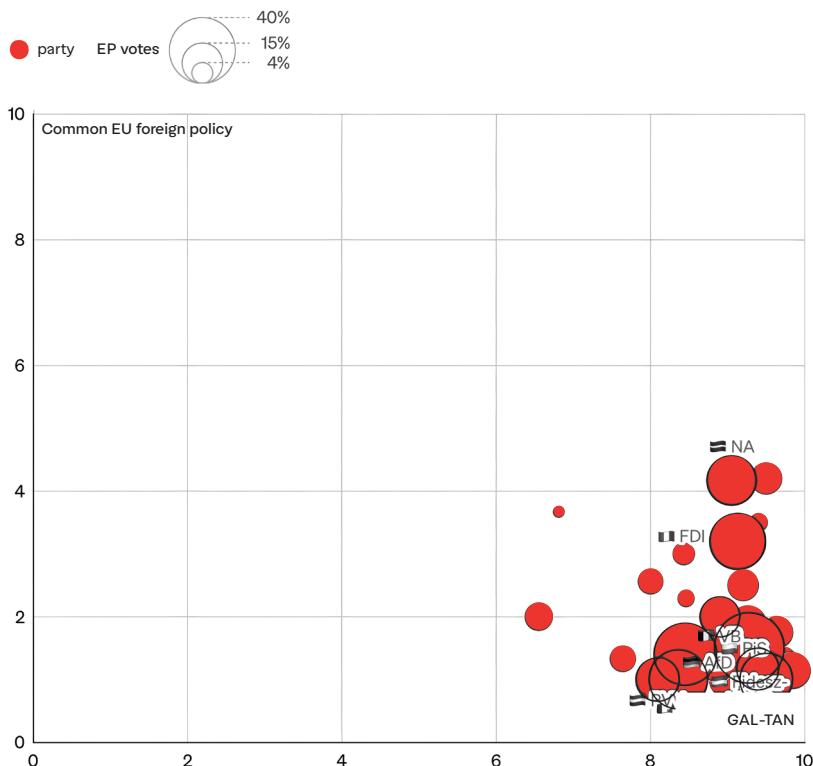
7 = strongly supports European integration

Grafik: NEOS LabQuelle: Chapel Hill Expert Survey

tional, Austrian FPÖ, Hungarian Fidesz and Czech ANO might still be supportive of the Kremlin, while showing that less obviously than in the last, the 9th EU Parliament term. Expectedly, official statements and voting behaviour within the EU Parliament might be more tactical and defensive than in previous years. The ESN with AfD as the most prominent representative might be, more than ever, Kremlin-supportive.

Figure 7: Far-Right in 2024 elected EU Parliament strongly opposes Common EU Foreign and Security Policy

Comparing attitudes to common EU policy and authoritarian orientation

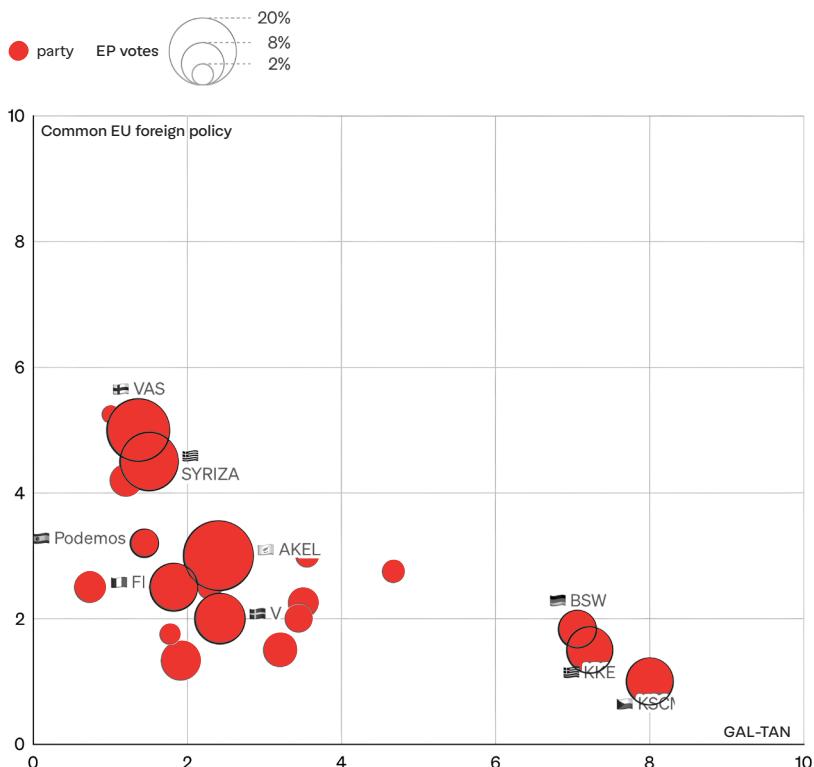


Both party families show the most ties with the accused war criminal Vladimir Putin.

The Left with the German party *Die Linke* and others have taken a more critical stance towards the warmonger Vladimir Putin, since the start

Figure 8: Far-Left in 2024 elected EU Parliament shows deep disagreement about common EU Foreign Policy

This correlates with divided liberal and authoritarian orientations



x-axis: GAL-TAN: 0 = green, alternative, liberal, 10 = traditional, authoritarian, nationalist;  
y-axis: EU authority over foreign and security policy: 1 = strongly opposes foreign and security policy,  
7 = strongly supports foreign and security policy  
Grafik: NEOS LabQuelle: Chapel Hill Expert Survey

of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, which might deepen in the years to come.

All the parties and MEPs who do not belong to any party family might intensify their pro-Russian positions as the *Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht*

(BSW) and Robert Fico's SMER have already proven.<sup>45</sup> While BSW is suspected of having received donations from the Kremlin,<sup>46</sup> Robert Fico, still depending on Russian gas, provokingly shows his close ties with Putin. He was the only EU member state Prime Minister to attend the military parade in Moscow on 9 May 2025, where he also met Xi Jinping. That again triggered oppositional mass demonstrations throughout Slovakia.<sup>47</sup>

Taking together the parties' China-related positions during the 9th and 10th EU Parliament terms, a shift to a more China-friendly approach can be seen. As a matter of fact, the highly critical China-related stance of the Italian FdI might shift to a more China-friendly course after the Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni visited China in July 2024 with a concrete outcome, a signed agreement on economic cooperation in green technology.<sup>48</sup> Her counterpart, the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has for years shown a definitive China-friendly position, aligning with close trade relations. Chinese investments have filled the financial gaps, after the EU froze funds due to Article 7 proceedings against Hungary's government, continuously breaking EU law and fundamental rights.<sup>49</sup>

Among the far right oppositional parties, belonging to the PFE party family, also the Austrian FPÖ, having concluded a friendship treaty with

<sup>45</sup> Political Capital (2024), p. 17.

<sup>46</sup> Delhaes, D. (2024, September 18). So finanziert sich das Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht. Handelsblatt. <https://www.handelsblatt.com/politik/deutschland/bsw-so-finanziert-sich-das-buendnis-sahra-wagenknecht/100069760.html>.

<sup>47</sup> Fouda, M. (2025, May 10). Slovak protesters condemn PM Robert Fico's Moscow visit to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin. Euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/05/10/slovak-protesters-condemn-pm-robert-ficos-moscow-visit-to-meet-russian-president-vladimir-> Armstrong, R.E. (2025, May 9). Russia holds Victory Day parade in Moscow amid its war in Ukraine. Euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/2025/05/09/russia-holds-victory-day-parade-in-moscow-amid-its-war-in-ukraine>.

<sup>48</sup> Political Capital (2024). AP, dpa, Reuters (2024, July 28). Italy's Meloni signs deal to 're-launch' ties with China. Deutsche Welle. <https://www.dw.com/en/italys-meloni-signs-deal-to-re-launch-ties-with-china/a-69791850>.

<sup>49</sup> Z. Kiszelly (2025, June 26). China's European bridgehead. G/S. <https://www.gisreports-online.com/r/china-hungary/>. Chin, J., Hibbert, M. (2025, March 3). Hungary and the Future of Europe. The Loop, ECPR's Political Science Blog. <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/hungary-and-the-future-of-europe/>.

Putin's party in 2016 and being involved in a still ongoing espionage scandal,<sup>50</sup> showed a clear China-friendly stance. The French RN, with court-proven Russian loans,<sup>51</sup> proved to be within this party family the most supportive party for the Chinese government in Beijing, having hitherto voted against 14 EU resolutions that condemned Chinese policy, including human rights violations and the insufficient autonomy of Hong Kong. However, the PFE might hardly find a common position towards China, as the party members are much more divided in their Beijing-positioning than in their Kremlin-positioning.<sup>52</sup>

Without any decision-making position, oppositional far right parties of course cannot establish economic cooperation. Besides, no media reports about any party donation by China can be found regarding the far left and the far right — with one exception. Since 2024, the former AfD MEP Maximilian Krah has been involved in an espionage scandal with China through an employee. This scandal is the second of three, including the latest Huawei bribery scandal in May 2025, when again the question came up if EU legislation and measures against corruption and fraud are sufficient.

In terms of parliamentary voting behaviour, the far-right ESN group, to which the AfD belongs, has generally proven to be the most pro-Beijing party family, with its members voting against 27 Beijing-critical resolutions. Compared with its stance on the Kremlin, however, the German AfD adopted a slightly more critical position towards Beijing.<sup>53</sup>

The far left party family The Left has shown to be more critical of the Chinese government in Beijing than the ESN. While some party members like the Italian M5S make their criticism towards Beijing clear, the

<sup>50</sup> ORF (2024, April 10). FPÖ relativiert Freundschaftsvertrag mit Putin-Partei. <https://orf.at/stories/3354063/>. Klenk, F. (2025, March 18). Bis hin zum Mordplan: Putins Jagd auf Wiener Politiker, Polizisten und Reporter. *Falter*. <https://www.falter.at/zeitung/20250318/putins-jagd-auf-wiener-politiker-polizisten-und-reporter>. Brandstätter, H. (2025), pp. 61–67.

<sup>51</sup> Schmitt-Leonardy, Ch. (2025, April 7). Dictatorship of the Court vs. Will of the People? Marine Le Pen's Embezzlement Conviction. *Verfassungsblog. On Matters Constitutional*. <https://verfassungsblog.de/marine-len-pen-verdict/>.

<sup>52</sup> Political Capital (2024).

<sup>53</sup> Political Capital (2024), p. 20.

German *Die Linke* proves to be Beijing-friendly. The Belgium PTB is within this group the most supportive party of China. This party belongs to those The Left members that have actively voted against Beijing-critical resolutions, apart from the Spanish *Podemos*, and German *Die Linke*. The Slovak SMER of Robert Fico has shown the most radical shift since its exclusion of the European S&D group, in openly praising China for its economic success.<sup>54</sup>

## 2. Serving foreign allies for tactical reasons

According to further surveys of Political Capital main trends in voting behaviour can be seen in the first six months of the 10th EU Parliament term. The anti-European far right ESN family has proved to be the most disciplined party family among the far right, since their members showed the most cohesive voting behaviour.<sup>55</sup> Apart from the German BSW, PFE parties belonged to those who mostly abstained the voting, followed by Giorgia Meloni's FdI from the ECR.<sup>56</sup>

The tactic of abstaining from votes while still attending parliamentary sessions was used most frequently by Viktor Orbán's *Fidesz*, for example to avoid adopting a critical stance towards China. When resolutions have been passed to condemn human rights violations in China and other autocratic governments such as in Belarus or Iran, *Fidesz* refused to vote to not risk their well-established political economic ties with China.<sup>57</sup> None other than US President Trump has criticized Orbán for such tactical behaviour, namely receiving enormous investments for Hungary from the main US rival China. Therefore, the friendship between Orbán and Trump is currently not without friction. Although being bullied by the “Tariff Man” Trump, Orbán did not however vote for any EU counter measures against possible high US tariffs — again for tactical reasons.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Political Capital (2024), 20f.

<sup>55</sup> Political Capital (2024), 20f.

<sup>56</sup> Political Capital (2024), p. 8.

<sup>57</sup> Political Capital (2024), p. 9.

<sup>58</sup> Moller-Nielson, Th. (2025, July 25). Hungary for trouble: Why Orbán must inevitably choose between the US and China. *Euractive*. <https://www.euractiv.com/news/hungary-for-trouble-why-orban-must-inevitably-choose-between-the-us-and-china/>

When the EU-US- deal on 15% percent instead of 30% percent tariffs for the EU was agreed on 27 July 2025, without any counter-tariffs for US exports, the anti-European far- right families PFE and ESN, being the most against common EU foreign policy, belonged towas one of the loudest critics. AfD, like others, as many named the deal a “capitulation”.<sup>59</sup> Orbán called the EU Commission President and chief negotiator Ursula von der Leyen a “featherweight”, whom Trump had “eaten for breakfast.”<sup>60</sup> Giorgia Meloni instead belonged to the few politicians who openly supported von der Leyen’s achievement. She, moreover, emphasised that the deal had avoided “potentially devastating” consequences, as was also stressed by the EU Commission.<sup>61</sup> Regarding the geopolitical and geoeconomic situation, hard times are coming for Europe.

### Conclusion and Liberal counterstrategies

The anti-European and anti-democratic fringe party families not only challenge EU’s foreign policy, but also fundamental rights and liberal democracy in Europe, as they mostly support autocratic regimes as in Russia and China. This will expectedly pose a security problem for Europe as a whole, when those parties will vote against common European security measures or, in worst case, inform their autocratic global allies on internal decision-making processes.<sup>62</sup> After the Kremlin has supported troll factories and cyberattacks to interfere in elections and referenda in EU member states, it might be expected that Beijing with

<sup>59</sup> Riffler (2025, July 29). German politicians furious at von der Leyen over new EU-US trade deal. *Euronews*. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/07/29/german-politicians-furious-at-von-der-leyen-over-new-eu-us-trade-deal>.

<sup>60</sup> Stasiuk, Y. (2025, July 25). Trump ate von der Leyen for breakfast, Orbán grumbles. *Politico*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-ursula-von-der-leyen-viktor-orban-trade-deal-eu-us-hungary-tariffs-imports-energy/>.

<sup>61</sup> AFP (2025, July 28). EU-US deal avoided ‘potentially devastating’ consequences, Italian Prime Minister Meloni says. *Euractive*. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/eu-us-deal-avoided-potentially-devastating-consequences-italian-prime-minister-meloni-says/>.

<sup>62</sup> Political Capital (2024), p. 20.

more advanced digital technologies will further export China's model of internet control and foreign interference.<sup>63</sup>

A delicate issue will be the positioning towards the US under the second Trump administration.<sup>64</sup> While the European Commission has opted for a de-escalation course to avoid any trade war with the US, several US politicians openly promote anti-democratic and anti-European political parties, mostly belonging to the far right PFE and ESN party families in the EU Parliament. This poses no interference as committed by the above-mentioned autocracies, but a clear authoritarian influence on political developments from abroad. In turbulent times, when cohesion at the EU level is even more important, anti-European, i.e. centrifugal, forces gain momentum. This situation should be used on the other hand as the so-called window of opportunity for pro-European, liberal counterstrategies:

#### 1. Strengthening European values in the global context

As the global rise of authoritarian regimes and autocracies show, neither human rights nor the rule of law nor liberal democracy can be taken for granted. What is important now is to strengthen EU institutions, expand Article 7 procedures, including stricter consequences, and finally abolish the blocking unanimity principle in the European Council. Reforms are therefore needed to improve and accelerate the EU's capacity to act. At the same time, more transparency regarding party financing is necessary, including reforms in legislation and measures. Liberal democratic values such as freedom, fundamental rights and progress are to be strengthened in Europe via education and awareness-taking

<sup>63</sup> Shahbaz, A. (2018). Freedom on the Net 2018: The Rise of Digital Authoritarianism. Fake news, data collection, and the challenge to democracy. *Freedom House*. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/rise-digital-authoritarianism>.

Freedom House (2024). Freedom on the Net 2024: China: Key Developments, June 1, 2023 – May 31, 2024 <https://freedomhouse.org/country/china/freedom-net/2024>.

<sup>64</sup> Nadjivan, S., Sustala, L. (2025). *15 Lehren für Europa – Vorbereitung auf die zweite Trump-Präsidentschaft*. Jänner. Wien: NEOS Lab. <https://lab.neos.eu/thinktank/publikationen/15-lehren-fuer-europa-vorbereitung-auf-die-zweite-trump-praesidentschaft>.

strategies and in the global context via liberal democratic partners abroad.

2. Improving working conditions for civil society and independent media

Independent media, investigative journalism, and civil society make an important contribution to participatory — not just electoral — democracy. They are therefore indispensable in a pluralistic society. Appropriate support for them is more important now than ever. This includes a solid constitutional framework that guarantees free working and funding conditions as well as concrete EU funding programmes. At the EU level, this means protecting fundamental rights and free media work, as well as civil society engagement in EU member and candidate countries. The anti-NGO acts passed in Hungary and Slovakia must be abolished.

3. Reaching resilience through research and media literacy

Reasons for the rising influence of autocracies and anti-democratic forces are a missing legal framework for digital space as well as insufficient media literacy among people in Europe and worldwide. With the use of artificial intelligence (AI), it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between accurate and fake information. In addition to legal regulations such as the *Digital Services Act (DSA)* and the *European Media Freedom Act (EMFA)* it is also important to strengthen people's media literacy so that they can distinguish between truth and lies and become resilient against attempted manipulation. This requires education from kindergarten to lifelong learning throughout Europe.

4. Fostering cybersecurity, and digital sovereignty in Europe

Given the increasing number of cyberattacks, often committed by foreign autocracies, Europe must focus on its own cybersecurity. Data protection, cybersecurity, and digital sovereignty are more important than ever, based on common European standards. Important steps such

as the GDPR have already been taken. The challenge now is to standardise these achievements in Europe to the extent that no single nation state acts alone. When cooperating with third states, a clear distinction should be made between cooperations in research and development and those in cyber and data security. European data protection and cyber security must be kept away from any foreign interference.

## 5. Advancing EU integration and enlargement

Although populist parties on both the far right and far left seek to undermine European unity, it is now time to complete the EU's integration and enlargement process, which has in the meantime become a geopolitical imperative. Ultimately, it is about strengthening the EU internally and externally. The longer the Western Balkan countries (wb6) remain in the so-called EU waiting room, the greater the disruptive influence of global autocracies on them will become. After EU Neighbourhood countries have received candidate status, the accession process with the Republic of Moldova, Georgia, and, after the war, Ukraine should be finalised. Until then, the support for Ukraine against the Russian aggressor must be continued. At the same time peoples' concerns must be taken seriously and political solutions developed to win voters back from anti-democratic and anti-European parties.

## 6. Clear positioning towards autocracy and authoritarianism

The European Union must urgently find a common foreign policy position and a common stance towards the autocratic powers Russia and China. Instead of numerous separate relations with anti-democratic, autocratic powers, the EU needs a coordinated approach towards Russia and China. The same is true for dealing with the competitive authoritarian US, which under Trump has become an unpredictable global player. Fundamentally good diplomatic relations with the US are necessary, even if Trump repeatedly engages in bullying. So, contact on equal terms is crucial. Apart from that, more positive relations with all other NATO partners, especially outside the EU, such as the UK and Canada are critical.

## 7. Expanding the EU Strategic Autonomy

Due to geopolitical and geoeconomic shifts, it is high time for Europe to become independent from global players like the US and to position itself much more as a global player. For that it should build up its strategic autonomy in the fields of economy, international relations and defence. A common security and defence strategy is essential for this. Internal coordination will play an important role in external action, ensuring that we speak with one voice. High Representative for Foreign Affairs Kaja Kallas and High Representative for Defence Andrius Kubilius can already serve as important faces of the EU. Now it is a matter of entrusting them with the corresponding competencies — without national resentment.

## 8. Investing in European defence

Investments in the defence industry and infrastructure are crucial to achieve strategic autonomy in Europe and to strengthen its own defence capabilities. National economic interests and competition among EU member states should be overcome here, and investments should be made in European expansion, combined with a clear allocation of competencies. As with all major challenges, the solutions lie in a common Europe.

## 9. Strengthening global alliances with liberal democracies worldwide

As a reliable global partner Europe should strengthen liberal democratic networks worldwide. Especially with Canada and Japan, new productive communities of interest could emerge, as a kind of global counter-reaction to autocratic and imperialistic as well as isolationist and protectionist tendencies. Canada, for example, is eligible to participate in Horizon Europe projects. The Erasmus+ program is open to project submissions worldwide.

## 10. Rethinking trade relations

In the new multilateral world (dis)order, Europe is called upon to present itself more independent of the United States, as an independent economic power, and to establish new, expedient, and profitable trade relations for Europe. Efforts to achieve free trade agreements and strengthen the WTO must remain a top priority. To this end, existing trade agreements such as CETA with Canada and — if possible — TTIP with the United States should be fully concluded and ratified, and the *Mercosur* agreement with the five South American countries of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela should be concluded.

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# US interference in the European digital single market and democratic processes

## Case of Czechia

PAVEL HAVLÍČEK

### Introduction

Despite the foreign influence and malign interference — the so-called FIMI — toolbox being associated with adversarial actors such as Russia, China, Iran, or North Korea, there are also areas in which the US-based actors, both public and private, conduct a similar type of behaviour when exercising pressure on European decision-and-policymakers. Well documented is the impact of US cultural wars that dealt with religion, the nation, and family, where so-called alt-right circles emerging in US became deeply involved in several sensitive debates across Europe, including over the Istanbul Convention in Poland, Czechia, and several other European countries. Beyond the liberal—conservative nexus, a new phenomenon has emerged around freedom of speech, censorship, and digital rights. These issues are heavily debated in Europe in connection with digital regulation, particularly the *Digital Services Act (DSA)* and the *Digital Markets Act (DMA)*, which face strong opposition from US technology companies. They remain a contentious point in EU—US trade relations and, until recently, in ongoing tariff negotiations.

With a recent spike in intensity of trade negotiations, Europeans have observed a coordinated and synergised approach by the US policymakers and tech giants headed by Meta, X, and Alphabet (Google). These actors have heavily opposed and criticised the EU politicians, European Commission as well as the national regulators in the EU member states. In the Czech context, this debate is matched by domestic opposition to the national adaptation of the DSA, which is missing in other countries,

including Poland, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, and Bulgaria. The DSA is heavily under fire from the freedom of speech/censorship point of view, while for the EU politicians, decision- and policymakers it represents the only way how to establish clear rules of the game on the digital single market. It also serves to protect the EU against unchecked and unregulated behaviour of the digital platforms and search engines, especially the very large ones.

On one occasion, during Digital Czechia,<sup>1</sup> an international conference organised by the think-tank of the main opposition movement of Andrej Babis in Prague, Czech Republic, a Meta representative openly called the approach of European Commission “discriminatory” and warned, if continued, that the company would have to approach the US administration for protection of its business interests.<sup>2</sup> The clash of values, regulatory approaches and US-EU interests in that sense is more than direct. However, and this should be the liberal response and way forward, it is essential to establish a clear set of rules of the game both to outline a predictable framework of the digital single market of the EU as well as prevent breaches of national security and democratic — including electoral — values and integrity. These risks have already appeared during the recent German, Romanian, and Polish elections, which are going to be followed by the Czech parliamentary elections on 3 and 4 October 2025. The liberal approach and debate about it deserve a chance here too.

### General assessment of the foreign influence

While the generally understood tactics of foreign interference into Western democratic processes is usually associated with malign actors such as Russia, PRC, or Iran, a new phenomenon emerged based on the results of the US presidential elections and the beginning of the second Donald

<sup>1</sup> Digital Czech Republic (n.d.). Home page. <https://www.digitalni-cesko.eu/en>.

<sup>2</sup> Havliček, P. (2025, March 12). Komentář: Ne každá regulace je špatná. Digitální prostor pravidla potřebuje. *Seznam Zprávy*. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-politika-komentar-ne-kazda-regulace-je-spatna-digitalni-prostor-pravidla-potrebuje-271598>.

Trump administration, which has manifested major difference with traditional allies in Europe. Though the confrontation with left-leaning political establishments across Europe, as well as with EU institutions, could have been expected, the second Trump presidency also posed new challenges for centre-right parties in power. The us president and his closest allies as well as members of his own family publicly demonstrated that their political preference lies with radical right wing anti-establishment parties and other actors outside of the political mainstream. Indeed, also because those political forces associated with the European MAGA camp generally follow a strong pro-us and pro-Trump agenda and their policy preferences.

Both in the public domain and personal communication as well as in the form of visits, personal meetings, and endorsements, the Trump team started uplifting anti-establishment politicians and candidates for offices in various EU and non-EU countries, including the UK. A particularly strong bone of contention occurred in Romania which, at the end of 2024, decided to cancel the first round of the presidential election. This was — based on the official accounts — decisively influenced by the Russian FIMI playbook. However, for the US, the case of Romania was just one of many in which the new administration started seeing political censorship and cancel culture, which they decided to openly fight with all available resources. The slogan “stop the steal” coming from the 2020 US presidential election started to be particularly fitting in the European context too. Along a similar line, a flagrant endorsement of German AfD by the social media mogul Elon Musk before the hotly contested early parliamentary vote could surprise only a few. The meeting with Alice Weidel moderated by Musk and streamed on X became infamous among the European political elite. A similar situation then occurred before the run-off of the Romanian presidential elections in May 2025 when Donald Trump, Jr. visited Romania only a few days before the first round of the elections supporting the far right candidate George Simeon, a follower of the previously successful Caline Georgescu. In Poland, by contrast, the conservative right wing candidate Karol Nawrocki was received at the White House and publicly welcomed in the Oval Office by Donald Trump himself.

Thus, while the time of transatlantic political romance seems over, the story does not end here with many more tensions and cases of confrontation in areas such as security and support for Ukraine, trade, or other sectoral policies, typical for the digital realm.

### The US-EU confrontation in the digital realm

Based on the newly established *symbiosis* between the political and digital power structures in the US,<sup>3</sup> which has been further bolstered since the presidential inauguration on 20 January 2025 and the endorsement of the political ambitions of Donald Trump by the social media owners and media moguls, including Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, and Shou Zi Chew of TikTok — who also donated significant amounts of money to the inaugural committee — a new zeal and appeal to protect the interest of the US tech companies and social media giants obviously emerged. It became particularly evident based on the rhetoric and speeches of the then-vice presidential candidate JD Vance who pronounced the protection of US digital platforms as a key priority in relations with the EU. As early as September 2024, in the middle of the election campaign, Vance stated that the Trump administration might reconsider its approach to NATO if the European partners are to regulate and impose their rules on the US companies, particularly X (formerly known as Twitter).<sup>4</sup> Already then, Vance warned the European Commission representatives, in particular Thierry Breton<sup>5</sup>, not to escalate and to withdraw their attempts to impose fines, or even a full ban on the US services on the EU digital single market. This kind of rhetoric further intensified after the vote's result in November 2024 and strengthening of the Trump's position and presidential mandate. However, the most important

<sup>3</sup> The White House (2025, July 24). X.com. <https://x.com/WhiteHouse/status/1948144806422610201>.

<sup>4</sup> Rommen, R. (2024, September 21). JD Vance Says US's NATO Support Could Be Pulled If EUR Tried to Regulate X. *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/jd-vance-nato-support-eu-regulation-x-musk-free-speech-2024-9>.

<sup>5</sup> Thierry Breton (2024, August 12). X.com. <https://x.com/ThierryBreton/status/1823033048109367549>.

milestone took place only in February 2025 at the Munich Security Conference where Vice President Vance openly criticised the European leaders. He stated that they are undermining the freedom of speech and imposing the “digital censorship”, when introducing the online regulation and rules for the digital single market:<sup>6</sup>

Everything from our Ukraine policy to digital censorship is billed as a defense of democracy, but when we see European courts canceling elections and senior officials threatening to cancel others, we ought to ask whether we’re holding ourselves to an appropriately high standard.

This moment of shock and transatlantic disunity was already preceded by another profound and even more explicit criticism of the EU’s digital regulation during the AI Summit that took place in Paris just before. In his speech there, Vance not only outlined the basic principles of the US approach to AI and its further development, which was presented along the line of opportunities and growth, but also protecting the US companies and criticising the EU partners for their lack of “optimism” and over-regulation:<sup>7</sup>

The Trump administration is troubled by reports that some foreign governments are considering tightening screws on U.S. tech companies with international footprints. America cannot and will not accept that, and we think it’s a terrible mistake.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Franke, B. (2025). *Munich Security Conference 2025 Speech by JD Vance and Selected Reactions*. Hamburg: Mittler. [https://securityconference.org/assets/02\\_Dokumente/01\\_Publikationen/2025/Selected\\_Key\\_Speeches\\_Vol.\\_II/MSC\\_Speeches\\_2025\\_Vol2\\_Ansicht\\_gekürzt.pdf](https://securityconference.org/assets/02_Dokumente/01_Publikationen/2025/Selected_Key_Speeches_Vol._II/MSC_Speeches_2025_Vol2_Ansicht_gekürzt.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Dastin, J., Melander, I. (2025, February 11). Vance tells Europeans that heavy regulation could kill AI. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/technology/artificial-intelligence/europe-looks-embrace-ai-paris-summits-2nd-day-while-global-consensus-unclear-2025-02-11/>.

<sup>8</sup> Reuters (2025, February 11). Quotes from US Vice President JD Vance’s AI speech in Paris. <https://www.reuters.com/technology/quotes-us-vice-president-jd-vances-ai-speech-paris-2025-02-11/>.

At this moment, we face the extraordinary prospect of a new industrial revolution ... But it will never come to pass if over-regulation deters innovators from taking the risks necessary to advance the ball. Nor will it occur if we allow AI to become dominated by massive players looking to use the tech to censor or control users' thoughts.

These speeches outlined the most important pillars of US criticism towards both the EU's normative model and the political elite standing behind the digital regulatory approach, which was repeatedly contrasted with the US and its values of freedom of speech and thought by the online users. This criticism opened the door for *domestication* of the critical points towards the EU and its institutions at the level of the individual EU member states, particularly those missing the national adaptation laws to the DSA.

Most recently, on 25 July 2025,<sup>9</sup> the US House of Representatives Report coming from the Committee on Judiciary stated that "...the DSA infringes on American online speech." And "the DSA is the EU's comprehensive digital censorship law." This report only underscores earlier assessments by the US government, including the one communicated by the State Department on 23 July 2025, which openly criticised the French Mission to the United Nations and this public support to the EU's DSA.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Committee on the Judiciary of the U.S. House of Representatives (2025, July 25).

*The Foreign Censorship Threat: How The European Union's Digital Services Act Compels Global Censorship And Infringes On American Free Speech.* [https://judiciary.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/republicans-judiciary.house.gov/files/2025-07/DSA\\_Report%26Appendix%2807.25.25%29.pdf](https://judiciary.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/republicans-judiciary.house.gov/files/2025-07/DSA_Report%26Appendix%2807.25.25%29.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Department of State (2025, July 22). *X.com*. <https://x.com/StateDept/status/1947755-665520304253>.



**Department of State**  @StateDept · 8 h ...  
In Europe, thousands are being convicted for the crime of criticizing their own governments. This Orwellian message won't fool the United States. Censorship is not freedom.

All the DSA protects is European leaders from their own people.

In Europe, one is free to speak, not free to spread illegal content.



 La France à l'ONU   · 14.07.2025

#EuropeProtects  
#DSAProtects  
#DemocracyNotAlgoracy

## Case of Czechia

In Czechia, the transatlantic tension was particularly evident in the debate on the acceptance of the national adaptation law for the EU's DSA, the so-called *Law on Digital Economy*, which became a hot issue in the Czech politics and society. After months of intense negotiations and open blockage of the legislative process by the opposition forces in the Czech parliament, the law finally failed to pass in the third reading in the Chamber of Deputies, the lower chamber of the Czech Parliament. However, the most interesting part occurred in between September 2023 and June 2025 when the main opposition movement ANO of Andrej Babiš and SPD of Tomio Okamura managed to block the whole process of its approval and prevented the bill from finally getting passed in the Parliament.

Overall, the law proposal saw one of the highest rates of session paralysis based on the successful parliamentary *filibuster* tactics. These prevented the legislators even from having the opportunity to go to vote and express their opinion on the bill. Despite both the general and legal expectation among European partners that EU member states would deliver on this by mid-February 2024, the deadline was not met. The key argument for both opposition parties was of digital “censorship”, or rather to protect the freedom of speech and criticise the original DSA for its framing of the public debate. At the same time, a clear reference was made to the policy of the United States and their criticism of the digital regulation, even going so far that the European Commission would supposedly sacrifice its own legislative act for a better trade deal or at least a negotiation position vis-à-vis the Trump administration. Both parties only much later agreed on 15% tariffs on all goods and services together with other financial compensations in energy and security as well as opening of their markets for investment.<sup>11</sup>

One of the main points of critique was that it is necessary to “go back Brussels” and renegotiate the original DSA package from the beginning. The opposition wanted to amend several key parts imposing censorship and curbing the freedom of speech on the Internet.<sup>12</sup> This was, at least, how the rapporteur of the law, from the main opposition party of Andrej Babiš spoke about this, both in private and during open session of the parliament. He further added that “95% of the law is without any problems”, but the difference was made by the censorship aspect of the law, which the movement understood as resonating with its key part of the electorate sensitive towards any limitations of the freedom of speech. Despite this being out of touch, the ANO movement continued in its rhetoric and played down all arguments against the fact that DSA has been at the EU level, and particularly for the very large platforms and search engines, already in place for many months and there was no chance revisiting the course at the level of EU27.

<sup>11</sup> Rapid Response 47 (2025, July 27). X.com. <https://x.com/RapidResponse47/status/1949527667478319115>.

<sup>12</sup> Personal meeting with Marek Novák, rapporteur on the Law on Digital Economy, on 21 January 2025.

Other key representatives of the opposition connected their criticism of the digital regulation with a more traditional Eurosceptic worldview, which also resonates rather well with a substantial part of the Czech society. Karel Havlíček, the former vice-PM under the government led by Andrej Babiš openly attacked the European Commission saying that “sometimes it is necessary to stand on the back” and oppose the initiatives coming from Brussels. This was fiercely pronounced at one of the key gatherings of the ANO party and its think tank Institute for Politics and Society and their Digital Czechia conference.<sup>13</sup> It was at the same time when a Meta representative called the approach of the European Commission “discriminatory” and mentioned that if continued, the company would need to ask for help from the US administration to protect its business interests in the EU and on its digital single market.<sup>14</sup>

These arguments connected with the electoral campaign, in which all points of criticism towards the ruling parties count, made the attempt to stop the law from passing inevitable. Thus, the situation of the opposition in the Czech context proved even easier than, for example, in Poland where the government was under direct and open pressure from the US to reject its own national adaptation law,<sup>15</sup> which is also missing. This pressure put the six remaining member states in a particularly vulnerable situation since the European Commission had to take legal measures, the so-called infringement procedure, against those states that did not deliver on adapting the European legislation in time.<sup>16</sup>

The position of the Czech government was, however, further complicated because of the internal ideological split in between the liberal and more conservative part of the cabinet composed of four (originally five) parties in the coalition. Especially the right wing of the main ruling party

<sup>13</sup> Havlíček, P. (2025, March 12).

<sup>14</sup> Havlíček, P. (2025, March 12).

<sup>15</sup> TVP World (n.d.). How Russia and China Shape Cameroon's Media. Anatomy of Disinformation [video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CtGW1nZhAcg>.

<sup>16</sup> Kroet, C. (2025, May 7). European Commission sues five countries for not applying digital platform rules. Euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/next/2025/05/07/european-commission-sues-five-countries-for-not-applying-digital-platform-rules>.

ODS (Civic Democrats/ECR) proved vulnerable to the pressure coming from the freedom of speech/anti-censorship civic movements,<sup>17</sup> which mobilised before the crucial third reading of the bill originally planned for June 2025, which finally also due to public pressure never took place. A similar alliance of out-of-parliament forces already in the past managed to block the so-called *Istanbul Convention* in the upper chamber of the Czech Parliament. Only much later, it became clear that the initiative was supported and sponsored by the US alt-right circles and other like-minded Polish groups too.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, a combined pressure from domestic political, societal as well as international actors prevented Czechia from absorbing the EU's regulation on the digital space and left many, including the most vulnerable parts of the society, such as the young people,<sup>19</sup> without the systemic measures for prevention. Even more strikingly, the lack of law also prevents Czechia from protecting its business interests against the manipulative trade practices, including from the PRC e-commerce entities or domestic attempts of fraud and online crime, which has been sharply increasing in number since 2020.

## Liberal answers

To find the right response to the current situation both inside of the EU and when faced with the international pressure, particularly from the US, it is necessary to look for appropriate answers and tools at our disposal

<sup>17</sup> Dušková, M. (2025, April 16). Jan Gregor z Aliance pro rodinu znova na výplatní páisce ministerstva spravedlnosti. *Alarm*. <https://denikalarm.cz/2025/04/jan-gregor-z-aliance-pro-rodinu-znovu-na-vyplatni-pasce-ministerstva-spravedlnosti/>.

<sup>18</sup> Gavrinev, V. (2024, January 1). Mailové schránky senátorů zaplavily desítky řetězových mailů, říká právnička. *Seznam Zprávy*. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-politika-mailove-schrankы-senatoru-zaplavily-desitky-retezovych-mailu-rika-pravnicka-244575>. Chytra, Z. (n.d.). Ordo Iuris-obrana lidské důstojnosti. *Tradiční Rodina*. <https://tradicni-rodina.cz/domaci/ordo-iuris-obrana-lidske-dustojnosti/>.

<sup>19</sup> AMO (2025, May 25). Otevřený dopis zákonodarcům: Výzva k urychlení přijetí zákona o digitální ekonomice. <https://www.amo.cz/otevreny-dopis-zakonodarcum-vyzva-k-urychleni-prijeti-zakona-o-digitalni-ekonomice/>.

to minimise the negative impact on the Union and its internal functioning, including at the level of the EU member states. One of the necessary prerequisites already achieved is the recently concluded trade negotiations and new trade deal between the EU and the US, covering investment, mutual economic partnership, and sectoral cooperation in areas such as security and energy.<sup>20</sup> This can after many months of harsh negotiations and threats of high tariffs in a potential trade war finally stabilise the bilateral relations,<sup>21</sup> which can positively spread into other sectors, including the digital realm, based on further negotiations.

However, it is one thing to come back to a more constructive agenda and bilateral dialogue, including potentially in a form of the 2021 and 2024 EU-US Trade and Technology Council (TTC) negotiations.<sup>22</sup> It is another to overcome the issue of diverging agenda, norms and values that seem to be quickly drifting away.

Despite the EU repeatedly referencing the “common values” in the bilateral statements,<sup>23</sup> already during the Biden administration, little was achieved in the ten working groups that emerged within the comprehensive negotiations between the European Commission and the US administration. Earlier attempts to strive for a new framework trade agreement seem to be long away, even more when observing the current bilateralization of relations preferred by Trump administration.

Thus, the question of how to overcome bilateral tensions and recalibrate the EU-US partnership remains pressing – particularly given that, until recently, one of the US social media moguls, Elon Musk, was using

<sup>20</sup> The White House (2025, July 28). Fact Sheet: The United States and European Union Reach Massive Trade Deal. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/07/fact-sheet-the-united-states-and-european-union-reach-massive-trade-deal/>.

<sup>21</sup> European Commission (2025, July 29). EU-US trade deal explained. [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/qanda\\_25\\_1930/QANDA\\_25\\_1930\\_EN.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/qanda_25_1930/QANDA_25_1930_EN.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> European Commission (n.d.). EU-US Trade and Technology Council (2021–2024). <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/factpages/eu-us-trade-and-technology-council-2021-2024>.

<sup>23</sup> European Commission (n.d.). EU-US Trade and Technology Council. [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/eu-us-trade-and-technology-council\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/eu-us-trade-and-technology-council_en),

this technological power to undermine the legitimacy of mainstream political parties in the EU across the right, centre, and left of the political spectrum.

However, now with Musk out and a new trade partnership in place, there might be a time and space for recalibration of the bilateral ties and re-establishment of the rules of the game, including in non-interference in the political sphere. This is a political no-go for most European governments, which cannot tolerate the political interference and uplifting the very extremes of the political anti-establishment in the EU.

In this sense, the EU needs to stay merit-based and stick to its rules and procedures while assessing the operation of the so-called very large platforms and search engines, no matter if from PRC or from the US. Only when sticking to its own values and principles it can both defend its measures and legislation at home as well as in the international domain. At the same time, it will be necessarily to show good will and interest in restoring the TTC and the dialogue on the rules and use of the digital instruments.<sup>24</sup> This should also be of interest to the US and its business actors, since the EU remains not only the largest trade opportunity, with a wealthy market of users and services, but also a global rule-setter. Through the so-called Brussels Effect, the EU has previously shaped global standards — most notably in data protection through the GDPR — and continues to influence many other areas of the digital economy.

In any case, in an increasingly deglobalised world, the transatlantic partnership should be regarded as one of the greatest assets — particularly when compared with the challenges posed by the PRC, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. These states are preparing to contest not only Western security but also the setting of the global agenda with a very different set of norms and values, gradually undermining what remains of Western dominance in world affairs, which is slowly but surely fading.

<sup>24</sup> The trade agreement already now mentions: “*Barriers for Digital Trade: The United States and the European Union intend to address unjustified digital trade barriers. In that respect, the European Union confirms that it will not adopt or maintain network usage fees. Furthermore, the United States and the European Union will maintain zero customs duties on electronic transmissions.*” The White House (2025, July 28).

However, this will be not possible to reverse without a stronger mutual respect and partnership, which is also typical for a politics of non-interference in domestic affairs, especially when it comes to uplifting the anti-European and in many respects also extremist political and societal voice across the European continent. Since it is one thing to listen to different voices and out of box ideas, and another to use the political technology to push the agenda of the European far right parties.

This must be clearly communicated to the Trump administration and its associates, who too often engage in (geo)political interference that benefited Europe's adversaries and those of the transatlantic alliance, and in doing so even alienated staunch supporters of close relations with the US, including German Chancellor Friedrich Merz.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusions

The chapter delved into the problem of the current transatlantic relations in their trade and digital dimension and had a closed look at the case of interference in the domestic political reality in the EU as well as the decision-making process in digital regulation, which both the US public and the private sector interests interpreted as negative and "discriminatory" by their own account.

Nevertheless, this cannot be framed merely as a business case of two parties negotiating better conditions for mutual trade, but rather as a broader dispute over values. In this context, the US side in particular employed every available means to undermine the European political establishment, including by amplifying far-right, anti-establishment forces across the European bloc and by making use of digital tools — most notably Elon Musk's outreach on X.

With a new and calmer climate in the bilateral ties now in place after signing of the new trade partnership agreement between the EU and US, there is an opportunity to recalibrate the relations and establish new rules

<sup>25</sup> Ross, T., Nöstlinger, N. (2025, February 23). Politico.eu. <https://www.politico.eu/article/friedrich-merz-germany-election-united-states-donald-trump-nato/>.

of the game, including in the political realm. A new pragmatic course and stronger mutual respect should help to find the right momentum for cooperation. It is desperately needed when considering the state of play in the world and rise of authoritarian powers, such as Russia or PRC and their global agenda with which neither the EU nor the US would be satisfied.

In practical terms, during the upcoming negotiations that are expected to take place as a consequence of the recently concluded interim trade and tariff regime, there needs to be both a generous and merit-based approach from the EU when dealing with US digital companies. For fair treatment and adhering to its own rules, norms, and procedures the US should give up on the abuse of the digital services for its own political and societal ambitions and outreach to the European society along the lines of FIMI.

However, by no means should the EU abandon its normative approach to global affairs and the values that underpin it, as these serve as a moral compass in an increasingly turbulent world. The same applies to the (digital) single market, where clear rules of the game are not only necessary but also crucial for external partners and investors to understand the EU's business environment and climate.

Finally, both the EU and US should strive not only for restoration of the business discussion and exchange of view on the global affairs, security, energy and other key domains, but also continue the debate on the value principles and mutual understanding that can only help avoid future crises. At the same time, pragmatic conclusions based on mutual respect should be drawn to find the next way forward together since there is nobody closer in the world for Europeans than the Americans, and vice versa.

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# Emerging Technologies

## Foreign Interference in European Politics, Threats and Policy Solutions

SILVIA FERNANDEZ

### Introduction

The rapid advancement and proliferation of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI), 5G networks, quantum computing, and digital platforms, have ushered in a new era of both opportunity and vulnerability for European democracies.<sup>1</sup> These innovations are transforming how citizens communicate, engage, and participate in public life. Yet, alongside this progress lies a darker reality: foreign and non-state actors are increasingly weaponizing these tools to exert influence over political processes, undermine democratic institutions, and erode societal cohesion.<sup>2<sup>3</sup></sup>

The interference manifests subtly, through disinformation campaigns, deep-fake videos, coordinated cyberattacks and the manipulation of digital ecosystems.<sup>4</sup> Such efforts are deliberately designed to exploit the openness and pluralism of democratic systems, amplifying existing divisions,

<sup>1</sup> Horowitz, M.C. (2020). Do emerging military technologies matter for international politics? *Annual Review of Political Science*, 23(1), 385–400. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-050718-032725>.

<sup>2</sup> Papageorgiou, M., Can, M., Vieira, A. (2024). China as a threat and balancing behavior in the realm of emerging technologies. *Chinese Political Science Review*, 9(4), 441–482. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41111-024-00248-0>.

<sup>3</sup> Tenove, Ch., et al. (2018). Digital Threats to Democratic Elections: How Foreign Actors Use Digital Techniques to Undermine Democracy. Research Report. *Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions, University of British Columbia*. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3235819](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3235819).

<sup>4</sup> Abrahams, N.T.O., et al. (2024). A review of cybersecurity strategies in modern organizations: examining the evolution and effectiveness of cybersecurity measures for data protection. *Computer Science & IT Research Journal*, 5(1), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.51594/csitrj.v5i1.699>.

fuelling mistrust, and destabilising the very foundations of liberal governance. As geopolitical tensions with authoritarian regimes like Russia and China further exacerbate this dynamic, these actors pursue strategic objectives by leveraging both state and non-state capabilities, including troll farms, private tech firms, and AI-powered influence operations. Notably, while disinformation and influence campaigns receive considerable attention in both academic and policy circles, the current discourse often overlooks subtler, more sophisticated forms of manipulation that may prove equally damaging to democratic discourse. Beyond the widely discussed deepfakes, threats such as “shallow fakes” (simple video editing presented as authentic), algorithmic amplification of divisive content, and infrastructure dependencies create vulnerabilities that are harder to detect and regulate. These lesser-known risks — including foreign-built infrastructure vulnerabilities, algorithmic manipulation, and hybrid forms of influence that blur physical and digital domains — remain under-explored despite their significant potential impact on democratic processes.

Furthermore, many analyses focus narrowly on state actors, ignoring the growing role of non-state entities and the regional nuances across Europe that shape vulnerability and response.

This article aims to explore how emerging technologies are being used to interfere with Europe’s political landscape, highlighting the actors, tactics, and technologies at play. It addresses the legal, ethical, and governance challenges of responding to these threats while upholding liberal values, human rights and democratic resilience. The objective is not to sound alarmist, but to provide a clear and grounded understanding of a complex and evolving threat landscape.

### Emerging technologies as vectors of influence

How AI and emerging tech are changing the rules of the game

Emerging technologies are no longer simply neutral tools of progress. In today’s interconnected world, they have become powerful instruments, set

up not for innovation alone but to manipulate, distort and destabilise. The intent behind the tech matters, and increasingly, that intent is being shaped by foreign actors who see European democracies as targets rather than partners.

What makes these technologies particularly dangerous is their dual-use nature and hybrid characteristics. The same AI that powers medical research can be deployed to generate synthetic propaganda. 5G infrastructure that enables smart cities can also facilitate surveillance and data collection. These dual-use technologies present unique regulatory challenges: how do you restrict malicious applications without stifling beneficial innovation? Similarly, hybrid technologies that operate across digital and physical domains — such as deepfakes that can influence real-world voting behaviour, or cyber-attacks on physical infrastructure — require governance approaches that span traditional regulatory boundaries.

The challenge is compounded by subtler forms of manipulation that receive less attention than dramatic deepfakes. “Shallow fakes” — videos that use simple editing techniques to mislead rather than sophisticated AI generation — are far more common and harder to detect through automated systems. Unlike deepfakes, which can be identified through technical analysis, shallow fakes exploit human cognitive biases and often fly under the radar of both detection systems and regulatory frameworks designed with high-tech manipulation in mind.

The openness of the EU’s digital ecosystem, a core strength of European democracies, also makes it more susceptible to foreign manipulation. As EU High Representative Josep Borrell once warned, we are witnessing “a new wave” of disinformation powered by fabricated images, videos, and deceptive websites that spread “five times the speed of light.”<sup>5</sup>

AI-powered disinformation campaigns, in particular, have evolved far beyond the troll farms and bot networks of the early 2010s. Today, generative AI is used to create realistic fake news, impersonate public figures,

<sup>5</sup> Brzozowski, A. (2023, February 7). EU steps up disinformation fight as threats to staff abroad rise. *Euroactive*. <https://www.euractiv.com/news/eu-steps-up-disinformation-fight-as-threats-to-staff-abroad-rise/>.

and flood multiple platforms with propaganda. These efforts are faster, highly scalable and frighteningly precise. And they are often more persuasive, precisely because they are algorithmically tailored to specific demographics. By leveraging user data and emotional cues, foreign actors can micro-target voters with hyper-personalised content designed to deepen grievances and polarise societies.<sup>67</sup>

Just days before the 2023 Polish parliamentary elections, a video began circulating on Telegram and fringe social platforms showing Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki allegedly making inflammatory remarks about the opposition. Within hours, journalists flagged the footage as an AI-generated deepfake, but the damage had already been done.<sup>8</sup> The clip was picked up by influencers, remixed, and injected into Facebook groups frequented by undecided voters. While mainstream media swiftly debunked it, the incident highlighted how quickly synthetic content can weaponize existing mistrust, especially in high-stakes moments. Poland's case illustrated not only the velocity of these campaigns, but also their emotional targeting — strategically seeded to trigger outrage and disengagement.

At the infrastructure level, the deployment of 5G networks introduces new vulnerabilities, especially when infrastructure is sourced from foreign-controlled suppliers. While 5G is critical to Europe's digital transformation, concerns over surveillance and backdoor access (particularly related to Chinese telecom companies) have triggered broader debates about technological sovereignty. This is not just about speed or connectivity. It's about control over critical infrastructure in a time of rising geopolitical rivalry.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Tenove, Ch., et al. (2018).

<sup>7</sup> Chang, H.H., et al. (2021, February 16). Social Bots and Social Media Manipulation in 2020: The Year in Review. *arXiv.org*. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2102.08436>.

<sup>8</sup> Warsaw Business Journal (2025, June 1). AI-Generated Fake News May Influence Polish Election. <https://wbj.pl/ai-generated-fake-news-may-influence-polish-election/post/146117>.

<sup>9</sup> Azgin, B., Kiralp, S. (2024b). Surveillance, disinformation, and legislative measures in the 21st century: AI, social media, and the future of democracies. *Social Sciences*, 13(10), 510. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13100510>.

As of 2024, several EU countries — including Germany and Italy<sup>10</sup> — continue to allow high-risk suppliers in certain non-core 5G network segments, as noted in European Commission monitoring reports.<sup>11</sup> The ongoing situation has prompted the Commission to highlight potential vulnerabilities in parts of the European 5G infrastructure.

On the other hand, cyber tools have also become more adaptive. AI-enhanced malware can now learn from its environment, bypass security measures, and move laterally across systems without detection. These attacks often target critical sectors (i.e. energy grids, health systems, electoral databases) with the goal of creating disruption, extracting sensitive data or planting digital backdoors for future sabotage.<sup>12</sup> The lines between cybercrime, espionage and hybrid warfare are increasingly blurred.

### Motivations and actors: Who's behind the curtain?

Foreign interference in Europe, as we know, is not monolithic. It's a fluid constellation of state and non-state actors, each using emerging technologies in service of distinct political, ideological or economic goals.

Russia remains the most visible and aggressive player in the disinformation space. It continues to deploy coordinated campaigns through state-run media, AI-generated personas, and social media networks. The goal? Destabilising democratic institutions, undermining support for Ukraine, weakening transatlantic alliances and amplifying societal divisions from within. The Internet Research Agency's operations during the 2016 US elections provide a template that has been adapted and refined for

<sup>10</sup> Kroet, C. (2024, August 12). Eleven EU countries took 5G security measures to ban Huawei, ZTE. Euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/next/2024/08/12/eleven-eu-countries-took-5g-security-measures-to-ban-huawei-zte>.

<sup>11</sup> Commission Staff Working Document (2025). Monitoring of Horizontal Recommendations 2024 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX%3A52025SC0291>.

<sup>12</sup> Achuthan, K., et al. (2024). Advancing cybersecurity and privacy with artificial intelligence: current trends and future research directions. *Frontiers in Big Data*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fdata.2024.1497535>.

European contexts, including targeted campaigns during Brexit referendum and French presidential elections.

China's approach is different. It is more subtle, but no less strategic. Through what's been dubbed "*techno-authoritarian diplomacy*",<sup>13</sup> China exports infrastructure (such as 5G and surveillance systems), builds soft power via media partnerships and cultural diplomacy, and engages in so-called "*information laundering*",<sup>14</sup> where state-aligned narratives are repackaged through seemingly neutral platforms. The aim is to shape global perceptions in line with Beijing's interests, while avoiding the direct backlash often provoked by more overt influence operations.<sup>15</sup> This indirect approach represents a particularly sophisticated form of influence that operates below traditional detection thresholds — Chinese state media content is republished by European outlets without clear attribution, and Chinese tech companies collect data that could inform future influence operations while providing seemingly beneficial services.

Iran is another growing player, especially in the cyber sphere. It has been linked to operations involving phishing campaigns, voice deepfakes, and sabotage efforts targeting European institutions. These operations often blur the lines between ideological activism and state-sponsored cyberterrorism. And unfortunately, they are progressively becoming more sophisticated in their technical execution.

Beyond these major state actors, a diverse array of other players is becoming more active in the European information space. This includes far-right groups amplifying anti-immigrant narratives through coordinated hashtag campaigns and bot networks, conspiracy theorists spreading doubts about vaccines or climate change through fake expert personas

<sup>13</sup> "The autocratic use of technology in the pursuit of authoritarian resilience and survival." Definition adapted from Conduit, D. (2025). Digital Authoritarianism and the Global Technology Industry: Evidence from Iran. *Government and Opposition*, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2024.31>.

<sup>14</sup> "Is a stratagem used by hostile actors within an information influence campaign." Definition adapted from StrATCOM | NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence Riga, Latvia. (n.d.). <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/information-laundering-in-germany/23>.

<sup>15</sup> Jayakumar, S., Ang, B., Anwar, N.D. (2020). *Disinformation and fake news*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-5876-4>.

on social media platforms, and commercial actors using AI to generate fake reviews or manipulate market sentiment through synthetic grassroots campaigns.

Meanwhile, non-state actors such as hacktivists collectives like *KillNet* or mercenary cyber groups for hire, are becoming force multipliers in this space. In 2022, the pro-Russian collective *KillNet* launched coordinated cyberattacks against government websites in Lithuania, Estonia and other EU Member States, demonstrating how ideological groups can serve strategic interests while maintaining plausible deniability for state sponsors. Some align ideologically with authoritarian regimes. Others purely operate for profit or disruption. Yet they all exploit the same technological vulnerabilities and the same democratic openness that characterises European information systems.

The motivations vary widely, but they largely fall into three categories:

- Destabilisation: undermining the integrity of democratic institutions and alliances, including NATO, OSCE and the EU. Examples include cyber-attacks on electoral databases in Estonia (2007) and disinformation campaigns targeting EU cohesion during migration crises.
- Narrative export: promoting authoritarian narratives that challenge liberal values like pluralism and human rights. This includes China's promotion of its "social credit" model as superior to Western privacy rights, and Russia's framing of liberal democracy as inherently unstable and corrupt.
- Economic and regulatory leverage: gaining influence in strategic sectors like telecom, AI, and data governance. Huawei's 5G infrastructure deals across Europe exemplify how technological dependencies can create long-term strategic vulnerabilities.

The line between ideological protest and strategic interference is exceedingly thin and becoming harder to trace. When hacktivist groups claim independence while serving authoritarian interests, or when commercial disinformation services sell their capabilities to the highest bidder, traditional frameworks for understanding and countering foreign influence become inadequate.

## Countering foreign influence: a liberal agenda for democratic resilience

What can we do?

If liberal democracy is to thrive in the digital age, it must adapt. That doesn't mean embracing surveillance or censorship. What it means is making Europe more resilient, more autonomous, and more democratic—never trading our values for convenience.

These three principles directly address the core vulnerabilities that foreign actors exploit. Resilience counters attempts at destabilisation by building systems and societies capable of withstanding and recovering from attacks on democratic institutions. Autonomy reduces dependencies that create leverage points for economic and regulatory coercion, particularly in critical technologies. Democracy itself must be strengthened as a system of participation and representation, because robust democratic engagement makes societies less susceptible to manipulation and narrative export.

Each of these values faces specific technological threats: resilience is undermined by cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure and electoral systems; autonomy is compromised by dependencies on foreign-controlled platforms and infrastructure; democracy is weakened when citizens cannot distinguish authentic information from manipulation, or when their participation is distorted by algorithmic amplification of divisive content.

### 1 Strengthen technological sovereignty

Europe should not have to choose between digital dependence on authoritarian tech giants or digital isolation. We must invest in homegrown AI, cybersecurity, and 5G alternatives. We shouldn't do this out of fear, but out of conviction that innovation should serve the public interest.

This directly strengthens autonomy by reducing dependencies that foreign actors can exploit, while enhancing resilience through diversified, secure technological foundations. For democracy, European-controlled

technologies can be designed with democratic values embedded from the start — transparency, accountability, and user control rather than surveillance and manipulation.

Funding open-source, interoperable technologies and prioritising EU-based R&D and infrastructure in strategic sectors is key to maintaining our autonomy without building walls.

2 Regulate foreign tech companies with more transparency and accountability

Europe's digital public square cannot be outsourced. Platforms wield enormous influence over what we see, share and believe. That influence, however, must be guided, not by opaque algorithms, but by democratic principles.

Building on the *Digital Services Act*'s foundation, we need enhanced transparency requirements for foreign tech firms operating in the EU, especially regarding content moderation and political advertising algorithms. The new EU *Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising* regulation, effective from October 2025, provides a strong baseline with its requirements for visible transparency labels and sponsor disclosure. However, more can be done to extend these principles beyond advertising to recommendation algorithms and content curation systems.

The EU *AI Act* offers additional leverage through its high-risk system regulations and transparency obligations. Liberal policymakers should use these frameworks to establish binding ethical guidelines for AI systems used in political contexts, prioritising fairness, pluralism and non-manipulation.

European liability frameworks, including the proposed *AI Liability Directive*, should be leveraged to ensure accountability standards that mirror European legal principles rather than allowing platforms to self-regulate according to foreign legal traditions.

Technology should serve the public interest and democratic values, not purely private interests at the expense of society. The goal is not to eliminate commercial innovation, but to ensure that private interests align with democratic welfare rather than undermining it.

### 3 Tackle disinformation and deepfake threats head-on

This is a tech issue as much as it is a societal one. While EU countries already invest in media literacy and detection technologies, current efforts remain fragmented and under-resourced relative to the scale of the threat. We need coordinated, ambitious expansion of these programmes.

The EU must significantly increase support for AI-powered detection tools that can identify not just sophisticated deepfakes but also shallow fakes and other forms of multimedia manipulation. Equally important is funding independent media literacy programs across Member States that teach citizens to recognize manipulation techniques across the spectrum—from simple editing tricks to sophisticated AI-generated content.

Empowering citizens to spot manipulation is far more effective — let alone democratic — than blanket bans or platform shutdowns. An informed citizen is a resilient citizen, and resilience starts with digital awareness and education.

### 4 Safeguard cybersecurity and election integrity

Digital attacks on voting infrastructure, political parties, or public institutions are attacks on sovereignty. A unified EU cybersecurity framework, with common rapid-response protocols and minimum standards, is urgently needed. Mandating security audits before elections and improving incident response mechanisms will help secure the most critical functions of our democracies.

Integrity should be a principle as well as a practice with systems to uphold it.

### 5 Address non-state threats with legal and intelligence cooperation

The growing role of cyber proxies and hacktivist groups demands a more agile response but also raises fundamental challenges about how to distinguish legitimate protest from strategic interference. When ideological groups serve foreign interests while claiming independence, or when commercial actors sell influence capabilities to the highest bidder, traditional legal frameworks prove inadequate.

Regulators face several dilemmas: prosecuting groups that may have legitimate grievances but use illegitimate methods; distinguishing between authentic grassroots movements and astroturfed campaigns; and managing the international legal complexities when cyber groups operate across borders while serving state interests.

Beyond strengthening real-time intelligence-sharing across the EU and creating legal instruments to prosecute digital interference, we need new frameworks for understanding and responding to the hybrid nature of these threats. This might include:

- Legal definitions that capture the spectrum from pure state action to state-sponsored proxies to ideologically aligned independent actors;
- Rapid response mechanisms that can adapt to the fluid nature of these groups;
- International cooperation frameworks that account for the cross-border, networked nature of modern influence operations.

Cross-border digital threats require cross-border and interdisciplinary democratic defences, but we must avoid creating surveillance tools that could easily be repurposed for domestic political control.

## 6 Balance surveillance with civil liberties

Security cannot come at the expense of individual freedoms. Any surveillance tools used to counter foreign influence must be proportionate, transparent and GDPR compliant. European liberalism has always held that rights and security must go hand in hand, and that principle must hold even in the face of digital manipulation.

The challenge is particularly acute when dealing with dual-use and hybrid technologies. How do you monitor for foreign manipulation without creating systems that could suppress legitimate political dissent? How do you regulate shallow fakes without censoring legitimate criticism or satire?

These dilemmas require careful calibration:

- Clear judicial authorisation and oversight for any intrusive monitoring – but this may slow response times in fast-moving influence campaigns.

- Clear legal thresholds and scope definitions to avoid mission creep — but overly narrow definitions might miss evolving threat tactics.
- Minimal data collection targeted at credible threats — but determining what constitutes a “credible threat” in the information space is inherently subjective.
- Independent audits and public accountability — but too much transparency about defensive measures could help malicious actors evade detection.

Rather than pretending these tensions don’t exist, liberal democracies must acknowledge them explicitly and err on the side of rights protection, accepting that perfect security is incompatible with democratic freedom.

#### 7 Renew and reinvent democracy for the digital age

Liberalism is strongest when it evolves. Participatory democracy tools like digital consultations and civic tech platforms can enhance democratic freedom by providing citizens with more direct channels for political engagement. This is valuable not simply to make people “feel seen”, but because expanded participation strengthens democratic legitimacy and makes manipulation harder by creating multiple channels for authentic political expression.

#### 8 Establish democratic defence infrastructure

Separately, we need European democratic intelligence hubs — cross-sector networks where Member States, civil society, and researchers collaborate in real-time to monitor, assess, and counter influence operations. These hubs would pool insights across election cycles, digital platforms, and public narratives, creating early warning systems and shared response protocols.

## Ethical and legal challenges in countering foreign influence

Emerging technologies bring with them a promise of progress and innovation, but also a minefield of ethical dilemmas. As Europe responds to foreign digital threats, liberal democracies must walk a delicate line: protecting citizens from harm without compromising the very freedoms that define our political identity.

### Surveillance, rights, and the liberal dilemma

At the heart of this dilemma lies surveillance. In recent years, there's been mounting pressure for European states to expand their digital monitoring capabilities in response to cyber threats, disinformation, and manipulation campaigns. But how far is too far?

For liberal policymakers, the answer must always start with rights. Our surveillance responses, however well-intentioned, cannot mirror the authoritarian methods we are trying to resist. Mass data collection, predictive profiling and opaque algorithmic policing risk creating a culture of suspicion that ultimately destroys democratic trust — precisely the outcome liberals must guard against by avoiding the authoritarian trap.

The solution is not to avoid surveillance altogether but to do it better, more responsibly. With strong legal safeguards, transparent oversight, and GDPR compliance as the baseline, liberal democracies can develop tools that are targeted, proportionate, and rights based.

However, these principles create practical tensions:

- Targeted monitoring requires determining what constitutes a legitimate target, but political speech exists on a spectrum from legitimate criticism to foreign manipulation.
- Proportionate responses may be insufficient to counter rapidly-spreading disinformation during critical election periods.
- Transparent oversight can reveal defensive capabilities to malicious actors seeking to evade detection.
- GDPR compliance may limit the data collection necessary to understand sophisticated influence networks.

These trade-offs cannot be wished away through better technology or clearer laws. They require ongoing democratic deliberation about the acceptable balance between security and freedom, with strong institutions capable of enforcing whatever balance is chosen.

Regulating foreign tech without undermining democracy

Foreign-controlled platforms operate across Europe, but rarely by European rules. This asymmetry creates certain risks such as exploitative data practices, algorithmic bias, manipulative political ads, and threats against electoral integrity.

For European liberals, the goal must be clear: to regulate to empower people, not to control them. Regulation that strengthens and protects rights. Until recently, platform self-regulation left too many gaps, and our democratic processes were vulnerable by design.

The EU's new Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising (TTPA) regulation addresses these gaps effectively. Meta and Google's decision to halt political ads rather than comply demonstrates the regulation's impact — companies are choosing exit over compliance, which suggests the rules meaningfully constrain platform power. The EU is setting a democratic benchmark.<sup>16</sup>

Liberal policymakers should build on this success by extending similar transparency requirements to recommendation algorithms and content moderation systems. The goal should be making algorithmic decision-making visible and accountable rather than trying to dictate specific outcomes. Additional measures might include:

- Mandatory impact assessments for algorithm changes during election periods.
- User control over algorithmic curation, allowing citizens to choose their own information diet.
- Interoperability requirements that prevent lock-in effects and enable platform switching.

<sup>16</sup> Regulation (EU) 2024/900 on the transparency and targeting of political advertising. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=legisum:4741696>.

## AI governance that respects rights

The EU *AI Act* represents a distinctly liberal approach to AI governance, offering an alternative to both US tech libertarianism and Chinese digital authoritarianism. However, implementation will reveal new dilemmas.

The Act's ban on AI systems designed for social scoring or behavioural manipulation is clear in principle, but determining what constitutes "manipulation" in practice will prove challenging. Recommendation algorithms influence behaviour — when does influence become manipulation? Political advertising aims to persuade — when does persuasion become coercion?

Rather than treating trust as the primary objective, liberal governance should focus on ensuring AI systems respect fundamental rights regardless of public opinion. Public trust in rights-violating technologies would not make those technologies acceptable. The goal should be building trustworthy systems — systems that deserve trust because they operate transparently, accountably, and in accordance with democratic values.

## Strengthening democratic resilience in a digital era

The greatest defence against foreign influence isn't necessarily tighter regulation, but stronger democracy. In the face of rising foreign interference, regulation is paramount — but not enough. What truly characterises a liberal democracy is empowered citizens with tools and knowledge, inclusive systems and the expectation of democratic participation.

Therefore, we must defend both infrastructure and meaning — the technical systems that enable democratic communication and the cultural understanding of what democracy means and why it matters.

## Media literacy as a democratic defence

Disinformation thrives where understanding falters. To inoculate society against digital manipulation, we need sustained investments in public education, as opposed to reactionary campaigns. We need sustained

engagement that nurtures critical thinking across generations. Citizens must learn the skills they need to separate fact from fiction, propaganda from truth, and authentic voices from bot-driven amplification.

Key actions include:

- Promoting algorithmic transparency and explainability for users.
- Integrating digital literacy and critical thinking into school curricula.
- Supporting independent journalism and fact-checking organisations.
- Funding citizen-led initiatives to foster media literacy, especially in marginalised communities.

These steps are not merely theoretical. Finland's enduring investment in media literacy — incorporating critical analysis and digital literacy from kindergarten through adulthood, with dedicated teacher training and public engagement — demonstrates how societies can build lasting resilience to disinformation.<sup>17</sup> Finland's top ranking in international media literacy assessments shows that sustained, system-wide education enables citizens to confidently discern fact from fiction and resist manipulation.

This is exactly what is needed throughout Europe. A long-term commitment, and not a knee-jerk reaction. Because the reality is that we don't need just savvy users, but informed citizens who can navigate complexity and uphold democratic norms.

#### Safeguarding elections through information integrity

AI and emerging tech have exponentially raised the stakes for election integrity. Malicious actors now possess faster, subtler and more scalable tools to distort public opinion. Liberal policymakers must respond with precision, never with panic.

France's 2022 presidential election offers an interesting example of what this kind of proactive trust-building can look like. Anticipating the risk of foreign interference, French authorities implemented a multi-layered civic strategy: the agency *Viginum* monitored digital manipulation in

<sup>17</sup> OSCE (2025, March). *Beyond Fake News. Advancing media and information literacy for an informed society*. <https://www.osce.org/mission-in-kosovo/587873>.

real time, issuing alerts to counter suspicious activity.<sup>18</sup> Civil society actors, including collaborative newsroom “*CrossCheck*”, played a crucial role too, engaging voters online and debunking viral falsehoods with credible, multilingual coverage. What made this approach particularly effective was its emphasis on credibility and inclusion, instead of top-down control. It was collaborative, adapted to diverse communities and focused on empowering citizens without creating fear or fatigue. France’s case shows us that electoral resilience is not built in code alone.

Recommended strategies to implement at national and EU level:

- Enhance media literacy and civic education around disinformation. A citizen who feels informed and engaged is harder to polarise, harder to deceive.
- Invest in transparency tools for political advertising and platform accountability.
- Facilitate cross-sector coordination between government, civil society, and tech platforms.
- Strengthen electoral authorities’ technical capacity to detect and respond to digital threats.
- Regulate political ads with clear guidelines on sponsorship, spending and targeting.
- Enforce penalties for violations and support investigative journalism that holds manipulation accountable.
- Protect electoral infrastructure with strong cybersecurity frameworks.

These strategies build on existing EU initiatives: the *Digital Services Act* provides platforms for transparency tools, the *European Media Freedom Act* supports independent journalism, and the proposed *European Media Literacy Framework* offers structure for educational programs. However, implementation remains uneven across Member States, requiring stronger coordination and increased funding.

Ultimately, protecting the vote means protecting public trust and that starts with clarity, accountability and truth.

Awareness and democratic ownership are also part of the equation.

<sup>18</sup> Ferriol, G. (ed.) Bouillon (2022). VIGINUM Year #1. Paris: VIGINUM. [https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/Publications/RA-Viginum-Annee1-32p-V20\\_EN\\_LQP-1.pdf](https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/Publications/RA-Viginum-Annee1-32p-V20_EN_LQP-1.pdf).

## Building trust through inclusion and participation

Democracies fracture when communities feel excluded. That's precisely where foreign actors seek to exploit tensions. Resilience depends heavily on making democratic participation accessible, meaningful and inclusive, particularly for youth, minorities and digitally vulnerable groups.

To promote engagement:

- Lower participation barriers via digital tools like e-voting and online consultations.
- Support community-end initiatives that amplify diverse voices and promote constructive dialogue.
- Ensure platforms prioritise pluralism over polarisation through algorithm design requirements that expose users to diverse viewpoints rather than reinforcing existing beliefs. While the DSA establishes transparency requirements, additional measures could include user control over recommendation systems and diversity metrics for content curation.
- Counter online harassment and hate speech.
- Encourage participatory policymaking with open feedback and deliberation channels.

Democracy is not static. It's a constant process of building through a set of values and engagement. In the digital age, that means creating spaces where people feel seen, heard and safe.

## Reclaiming democratic storytelling

Foreign influence targets systems and meaning. Liberal democracies must not only debunk propaganda but offer compelling and credible alternatives. A values-based digital narrative is essential.

To strengthen democratic storytelling:

- Coordinate strategic communication from EU institutions by developing consistent, evidence-based messaging about democratic values and European achievements, countering authoritarian narratives through positive alternative stories rather than purely reactive debunking.

- Support independent media, cultural production and fact-checking collaborations.
- Empower civil society and artists to create meaningful content that connects.
- Invest in cross-border dialogue to affirm shared democratic values.

Rather than reactively responding to populists and propagandists, Europe must proactively define the narrative space, with stories that speak to openness, pluralism and hope.

The rise of digital technologies has brought forth both promise and peril. If liberal democracies are to weather foreign influence, they must commit to technical safeguards as well as to a democratic culture rooted in truth, inclusion and participation. Regulation alone can't save democracy. But empowered societies, informed choices and inclusive institutions can.

## Conclusion

Digital disinformation isn't just a technical glitch. It's a mirror held up to our democratic vulnerabilities. It reveals cracks in public confidence, challenges to institutional integrity and the urgency of collective response. But in its distortion, it also points the way forward: towards smarter, more inclusive policymaking, and public spaces that feel protected and human.

The junction of emerging technologies and foreign influence presents one of the most critical tests for Europe's democratic health and resilience. From threats to press freedom and judicial independence to the distortion of public debate, the digital realm has become both a battleground and a canvas. And yet, these challenges invite not only defence, but also imagination.

Democracy, after all, is not a finished project. It is re-authored every day by citizens, courts, lawmakers, and communities. We cannot control every tool or threat. We can, however, control the spirit in which we meet them. With vigilance. With care. And with courage.

Let this be an era in which Europe reclaims its digital future, not by retreating from openness, but by reimagining it. Where innovation aligns

with integrity, and surveillance is accountable. Where people remain at the centre.

Democracy is not strengthened by firewalls alone. It is sustained by conviction. By curiosity. By hope.

Yet this conviction must be coupled with clear-eyed recognition of the challenges ahead. Perfect security remains incompatible with democratic freedom. Building resilience requires accepting some vulnerability as the price of preserving the openness that makes democracy worth defending. European policymakers must navigate these tensions thoughtfully, choosing democratic legitimacy over authoritarian efficiency even when the costs are real and immediate.

And that, in the end, is the truest form of resilience — not invulnerability, but the strength to remain democratic while under attack.

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# Instrumentalized “Gender”

## The Democratic Stakes in the Face of Transnational Anti-Gender Mobilization

MALWINA TALIK

### Introduction: long shadow of contested equality

In a liberal democracy, diversity and gender equality are not only matters of individual freedom and inclusivity but also central elements of a resilient society. The past thirty years have brought significant and sustained progress in this regard, but they have also been marked by growing resistance. Whereas debates around gender equality and diversity are often underestimated as “soft” social issues, the backlash against them has far-reaching, tangible consequences, not only for women and LGBTQIA+ communities, but also for the foundations of liberal democracy, academic freedom, and even national security.

A diverse range of actors, from ideologically driven groups to opportunistic political players, has contributed to the rapid spread of anti-gender narratives and actions across the EU. Although these developments appear grounded in local or national contexts, they are often (in)directly backed by transnational networks with coordinated funding, some of which originate from openly authoritarian states. Increasingly, the term “gender” has been instrumentalized as a political tool, used to gain and consolidate power, exert geopolitical influence, fuel anti-EU sentiment, and vilify the EU enlargement process.

This paper highlights the transnational dimension of anti-gender mobilization and examines its impact on liberal democracy. It is structured in two parts: the first part traces the evolution of the movement, focusing on its strategies, funding sources, and examples of state-led policies, including external (non-EU) influences. The second analyses how these

dynamics undermine liberal democracy within the EU and in its external relations and concludes with recommendations for an effective response.

## Understanding anti-gender mobilization in Europe

From progress to pushback

The roots of today's anti-gender mobilization can be traced to the mid-1990s when the UN Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (1994) and the Beijing Conference on Women (1995) paved the way for the recognition and reinforcement of women's sexual and reproductive rights within the UN human rights system. These watershed moments for the progressive agenda faced immediate opposition from the Vatican, which considered both the outcomes a diplomatic setback and an effort to undermine the concept of the traditional family.<sup>1</sup> The Holy See has since consistently opposed what it labelled as “gender ideology”, and levered its dual role as the Europe's most influential religious institution and a sovereign diplomatic entity with a Permanent Observer Status at key multilateral organizations to influence policy and discourse on that matter.<sup>2</sup>

It was not until a decade later that the anti-gender mobilization gained visibility with large protests organized in response to specific policy proposals, such as same-sex marriage bills in Spain (2004) and Slovenia (2009), sex education in Croatia (2006), or a local form of civil partnership in Italy (2007).<sup>3</sup> The “gender theory”,<sup>4</sup> increasingly used as a pejorative and menacing concept, soon became a lasting part of mainstream discourse following France's 2012–2013 protests against

<sup>1</sup> Kuhar, R., Paternotte, D. (2019). *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe : mobilizing against equality*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Datta, N. (2025). *The Next Wave. How Religious Extremism Is Reclaiming Power*. Brussels: European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, p. 59.

<sup>3</sup> Kuhar, R., Paternotte, D. (2019), p. 256–257.

<sup>4</sup> Since then, it has also appeared under terms such as “gender ideology” and “genderism.”

marriage equality.<sup>5</sup> In the following decade, organizations linked with the anti-gender movement expanded across the EU, reaching Central and Eastern Europe, the Baltics, and even the Nordic countries, despite their strong egalitarian traditions.<sup>6</sup> They forged ties with national conservative and far right policymakers, which helped them institutionalize anti-gender rhetoric. Some European actors have also exported these agendas abroad, particularly to Africa.<sup>7</sup>

The rise of anti-gender movements has been linked to four overlapping crises: a democratic crisis fuelled by declining trust in liberal institutions; a masculinity crisis aimed at restoring traditional gender roles; a perceived equality crisis, where feminism is seen as overreaching; and a knowledge crisis driven by distrust in science and academia.<sup>8</sup> While these crises act as triggers, the rise of anti-gender movements also depends on a broad coalition of unlikely allies, each advancing their own agendas.

#### The alternative universe of anti-gender discourse

A deep-seated fear of “gender” as an elite-imposed project lies at the heart of the anti-gender movement, reinforced by a polarizing “us versus them”<sup>9</sup> narrative.<sup>10</sup> It is not used in the academic sense but as “a metaphor that can tap into people’s feelings of uncertainty about the world around them and direct them towards equality issues”.<sup>11</sup> Anti-gender

<sup>5</sup> Kuhar, R. (2024). *Resisting Gender Equality: Unmasking the Dynamics of the Anti-Gender Opposition* [speech]. Sarajevo: Heinrich-Böll Stiftung. <https://ba.boell.org/en/2024/03/08/resisting-gender-equality-unmasking-dynamics-anti-gender-opposition>.

<sup>6</sup> Datta, N. (2025), p.76–77

<sup>7</sup> Datta, N. (2025), p.129.

<sup>8</sup> Kuhar, R. (2024).

<sup>9</sup> Polidoro A., van Doren Z. (2025), *Gendered Disinformation: A Barrier to Equality and Democratic Participation*. Potsdam: Friedrich Naumann Foundation. [https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/a4\\_pp\\_gender-disinformation\\_en\\_web-1.pdf](https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/a4_pp_gender-disinformation_en_web-1.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Polidoro A., van Doren Z. (2025).

<sup>11</sup> Pető, A., (2025) What is the anti-gender movement and why is it winning (now)? Progressive Post. : <https://progressivepost.eu/what-is-the-anti-gender-movement-and-why-is-it-winning-now/>.



Figure 1 and 2. Social media posts by CitizenGo.org\*

actors strategically frame progressive values as external threats, transforming debates on equality into issues of cultural survival and national security, deliberately failing to recognize them as a domestic issues.<sup>12</sup> Within this narrative, the EU is construed as the chief enforcer of “gender ideology” and positioned as a proxy for a morally decaying, liberal West. As a result, anti-gender rhetoric frequently aligns with anti-EU and anti-establishment narratives, reinforcing broader populist and nationalist agendas.

Feminists are alternately depicted as either selfish or misguided victims, while LGBTQIA+ individuals are equated with sexual predators. Gender studies are dismissed as unscientific and ideological, whereas respecting sexual and reproductive rights is framed as promotion promiscuity or the killing of innocent lives, often minimizing the woman’s health and life. Comprehensive sexuality and equality education is deliberately misrepresented as the “sexualization” of children and an effort

<sup>12</sup> Kolarski, L., personal interview at the Austrian Institute for International Affairs (oiip) and a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Political Sciences at the University of Belgrade, 23 June, 2025.

\* Picture 1 was posted on Facebook on July 1, 2025, picture 2 on June 8, 2025 on the same platform. CitizenGO is a transnational ultra-conservative and anti-gender advocacy group. This type of communication exemplifies the strategic use of digital platforms to amplify moral panic, stir anti-EU sentiment, and influence public opinion.

to erase biological sex differences. Anti-gender actors also introduce alternative terms and activities aligned such as “Marches for Life and Family” as a counter to Pride parades or promoting the “Convention on the Rights of the Family” in opposition to the *Istanbul Convention*. They often reject the findings of the World Health Organization as well as established research and academia, and instead establish NGOs offering ideologically driven alternatives, including crisis centres, “reversal abortions”, “conversion therapies”, and religious education replacing comprehensive sexual education.<sup>13</sup> They also appropriate language by recasting terms like “women’s rights” as “mother’s rights” and replacing “gender mainstreaming” with “family mainstreaming”, while repackaging religious narratives into modern, youth-oriented messages.<sup>14</sup>

## Transnational networks, local impact: who is behind the anti-gender mobilization?

Polish scholars A. Graff and E. Korolczuk described anti-gender mobilization as “a new ideological and political configuration which successfully combines the local and the transnational, making possible a politically effective mass movement”.<sup>15</sup> Liberal actors have often misread this mobilization as a domestic phenomenon and overlooked its transnational coordination and cross-border learning.<sup>16</sup>

Though its origins are rooted in the Vatican, the anti-gender movement has expanded into a diverse alliance: “It binds together different religious and political forces, from fundamentalist groups to even, in some countries, football hooligans.”<sup>17</sup> Anti-gender actors can be broadly categorized into three groups: (1) longstanding allies linked to the Catholic

<sup>13</sup> Various sources, see e.g. Kuhar, R., Paternotte, D. (2019). Butler, J. (2024). *Who's Afraid of Gender?* London: Allen Lane.

<sup>14</sup> Griffon L., Pruth C., Johansson M. (2019). The Fierce and the Furious. *EuroMed Rights & The KvinnatillKvinnan Foundation*, p. 9. [https://kvinnatillkvinnan.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/The\\_fierce\\_and\\_the\\_furious.pdf](https://kvinnatillkvinnan.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/The_fierce_and_the_furious.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Graff A., Korolczuk E. (2019). Worse than communism and Nazism put together. War on gender in Poland. In Kuhar, R., Paternotte, D. (2019), p. 176.

<sup>16</sup> Graff A., Korolczuk E. (2019), p. 175.

17 Pető, A. (2025).

Church; (2) organizations specifically established to oppose so-called “gender ideology”; and (3) new allies, including academics, media figures, politicians, and influencers.<sup>18</sup> When examined closely, their networks reveal a far more complex structure. An emerging trend is support of wealthy tech entrepreneurs and members of former aristocratic families.<sup>19</sup>

The steady rise of the anti-gender mobilization is linked to the growing financial backing. Between 2019 and 2023, funding for anti-gender initiatives in Europe surged to approximately \$1.18 billion, generated by 275 organizations.<sup>20</sup> At least 14% of this funding originated from state or EU-linked sources, including think tanks, academic programs, and media outlets.<sup>21</sup> This highlights how deeply and effectively anti-rights groups are able to “instrumentalis[e] the existing institutions, values and resources of liberal forces”.<sup>22</sup> Although, to the best of the author’s knowledge, no comprehensive study exists detailing the full financial support for gender equality initiatives, some figures can be traced through EU funding. As gender mainstreaming is one of the horizontal priorities in its budget, the EU devoted EUR 158.47 billion to projects promoting gender equality during the period 2021–2024, either as a principal objective or as an important and deliberate objective, though not as the primary rationale.<sup>23</sup>

As the graph below illustrates, most of the overall anti-gender funding (73%) originated within Europe, with the top countries being Hungary (nearly 20% of anti-gender funding), France, the UK, Poland, and Spain. Outside the EU, Russia was the largest source of funding during this period, accounting for 18% of the total. This funding sharply increased in the year before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and ceased following

<sup>18</sup> Kuhar, R. (2024).

<sup>19</sup> Datta, N. (2025), p. 38.

<sup>20</sup> Datta, N. (2025), p. 76.

<sup>21</sup> Datta, N. (2025), p. 48, p. 143.

<sup>22</sup> Pető, A. (2025).

<sup>23</sup> European Commission (n.d.). Gender Equality Mainstreaming. [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/horizontal-priorities/gender-equality-mainstreaming\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/eu-budget/performance-and-reporting/horizontal-priorities/gender-equality-mainstreaming_en).

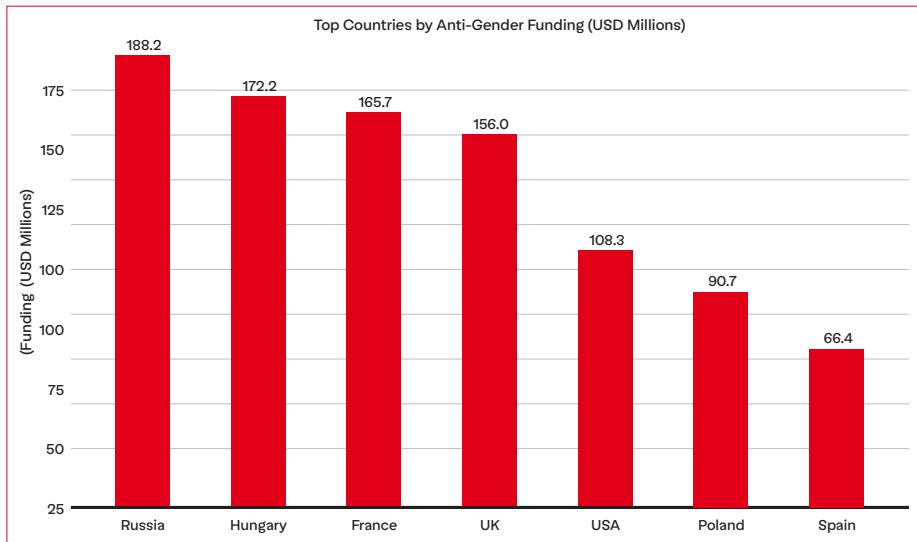


Figure 3: Top countries by source of funding for anti-gender stakeholders in the EU (2019–2023)\*

sanctions.<sup>24</sup> The reasons for this sudden increase are unclear; however, it cannot be ruled out that it might have aimed at reinforcing groups of influence that would amplify Russian narratives and exacerbate polarization within European societies in the lead-up to the Russian offensive. Meanwhile, US-based organizations reduced their spending compared to the previous period, providing 9% of total funding.

#### Growing professionalization of the anti-gender agitation

Increased funding has significantly boosted the professionalism and outreach of anti-gender movements. They have expanded international networks, deepened policymaker engagement, enhanced capacity-building, and increasingly used litigation and lawfare to shape policy

<sup>24</sup> Datta, N. (2025), p. 11.

\* Own graph based on data from Datta, N. (2025), p. 11.

and public discourse,<sup>25</sup> which partly explains their success in securing public funding.

To widen their appeal, they rebranded religious doctrines in secular language to make them sound more neutral, scientific, or rational. This includes the term “gender ideology” itself, but also “protection of families”, “natural differences between genders”, or “sexualization of children”. Andrea Pető argues that the language of anti-gender movements has become their greatest strength: by using populist strategies and addressing broad, non-expert audiences in simple, accessible, and emotionally resonant terms, they can persuade and mobilize large groups of people.<sup>26</sup> The anti-rights actors justify their agenda not only on moral grounds but also by constructing a parallel infrastructure that includes ideologically aligned research centres, NGOs, think tanks, and experts providing “evidence”. This ecosystem operates its own media outlets and elite education networks to disseminate its views. Despite overlapping funding and personnel, these groups present themselves as independent to enhance their perceived scientific credibility. The anti-gender movement strategically leverages political and institutional allies to embed its influence within mainstream governance. This enables legislative change and ensures long-term systemic impact through institutional consolidation.<sup>27</sup>

In the EU, this approach has proved effective, particularly in Hungary under *Fidesz* (since 2010) and in Poland during the PiS-led government (2015–2023). When political actors with openly anti-rights or extremist agendas gain political influence, they shift the movement’s discourse from the margins to the mainstream, and in a long-run can also facilitate formal transnational political networks.<sup>28</sup> For example the Polish government launched a diplomatic campaign in Central and Eastern Europe to push countries to withdraw from the *Istanbul Convention* and

<sup>25</sup> Datta, N. (2025), p. 79.

<sup>26</sup> Pető, A. (2024, January 9). *Strategies of progressive actors against anti-gender movements*. Global Action for Trans Equality. <https://gate.ngo/knowledge-portal/article/strategies-of-progressive-actors-against-anti-gender-movements/>.

<sup>27</sup> Datta, N. (2025), p. 84.

<sup>28</sup> Datta, N. (2025), p. 99.

adopt the *Convention on the Rights of the Family* instead, a document drafted by a Polish anti-gender think tank.<sup>29</sup>

Despite advancing agendas that often curtail women’s rights, anti-gender movements frequently position women in leadership roles: 30% of 275 mapped organizations in the EU were led by women, including several key actors.<sup>30</sup> This presence legitimizes their message by portraying it as shared by women or even necessitated by them. However, the extent of their actual influence versus symbolic function remains unclear. In politics, figures like former Hungarian president Katalin Novák and AfD co-leader Alice Weidel exemplify how female leadership can reinforce rather than challenge conservative agendas. A similar role is played by ultra-conservative female journalists and activists, such as Eva Vlaardingerbroek in the Netherlands, who advocates far right positions and opposes feminism and immigration, and Kaja Godek in Poland, known for her anti-abortion campaigns and outspoken opposition to LGBT rights.

While traditional outreach methods persist, self-owned and online platforms have become crucial tools for spreading gendered disinformation and legitimizing anti-gender narratives. Social media has offered a strategic advantage, enabling direct outreach and message amplification outside mainstream channels. Algorithms favouring emotional and polarizing content further amplify these messages, facilitating the radicalization of youth through pseudo-traditionalist influencers.<sup>31</sup> But gendered disinformation can also serve as a geopolitical tool which “in certain regions may aim to disrupt societal progress, align public sentiment with authoritarian agendas, or stoke fear and opposition in countries with socially conservative population”.<sup>32</sup> For example, gendered disinformation campaigns may target female politicians with

<sup>29</sup> Ciobanu, C. (2020, October 6). Poland begins push in region to replace Istanbul Convention with “Family Rights” treaty. *Balkan Insight*. <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/10/06/poland-begins-push-in-region-to- replace-istanbul-convention-with-family-rights-treaty/>.

<sup>30</sup> Datta, N. (2025), p. 81.

<sup>31</sup> Datta, N. (2025), p. 5, 119.

<sup>32</sup> Griffon L., Pruth C., Johansson M. (2019), p. 9.

smear stories or disproportionately highlight certain facts about them which, because of social biases, harm their reputations more severely than if the same narratives were directed at men. These campaigns exploit gender to undermine women's credibility and competence, and to discourage their political participation. They shape perceptions to favour strong, traditionalist leadership and discourage dissent, which creates the impression that social change is dangerous or destabilizing.

#### State-orchestrated anti-gender campaigns and “anti-gender foreign policy”

Gaining allies within state governments equips the anti-rights stakeholders with a direct influence over legislation and, in illiberal contexts, grants access to state media, education, and other institutions. This also results in “state-sponsored homophobia”, use of homophobia as a tool for nation-building and legitimizing political power<sup>33</sup> which in practical terms means that governments or political leaders deliberately use anti-LGBT rhetoric, policies, laws, or campaigns to achieve broader political goals, creating imagined common enemies and transforming prejudice into a political tool. Internationally, it translates into holding seats in multilateral organizations and shaping votes on gender-related issues. In the past ILGA published reports tracing the degree of state-sponsored homophobia worldwide.<sup>34</sup>

Hungary and Russia have been the two most active state actors in the EU's anti-gender network. Russia's support for anti-gender movements and gendered disinformation serves two key aims. It fuels polarization and boosts far right and national-conservative forces that align with or advance Kremlin interests. Moreover, promoting a gender-hostile stance has become central to Russia's identity, allowing it to brand itself

<sup>33</sup> Shevtsova, M. (2020). Fighting “Gayropa”: Europeanization and Instrumentalization of LGBTI Rights in Ukrainian Public Debate. *Problems of Post-Communism*, 67(6), 502.

<sup>34</sup> ILGA (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association) is a global federation of more than 2,000 organizations campaigning for the human rights of LGBTI+ people. See their report on state-sponsored homophobia: <https://ilga.org/state-sponsored-homophobia-report/>.

internationally as the defender of “traditional” and “true European” values.<sup>35</sup> Russia has strategically infiltrated European “pro-life” and Christian Right movements and played a key role in the rise of anti-gender campaigns, not least through being one of the “main financiers of religious extremism in Europe”.<sup>36</sup> The Kremlin has domestic allies who, within their own spheres of influence, actively support the international anti-gender agenda, including oligarchs Konstantin Malofeev and Vladimir Yakunin who, with their financial support, have been central to Kremlin-aligned influence networks.<sup>37</sup> Malofeev has played a key role in cultivating ties with European far right politicians.<sup>38</sup>

The close alliance between the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church has further facilitated the spread of anti-gender narratives, using Orthodox churches in Europe<sup>39</sup> to back anti-rights campaigns aligned with Russia’s geopolitical interests.<sup>40</sup> For example, in Serbia Russia is often presented as a cultural role model and guardian of “traditional values”, in contrast to the EU and NATO, which are framed as threats to national identity. The Russian Orthodox Church and pro-Russian media further reinforce narratives that depict “gender ideology” as a tool of Western neocolonialism, especially in countries pursuing EU integration”.<sup>41</sup> Russian media with international outreach and content in local languages, such as RT and Sputnik, have portrayed Europe as decadent and morally corrupt, often using the term “Gayrope”. This trope has been used since the Euromaidan protests and Ukraine’s 2012–2013 EU talks to frame the European Union as a moral threat and integration as “coercive homosexualization”.<sup>42</sup> In 2022, the EU banned both outlets, citing their central role in spreading (gendered) disinformation.<sup>43</sup> The pandemic, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and resulting

<sup>35</sup> Kuhar, R., Paternotte, D. (2019) *op.cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> Datta, N. (2025), pp. 24, 29.

<sup>37</sup> Datta, N. (2025), p. 26.

<sup>38</sup> Datta, N. (2025), p. 30.

<sup>39</sup> E.g. in North Macedonia, Serbia, Romania, Moldova, Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus.

<sup>40</sup> Datta, N. (2025), pp. 66–67.

<sup>41</sup> Kolarski, L., personal interview.

<sup>42</sup> Shevtsova, M. (2020), p. 500.

<sup>43</sup> Datta, N. (2025), p. 120.

sanctions disrupted transnational networks and funding, showing the sanctions' impact.<sup>44</sup> Still, Russia remains active in the EU, with 55% of all anti-LGBTQ disinformation linked to Russian sources.<sup>45</sup>

Some European countries have followed Russia's example: Hungary passed an anti-LGBTQ law in 2021, called a "Russian-style propaganda law" for mirroring Russia's 2013 law, and Bulgaria adopted a similar law in 2024 with backing from Russia-aligned parties.<sup>46</sup>

A country that has replaced Russia as a leading European state sponsor of anti-gender movements is Hungary. Under Orbán's government it has become "a principal sponsor of nearly all major transnational far right political initiatives (...) and has cultivated a distinct illiberal and anti-gender influence apparatus".<sup>47</sup> Since 2022, the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) Hungary has been held annually in Budapest, refusing accreditation to many journalists with differing views and branding itself as a "No Woke Zone".<sup>48</sup>

Hungary's government has effectively developed a well-coordinated model that is more influential than the traditional efforts. Led by religious and conservative groups, it has funnelled 77% of its anti-gender funding through five state-controlled foundations,<sup>49</sup> including think tanks, media outlets, and advocacy groups with regional, but also European, and international outreach. Hungary pursues what could be described as an "anti-gender foreign policy".<sup>50</sup> Some of the foundations involved are among the most influential international grant-makers within Europe's anti-rights landscape. Others actively promote Orbán's policies as a model to follow abroad in Africa or to the American right, also by

<sup>44</sup> Datta, N. (2025), p. 33.

<sup>45</sup> Datta, N. (2025), p.120.

<sup>46</sup> ILGA Europe (2025, June 27). Bulgaria passes anti-LGBTI propaganda law [press release]. *ILGA-Europe*.

<sup>47</sup> Datta, N. (2025), p.101.

<sup>48</sup> Heilbrunn, J. (2023, May 6). CPAC Hungary: A "No Woke Zone". *Politico*. <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/05/06/cpac-hungary-woke-free-zone-00095576>.

<sup>49</sup> Datta, N. (2025), p. 49. Namely: Batthyány Lajos Foundation, Tihany Foundation/MCC Foundation, Bethlen Gábor Fund Management, Foundation for Research on Central and Eastern European History and Society, Foundation for a Civic Hungary (FIDEZS).

<sup>50</sup> Datta, N. (2025), p.13.

partnering with like-minded institutions.<sup>51</sup> Hungarian government also gathers international anti-gender actors at the events organized by the state such as a biannual Budapest Demographic Summit.<sup>52</sup>

### Challenging liberal norms: the impact of anti-gender agenda on liberal democracy

Anti-gender movements influence democracy in multiple ways — some direct, others more insidious — starting with the questioning of gender equality and diversity. By framing the rights of women and LGBTQIA+ individuals as partisan, dangerous, or foreign, these movements not only inflict psychological harm on vulnerable groups but also normalize exclusionary narratives and perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Consequently, anti-gender rhetoric should not be dismissed merely as a by-product of populism. Rather, it “serves as justification for initiatives putting limits on liberalism, which is reduced to its cultural dimension and presented as a danger to traditional values, a threat to children, as well as antithesis to freedom”, and functions as “a force hostile to ordinary people’s personal liberty”, for example by constraining how individuals raise their children according to their own beliefs.<sup>53</sup>

A general erosion of democracy disproportionately affects those who have traditionally and historically occupied marginalized positions.<sup>54</sup> Countries exhibiting the greatest openness toward LGBTQIA+ populations (Figure 6) and the highest gender equality indices (Figure 5) such as Belgium, Sweden, France, or Spain also tend to occupy the top positions in measures of liberal democracy (Figure 4) in stark contrast to e.g. Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, or Romania. However, even in countries with a stable rule of law and ranked among the most gender-equal

<sup>51</sup> Datta, N. (2025), pp. 49, 112, 128.

<sup>52</sup> See: <https://budapestdemografiaicsucs2023.hu/en>.

<sup>53</sup> Korolczuk, E., Graff, A., Kantola, J. (2025). Gender danger. Mapping a decade of research on anti-gender politics. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 34(5), 621–640. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2025.2489584>.

<sup>54</sup> Korolczuk, E., Graff, A., Kantola, J. (2025), p. 629.

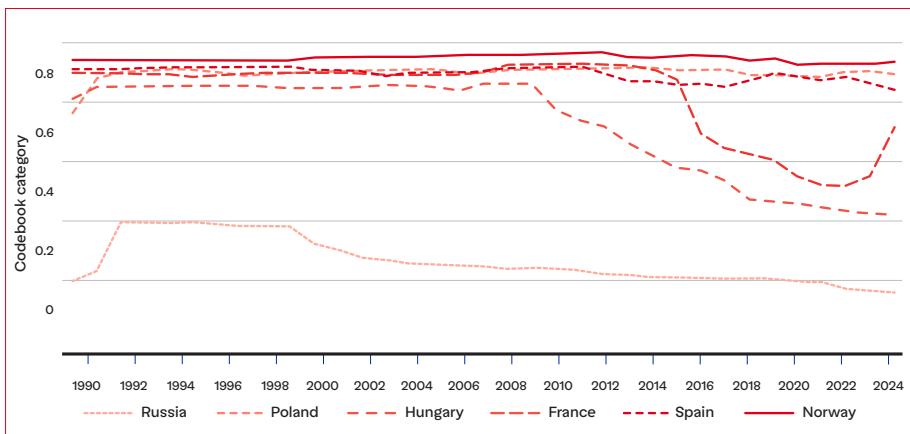


Figure 4: Liberal democracy rating in Russia, Hungary, Norway, Spain, and Poland (1990–2024)\*

countries in the European Union, such as Sweden, there are indications that exclusionary discourses and practices continue to become normalized, and that anti-gender initiatives are increasingly accompanied by acts of violence including “harsh, unfounded public criticism, and accusations of wrongdoing (e.g. claims that people who promote ‘gender theory’ are responsible for brainwashing children into seeking ‘sex change’) to direct attacks on politicians (especially those of foreign background), employees of state institutions, academics, and activists”.<sup>55</sup>

The anti-gender discourse has an underestimated radicalizing effect. By casting gender equality and diversity as threats to traditional order and men’s social position, these narratives draw in disaffected men and can trigger violent behaviour. According to the OSCE findings<sup>56</sup> misogyny

<sup>55</sup> Karlberg, E., Korolczuk, E., Sältenberg, H. (2025). Insidious de-democratization: conceptualizing anti-gender politics in Sweden. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 34(5), 732–748. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2024.2446345>, p. 736, 741.

<sup>56</sup> See: Johnston M., Meger S. (2022), *The Linkages between Violent Misogyny and Violent Extremism and Radicalization That Lead to Terrorism Policy Brief*. Vienna: OSCE Secretariat. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/c/525297.pdf>.

\* Liberal Democracy Index, V-Dem Institute data set, [https://v-dem.net/data\\_analysis/VariableGraph/](https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph/).

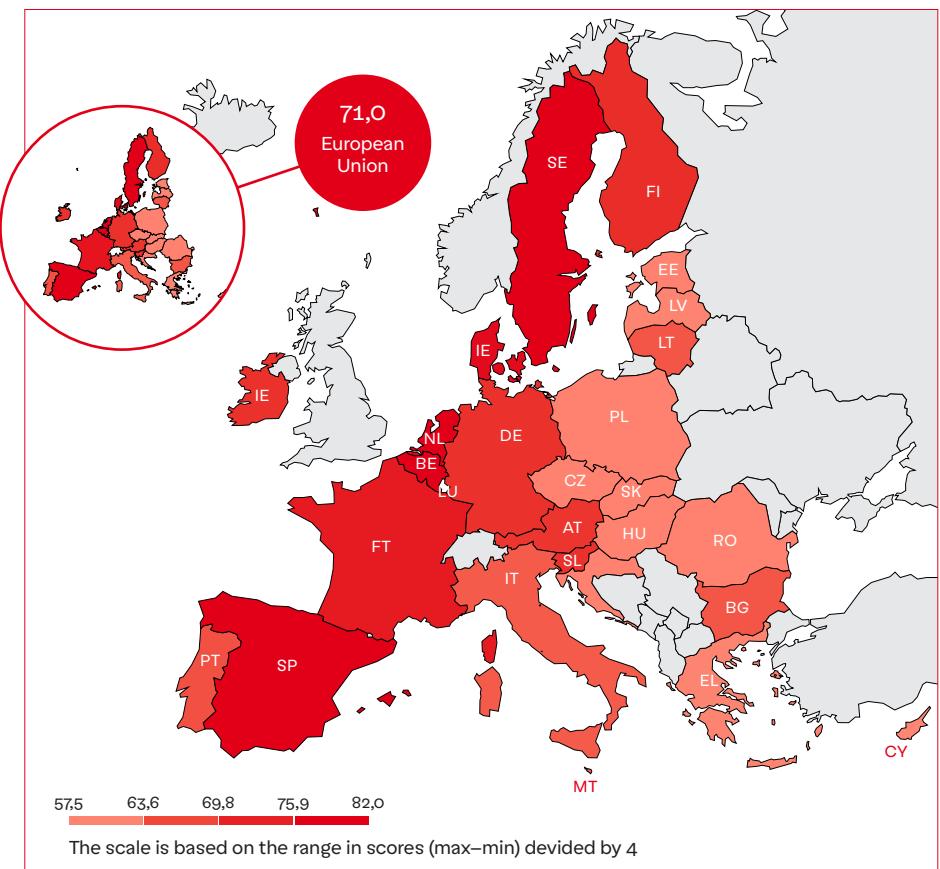


Figure 5: Gender Equality Index (2024)\*

is not only linked to hate crimes but can also be a gateway to violent extremism.

Moreover, by reinforcing traditional gender roles and power hierarchies, these movements create a hostile climate for female leadership, which

\* European Institute for Gender Equality (2024), Gender Equality Index map: country comparison. <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2024/compare-countries/index/map.VariableGraph/>.

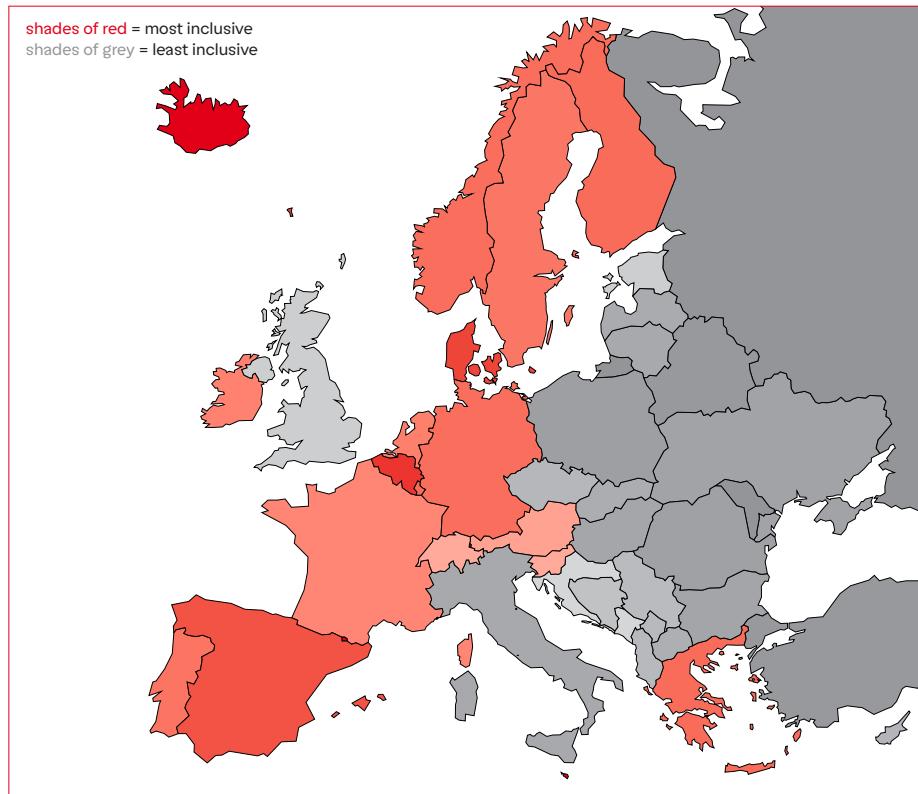


Figure 6: Legal and policy practices for LGBT as of 2025\*

discourages women's high-level participation. Liberal figures such as former Slovak president Zuzana Čaputová and former D66 party leader Sigrid Kaag (Netherlands) chose not to continue in their roles due to sustained threats and online harassment, which also impacted their families. However, female right-wing populist politicians are also not spared, as seen in attacks such as deepfake pornography targeting

\* ILGA-Europe (2025). *Rainbow Map*. <https://rainbowmap.ilga-europe.org/>. The Rainbow Map evaluates European countries on the basis of their legal and policy practices regarding LGBTI rights.

Giorgia Meloni.<sup>57</sup> This gendered vulnerability also opens opportunities for domestic and foreign actors to interfere in elections, using disinformation campaigns to target female candidates.

Anti-gender equality pushback is linked to the rise of far right populists who recognize the movement’s strong nationalist and populist rhetoric: The opposition to “gender” is also a possibility for the right to create a broad alliance and unite various actors that did not cooperate in the past. So, the very concept of “gender” has become a necessary element to bind together this coalition of its opponents”.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, far right parties try to increase their legitimization by involving women and queer people. For example, Germany’s AfD leader Alice Weidel is openly lesbian, yet the party promotes anti-LGBTQIA+ policies. In Nordic countries far right parties use anti-gender rhetoric which exploits elements of welfare chauvinism and emphasize national solidarity built on family-centred social policies, yet structured in ways that sideline migrants, particularly migrant men.<sup>59</sup> In Sweden, far right groups frame themselves as champions of white women’s rights, using gender equality as a tool to stigmatize racialized minorities as a threat (femonalationalism):<sup>60</sup> “Anti-gender actors in the parliament instrumentalize feminist concepts and the image of Sweden as an (already) exceptionally gender equal country in order to vilify immigrant women as passive victims and immigrant men as criminals”.<sup>61</sup> Authorities such as the EU, WHO, and governments following their guidelines are portrayed as promoting a covert, harmful agenda to impose a new social order. This narrative exploits and fuels anti-EU sentiment and over time, it erodes trust in democratic and international institutions, which are increasingly depicted as serving external interests rather than the public good. This phenomenon extends beyond the EU to its candidate countries, where its impact on EU enlargement demands closer scrutiny. Anti-gender movements have grown rapidly in the Western Balkans portraying inclusiveness as a sign

<sup>57</sup> Polidoro, A., van Doren Z. (2025), p. 5–6.

<sup>58</sup> Pető, A. (2025).

<sup>59</sup> Korolczuk, E., Graff, A., Kantola, J. (2025), p. 628.

<sup>60</sup> Korolczuk, E., Graff, A., Kantola, J. (2025), p. 630.

<sup>61</sup> Karlberg, E., Korolczuk, E., Sältenberg, H. (2025), p. 73

of EU decadence and a threat to traditional values.<sup>62</sup> Russia strategically employs the “*Gayropa*” narrative to set societies against the EU enlargement, while the Russian Orthodox Church amplifies these messages. When anti-gender actors influence elected officials or governments, they exploit state power to embed illiberal policies that roll back rights: “triggering polarization around gender, the far right, even with a small parliamentary presence, jeopardizes deliberation and debates on gender equality. This includes pushing pro-equality actors out of the parliamentary arena”<sup>63</sup> and deploying the state apparatus to undermine protections. This is evidenced in the backlash against international instruments like the *Istanbul Convention*, which removes essential legal tools to combat domestic violence and gender-based abuse. Within the EU, five countries, namely Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Lithuania, and Slovakia, have not ratified the *Istanbul Convention*, while Poland’s national-populist government considered withdrawing from it and sought to build a broader EU coalition to support this stance.

One of the most serious risks in confronting anti-gender movements is failing to recognise their corrosive impact on democratic institutions. In particular, political actors with anti-gender agendas exploit legal and political mechanisms to restrict rights, marginalise dissent, and erode institutional checks and balances.

### Liberal response

Liberal responses to the anti-gender backlash have evolved over time and combined legal, institutional, educational, and discursive strategies to protect gender equality and democratic norms. The EU has taken steps

<sup>62</sup> Dimitrievski, A. (2025). *The anti-gender movement as a threat to democracy in the Western Balkans*. ReThink.CEE Fellowship. Washington, D.C.: German Marshall Fund, p. 5. <https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/The%20Anti%20Gender%20Movement%20as%20a%20Threat%20to%20Democracy%20in%20the%20Western%20Balkans.pdf>.

<sup>63</sup> Caravantes, P., Elizondo, A., Lombardo, E. (2024). Gendering democracy: feminist parliamentary responses to opposition against gender equality. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 34(5), 749–763. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2024.2427200>, p. 749.

to strengthen gender equality through legislation, such as the *EU Gender Equality Strategy*, anti-discrimination directives, and court challenges to restrictive laws in Hungary and Poland. Further efforts include knowledge production by bodies like EIGE, as well as public hearings and awareness campaigns aimed at countering misinformation. The EU has also sought to respond beyond top-down measures by supporting grassroots initiatives and engaging citizens through well-funded programmes such as CERV (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values), launched in 2021 which promotes European values and prioritizes gender equality, citizen engagement, and combating gender-based violence.<sup>64</sup> Gender mainstreaming is one of the horizontal priorities in the EU budget, which translated into EUR 158.47 billion for projects promoting gender equality during the period 2021–2024, either as a principal objective or as an important objective.

A successful example of feminist response to the anti-gender attempts in parliaments comes e.g. from the Catalan Parliament where far right party Vox was prevented from backslicing gender equality policies. Feminist MPs and committees countered achieved this through a *cordón sanitaire*, expert reports on gender to raise awareness and provide reliable sources of information, formal rules like the “Zero Tolerance commitment”, and strategic debate engagement.<sup>65</sup> Their efforts were supported by Catalonia’s strong institutionalization of gender equality, including dedicated committees, a Gender Equality Plan, anti-harassment protocols, and collaboration with civil society. Nevertheless, Vox constituted a minor force in the Catalan Parliament, therefore the study highlights the need for institutional reforms to better equip parliamentary bodies to use legal instruments against exclusionary rhetoric and to strengthen their capacity to resist anti-gender attacks.<sup>66</sup>

A case study of progressive actors in Slovenia illustrates that responses to anti-gender movements combine multiple strategies. Some actors engage directly through counter- protests and solidarity initiatives, others seek to mitigate opposition via social media moderation, public

<sup>64</sup> European Commission. Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV). <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/programmes/cerv>.

<sup>65</sup> Shevtsova, M. (2020).

<sup>66</sup> Caravantes, P., Elizondo, A., Lombardo, E. (2025).

education, and threat reporting, while some adopt strategic non-engagement to avoid amplifying anti-gender voices. The success of these approaches, however, depends heavily on available resources, media access, and the broader political context.<sup>67</sup>

Assessments of liberal responses to anti-gender movements vary, particularly in terms of tone and channels of gender mainstreaming. Andrea Pető argues that early liberal strategies were limited, often adopting an “enlightened and offended” stance that relied heavily on public campaigns and workshops to explain gender concepts. As the backlash intensified, liberal actors shifted to a more defensive approach, using the technical language of gender equality policy to protect existing provisions rather than actively mobilizing or persuading broader audiences. Pető also suggests that in some contexts strategic nonaction can be as effective as street protests, as it restricts opportunities for engagement and leaves opponents without a platform to respond.<sup>68</sup> A similar view is shared by Sam Adler-Bell, who argues that legal frameworks, educational campaigns, and policy reinforcement may be insufficient if they rely on jargon-heavy or insular language that primarily resonates with already sympathetic audiences. Progressive strategies, he suggests, should focus on making ideas about gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights accessible, relatable, and compelling to a wider public.<sup>69</sup>

### Policy recommendations

To counter anti-gender movements, gender equality and diversity must be treated as a priority issue, not a secondary concern. Given the strategic

<sup>67</sup> Smrdelj, R. (2025). Navigating Antagonism: Feminist and LGBT+ Responses to Slovenian Anti-Gender Mobilizations. In: Smrdelj, R., Kuhar, R. (eds). *Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe and the Feminist Response. Palgrave Studies in European Political Sociology*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-87693-6\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-87693-6_3).

<sup>68</sup> Pető, A. (9 January 2024, ).

<sup>69</sup> Adler-Bell, S. (2022, June 10). *Unlearning the Language of ‘Wokeness’*. *Intelligencer. New York Magazine*. <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2022/06/unlearning-the-language-of-wokeness.html>.

coordination of anti-rights actors, effective responses must be proactive, not reactive, and involve cross-sectoral, well-planned collaboration. Public institutions, civil society, businesses, and youth organizations must work in concert to defend democratic values and human rights.

- Prevent policy capture. Anti-gender movements can shape policy and influence lawmaking, often through far right and populist parties. Therefore, it is essential to maintain a *cordon sanitaire* and prevent such parties from gaining institutional power or forming governments. A political coalition agreeing on a *cordon sanitaire* equips parliaments to “counter or prevent the anti-democratic effects (...) and mitigate the disruptive role of anti-gender actors on equality matters”.<sup>70</sup> While liberalism values pluralism and free debate, it also upholds fundamental rights, rule of law, and fact-based policymaking. Granting legitimacy to parties that promote exclusionary, anti-rights agendas undermines these principles.
- Avoid the vicious circle of polarization. Anti-gender movements weaponize language to frame debates as existential conflicts, dividing society into rigid binaries. This mirrors broader far-right populist strategies that thrive on affective polarisation, which functions along emotional or social divides rather than policy issues. Reactive, combative responses risk reinforcing these dynamics, undermining public trust and deepening divides. A liberal response requires strategic communication which includes outreach in both urban and rural areas: “The message should be tailored in a way that is understandable to all citizens, using relatable examples and everyday language that resonate with people’s lived experiences. This helps build broader support and undermines the narrative that gender equality is something imposed from the outside.”<sup>71</sup>
- Build strategic alliances beyond the liberal core. Countering anti-gender movements requires coalitions that extend beyond the traditional liberal spectrum. Progressive religious communities, including LGBTQIA+-affirming faith groups, offer valuable allies and insight into culturally sensitive engagement strategies: “Engaging religious and community leaders, especially those with moderate views, can help challenge extremist

<sup>70</sup> Caravantes, P., Elizondo, A., Lombardo, E. (2025), p. 750.

<sup>71</sup> Kolarski, L., personal interview.

narratives from within. These figures often hold significant influence in local communities and can offer alternative interpretations that align with values of compassion, justice, and dignity".<sup>72</sup> Liberal-conservative actors also represent potential partners. For example, in the past a small core of European People's Party (EPP) politicians consistently opposed progressive reforms on Christian social grounds. However, developments such as Ireland's abortion liberalization in 2018, Poland's restrictive abortion laws in 2020, and *Fidesz* departing the EPP in 2021 have pushed the EPP's stance on sexual and reproductive health gradually toward the political center.<sup>73</sup>

- Sustain visibility and support for women and LGBTQIA+ rights. Backlash often follows progress but retreating in response risks reinforcing regressive forces. As the Slovenian case shows, persistent advocacy can yield long-term gains: although same-sex marriage was initially blocked, public debate increased LGBTQIA+ visibility, dispelled stereotypes, and built momentum for eventual legalization in 2023.<sup>74</sup> Similarly the EU's support for the banned Pride was highly significant for Hungarian society, likely giving people greater courage to march despite the ban and the risk of fines.
- Expose misleading narratives and gendered disinformation. Anti-gender actors increasingly adopt pseudo-scientific or sanitized language to mask regressive agendas and gain public legitimacy. Social media is a critical arena where anti-gender movements coordinate disinformation, harassment, and hate targeting women and LGBTQIA+ communities. Countering this requires strategic transparency from tracing funding, revealing networks, to unpacking disinformation through investigative journalism and institutional collaboration, not only in the EU, but also in candidate countries. Strengthening legal frameworks to criminalize deliberate gendered disinformation and hold platforms accountable is essential. The EU's *Digital Services Act (DSA)* is a valuable step, addressing systemic risks, but its scope on gendered disinformation

<sup>72</sup> Kolarski, L., personal interview.

<sup>73</sup> Datta, N. (2025), p.97.

<sup>74</sup> Dimitrevski, A. (2025), p.17.

specifically remains limited. Expanding and sharpening these regulations is urgent to protect democratic values and ensure digital safety for vulnerable groups.<sup>75</sup> Supporting gender research and targeted media literacy in the EU and candidate countries helps citizens to critically engage with information, strengthening democratic accountability and resistance to manipulation.

- Sustain investment in equality. The reduction of funding from the US has led to cuts in key initiatives, with ripple effects now reaching Europe. Amid overlapping crises like war and economic strain, gender and LGBTQIA+ equality risk being deprioritized, despite these groups being disproportionately affected. Meanwhile, anti-gender movements expand their influence through well-funded, sophisticated networks. A liberal response demands proactive, sustained funding for institutions, civil society, and international partnerships. Reducing resources now risks empowering backlash forces and undermining decades of progress. Continued support for academic gender studies fellowships is vital to uphold credible, evidence-based challenges to misinformation.

### Conclusions: more than just a social issue

Anti-gender movements, especially when opaque and politically influential, pose a serious threat not only to gender equality but to the foundations of liberal democracy. The weaponization of gender, through attacks on women leaders, the suppression of inclusive education, and politicized homophobia, undermines pluralism and often precedes broader assaults on judicial independence and press freedom. In both EU member states and candidate countries, these dynamics are early indicators of democratic backsliding and create openings for foreign interference. The cases of Russia and Hungary demonstrate that even when an external actor loses some direct leverage, the groundwork it laid can continue to evolve autonomously, and new actors often emerge to exploit the situation for their own strategic gains.

<sup>75</sup> Polidoro A., van Doren Z. (2025), p. 6–7.

The normalization of exclusionary narratives erodes trust in democratic institutions and weakens public resilience to authoritarian influence, both domestic and foreign. Responding effectively requires recognizing gender equality not as a peripheral issue, but as a cornerstone of democratic integrity, while also rethinking and adapting the language and narratives through which liberal actors address gender equality and diversity.

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# Exiles or Persecutors?

## Unpacking the Russian and Chinese Diasporas as Europe's Liberal Dilemma

ODILIA ABREU

### The authoritarian playbook: a spider web of transnational repression

Europe has witnessed a significant expansion of Russian and Chinese diaspora communities, a development that presents a profound liberal paradox. While many individuals within these communities genuinely seek refuge from oppressive regimes, there is also a clear and present risk that some actors may tacitly, or even actively, advance the strategic aims of the very regimes others have fled.

The plight of these diaspora communities is complex and deeply intertwined with this duality. While some individuals are fleeing a system that represses dissent, others risk becoming vectors for that same repression, whether through propaganda, surveillance, or influence operations. The fundamental liberal imperative to protect dissidents must be safeguarded “above all”, transcending economic interests, energy dependencies, or diplomatic considerations.

The challenge posed by Russia and China foreign interference in Europe is not a collection of isolated incidents but a systemic “spider web” of interconnected threats. These threats link economic leverage, political influence, digital warfare, and the complex dual roles of diaspora communities. This interconnectedness means factors cannot be analysed in isolation, as each contributes, directly or indirectly, to the broader landscape of foreign interference. The need from Russia and China to “control time, space and movements” of individuals abroad is a stark reminder of their desire for pervasive control. This echoes Michel Foucault’s

concept of the “panopticon”,<sup>1</sup> within carceral structures. This panoptic model serves as a powerful metaphor for how authoritarian regimes seek to extend their reach into liberal societies, turning diaspora members into subjects of a pervasive, albeit invisible, system of control.<sup>2</sup>

How is this “spider web” of influence connected? The answer lies partially in transnational repression. This can take many forms, from the most violent to the most subtle: direct physical attacks; digital threats and surveillance; or misuse of international instruments such as Interpol’s “Red Notices”.<sup>3</sup>

At its core, transnational repression is a state-directed strategy.<sup>4</sup> It is carried out by institutional actors — intelligence services, police forces, and diplomatic personnel — who are trained, deployed, and coordinated by the state itself to extend its control beyond its physical borders.<sup>5</sup>

This complex issue has been explicitly acknowledged by the European Parliament, which has warned that “the practice of transnational repression negatively impacts every level of society, from individual rights to national security and democratic institutions.”<sup>6</sup>

A resolution of the Council of Europe<sup>7</sup> identified transnational repression as a growing concern to the rule of law and human rights, across Europe. According to Freedom House,<sup>8</sup> by the end of 2022, there were 854 docu-

<sup>1</sup> Giddens, A. (2001). *Sociología*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.

<sup>2</sup> SSRN (2024). *Transnational Repression*. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=4929094](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4929094).

<sup>3</sup> Freedom House (2024). *Defending Democracy in Exile: Transnational Repression*. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression>.

<sup>4</sup> Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) (2024). *Transnational Repression*. <https://www.fbi.gov/investigate/counterintelligence/transnational-repression>.

<sup>5</sup> Wong, K.C.-P. (2024). Sowing Hate, Cultivating Loyalists: Mobilizing Repressive Nationalist Diasporas for Transnational Repression by the People’s Republic of China Regime. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 68(12), 1655–1678. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642241267931>.

<sup>6</sup> European Parliament (2025). *Transnational repression of human rights defenders: The impacts on civic space and the responsibility of host states*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO\\_STU\(2025\)754475](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU(2025)754475).

<sup>7</sup> Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (2024). *Transnational repression as a growing threat to the rule of law and human rights*. <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/32999/html>.

<sup>8</sup> Freedom House (2024). *Transnational Repression*. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression>.

mented cases of physical transnational repression in 91 countries, with the governments of China and Russia among the most prolific perpetrators. The presence of hostile intelligence networks further illustrates this problem. The European Union's External Action Service (EEAS) internal security unit has warned of an estimated 250 Chinese and 200 Russian intelligence operatives that are active in Brussels alone.<sup>9</sup> These networks leverage diaspora members who align with authoritarian states, transforming them into conduits for espionage, surveillance, and influence. This allows for the illegitimately manipulation of democratic process through actions such as leaking confidential documents and running disinformation campaigns.<sup>10</sup>

### Russia: from disinformation to direct violence

Several sources, including intelligence agencies and research organizations,<sup>11</sup> argue that Europe is facing a coordinated campaign of sabotage, arson, and disinformation orchestrated by Russia. The effects of this campaign are increasingly visible across Europe:<sup>12</sup>

- Lithuania: An Ikea store was deliberately set on fire.<sup>13</sup>
- United Kingdom: Seven people were charged over an arson attack on a business with links to Ukraine.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Schillitz, Ch.B. (2019, February 2). Russische und chinesische Spione in Brüssel. *Welt*. <https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article188487901/Europaeische-Union-Russische-und-chinesische-Spione-in-Bruessel.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (BfV) (2021). *Brief Summary of the 2020 Report on the Protection of the Constitution*. <https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/Shared-Docs/publikationen/EN/reports-on-the-protection-of-the-constitution/2021-06-brief-summary-2020-report-on-the-protection-of-the-constitution.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> O'Carroll, L. (2025, March 18). Russia criminal networks drive increase in sabotage — Europol. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/mar/18/russia-criminal-networks-drive-increase-sabotage-europol>.

<sup>12</sup> Financial Times (2025). Russia's shadow operations in Europe. <https://www.ft.com/content/c88509f9-c9bd-46f4-8a5c-9b2bdd3c3dd3>.

<sup>13</sup> Laurence, P. (2025, March 17). Russian sabotage and arson campaigns. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c757kpk21d90>.

<sup>14</sup> Sandford, D. (2025, October 25). Targeting Ukraine-linked businesses in UK. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvgexrw3x2xo>.

- France: Five coffins inscribed with the words “French soldiers in Ukraine” were placed under the Eiffel Tower.<sup>15</sup>
- Estonia: The Interior Minister and a journalist had the windows of their cars smashed in what appeared to be coordinated acts of intimidation.<sup>16</sup>

The abuse of Interpol Red Notices<sup>17</sup> has become a significant tool of trans-national repression, enabling authoritarian governments to pursue exiled nationals abroad and undermine human rights. While a Red Notice is intended as a legitimate request for provisional arrest,<sup>18</sup> it is frequently misused by regimes to harass dissidents who have sought refuge in democratic nations. Russia has been identified as a leading offender, responsible for approximately 38% of all public Red Notices.<sup>19</sup> This trend reflects a deliberate strategy by the Kremlin to use international law enforcement systems to silence its critics.

The misuse of Interpol undermines the organization’s mission and threatens the safety of individuals in exile. This abuse can lead to wrongful arrests, prolonged detentions, and the fear of extradition to a country where the individual may face torture or an unfair trial.<sup>20</sup>

Another striking example of this “spider web” of influence involves the use of Brazil as a “training ground” for Russian deep-cover agents who assume false identities.<sup>21</sup> Once their cover was “bulletproof”, they

<sup>15</sup> Albertini, A., Leloup, D., Reynaud, F. (2024, June 3). Cercueils à la Tour Eiffel: un lien direct établi avec l’affaire des Mains Rouges. *Le Monde*. [https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2024/06/03/cercueils-a-la-tour-eiffel-un-lien-direct-establi-avec-l-affaire-des-mains-rouges\\_6237067\\_4408996.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/pixels/article/2024/06/03/cercueils-a-la-tour-eiffel-un-lien-direct-establi-avec-l-affaire-des-mains-rouges_6237067_4408996.html).

<sup>16</sup> Goryashko, S. (2025, February 20). Estonia thwarts Russian hybrid operation. *Politico.eu*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/estonia-thwarts-russian-hybrid-operation-arrests-10>.

<sup>17</sup> European Parliament (2019). *Report on Russian hybrid warfare*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO\\_STU\(2019\)603472](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EXPO_STU(2019)603472).

<sup>18</sup> Interpol (2025). *Red Notices*. <https://www.interpol.int/How-we-work/Notices/Red-Notices/View-Red-Notices>.

<sup>19</sup> Council of Europe (2025). *Transnational repression as a growing threat to the rule of law and human rights*. <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/32999/html>.

<sup>20</sup> Council of Europe (2017). *Abusive use of the Interpol system: the need for more stringent legal safeguards*. <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=23524&lang=en>.

<sup>21</sup> Schwirtz, M., Bradley, J. (2025). A fábrica de espiões. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/pt/2025/05/21/world/europe/a-fabrica-de-espiores.html>.

were redeployed to other countries, including Poland, Portugal,<sup>22</sup> and the Netherlands,<sup>23</sup> where their Brazilian identities provide a powerful and trusted form of camouflage.<sup>24</sup> This strategy highlights a sophisticated form of state-sponsored espionage that poses a significant threat to European security and democratic integrity.<sup>25</sup>

The Russian Federation has a well-documented history of state-sponsored assassinations and attempted killings of dissidents abroad. Notable cases include the 2006 poisoning and killing of former intelligence officer Alexander Litvinenko, and the 2018 poisoning and attempted assassination of former intelligence officer Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia in the United Kingdom — known as the “Salisbury attack”.<sup>26</sup> In 2021, the European Court of Human Rights<sup>27</sup> held Russia responsible for violating Litvinenko’s right to life, having established that the two perpetrators were Russian agents.

### Russia: a doctrine of foreign influence

To comprehend the full scope Russian foreign interference, it is crucial to analyse the oppressor’s perspective and their use of diaspora communities to advance its geopolitical interests. This strategy is well-documented in academic research, official Russian doctrine, and reports from intelligence agencies.

The Russian government’s strategy is not a secret; it is codified in its own official documents. The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian

<sup>22</sup> Godinho, J.P. (2025, May 27). Casal de espiões russos que vieram do Brasil tinha casa arrendada na cidade do Porto. *Observador*. <https://observador.pt/2025/05/27/casal-de-espiões-russos-que-vieram-do-brasil-tinha-casa-arrendada-na-cidade-do-porto/>.

<sup>23</sup> Corera, G. (2022, June 16). Russian spies expelled from Portugal. *BBC News* <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61831961>.

<sup>24</sup> The New York Times (2025).

<sup>25</sup> Cursino, M. (2025, August 3). Espionage case in Europe. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cljyj9jp9930>.

<sup>26</sup> France24 (2024). Sergei Skripal case. <https://www.france24.com/es/tag/sergei-skripal/>.

<sup>27</sup> European Court of Human Rights (2021). *Russia responsible for assassination of Aleksandr Litvinenko in the UK* (ECHR 278/2021). <https://www.echr.coe.int/>.

Federation<sup>28</sup> emphasizes the pivotal role of the Russian diaspora in achieving Russia's foreign policy objectives. The Kremlin defines a "compatriot" broadly to include not only ethnic Russians but also Russian speakers and anyone with a historical, cultural, or linguistic connection to Russia.

This policy is actively managed through state-sponsored initiatives:

- World Congress of Russian Compatriots:<sup>29</sup> Held every three years, this event serves as a platform for the Kremlin to cultivate and leverage transnational networks. It highlights how Russia actively unifies disparate communities under a single geopolitical agenda.<sup>30</sup>
- State-funded institutions: Organizations like the Russkiy Mir Foundation<sup>31</sup> and Rossotrudnichestvo<sup>32</sup> are dedicated to promoting Russian language and culture, but they function as tools for projecting soft power and political influence.<sup>33</sup>

As Öncel Sencerman<sup>34</sup> details in his article "Russian Diaspora as a Means of Russian Foreign Policy", the Russian diaspora has been systematically transformed into an instrument of Moscow's foreign policy agenda.

### China: subtle influence, hard repression

China's foreign influence operations are driven by two main objectives: to project a positive image of China and to infiltrate and suppressing

<sup>28</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2024). *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*. [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/fundamental\\_documents/1860586/](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/).

<sup>29</sup> Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation (2024, June 5). Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's opening remarks at the 8th World Congress of Compatriots. [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/1978187/](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1978187/).

<sup>30</sup> Sencerman, O. (2018, June 10), Russian Diaspora as a Means of Russian Foreign Policy, *Military Review*, p. 47 .<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/Sencerman-Russian-Diaspora.pdf>, p. 47.

<sup>31</sup> Russkiy Mir Foundation (2024). *About us*. <https://russkiymir.ru/en/>.

<sup>32</sup> Rossotrudnichestvo (2024). *Official site*. <https://rs.gov.ru/en/>.

<sup>33</sup> EUR-Lex (2022). *Council Regulation (EU) 2022/1270 of 21 July 2022 concerning restrictive measures*. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32022R1270>.

<sup>34</sup> Sencerman, O. (2018, June 10), p. 45.

dissent. The first aims to win hearts and minds by promoting attractive narratives about China's economic success and cultural traditions.<sup>35</sup> This is often channelled through state-funded media, cultural institutions like Confucius Institutes and networks of intermediaries.<sup>36</sup> The second objective focuses on suppressing any actions contrary to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) interests, often with a repressive hand. This includes punishing states, companies, or individuals that challenge Beijing's policies, as seen in economic coercion and travel restrictions.<sup>37</sup> Such activities are primarily orchestrated through the United Front Work Department (UFWD),<sup>38</sup> a central Party organization tasked with co-opting foreign elites and controlling diaspora groups.

The investigation "China Targets"<sup>39</sup> reveals how China recruits dissidents-turned-spies to infiltrate overseas activist groups.<sup>40</sup> One such case is that of Jian Guo,<sup>41</sup> a Chinese-German dual national who, according to German authorities, allegedly spied for China. While serving as an aide to a far-right German politician in the European Parliament in Brussels. This case highlights how Chinese intelligence services can leverage individuals from the diaspora to gain access to highly sensitive political environments.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Brady, A.-M. (2020). Cultural Governance in Contemporary China: "Re-Orienting" Party Propaganda. In Brady, A.-M. (ed.). *To Govern China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/to-govern-china/cultural-governance-in-contemporary-china-reorienting-party-propaganda/FDC3BC7F5D16463D0379C529ED31D424>.

<sup>36</sup> Schaefer, B. (2021, May 27). *Confucius Institutes: China's Trojan Horse*. Heritage Foundation Commentary. <https://www.heritage.org/homeland-security/commentary/confucius-institutes-chinas-trojan-horse>.

<sup>37</sup> Institut de Recherche Stratégique de l'École Militaire (IRSEM) (2024). *Chinese Influence Operations*. <https://www.irsem.fr/report>.

<sup>38</sup> Ewe, K., Bicker, L. (2024). United Front: China's "magic weapon" caught in a spy controversy. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c878evdp758o>.

<sup>39</sup> International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) (2024). *China Targets Project*. <https://www.icij.org/investigations/china-targets/>.

<sup>40</sup> International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) (2024).

<sup>41</sup> Friedrich Naumann Foundation (2025). Ein Blick hinter die Kulissen chinesischer Spionage im Europaparlament. <https://www.freiheit.org/de/europa/ein-blick-hinter-die-kulissen-chinesischer-spionage-im-europaparlament>.

<sup>42</sup> Berliner Zeitung (2025, April 26). Spionageverdacht: Krah-Mitarbeiter wollte für den BND arbeiten. <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/news/spionageverdacht-krah-mitarbeiter-wollte-fuer-den-bnd-arbeiten-li.2209728>.

Aware of the strategic importance of its diaspora, China has established overseas police stations<sup>43</sup> whose role, while not always directly linked to overt attempts at destabilizing European states, raises serious concerns. The very existence of these facilities poses a clear threat to the rule of law, human rights, and the territorial sovereignty of democratic nations. Their primary function — to monitor, control, and repress the Chinese diaspora — constitutes a form of foreign interference that directly undermines democratic values.<sup>44</sup>

An investigation by Safeguard Defenders: “110 OVERSEAS — Chinese Transnational Policing Gone Wild”<sup>45</sup> shows that between 2021 and 2023, Chinese police “persuaded” around 230,000 alleged fugitives to return to China “voluntarily.” Crucially, not all these individuals were accused of crimes, raising serious concerns about the nature of these so- called “persuasions”. Furthermore, the report also documents at least 54 police- run “overseas police service centres” across five continents, some explicitly implicated in collaborating with Chinese authorities to conduct policing operations on foreign soil.

While China claims its “overseas police stations” function as administrative service centres for Chinese citizen’s abroad, compelling evidence indicates that these facilities serve Beijing’s broader objectives, including the political persecution of dissidents and control over the Chinese diaspora. Reports confirm the presence of such facilities in several EU Member States, including Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Germany.<sup>46</sup>

The existence of “overseas police stations” directly challenges the sovereignty of European states. This creates a parallel policing mechanism

<sup>43</sup> Dos Santos, N. (2022). China’s overseas police stations. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/12/04/world/china-overseas-police-stations-intl-cmd>.

<sup>44</sup> House of Commons (2023). *The Chinese Communist Party’s Overseas Police Service Stations: Interim Report of the Special Committee on the Canada–PRC Relationship*. Ottawa: House of Commons. <https://publications.gc.ca/site/eng/9.931039/publication.html?wbdisable=true>.

<sup>45</sup> Safeguards Defenders (2022, June 10). 110 OVERSEAS — Chinese Transnational Policing Gone Wild. <https://safeguarddefenders.com/en/blog/110-overseas-230000-chinese-persuaded-return>.

<sup>46</sup> European Parliament (2022). *Parliamentary Question: Chinese overseas police stations in the EU*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2022-003564\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2022-003564_EN.html).

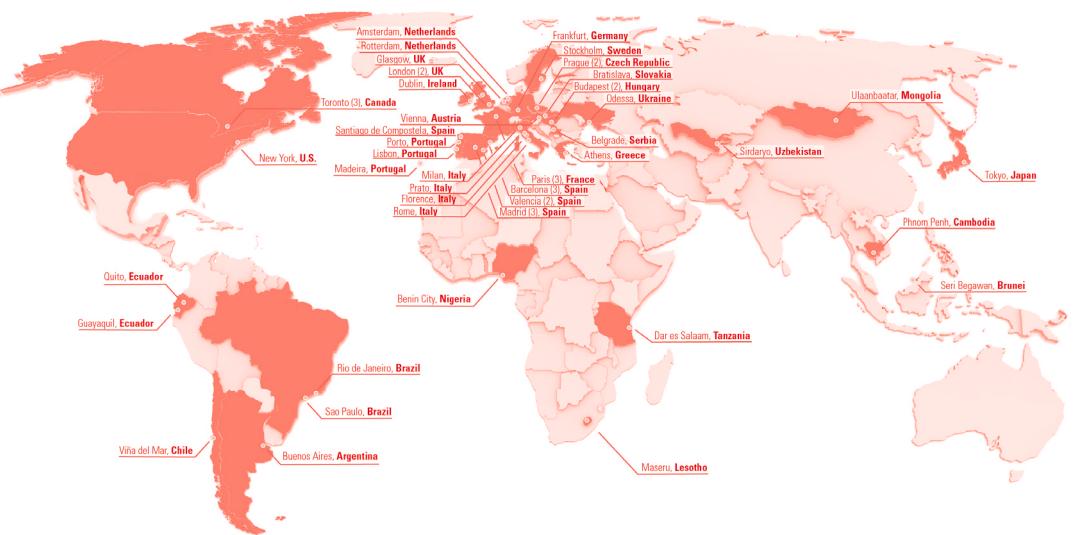


Figure 1: Alleged Chinese police service stations operating globally. ©SafeguardDefenders

that operates outside the legal framework of the host country, weakening the rule of law.

Chinese student communities have increasingly become targets of CCP pressure, with growing demands for political loyalty threatening academic freedom and civic participation.<sup>47</sup> This creates an atmosphere of self-censorship, which is directly contrary to the liberal principles of freedom of expression that are foundational to European universities. China's influence operations in Europe are a growing concern. They operate through a mix of traditional espionage<sup>48</sup> and "grey zone" activities like transnational repression, posing a significant challenge to liberal

<sup>47</sup> Benner, T., et al. (2018, May 20). *Authoritarian Advance: Responding to China's Growing Political Influence in Europe*. GPPI & MERICS, p. 36. <https://gppi.net/2018/02/05/authoritarian-advance-responding-to-chinas-growing-political-influence-in-europe>.

<sup>48</sup> Hawkins, A. (2024, May 8). Chinese espionage in Europe: court case. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/08/court-chinese-espionage-europe>.

democracies. This approach, while often subtle, is highly effective, relying on media manipulation, economic pressure, and cultural institutions to expand its influence.<sup>49</sup>

The European Parliament has explicitly acknowledged the severity of this issue. A joint report by the Global Public Policy Institute (GPPI)<sup>50</sup> and the Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS) cautions, “China’s rapidly increasing political influencing efforts in Europe and the self-confident promotion of its authoritarian ideals pose a significant challenge to liberal democracy as well as Europe’s values and interests.”<sup>51</sup>

While substantial trade relations, reaching €739 billion in 2023,<sup>52</sup> form the backbone of the EU- China relationship, they also provide a platform to exert influence in multifaceted ways. This influence is not limited to economics but extends to a broader political agenda that poses risks to Europe’s democratic values and rule of law.

### Blurring lines: advanced disinformation tactics

To fully grasp the scope and consequences of foreign interference in Europe, it is essential to recognize the breadth of the actions of states like Russia and China. The most visible manifestation of this is disinformation, which is often orchestrated from abroad but amplified from within diaspora networks, posing a direct and growing threat to the integrity of European democratic institutions.

Both Russia and China have intensified their interference in Europe, each using distinct but equally concerning methods. Russia’s approach has become more visible since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022,

<sup>49</sup> Walsch, J.Ch., Ngamsang, N. (2024). Confucius Institutes as Instruments of Soft Power. *Journal of Education and Vocational Research* 4(10):302–10. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260005444\\_Confucius\\_Institutes\\_as\\_Instruments\\_of\\_Soft\\_Power\\_Comparison\\_with\\_International\\_Rivals](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260005444_Confucius_Institutes_as_Instruments_of_Soft_Power_Comparison_with_International_Rivals).

<sup>50</sup> GPPI (2018). *Research on Chinese influence operations*. <https://gppi.net/>.

<sup>51</sup> Benner, T., et al. (2018, May 20), p.2.

<sup>52</sup> European Commission (2024). *EU trade relations with China*. [https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/china\\_en](https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/china_en).

relying on disinformation campaigns. Narratives such as Ukraine's supposed "denazification"<sup>53</sup> are used to justify its aggression. These actions form part of a broader "militarisation of history",<sup>54</sup> a process in which historical narratives are framed through militaristic lens to cultivate authoritarian ideal.

According to the European External Action Service (EEAS), Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)<sup>55</sup> is a core component of Russia and China's broader hybrid warfare strategies against Europe. The report underscores that democratic elections are a prime target of Russian FIMI operations, which directly undermine Europe's democratic institutions.<sup>56</sup> With regard to China, the EEAS highlights that information suppression remains one of the most concerning features of Chinese FIMI, and a frequently overlooked aspect of transnational repression.<sup>57</sup>

Foreign interference in Europe increasingly relies on sophisticated disinformation tactics that deliberately blur the line between truth and falsehood. Two of the most alarming examples of this are China's "Spamouflage" network and Russia's "Doppelgänger" campaign.

The "Spamouflage"<sup>58</sup> network is a Beijing-linked online influence operation that has targeted countries across Europe. It has been used to spread disinformation about domestic issues, such as the deadly floods in Valencia, Spain. In one particularly alarming incident, the operation impersonated

<sup>53</sup> EUvsDisinfo (2025). Russia aims to "denazify" Ukraine and disarm its "terrorist regime"., <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/russia-aims-to-denazify-ukraine-and-disarm-its-terrorist-regime/>.

<sup>54</sup> Persson, E. (2025). Militarization of history and mnemonic habits in Putin's Russia: pedagogy of war. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 77(3), pp. 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2025.2485853>.

<sup>55</sup> European External Action Service (EEAS) (2025). *3rd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats*. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/3rd-eeas-report-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats-0\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/3rd-eeas-report-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats-0_en).

<sup>56</sup> European External Action Service (EEAS) (2025).

<sup>57</sup> European External Action Service (EEAS) (2025).

<sup>58</sup> Guilbert, K. (2025, January 30). Chinese influence operation urged Spaniards to overthrow the government, intelligence firm finds. *Euronews*. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/01/30/chinese-influence-operation-urged-spaniards-to-overthrow-the-government-intelligence-firm->.

a human rights group to call for the Spanish government's overthrow.<sup>59</sup> This tactic aims to exploit a crisis to sow chaos, polarize public opinion, and undermine trust in government institutions.<sup>60</sup>

The “Doppelgänger campaign” orchestrated by Russia<sup>61</sup> represents a highly advanced form of disinformation. It involves creating highly convincing fake versions of official websites, such as those of France’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs<sup>62</sup> and reputable media outlets like *Le Monde*.<sup>63</sup> These meticulously crafted “clone” sites are used to disseminate fabricated articles and false information that appears to be from a trusted source. Disinformation campaigns from China and Russia are becoming increasingly sophisticated, demonstrating how advanced tactics are blurring the line between truth and falsehood and, in the process, undermining trust in institutions and democratic discourse.

### Portugal and Germany: experiences from two frontlines

Portugal<sup>64</sup> and Germany serve as particularly illustrative examples of the paradoxical role diasporas play, offering a valuable North-South comparison of foreign interference in Europe. They provide distinct models

<sup>59</sup> Guilbert, K. (2025, January 30).

<sup>60</sup> Ruhyyih Ewing, G. (2025, January 30). China influence operation tied to Valencia floods and call to overthrow government. *Politico.eu*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/china-influence-operation-overthrow-spain-government-valencia-floods-spamouflagraphika/>.

<sup>61</sup> Leloup, D. (2023, August 28). Large-scale Chinese disinformation campaign dismantled by Meta. *Le Monde*. [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/pixels/article/2023/08/29/large-scale-chinese-disinformation-campaign-dismantled-by-meta\\_6113916\\_13.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/pixels/article/2023/08/29/large-scale-chinese-disinformation-campaign-dismantled-by-meta_6113916_13.html).

<sup>62</sup> France24 (2023, June 30). France uncovers major Russian disinformation campaign. <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20230613-france-says-uncovers-major-disinformation-campaign-waged-by-russia>.

<sup>63</sup> Reynaud, F., Leloup, D. (2023, June 13). ‘Doppelgänger: the Russian disinformation campaign denounced by France. [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/pixels/article/2023/06/13/doppelganger-the-russian-disinformation-campaign-denounced-by-france\\_6031227\\_13.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/pixels/article/2023/06/13/doppelganger-the-russian-disinformation-campaign-denounced-by-france_6031227_13.html).

<sup>64</sup> Rodrigues, I. (2021). The Presence of China and the Chinese Diaspora in Portugal and Portuguese-Speaking Territories. *ResearchGate*. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354541627\\_The\\_Presence\\_of\\_China\\_and\\_the\\_Chinese\\_Diaspora\\_in\\_Portugal\\_and\\_Portuguese-Speaking\\_Territories](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354541627_The_Presence_of_China_and_the_Chinese_Diaspora_in_Portugal_and_Portuguese-Speaking_Territories).

of how this phenomenon manifests across the region due to their unique historical relationships and geopolitical positions.

**Contrasting scales of diaspora:** Germany is home to the largest Russian diaspora in the EU, a legacy of historical migration from the former Soviet Union. This makes it a primary hub for Russian influence operations. In contrast, Portugal's Chinese diaspora is much smaller in absolute terms but represents a significant, and in some ways more concentrated, presence relative to the country's population size. This difference highlights how influence is exerted through both scale and economic density.

**Distinct models of presence:** In Portugal, the vulnerability is primarily economic and driven by mechanisms like the Golden Visa program and China's role as a key trading partner. China's substantial investments in Portugal's energy, finance, and infrastructure sectors create a relationship of interdependence. This can result in a "tacit silence" on sensitive issues such as human rights. In Germany, the dynamic is primarily geopolitical, with the country functioning as a hub for both Russian and Chinese espionage and political influence. Germany's central role in European politics and its historical energy dependence on Russia make it a critical frontline for hybrid warfare.

#### Germany: networks, espionage, and strategic infiltration

Germany has emerged both as a significant destination for dissidents and as a key battleground for Chinese and Russian influence operations.<sup>65</sup> This duality is particularly evident due to Germany's unique geopolitical position, its large diaspora, and its deep economic ties with both countries. The tactics employed range from traditional intelligence gathering to more sophisticated infiltration strategies, often targeting diaspora communities directly.

Germany authorities acknowledge the presence of foreign operatives on its territory, noting that "espionage, foreign influence, and state-sponsored terrorism have considerable negative effects for Germany, including

<sup>65</sup> Financial Times (2024). Honeypots and influence operations: China's spies turn to Europe. <https://www.ft.com/content/6c115d61-7948-457e-ace9-f65c3cbb6ee9>.

violations of national sovereignty, Germany's negotiating positions by leaking confidential documents in advance, and illegitimately influencing the democratic process.”<sup>66</sup>

Germany hosts the EU's largest Russian diaspora, numbering more than 300,000<sup>67</sup> citizens as of 2023,<sup>68</sup> alongside a sizeable and growing Chinese community, of roughly 155,000 citizens.<sup>69</sup>

The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV),<sup>70</sup> Germany's domestic intelligence agency, has consistently raised concerns about espionage, intimidation, and influence operations targeting both diaspora communities and national interests. These activities have directly affected groups such as Uyghur, Hong Kong, and Falun Gong activists, and are viewed as part of China's broader strategy of trans-national repression, designed to silence dissent and maintain control over its citizens abroad.

Beyond repression, the BfV has also warned that China is actively seeking to shape German politics<sup>71</sup> and decision-making through the Chinese Communist Party's International Liaison Department (ILD), which builds networks of contacts to promote Chinese interests and values within Europe.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (BfV) (2020). *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2020*, p. 39. [https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/EN/home/home\\_node.html](https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/EN/home/home_node.html).

<sup>67</sup> Destatis (2023). *Foreign population by country of birth*. <https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/Tabellen/auslaendische-bevoelkerung-geburtsort.html>.

<sup>68</sup> Statista (2023). Number of people with Russian citizenship living in Europe as of January 1, 2023, by selected country. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1294283/russian-citizens-living-in-europe-2021-by-country/>.

<sup>69</sup> Destatis (2023). *Migration and Integration Statistics*. <https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/Tabellen/auslaendische-bevoelkerung-geburtsort.html>.

<sup>70</sup> Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (BfV) (2024). *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2024*, p. 300. <https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/SharedDocs/publikationen/DE/verfassungsschutzberichte/2025-06-10-verfassungsschutzbericht-2024.html>.

<sup>71</sup> Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (BfV) (2024).

<sup>72</sup> International Consortium of Investigative Journalists-ICIJ (2024), China uses dissidents-turned-spies to infiltrate overseas activist groups, as authorities flounder. <https://www.icij.org/investigations/china-targets/china-uses-dissidents-turned-spies-to-infiltrate-overseas-activist-groups-as-authorities-flounder/>.

The Alliance for Securing Democracy (ASD) at the German Marshall Fund, through its Authoritarian Interference Tracker,<sup>73</sup> has catalogued hundreds of incidents of authoritarian interference. These range from Russia operatives hiring vandals ahead of the 2025 German federal elections<sup>74</sup> to Chinese officials threatening the family of a Uyghur activist living in Germany — an illustration of how both regimes weaponize diaspora connections for coercion and control.<sup>75</sup>

When it comes to Russia, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation paper “Networks of Power: Russia’s Shadow Influence in Germany”<sup>76</sup> underscores how Russia systematically deploys instruments of “sharp power” to amplify its economic and political influence. The authors specifically point out that Russian cultural centres, think tanks, and educational institutions often function as key conduits for Kremlin-aligned narratives.

Russia’s willingness to cross red lines was demonstrated in 2019 when former Russian intelligence officer Vadim Krasikov assassinated Zelikhan Khangoshvili, a Chechen asylum seeker and Georgian citizen, in broad daylight in Berlin. A German court later convicted Krasikov of the killing, with the presiding judge explicitly attributing responsibility to the Kremlin — an extraordinary acknowledgment of direct state involvement in extraterritorial political violence on German soil.<sup>77</sup>

Portugal: complicity, data leaks, and diaspora vulnerabilities

Some EU Member States have historically implemented policies to attract foreign investment that have inadvertently created avenues for external

<sup>73</sup> Alliance for Securing Democracy (ASD) (2024). *Authoritarian Interference Tracker*. <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/toolbox/authoritarian-interference-tracker/>.

<sup>74</sup> ASD (2025). Russia hires vandals ahead of German federal election. <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/incident/russia-hires-vandals-ahead-of-german-federal-election/>.

<sup>75</sup> ASD (2025). Uyghur man living in Germany has family threatened by Chinese officials due to his activism abroad. <https://securingdemocracy.gmfus.org/incident/uyghur-man-living-in-germany-has-family-threatened-by-chinese-officials-due-to-his-activism-abroad/>.

<sup>76</sup> Friedrich Naumann Foundation (2024). *Networks of Power: Russia’s Shadow Influence in Germany*. Berlin: FNF <https://shop.freiheit.org/#!/Publikation/1844>.

<sup>77</sup> Freedom House (2024). *Germany Country Report — Transnational Repression*. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/transnational-repression/germany>.

influence. In Portugal, this strategy has been particularly visible through initiatives such as the Golden Visa scheme<sup>78</sup> and the easing of visa restrictions. As a result, the number of Chinese citizens in the country grew from 16,785 in 2011 to 27,839 in 2019<sup>79</sup> and further to 281,123 in 2023,<sup>80</sup> alongside a steady presence of Russian nationals.

Launched in 2012, the Golden Visa programme grants residence permits to foreigners who invest at least €350,000 in Portugal,<sup>81</sup> most often through real estate. The scheme quickly transformed Lisbon into a hub of Chinese investment in Europe. Since its inception, more than 4,600 permanent visas have been granted to Chinese citizens.<sup>82</sup>

While designed to stimulate economic growth and boost the real estate market, they have also facilitated significant capital inflows — raising concerns over money laundering, illicit financial flows, and national security risks.<sup>83</sup>

These concerns have been echoed by European institutions and the EU's Court of Justice has even ruled against “golden passport” schemes with many “golden visa” programmes undergoing stricter scrutiny or outright elimination in 2025.<sup>84</sup>

Why does China have its eyes on Portugal? Beyond the entry opportunities provided by Portugal’s Golden Visa scheme, the country holds a strategic

<sup>78</sup> Freedom House (2024), p.6.

<sup>79</sup> Freedom House (2024), p.12.

<sup>80</sup> Pordata (2025). *População estrangeira com estatuto legal de residente*. <https://www.pordata.pt/pt/estatisticas/migracoes/populacao-estrangeira/populacao-estrangeira-com-estatuto-legal-de-residente>

<sup>81</sup> Gaspar, S., Rodrigues, I. (2021) The Presence of China and the Chinese Diaspora in Portugal and Portuguese-Speaking Territories. *ResearchGate*. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354541627\\_The\\_Presence\\_of\\_China\\_and\\_the\\_Chinese\\_Diaspora\\_in\\_Portugal\\_and\\_Portuguese-Speaking\\_Territories](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354541627_The_Presence_of_China_and_the_Chinese_Diaspora_in_Portugal_and_Portuguese-Speaking_Territories).

<sup>82</sup> Rodrigues, I., Amante, M.F. (2020). Mobility Regimes and the Crisis: The Changing Face of Chinese Migration due to the Portuguese Golden Visa Policy. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1752640>.

<sup>83</sup> European Parliament (2024). *Citizenship by investment (CBI) and residency by investment (RBI) schemes in the EU*. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS\\_BRI\(2024\)762395](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2024)762395).

<sup>84</sup> Transparency International (2025). EU Court of Justice puts an end to harmful citizenship-by-investment schemes. <https://transparency.eu/eu-court-of-justice-puts-an-end-to-harmful-citizenship-by-investment-schemes/>.

role in Beijing's broader Euro-African strategy.<sup>85</sup> Portugal's deep ties with Portuguese-speaking countries<sup>86</sup> provide China with a unique gateway for advancing its Belt and Road Initiative,<sup>87</sup> including the potential for more efficient shipping routes.

China's influence in Portugal is most visible through economic investment, which has raised concerns among Portugal's Western allies about potential political and strategic leverage.<sup>88</sup> One example is the 2016 acquisition by China National Fisheries Corp, which invested €5 million to purchase a 51% stake in the frozen seafood company Marfresco.<sup>89</sup>

Nevertheless, behind this economic presence lies a form of political interference, rooted both in the dependencies such investments create and in the role of diaspora communities. This dynamic poses a difficult question: how can Portugal balance the pursuit of economic opportunities with the protection of human rights and democratic resilience?

Reports have emerged of alleged covert Chinese police "service stations" operating in Portugal,<sup>90</sup> with locations identified in Lisbon, Porto, and Madeira. These centres are suspected of surveilling and intimidating members of the Chinese diaspora. Reports have surfaced of alleged covert Chinese police "service stations" operating in Portugal, with locations identified in Lisbon, Porto, and Madeira. These centres are suspected of surveilling and intimidating members of the Chinese diaspora,

<sup>85</sup> GIS Reports Online (2024). *Chinese influence in Portugal*. <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/chinese-influence-portugal>.

<sup>86</sup> Presidência da República Portuguesa (2018). *Declaração conjunta entre a República Portuguesa e a República Popular da China sobre o reforço da parceria estratégica global*. <https://www.presidencia.pt/actualidade/toda-a-actualidade/2018/12/declaracao-conjunta-entre-a-republica-portuguesa-e-a-republica-popular-da-china-sobre-o-reforco-da-parceria-estrategica-global/>.

<sup>87</sup> Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) (2024). *China's Belt and Road Initiative*. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

<sup>88</sup> Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2018). *This is China's Plan to Dominate Southern Europe*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2018/10/this-is-chinas-plan-to-dominate-southern-europe>.

<sup>89</sup> GIS Reports Online (2024).

<sup>90</sup> Safeguard Defenders (2022). 14 governments launch investigations into Chinese overseas police service stations. <https://safeguarddefenders.com/en/blog/14-governments-launch-investigations-chinese-110-overseas-police-service-stations>.

raising serious concerns about violations of individual freedoms and challenges to Portugal's sovereignty.<sup>91</sup>

At the same time, Lisbon's City Hall has come under scrutiny for repeatedly failing to protect dissidents. According to Politico,<sup>92</sup> since 2011 municipal employees have disclosed sensitive personal data of Russian and Chinese dissidents — including names, identification numbers, home addresses, and telephone numbers — directly to their respective governments. This practice has exposed activists at significant risk, undermining the very protections they sought within Portugal's borders. The scandal came to light in 2021 when it was revealed that details of dissidents protesting the arrest of Alexei Navalny's had been handed to the Russian embassy and Moscow's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>93</sup>

At the time, Lisbon's mayor, Fernando Medina, dismissed the practice as a bureaucratic error and described them as a "routine procedure" of notifying embassies about demonstrations. However, the scope and persistence of these disclosures — during a decade — suggest more than mere administrative oversight. The full truth behind this case remains unclear, but its implications for the protection of dissidents in Europe are profound.<sup>94</sup>

Although Portugal is not usually at the forefront of debates on Russian influence, notable cases of interference have surfaced. One such case involved the Russian spy couple Vladimir Aleksandrovich Danilov and Yekaterina Leonidovna Danilova,<sup>95</sup> who lived in Portugal for several

<sup>91</sup> Hugo, F. (2022). Ministério Público investiga esquadras ilegais chinesas em Portugal. *Expresso*. <https://expresso.pt/sociedade/2022-10-27-Ministerio-Publico-investiga-esquadras-ilegais-chinesas-em-Portugal-e1be69a6>.

<sup>92</sup> Hernández-Morales, A. (2021, June 10). Lisbon admits sharing Russian dissidents' personal data with Moscow. <https://www.politico.eu/article/fernando-medina-lisbon-russia-dissidents-personal-data-sharing/>.

<sup>93</sup> Público (2021, June 10). Câmara de Lisboa enviou dados de manifestantes anti-Putin ao governo russo. <https://www.publico.pt/2021/06/10/local/noticia/camara-lisboa-enviou-dados-manifestantes-antiputin-residentes-portugal-governo-russo-1965956>.

<sup>94</sup> Santos Carrapatoso, M., Penela, R. (2021, June 18). Fernando Medina apresenta conclusões da auditoria ao caso dos ativistas anti-Putin. <https://observador.pt/2021/06/18/fernando-medina-apresenta-conclusoes-da-auditoria-ao-caso-dos-ativistas-anti-putin/>.

<sup>95</sup> SIC Notícias (2025). Casal de espiões russos viveu em Portugal durante anos. <https://sicnoticias.pt/pais/2025-05-27-casal-de-espioes-russos-viveu-em-portugal-durante-anos-4e9e784b>.

years under the false identities of Manuel Francisco Steinbruck Pereira and Adriana Carolina Costa Silva Pereira.<sup>96</sup> In 2022, the Portuguese government expelled ten Russian diplomats, citing activities had “gone far beyond” the scope of diplomatic functions.<sup>97</sup> The decision, coordinate with several EU partners, reflected both the fallout from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and heightened concerns over espionage and foreign interference on Portuguese soil.<sup>98</sup>

### Policy recommendations

Liberal policymakers should actively strengthen protections for diaspora members in the EU, implementing measures to shield them from intimidation, surveillance, or coercion by foreign governments, and integrating these protections into human rights policy planning and implementation.

- Proactive identifying and support *at-risk individuals* by establishing secure channels for reporting incidents and ensuring access to legal assistance. Platforms such as the Protect Defenders platform<sup>99</sup> and the European Union Temporary Relocation Platform,<sup>100</sup> provide strong models for relocation and protection of human rights defenders.
- Implement safeguards against transnational repression to prevent surveillance, harassment, and coercion orchestrated by foreign state actors. This requires enhanced intelligence sharing and coordinated

<sup>96</sup> Pinto, N.T. (2025, May 31). A perfect legend for the illegals: How a Russian spy couple became Portuguese citizens. *Euronews*. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/05/31/a-perfect-legend-for-he-illegals-how-a-russian-spy-couple-became-portuguese-citizens>.

<sup>97</sup> RTP Notícias (2022, April 6). Embaixada da Rússia em Lisboa recusa comentar expulsão de funcionários russos. [https://www.rtp.pt/noticias/pais/embajada-da-russia-em-lisboa-recusa-comentar-expulsao-de-funcionarios-russos\\_n1396666](https://www.rtp.pt/noticias/pais/embajada-da-russia-em-lisboa-recusa-comentar-expulsao-de-funcionarios-russos_n1396666).

<sup>98</sup> Expresso (2022, April 5). Portugal expulsa 10 funcionários da embaixada russa. <https://expresso.pt/politica/2022-04-05-Portugal-expulsa-10-funcionarios-da-embaixada-russa-1ca02c73>.

<sup>99</sup> ProtectDefenders.eu (2024). *About us*. <https://protectdefenders.eu/about-us/#who>.

<sup>100</sup> European Union Temporary Relocation Platform (EUTRP) (2024). *Official website*. <https://eutrp.eu/>.

law enforcement responses across EU Member States. For example, “Operation Eastwood”, coordinated by Europol and Eurojust, targeted the pro-Russian cybercrime network NoName057(16).<sup>101</sup>

Liberal policymakers should propose and ensure that mechanisms are in place to promote the ethical scrutiny of residency and visa schemes in the EU.

- Prioritize protection for political exiles by subjecting residency and visa schemes to ethical review, ensuring swift and secure processing for genuine dissidents. This can be achieved by developing a fast-track protection channel for political exiles and dissidents, with defined processing deadlines and safeguards against arbitrary rejection, leveraging the expertise of the EU Agency for Asylum (EUAA).<sup>102</sup>
- Establish accountability for regime-linked individuals to ensure rigorous scrutiny of applicants demonstrably connected to authoritarian regimes who may pose security. This should be connected to the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime which lists persons and entities<sup>103</sup> or by creating an EU-level system (building on Europol/Eurojust data intelligence) to flag regime-linked individuals during visa and residency processing.

Liberal policymakers should enhance transparency and oversight of foreign influence by strengthening mechanisms to monitor, regulate, and disclose the activities of foreign state-linked actors, reinforcing the relevance of a comprehensive “foreign agent” law.

<sup>101</sup> Europol (2024). Global operation targets NoName057(16) pro-Russian cybercrime network. <https://www.europol.europa.eu/media-press/newsroom/news/global-operation-targets-nickname05716-pro-russian-cybercrime-network>.

<sup>102</sup> European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) (2024). *Official site*. <https://euaa.europa.eu/>.

<sup>103</sup> Council of the European Union (2024, December 2). EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime listings renewed for an additional year. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/12/02/eu-global-human-rights-sanctions-regime-listings-renewed-for-an-additional-year/>.

- Introduce enhanced transparency requirements for foreign investments, particularly those originating from state-linked entities. This can be newly-established or they can strengthen a specialized authority modelled on the EU Foreign Direct Investment Screening Regulation.<sup>104</sup>
- Strengthen oversight of cultural, religious, and educational institutions with foreign ties by requiring clear disclosure of funding sources and operational links to authoritarian regimes, ensuring they do not serve as conduits for foreign interference. This could be achieved through foreign agent transparency laws (similar to the US Foreign Agents Registration Act<sup>105</sup>), which obliges entities acting on behalf of foreign governments or interests to register and report their activities.

Liberal policymakers should strengthen mechanisms to demand and guarantee public accountability from national authorities for acts of transnational repression.

- Addressing data leaks through rapid response units across Europe. These units should be embedded in data protection agencies and human rights organisations, with the mandate to provide assistance to dissidents and at-risk individuals whose sensitive personal information has been compromised. This should be connected to the *European Data Protection Board*<sup>106</sup> and EU Fundamental Rights Agency<sup>107</sup> to ensure consistency in responding to breaches affecting exile and diaspora communities.

<sup>104</sup> European Commission (2024). *Investment Screening Regulation*. [https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/enforcement-and-protection/investment-screening\\_en](https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/enforcement-and-protection/investment-screening_en).

<sup>105</sup> United States Department of Justice (2024). *Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA)*. <https://www.justice.gov/nsd-fara>.

<sup>106</sup> European Data Protection Board (EDPB) (2024). *Official site*. [https://www.edpb.europa.eu/edpb\\_en](https://www.edpb.europa.eu/edpb_en).

<sup>107</sup> European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (2024). *Official site*. <https://fra.europa.eu/en>.

## Conclusions

Diaspora communities play a dual role in Europe, serving both as a refuge for dissidents and as a potential source of influence for authoritarian regimes. This presents a significant challenge for liberal democracies, requiring them to protect individuals while also safeguarding against foreign interference.

Europe faces a dense and systemic web of foreign interference and transnational repression led by Russia and China, extending well beyond traditional diplomacy. This “spider web” of influence weaves together economic leverage, disinformation, digital warfare, and transnational repression. At the very centre of this web lie diaspora communities, caught between two opposing forces.

The cases of Portugal and Germany illustrate this paradox vividly: Portugal reveals vulnerabilities tied to investment schemes, strategic dependencies, and failures to protect dissidents, while Germany shows how the scale of its Russian and Chinese diaspora can be exploited by authoritarian states for intelligence, infiltration, and influence operations.

Beyond legislative measures, a more alarming issue is the connivance by some EU Member States, where economic interests and energy dependencies lead to a deliberate silence in the face of foreign interference and translational repression. In certain cases, political representatives may even act as allies of these regimes, further exposing diaspora members within their own territories. This issue has been particularly evident in Lisbon, where municipal authorities systematically disclosed dissidents’ personal data to their countries of origin over the course of a decade.

For liberals, the task is twofold: shield dissidents from transnational repression and prevent the instrumentalization of diaspora communities as tools of foreign interference. Achieving this balance requires more than security measures alone. It demands a principled approach that integrates strong safeguards for human rights with mechanisms for transparency, accountability, and oversight of foreign-linked institutions. It also requires actively engaging diaspora communities as partners in the defence of democratic values — drawing on their knowledge, voices, and legitimacy to build resilience against authoritarian narratives.

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# Democracy In Trouble

## The Liberal Pathway From Soft Power To Democratic Resilience

RACHEL PALMA RANDLE

### Introduction

The year 2024 was a remarkable one for democracy. With 74 national elections,<sup>1</sup> alongside the European Parliamentary elections, more than 1.6 billion people around the globe cast their votes. At first glance, these numbers might suggest that democracy is thriving. Yet, in recent years we have also witnessed troubling signs of democratic backsliding worldwide. This erosion — fuelled by election interference and the distortion of public debate — demands urgent attention. Simply analysing disinformation in elections or acknowledging the widespread consensus that foreign powers are meddling in democratic processes, is not enough. Liberal leaders must confront what has gone wrong and, more importantly, articulate a vision for how participatory democracy can be sustained in liberal societies.

In today's political landscape, far right movements and foreign state actors are often united and highly coordinated in their attempts to sway electoral outcomes across Europe and beyond. By contrast, progressive and liberal responses are too often fragmented, slow, underfunded, and mired in regulatory debates over national competencies. While legislation and stronger regulation remain essential — for example, in the sphere of campaign finance — what is urgently needed is a dramatic shift in scale, funding, and coordination to confront foreign interference.

<sup>1</sup> International Idea (2024). The 2024 Global Elections Super Cycle. <https://www.idea.int/initiatives/the-2024-global-elections-supercycle>.

Civil society and NGOs are vital to strengthening civic preparedness and democratic resilience. However, the responsibility for resisting influence operations and fact-checking the vast online information space cannot rest on the shoulders of individuals and charities alone. Liberal and progressive parties across Europe must work together and press for bold action: both to rein in the algorithms that amplify disinformation and to support ongoing efforts against foreign information manipulation and interference.<sup>2</sup>

### Time to be Bold

As liberals, there is often an instinctive resistance to heavy regulation and legislative intervention. Yet since 2015 — through the UK experience, the Cambridge Analytica scandal, and more recent elections in Poland and Romania — it has become undeniable that data exploitation, political propaganda, and foreign interference pose a direct and present danger to democracy. This destabilization of governmental foundations and erosion of individual rights should be treated as an international emergency — one that liberals must be at the forefront of confronting. In Brussels, however, progress remains cautious and slow. Attention is directed toward initiatives like the *Democracy Shield* and civic preparedness programs, while officials tread carefully so as not to blur national competencies. What is consistently missing from these discussions are two fundamental questions: who will coordinate with civil society, and how will this work be funded? Relying on individual states to resist interference assumes not only that governments want to prevent foreign influence — rather than welcome it — but also that they have the resources and expertise to tackle challenges that are by nature transnational.

<sup>2</sup> European Union External Action (2025, March 14). Information Integrity and Countering Foreign Information Manipulation & Interference (FIMI). [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/information-integrity-and-countering-foreign-information-manipulation-interference-fimi\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/information-integrity-and-countering-foreign-information-manipulation-interference-fimi_en).

The language of “foreign interference”, “democratic backsliding”, and “civil preparedness” dominates political and policy debates. Yet ordinary citizens remain largely unaware of, or indifferent to, academic analyses of threats to democracy. People respond to what touches their daily lives — issues that resonate with their concerns. For many, elections are the only moments when they actively engage with the concept of democracy. This disconnection from community services and ongoing political dialogue leaves citizens especially vulnerable to the pull of algorithms that appear to offer simple solutions to complex problems.

### Not Hollywood but Europe

Foreign interference in elections is no longer the stuff of Hollywood thrillers. Today, there is quantifiable and compelling evidence of external meddling in Western democracies. Where threats once seemed straightforward and easily understood, they have become increasingly complex, refined, and hybrid in nature. As the European External Action Service (EEAS) explains:

Hybrid threats combine conventional and unconventional, military and non-military activities that can be used in a coordinated manner by state or non-state actors to achieve specific political objectives. Hybrid campaigns are multidimensional, combining coercive and subversive measures, using both conventional and unconventional tools and tactics. They are designed to be difficult to detect or attribute. These threats target critical vulnerabilities and seek to create confusion to hinder swift and effective decision-making.<sup>3</sup>

Hostile actors employ a wide arsenal of tools in such hybrid warfare to undermine democracy. These include, but are not limited to, strategic corruption, economic extortion, disinformation, manipulation and psychological warfare, cyberattacks, the weaponization of social media

<sup>3</sup> European Union External Action (2025, March 14).

and personal data, and, critically, interference in elections and public debate.

Evidence of these tactics in action is mounting. The following cases of foreign interference in elections — substantiated by credible sources — will be referenced throughout this article:

- the UK General Election (2019);
- the Romanian Presidential Election (2024);
- the European Parliament elections in the Netherlands (2024);
- the Belgian local elections (2024); and
- the Polish National Election (2025).

### People vs. The System

The country examples can be analysed through two distinct “spheres” of foreign influence: the *societal* and the *institutional*. The FIMI-ISAC report (October 2024) illustrates just how varied and extensive foreign interference can be, with case studies ranging from gendered disinformation in EU elections to conspiracy theories about delayed results in Spain.<sup>4</sup> The report identifies two broad narratives that we adopt here: one seeks to exploit weaknesses within society, while the other aims to undermine trust in democratic institutions over time. As the following examples show, most interference campaigns contain elements of both.

Exploitation of societal vulnerabilities often takes the form of disinformation: spreading false or misleading claims about social groups, political parties, or sensitive issues. Such tactics deepen polarization and fuel civic disengagement, leaving communities less inclined to participate actively in public life. In some cases, citizens even tolerate — or welcome — anti-democratic narratives if they believe these will deliver short-term improvements to their daily lives. These are developments

<sup>4</sup> Margas, K., Nazari, S. (2025). Poland: Country Election Risk Assessment (CERA). FIMI-ISAC. <https://fimi-isac.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/POLISH-CERA.pdf>.

that politicians at every level must confront to safeguard the social fabric, both locally and nationally.

Erosion of trust in institutions involves a different set of tools: disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, and financial manipulation. Foreign actors frequently target democracy outside the electoral cycle, seeking to chip away at public confidence in institutions over time. Here, evidence is tangible — for instance, the TikTok disinformation campaign during Romania's most recent election. Under frameworks such as the *Digital Services Act* and the *Democracy Shield*, the EU is beginning to address these threats. On the financial front, however, the risks are often overlooked: foreign donations to political parties can give them disproportionate influence, shaping campaigns and even the trajectory of parties or individual politicians.

There is, of course, no single solution to the challenges democracy faces. Yet by examining interference through these two spheres — societal vulnerabilities and institutional erosion — we can identify practical measures that liberal leaders and progressive parties might take, both individually and collectively, to begin the long, patient work of restoring participatory democracy in ways that make a real difference in citizens' lives.

### Playing on social vulnerabilities

Online tools have become essential in modern election campaigns, transforming how political parties communicate and engage with voters. Direct access to the electorate has been a game-changer. Yet the very same tools are also exploited by malign actors, as seen in recent elections in Poland, Romania, and the Netherlands.

### Poland: exploiting social divisions

The Polish Presidential Elections in 2025 faced unprecedented challenges from foreign manipulation. Even before the vote, warnings were raised in the *Poland: Country Election Risk Assessment. FIMI Response Team Report:*

The primary concern revolves around influence operations, cyberattacks, and the exploitation of social divisions, with Russia and Belarus identified as major potential actors. Russia and Belarus are leveraging existing political fault lines in Poland concerning judicial reforms, human rights, migration, and civil rights. Foreign actors have used tactics such as, but not limited to, email leaks, the creation of fake news outlets, the weaponisation of refugees, incapacitating online services, and the saturation of the digital sphere with polarised content. Several of these tactics were evident in 2021 when a cyberattack breached the digital communications of Michał Dworczyk, a prominent figure in Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki's administration.

As of April 15, 2025, multiple foreign interference operations targeting Poland, aiming to interfere in the upcoming election, had been uncovered.”<sup>5</sup>

By the time of the election, foreign information manipulation and interference were not only inevitable but fully expected. And yet, across Europe, efforts to shift from analysis to action remained limited.

Today, disinformation poses as great a threat to democratic stability as conventional warfare. Pro-Russian and far right narratives circulate within online echo chambers where heavily funded and coordinated campaigns fuel polarization and social discord. The standard liberal response — fact-checking — has proven inadequate, based on the flawed assumption that once people are presented with accurate information, they will reject disinformation and democracy will be secure. In reality, fact-checking alone cannot stem the momentum of disinformation. As experts emphasize, “Building societal resilience means not just reacting to disinformation but anticipating it — and ensuring adversaries do not get there first.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Margas, K., Nazari, S. (2025).

<sup>6</sup> Kubś, J. (2025, June 6). The Kremlin's Double Game: Russian Attempts to Influence Poland's 2025 Election. *Globsec*.

## Romania: the weaponisation of social media

A stark example of social media being weaponized to undermine democracy was the annulment of Romania's 2024 Presidential Election after the first round. According to Funky Citizen, a Romanian non-profit organization specializing in anti-disinformation efforts, a €1 million disinformation campaign boosted Cal Georgescu's candidacy. The operation was coordinated through 250,000 TikTok accounts spread across 19 countries and relied on the platform's "apparent inability — or unwillingness — to detect and counter this threat."<sup>7</sup>

Funky Citizen documented:

- coordinated inauthentic online behaviour;
- automated accounts and bot activity;
- daily disinformation and misleading narratives; and
- smear campaigns targeting minorities, social groups, and candidates (including attacks based on mental illness and family status).

The impact was staggering. "In just two months, Georgescu's content garnered over 100 million views, with hashtags promoting his candidacy dominating the platform's Romanian political discourse."<sup>8</sup>

The organization concluded: "This crisis serves as a stark warning: without substantial reform in platform governance and oversight, social media platforms risk becoming powerful tools for undermining democratic processes." While the Rapid Response System established under the Romanian Signatories of the Code of Practice by Meta, TikTok, Google, and Microsoft represented an important step, it was both reactive — introduced only after the annulment of the election in December 2024 — and inadequate. The removal of malicious content and fake accounts was far too slow and limited in scope to counter the damage already done.

## The Netherlands: disrupting voter information

<sup>7</sup> Funky Citizen (2024). Undermining Democracy: The Weaponization Of Social Media In Romania's 2024 Elections. <https://funky.org/undermining-democracy-the-weaponization-of-social-media-in-romanias-2024-elections/>.

<sup>8</sup> Funky Citizen (2024).

Where the situations in Romania and Poland centred on the spread of dis-information, the European Parliament elections in the Netherlands revealed the opposite dynamic: the blocking of information. In June 2024, several political parties reported limited accessibility to their websites. These disruptions were later confirmed as Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks, which prevented Dutch voters from accessing information about party platforms in the days leading up to the polls. Russian “hacktivists” eventually claimed responsibility, and Dutch intelligence services corroborated their involvement. Although short-lived, the attacks interfered with the availability of vital political information on a *crucial voting day*.<sup>9</sup>

This case underscores how online assaults on democracy are increasingly sophisticated and extend beyond simple election day disruptions. They work persistently to weaken democratic institutions. Tackling these threats requires sustained collaboration across Europe and beyond, since no single country — or single election — can resolve the problem.

While the European Union has developed legislation such as the *Digital Services Act* and, more recently, the *Democracy Shield*, the challenge lies not in drafting laws but in enforcing them. Enforcement remains inconsistent, often bogged down in lengthy legal disputes. Progress may ultimately come through the courts, where precedent can establish meaningful limits on the behaviour of both platforms and malign actors.

Liberals and progressives must therefore insist on strong, consistent enforcement. The online sphere must be reshaped to balance freedom of expression with the civic right to open, free, and fair elections. Cybersecurity deserves to be defended with the same seriousness and resources as the physical borders of Europe.

### Breaking down trust in democratic institutions

<sup>9</sup> National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) (2024, October). Cyber Security Assessment Netherlands 2024. <https://english.nctv.nl/topics/cyber-security-assessment-netherlands>.

Of the many ways to erode trust in democratic institutions, two often-overlooked “poor cousins” of disinformation stand out: electoral disruption and civic disengagement. Though less visible in public debate, their impact is no less damaging. Both reveal how fragile institutional trust has become — and how ill-prepared the EU and its member states remain in addressing these murkier challenges. Progressives, in particular, struggle to re-engage communities that no longer feel compelled to participate actively in civic life, or that view threats to democracy as abstract and irrelevant to their daily concerns.

Foreign interference online can sometimes feel remote from the act of casting a ballot. Yet electoral corruption is a far more concrete — and often more immediate — form of democratic interference. Two areas deserve special attention: the misuse of Special Voting Arrangements (sva) and campaign finance fraud. By examining these practices, we can better understand both the practical mechanics and the broader dynamics of how foreign actors exploit vulnerabilities in electoral systems.

#### Belgium: electoral disruption in Ninove

What may seem like a “far from your bed” scenario is illustrated vividly by the recent case of local elections in Ninove.<sup>10</sup> In this instance, the disruption came through proxy voting. Irregularities were first flagged by a local magistrate, and prosecutors suspect that voters casting ballots by proxy had been pressured into doing so (which is illegal), with falsified medical certificates used to justify the arrangements. While no verdict has been reached, several arrests have already been made.

Although this case appears to involve domestic actors rather than foreign interference, it demonstrates how fragile electoral procedures can be. Ninove also shows that disruption does not necessarily depend

<sup>10</sup> VRT.be (2025, May 21). 6 of the 8 suspects detained in Ninove electoral fraud investigation have been released, Mayor's stepdaughter still detained. <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/en/2025/05/21/6-of-the-8-suspects-detained-in-ninove-electoral-fraud-investigation/>.

on shifting results in numerical terms: simply raising doubts about the integrity of an election can be enough to damage public trust.

The significance of proxy voting — and its risks — varies across Europe. Delegating one's vote is permitted in the UK, Poland, and the Netherlands, among others.<sup>11</sup> In the Netherlands, it is a common practice; in Poland, it remains marginal. Proxy voting and other Special Voting Arrangements (SVA), such as postal ballots, provide important access for citizens unable to vote in person. Yet as the Ninove case reveals, they also open the door to coercion, large-scale recruitment of votes, limited transparency, and even the loss of ballots through transfer errors. The potential for abuse is not confined to domestic politics: it is easy to imagine foreign actors exploiting such mechanisms — for example, mobilizing diaspora communities or networks to collect proxy votes under false pretences. The effect might not be decisive in terms of numbers, but it would still corrode confidence in the system.

For this reason, continuous attention to checks and balances in both legislation and electoral organization is essential. Ensuring secure elections requires not only legal safeguards but also dedicated budgets. Liberals, in particular, should resist cuts to electoral spending and instead push for stronger protections. Other tools are available as well: active participation in election observation missions, along with fostering knowledge-sharing and practical exchanges between electoral bodies, can help close vulnerabilities and limit the risk of disruption.

#### United Kingdom: party financing as a vulnerability

The UK illustrates how gaps in party finance regulation can create opportunities for undue influence. While there are rules governing donations and contributions, recent controversies have shown how sophisticated actors — both domestic and foreign — can exploit loopholes or the slow

<sup>11</sup> Heinmaa, T. (2020, October 19). Special Voting Arrangements (SVAs) in Europe: In-Country Postal, Early, Mobile and Proxy Arrangements in Individual Countries. *International Idea*. <https://www.idea.int/news/special-voting-arrangements-svas-europe-country-postal-early-mobile-and-proxy-arrangements>.

pace of enforcement. Large donations can amplify certain voices, disproportionately influence campaigns, and even shape the priorities of political parties or individual politicians.

This case underscores a broader truth: financial transparency is not a mere technicality, but a cornerstone of democratic resilience. When party funding is opaque or poorly monitored, the integrity of elections and public trust in institutions are at risk. The UK example serves as a cautionary tale, reminding liberal leaders and progressive parties that robust enforcement, timely regulation, and vigilance are essential to prevent money from undermining democracy.

While the systems and regulators overseeing electoral finance in the UK are generally regarded as robust and transparent, recent analysis of the 2019 General Election reveals a significant loophole. This gap allows individuals to donate substantial sums to individual candidates during the campaign period without being required to declare the source. Such a loophole creates a clear opportunity for actors seeking to influence campaigns without public scrutiny.

According to *Donations to Candidates at Election Time* by Butler and Pack:

Based on an analysis of candidate returns provided to us by the Electoral Commission, we estimate that over £3.4 million was donated this way at the 2019 election, with almost no ability for citizens to identify the sources of these donations.<sup>12</sup>

Transparency in campaign finance — ensuring that the public can see who is funding parties and candidates — is central to a healthy democracy, enabling accountability for both politicians and donors. The rise of the “super donor” further amplifies these risks. High-profile examples, such as Elon Musk’s reported \$290 million in support of Republican candidates in the US or the rumoured £78 million to Reform UK, alongside hundreds of donors contributing £100,000 or more to UK candidates, illustrate the scale. Motivations behind these contributions remain

<sup>12</sup> Butler, Ch., Pack, M. (2025, May 19). *Donations to Candidates at Election Time: A Hidden Source of Mass Party Funding?* *The Political Quarterly* 96(3), 546–553.

opaque, and the legal loopholes that allow them highlight systemic vulnerabilities in even well-regulated democracies.

### Stricter oversight in the Netherlands

Across the Channel, new legislation in the Netherlands could mark a step forward in effective campaign finance regulation. The forthcoming Dutch General Election will provide a useful case study for both campaign finance and disinformation.

Dutch regulations<sup>13</sup> for party financing have evolved in recent years. The *Wet financiering politieke partijen* came into effect on 1 January 2023, following widespread media attention<sup>14</sup> to a €1 million donation to D66 — though donations of this scale were by no means unprecedented. In the lead-up to parliamentary elections, additional transparency measures<sup>15</sup> require participating parties to publish detailed overviews of gifts, with the reporting threshold lowered to €1,000. Media routinely scrutinize these registers, producing regular post-election analyses of who donated to which party.

While these changes place significant administrative pressure on political parties and may discourage donors who prefer anonymity, they also strengthen democracy from a foreign interference perspective. By ensuring parties disclose their backers, voters gain a clearer picture of influences shaping political campaigns.

No system is perfect. Loopholes will always exist, and stricter regulations may not automatically improve outcomes. They can, at times, limit engagement and hinder connections between parties and supporters.

<sup>13</sup> Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (2024). Giften en subsidies politieke partijen. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/democratie/rol-politieke-partijen/giften-en-subsidies-politieke-partijen>.

<sup>14</sup> Landman, I. (2021, March 4). Tonnen aan giften voor partijen: 'Donateur wordt zo beetje werkgever van politici'. *NOS*. <https://nos.nl/artikel/2371252-tonnen-aan-giften-voor-partijen-donateur-wordt-zo-beetje-werkgever-van-politici>.

<sup>15</sup> Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (2023). Aanvullend overzicht giften en schulden politieke partijen Tweede Kamerverkiezing 2023. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/democratie/documenten/rapporten/2024/01/22/aanvullend-overzicht-giften-en-schulden-politieke-partijen-tweede-kamerverkiezing-2023>

The challenge for legislators is to design transparent, fair, and adaptable regulations that keep pace with a fast-moving political landscape. Standards such as Transparency International's *Standards for Integrity in Political Life*<sup>16</sup> provide valuable guidance — benchmarks that liberal politicians and parties would do well to embrace.

### The core of the solution is civic engagement

So, how can liberal leaders begin to untangle this complex web? One core approach — rooted in liberal values — is empowering communities and individuals to move beyond passive citizenship. Enabling citizens to engage actively, challenge political leaders, and critically evaluate campaigns and disinformation is central to a functioning democracy. An engaged community that understands its strengths and needs could, at least in theory, resist populist narratives — provided there is a shared understanding of reality rather than the myths circulating online.

Yet people are busy. Demands on society are at an all-time high, life moves fast, and frustrations mount when political and societal change lags behind. The EU must therefore be cautious not to overburden citizens with expectations of self-education and advocacy, luxuries accessible mainly to the time- and financially- rich. Volunteer fact-checkers and civil education initiatives, such as the coordinated efforts in the Romanian elections, are vital but insufficient on their own to counter the tidal wave of organized misinformation and interference. Reliance on individuals to act independently is unrealistic. Meanwhile, dwindling funding for democracy-related projects poses a serious threat to civic engagement and understanding of democratic systems.

The challenge is not purely financial, though money is a significant barrier in combating well-funded right wing and foreign disinformation networks. More pressing is the fragmented, siloed nature of funding for NGOs and

<sup>16</sup> Transparency International (2024, December 16). Electoral corruption in the biggest election year. <https://www.transparency.org/en/blog/electoral-corruption-in-biggest-election-year>.

civil society, which limits their ability to achieve sustained impact. Securing small, inconsistent grants has long been a precarious survival strategy for these organizations; in today's environment, it is a recipe for failure. Coordinating civil society efforts, "supersizing" their voices, and consolidating funding streams are critical steps to maximize effectiveness. There is no single solution. What is urgently required is coordinated action across all levels of government. This includes civil education to rebuild trust in institutions, proactive measures to counter disinformation, enforcement of legislation to regulate social media platforms, and reforms to election law and campaign finance. Only through a comprehensive, multi-layered approach can liberal leaders hope to protect and strengthen participatory democracy.

### Five things liberals can do to keep democracy out of trouble

Plenty of problems exist, but there are also solutions. While there are no quick fixes — no sticking plaster for the grazed knee of democracy — liberal leaders can take deliberate actions at national, party, and EU levels to strengthen resilient, participatory democratic systems. These actions provide concrete guidance toward robust European electoral frameworks, which form the backbone of vibrant democracies.

#### 1. Drive the pace of investment in and enforcement of cybersecurity

Liberals must continuously pressure the EU Commission to enforce existing powers under the *Digital Services Act*, limiting the influence of mega social media platforms. Legislation and policy proposals abound, but most lack the urgency and enforceability needed to counter sophisticated foreign interference. Civil society, NGOs, and political parties are aware of the threat but need bold leadership to match the speed and coordination of foreign actors.

Investing in cybersecurity at both EU and national levels offers a potential "quick win". Yet Europe remains hesitant in tackling online foreign threats, especially given US dominance of digital platforms and concerns

about geopolitical influence. European leaders must commit not only to hard power cybersecurity tools but also to supporting innovation in European digital infrastructure, reducing reliance on US and Chinese platforms.

## 2. Holistic funding for civil society: freeing capacity to strengthen democracy

Responsibility for democracy cannot rest solely with nation-states, especially given the coordinated and well-resourced nature of foreign interference. NGOs and civil society play a vital role in civic engagement, but the current funding model – small, inconsistent grants – is inadequate. This siloed approach limits impact, forces organizations into endless cycles of applications and reporting, and prevents strategic, coordinated action.

A holistic EU-wide funding model could consolidate grants, provide long-term stability, and free NGOs to focus on protecting democracy rather than chasing resources. Lessons can be drawn from initiatives like the Polish Resilience Council, which demonstrates effective cross-sector collaboration between government and civil society. Liberal parties should explore alternative funding structures that enable NGOs to work strategically across borders, with long-term commitment as the foundation.

## 3. Support and fund training for political activists

Most training for political staff and activists focuses narrowly on managing online abuse or countering disinformation. Coordination across moderate parties – both within and between nation-states – on hybrid threats is minimal, leaving grassroots campaigners disconnected from broader democratic strategies.

Providing systematic training for activists and campaign staff would bridge this gap. It would create spaces to share best practices, integrate lessons from recent elections in Romania and Poland, and reinforce the role of civil society as part of a functioning participatory democracy. Liberal politicians must take the lead in addressing this training gap.

#### 4. Invest in civic education

Strategic investment in soft power initiatives — civic education, NGO support, and community engagement — is essential but under threat as resources shift toward hard-power priorities like defence spending. Civic education strengthens democracy, rebuilds trust in institutions, and promotes informed community participation.

Communities are increasingly polarized, with opinions framed in binary terms. Rebuilding trust and cohesion requires government-backed investment, not just reliance on charities and NGOs. Liberal politicians are well-positioned to prioritize these soft-power initiatives and advocate for sustained support.

#### 5. Lead by example

Much discussion of democracy occurs at a high intellectual level, detached from grassroots realities. Liberal stakeholders must improve in three key areas:

1. Direct communication with voters: Honest dialogue about local issues mitigates populist narratives that blame “others” for societal problems.
2. Devolving real powers and resources to communities: Reducing feelings of helplessness and increasing civic agency strengthens democratic resilience.
3. Facilitating collaborative action: Bringing together citizens, stakeholders, and public and private sectors to create tangible, visible improvements in people’s daily lives counters the narrative that democracy is ineffective.

Liberal leadership is not just about policy; it is about demonstrating that participatory democracy works in practice, showing up where people live, and actively reinforcing the value of engagement.

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# Oil, Goals, and Political Influence

## How Gulf States Use European Football as a Soft Power Strategy

CONSTANTINOS SARAVAKOS

### Introduction

Across the early twenty-first century Gulf states, most prominently Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia, have managed to influence international relations via energy exports and sovereign wealth investments. However, more recently, their strategic focus has increasingly shifted toward enhancing their legitimacy, reputation, and visibility. The Gulf states have emerged as pivotal actors in international sports arena over the last decade, yet the regional political character of these states often sits uncomfortably beside their international ambitions. Despite efforts at institutional modernisation, all three remain non-democratic monarchies, with limited political pluralism and concentrated executive power. According to Freedom House's most recent evaluations, Saudi Arabia and the UAE remain categorised as "Not Free", while Qatar — though slightly more open — also fails to meet liberal democratic thresholds, particularly in areas concerning press freedom, labour rights, and judicial independence.<sup>1</sup>

Gulf states have moved towards direct sovereign investment in top-tier European and US sports, an evolution signalling that sportswashing is entering a new phase, with state-backed entities and wealth funds acquiring clubs and leagues, rather than simply intermediaries, making

<sup>1</sup> Freedom House (2024). *Freedom in the World: Country Scores*. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2024/table-scores>.

sport vulnerable to geopolitical and macroeconomic pressure.<sup>2</sup> As these investments deepen, regulatory and legal systems struggle to keep pace, leaving democratic institutions exposed to influence that escapes traditional scrutiny. The prolonged investment drought and economic crisis across Europe over the past decade have made many football fan bases more receptive to ownership models that, while often undemocratic, could deliver financial stability and on-field success.

In this context, the concepts of *soft power* and *sportswashing* have gained renewed analytical relevance. Joseph Nye originally defined soft power as the capacity to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment.<sup>3</sup> For Gulf states, football serves precisely this function: it is a stage on which to recode authoritarian image into cosmopolitan legitimacy, and where association with elite European clubs can signal progressiveness and global integration. Conversely, critics have advanced the notion of sportswashing, namely a more pejorative frame, whereby regimes instrumentalise sport to obscure rights violations, deflect scrutiny, or launder reputational risk.

This paper argues that Gulf states deploy European football not merely as entertainment or commercial investment, but as a calibrated soft power vector, a tool of foreign policy and domestic image management. This soft power is not benign or incidental; it is embedded within broader projects of regime survival, geopolitical leverage, and post-oil economic vision. By examining the strategic logics, institutional channels, and political consequences of Gulf investments, focusing on European football, the paper aims to unpack the interplay between sport, sovereignty, and symbolic capital in a changing international order.

<sup>2</sup> Oxford Analytica Expert Briefings (2023, July 19). Sportswashing by Gulf states will evolve further.

<sup>3</sup> Nye, J. S. (2004). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: PublicAffairs.

## Football as a political tool

Football has long been entangled with politics, from military dictatorships to democratic states. Governments and leaders have repeatedly recognised the sport's emotional power and its ability to generate legitimacy, or in some cases avoid scrutiny. One of the most evident historic examples comes from Argentina under the rule of dictator Jorge Rafael Videla. During the 1978 World Cup, the ruling military junta used the national team's triumph to project unity and mask the regime's brutal repression, even as thousands of political dissidents were "disappeared" just kilometres from the stadium.<sup>4</sup> The tournament was transformed into political theatre, one in which victory was leveraged not for sporting glory alone, but for regime validation.

This pattern has repeated across contexts. Benito Mussolini's Italy hosted and won the 1934 World Cup showing to everyone the fascist power, while, more recently, Vladimir Putin's Russia used the 2018 tournament to showcase stability and attract global attention despite rising authoritarianism and international sanctions. What these examples share is a belief that football, as a globally popular and emotionally resonant medium, can be instrumentalised to reshape public narratives. In the hands of states, it becomes a tool not just of culture, but of control, diplomacy, and ideological projection, that shapes attitudes.

The Gulf states have adapted this logic to the 21st century. But unlike past examples of state-led football manipulation, the Gulf strategy is not confined to national teams or domestic tournaments, it is deeply embedded in global club ownership, corporate sponsorship, and long-term media investment. Each state's approach is distinct, yet shares common features: use of sovereign wealth, alignment with national branding goals, and pursuit of prestige through elite football institutions.

Qatar's case is perhaps the most emblematic, since through Qatar Sports Investments (QSI), a state-linked entity, the country has managed

<sup>4</sup> Archetti, E.P. (2002), Football, Political Discourse and the Military Regime in Argentina (1976–83). *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 21(3), 439–457. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1470-9856.00052>.

to purchase Paris Saint-Germain (PSG), a prestigious French club of the capital, in 2011. It transformed the club into a continental powerhouse, by signing global stars such as Neymar and Lionel Messi. Thus, PSG became the flagship of Qatari visibility in Europe,<sup>5</sup> while at the same time, Qatar launched beIN Sports, a satellite broadcaster operating in over 40 countries, giving the state a significant stake in the sport's global media ecosystem.<sup>6</sup> The ultimate stage was the 2022 FIFA World Cup, the first ever such tournament in the Arab world. Qatar spent an estimated \$220 billion on infrastructure and promotional efforts, crafting a quite carefully designed spectacle meant to display high quality content both in and out the pitch. While critics for labour abuses and civil liberties restrictions were loud, the state's narrative focused on legacy, tolerance, and national pride as the main themes of their campaign.<sup>7</sup> In addition, FIFA not only failed to question the regime's practices, but actively put aside political and human rights concerns, urging national football associations that expressed criticism to "focus solely on football" instead.<sup>8</sup>

The United Arab Emirates, meanwhile, used football ownership to position Abu Dhabi as a modern, outward-facing hub. In 2008, Sheikh Mansour's Abu Dhabi United Group bought Manchester City, a club with a long history but few recent successes. Over the next decade, heavy investment turned City into one of the most successful teams in Europe, winning multiple Premier League titles and, eventually, the UEFA Champions League. The club's facilities, academy system, and international partnerships all bear the imprint of state ambition, with the City Football Group becoming a transnational franchise network.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Conn, D. (2021, August 10) Qatar's Billion-Euro Bid for Glory Through Paris Saint-Germain. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2021/aug/10/psg-paris-saint-germain-messi-qatar-ownership>.

<sup>6</sup> beIN Media Group (2023). Our Story. <https://www.beinmediagroup.com/about/>.

<sup>7</sup> Amnesty International (2022). Qatar: Reality Check 2022. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2022/10/reality-check-2022/>.

<sup>8</sup> Roan, D. (2022, November 4). Fifa tells teams to 'focus on football' at Qatar World Cup in letter revealed by BBC Sport. *BBC Sport*. <https://www.bbc.com/sport/football/63533589>.

<sup>9</sup> Robinson, J., Clegg, J. (2018). *The Club: How the English Premier League Became the Wildest, Richest, Most Disruptive Force in Sports*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Manchester City is now synonymous not only with sporting success but with the UAE's broader narrative of urban innovation and leadership. Saudi Arabia entered the football arena more recently, but with similar ambition. In 2021, its Public Investment Fund (PIF), chaired by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, acquired Newcastle United, a historic but underperforming English club. The move sparked controversy over human rights, but also drew attention to the Kingdom's Vision 2030 programme, which aims to diversify the economy, increase cultural engagement, and reposition the country globally.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the club takeover, Saudi Arabia has hosted high-profile international matches, expanded its domestic league with marquee player signings, and is preparing bids for major tournaments. These moves are not isolated — they reflect a broader state strategy of branding, reform, and influence projection through sport.

Across all three cases, football functions as a symbolic extension of state power. Stadiums, players, trophies, and media platforms become vessels through which Gulf states communicate identity, cultivate soft power, and assert their place in a crowded global landscape. But beneath the surface, they also reveal the tensions of modern authoritarianism: using spectacle to mask constraint, and projecting openness through a sport that often resists political neutrality.

By the mid-2010s, the global map of sport investment had shifted dramatically. In 2014 alone, 76.2% of global sport investments originated from Asia and the Middle East, a staggering figure that reflected both the region's financial firepower and its growing strategic interest in sport as a vehicle of influence.<sup>11</sup> As Figure 1 shows, by 2014 the Middle Eastern countries have been intensifying investments in European football in almost every major league and this trend keep expanded.

<sup>10</sup> Maguire, J., Falcoos, M. (2023). Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and Football: Soft Power or Spectacle? *Sport in Society*, 26(4), 511–527. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2023.2194932>.

<sup>11</sup> PwC (2015). *Changing the Game: Outlook for the Global Sports Market to 2019*. <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/industries/tmt/publications/global-sports-outlook.html>.

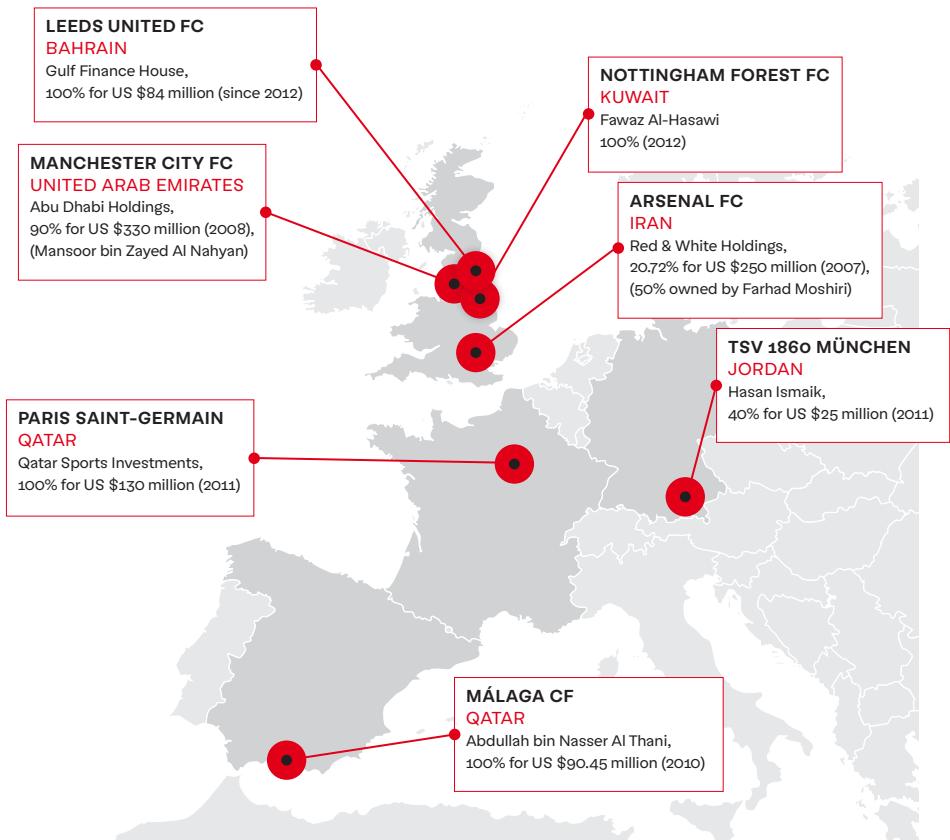


Figure 1. Middle Eastern countries intensifying investments in European football by 2019

Source: FashionNetwork.\* 2023, August 9). Middle Eastern countries intensifying investments in European football.

\* <https://www.fashionnetwork.com/news/Middle-eastern-countries-intensifying-investments-in-european-football,458154.html>.

The Gulf states, especially Qatar, the UAE, and later Saudi Arabia, began embedding themselves directly into the global football economy, by positioning themselves as indispensable stakeholders in the game's future. This investment wave was not incidental, as it emerged from deliberate policy frameworks that linked sport to broader national branding strategies, economic diversification goals, and political image-building. Football became the most effective and emotionally resonant arena in which these ambitions could be realised.

This political economy of football plays out through two interrelated strategies. The first is external investment in European football clubs and infrastructure, creating direct stakes in the symbolic and commercial heart of global football. The second is the importation of football prestige into the Gulf itself—by hosting elite tournaments, building state-of-the-art venues, and attracting high-profile players to domestic leagues. Together, these two pathways produce a dynamic flow of influence, as shown in the accompanying diagram: a transnational feedback loop where prestige and capital circulate between Arab states and Europe.

In the first strategy of club ownership, the Gulf states leverage the global visibility of European teams to generate soft power. Prominent football clubs in major leagues such as Manchester City (UAE), Paris Saint-Germain (Qatar), and Newcastle United (Saudi Arabia) are broadcasted globally, and represent urban spaces rebranded through state investment. Stadiums, shirt sponsors, and global fan bases all become surfaces on which national narratives are projected and contested. Currently, European football clubs are owned by Gulf companies' interests to a great extent. Table 1 demonstrates that more than 15 football clubs across Europe's top six leagues are owned, either fully or partially, by Gulf state investment vehicles. The combined current value of these clubs (based on available data) approaches \$3 billion. This figure highlights the significant economic footprint that Gulf states have established within the European football ecosystem, reflecting a broader strategy of economic and political integration into European markets, with continued signs of expansion.

Table 1. European Football Clubs Owned by Gulf Investors (since 2000s)

Club	Country	Year Acquired	Owner/Entity (Country)	Stake	Purchase Price	Est. Current Value
K.A.S. Eupen	Belgium	2012	Aspire Zone Foundation (Qatar)	100%	"Modest" undisclosed sumreuters.comreuters.com	N/A (small club)
Lommel S.K.	Belgium	2020	City Football Group (UAE)	Majority	Undisclosed (nominal, assumed debt)	N/A (2nd tier club)
Manchester City	England	2008 (90%; 100% by 2009)	Sheikh Mansour — Abu Dhabi United Group (UAE)	100%	>£200 m (2008)	~\$5.3 billion (2025)
Portsmouth	England	2009 (Aug) / 2009 (Oct)	Sulaiman Al-Fahim (UAE) / Ali Al-Faraj (Saudi)	100%	Nominal (£1) + ~£60 m by 2010	N/A (club insolvent by 2010)
Nottingham Forest	England	2012	Al-Hasawi Family (Kuwait)	100%	Undisclosed (~£25–50 m est.)	~\$60 m (80% stake in 2016)
Leeds United	England	2012	GFH Capital (Bahrain)	100%	£44 m (2012) (net ~£22 m)	~\$800 m (2023)
Sheffield United	England	2013 (50%; 100% by 2019)	Prince Abdullah bin Mosaad (Saudi Arabia)	100%	~£10 m injection + £5 m (2019)	~£100 m (2019)
Newcastle United	England	2021	Saudi Public Investment Fund — PIF (Saudi)	80%	~£300 m (2021)	~\$1.1 billion (2025)
Paris Saint-Germain	France	2011 (70%; 100% by 2012)	Qatar Sports Investments (Qatar)	100%	~€100 m total (2011–12)	~€4.6 billion (2024)

Table 1. cont.

ES Troyes AC	France	2020	City Football Group (UAE)	~99%	~€7–10 m (2020)	~\$40 m (Ligue 1 value)
Paris FC	France	2020	Bahraini Sovereign Fund (Bahrain)	20%	~€5 m (2020)	~€25 m
Palermo F.C.	Italy	2022	City Football Group (UAE)	80%	~€13 m (2022)	N/A (Serie B club)
S.C. Braga	Portugal	2022	Qatar Sports Investments (Qatar)	21.67%		
Getafe CF	Spain	2011	Royal Emirates Group (UAE)	100%	€70–90 m (2011)	N/A (deal collapsed later)
Málaga CF	Spain	2010	Sheikh Abdullah Al-Thani (Qatar)	100%	€36 m (2010)	~€100 m
Girona FC	Spain	2017	City Football Group (UAE)	44.30%	Not disclosed (deal valued club ~\$30 m est.)	~\$180 m (promoted club)
UD Almería	Spain	2019	Turki Al-Sheikh (Saudi Arabia)	100%	~€20 m (2019)	~\$100 m (La Liga status)

Source: Author's elaboration\*. Various sources. \*\* [on the next page]

- \* Notes: Newcastle United's new owners have spent an estimated £250–300m on player transfers in the first two seasons post-takeover (Deloitte, 2023). Prince Abdullah's initial 50% stake in Sheffield Utd was obtained via a £10m investment commitment. He gained full control in 2019 after a legal dispute, for a nominal sum set by the court. Beyond the initial injection, Sheffield Utd's Saudi owner has run the club with relatively modest funding, focusing on sustainable budgets (Yorkshire Post, 2020). At Málaga CF, the owner's early spending on star players (e.g. Santi Cazorla, Ruud van Nistelrooy) was substantial, but exact totals (~€100–150m) were never officially disclosed. The club's finances deteriorated after 2012. Nottingham Forest's valuation soared after promotion to the Premier League in 2022; Forbes estimates around \$600m in 2023 (Ozanian, 2023). The Al-Hasawi family sold the club in 2017 (to Greek investor Evangelos Marinakis) for a reported ~£50m (BBC Sport, 2017). Under Kuwaiti ownership (2012–2017), Nottingham Forest operated at a loss; the owners invested to cover operating costs and player signings, but no single "purchase fee" was reported (Swiss Ramble, 2018). K.A.S. Eupen's value is difficult to quantify; as a small top-division club used for player development, its estimated worth is under \$15m. Getafe CF's approximate market value in 2023, as a mid-table La Liga club, is in the range of \$150–200m (Transfermarkt, 2023). The planned 2011 takeover of Getafe by Dubai's Royal Emirates Group fell through shortly after announcement (Guardian, 2011), so actual investment into the club was minimal.
- \*\* Abuamer, M., Nassar, Y. (2023). The rise of Gulf states' investments in sports: Neither soft power nor sportswashing? *POMEPS Studies*, 45. Alencar, M. (2023, November 28). Who owns Manchester City now? How much did Sheikh Mansour pay in 2008? *City A.M.* <https://www.cityam.com>. Arab News (n.d.). Details on Málaga CF's financial history. <https://www.arabnews.com>. Barzani, H. (2022, April 4). Many European soccer teams are owned by Gulf states. But why? *Atlantic Council*. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org>. BBC Sport (2017). Nottingham Forest sold to Evangelos Marinakis. <https://www.bbc.com/sport>. Bostock, B. (2020, June 21). Saudi Arabia's crown prince is trying to buy Newcastle... Here are all the major clubs owned by royalty. *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com>. Business Insider (n.d.). [Report on Sheffield United ownership. <https://www.businessinsider.com>. Deloitte (2023). Annual Football Finance Review. El Tayeb, M. (2023, February 17). Which European football teams are owned by Arabs? *Doha News* <https://www.dohanews.co>. Elkington, M. (2010, June 26). Qatari Sheikh Al-Thani buys Malaga football club. *Reuters* <https://www.reuters.com>. Ozanian, M. (2023, May 31). The world's most valuable soccer teams 2023. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com>. Grohmann, K. (2023, March 22). PSG a success as Qatar's political tool but bland on the pitch — Lahm. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com>. The Guardian (2012, July 10). Nottingham Forest confirm Al-Hasawi family as new owners. <https://www.theguardian.com>. Reuters (2011, April 21). Renamed Getafe bought for up to €90m, say owners. <https://www.reuters.com>. Swiss Ramble (2018). Financial analysis of Nottingham Forest. <https://www.swissramble.blogspot.com>. The Guardian (2011). Royal Emirates Group's failed bid for Getafe. <https://www.theguardian.com>. Transfermarkt (2023). Club valuation: Getafe CF. <https://www.transfermarkt.com>. Vyas, H. (2018, September 14). Sheikh Mansour's smart investment key to Man City success — Guardiola. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com>. Yorkshire Post (2020). Sheffield United's financial strategy under Saudi ownership.

However, this investment expansion has not only economic consequences, but primarily social ones. In England, especially in Manchester, Etihad Campus redevelopment, job creation, and enhanced infrastructure have been celebrated by many as evidence of “benevolent” foreign ownership, even as critics question the democratic accountability of such influence. With this strategy, the Gulf state capital shifts from oil to urban real estate, reshaping local space while deepening housing inequalities.<sup>12</sup> Manchester Life, a joint venture between Manchester City Council and Abu Dhabi United Group (ADUG), facilitates the transfer of public land for private housing development under a profit-sharing arrangement. Situated in Ancoats, a rapidly gentrifying area, this scheme accelerates property-led regeneration while raising concerns over displacement and reduced housing affordability.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, in Newcastle, Saudi ownership has been embraced by large sections of the fanbase for ending years of stagnation and underinvestment. Social legitimacy by delivering localised success and economic revitalisation is seen in Newcastle City Council chief executive comment that declining investment opportunities from Saudi Arabia would mean “narrowing what you can do for residents” on Tyneside, framing such partnerships as pragmatic tools for urban development. Her statement, that these moves could help “make Newcastle where it should be”, is an illustrative example of how local authorities can publicly validate controversial ownership structures when framed as avenues for economic regeneration and civic pride.<sup>14</sup> The second strategy, which involves reversing the flow of football capital, seeks to bring the sport’s symbolic centre of gravity closer to the Gulf. Qatar’s hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup was the most obvious case, but this pattern extends further. Saudi Arabia, for instance, hosted

<sup>12</sup> Goulding, R., Leaver, A., Silver, S. (2024, May). When the Abu Dhabi United Group Came to Town: Constructing an Organisational Fix for State Capitalism through the Manchester Life Partnership. *Antipode* 56, no. 3: 896–921. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.13013>.

<sup>13</sup> Collins, D. (2019) Town hall “censors” Peterloo massacre memorial performance. *The Sunday Times* 25 August <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/town-hall-censors-peterloo-massacre-memorial-dnzp9g2s5>.

<sup>14</sup> Holland D. (2025, April 15). Newcastle Council Defends Seeking Saudi Investment. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/clyq3r25q690>.

the Spanish and Italian Super Cups, the Club World Cup, and has aggressively recruited star players, including Cristiano Ronaldo, Karim Benzema, and Neymar, to boost the appeal of its domestic Pro League.<sup>15</sup> The UAE, too, has hosted elite tournaments and promoted youth competitions to burnish its sports credentials. These events not only attract global media attention but also position Gulf cities, such as Doha, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, as hubs of international prestige and cultural sophistication.

In both strategies, the aim is not simply to “buy” prestige but to facilitate long-term influence. The Gulf states are reshaping the geography of global football, by inserting themselves into Europe’s most powerful clubs and drawing European talent and competitions into their own territories. They construct a reciprocal system of visibility and control, economic flows are exchanged for political capital, and football becomes both the means and the message of soft power.

### Strategic investments in Europe

Behind Gulf states’ football strategies lies a set of carefully coordinated, well-capitalised institutional actors. These are not ad hoc purchases or vanity projects driven by individual billionaires; rather, they are strategic investments channelled through sovereign wealth funds and media conglomerates with deep state linkages and global ambitions. The result is a web of influence that spans clubs, leagues, broadcast rights, and infrastructure — anchored by the vast financial power of the Gulf’s oil economies.

At the centre of this web are three major sovereign wealth funds. The Qatar Investment Authority (QIA), with assets reportedly exceeding \$450 billion, is the financial arm behind Qatar Sports Investments (QSI), which owns Paris Saint-Germain. Beyond football, QIA also owns major stakes in Barclays, Heathrow Airport, and Volkswagen, positioning it as one

<sup>15</sup> Al Jazeera (2023), ‘Saudi Pro League: The Star-Filled Face of Vision 2030. <https://www.aljazeera.com/sports/2023/8/19/saudi-pro-league-the-star-filled-face-of-vision-2030>.

of the world's most aggressive investment vehicles. The Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA), one of the largest such funds globally, underpins UAE-linked ventures like the City Football Group, which owns not only Manchester City but a network of affiliated clubs across Australia, Spain, the US, and beyond.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF), has rapidly expanded into sport, most visibly through its 80% stake in Newcastle United; PIF was recently valued at over \$700 billion, while it has also launched LIV Golf and is now a central actor in the future of the Saudi Pro League and potential tournament bids.

These funds are the financial conduits that make soft power through football possible. They operate not only to diversify national economies beyond oil, a long-standing goal, but to assert strategic presence in Western capitals and industries. Football clubs, in this model, are not ends in themselves; they are cultural outposts and reputational assets embedded in European public life.

The sheer scale of recent investment by Saudi Arabia illustrates the seriousness of this strategy. Although football has not traditionally been the dominant sport in the Kingdom, where domestic audiences have historically favoured other pastimes, the state has moved aggressively to reshape that dynamic. In the summer of 2023 alone, clubs from the Saudi Pro League collectively spent \$489 million on player transfers. That placed them not only ahead of Spain's La Liga, but also on par with Germany's Bundesliga and France's Ligue 1, long considered among the elite footballing powers of Europe (Figure 2).<sup>17</sup>

What makes this even more striking is the net spending: while the Bundesliga and Ligue 1 operated with modest surpluses or narrow deficits, the Saudi Pro League posted a net spend of \$473 million, the second highest after England's Premier League. This figure reflects not only the purchase of talent but the premium required to attract top-tier

<sup>16</sup> Gulf Sovereign Wealth Funds Institute (2023). Profiles: QIA, ADIA, and PIF. <https://www.swfinstitute.org/fund-rankings/>.

<sup>17</sup> Statista (2023). *Saudi Transfer Spending on Par With European Top Leagues*. <https://www.statista.com/chart/30660/summer-transfer-spending-in-top-football-leagues/>

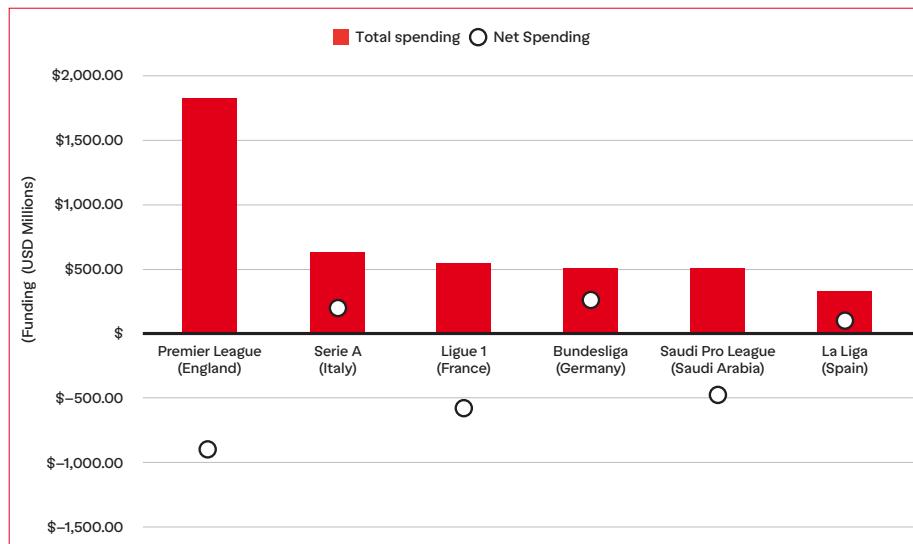


Figure 2. Saudi Transfer Spending on Par with European Top Leagues

Source: Statista (2023). As of August 7, 2023.

athletes, often in their prime, from established leagues to a country with little historic footballing clout. It also reflects the Kingdom's broader willingness to subsidise prestige through direct state support or quasi-state mechanisms such as the Public Investment Fund.

These numbers confirm that Saudi Arabia is not merely experimenting with sport as soft power, it is committing at scale. The ambition is not just to participate in football's global economy, but to reshape it, shifting the centre of gravity toward the Gulf. The strategy mirrors earlier moves by Qatar and the UAE but operates on an even more assertive footing: large financial outlays, state-backed coordination, and a clear alignment with national development plans like Vision 2030,<sup>18</sup> which seeks to diversify the economy of the country and foster international tourism to elevate the country's global profile; these goals are directly supported

<sup>18</sup> Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2016) *Vision 2030*. <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa>.

by high-profile football investments and marquee player acquisitions. As the diagram above illustrates, both the export of capital to Europe and the import of footballing assets to the Gulf are parts of the same political loop: influence is both projected outward and drawn inward. Another critical pillar of this strategy is media expansion, especially through beIN Sports, a Qatari-owned network operating in over 40 countries. Originally launched in 2012 as a subsidiary of Al Jazeera, beIN has since become a dominant broadcaster of European football, including the English Premier League, La Liga, and the UEFA Champions League across MENA and Asia-Pacific markets. It holds billions of dollars' worth of sports rights and has positioned Qatar not just as a club owner, but as a gatekeeper of football's visual economy.<sup>19</sup>

This convergence of club ownership, media rights, and sovereign capital has transformed Gulf states into central stakeholders in European football's financial architecture. As scholars have noted, these states are not just "buying influence" — they are redefining governance structures, shaping what kinds of actors, including sovereign wealth funds, state-owned media conglomerates, and politically connected investors, can participate in football's political economy, and how sport intersects with global capital flows.<sup>20</sup> In doing so, they both exploit and challenge Europe's liberal sporting model, inserting authoritarian-backed capital into ostensibly open and democratic institutions. The case of English football (Premier League) is indicative, as the traditional characteristics of merit-based competition, community ownership, regulatory independence, and non-political governance,<sup>21</sup> trademarks of a sport rooted in cultural heritage, have gradually given way to an entertainment empire where anyone can intervene, as long as they can invest. This shift has opened

<sup>19</sup> beIN Media Group (2023). Corporate Overview. <https://www.beinmediagroup.com/about/>.

<sup>20</sup> Brannagan, P.M., Giulianotti, R. (2018). The Soft Power-Soft Disempowerment Nexus: The Case of Qatar. *International Affairs*, 94(5), 1139–1157. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiy125>.

<sup>21</sup> Robinson, J., Clegg, J. (2018). *The Club: How the English Premier League Became the Wildest, Richest, Most Disruptive Force in Sports*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

the door to powerful political actors who were previously unengaged with football but now see it as a vehicle for political access.

Yet this influence does not operate invisibly. Fan protests, journalistic investigations, and parliamentary scrutiny have increasingly raised concerns about ownership transparency, human rights records, and the dilution of football's traditional identity. As the paper will explore in the next section, strategic investment generates prestige — but also political risk.

### Objectives and mechanisms of Gulf football strategy

To understand why Gulf monarchies invest so heavily in football, it is necessary to move beyond surface narratives of economic diversification or fandom. Football functions not just as a platform for entertainment or profit, but as a carefully cultivated vehicle to achieve four overlapping strategic objectives: cultural prestige, political legitimacy, economic integration, and reputational shielding against human rights scrutiny.

Cultural prestige sits at the forefront. Football is the world's most watched and followed sport, with deep emotional roots and symbolic resonance. For relatively small Gulf states like Qatar or the UAE, cultural visibility through elite clubs or tournaments offers a pathway to disproportionate global relevance. Hosting Lionel Messi at Paris Saint-Germain or welcoming Cristiano Ronaldo to the Saudi Pro League signals not only sporting ambition but geopolitical reach. These moments feed national narratives of progress, openness, and modernity.

Closely linked is the goal of political legitimacy, both domestically and internationally. In authoritarian regimes where internal democratic validation is absent, global recognition can offer a substitute source of authority. The World Cup in Doha or Saudi bids to host the 2030 tournament are designed as much for foreign audiences as for domestic ones, projecting the image of competent, visionary leadership. Aligning with prestigious Western institutions also helps soften perceptions of despotism and consolidate regime narratives of reform and success.

At the economic level, football facilitates integration into Western markets. Through club sponsorships, media rights, and ownership stakes, Gulf

sovereign wealth becomes embedded in key sectors of European economies. These investments are not merely financial—they create mutual dependencies, ensuring that European stakeholders, governments, and fans have a vested interest in Gulf prosperity and stability. In this way, football functions as a quiet but effective diplomatic tool.

Finally, a less acknowledged yet central goal is human rights buffering. Criticism of Gulf regimes — over issues such as migrant labour conditions, gender inequality, or press censorship — is often deflected by the glamour and spectacle of football. Mega-events generate narratives of celebration, urban renewal, and intercultural dialogue, while drowning out uncomfortable truths. In this sense, football acts as a reputational shield, reducing the moral costs of illiberal governance.

These objectives are advanced through a range of mechanisms of influence, both overt and subtle. Media framing is among the most important. State-backed broadcasters like beIN Sports shape how narratives are presented — focusing on player excellence, infrastructure achievements, or national pride, while downplaying dissent. Promotion of traditional values is also key: Gulf-hosted sporting events often come with restrictions on LGBTQ+ visibility, alcohol consumption, or fan behaviour, reinforcing conservative norms under the guise of cultural authenticity.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps most concerning is the silencing of liberal critique. Journalists, athletes, and fans who question the ethics of Gulf ownership or tournament hosting often face legal threats, access restrictions, or social pressure. In Western settings, financial ties to clubs and broadcasters discourage institutional criticism. The result is not censorship in the traditional sense, but a kind of ambient self-regulation, where critique is muted by commercial entanglement and reputational risk.

Football, then, is not a neutral space. It becomes a carefully engineered ecosystem of influence—where prestige, money, identity, and power converge. And it is within this ecosystem that Gulf states have embedded themselves, recalibrating both the politics of the game and the politics behind it.

<sup>22</sup> Amnesty International (2022). *Reality Check 2022: Qatar, the World Cup, and Human Rights.* <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2022/10/reality-check-2022/>.

## Qatargate: the most evident symptom of the problem

In December 2022, a tax fraud probe in Belgium quickly developed into one of the EU's most damaging corruption scandals, *Qatargate*. Former MEP Antonio Panzeri admitted to receiving over €2.5 million in cash for lobbying in favour of Qatar and other Gulf states, while alongside him, the European Parliament Vice President, Eva Kaili, and other EU officials were implicated in what investigators described as a cash-for-influence scheme within EU institutions. This scheme aimed to serve Qatari diplomatic interests to show that Qatar was modernized enough and had the capacity to host the most prestigious sports tournament of the world.<sup>23</sup>

Qatar's flagship soft power project saw the scandal break just weeks after the 2022 World Cup, which had been promoted as a symbol of progress and modernisation. These claims collapsed into public disgrace, revealing the uncomfortable overlap between football, lobbying, and authoritarian influence. Longstanding suspicions about figures like the famous former football player and former FIFA president Michel Platini and the former French President Nicolas Sarkozy, both central to Qatar's bid to host the tournament, were reignited. Qatar's officials could not have gained such direct access to both presidents were it not for their strategic investment in Paris Saint-Germain. At a time when the French capital and economy were in need of a significant boost, the club's acquisition provided a gateway, not only into the French economy but also into the broader European industrial and political landscape.

Despite the scale of the scandal, the political fallout was modest. The tournament went ahead at full capacity, and European partnerships with Gulf entities, through football clubs, media deals, and infrastructure investments, remained intact, while few institutional reforms followed

<sup>23</sup> Volpicelli, G., Wax, E., Braun, E. (2023, February 3). A well-oiled system: What police say happened in the Qatargate scandal. *Politico.eu*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-parliament-corruption-scandal-qatargate-police-interviews-pier-antonio-panzeri-francesco-giorgi-eva-kaili-andrea-cozzolino/>.

to address certain critique.<sup>24</sup> Soft power was effective, despite the evident failure.

Public opinion was also shaped through this investment process and resulted to echo this ambiguity (Statista, 2022). As Figure 3 shows, while a minority of respondents agreed with boycott-related statements, only 19% believed fans should boycott, 18% felt national teams should withdraw, and just 10% said they would boycott sponsoring brands; opposition was consistently stronger. In each case, more respondents disagreed than agreed, with 58% outright rejecting the idea of boycotting

<sup>24</sup> According to the official website of FIFA, the 2022 FIFA World Cup recorded over 3.4 million spectators, achieving an average stadium attendance capacity of 96.3%. More than one million visitors travelled to Qatar to watch matches in person, with the top visiting countries being Saudi Arabia, India, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Mexico. Al Bidda Park in Doha welcomed over 1.8 million fans during the FIFA Fan Festival. As the most compact World Cup since 1930, the tournament allowed fans, teams, and media to attend multiple matches and entertainment events per day. A record 420,000 volunteer applications were received, from which 20,000 volunteers were selected—including 3,000 international participants from 150 countries. The Doha Metro and Lusail Tram networks registered 9.19 million trips during the group stage alone, averaging over 707,000 passengers per day.

Global engagement figures were unprecedented: approximately five billion people interacted with the tournament across media platforms. According to Nielsen, there were 93.6 million social media posts related to the event, with a cumulative reach of 262 billion and 5.95 billion user engagements. Television viewership also broke national records. In France, the final attracted 24.08 million viewers—81% of the audience share and a 24% increase from the 2018 final. Argentina registered 12.07 million viewers across three channels, while the US saw a combined audience of nearly 26 million, including nine million Spanish-language viewers—a 65% increase from 2018. In the MENA region, beIN Sports reached 242.79 million viewers, or 67.8% of its potential audience. Brazil's overall tournament reach was 173 million, or 81% of the population. In Japan, 36 million watched the match against Costa Rica, achieving a 66.5% share—a national record. The UK reached 51.22 million viewers over the course of the tournament, covering 83.9% of its total market. Korea's opening match attracted 11.14 million viewers, nearly doubling the average 2018 figures. Portugal's round-of-16 match against Switzerland set a national record with 3.89 million viewers and a 71.8% share.

Commercially, the tournament was also a major success. All global and regional sponsorship packages were sold out, and FIFA's 32 Commercial Affiliates activated over 600 marketing campaigns globally.

FIFACOM. *FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 in Numbers*. <https://publications.fifa.com/en/annual-report-2022/tournaments-and-events/fifa-world-cup-qatar-2022/fifa-world-cup-qatar-2022-in-numbers/>.

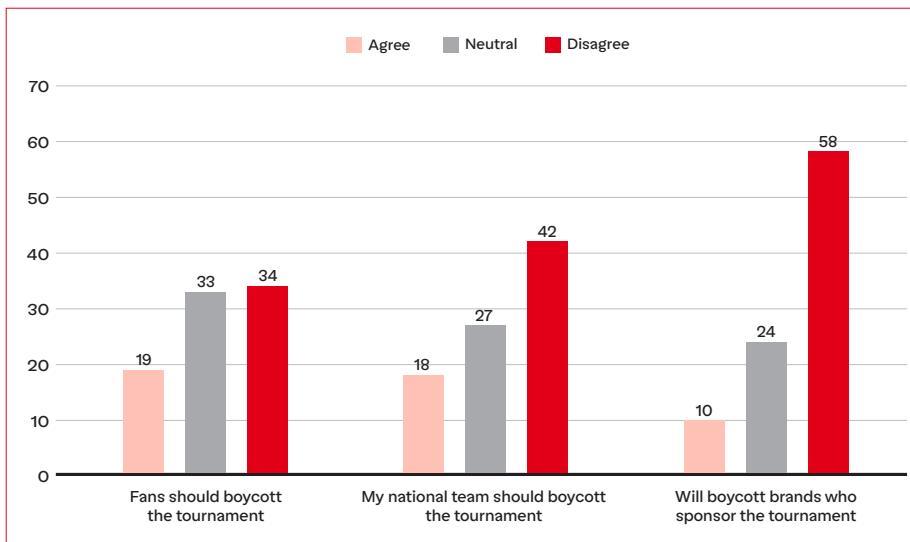


Figure 3. World Cup boycott fails to attract the masses

Note: 1031 adults (16–64 years old) in England — of which 699 football fans. November 2022.

Source: Statista (2022).

corporate sponsors. A significant percentage of participants remained neutral, suggesting uncertainty or indifference, which could be interpreted as a sign of non-football interest (68% of the participants said that they are football fans). This broader ambivalence shows that while concerns about Qatar's human rights record were widely reported, they did not translate into widespread fan disengagement.

This gap between values and behaviour is telling. Despite months of media scrutiny over migrant labour, LGBTQ+ rights, and civil liberties in Qatar, engagement levels remained high. Many fans are emotionally tied to clubs like PSG, Manchester City, and Newcastle United — now owned or funded by Gulf sovereign wealth. For them, disengagement means sacrificing not just entertainment, but personal and community identity. *Qatargate* is the most evident case of Gulf's soft power thriving. It succeeded not because it silences criticism, but because it operates within

a framework that exploits the dissonance between ideals and institutions. In other words, it exploits the discrepancy between what democracies say they value, and what they actually do when money, prestige, and football are at stake.

The modest political fallout from *Qatargate* shows the way Gulf soft power operates through mechanisms of ambient self-regulation — a system where formal critique is dampened not by censorship, but by the existence of mutual dependencies and institutional self-interest. The European Parliament was rocked by credible allegations of bribery and influence-peddling, with cash-filled suitcases linked to figures advancing Qatar's interests, including support for the country's image ahead of the World Cup. Nevertheless, despite the scandal's large scale, which led European figures like European Parliament President Roberta Metsola and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to offer minimal institutional response beyond vague calls for "transparency" and "ethics reform." According to Politico, much of the EU's top leadership remained "remarkably silent" in the aftermath, avoiding any meaningful confrontation with Qatar or calls to reassess partnerships.<sup>25</sup> This silence is the tool by which the political influence is absorbed, reflecting a broader reluctance to antagonize a geopolitical and economic partner with deep financial ties to European infrastructure, media rights, and energy security. These ties are strong only due to the strategic investments happened in earlier years by Gulf states in European football, as explained in previous sections. Any incentives to downplay, delay, or depoliticize grow stronger, as long as reputational risk touches shared institutional investments.

Reputational shielding, then, is not only about public image management — it's about how institutions quietly avoid, tame, absorb or deflect critique to preserve the status quo. Events like the World Cup become convenient turning points, redirecting attention from misconduct toward spectacle, unity, and soft nationalism. In the *Qatargate* case, the timing

<sup>25</sup> Politico.eu (2022, December 13).Europe's Leaders Shrug at Qatargate Fallout. <https://www.politico.eu/article/roberta-metsola-macron-von-der-leyen-michel-eu-leaders-qatargate-fallout/>.

was particularly revealing: the scandal erupted weeks after the tournament, yet little political will emerged to question the deeper structure of EU–Gulf relations. Any efforts to delay public disclosures, avoid naming specific actors, and limit parliamentary debate reinforced a culture of institutional self-preservation. The fear of diplomatic rupture or the loss of investment flows functions as an unspoken constraint on democratic accountability. Even when evident flaws are exposed, the mutual benefit often prevents systemic change, as the EU’s leaders largely chose “quiet diplomacy” and “procedural fixes”<sup>26</sup> rather than confronting the deeper reality: that authoritarian soft power now sits comfortably within liberal institutions, shaping their incentives from the inside out.

### Impact on norms and critical reflection: the liberal way forward

The rise of Gulf influence in European football has significantly reshaped the discursive space around liberal values themselves and not only transformed the sport’s financial and political landscape, as it was expected at the first place. As football becomes increasingly entangled with the geopolitical agendas of non-democratic states, the language, boundaries, and limits of liberal critique have shifted. Authoritarian regimes are not new in controlling football for political legitimacy, however, the ownership of iconic European clubs or the hosting of the world’s biggest tournaments, seems to be routinely normalised.

This shift in discourse is most apparent in the muted tone of institutional responses. European governments, leagues, and governing bodies have rarely issued strong condemnations of Gulf ownership practices. The French state, for example, largely celebrated Qatar’s investment in Paris Saint-Germain and offered only mild criticism amid the World Cup controversy. In the UK, a traditional liberal democracy with long history of resisting authorisation, official messaging around Manchester City or Newcastle United has avoided framing ownership in moral or

<sup>26</sup> Politico.eu (2022, December 13).

democratic terms, focusing instead on economic benefits and infrastructure development. Even within the European Union, where normative power is often invoked as a cornerstone of identity, the *Qatargate* corruption scandal triggered more outrage over institutional embarrassment than over the deeper question of how soft power undermines democratic integrity. While ethics investigations followed, few systemic safeguards were introduced and the episode was less a turning point than a fleeting moment of scandal in an otherwise permissive environment.<sup>27</sup>

Gulf regimes have shown that by embedding themselves in beloved institutions, they can diffuse criticism, absorb reputational damage, and maintain a level of legitimacy that would be unavailable through diplomatic channels alone. Soft power in this form is not about cultural exchange, it is about inoculation from pressure. More troublingly, this dynamic has begun to reshape liberal discourse from within. Tolerance, diversity, and human rights are still espoused, but increasingly in ways that avoid confrontation with power. The presence of illiberal actors at the heart of liberal cultural life generates a kind of silent accommodation: an acceptance that engagement, not critique, is the path forward. In this context, liberalism risks becoming a brand more than a principle, invoked selectively and pragmatically, rather than consistently and courageously.

### Liberal policy recommendations

If football is to retain its cultural integrity while resisting becoming a vessel for illiberal influence, then liberal democracies must confront the political dimensions of the sport more openly and strategically. This paper does not argue that football should be free of foreign ownership or that engagement with the Gulf is inherently problematic. But it does

<sup>27</sup> Bayer, L., Barigazzi, J. (2022, December 12). Qatar's Lobbying Machine in Brussels Under Fire. *Politico.eu*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/qatar-lobbying-scandal-brussels-european-parliament/>.

suggest that a line has blurred, between openness and naivety, between inclusion and complicity. And as Gulf investment deepens, that line will only become harder to see.

Rather than retreating into ambivalence or reactive scandal management, policymakers, footballing institutions, and civil society should pursue a coherent, principled approach, one that balances openness with resilience, and commercial pragmatism with normative values.

- Institutionalise ownership transparency. At a minimum, football clubs, in particular those in top European leagues, should be required to disclose ultimate beneficial ownership, funding sources, and political affiliations. National football associations and European regulators (such as UEFA) must move beyond procedural “fit and proper person” tests toward legally binding disclosure frameworks, with consequences for non-compliance. Clubs function as public cultural assets, not just private companies; the public has a right to know who owns them, and to what end.
- Reframe openness as resilience, not vulnerability. Liberalism need not mean passive exposure to any form of capital. Policymakers should clarify that accepting foreign investment must come with reciprocal standards: respect for rule of law, transparency, and alignment with basic human rights. Regulatory bodies (sporting or otherwise) should reject the false binary between isolation and capture. Strategic openness is possible — but only if it is matched with rules that protect democratic norms.
- Promote fan education and civic literacy. Supporters are not just consumers; they are stakeholders in the symbolic and social value of football. Leagues, clubs, and fan organisations should actively foster programmes that raise awareness about ownership structures, human rights concerns, and the geopolitical context of club funding. Educational campaigns — run independently or in partnership with NGOs — can empower fans to engage critically with the sport without abandoning their emotional attachments.
- Embed normative standards into football governance. European football has long proclaimed values of inclusion, fairness, and respect — but these principles must move from slogans to governance. UEFA, FIFA,

and national federations should develop normative benchmarks for club ownership, tournament hosting, and media partnerships. These should include labour protections, anti-discrimination standards, press freedom, and mechanisms for redress. Compliance should be monitored by independent ethics bodies with investigatory powers — not left to internal committees or public relations departments.

The aim is not to politicise football where it was once apolitical; football has always been political. The task now is to ensure that its politics are compatible with the democratic ideals many European institutions claim to uphold. A liberal response must go beyond critique. It must offer rules, resilience, and the confidence to defend values — not just assume them.

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# Türkiye's Role in Shaping and Shaking European Democracy

ELIF GÜNEY MENDERES

*“War is father of all and king of all; and some he has shown as gods, others men; some he has made slaves, others free.”*

HERACLITUS

## Introduction

What Heraclitus observed long ago captures a paradox at the core of both politics and history: tension, far from being merely destructive, can be generative.<sup>1</sup> This insight offers a useful lens for understanding the evolving and often uneasy relationship between Türkiye and Europe. At times, cooperation between Ankara and Brussels has stimulated progress in diplomacy, trade, and institutional reform. At others, it has produced mistrust, hindered cooperation, and reinforced narratives of cultural incompatibility. Yet, as Heraclitus suggests, struggle can also be a precondition for transformation.

Türkiye is not a peripheral outsider to Europe's story. Its aspirations for European Union (EU) membership date back to the 1963 *Ankara Agreement*, which recognised Türkiye's eligibility for full membership in the long term. Since 1995, it has maintained a customs union with

<sup>1</sup> Kahn, C. H. (1979). *The art and thought of Heraclitus: An edition of the fragments with translation and commentary*. Cambridge University Press.

the EU and has been an official candidate for membership since 1999.<sup>2</sup> As a longstanding member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and home to one of Europe's largest diasporas — particularly in Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, and France<sup>3</sup> — Türkiye's ties to Europe are woven through decades of economic interdependence, cultural exchange, institutional alignment, and transnational social and political entanglement. Nevertheless, European discourse has often cast Türkiye as a “geopolitical other,”<sup>4</sup> drawing cultural and political boundaries that portray it as distinct, if not incompatible, with Europe.

Türkiye's practice of “strategic ambiguity” has become an asset in the multipolar order, enabling it to host negotiations ranging from Ukraine-Russia talks to Iran's nuclear discussions with the E3 countries (Germany, France, and Britain).<sup>5</sup> This convening power demonstrates that, even while sidelined in Europe's enlargement debates, Türkiye nonetheless shapes the continent's security architecture through mediation and flexible alignment.

Domestically, Türkiye is characterised by a complex political landscape often described as a harmony of chaos, where divergent identities and ideologies coexist, and where civil society persists despite mounting pressures. The early 2000s saw reforms that raised cautious optimism about democratic convergence with EU norms. Yet, as accession momentum stalled after 2007, that trajectory reversed. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), once viewed as a reformist force, turned

<sup>2</sup> Müftüler-Bac, M. (1998). The Never-Ending Story: Turkey and the European Union. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 34(2), 240–258. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/00263209808701250>.

<sup>3</sup> Hoffman, M., Makovsky, A., Werz, M. (2020). *The Turkish Diaspora in Europe: Integration, Migration, and Politics*. Center for American Progress. <https://feps-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/downloads/publications/turkishdiaspora-report-final.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Turhan, E. (2023). Turkey as a “geopolitical Other”: The construction of European identities in the geopolitical era and its implications for EU–Turkey relations. *European Politics and Society*, 24(5), 605–621.

<sup>5</sup> Mammadov, A. (2025, August 11). How Turkey's Strategic Ambiguity Became an Advantage in a Multipolar World. Atlantic Council — TURKEYSource. [https://www.atlantic-council.org/blogs/turkeysource/how-turkeys-strategic-ambiguity-became-an-advantage-in-a-multipolar-world/?utm\\_source..](https://www.atlantic-council.org/blogs/turkeysource/how-turkeys-strategic-ambiguity-became-an-advantage-in-a-multipolar-world/?utm_source..)

toward authoritarian consolidation. Democratic backsliding deepened through the erosion of judicial independence, restrictions on media, and an increasingly centralised executive.<sup>6</sup>

These concerns, however, are not unique to Türkiye. Across Europe, democratic values are under strain. Far right populist movements have gained ground, public trust in institutions has eroded, and polarisation has become a defining feature of political life.<sup>7</sup> Hungary offered the first clear example in 2010, when *Fidesz*, a member of the European People's Party, won national elections.<sup>8</sup> This culminated in Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's 2014 "illiberal democracy" speech, in which he outlined a non-liberal vision of governance. A third major challenge followed Poland's 2015 elections, when the Law and Justice Party (PiS) consolidated power. Anti-migrant rhetoric — often intensified by Türkiye's strategic use of migration flows — has accelerated these dynamics. In Central and Eastern Europe, democratic backsliding has become institutionalised, while even established democracies face challenges to press freedom and judicial autonomy.

Within this shifting terrain, Türkiye exerts a multifaceted influence on European democracy. Through diaspora mobilisation, consular outreach, migration diplomacy, cultural and media networks, and municipal-level soft power, it projects its presence well beyond its borders. Some of these tools enhance cultural connectivity and integration, while others risk exporting domestic polarisation into European public life or blurring the line between civic engagement and political control. Like any regional power, Türkiye pursues its interests, but its methods increasingly raise normative questions about transparency, pluralism, and democratic resilience.

<sup>6</sup> Acemoglu, D., Ucer, M. (2015). The Ups and Downs of Turkish Growth, 2002–2015: Political Dynamics, the European Union and the Institutional Slide. *NBER Working Papers* (21608).

<sup>7</sup> Kessel, S. v. (2024). Populism, the Far Right and EU Integration: Beyond Simple Sichotomies. *Journal of European Integration*, 47(1), 127–133. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2025.2434341>.

<sup>8</sup> Scherz, A. (2025). How should the EU respond to democratic backsliding? A normative assessment of expulsion and suspension of voting rights from the perspective of multilateral democracy. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 1–26. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2024.2444326>.

This chapter explores how Türkiye — geopolitically strategic, politically complex, and marked by illiberal tendencies — both shapes and challenges Europe. As Heraclitus reminds us, conflict holds the potential for renewal, but only if met with political imagination, mutual respect, and the courage to transform tension into opportunity.

### **Türkiye's multidimensional influence in Europe**

Foreign political influence refers to actions by external actors that seek to shape another country's political environment in ways that advance their own strategic, ideological, or economic interests.<sup>9</sup> Such influence becomes problematic when it undermines democratic sovereignty, erodes institutional autonomy, or distorts public discourse.<sup>10</sup> The very freedoms that underpin democracy can also be exploited to promote illiberal agendas.<sup>11</sup>

In Europe, concerns about foreign influence are often associated with authoritarian actors such as Russia or China.<sup>12</sup> Both have converged in their efforts to weaken democratic norms by exploiting social divisions, manipulating information ecosystems, and undermining trust in democratic governance. Türkiye's position is more complex. Unlike Russia or China, it is not a systemic rival of the European Union. Yet it increasingly employs influence strategies that resemble authoritarian patterns, particularly in its engagement with the Turkish diaspora in Europe, its use of migration diplomacy, and its deployment of religious and cultural networks.

Türkiye's foreign policy today is marked by strategic inconsistency and

<sup>9</sup> Nye, J. (1990). Soft Power. *Foreign Policy*, 80, 153–171. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>.

<sup>10</sup> Walker, C. (2018). What Is "Sharp Power"? *Journal of Democracy*, 29(3), 9–23. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/what-is-sharp-power/>.

<sup>11</sup> Diamond, L. (2015). Facing Up to the Democratic Recession. *Journal of Democracy*, 26(1), 141–155. doi:<https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2015.0009>.

<sup>12</sup> Sabanadze, N., Vasselier, A., Wiegand, G. (2024). *China-Russia Alignment: A Threat to Europe's Security*. Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS). <https://merics.org/en/report/china-russia-alignment-threat-europes-security>.

institutional volatility, outcomes of its highly centralised presidential system. As decision-making has become increasingly personalised, foreign policy has grown unpredictable and prone to abrupt reversals. A political circle that advocates dialogue and peace one day may abandon such positions the next if domestic political imperatives demand it. This erosion of institutional continuity undermines Türkiye's capacity to sustain long-term, trust-based partnerships. The transition from an institutionally anchored foreign policy tradition to one shaped primarily by individual leadership has profoundly altered both the substance and the credibility of Türkiye's external engagements.<sup>13</sup>

The absence of a rule-based, accountable foreign policy has understandably exposed Türkiye to charges of instrumentalism. Tools such as diaspora outreach, media platforms, and religious networks — ostensibly forms of soft power — often serve domestic political ends, blurring the line between civic engagement and transnational influence.<sup>14</sup> These instruments can strengthen community cohesion abroad, but they also risk deepening polarisation, importing domestic conflicts, and bypassing host-country institutions, thereby straining international trust and norms.

Türkiye's presence in Europe should therefore be understood as part of a multifaceted system of influence. This system operates through state and non-state actors, formal and informal mechanisms, and both cooperative and coercive practices. The resulting complexity reflects the broader volatility of Türkiye's foreign policy, as well as the challenges it poses for European democracies.

### Diaspora electoral interference

The total population of Turkish people living in Western European countries exceeds six million.<sup>15</sup> This socially, economically, and culturally

<sup>13</sup> Aydin, M. (ed.). (2011). *Turkish Foreign Policy: Old Problems, New Parameters*. UNISA Press.

<sup>14</sup> Houtkamp, C., Bruijne, K.D. (2021). Whose Long Arm? Challenges to Understanding Turkish Diaspora Politics. *Clingendael*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep29358>.

<sup>15</sup> Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (n.d.). Turkish Citizens Living Abroad. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/the-expatriate-turkish-citizens.en.mfa>.

diverse community is embedded within host societies but often maintains strong cultural, emotional, and legal ties to Türkiye, including citizenship and voting rights. In the 2023 elections, approximately 3.4 million members of the Turkish diaspora were eligible to vote.<sup>16</sup>

Türkiye's diaspora presence in Europe dates back to the labour migration agreements of the 1960s, particularly with Germany in 1961, the Netherlands in 1964, and Austria in 1964.<sup>17</sup> The first wave of migrants, often described as "guest workers", was expected to return after a few years. Instead, family reunification policies and the eventual acquisition of citizenship transformed temporary migration into permanent settlement. Subsequent decades brought new waves: in the 1980s and 1990s, political refugees, including Kurds, Alevis, and leftist dissidents, sought safety in Europe.<sup>18</sup> From the 2000s onwards, students, entrepreneurs, skilled professionals, and expatriates added further diversity in terms of class, ideology, and political affiliation.

Türkiye's engagement with its diaspora has since become increasingly institutionalised.<sup>19</sup> The creation of the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) in 2010 marked a turning point in state-led diaspora governance. A 2012 legal reform granting external voting rights further transformed the diaspora into an active electoral constituency. This change significantly influenced party strategies, particularly those of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Republican People's Party (CHP), which tailored their outreach across European countries.<sup>20</sup> Electoral campaigns abroad now regularly include rallies, consular

<sup>16</sup> TRT Global. (2023, April 28). Türkiye Elections: Here's What You Need to Know About Diaspora Voting. <https://trt.global/world/article/12990458>.

<sup>17</sup> Kilic, H., Biffl, G. (2022). Turkish Migration Policy from the 1960s Until Today: What National Development Plans Tell Us. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 23, 2047–2073. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-021-00912-3>.

<sup>18</sup> Kaya, A., Kentel, F. (2005). *Euro-Turks: A bridge or a breach between Turkey and the European Union?* Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS). <https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/euro-turks-bridge-or-breach-between-turkey-and-european-union-comparative-study-french/>.

<sup>19</sup> Houtkamp, C., Bruijne, K.D. (2021).

<sup>20</sup> Çobankara, S.F. (2023). The Effects of Granting the Right of External Voting to the Diaspora Policies of AKP and CHP. *Turkish Journal of Diaspora Studies*, 3(1), 24–41. doi:<https://doi.org/10.52241/TJDS.2023.0052>.

coordination, and targeted media efforts. These practices have reshaped the transnational political landscape and altered the role of diaspora communities within their host societies. For example, during Türkiye's 2023 general election, riot police in Amsterdam were deployed to disperse violent clashes between opposing political observers at a polling station, highlighting how homeland politics can inflame tensions in diaspora neighbourhoods.<sup>21</sup> Multiparty mobilisation demonstrates that diaspora politics is a broad and pluralistic arena.<sup>22</sup>

The AKP's engagement has drawn disproportionate attention due to its scale, frequency, and reliance on state institutions. High-profile rallies in Cologne (2008), Düsseldorf (2011), and Sarajevo (2018) illustrate the symbolic importance attached to diaspora support.<sup>23</sup> During election cycles, state-linked networks distribute campaign materials, organise events, and even arrange transport for voters. Such practices have generated concern in host countries because they risk importing Türkiye's domestic polarisation – between secularists and conservatives, Turks and Kurds, or pro-government and opposition groups – into European public life.<sup>24</sup> Community centres, mosques, cafés, and even family gatherings often become arenas of ideological contestation. The Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı) has also been implicated

<sup>21</sup> DutchNews.nl. (2023, May 8). Riot police break upfights at Turkish polling station in Amsterdam. <https://www.dutchnews.nl/2023/05/riot-police-break-up-fights-at-turkish-polling-station-in-amsterdam/diaspora-support>.

<sup>22</sup> Yener-Roderburg, I.Ö., Yetiş, E.Ö. (2024). Building Party Support Abroad: Turkish Diaspora Organisations in Germany and the UK. *Politics and Governance*, 12(75). doi:<https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.7546>.

<sup>23</sup> Anadolu Agency (2018, September 27). Germany: 6,000 police deployed for Erdogan visit. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/germany-6-000-police-deployed-for-erdogan-visit/157463>.

Balkan Insight (2018, April 25). Turkey's Erdogan to organise election rally in Sarajevo. <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/04/25/turkey-s-erdogan-to-organise-election-rally-in-sarajevo-04-25-2018/>

BBC News. (2017, March 13). Turkey–Netherlands row escalates. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39251216>.

<sup>24</sup> Aydin, Y. (2024). Turkey's Policy towards its Diaspora in Germany: Consequences for Bilateral and Intersocietal Relations. *CATS Network Paper*, 4. [https://www.cats-network.eu/assets/cats/CATS\\_Network\\_Paper\\_\\_Briefs/CATS\\_NETWORK\\_PAPER\\_\\_NO\\_4\\_\\_24.04.2024.pdf](https://www.cats-network.eu/assets/cats/CATS_Network_Paper__Briefs/CATS_NETWORK_PAPER__NO_4__24.04.2024.pdf).

in partisan messaging, including the promotion of specific parties and candidates.<sup>25</sup>

Diaspora mobilisation is increasingly digital. WhatsApp groups, Telegram broadcasts, and Facebook pages create media ecosystems that mirror the polarised environment of Türkiye itself. These platforms circulate highly partisan narratives, often including disinformation and emotionally charged content, which reinforce group boundaries and complicate integration.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, the Turkish diaspora's digital sphere frequently acts as an extension of Türkiye's domestic politics. This dynamic has at times spilled over into diplomatic conflict. In 2017, Turkish ministers' attempts to campaign in Germany and the Netherlands for the constitutional referendum triggered large diaspora protests and diplomatic crises, with host governments accusing Ankara of exporting its internal conflicts into European politics.<sup>27</sup>

The visibility of Türkiye's electoral activity abroad carries direct implications for host country politics. In Germany, debates over dual citizenship, religious freedom, and political loyalty have intensified in response to Turkish election campaigns. Far right actors such as *Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)* have capitalised on these tensions to question the democratic compatibility of residents of Turkish origin.<sup>28</sup> Mainstream parties, meanwhile, struggle to reconcile integration goals with security concerns. In Austria, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) has long opposed Türkiye's EU membership, portraying the Turkish community as a driver of "Islamisation" and a cultural threat, thereby pressuring

<sup>25</sup> Maritato, C. (2024). Care and Control: Turkey's Ambitions for 'Its' Domestic Abroad. *CATS Network Paper*, 3. [https://www.cats-network.eu/assets/cats/CATS\\_Network\\_Paper\\_\\_Briefs/CATS\\_NETWORK\\_PAPER\\_\\_NO\\_3\\_\\_24.04.2024.pdf](https://www.cats-network.eu/assets/cats/CATS_Network_Paper__Briefs/CATS_NETWORK_PAPER__NO_3__24.04.2024.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> Trauthig, I.K., Martin, Z.C., Woolley, S. (2023). Messaging Apps: A rising tool for informational autocrats. *Political Communication. Political Research Quarterly*, 77(1), 17–29. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/10659129231190932>.

<sup>27</sup> Toygür, İ. (2017, March 16). Understanding the Dutch elections following the dispute with Turkey. Elcano Royal Institute. <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/commentaries/understanding-dutch-elections-following-dispute-turkey/>.

<sup>28</sup> Anadolu Agency (2016, May 1). Far-right German party adopts anti-Islam program. Anadolu Agency. Retrieved July 18, 2025, from <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/far-right-german-party-adopts-anti-islam-program/564830>.

centrist parties to adopt restrictive positions.<sup>29</sup> This securitised framing has been echoed by other mainstream actors, deepening the association between integration debates and suspicions of Ankara's influence.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, in the Netherlands, far right leader Geert Wilders declared in 2015 that Turks should "stay away from us", rhetoric that has shaped broader debates on integration and foreign influence.

Although Turkish diaspora communities are politically diverse and many uphold democratic norms, the growing involvement of state-linked religious and diplomatic networks aligned with Türkiye's ruling coalition poses challenges. Such engagement risks compromising the neutrality of public space, the independence of civic life, and the democratic integrity of host societies.

### Migration leverage

Migration has long been a defining dimension of Türkiye–Europe relations. The 2015–2016 refugee crisis marked a turning point, shifting mobility governance from a primarily humanitarian issue into a strategic bargaining tool.<sup>31</sup> Türkiye's geopolitical position — as both a host country and a transit corridor, particularly for Syrians — placed it at the centre of the European Union's most significant recent challenge. Today, approximately 3.9 million officially registered migrants and refugees reside in Türkiye, 90% of whom are Syrian, displaced by the ongoing conflict in Syria.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Güllal, A.G.G., Atvur, S., Uysal Oğuz, C. (2023). Austrian populist right and Türkiye: A discourse analysis for FPÖ. *Akademik Hassasiyetler*, 10(21), 582–603. <https://doi.org/10.58884/akademik-hassasiyetler.1261612>.

<sup>30</sup> Günay, C., Übleis-Lang, M., Bonat, M. J. (2024, May 7). The Turkish diaspora in Austria (CATS Network Paper No. 5). Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS), Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP). [https://www.cats-network.eu/assets/cats/CATS\\_Network\\_Paper\\_\\_Briefs/CATS\\_NETWORK\\_PAPER\\_NO.\\_5\\_\\_07.05.2024.pdf](https://www.cats-network.eu/assets/cats/CATS_Network_Paper__Briefs/CATS_NETWORK_PAPER_NO._5__07.05.2024.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> Kaya, A. (2020). Migration as a Leverage Tool in International Relations: Turkey as a Case Study. *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, 17(68), 21–39. doi:10.33458/uidergisi.856870.

<sup>32</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM) (n.d.). Türkiye'de Göç. <https://turkiye.iom.int/tr/turkiyede-goc#:~:text=T%C3%BCrkkiye'de%20ikamet%20eden%20g%C3%BCn%C6%C>

The *EU-Türkiye Statement* of March 2016 represented a milestone in formalising interdependence.<sup>33</sup> In return for €6 billion in financial assistance, a revival of EU accession talks, and a roadmap toward visa liberalisation, Türkiye pledged to curb irregular crossings in the Aegean and to accept the return of asylum seekers from the Greek islands. While framed as a pragmatic response to an unprecedented crisis, the deal redefined cooperation: migration management was no longer treated as a shared responsibility but as a condition for EU political engagement.

Türkiye has repeatedly instrumentalised this arrangement to exert pressure on Brussels. Threats to “open the gates” have served as a coercive tactic, most notably in February 2020, when Ankara suspended border controls and allowed thousands of migrants to move toward the Greek border at Pazarkule.<sup>34</sup> This highly symbolic act exposed both the fragility of the externalised border regime and the extent to which migration had become embedded in Türkiye’s broader geopolitical posture.<sup>35</sup>

The asymmetry in EU-Türkiye migration relations stems as much from European governance failures as from Ankara’s strategy. The 2016 statement outsourced responsibility to Türkiye, while EU member states failed to agree on a fair relocation mechanism within the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). Germany initially took a leading role under Chancellor Angela Merkel’s 2015 “*Wir schaffen das!* (We can do it!)”<sup>36</sup> approach, but quickly retreated under domestic pressure, favouring

<sup>33</sup> A7men,%C3%A7at%C4%B1%C5%9Fmalar%20sonucunda%20T%C3%BCrkkiye’ye%20gelmeli%C5%9Ftr.

<sup>34</sup> Tafani, I., Riccaboni, M. (2025). The impact of the EU-Turkey agreement on the number of lives lost at sea. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 12(869). doi:<https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-04900-1>.

<sup>35</sup> Anadolu Agency (2020, March 17). Asylum seekers hold a demonstration demanding Greece to open border gates. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/pg/photo-gallery/asylum-seekers-hold-a-demonstration-demanding-greece-to-open-border-gates>.

<sup>36</sup> Aydin, M. (2014). The New Turkish Diaspora Policy Its Aims: Their Limits and the Challenges for Associations of People of Turkish Origin and Decision-makers in Germany. SWP. [https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research\\_papers/2014\\_RP10\\_adn.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2014_RP10_adn.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> Barigazzi, J., von der Burchard, H. (2020, August 31). Angela Merkel’s “*Wir schaffen das,*” 5 years on. *Politico.eu*. <https://www.politico.eu/article/angela-merkel-wir-schaffen-das-5-years-on/>.

externalisation over burden-sharing. Greece, meanwhile, struggled with overcrowded reception centres on the Aegean islands, culminating in humanitarian crises in Moria and other camps that highlighted systemic EU incapacity.<sup>37</sup> The EU border agency Frontex was also implicated in serious misconduct, including confirmed pushbacks in the Aegean Sea, documented by the European Parliament in 2022.<sup>38</sup> Such practices undermined the EU's legal and normative credibility and underscored its reliance on deterrence rather than solidarity. By tolerating rights violations, prioritising short-term domestic politics, and failing to design a coherent asylum system, European actors themselves created the vulnerabilities that Türkiye was able to exploit.

The refugee crisis and Türkiye's subsequent actions accelerated the rise of nationalist and far right parties in Europe. These groups exploited migration fears to mobilise support and depict the EU as weak and incapable of securing its borders.<sup>39</sup> In this sense, Türkiye's external leverage translated into internal disruption, exposing divisions within Europe's democratic consensus.

The EU's reliance on Türkiye has produced a normative paradox. Cooperation is seen as indispensable for reducing irregular flows and safeguarding borders, yet dependence has constrained the EU's normative agenda on human rights, the rule of law, and democratic backsliding in Türkiye. The migration deal subordinated the EU's liberal-democratic identity to securitised imperatives, undermining its credibility as a normative actor in its neighbourhood.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Al Jazeera. (2019, November 27). Desperate refugees face up to closure of Moria camp. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/11/27/desperate-refugees-face-up-to-closure-of-moria-camp>.

<sup>38</sup> Radjenovic, A. (2022, March). Alleged pushbacks and rights violations at the EU's external borders. European Parliamentary Research Service. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/738191/EPRS\\_BRI\(2022\)738191\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/738191/EPRS_BRI(2022)738191_EN.pdf).

<sup>39</sup> Triandafyllidou, A. (2017). A "Refugee Crisis" Unfolding: "Real" Events and Their Interpretation in Media and Political Debates. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 16(1–2), 198–216. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2017.1309089>.

<sup>40</sup> Lavenex, S. (2018). "Failing forward" towards Which Europe? Organized hypocrisy in the Common European Asylum System. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 56(5), 1195–1212. doi:[10.1111/jcms.12739](https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.12739).

This arrangement has also enabled the de facto outsourcing of European migration governance to an increasingly authoritarian partner. Türkiye's refugee regime, while comparatively generous in hosting capacity, has been implemented with limited institutional oversight, raising concerns about the transparency and consistency of protection standards. Moreover, migration management is often shaped by domestic political calculations and international disputes. The February 2020 border opening, for example, was influenced by a diplomatic standoff and domestic pressures.<sup>41</sup> The 2023 general elections revealed how deeply migration has become politicised: both the ruling coalition and opposition parties promised to reduce refugee numbers, reflecting economic pressures and nationalist sentiments. Such rhetoric not only threatens refugee protection but also undermines Türkiye's reliability as a partner for the EU.

Migration has thus evolved into a key instrument of geopolitical leverage in Türkiye–EU relations. While the 2016 statement managed the immediate fallout of the refugee crisis, it entrenched an asymmetric, interest-driven framework. Despite the EU's substantial financial commitments, core political promises — most notably visa liberalisation — remain unfulfilled. This selective implementation has deepened public scepticism in Türkiye and highlighted the EU's inconsistency in aligning its interests with its values. Far from fostering democratic transformation, the migration deal has bolstered authoritarian resilience in Türkiye while constraining the EU's transformative capacity. By treating Türkiye primarily as a border custodian, the EU has legitimised illiberal practices and diminished its own normative authority. Moving forward, a recalibration of the partnership is required — one that restores mutual accountability, safeguards legal integrity, and re-centres a principled commitment to shared democratic norms.

<sup>41</sup> Aksel, D.B., İçduygu, A. (2018). National Report on Turkey: Patterns of Politicization on Refugees and Policy Responses. *CEASEVAL Research On The Common European Asylum System*, 10. <http://ceaseval.eu/publications>.

## Media and cultural diplomacy

Türkiye has developed a network of transnational media, religious, and cultural institutions, similar to other states seeking to expand their global influence and cultivate ties with diaspora communities. These include global broadcasters such as TRT World and the Anadolu Agency (AA); religious bodies affiliated with the Presidency of Religious Affairs; and cultural organisations such as the Yunus Emre Institutes (YEİS). Together, they form the core of Türkiye's public diplomacy architecture, designed to project state narratives internationally and sustain diasporic identity, belonging, and cultural continuity.<sup>42</sup>

TRT World, launched in 2015 as an English-language broadcaster, and the state-run AA, with a legacy dating back to 1920, are central to Türkiye's global media strategy. Their role parallels that of other state-sponsored broadcasters — France 24, Deutsche Welle, or Al Jazeera — which project national perspectives in the competitive global information order. Turkish outlets serve both Turkish-speaking audiences abroad and international viewers, providing geopolitical perspectives. Yet their close alignment with official state positions, particularly during election periods, has raised concerns about media pluralism, journalistic independence, and foreign influence on diasporic political behaviour. The growing reliance on emotionally charged storytelling further complicates the media landscape, blurring distinctions between public diplomacy, state branding, and partisan mobilisation.<sup>43</sup>

Religious institutions constitute another pillar of Türkiye's transnational engagement. The Presidency of Religious Affairs coordinates mosques and prayer spaces across Europe, working through partner organisations such as DITIB (Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs) in Germany

<sup>42</sup> Öktem, K. (2014). *Turkey's New Diaspora Policy: The Challenge Of Inclusivity, Outreach and Capacity*. Istanbul: IPC. <https://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/Content/Images/CKEditorImages/20200327-00032456.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> Manor, I. (2018). *The Digitalization of Diplomacy: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Terminology*. Oxford Digital Diplomacy Research Group. <http://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/sites/www.odid.ox.ac.uk/files/DigDiploROxWP2.p>.

and *Diyanet de Belgique (BDV)* in Belgium.<sup>44</sup> These institutions function as community hubs, offering religious guidance and moral education, particularly for earlier cohorts of migrants from the 1960s and 1970s. They have long preserved cultural identity while mediating between homeland values and host-country norms.<sup>45</sup>

However, the intersection of religious services and geopolitical interests has prompted democratic scrutiny.<sup>46</sup> Several EU member states have introduced policies to curb foreign funding, increase local imam training, and promote theological instruction aligned with democratic values. France's 2021 *Law on Separatism* requires religious associations to declare foreign funding exceeding €10,000;<sup>47</sup> Austria has closed mosques accused of promoting political Islam;<sup>48</sup> and Germany is gradually shifting toward training imams domestically, reducing reliance on clergy appointed by Türkiye.<sup>49</sup> While these policies aim to integrate Muslim communities within national constitutional frameworks, they also provoke debate about religious freedom, integration, and pluralism.

Türkiye's cultural diplomacy, channelled primarily through the YEIS, mirrors the work of the *Institut Français, Goethe-Institut*, or British Council. YEIS provide Turkish language courses, host exhibitions, and organise cultural events, thereby enhancing Türkiye's soft power and fostering intercultural dialogue. These institutes present Türkiye as a civilisational

<sup>44</sup> Seufert, G. (2020). The changing nature of the Turkish State Authority for Religious Affairs (ARA) and Turkish Islam in Europe. *Centre For Applied Turkey Studies (CATS)*, 2. [https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/CATS\\_Working\\_Paper\\_Nr\\_2\\_Guenter\\_Seufert.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/CATS_Working_Paper_Nr_2_Guenter_Seufert.pdf).

<sup>45</sup> Seufert, G. (2020).

<sup>46</sup> Öcal, D.K., Gökarıksel, B. (2022). Grounding religious geopolitics: The everyday counter-geopolitical practices of Turkish mosque communities in Germany. *Geoforum*, 129, 151–160. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2022.01.011>.

<sup>47</sup> Euronews (2021, February 16). Here's what you need to know about France's controversial separation law. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2021/02/16/heres-what-you-need-to-know-about-france-s-controversial-separatism-law>.

<sup>48</sup> BBC News (2018, June 8). Austria to close seven mosques and expel imams in 'political Islam' crackdown. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44410597>. DW News (2024, May 8). Germany to halt admission of Turkey-trained imams. <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-to-halt-admission-of-turkey-trained-imams/a-67722838>

<sup>49</sup> DW News (2024, May 8). Germany to halt admission of Turkey-trained imams. <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-to-halt-admission-of-turkey-trained-imams/a-67722838>.

actor while strengthening connections among diaspora communities. Critics, however, argue that YEI programming often reflects the ideological preferences of the ruling party, marginalising opposition-aligned diaspora organisations and dissident voices. In Germany, for instance, debates have raised concerns that YEIs promote long-distance nationalism and partisan messaging rather than serving as neutral cultural intermediaries.<sup>50</sup> Such practices risk weakening cultural pluralism and exacerbating polarisation within diaspora communities.

Beyond formal institutions, popular culture has also become an influential vehicle of Türkiye's soft power. Turkish television dramas are widely consumed by diaspora audiences and international viewers, reinforcing themes of national pride, religious identity, and historical continuity. Some series, such as *Diriliş: Ertuğrul* or *Payitaht: Abdülhamid*, carry overt political symbolism, aligning with neo-Ottoman narratives or portraying the late Ottoman sultan as an anti-imperial hero. While these productions strengthen cultural ties and emotional identification with the homeland,<sup>51</sup> they also risk blurring the line between cultural outreach and political messaging. Research among Turkish communities in Sweden shows that such dramas foster both cultural continuity and strong attachment to homeland narratives, amplifying their impact on diaspora political engagement.<sup>52</sup>

In parallel, new migrant-led digital collectives illustrate how diasporic media use extends beyond state influence. These platforms transform experiences of exile, loss, or political marginalisation into collective narratives of solidarity, providing alternative spaces of expression and identity formation.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Aydin, M. (2014).

<sup>51</sup> Çevik, S.B. (2019). Turkish historical television series: public broadcasting of neo-Ottoman illusions. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 19(2), 227–242. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2019.1622288>.

<sup>52</sup> Bilici, F., Ekici, M. (2022). Turkish dramas beyond borders: Reception and cultural identity in Sweden. *Series – International Journal of TV Serial Narratives*, 8(2), 55–69. <https://series.unibo.it/article/download/15488/15691/64103>.

<sup>53</sup> Savaş, Ö. (2019). Affective Digital Media of New Migration from Turkey: Feelings, Affinities, and Politics. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 5405–5426. [https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/viewFile/10938/2854?utm\\_source](https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/viewFile/10938/2854?utm_source).

While many states pursue cultural and religious outreach abroad, the challenge lies in ensuring transparency, pluralism, and respect for host-country norms. For Türkiye's overseas institutions, credibility depends on inclusive representation, civil oversight, and institutional autonomy. Such practices would not only strengthen integration and empowerment of Turkish-origin communities in Europe but also bolster the legitimacy of Türkiye's soft power. Rather than framing Türkiye's engagement as inherently problematic, European democracies would benefit from cooperative frameworks that combine critical dialogue with democratic safeguards.<sup>54</sup> Such frameworks could foster a more cohesive and participatory diasporic landscape while reinforcing democratic norms on both sides, offering a more constructive vision for future engagement.

### Geopolitical and military pressure

Türkiye's geopolitical position has become a pivotal factor in recalibrating the European security architecture. While Türkiye is increasingly perceived as an indispensable actor in multiple theatres of conflict, its assertive manoeuvring also poses normative and strategic dilemmas for both the European Union and NATO.

One of the earliest and most visible examples of this shift emerged in Syria, where Türkiye's cross-border military operations, justified as counterterrorism and border protection, significantly altered the regional balance of power. By establishing control zones in northern Syria, Türkiye consolidated leverage over both regional dynamics and European security calculations.<sup>55</sup> The 2016 *EU-Türkiye Statement on Migration* institutionalised this role, positioning Ankara as a gatekeeper of European borders and giving it substantial influence over EU internal security and migration policymaking.

<sup>54</sup> Yunus Emre Institute (n.d.). About us. <https://www.yee.org.tr/tr/node/59>.

<sup>55</sup> Siccardi, F. (2021). How Syria Changed Turkey's Foreign Policy. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. [https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/files\\_\\_Siccardi\\_-\\_Turkey\\_Syria-V3.pdf](https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/files__Siccardi_-_Turkey_Syria-V3.pdf).

Türkiye's ability to wield influence within NATO has been equally pronounced. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has repeatedly utilised NATO's consensus-based decision-making to advance domestic and foreign policy interests. Most notably, Türkiye's prolonged delay in ratifying Sweden and Finland's NATO membership applications exposed deep fractures within the alliance.<sup>56</sup> Although Ankara ultimately lifted its veto, it did so only after extracting concrete concessions: both Nordic governments strengthened counterterrorism cooperation and introduced legislative reforms; Finland resumed arms exports to Türkiye; and the United States approved a \$23 billion F-16 fighter jet package. These outcomes illustrate how Türkiye has learned to instrumentalise multilateral institutions for tactical advantage.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine added yet another layer to Türkiye's balancing act. Despite extensive cooperation with Moscow in energy, trade, and regional security, Ankara took steps that aligned closely with Western strategic interests. These included supplying Bayraktar TB2 drones to Kyiv, supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity, and facilitating the *Black Sea Grain Initiative*. At the same time, Türkiye maintained diplomatic engagement with both sides, positioning itself as an indispensable mediator. This delicate balancing act elevated Türkiye's regional stature while deepening Europe's military and diplomatic reliance on Ankara. The irony is clear: the EU, long critical of Türkiye's security-first approach, has itself adopted a similar posture in the face of renewed continental insecurity.

This dynamic has produced a strategic double standard. Despite pronounced democratic backsliding in Türkiye — including political arrests, restrictions on press freedom, and curbs on judicial independence — the EU has avoided recalibrating its relations. Defence-industrial cooperation, energy transit, and conflict mediation have consistently overshadowed democratic concerns. The tacit message is unmistakable: as long as Türkiye remains strategically “useful”, its domestic authoritarian consolidation is a secondary issue.

<sup>56</sup> Elgin, K.K., Lanoszka, A. (2023). Sweden, Finland, and the Meaning of Alliance Membership. *Texas National Security Review*, 6(2). doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/46144>.

Yet such realpolitik carries risks. Türkiye's so-called "drone diplomacy", visible in arms exports to Ukraine, Poland, and Albania, has bolstered its status as a defence partner. But the contradiction remains stark: European democracies are increasingly dependent on security tools supplied by a regime whose democratic credentials are contested, while still proclaiming their commitment to liberal values.

A Türkiye that is domestically unstable and institutionally eroded may ultimately prove to be an unreliable foreign policy partner. The integrity of Europe's security order cannot be divorced from the democratic health of its key actors. Strategic reliance on an authoritarian partner risks importing volatility and eroding the EU's normative foundations. A secure Europe must rest not only on collective defence but also on the democratic values that lend such defence its legitimacy.

### Local and municipal partnerships

City diplomacy has become an increasingly important dimension of global governance, enabling municipalities to access knowledge, best practices, and investment.<sup>57</sup> Within this context, it has also emerged as a significant, though often overlooked, arena of Türkiye's foreign policy. At a time when formal EU–Türkiye relations are strained by democratic backsliding and geopolitical frictions, subnational actors — particularly metropolitan municipalities — have provided alternative channels of dialogue and cooperation.

Major cities such as Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara have cultivated extensive partnerships with European municipalities and networks, including Eurocities, C40, and ICLEI. These collaborations focus on climate resilience, democratic local governance, inclusive urban planning, and cross-cultural dialogue. In doing so, they not only deliver practical benefits

<sup>57</sup> Pejic, D., et al. (2025). City Diplomacy in Response to Multiple Crises: The 2024 Cities and International Engagement Survey. *The Melbourne Centre for Cities*. Retrieved from [https://www.unimelb.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/5243778/City-Diplomacy-in-Response-to-Multiple-Crises-Report.pdf](https://www.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/5243778/City-Diplomacy-in-Response-to-Multiple-Crises-Report.pdf).

but also operate symbolically, projecting pluralism and shared values at a time when Türkiye's central government is criticised in Europe for eroding democratic norms.<sup>58</sup> Opposition-led municipalities thus often function as counterweights to Ankara's increasingly authoritarian posture, positioning themselves as emissaries of a more cosmopolitan and pluralistic identity abroad.

By contrast, the central government and its affiliated municipalities have pursued a parallel model of city diplomacy rooted in ideological alignment and soft power projection. This approach is most visible in countries with significant Turkish diaspora populations — such as Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Austria — where partnerships are often mediated not through transparent institutional frameworks, but via party-linked platforms and religious networks.<sup>59</sup> Initiatives have included mosque construction, cultural centre development, and city-twinning agreements. While these efforts can facilitate cultural exchange and strengthen diaspora engagement, they also raise concerns about foreign influence in local politics. In Germany, for example, municipal actors have voiced alarm over Türkiye's indirect role in shaping religious education, diaspora mobilisation, and discursive control within local Turkish communities.<sup>60</sup> Such dynamics complicate democratic accountability and risk importing Türkiye's internal ideological cleavages into European municipal politics.

A mapping of Türkiye's municipal initiatives across Europe would likely reveal a dual structure. Opposition-led metropolitan municipalities prioritise open diplomacy, environmental cooperation, and democratic exchange through European networks. Government-aligned municipalities, by contrast, emphasise diaspora-oriented and cultural

<sup>58</sup> Eurocities (2023, March 22). How city diplomacy is shaping EU and global policy. <https://eurocities.eu/latest/how-city-diplomacy-is-shaping-eu-and-global-policy/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CCity%20diplomacy%20is%20no%20longer,building%2C%20and%20democratic%20renewal.%E2%80%9D>.

<sup>59</sup> Adar, S., et al. (2024). The Turkish Diaspora Landscape in Western Europe. SWP. doi:[https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2024C20\\_Turkish-DiasporaPolicy.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2024C20_Turkish-DiasporaPolicy.pdf).

<sup>60</sup> Aydin, Y. (2024).

linkages, with limited engagement in governance or sustainability initiatives. This bifurcated landscape underscores both the opportunities and risks of Türkiye's municipal diplomacy. Ultimately, its democratic value depends not simply on the existence of translocal ties, but on their governance — particularly whether they are conducted transparently, adhere to mutual accountability, and uphold democratic legitimacy.

Table 1. Türkiye's Municipal Initiatives in Europe\*

Country or Name of the Network	Number of Sister Cities with Türkiye or Name of the City	Political Leaning in Türkiye (2025)	Type of Cooperation
Germany	97	Various parties	Cultural & diaspora-oriented
Bulgaria	132	Various parties	Cultural & diaspora-oriented
Greece	86	Various parties	Cultural & diaspora-oriented
Italy	51	Various parties	Cultural & diaspora-oriented
Romania	48	Various parties	Cultural & diaspora-oriented
Hungary	39	Various parties	Cultural & diaspora-oriented
Poland	37	Various parties	Cultural & diaspora-oriented
Sweden	25	Various parties	Cultural & diaspora-oriented
France	24	Various parties	Cultural & diaspora-oriented
United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG)	3	Various parties	Global municipal governance

\* These data have been compiled from official reports and media scans of various municipal networks: United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) (n.d.). *About us*. <https://uclg.org/about-us>. Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) (n.d.). *National associations*. <https://ccre-cemr.org/national-associations>. ICLEI — Local Governments for Sustainability (n.d.). *Members*. <https://iclei.org/iclei-members/>. European Association for Local Democracy (ALDA) (n.d.). *Members*. <https://www.lda-europe.eu/members/>. Union of Municipalities of Türkiye (TBB) (n.d.). *Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM)*. [https://www.tbb.gov.tr/en/euro-mediterranean-regional-and-local-assembly-arlem?utm\\_source](https://www.tbb.gov.tr/en/euro-mediterranean-regional-and-local-assembly-arlem?utm_source). Union of Municipalities of Türkiye (TBB) (n.d.). *Sister city infographic*. [https://www.yereldeab.org.tr/Portals/8/yayinlar/infografik/infografik\\_O3.pdf](https://www.yereldeab.org.tr/Portals/8/yayinlar/infografik/infografik_O3.pdf).

Table 1 cont.

Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR)	16	Various parties	Local governance & policy exchange
Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI)	25	Various parties	Sustainability & climate action
European Association for Local Democracy (ALDA)	6	Various parties	Local democracy & governance
Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM)	5	Various parties	Regional cooperation & governance
Metropolis	Istanbul	Opposition-led	Global urban governance
C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group	Istanbul	Opposition-led	Climate leadership & sustainability
Eurocities	Istanbul, Izmir	Opposition-led	Urban policy exchange & governance
B40 Balkan Cities Network	Istanbul	Opposition-led	Regional cooperation
MedCities	Izmir	Opposition-led	Mediterranean urban sustainability
Covenant of Mayors	Izmir	Opposition-led	Climate action & energy transition
Intercultural Cities Network	Osmangazi, Bursa	Opposition-led	Intercultural dialogue & inclusion
Intercultural Cities Network	Ephesus, Selçuk, Izmir	Opposition-led	Intercultural dialogue & inclusion

## Strategies for democratic resilience

Türkiye's relations with the EU rest on a dense web of legal instruments, mutual interdependence, and partial voluntary compliance with EU rules.<sup>61</sup> As Türkiye extends its transnational footprint across Europe — through media, migration diplomacy, religious institutions, and municipal networks — European democracies must move beyond reactive postures. The challenge is not to isolate Turkish influence but to channel it into frameworks that protect democratic norms, strengthen pluralism, and empower civic agency. This requires proactive, rights-based strategies at local, national, and EU levels.

Several policy pillars stand out:

- Diaspora engagement as democratic participation. Diaspora communities should neither be instrumentalised as extensions of foreign states nor treated as politically detached civic entities. They are active stakeholders in pluralist democratic life. European governments should invest in diaspora-led civil society initiatives that promote participation, intercultural dialogue, and pluralism. Programs such as Germany's *Demokratie Leben!* provide useful models. At the same time, updated legal frameworks must clarify rules on external campaigning, foreign funding, and dual political engagement — safeguarding electoral integrity without stigmatising ethnic minorities. Türkiye's use of consular and mosque networks during elections underscores the urgency of robust safeguards that defend both sovereignty and civil liberties.
- Reframing migration cooperation. The 2016 EU–Türkiye migration deal entrenched asymmetrical dependency, trading normative leverage for short-term border control. Recalibration requires diversifying migration partnerships, investing in frontline member states, and strengthening the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). Migration must be

<sup>61</sup> Müftüler-Baç, M. (n.d.). A fragile relationship: Turkey and the European Union Moving Beyond Membership with External Differentiated Integration. *West European Politics*, 48(5), 1186–1215. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2024.2442870>.

addressed not merely as a security challenge but as a shared humanitarian and geopolitical responsibility, rooted in international law, solidarity, and human dignity. Europe's demographic and economic outlook further highlights the need for skilled migration. Building inclusive, rights-based mobility frameworks is therefore both a moral imperative and a pragmatic necessity for sustaining growth and innovation. A principled approach would restore EU credibility and reduce susceptibility to coercive diplomacy.

- Media transparency and civic empowerment. Türkiye's state-backed media outlets significantly shape diaspora narratives. International broadcasting is legitimate, but opaque funding and politically aligned content risk distorting public discourse. European democracies should expand transparency requirements for foreign media operations and strengthen independent, multilingual journalism that responds to diaspora needs. Scaling digital literacy initiatives — tailored to migrant communities — will further empower civic choice without resorting to censorship.
- Conditioning strategic cooperation on democratic benchmarks. Türkiye's foreign policy demonstrates its readiness to instrumentalise alliances. While Türkiye remains a crucial partner in defence, trade, and energy, cooperation should be conditioned on progress in judicial independence, the rule of law, and civil liberties. Arms exports, customs union upgrades, and bilateral agreements must be structured to reinforce democratic values rather than sacrifice them.
- Harnessing city diplomacy. City-level partnerships are increasingly important arenas of influence, particularly in municipalities with large diaspora populations. The EU should facilitate a network of value-driven municipalities committed to transparency, civic participation, and intercultural inclusion. Targeted funding for local initiatives — youth exchanges, arts programming, civic education — can foster belonging and counter polarisation. Municipalities, as the most accessible layer of governance, are uniquely positioned to build resilience and social cohesion.

## The road ahead

Democratic resilience will not be secured through exclusion or securitisation. It requires principled engagement, sustained institutional attention, and strategic civic investment. Whether or not Türkiye continues its diplomatic charm offensive, Europe must define a coherent policy towards Ankara.<sup>62</sup> Türkiye's engagement with Europe remains marked by both cooperation and contention. The challenge for Europe is to manage this ambivalence in ways that safeguard its democratic integrity while keeping channels of dialogue open.

Türkiye's expanding role in Europe — through migration diplomacy, media, diaspora networks, and municipal ties — is at once a challenge and a mirror. These instruments can build connection or fuel division, depending on how they are governed and received. To reduce Türkiye to a mere threat is to oversimplify a complex landscape in which civil society, local actors, and diaspora initiatives continue to uphold democratic values and foster pluralism.

For the EU, the task is not withdrawal but principled resilience: a strategy rooted in transparency, accountability, and inclusion rather than reactive geopolitics. As Heraclitus reminds us, tension can be generative; it can reveal deeper truths and open paths for transformation. Türkiye's presence should prompt reflection, not fear — reflection on Europe's democratic cohesion and its capacity to act with confidence rather than retreat.

Real resilience lies in staying open, engaged, and principled, even in the face of uncertainty. The future of Europe–Türkiye relations will be shaped not only by geopolitical bargaining but also by whether both sides can transform conflict into constructive dialogue, and tension into a catalyst for renewal.

<sup>62</sup> Toygür, I. (2021).

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*Football, then, is not a neutral space. It becomes a carefully engineered ecosystem of influence—where prestige, money, identity, and power converge. And it is within this ecosystem that Gulf states have embedded themselves, recalibrating both the politics of the game and the politics behind it.*

CONSTANTINOS SARAVAKOS

# China's Soft Power and Influence Operations in Europe

## Strategic Engagement or Political Disruption

SHUSHAN AVAGYAN

### Introduction

China has directed substantial resources over the past twenty years toward building influence across Europe through what it describes as soft power rather than direct political coercion. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Confucius Institutes (CIs), media partnerships, and strategic economic investments can all be viewed as elements of a comprehensive plan to shape European public attitudes and policymaking processes.

These partnerships have sparked concern about growing economic dependence, political influence, and security risks to national sovereignty. While influence itself can be neutral, power dynamics shift significantly when one actor gains disproportionate control over decision-making authority. This raises key questions: Where should Europe draw the line between legitimate influence operations and foreign interference? And what steps should the EU and its member states take to counter Chinese interference?

At a time of unease, when the EU faces challenges from multiple directions, unity is essential. Yet, a joint European approach to China is lacking. Instead, individual member states pursue divergent strategies. To safeguard its interests, the EU should move beyond fragmented national responses and replace them with a unified, proactive, and resilient policy framework.

## Conceptual framework: soft power vs. foreign interference

Defining the boundary between soft power and unwanted interference is not straightforward. In international relations, soft power is most closely associated with Joseph S. Nye, Jr., who defines it as “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes you want...through attraction and persuasion that makes others want what you want”<sup>1</sup> (Nye, 2008, *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*).<sup>2</sup> Unlike coercive power, which relies on threats or payments, soft power arises from cultural appeal, political values, and the perceived legitimacy of policies (Nye, 2004).

By contrast, foreign interference has no canonical definition but has become central in security and policy debates. It generally refers to covert, manipulative, or deceptive actions by foreign actors designed to subvert democratic institutions or decision-making. Key elements are opacity and intent: RMIT University (2025) emphasizes coercion and corruption<sup>3</sup>, while the US Department of Defense (2023) highlights the risks of research misappropriation through undisclosed foreign ties.<sup>4</sup> Scholars (e.g., Grasz, 2022) similarly underline that interference differs from soft power by its centralized, state-directed reliance on disinformation, cyber operations, and clandestine financing.<sup>5</sup>

The EU itself lacks a clear, legally binding definition of either concept. In general, it treats interference as illegitimate attempts by foreign powers to sway democratic processes. China’s approach, often blending economic leverage with political charm while sidestepping sensitive

<sup>1</sup> Nye, J. (2008). Public Diplomacy and Soft Power. *Annals of The American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616: 94.

<sup>2</sup> Nye, J. (2004). *Wielding soft power*. In *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. New York: Public Affairs.

<sup>3</sup> Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (2025, July 10). 2026 Degree & Diploma Guide: Melbourne-based courses for Australian and New Zealand citizens and permanent residents. <https://www.rmit.edu.au/content/dam/rmit/au/en/docs/study/career-advisers/brochures/2026-degree-diploma-guide-rmit-university.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Defense (2023). 2023 National Defense Science & Technology Strategy: Sharpening our competitive edge. <https://media.defense.gov/2023/May/09/2003218877/-1/-1/0/NDSTS-FINAL-WEB-VERSION.PDF>.

<sup>5</sup> Wasson, W. W. (2023, August 29). Beyond Misinformation: The Misrepresentation and Misappropriation of Research (Working Paper).

political issues, illustrates the ambiguity: it seeks market dominance while cultivating political goodwill, which can pose a direct threat to European values.

Although soft power may appear less threatening if it does not breach legal boundaries, it can be equally, if not more, dangerous. First, the absence of consensus on how to confront unwanted soft power makes it difficult to mount a coordinated response. Second, the most effective forms of soft power are normalized and invisible, subtly reshaping values without notice. Third, attribution is challenging: even when foreign influence is suspected, it is often difficult to prove state involvement or malign intent.

### The EU's legal and policy toolkit

The EU has adopted several important legal acts and policy initiatives to confront foreign interference.

- The *Digital Services Act* (DSA) seeks to curb the spread of disinformation online, a primary vector of influence.
- The *Regulation on Transparency and Targeting of Political Advertising* (TTPA) enhances accountability in campaigns, reducing foreign sway.
- The *Artificial Intelligence Act* (AI Act) acknowledges AI's potential misuse in interference, while the *nIS2 Directive* strengthens cybersecurity in critical areas, including elections.
- On the economic side, the *Foreign Subsidies Regulation* (FSR) and the *Anti-Coercion Instrument* (ACI) address economic coercion and unfair competition.

We can find even more instruments on the economic front. Trade Defence Instruments (TDIs) — including anti-dumping and anti-subsidy duties — are being deployed, as seen in recent investigations into Chinese electric vehicles and wind turbines.<sup>6</sup> Tariffs and strict product standards also act

<sup>6</sup> European Commission (n.d.). Enforcement and protection. Enforcement and protection — Trade and Economic Security. European Commission (n.d.). Foreign Subsidies Regulation. [https://competition-policy.ec.europa.eu/foreign-subsidies-regulation\\_en](https://competition-policy.ec.europa.eu/foreign-subsidies-regulation_en).

as barriers to imports of cheap goods.<sup>7</sup> The EU's growing concern about dependencies in strategic sectors — electric vehicles, green technologies, critical raw materials, semiconductors, and pharmaceuticals — highlights the economic dimension of its vulnerability.<sup>8</sup>

These measures demonstrate progress, but they also underscore the need for a more comprehensive and anticipatory approach.

## Mechanisms of China's soft power in Europe

### 1. Educational and cultural institutions

Confucius Institutes (cIs) were created to promote Chinese language and culture worldwide. Yet they are increasingly criticized for constraining academic freedom and propagating official narratives.<sup>9</sup> Sensitive issues such as Tibet, Taiwan, or the Tiananmen Square protests are routinely avoided.<sup>10</sup>

Several European universities have closed their cIs. By 2020, multiple Swedish universities had ended partnerships, citing interference and censorship.<sup>11</sup> Germany's federal government has similarly called China “the greatest threat”<sup>12</sup> in economic, industrial, and scientific espionage,

<sup>7</sup> European Parliament (2025, April 8). New screening rules for foreign investment in the EU [press release]. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20250407-IPR27703/new-screening-rules-for-foreign-investment-in-the-eu>.

<sup>8</sup> Eurostat (2025, February). China-EU — international trade in goods statistics. [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=China-EU\\_-\\_international\\_trade\\_in\\_goods\\_statistics](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=China-EU_-_international_trade_in_goods_statistics). European Commission (n.d.). Critical Raw Materials Act. [https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/raw-materials/areas-specific-interest/critical-raw-materials/critical-raw-materials-act\\_en](https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/raw-materials/areas-specific-interest/critical-raw-materials/critical-raw-materials-act_en).

<sup>9</sup> Edwards, L. (2021, May 27). Confucius Institutes: China's Trojan Horse. *The Heritage Foundation*. <https://www.heritage.org/homeland-security/commentary/confucius-institutes-chinas-trojan-horse>.

<sup>10</sup> Jakhar, P. (2019, September 7). Confucius Institutes: The growth of China's controversial cultural branch. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-49511231>.

<sup>11</sup> ACA (2015). Stockholm University to close Confucius Institute. <https://aca-secretariat.be/newsletter/stockholm-university-to-close-confucius-institute/>.

<sup>12</sup> DW.com (2023, June 29). Germany to restrict influence of China's Confucius Institute. <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-to-restrict-influence-of-chinas-confucius-institute/a-66065072>.

urging universities to terminate cooperation. The existence of C1 and the pressures they bring can lead to some kind of censorship in academic environments, which undermines open discussion. Although the US has taken a unified stance on C1s, the EU leaves the decision to individual member states and institutions, creating inconsistency.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): economic engagement or strategic entrapment?

The BRI is presented as a vehicle for global trade expansion through infrastructure investments. In Europe, projects like the Budapest–Belgrade railway are advertised as growth opportunities.<sup>14</sup> Yet this €3.8 billion project, financed through Chinese loans, is so costly that Hungary would need nearly a millennium to break even.

Italy, the only G7 member to join the BRI, is now reconsidering its participation due to unmet expectations and strategic risks.<sup>15</sup> Globally, the debt burden has been severe: a 2021 study found that 42 countries

<sup>13</sup> In 2018, then-FBI Director Christopher Wray testified before Congress that the FBI was “watching warily” and had opened “appropriate investigative steps” into C1s. He described the institutes as one of many tools China uses to “take advantage of our open research and development environment. Then official actions followed: In 2020, the Department of State designated the Confucius Institute US Center as a “foreign mission” of the People’s Republic of China. This classification requires the center to register and regularly provide information to the State Department about its personnel, funding, and operations, significantly increasing transparency and oversight.

Brake, M. (2018, February 27). FBI Monitoring Chinese-run Confucius Institute. OCPA. <https://ocpathink.org/post/independent-journalism/fbi-monitoring-chinese-run-confucius-institutes#:~:text=%E2%80%9CIt's%20just%20one%20of%20the,have%20developed%20appropriate%20investigative%20steps.%E2%80%9D.>

US Department of State, Office of Spokesman (2020, August 13). “Confucius Institute U.S. Center” Designation as a Foreign Mission. <https://2017-2021.state.gov/confucius-institute-u-s-center-designation-as-a-foreign-mission/#:~:text=On%20August%2013%2C%202020%2C%20the,the%20People's%20Republic%20of%20China.>

<sup>14</sup> Bodeen, Ch. (2024, May 3). As China's Xi Jinping visits Europe, Ukraine, trade and investment are likely to top the agenda. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/china-france-hungary-serbia-xi-jinping-trade-470fc6954586e250261781ed76165cf5.>

<sup>15</sup> Mazzocco, I., Palazzi, A.L. (2023, December 14). Italy Withdraws from China's Belt and Road Initiative. CSIS. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/italy-withdraws-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative.>

face Chinese debt exceeding 10% of GDP.<sup>16</sup> Among them, Montenegro's case is especially curious: in 2020 country's national debt-to-GDP ratio was over 100%. The most alarming aspect of the loan contract, from the perspective of "debt-trap" critics, was a clause that stipulated that if Montenegro failed to repay the loan, an arbitration court in China could be given the right to seize Montenegrin state-owned land and assets.<sup>17</sup>

Such entanglements reduce policy flexibility, especially in foreign policy and human rights advocacy. Engagement with the BRI is not inherently negative, but EU states must negotiate from a position of strength, advancing their own interests rather than merely "de-risking".

### 3. Diplomatic engagement

China has intensified its diplomatic outreach in Europe, aiming to strengthen ties amid global tensions. This "charm offensive" includes high-level visits and trade discussions, reflecting Beijing's strategic interest in fostering closer relations with European nations. However, China's indistinct position on Russia's actions in Ukraine and its perceived support for authoritarian regimes have raised concerns.<sup>18</sup> European leaders have become increasingly alert, balancing engagement with caution, as they navigate the complexities of China's growing influence in the region.<sup>19</sup>

Bilateral engagements between China and individual EU member states can lead to divergent policies, weakening the EU's collective negotiating

<sup>16</sup> Parks, B.C., et al. (2023, November). The Belt and Road Reboot. *AidData at William & Mary*. *summary.html* <https://www.google.com/search?q=https://docs.aiddata.org/reports/belt-and-road-reboot/>.

<sup>17</sup> Read also Panda, A. (2017, December 11). Sri Lanka Formally Hands Over Hambantota Port to Chinese Firms on 99-Year Lease. *The Diplomat*. <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/sri-lanka-formally-hands-over-hambantota-port-to-chinese-firms-on-99-year-lease/>.

<sup>18</sup> U.S.-China Economic and Security Commission (2025, August 31). China's Position on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine. <https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-position-russias-invasion-ukraine>

<sup>19</sup> Casarini, N. (2024, February). *The Future of the Belt and Road in Europe*. Rome: IAI. <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaip2402.pdf>.

power and unity. One such example might be the blocking of an EU statement at the UN Human Rights Council that would have criticized China's human rights record in 2017 by Greece, an EU member, and a member of the "16+1" format.<sup>20</sup> While Athens denied direct links, this might be viewed as an example of how economic dependencies can translate into diplomatic leverage, as Greece was receiving Chinese investment in the Port of Piraeus.

#### 4. Media and public perception

China has intensified media operations in Europe to reshape narratives and project a favourable image of the CCP. Content-sharing agreements with European outlets allow Chinese state media to disseminate narratives indirectly.<sup>21</sup> Social media campaigns have also expanded: in 2023, Meta dismantled a large-scale Chinese network designed to amplify pro-China messages,<sup>22</sup> though with limited engagement.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, European audiences remain sceptical. Freedom House reports growing distrust, rooted in concerns over human rights abuses, economic coercion, and political interference.<sup>24</sup> This scepticism undermines Beijing's attempts at cultural diplomacy and limits the reach of its soft power.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, E. (2017, June 18). Greece blocks EU's criticism at UN of China's human rights record. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/18/greece-eu-criticism-un-china-human-rights-record#:~:text=In%20a%20decision%20described%20as,council%20in%20Geneva%20last%20Thursda>.

<sup>21</sup> Freedom House (2022). Beijing's Global Media Influence 2022. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/beijing-global-media-influence/2022/authoritarian-expansion-power-democratic-resilience>. Human Right Foundation (2024, March 27). Beyond Borders: China's Grip on Global Media. <https://hrf.org/latest/beyond-borders-chinas-grip-on-global-media/>.

<sup>22</sup> Bergengruen, V. (2023, August 31). Meta Takes Down 'Largest Ever' Chinese Influence Operation. *The Time*. <https://time.com/6310040/chinese-influence-operation-meta/>.

<sup>23</sup> O'Sullivan, D., Devine, C., Gordon, A. (2023, November 13). China is using the world's largest known online disinformation operation to harass Americans. *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/11/13/us/china-online-disinformation-invs/index.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Freedom House (2022).

## Economic dependencies and vulnerabilities

China has become dominant in several industries, raising concerns about European economic reliance. Dependence itself is not inherently negative, but it can create vulnerabilities that foreign powers may exploit.

The EU is particularly exposed in sectors such as:

- Electric vehicles (EVs): Imports from China rose from €1.4 billion in 2020 to €11.5 billion in 2023, representing 37% of all EU EV imports.<sup>25</sup>
- Solar energy: China controls over 80% of global solar cell exports and over 90% of key supply chain segments. More than 90% of panels used in the EU are imported from China.<sup>26</sup>
- The German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) found that imports of antibiotic APIs from China to the EU more than doubled between 2001 and 2021, accounting for roughly 79% of all EU antibiotic API imports by volume.<sup>27</sup>

The EU has responded with tools such as the FSR, IPI, and ACI, and has opened anti-subsidy investigations into Chinese EVs. Still, its strategy remains more “de-risking” than a comprehensive countermeasure. Without stronger diversification, economic dependency risks undermining liberal democratic decision-making. This is not just about trade imbalances; it can undermine a nation’s ability to make independent decisions, which in turn threatens the essence of liberal democratic self-determination. For a truly liberal global economic order to thrive, not only openness but also a proactive stance against the kind of concentrated power that can turn economic opportunities into vulnerabilities is needed.

<sup>25</sup> Eurostat (2025, February).

<sup>26</sup> IEA (2022, July 7). Solar PV Global Supply Chains. <https://www.iea.org/reports/solar-pv-global-supply-chains>.

<sup>27</sup> Bayerlein, M. (2023, January 11). The EU’s Open Strategic Autonomy in the Field of Pharmaceuticals. SWP. <https://www.swp-berlin.org/10.18449/2023Co2>.

**Figure 1. EU regulations for countering Chinese economic coercion**

Foreign Subsidies Regulation (FSR): This rule empowers the European Commission to investigate and tackle any foreign subsidies that could disrupt fair competition in the EU internal market, including in mergers and public procurement. It has already led to some Chinese companies withdrawing bids in procurement processes.

International Procurement Instrument (IPI): This instrument allows the EU to restrict access to its public procurement markets for companies from countries that improperly discriminate against EU businesses in their own procurement markets.

Anti-Coercion Instrument (ACI): This new instrument enables the EU to respond to economic coercion by third countries with a wide range of countermeasures, including tariffs and restrictions on trade and investment.

The EU has launched an anti-subsidy investigation into Chinese EVs and imposed provisional tariffs, signalling a willingness to protect its automobile industry from potentially unfair competition.

**Policy recommendations****1. Develop a unified EU strategy on foreign influence**

While soft power can certainly be a legitimate tool, the challenge for the EU is to be able to clearly distinguish it from illegal interference, which might be invisible. China's case serves as a prime example of a subtle yet powerful form of influence that can normalize values that stray from core European principles. To effectively navigate this complex landscape, the EU needs to move past fragmented national responses and create a unified, proactive, and resilient policy framework.

This comprehensive strategy must make a clear distinction between legitimate public diplomacy and illicit foreign interference. A vital first step is to ground this strategy in a solid and ongoing threat assessment.

This tackles the fundamental challenge of defining what constitutes “unwanted interference” and identifying when “soft power” crosses the line, shifting from abstract discussions to a concrete, intelligence-driven understanding. Such an assessment should be dynamic, evolving with the changing threats. Looking internationally, examples like NATO’s thorough threat analyses, which shape its strategic concepts, or the regular national security reviews conducted by countries like the United States, provide valuable models to follow. NATO’s most recent example of this is the *2022 Strategic Concept*, which was updated to reflect a new security environment. This document is the first of its kind to mention China, identifying its “stated ambitions and coercive policies” as a systemic challenge to Euro-Atlantic security.<sup>28</sup> The United States also conducts independent regular national security reviews. The Biden administration’s *2022 National Security Strategy* is the most recent publicly available, comprehensive document of its kind.<sup>29</sup> It clearly identifies the People’s Republic of China as “the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it. For the EU, this assessment needs to cover some particularly important questions: What exactly are China’s goals when it comes to influencing key sectors in Europe, e.g., critical infrastructure, advanced technology, academia, media, and cultural institutions? How is China planning to achieve these goals — investments, joint ventures, cultural exchanges, educational partnerships, or even trying to win over political and economic elites? What specific weaknesses exist within EU member states, such as economic dependencies, political divides, legal loopholes, or even seemingly harmless cultural initiatives that could be taken advantage of? Most importantly, this assessment should look at both the short-term and long-term effects of these actions on democratic processes, national sovereignty, and economic security, even if it is

<sup>28</sup> NATO (2022, June 22). NATO 2022 Strategic Concept. [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> The White House (2022, October). National Security Strategy. <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

difficult to prove any malicious intent. By exploring these questions, the EU can start to pinpoint the “invisible line” where genuine soft power turns into harmful influence.

It's crucial to overcome the internal differences among member states.

Foreign players, especially China, are skilled at manipulating these differences, taking advantage of varying economic interests or historical connections. To combat this, the EU needs to promote ongoing, high-level political discussions that focus specifically on foreign influence. The European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Commission should lead the charge in forming a permanent, expert-level task force made up of intelligence, foreign affairs, and legal representatives from countries allied to combat the Chinese influence. This group would enable continuous information sharing and consensus-building, helping to create a shared understanding of threats and common strategies to counter them. Additionally, developing joint training programs for national officials aimed at recognizing and countering influence operations would further strengthen collective resilience.

Sharing intelligence with allies isn't just beneficial; it's absolutely essential.

Foreign influence operations are inherently transnational, and no single country can tackle them on its own. By establishing formal intelligence-sharing agreements and platforms with partners like the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Japan, and South Korea, joint threat assessments and analyses can be conducted. This collaborative strategy would greatly boost the EU's capacity to identify harmful activities and grasp their methods. It would also facilitate the exchange of best practices for enhancing societal resilience and developing shared indicators for early warning.

The EU should set up a “Foreign Influence Threat Assessment Unit” within the EEAS, which will provide both classified and unclassified assessments on a regular basis. This suggestion aims to tackle the current gaps in shared understanding and agreement. Additionally, the European Commission should introduce a draft called the “EU Foreign Influence Resilience Act”. This act will include standardized definitions of foreign interference and will require all member states to register foreign agents transparently.

## 2. Enhance transparency in educational, cultural, and media collaborations

The EU needs to push for a new directive focused on the transparency of foreign funding in academia and culture, as well as the media. This directive would require the creation of a centralized, publicly accessible registry at the EU level for all educational institutions — like universities and research centres — as well as cultural organizations and think tanks that receive foreign funding above a certain threshold (e.g. €100,000 a year from a single foreign source). A separate but similar registry should be created for media companies. The disclosure requirements should be detailed, covering the full name of the foreign entity, where it is from, the exact amount of funding, the specific purpose behind it, and any conditions or agreements related to deliverables or intellectual property. This also includes any indirect funding routes.

Moreover, the directive should give host institutions the power to end agreements that clearly threaten academic freedom or research integrity, without facing any financial penalties. This means that even if the contract between a host institution and CI has a provision of penalty in case one of the parties terminates the contract, the provision will have no force if the host institution has done so, because the contract or functioning of CI poses certain threats to academic freedom or research integrity. This step will greatly enhance accountability and help prevent hidden influence operations. By bringing foreign financial connections into the open, academic freedom can be protected, sensitive research from intellectual property theft might be shielded, and cultural exchanges that genuinely foster mutual understanding instead of acting as propaganda can be ensured.

Following Section 117 of the US's *Higher Education Act* a strong, EU-wide disclosure system is essential. This is not about hindering legitimate international collaboration; it is about ensuring that transparency allows for informed scrutiny from the public, faculty, and policymakers. Clear disclosures will make it easier to spot situations where academic freedom is at risk or where research benefits are disproportionately going to foreign state actors. It aligns perfectly with the EU's commitment

to open societies while equipping them with the tools needed to guard against exploitation.

The EU should enact a robust new EU Directive on Transparency of Foreign Funding in Academia and Culture to safeguard academic freedom, protect sensitive research, and prevent undue influence. This directive must go beyond current varied national disclosure practices, which create loopholes and allow for covert influence.

### 3. Strengthen economic resilience

#### 3.1. Accelerated diversification of supply chains:

The EU particularly needs to take charge and encourage European companies to diversify their sources for critical raw materials — like rare earths and lithium — as well as essential goods like active pharmaceutical ingredients and semiconductors. Relying too heavily on any one external source, especially China, puts the EU in a vulnerable position that can be exploited for political gain. To tackle this issue, the EU needs to significantly boost the scope and funding of initiatives like the *Critical Raw Materials Act* and the *European Chips Act*. The European Commission, along with member states, should set up a “Critical Supply Chain Resilience Fund” to provide subsidies, tax incentives, and risk-sharing options for companies that choose to near-shore or “friend-shore” their supply chains with trusted partners.

#### 3.2. Enhanced anti-coercion instrument (ACI) effectiveness:

The ACI is an essential tool, but its success particularly depends on how quickly and credibly it can be put into action. The EU needs to simplify the activation and enforcement processes of the ACI so that it can respond faster and more decisively to economic coercion. This approach directly addresses situations where economic opportunities can be twisted into vulnerabilities, which can threaten independent decision-making. The European Commission, working closely with the Council, should regularly conduct “stress tests” on the ACI mechanism to pinpoint

and remove any bureaucratic hurdles. It's crucial to develop and clearly communicate legal interpretations for its use, showing the EU's strong commitment to using this instrument when needed.

#### 4. Bolster digital sovereignty and information integrity

The digital landscape has turned into a key battleground for foreign influence. While the EU has laid down some foundational legal tools, like the *Digital Services Act (DSA)* to regulate platforms, the *Digital Markets Act (DMA)* to promote fair competition, and the *NIS2 Directive* for cybersecurity, the real effectiveness of these measures hinges on how well they are implemented. The challenge is about having the ability to enforce them effectively and to proactively tackle the sneaky nature of online disinformation.

To make sure the DSA and DMA live up to their potential, the EU needs to significantly enhance the regulatory capacity and technical know-how of the European Commission and national Digital Services Coordinators. This is crucial to fill the current gap where legal frameworks exist, but enforcement resources might be lacking. Learning from the hurdles faced by organizations like the Irish Data Protection Commission in enforcing GDPR, it is essential to allocate dedicated financial and human resources. The Commission faces challenges to effectively enforce the GDPR against the large tech companies operating in Ireland. The reasons include lack of financial and human resources, legal challenges, and procedural delays. Engaging top-notch data scientists, legal experts, and behavioural psychologists is essential. Utilizing the DSA's data access provisions is vital; regulators should actively review platform content moderation practices and algorithmic decision-making to pinpoint and address state-sponsored disinformation campaigns right at their source.

It is recommended to boost the budget and staffing for key units within the European Commission and national Digital Services Coordinators over the next couple of years. A mandatory EU-wide training program for all personnel enforcing the DSA should be initiated. Annual public audits of major online platforms should be conducted to ensure their compliance with DSA disinformation rules.

Counter-disinformation efforts: Initiatives like *EUvsDisinfo* are crucial, but they need to evolve from just monitoring to becoming proactive and responsive forces. Creation of quick response systems that can deliver counter-narratives effectively is needed. Supporting independent fact-checking networks across member states is essential, fostering a decentralized yet coordinated community of truth-tellers. These networks should be equipped with the resources needed for multilingual analysis and cross-border collaboration.

It's proposed to boost funding for *EUvsDisinfo* and create a new "Rapid Response Disinformation Fund" aimed at supporting independent fact-checking groups and journalistic investigations into foreign influence. Additionally, the EU should launch a major EU-wide public information campaign to showcase the efforts of these initiatives.

Advanced Digital Literacy Programs: The best way to combat online influence is by empowering citizens with knowledge. The EU needs to roll out ambitious programs that promote advanced digital literacy and critical thinking skills. These programs should equip individuals with tools to critically evaluate online information, spot foreign influence tactics (like deepfakes, coordinated fake behaviour from troll farms, and emotionally charged content), and verify sources on their own. It's essential that these initiatives are tailored to fit the cultural and linguistic diversity of the member states, using engaging formats that range from school curricula to public workshops.

Cyber resilience: Finally, cybersecurity measures are the core of a secure digital information space, as cyberattacks often precede or accompany foreign influence campaigns. All new digital infrastructure and platforms developed or supported by the EU must integrate "security by design" principles, coupled with regular penetration testing and vulnerability assessments. This ensures that the technical means of spreading disinformation are disrupted and critical digital services remain operational.

At this point, it is recommended to mandate comprehensive cybersecurity audits for all public and private digital infrastructure deemed critical by the *NIS2 Directive*.

## 5. Adopt a proactive diplomatic posture

China is ramping up its diplomatic efforts in Europe, marked by high-profile visits and trade talks, all aimed at bolstering relationships. This, what has been described as a “charm offensive,” is difficult to ignore. Yet, Beijing’s vague stance on Russia’s war in Ukraine and its ongoing support for authoritarian regimes raise serious concerns about its dedication to the shared values of Europe. The one-on-one dealings with various EU member states often result in conflicting policies, which can undermine the EU’s overall negotiating strength and unity. China tends to play a divide-and-conquer game, taking advantage of the unique economic interests and geopolitical situations of individual member states. To effectively respond to this challenge, the EU needs to adopt a more assertive, unified, and values-driven approach in its diplomacy with China, ensuring that strategic discussions go beyond mere transactions and are firmly anchored in the EU’s core principles and international law.

1. Regular, high-level strategic dialogues with core values at their heart: It’s essential for the EU to set up a dedicated and consistent framework for high-level strategic dialogues with China, firmly rooted in core values. These discussions need to tackle pressing issues head-on, such as human rights, democratic principles, and the importance of international law, especially regarding sovereignty and territorial integrity, particularly in relation to Taiwan and the South China Sea. By weaving these values into the heart of the strategic dialogue, the EU clearly communicates that economic benefits won’t come at the expense of fundamental principles, effectively countering China’s attempts to downplay these issues and its support for authoritarian regimes.

To make this happen, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Commission should regularly organize high-level EU-China strategic dialogues, ensuring that human rights, the rule of law, and international security are always on the agenda.

2. Strengthened coordination with allies: To strengthen its position and counter China’s “divide and rule” strategies, the EU needs to work closely

with its key international partners to coordinate messaging, sanctions, and policy approaches regarding China. This collaboration should include, but not be limited to, Japan, South Korea, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Building on current efforts, the EU could set up a regular “China Strategy Coordination Forum” with these allies. This forum would enable the sharing of intelligence about China’s diplomatic manoeuvres, help align strategies for engaging with Beijing and create unified responses to any harmful influence.

3. Expanded “value-based” diplomacy: The EU needs to take a proactive stance in supporting democratic resilience and human rights in third countries, particularly those vulnerable to Chinese soft power or foreign meddling. This means expanding “value-based” diplomacy by providing real alternatives to Beijing’s approach. By offering targeted development aid, building the capacity of civil society and independent media, and promoting transparent governance, the EU can empower these nations to stand strong against unwarranted influence. This strategy directly counters China’s “charm offensive” by presenting a credible, rights-respecting option, especially in areas where Beijing is trying to extend its reach through economic incentives that often overlook human rights. It’s recommended to boost funding for the EU’s Democracy and Human Rights Support, focusing on programs in countries at risk of foreign influence.

## Conclusion

Europe is navigating a complex environment of foreign influence, particularly from China, whose strategies often blur the line between legitimate soft power and interference. This paper examined mechanisms of Chinese influence, the risks posed by economic dependencies, the dangers of disinformation, and the EU’s diplomatic challenges.

It proposed five policy responses:

1. A unified EU strategy on foreign influence;
2. Greater transparency of foreign funding;

3. Stronger economic resilience;
4. Securing Europe's digital infrastructure; and
5. more proactive, values-driven diplomatic posture.

Together, these measures offer a robust framework for preserving European sovereignty, protecting democratic institutions, and ensuring that engagement with China does not come at the expense of liberal values.

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Europe is fragile. Its openness, which is its greatest strength, is also the entry point for manipulation. The same freedoms that sustain democracy — expression, association, debate — are being weaponised by those who despise them. Authoritarian regimes and their proxies inject propaganda into European discourse, exploit the transparency of our institutions, and turn diversity of opinion into division. The EU's adherence to international law and ethical governance is mocked by adversaries who face no such constraints. And the Union's unity, forged from compromise among many voices, is tested by rivals who act as one.

These adversaries are no longer limited to states. Alongside Russia stand other authoritarian powers, ideological movements, religious extremists, and even global corporations that put profit or influence above democratic responsibility. They all share a single goal: to fragment Europe, to exploit its openness, and to replace cooperation with chaos.

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