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OPPOSITION STRATEGIES IN HYBRID REGIMES: A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE OF HUNGARY AND SERBIA

Dejan BURSAĆ and Anna UNGER[1]

The erosion of democratic governance has profoundly affected Central and Eastern Europe, with several countries undergoing a sustained wave of autocratization. This paper examines the constraints imposed by the regimes in Hungary and Serbia and the opposition strategies employed within these contexts, focusing on protests, boycotts, electoral tactics, and coalition-building, as well as their variation across electoral cycles since 2014. Building on a structured comparative framework, the study uses a theory-informed analytical matrix to evaluate the extent to which opposition actors confront regime-imposed obstacles and whether they generate comparable strategic responses. The findings indicate that an inconsistent strategic approach has been a defining feature of opposition behaviour over the past decade, likely contributing to weak performance. These patterns are observable in both countries and appear largely independent of institutional design, international positioning, or ideological specificities, suggesting that hybrid regimes tend to constrain opposition actors in ways that produce similar outcomes.

Key words: hybrid regimes; opposition strategies; elections; Hungary; Serbia.

1 INTRODUCTION: A TALE OF TWO REGIMES

For several years, reports from various international organizations have observed trends of democratic decline in the region of Central and Eastern Europe, with Serbia and Hungary often highlighted as drivers of autocratization. The Democracy Report (V-Dem 2024) distinguishes these two countries as rare European examples of electoral autocracies – alongside only Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, and Turkey. Moreover, Hungary is the only EU member state within the group, while Serbia stands out in this category as the only candidate country that

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has opened accession negotiation chapters with the EU, almost two-thirds of them. Nations in Transit report (Freedom House 2024) also categorizes both as hybrid regimes.

Hybrid regime represents a type of governance in which a democratic facade is maintained while power is concentrated, and elections are manipulated to secure electoral victories (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). These regimes combine the formal rules of democracy and the rule of law with manipulative authoritarian practices, in a manner that renders power transfer unlikely. This happens due to the uneven playing field: although elections appear to be competitive and even partly free, they are typically not fair, as ruling parties have almost unlimited access to institutions, financial and public resources, and the media, compared to their competitors who are faced with many practical obstacles (Levitsky and Way 2010).

Despite their differing ideological backgrounds, genesis of their respective parties, institutional distinctiveness, and disparate international contexts, the regimes of Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia and Viktor Orbán in Hungary exhibit significant similarities in the manner they maintain power. The inception of both regimes is viewed as an authoritarian response to the political and economic crises of the 2000s, especially the challenges faced by the political elites of newly democratized countries (Losoncz 2022). In Hungary, these issues culminated following EU accession, with poor performance of successive governments leading to a legitimacy crisis after 2006, compounded by the effects of the global financial crisis (Ágh 2013). In Serbia, the prolonged and delayed transition culminated in catastrophic effects from the economic crisis, which in 2011 caused unemployment to affect more than a quarter of the workforce (Jović and Bursać 2025). In both cases, disillusioned voters sought new options.

Since its first electoral victory in 2012, the Serbian Progressive Party (in Serbian *Srpska napredna stranka, SNS*) has begun to take over horizontal and vertical levels of power in Serbia, a process that was completed in 2017 when its leader Vučić transitioned from the position of PM to the one of a directly elected president. This consolidation of power fully centralized authority in a single individual in a political position that officially holds limited constitutional powers but draws unprecedented political strength from a commanding role within the ruling party (see Bursać and Vučićević 2021). It is precisely during this period that various international indices, NGOs, and political theorists begin to observe declining democracy in Serbia and categorize it as a hybrid regime. On the other hand, Viktor Orbán and his party Fidesz returned to power in the 2010 elections – after serving as PM in his earlier, significantly more liberal iteration from 1998 to 2002. As executive power in Hungary is more firmly institutionalized within the government, he didn't have an incentive to switch positions, like Vučić did. Orbán soon embarked on a transformation towards what he publicly calls "illiberal democracy", through a series of constitutional reforms, as well as through informal arrangements typical of hybrid regimes. Democratic institutions in Hungary are hollowed out by reducing elected positions (e.g., smaller parliaments, fewer local seats) and increasing the control of appointed power players over elected bodies. In both cases, authority is centralized in leaders who occupy the dual role of political competitors and arbiters, while charismatic leader-follower linkages legitimize autocratic governance under popular claims, leading Benedek (2025) to classify both regimes as paradigmatic examples of populist electoral autocracies.

Although Orbán's regime appears to be ideologically motivated by conservative right-wing ideas, while Vučić seems more a political opportunist who has shifted

from previously hardline nationalist standpoint towards political centre (Losoncz 2022), allowing for big-tent populist policies; the two leaders have formed a sort of informal political alliance (Ilić 2024). This is reflected in mutual support (both verbal and electoral – considering the significant Hungarian minority in Serbia that is awarded dual voting rights), as well as in joint projects, and finally lobbying efforts that Serbian regime receives in the European Union due to Orbán's favour. As Dukalskis (2021) argues, the survival of autocratic regimes is often aided by having a reliably autocratic neighbourhood, which provides a rationale for cooperation. Bozóki and Hegedűs (2018) observed a similar relationship between Orbán's government and the former PiS government in Poland, with both regimes mutually shielding one another from potential EU sanctions.

In addition to internal operational dynamics, the external environment also has a significant impact. Both regimes seem embedded in the Western-based international system. While Hungary is a member of the EU and NATO, which allows Orbán to dissent from within, Vučić's inherited position is much more complex. Troubled recent history, external constraints, partial reliance on Russia (providing energy supply and challenging Kosovo's independence), as well as the presence of Western power players in the Western Balkans, foster a kind of balancing act. Vučić is cooperative and is often perceived as a strategic partner of Washington, Brussels, Berlin, and other centres of power (Karnitschnig and Hajdari 2024). On the other hand, this enables him to make internal concessions regarding democracy and the rule of law to advance his regime. Whereas Orbán operates within a system that lacks effective mechanisms for disciplining its own members (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018), Vučić, as the leader of a perpetual EU candidate, relies on the principle of stabilitocracy (see Bieber 2018), a trade-off in which he provides the desired geopolitical results in the Western Balkans in exchange for West's leniency regarding democratic values. If it maintains a minimal democratic facade, the Serbian regime appears able to undermine the electoral process, restrict media freedom, and erode the rule of law, provided it continues to demonstrate commitment to foreign policy objectives such as normalizing regional relations and gradually distancing Serbia and the Western Balkans from Russian influence. This relationship also allows the Serbian regime to domestically advance its position through appropriating the EU agenda while simultaneously pushing nationalist or pro-Russian narratives, effectively constraining the opposition's available space for political positioning (Laštro and Bieber 2021).

In any case, the effect of both regimes at the polls is the same: their replacement seems unlikely. Electoral victories are typically decisive, their ratings are high and largely based on the leader's popularity, while the opposition is usually fragmented and often appears powerless to oppose the ruling parties. Hence the SNS has not lost any presidential, parliamentary, provincial, or even local elections in Serbia since 2012; while Fidesz has generally won decisively in all parliamentary, European, and local elections, apart from the local elections in 2019, when the opposition managed to win in several major cities, including the capital Budapest. However, this did not significantly threaten the regime, which has since won parliamentary elections in 2022, European elections in 2024, and regained control of several cities in another local vote in 2024.

During this period, both Hungary and Serbia remain hybrid regimes rather than fully closed autocracies. As such, the potential for electoral turnover continues to hold significance for opposition actors, yet they consistently fail to achieve it. Our research seeks to understand why this is the case, and whether structural similarities of these regimes contribute to such patterns of opposition behaviour

and, consequently, to the repeated electoral outcomes. The outline of the study is as follows: this section will be followed with a theoretical one, analysing the existing explanation of political logic in hybrid regimes, but also proposing a methodological and hypothetical framework, continuing to a comparative analysis focusing on structural settings of both regimes and key opponents strategies (protests, boycotts, uniting, coalition-building, innovative candidates, major new actors) employed by the opposition in Hungary since 2010 and Serbia since 2012, followed with discussion on findings and conclusions, but also potential disruptive cases that emerged since 2024.

2 THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The third wave of democratization, particularly in the former socialist states, has also been accompanied by new forms of autocratization. This has occurred through the emergence of transitional regime models that combine democratic procedures and regularly hold elections, thereby satisfying both internal and external demands for democracy. However, in practice, these regimes exhibit various forms of authoritarian practices and sometimes deliberately implement a range of manipulative strategies, both in the electoral arena and in everyday governance. The diversity of these practices has led to terminological variety within political science, with states that fall within this area between liberal democracy and autocracy being referred to as semi-democracies (Case 1993), pseudo-democracies (Diamond, Linz and Lipset 1995), competitive authoritarianisms (Levitsky and Way 2002), semi-authoritarianisms (Ottaway 2003), illiberal democracies (Zakaria 2003), electoral authoritarianisms (Schedler 2006), and most commonly, hybrid regimes (Levitsky and Way 2010). Some of these regimes emerged during the protracted process of democratizing the single party authoritarian systems, while others represent a newer trend – the backsliding of countries that had achieved certain standards of democratic governance (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019).

The survival logic of hybrid regimes revolves around regular quasi-democratic elections, where power is maintained not through military or one-party repressive structures, but through seemingly competitive elections that confer democratic legitimacy on the political regime. This operates on two levels: internally, offering citizens at least a pretence of choice and even a safety valve for political and societal grievances, while providing an image of democratic governance; while externally, presenting the regime as an acceptable partner and member of the international community that adheres to some democratic values. This factor, reinforced by the Serbian and Hungarian regimes' integration into a Western-based order, also contributes to efforts to prevent their transformation into one-party autocracies characterized by overt repression. After all, it is unlikely that Hungary would have retained its position as an EU member, or that Serbia would have been accepted as an EU candidate vividly cooperating with Western democracies, if these regimes had abruptly abolished elections. As a result, hybrid regimes can be fragile and less stable than both genuine democracies and genuine autocracies (see Knutsen and Nygard 2015).

However, the strategies of ruling parties during elections reveal why these democracies are merely a facade, with their political and legal systems reshaped into a sham democracy. Whereas in developed democracies elections serve for power allocation and the exercise of accountability (Bursać and Vučićević 2021); in hybrid regimes, they function as a means of legitimizing the regime. Schedler (2002a) therefore argues that ruling parties will strive to keep competition

limited to the electoral arena, where they retain control over the process, and thus the outcome remains relatively predictable. As a result, the ruling party extensively uses its position and unequal access to institutions (especially the judiciary and independent bodies), public resources, and media, while simultaneously attempting to uphold a minimal standard of democracy that would keep opposition parties in the contest, securing the multiparty competition and providing legitimacy to the race (i.e. Schedler 2013). Hence, openly autocratic and violent methods are rarely employed – as there is simply no need for that.

Within these constraints, the opposition in both countries has attempted various strategies; either in the electoral or in the broader non-institutional arena; but the results have largely been absent. While research on the concept of hybrid regimes has expanded over the past decades – including studies on various forms of these regimes (see, for example: Karl 1995; Diamond 2002; Schedler 2006; Levitsky and Way 2010; Schedler 2013) or the characteristics of elections in these systems and their potential democratizing effects (i.e. Howard and Roessler 2006; Lindberg 2009a; Brownlee 2009; Magaloni 2010; Bunce and Wolchik 2011; Birch 2011; Kaya and Bernhard 2013); the literature on the behaviour of stakeholders within these processes is comparatively limited and predominantly focuses on the perspective of the ruling actor. However, a fundamental characteristic of hybrid regimes that sets them apart from traditional autocracies is the existence of legitimate opposition and the regular occurrence of multi-party elections that are only partly free, fair, or competitive.

The analysis of the opposition's room for manoeuvre and possible strategies is rarely addressed independently in available studies. Instead, it is typically examined through the lens of the regime's authoritarian characteristics, which is somewhat understandable. Within these studies, the most frequently cited factors contributing to the opposition's success are unity and widespread protests authoritarian rule. Diamond (2002) identifies four key elements: mobilization efficiency, a unified opposition, political acumen, and a certain degree of heroism from the anti-regime camp. Similarly, Bunce and Wolchik (2011) emphasize the importance of coalition-building capacities within the opposition and the innovative, creative campaigns they develop. In authoritarian or hybrid regimes, they argue, the opposition faces multiple challenges: organizing effectively against the incumbent party and convincing the public that it can defeat authoritarian leaders in elections and subsequently govern while democratizing the country (Bunce and Wolchik 2009). While such tasks may appear straightforward in democratic contexts, they are far from trivial in authoritarian or hybrid systems. According to the electoral model of democratization (see Lindberg 2009b), an opposition victory depends on ensuring fair elections. Achieving this requires collaboration with civil society, effective voter mobilization, and, critically, the strategic use of street protests or mass mobilization to challenge the regime.

The abovementioned authors argue that genuine opposition unity is a prerequisite for a successful strategy, bringing together all opposition members who agree on the non-democratic nature of the regime. Regional cases from the Western Balkans further demonstrate the importance of large-scale protest mobilization, cross-cleavage cooperation countering the ideological big-tent dominance of regime parties, and opposition cohesion as effective strategies for challenging authoritarian incumbents in Montenegro and North Macedonia (Laštro and Bieber 2021). This unity must include real cooperation with civil society and social movements. A key factor is that opposition parties must view these non-party actors not as challengers or competitors, but as social partners

essential to achieving a common goal. But this dynamic unfolds in an environment where the regime can impose rules that disadvantage collaboration or simply co-opt desirable opposition parties to undermine perceived unity. Bieber (2003) earlier highlighted the Serbian case, arguing that the fall of Milošević in the year 2000 was made possible primarily by unity and broad coalition-building among societal actors, while the persistence of selfish strategies and fragmentation within the opposition in the years before significantly contributed to the regime's prolonged endurance. Furthermore, the presence of political courage, innovation, and creativity is difficult to define as a universal characteristic, as it can vary significantly depending on the political and broader societal context of each country. For example, courage (or heroism, as Diamond terms it) involves taking risks, openly confronting power, and facing the consequences of doing so in order to reveal the authoritarian nature of the system.

In general, participating in such a context requires far greater effort from the opposition, as the political struggle in a distorted and unequal political environment transcends the classical political contest. In other words, to achieve meaningful results, the opposition must go beyond the standard political actions typical for liberal democracies. This framework, based on several previous studies, allows for a comparative analysis of the approaches of the oppositions in two countries, enabling us to propose our hypotheses:

H1: Despite the somewhat different institutional and contextual settings in Serbia and Hungary (type of electoral system, EU membership, external support, ideological roots etc.), the opposition in these types of regimes faces similar manipulations and obstacles.

H2: The shared structural constraints of hybrid regimes condition opposition agency in both Serbia and Hungary, resulting in largely similar strategic choices and outcomes, particularly regarding the adoption (or avoidance) of regime-challenging strategies and their overall effectiveness.

Our analysis will include a comparative case study of electoral cycles in both countries from 2014 onward, focusing on the period from the first parliamentary elections after the establishment of the regime (and the first in which the ruling party has not changed in the electoral arena), covering a decade-long period in Hungary and Serbia. The elections to be considered will include presidential, parliamentary, provincial, and significant local elections in Serbia, as well as parliamentary, European and significant local elections in Hungary. By significant, we define local elections in which voting occurred in capital cities or simultaneously in more than a half of local administrative units. If elections truly serve as an arena for securing legitimacy of a hybrid regime, then the level of government being elected is irrelevant – according to Schedler (2002b), in electoral autocracies, all elections matter as they can either sustain or undermine the autocrat's power and image, both in terms of internal and external legitimacy.

Our methodological approach is primarily analytical and comparative, relying on a structured case study design. As an analytical tool for mapping the opposition strategies and assessing their success, we will design a simple matrix of opposition strategies that encompasses all relevant elections in two countries over a ten-year period. The analytical categories summarized in the matrix will not be treated as isolated tactics, but as a structured set of responses to regime-imposed constraints. In the comparative analysis that will follow, electoral cycles will be assessed through the presence, absence, or partial adoption of these strategies, allowing us to identify patterns of consistency across cases. Rather

than evaluating individual elections in isolation, the matrix enables a longitudinal reading of opposition behaviour within these regimes. The classification of opposition strategies relies on analysis of primary and secondary sources, including election reports and contemporary media coverage, to identify whether, and to what extent, specific strategic dimensions were present across electoral cycles.

3 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CHALLENGES IMPOSED BY HYBRID REGIMES AND CORRESPONDING OPPOSITION STRATEGIES

Since the opposition is fighting on two fronts, also attempting to shift competition from the electoral arena to the one that questions the overall rules, while the ruling party seeks to keep the political conflict within the formal institutions, frequent concessions are implemented to give opposition hope for the possibility of electoral regime change. In developed democracies, there is a certainty regarding electoral procedures and an uncertainty regarding electoral outcomes, whereas in more authoritarian regimes, the reverse holds true: electoral rules are deliberately designed and manipulated according to the current needs, ultimately maximizing the certainty of the outcomes, that is, the maintenance of the regime in power (Martínez and Coma 2017). The Hungarian example since 2010 demonstrates that the rules of the electoral system have been subject to continuous changes for both local and parliamentary elections. The ruling party consistently utilizes its legislative majority to reshape these rules prior to each election (Tanács-Mandák and Horváth 2025), thereby hindering the opposition's ability to effectively perform the strategic tasks. A similar case can be observed in Serbia, where the ruling parties abruptly lowered the electoral threshold ahead of the 2020 elections to undermine the opposition's boycott and further fragment the opposition landscape.

Opposition parties face multiple challenges in such an environment. Some of the key obstacles inhibiting the opposition that can be identified in both countries and fit the theoretical models of hybrid regime are:

1. Unequal resources between ruling and opposition parties in terms of finances, media, and institutional access;
2. The dual nature of elections, where ruling parties seek legitimacy while the opposition is compelled to compete in elections it deems illegitimate, creating a dilemma whether to participate in an unequal contest and legitimize it – or to abstain from the race and forfeit the resources associated with parliamentary seats (but even when they are represented in parliaments, pressure on the opposition is exerted through legislative procedures and disciplinary measures, as noted by Ilonszki and Dudzińska (2021));
3. Electoral manipulation (rather than blatant ballot stuffing; see Schedler 2002a) through continuous fine-tuning of rules in both countries, including regulations on candidacy, campaign financing, electoral formulas, the timing of elections, and the diaspora vote (in Hungary), as well as opportunistic early election calls, support for various smaller parties to fragment the opposition vote, manipulations of voter register, manipulative definitions of ethnic minority parties, and the nationalization of elections through simultaneous voting for different levels of elections on the same day (in Serbia);
4. Hybrid systems also determine subnational levels of politics (Ross 2014), as seen in both Hungary and Serbia, where local politics is also manipulated, since it can present a nest of survival and entrenchment for the opposition –

a lesson drawn from Serbia's local opposition islands in the 1990s, which became a springboard for regime change and democratization in 2000;

5. Unrestricted use of media-dominant regime leader during elections, which nationalizes all levels of voting turning them effectively into referendums on the most popular politician who also holds incumbent executive top position – in this context, both Vučić and Orbán serve as proxies for voter information at all levels of elections. But also outside the electoral cycles, both regimes are prone to manufacturing or amplifying crises in order to induce a rally-around-the-flag effect, whereby citizens, in times of instability, seek security from an omnipresent regime that claims to provide it, as described by Sata and Zerkowska-Balas (2025). Beyond criticism, the opposition is usually unable to effectively counter this approach;
6. A lack of international support for the opposition. Although international actors sometimes verbally condemn regime actions, especially regarding Orbán who is easily brought into conflict with them due to a more comfortable geopolitical position, they are generally unable to assist the opposition in the way seen for example in Serbia under the 1990s Milošević regime: through massive financial, human, know-how, and media support. In the current Serbian situation, there is also a lack of interest from the external actors, as the regime maintains a predictable and mutually useful relationship with them in the context of stabilitocracy (see Bieber 2018).

Overcoming the dominant party in such regimes filled by obstacles, as we have seen, requires, among other things, mobilization, unity, heroism, coalition-building, the creativity and innovative nature of opposition campaigns, or alternatively challenging the very legitimacy of elections (Diamond 2002; Schedler 2002b; Bunce and Wolchik 2011; Laštro and Bieber 2021). In the strategies employed by opposition parties in the two countries over the past decade, we observe examples of each of these behaviours, which led us to identify six analytical categories corresponding to them. Based on these categories, we will examine which strategies opposition parties utilized during electoral cycles. It is important to emphasize that this analysis primarily focuses on the actions of major liberal, pro-democratic, and pro-European opposition parties and movements, even though hybrid regimes in both countries also face relevant opposition from the right-wing spectrum, particularly among populist or nationalist right-wing parties. But as Bunce and Wolchik (2011) suggested, liberal and pro-democratic opposition parties in hybrid regimes primarily emphasize the role of elections as a process of democratization, thus directing their efforts against the regime and its operations. In contrast, the populist right generally has fewer objections to the regime type itself and is more concerned with other government policies, such as socioeconomic, cultural, ethnic, or foreign policy grievances. The six categories we observe are:

1. Major protests, which correspond to pre-electoral voter mobilization;
2. Electoral boycotts, representing a challenge to the legitimacy of the process and shifting the political struggle to the extra-institutional arena, which the regime aims to avoid;
3. Unity, referring to the unification of pro-democratic forces for a joint list and a joint campaign;
4. Coalition-building, which involves forming pre-electoral alliances with opposition parties from the opposite end of the spectrum, primarily with right-wing parties and movements, but also with wider societal actors;
5. New candidates, perceived as new electoral list holders, PM candidates, or presidential candidates, especially when the opposition has managed to mobilize a previously uninvolved but popular public figure as their frontrunner, representing both heroism and innovation or creativity;

6. Major new actors at the elections, which also signifies heroism and creativity, recognizable in the emergence of a new opposition movement or political party (most commonly from the civil society) nested in the pro-democracy camp, that also achieves a notable result in elections and maintains relevance afterwards.

A review of the six categories applied by the opposition in different relevant electoral contests since 2014 (eight in Hungary and eight in Serbia) follows in the matrix below. Using the matrix as an analytical guide, we assess how opposition actors combined (or failed to combine) protest mobilization and extra-institutional contestation with unity, coalition-building, and electoral innovation across successive electoral cycles.

TABLE 1. OPPOSITION STRATEGIES IN SERBIA AND HUNGARY (2014–2024)

Country/ year	Type	Major protests	Boycott	Unity	Coalition-building	New candidates	New actors
SRB 2014	Parliamentary	x	x	x	x	x	x
SRB 2016	Parliamentary, provincial, local	Partial (only after)	x	x	x	x	Yes
SRB 2017	Presidential	Partial (only after)	x	Yes	x	Yes	x
SRB 2018	Belgrade local	x	x	x	x	x	Yes
SRB 2020	Parliamentary, provincial, local	Yes	Yes	x	x	x	x
SRB 2022	Presidential, parliamentary and local	Yes	x	Yes	x	Yes	Yes
SRB 2023	Parliamentary, provincial, local	Yes	x	Yes	x	x	x
SRB 2024	Local	Yes	Partial	Partial	x	Yes	Yes
HUN 2014	Parliamentary	x	x	Partial	x	Yes	x
HUN 2014	European	x	x	x	x	Yes	x
HUN 2014	Local	x	x	x	x	Yes	x
HUN 2018	Parliamentary	Yes	x	x	x	Yes	Yes
HUN 2019	European	x	x	x	x	Yes	Yes
HUN 2019	Local	Yes	x	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
HUN 2022	Parliamentary	Yes	x	Yes	Yes	Yes	x
HUN 2024	European, local	Yes	x	Partial	Partial	Yes	Yes

The matrix captures variation in opposition strategies across selected electoral cycles by indicating the presence, absence, or partial adoption of identified strategic dimensions, where "partial" denotes implementation constrained to only a limited number of subjects. Moreover, the table highlights whether strategies converged around unity and coordination or remained fragmented across opposition actors. These variations allow us to identify patterns of strategic inconsistency that could explain opposition performance over time. Several important trends can be observed from it. The 2014 electoral cycle in Serbia was disastrous for the opposition, which entered parliament with only two lists that together gained just over 12% of the vote. As reflected in the matrix, the opposition failed to adopt almost all available strategic options in those elections. A similar pattern of behaviour, with comparable outcomes, was observed in 2016, when performance improved only marginally: two additional lists (which can be considered new actors) barely crossed the threshold, yet none of the opposition parties secured more than 6.21% of the vote individually, while regime parties once again obtained a supra-majority (see Republička izborna komisija 2025).

The opposition rarely wins, as we have already established before the electoral arena in a hybrid regime is controlled and outcomes are predictable. However, there was one electoral victory within the comparative sample: in the 2019 Hungarian local elections, opposition parties managed to win in Budapest and about a dozen other major cities. The matrix reveals that the opposition employed all strategies within the electoral arena at that time: the election year

began with large protests; there was unity among pro-democratic forces; and a pre-election alliance was formed at the national level with the far-right Jobbik, which held high ratings then; an innovative method of candidate selection through primaries was implemented (see Kazai and Mécs 2019). Additionally, the opposition benefited from a favourable electoral system in the local elections, with direct voting for mayors, which is not the case in Serbia. In this context, the primaries proved to be a wise strategy for kick-starting the prolonged campaign and mobilizing voters beforehand (Mikola and Santos 2025). Ilonszki and Dudzińska (2021) view these elections as an example of a learning curve in cooperative strategies under autocratic conditions that ultimately produced results.

As reflected in the matrix, unity and coalition-building only converged in Hungary in 2019 and 2022, albeit with varying outcomes. In that sense, it is important to explain why ruling Fidesz lost Budapest and other cities in 2019, a sort of an exception confirming the rule. This defeat did not significantly threaten the stability of the regime, nor did it ultimately provide the expected momentum for the opposition, given that the ruling party result in the subsequent 2022 elections marked the largest victory for any party in Hungarian parliamentary vote since the fall of socialism (OSCE 2022). This may also indicate that opposition in such environments struggle to adapt in a timely manner to rapidly changing conditions. On the other hand, the local elections in Serbia in 2023 and 2024 clearly demonstrate that the regime in this country is unwilling to yield even a single town to the opposition, even if this means manipulating their way into power after the elections by using institutional leverage to craft local majorities, as occurred in the cities of Niš and Čačak (see N1 2024a; N1 2024b). Part of the answer to this question lies in the fact that Orbán did not consciously wish to lose the local elections in 2019, but the opposition learned how to compete with Fidesz, at least at the local level, where they employed all the winning strategies as per matrix (Table 1). However, it turned out that the same approach was not sufficient at the national level: the thematic framework of the 2022 campaign was unsuitable for the key issue (the Ukrainian crisis), leading to a lack of mobilization (Reuters 2022). Moreover, the mixed electoral system contained an inherent obstacle: namely, the institutional framework of single-round elections in single-member districts, which required candidates to run in at least 71 districts (a change made before the elections in a manipulative move typical of hybrid regimes), practically imposed unification as a rational choice for all the opposition parties. Nevertheless, building a national coalition between liberals and the left on one side, and the far-right on the other, is no easy task. Although they ran together in the elections, voters punished this broad coalition, awarding them a quarter fewer votes than they had received individually in the previous elections. Namely, in the 2018 parliamentary election, various opposition lists managed to win more than 2.7 million votes combined in the party-list component of Hungary's mixed-member electoral system. The far-right Jobbik party secured 19.06% of the vote, followed by the Hungarian Socialist Party–Dialogue coalition (11.91%), Politics Can Be Different (Hun. LMP, 7.06%), the Democratic Coalition (5.38%), Momentum Movement (3.06%), and Together (Hun. Együtt, 0.66%) – collectively receiving over 47% of the popular vote and translating to 64 seats. However, in 2022, a coalition of these six parties, led by a relatively innovative and successful local leader, Péter Márki-Zay, chosen through primaries mainly for his independent status and potential appeal to conservative voters, garnered only 1.95 million votes (34.44% in the party-list component, 57 seats, see Nemzeti Választási Iroda 2022). Although most of the strategies from 2019 were replicated (apart from the introduction of a new political actor), the opposition's failure highlights that adaptation to the broader

political context is just as important as the institutional conditions of electoral competition, which partially calls their innovativeness into question.

Through a different set of mechanisms – but with similar effects – the Serbian electoral system generates extreme fragmentation. The proportional representation in a single nationwide district and a low threshold of 3% encourages even small parties to participate in elections, as it is relatively easy to gain parliamentary status, resulting in dozens of minor opposition actors on the verge of entering parliament. In contrast, fragmentation in Hungary is not as extreme (due to the single-member district component of the mixed system) and primarily appears to be ideological. However, as we have seen, in such an ideologized competition, cooperation between the two ends of the spectrum can prove difficult. Conversely, due to institutional incentives, such collaboration has not occurred in Serbia during any of the electoral cycles analysed (although it has occurred sometimes during protest activities). Achieving unity is thus challenging, and coalition-building in both countries is even more difficult, as notably visible in the matrix. This was evident in the case of the boycott of the local elections in Serbia in 2024: after the pro-democratic opposition parties engaged together in December 2023 and achieved the best parliamentary result of 24.32% in a Serbian hybrid regime to date (despite heavy violations of electoral rules by the ruling parties, see OSCE 2023) the internal dilemma of whether to remain in the race or question its legitimacy ultimately divided the opposition prior to the local vote and hindered potential tight races in several of the largest cities in the country, where the ruling SNS could have been challenged (NIN 2024).

Both recent boycotts (2020, 2024) of the elections in Serbia were unsuccessful: they did not undermine either the internal or external legitimacy of the regime, partly because external support does not depend on the democratic development in the country itself but rather on the regime's cooperation regarding the foreign policy agenda, in line with the previously explained dynamics of stabilitocracy. Despite this, the regime made efforts both times to facilitate the participation of opposition parties through various concessions (lowering the electoral threshold, introducing even more relaxed rules for ethnic minority parties, adopting concessions regarding the voter register, see OSCE 2020; OSCE 2024), which indicates that there was indeed concern for the legitimacy of the boycotted elections. On the other hand, in Hungary the strategy of boycotting the elections has not been attempted, but street protests and mobilizations have been very frequent.

Often, the opposition's attempts are also not well timed. For example, as matrix demonstrates in Serbia, pro-democratic protests frequently erupt only after elections, as a form of disagreement with the results and the conducting of electoral process, when the outcome is already seemingly irreversible (see BBC 2023). This indicates that the opposition is typically reactive and does not plan, but also that a boycott-or-not dilemma is omnipresent. On the other hand, the large protest movements in Serbia in 2022 and 2023 seemingly facilitated unity and thereby contributed to solid results in the subsequent elections.

It appears that the opposition in both countries lacks a long-term strategy. The Serbian case in general indicates repeated switching between matrix dimensions rather than cumulative strategy-building, while in Hungary, as some authors note (Ilonszki and Dudzińska 2021) and as our analysis confirms, the opposition exhibits a pattern of slow adaptation to the changing political context. Throughout, we can observe significant inconsistency, and in the case of Serbia, even chaotic approach: once again, a prime example of this are the events

between the 2023 and 2024 elections (see Radio Slobodna Evropa 2024), when the entire opposition insisted on electoral irregularities and questioning the system legitimacy, leading to protests and even a hunger strike by several opposition representatives, while completely neglecting the upcoming local elections in 2024 in over 80 cities and municipalities, including the capital, Belgrade – which some of them intended to participate in. In such a context, even the opposition which seems to have previously learned how to build coalitions among themselves fractured, with some opting for a boycott without any hope of undermining the legitimacy of the contest, while others are participating in the elections, without any expectation of victory. This overall represents the worst-case scenario for both camps.

Ultimately, the reason for this situation can also be found in the opposition's relationship with the idea of liberal democracy, which focuses on representative institutions instead of challenging them. In this sense, the restoration of liberal democracy (so often highlighted by the opposition parties) is not a near goal for most voters, as the broader electorate associates these values with the failures of the previous administrations, which hybrid regimes consciously exploit through the media. After all, both regimes were established on the wave of immense dissatisfaction with previous governments, which used to symbolize liberal democracy (Enyedi 2020). Hence Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia often refers to opposition parties as a corrupted elite that led the relatively unsuccessful Serbian transition and whose legitimacy has been damaged by mismanagement of the economy during the global financial crisis and moreover Kosovo's proclamation of independence in 2008 (Bursać and Vučićević 2021). In other words, prevention of democratic decline and restoration of liberal democracy is not relevant to the dominant groups in the society, and their experience of liberal democracy is of an elite-driven political system with neither deep-rooted social traditions nor a significant economic track record that would strengthen its legitimacy. Conversely, Gessler (2025) argues that within authoritarian environments, democratic actors frequently use democracy rhetorically, but as they do not set the political agenda, they end up politicizing their own disempowerment. Apart from institutional constraints imposed by the regime, numerous disadvantages within the electoral arena, and unfavourable international conditions, this may represent an additional conceptual factor explaining why old pro-democratic opposition forces appear to be failing in these two countries.

4 BREAKING THE SPELL: THE EMERGENCE OF NEW ACTORS SINCE 2024

Until 2024, both the Serbian and Hungarian oppositions largely conformed to the strategic inconsistency identified in this study, without seriously challenging entrenched incumbents. Developments since 2024, however, suggest the emergence of qualitatively new opposition configurations that partially transcend this pattern.

In Hungary, the rise of the Tisza party represents a notable departure from earlier dynamics. Triggered by the highly publicized takeover of former Fidesz functionary Péter Magyar, who resigned from government-related positions and rapidly gained nationwide visibility (see Kovarek 2025), Tisza combined several dimensions of our analytical matrix in a manner not previously observed. The party paired political novelty with large-scale protest mobilization and cross-cutting voter appeal, while adopting an organizational logic distinct from

established opposition parties. Its strategy emphasized inclusiveness and internal democracy through wide consultations, grassroots support-building, and the use of primaries for candidate selection (see Hungarian Observer 2025). Meanwhile, it explicitly declines cooperation with existing opposition parties, refusing any alliance with the old opposition (Krizsán 2025).

A broadly comparable dynamic emerged in Serbia, albeit outside the formal party system. Following the collapse of the canopy at the newly renovated Novi Sad railway station in November 2024, which resulted in 16 fatalities, a student-led protest movement gradually evolved into a significant political actor. Rather than articulating conventional liberal-democratic demands, the movement's diffuse and decentralized organizational form challenged established modes of political competition (Zaharijević 2025). It simultaneously exposed the limits of regime-sanctioned pluralism, prompting the authorities to abandon the facade of democracy and resort to open repression. The student movement fulfilled several key conditions of our matrix: it constituted the largest protest mobilization in Serbia to date, attracted broad societal participation, and represented a genuinely new political force. While moving toward institutionalization, it also explicitly rejected cooperation with existing opposition parties, marking a clear break from earlier opposition configurations (Vreme 2025).

Viewed through the lens of our analytical matrix (Table 2), both cases display strikingly similar traits. Each actor emerged with mass protests, articulated an ambition to challenge the regime electorally, and engaged in coalition-building across diverse societal groups (citizens, activists, local organizations), while simultaneously refusing formal cooperation with established opposition. In doing so, both cases call into question the long-standing assumption that opposition unity is a necessary precondition for success against authoritarian incumbents. Moreover, both introduced innovative democratic practices in candidate selection, through formal primaries in Hungary and decentralized parliamentary-list formation via approximately 90 informal student assemblies (plenums) across Serbian faculties (see Mašina 2025). Taken together, both actors seem to compensate full opposition unity through mass mobilization, political novelty, and coalition-building across societal cleavages.

TABLE 2. OPPOSITION STRATEGIES OF NEW ACTORS IN SERBIA AND HUNGARY (2024–2025)

Country	Actor	Major protests	Boycott	Unity	Coalition-building	New candidates	New actors
HUN	Tisza Party	Yes	x	x	Partial	Yes	Yes
SRB	Student movement	Yes	x	x	Partial	Yes	Yes

Although it is not yet possible to assess the full extent to which these actors challenge incumbent regimes, given the absence of parliamentary or presidential elections capable of producing a change in executive power, several electoral contests held during their emergence provide early indicators of their potential. The 2024 European Parliament elections marked a breakthrough for Tisza; merely weeks after Péter Magyar joined the party. It emerged as the second strongest list with 29.6% of the vote. Local elections held on the same day further demonstrated its mobilization potential, as Tisza secured 27.34% in Budapest, despite organizational constraints that limited its participation outside the capital (Kovarek 2025). In Serbia, student-affiliated lists contested local elections in five smaller municipalities during 2025. While these contests did not result in opposition victories, they consistently produced significant declines in vote shares for the SNS, which had easily secured supra-majorities in these localities

before (Nova 2025). Given the structural advantages in terms of widespread clientelism, budget, and media access enjoyed by the ruling party under conditions of hybrid rule (particularly in smaller municipalities) such electoral erosion signifies national electoral potential. Public opinion data further reinforce these trends. In Hungary, polling ahead of the April 2026 parliamentary elections suggests that Tisza represents the most credible opposition challenge in over a decade and could topple Orbán (HVG 2026). In Serbia, although election timing remains uncertain, surveys similarly indicate growing disruptive potential from the student movement (CRTA 2025).

5 CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study is to provide a comparative insight into the behaviour of the opposition in hybrid regimes, an understudied issue within the generally rich literature on democratic decline and autocratization. This paper's main contribution is synthetic: it systemizes opposition strategies in hybrid regimes to show how structural constraints channel opposition behaviour toward inconsistency and ultimately, electoral failure. We examined the behaviour of opposition in Serbia and Hungary in such unfavourable context through the operationalization of six categories of possible strategies across different election levels from 2014 to 2024, during which the ruling parties in both countries consistently prevailed. Our analysis largely confirms both hypotheses. The findings show that Serbia and Hungary present opposition actors with comparable structural and manipulative constraints (H1), which in turn shape similar strategic behaviours and outcomes across the examined electoral cycles (H2).

We found no differences in the obstacles presented by the regimes (H1), despite the disparities between Vučić's and Orbán's rule in terms of electoral models, ideological foundations, and their respective international positions, meaning that this type of regime produces similar challenges to the opposition. The regime's pressure, in the form of manipulations, as well as the broader conceptual trap of a non-openly oppressive, electoral-bound authoritarian rule, creates a dilemma of participation that is consistent in both regimes. But since the very nature of a modern hybrid regime is not openly oppressive, there is always an option (and an incentive) for opposition parties to run in the elections, which are held in a controlled environment and with similar outcomes, causing opposition to frequently change strategies and approaches. That way, opposition seems more reactive and less strategically adaptable to both institutional and contextual changes of environment. This lack of long-term strategic approach is most apparent in the unstable coalition politics, frequent protest mobilizations, and in Serbia, particularly in the constant switching between electoral and extra-institutional arenas. These inconsistencies, sometimes applied in a chaotic and unplanned manner, despite some limited success (Hungary 2019, and to some extent, Serbia 2023) are perceived as confusing to voters and ultimately hinder their critical mobilization. This further confirms our second hypothesis (H2).

There are certain limitations to our explanation. Despite the transparent analytic structure of the matrix and its grounding in the relevant sources and theoretical literature, the assessment offered in this study remains largely based on the authors' informed but inherently subjective evaluations. A more comprehensive second-stage inquiry would benefit from an expanded methodological approach, including systematic expert surveys, interviews with opposition actors, or quantitative indicators of strategic behaviour and voter mobilization. Moreover,

it is uncertain to what extent the findings can be generalized to all hybrid regimes. Although contemporary hybrid regimes share key conceptual features and impose broadly similar constraints, their effectiveness may vary significantly depending on the specific social and political context. Furthermore, other factors not examined here may also account for the limited success of opposition parties, such as characteristics of their voter base, economic conditions, or broader structural determinants of political competition. Final potential limitation is temporal. While our analysis ultimately focuses on electoral outcomes, this perspective overlooks important developments and the emergence of new actors in both countries since 2024, which may have altered the relative importance of traditional opposition forces versus new political actors. The Serbian student movement and the Tisza Party may therefore constitute boundary conditions for our main arguments, while simultaneously underscoring the growing relevance of new actors in certain political contexts.

These new actors are not associated with the traditional opposition's past shortcomings, such as fragmentation and ineffectiveness. Instead, they have demonstrated the courage, heroism, and creative campaigning strategies emphasized in the literature. If successful, their rise would also suggest that the hybrid regime's institutional and political design long served to contain a stagnant opposition, and that only the emergence of new political actors (in new political contexts) could boost a serious challenge to incumbents. This, in turn, could substantially advance our understanding of what constitutes effective opposition strategies (and credible opposition actors) in hybrid regimes and open new avenues for research of the subject, possibly applicable to other countries as well.

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OPOZICIJSKE STRATEGIJE V HIBRIDNIH REŽIMIH: PRIMERJAVA MADŽARSKE IN SRBIJE

Erozija demokratičnega upravljanja je močno prizadela Srednjo in Vzhodno Evropo, pri čemer več držav doživlja dolgotrajen val avtokratizacije. Prispevek preučuje omejitve, ki jih vzpostavljajo režimi na Madžarskem in v Srbiji, ter strategije opozicije znotraj teh okvirov, pri čemer se osredotoča na proteste, bojkote, volilne taktike in oblikovanje koalicij, pa tudi na njihovo spreminjanje skozi volilne cikle od leta 2014 dalje. Na podlagi strukturiranega primerjalnega okvira prispevek uporablja teoretično utemeljeno analitično matriko za oceno, v kolikšni meri opozicijski akterji soočajo ovire, ki jih postavljajo režimi, ter ali ustvarjajo primerljive strateške odzive. Ugotovitve kažejo, da je nedosleden strateški pristop zaznamoval delovanje opozicije v zadnjem desetletju, kar je verjetno prispevalo k njenim šibkim rezultatom. Ti vzorci so opazni v obeh analiziranih državah in se zdijo v veliki meri neodvisni od institucionalne zasnove, mednarodnega položaja ali ideoloških posebnosti, kar nakazuje, da hibridni režimi omejujejo opozicijske akterje na načine, ki vodijo do podobnih izidov.

Ključne besede: hibridni režimi; opozicijske strategije; volitve; Madžarska; Srbija.

ILLIBERAL ATTITUDES AND THE JUSTIFICATION OF VIOLENCE: MISOGYNY'S ROLE IN UNDERMINING DEMOCRACY

Szilárd BARTOK and Sorana-Alexandra CONSTANTINESCU[1]

In recent years, the resurgence of authoritarian tendencies and political extremism across Central-Eastern Europe has prompted renewed scholarly attention to the sociocultural undercurrents that sustain such ideologies. Among these, misogyny has emerged as a potent ideological companion to authoritarianism and political violence. This study investigates the intersection of misogyny and political radicalism using data from the Joint European Values Study/World Values Survey (EVS/WVS 2024). Findings reveal that misogyny is a significant predictor of political violence in five countries and in the pooled regional model, while support for military rule consistently correlates with violent political attitudes across most cases. Democratic values are negatively associated with political violence. Socio demographic factors such as sex and age show limited and context-dependent effects, while income level is not a significant predictor. The results highlight the convergence of gender prejudice and authoritarianism as a destabilizing force in post-communist democracies, contributing to democratic backsliding and sociopolitical polarization.

Key words: misogyny; anti-gender mobilization; authoritarianism; gender prejudice; post-communist societies; political violence.

1 INTRODUCTION

The study investigates the interaction of misogyny and political violence in Central-Eastern Europe, a region marked by complex post-communist transitions that continue to influence present political developments and dynamics (Bădescu et al. 2025; Just and Morgado 2023), providing fertile ground for the rise of illiberalism. Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia were selected for their shared trajectory as post-

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communist states that joined the European Union (EU), undergoing similar processes of democratization and institutional reform. Their EU accession required the formal adoption of gender equality legislation, establishing a common policy framework, though its implementation and societal acceptance varied across countries (Sedelmeier 2012).

More recently, countries such as Hungary, Poland, and Romania have experienced concerning democratic backsliding (Puiu 2024). This erosion of democratic norms has coincided with the rise of populist-authoritarian parties that mobilize public sentiment through reframed national narratives (Bartok et al. 2024), and recent crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have further provided opportunities for populists to normalize their discourse (Haček 2014) or entrench their power (Tóth et al. 2025). These parties appeal to a configuration of attitudes, including distrust in global governance, hostility toward immigrants, traditionalist values, and religiosity, not as residual cultural traits, but as politically cultivated responses to perceived threats against national sovereignty and identity (Enyedi 2020; Jackson and Doerschler 2024). These attitudes, however, are not simply remnants of the past or population-wide orientation; rather, they are the product of right-wing populist-authoritarian parties' reframing of national discourse, such as through the harnessing of anti-Western resentment, the creation of a civilizationist anti-immigration platform, the revival of Christianity as a political identification, or the disempowerment of civil society. Within this transformed discursive environment, citizens can become more receptive to radical interpretations of political conflict. This kind of reframing contributes to the ideological grievances and identity-based anxieties that emerging research identifies as key drivers of public acceptance of political violence (Enyedi 2020). As such, individuals who perceive their in-group position threatened, including those who feel that gender hierarchies or gendered expectations are being contested, are more likely to legitimize violence as a form of political expression or defence (Kalmoe and Mason 2022; Ongun Baydar et al. 2025; Scaptura 2019). This tendency is especially pronounced in contexts where authoritarian narratives normalize aggression and frame violence as necessary for preserving national or moral order. Political violence acceptance thus becomes a measurable indicator of democratic fragility and sociopolitical polarization. This ideological convergence between misogyny, authoritarianism, and political violence reflects a broader sociopolitical polarization in post-communist Europe (Guasti and Michal 2025; Vachudova 2020).

Against this backdrop, the present research investigates how gender prejudice intersects with political extremism, particularly in relation to public approval of political violence. By examining individual-level attitudes and demographic factors, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of sociopolitical polarization and democratic backsliding in post-communist Europe. The research is guided by the following question: *What individual-level attitudes and demographic factors are associated with the approval of political violence in the Central-Eastern European region?* The findings have implications for both academic theory and policy interventions aimed at safeguarding democratic norms and promoting gender equality in the region.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Political violence refers to the use of force or intimidation to achieve political objectives, encompassing a wide spectrum of actions, from state repression and

terrorism to civil unrest and insurgency (Sandler 2016). It is increasingly studied not only as a symptom of democratic erosion but also as a mechanism for consolidating authoritarian power. In democratic contexts, political violence often emerges in response to perceived threats to identity, status, or sovereignty. Auerbach and Petrova (2022) argue that unmet expectations and flawed democratization processes can fuel support for authoritarian actors and violent mobilization. This is particularly evident in regions experiencing democratic backsliding, where populist leaders may legitimize violence as a tool of political consolidation.

These mechanisms help explain why political violence intensifies under conditions of democratic backsliding, where institutional delegitimation and identity-based grievances converge. In this regard, social movement theory conceptualizes violence as a tactical escalation that emerges when institutional channels are blocked or delegitimized (Bosi and Demetriou 2015). In such contexts, actors may perceive violent repertoires as the only remaining means of exerting influence or signalling resistance (Bosi et al. 2014; della Porta 2013). This perspective highlights how political violence is not random but embedded within broader trajectories of contentious politics, where shifts from protest to militancy often reflect organizational dynamics and state responses (Bosi et al. 2014). Radicalization studies complement this view by emphasizing the role of identity-based grievances in fuelling support for violence. Research shows that feelings of status anxiety, perceived cultural displacement, and misogyny can become central drivers of radicalization, particularly when amplified in online echo chambers that reinforce exclusionary narratives (Bundtzen 2023; Fielitz and Thurston 2018). These digital spaces facilitate the circulation of anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQ discourses, which intersect with authoritarian ideologies to construct enemies and justify aggression (Ging 2019; Lewis et al. 2020).

Building on this foundation, the following literature review examines political violence throughout three interrelated domains: (1) feminist theories of misogyny and structural violence, (2) the role of misogyny in radicalization and extremist ideologies, and (3) the political dynamics of anti-gender discourse and democratic backsliding in Central-Eastern Europe, in order to better understand how gender prejudice functions as a driver of political violence acceptance in the region.

Misogynistic belief systems are constantly associated with violence both at individual and societal levels (Díaz and Valji 2019; Windisch 2023), explaining why gender prejudice becomes a powerful driver of political-violence acceptance in the region, with far-right and populist right movements frequently embedding and amplifying such ideologies (DeCook and Kelly 2022; Gentry 2022; O'Hanlon et al. 2024; Perliger et al. 2023; Švábová 2024; Jackson and Doerschler 2024). Moreover, the rise of far-right and populist right-wing parties and personalities in Central-Eastern Europe has coincided with the mainstreaming of anti-gender and anti-progressive rhetoric (Ćeriman and Vučković Juroš 2024; Darakchi 2019; Fábián 2025; Grudzinska 2021; Matejková and Mihálik 2023; Muchova 2025; Neagu 2023; Norocel and Pettersson 2025; Stoencheva 2022; Svatonova 2021; Vučković Juroš et al. 2020) gaining traction in a region that has long struggled to address gender inequality and gender-based violence (Auerbach and Petrova 2022; Bochsler and Juon 2020; Einhorn and Sever 2003; Enyedi 2020; Fábián 2010; Frunză 2006; Krizsán and Roggeband 2017; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017; Sedelmeier 2012). Hence, entrenched misogyny and anti-gender politics create fertile ground for the normalization of hostility, exclusion, and ultimately political violence. This dynamic aligns with longstanding feminist arguments that violence against women, particularly domestic violence, is not merely

interpersonal but deeply political, rooted in broader systems of gendered power and control (Marcus 1994, 2014; Pain 2014; Sloan-Lynch 2012).

Marcus (1994) draws parallels between domestic violence and terrorism, noting shared tactics such as psychological warfare, calculated intimidation, and the creation of persistent fear. Her later work (Marcus 2014) reframes domestic violence as a form of torture and terrorism, emphasizing its structural and ideological dimensions. Similarly, Sloan-Lynch (2012) and Pain (2014) argue that domestic violence enforces patriarchal domination through institutionally embedded terror, warranting recognition as a form of everyday terrorism. At the same time, violent misogyny and extremism often lack legal and conceptual clarity in the context of violent extremism prevention, despite growing evidence that misogyny functions as a core component of multiple extremist ideologies (Zimmerman 2024; O'Donnell and Shor 2022; Lockyer et al. 2025).

There is a need to recognize the full spectrum of male supremacist ideology and tailor prevention mechanisms focused on tackling misogynistic violence (O'Hanlon et al. 2024). Misogynist violence and specific manifestations, such as violent incels, need to be understood in the context of toxic and hegemonic masculinity. Addressing this requires challenging broad systems of oppression, such as cisheteropatriarchy and white supremacy, that underpin these ideologies and enable their spread (O'Hanlon et al. 2024). Therefore, this paper positions misogyny not simply as a personal bias but as a system of domination that legitimizes violence and sustains authoritarian social orders. Consistent with this direction, Edwards (2022) suggests that gender-based hate crimes often act as precursors to broader community violence and armed conflict, driven by efforts to reinforce male-dominated hierarchies. Therefore, the association between misogyny and violent extremism is documented to happen both at the individual and aggregate levels.

Individually, many perpetrators of violent extremism have a background of domestic violence and misogyny (Windisch 2023), while at an aggregate level, misogynistic beliefs and control over women are often explicit parts of the ideologies and tactics of prominent terrorist organizations and non-state armed groups (Díaz and Valji 2019). Moreover, research on radicalization shows that misogyny, racism and hypermasculinity fuel it, increasingly relying in recent years on online radicalization, gamified violence, revealing how the deep hatred of women acts as a gateway to broader extremist ideologies (Švábová 2024). These patterns underscore that misogynistic worldviews are not only produced within digital spaces but are also rooted in longer-term socialization processes that shape how individuals interpret hierarchy, authority, and belonging (Starowicz et al. 2025). These socialized beliefs form part of a broader ideological framework, with recent studies showing that misogynistic worldviews are closely tied to approval of violence (Ongun Baydar et al. 2025). Perceived status threats and injustice are also positively associated with approval of firearms, violence, and aggressive fantasies (Scaptura 2019) and with right-wing authoritarian attitudes (Pauwels and Heylen 2020).

Over the past decade, researchers have begun to unravel the crucial role that online spaces play in spreading and reinforcing misogynistic beliefs, with increasing literature on the relationship between online misogynist communities and far-right online spaces (O'Hanlon et al. 2024; Zimmerman 2024; Švábová 2024). These specific online spaces have been broadly studied as the *manosphere* (Farrell et al. 2019; DeCook and Kelly 2022; Perliger et al. 2023). The manosphere is characterized by Ribeiro et al. (2021) as *a conglomerate of Web-based misogynist movements focused on men's issues*. While comprising of a

number of different groups with varying ideologies, these communities are united in their misogynistic and male supremacists' beliefs, and their framing of men as victims of the current gender order (DeCook and Kelly 2022). These digital ecosystems not only reinforce anti-feminist and anti-democratic narratives but also serve as echo chambers for broader ideological grievances, being studied even as an overlooked security threat (Hunter and Jouenne 2021). Within the *manosphere* and the alt-right, communities frequently articulate deep dissatisfaction, frustration, and disorientation with modern society, sentiments that are often rooted in perceived declines in male status and the so-called 'crisis of masculinity' (Barcellona 2022).

This convergence of misogynistic rhetoric and socio-political discontent underscores how gendered resentment becomes a gateway to more expansive extremist worldviews. In Central-Eastern Europe, anti-gender ideology has become a key instrument of illiberal governance. Feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and gender equality are increasingly framed as threats to national identity and traditional values (Bartok et al. 2024; Darakchi 2019; Fábián 2025; Graff and Korolczuk 2022; Grudzinska 2021; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). This discursive reframing matters for the study of political violence because it normalizes exclusion, legitimizes hostility toward women and queer communities, and lowers the threshold for public acceptance of coercive or punitive measures against them. Anti-gender narratives thus operate as boundary making devices that can translate into support for repressive policies, tolerance of harassment, and broader misogynistic attitudes that underpin the social acceptance of political violence (Stoencheva 2022).

In Bulgaria, anti-gender rhetoric has been absorbed into heteronormative, religious, nationalist, and anti-feminist narratives. Notably, some women support these discourses, aligning themselves with patriarchal privilege and distancing themselves from other women (Constantinescu 2021a; Darakchi 2019). In Poland, it is framed as a defence of cultural and moral traditions against liberal elites (Grudzinska 2021). This anti-gender discourse is part of a broader neo-fascist ideology aimed at preserving cishetero-patriarchal dominance, often accompanied by xenophobic and anti-EU sentiments (Korolczuk 2020). In Hungary, the state's opposition to gender and sexual minorities reflects a broader push toward patriarchal control (Bartok et al. 2024; Fábián 2025). Anti-gender rhetoric not only minimizes the structural nature of violence against women but also fosters resentment toward other marginalized groups, including immigrants, ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ+ communities (Edwards 2022; Ferber and Kimmel 2008; Piazza 2025; Van Hiel et al. 2020). Therefore, despite formal commitments to international gender equality norms, many post-communist states have struggled to implement effective protections for women due to cultural resistance, institutional inertia, and the depoliticization of gender violence (Einhorn and Sever 2003; Fábián 2010; Krizsán and Roggeband 2017), framing the rejection of feminism as opposition to Western liberalism, reinforcing nationalist and civilizationist narratives (Frunză 2006; Enyedi 2020). Therefore, although EU accession led to the nominal adoption of gender equality laws (Sedelmeier 2012), enforcement remains uneven and politically contested (Fábián 2010; Fábián 2017; Krizsan and Roggeband 2019).

While the origins of "gender ideology" discourse can be traced to the Catholic Church in the 1990s, where it was used to resist growing international recognition of sexual and reproductive rights (Kuhar and Paternotte 2017), it has since been adopted and adapted by far-right and populist actors, becoming a central grievance in reactionary conservative ideology. This coincided with the accession of radical right-wing parties that worked to increase polarization

around gender equality, while at the same time ideological positioning has become a key factor in shaping attitudes toward gender roles, with traditionalist individuals increasingly aligning with radical right actors who challenge gender equality policies (Bartolomé Peral et al. 2024).

Moreover, the spread of anti-gender ideology and the lack of robust legal protections for women and LGBTQ communities have created space for the extreme right, enabling these actors to frame equality initiatives as external impositions and mobilize resistance against them (Bogaards and Pető 2022; Constantinescu 2021b; Constantinescu et al. 2025). Within this regional context, misogyny emerges not only as a persistent social prejudice but also as a politically consequential ideology. Prior research suggests that gender-based violence is not merely interpersonal but embedded in sociopolitical structures (Anderson and Umberson 2001; Johnson 1995, 2005; Marcus 1994, 2014; Pain 2014; Sloan-Lynch 2012), these dynamics are particularly salient in post-communist societies, where gendered violence is often depoliticized and dismissed in public discourse and policy (Fábián 2010). Resistance to legal interventions is at times justified by invoking fears of state intrusion reminiscent of communist regimes, contributing to weak enforcement and societal tolerance of certain forms of abuse (Fábián 2017; Rada 2014, 2020). At the same time, anti-gender ideology has gained traction across the region, often mobilized by right-wing populist actors to delegitimize progressive movements and reinforce patriarchal hierarchies (Darakchi 2019; Fábián 2025; Grudzinska 2021).

This ideological shift is not isolated, but forms part of a broader political strategy embraced by authoritarian and populist actors across the region. In countries like Poland, Hungary, and Bulgaria, anti-gender rhetoric has become a political tool to delegitimize progressive movements and consolidate power (Bartok et al. 2024; Grudzinska 2021; Stoencheva 2022). Such narratives not only minimize the structural nature of violence against women but also foster resentment toward other immigrants, ethnic minorities, and LGBTQ+ communities (Barcellona 2022; Edwards 2022; Ferber and Kimmel 2008; Ongun Baydar et al. 2025; Piazza 2025; Rottweiler et al. 2025; Scaptura 2019; Van Hiel et al. 2020; Windisch 2023). Similar phenomena are observable in other Central-Eastern European countries as well, such as Croatia (Ćeriman and Vučković Juroš 2024; Vučković Juroš et al. 2020), Czech Republic (Matejková and Mihálik 2023; Muchova 2025; Svatonova 2021), Romania (Neagu 2023; Norocel and Pettersson 2025), Slovakia (Matejková and Mihálik 2023), and Slovenia (Kuhar 2017).

All these patterns present the Central-Eastern European region as a distinct and revealing context for examining the entanglement of gender politics and democratic backsliding. Despite formal commitments to international gender equality norms, many post-communist states have struggled to implement effective protections for women, often due to cultural resistance, institutional inertia, and the political instrumentalization of gender (Constantinescu et al. 2025; Einhorn and Sever 2003; Fábián 2010; Krizsán and Roggeband 2017; Puiu 2024). Nationalistic state leaders are argued to play a crucial role in inciting political violence through ethnic favouritism (Choi 2025). Furthermore Jungkunz, Fahley and Hino (2025) indicate that populist attitudes mediated by conspiratorial beliefs are linked to approval of political violence. Moreover, rejecting feminism and progressive causes is frequently framed as opposition to Western liberalism, reinforcing nationalist and civilizationist narratives (Enyedi 2020; Frunză 2006; Šteger 2024). Within this ideological environment, misogyny forms part of an exclusionary, hierarchical worldview that can make political violence appear justified, necessary, or even virtuous. This study now turns to

empirical analysis to assess how these dynamics manifest in individual-level acceptance of political violence across the region.

3 DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The present study draws on statistical analysis of the Joint European Values Study/World Values Survey dataset, using data collected between 2017 and 2022 (EVS/WVS 2024). The dataset merges the common elements of the 2017 European Values Study with the seventh wave of the World Values Survey, providing a harmonized and cross-nationally comparable foundation for examining political and social attitudes.

The analysis focuses on Central-Eastern European member states of the European Union: Bulgaria (BG, N=1558), Croatia (HR, N=1487), Czech Republic (CZ, N=3011), Hungary (HU, N=1514), Poland (PL, N=1352), Romania (RO, N=2870), Slovakia (SV, N=2632), Slovenia (SL, N=1075). These cases offer a coherent regional cluster marked by shared post-communist trajectories, similar institutional legacies, and parallel contemporary debates over gender, democracy, and political violence. The research will evaluate the following hypotheses:
H1: Higher levels of misogynistic attitudes are positively correlated with individuals' approval of political violence in the Central-Eastern European region.
H2: Men are more likely than women to approve of political violence Central-Eastern European region.
H3: Support for authoritarian forms of governance is positively associated with the justification of political violence in the Central-Eastern European region.
H4: The relationships proposed in H1 and H3 hold across both at the aggregate level of the full dataset and within individual country samples.
H5: Respondents' income levels do not significantly influence their views on political violence.
H6: Younger respondents are more likely to approve of political violence in the Central-Eastern European region.

Dependent variable
The dependent variable is *Justifiable: Political Violence*. This variable captures respondents' willingness to approve the use of political violence. It is based on the survey item "Please tell me for each of the following statements whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between…Political violence." Responses are measured on a 10-points scale ranging from "Never justifiable" to "Always justifiable," allowing for the assessment of varying degrees of acceptance. Higher scores indicate greater approval of political violence as a legitimate political tool, while lower scores reflect stronger rejection of such actions.

Independent variables
The main independent variable is Misogynistic attitudes. This is a composite index constructed from four survey items reflecting traditional gender role beliefs. The items include:
1. *"Men should have more rights to a job than women." (factor loading: .676)*
2. *"Men make better political leaders than women do." (factor loading: .816)*
3. *"University is more important for a boy than for a girl." (factor loading: .760)*
4. *"Men make better business executives than women do." (factor loading: .855).*

These items were subjected to factor analysis, yielding a single factor that explains 60.8% of the variance (eigenvalue = 2.43). The resulting scale demonstrates good internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha = .759). Factor scores were extracted using regression (REGR factor score) and used as the main predictor in H1 and H4. The other independent variables are:

Sex: A binary variable indicating the respondent's sex (0 = Female, 1 = Male), used to test H2.
Age: A continuous variable representing the respondent's age in years, used to test H6.
Income Level: Measured using decile-based on a national income scale, used to test H5.
Authoritarian Governance Preferences variables, each measured on a five-point Likert scale; these variables assess support for different political systems and are used to test H3 and H4:

1. Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections.
2. Having experts, not government, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country.
3. Having the army rule the country.
4. Having a democratic political system.

4 RESULTS

A correlation analysis was conducted to examine H1, the relationship between misogynistic attitudes and the approval of political violence. The analysis utilized extracted factor scores representing misogyny as the independent variable, and the item *Justifiable: Political violence* as the dependent variable. Results indicated a statistically significant, though modest, positive correlation across the full sample ($r = .147$, $p < .01$), suggesting that higher levels of misogyny are associated with greater justification of political violence. To assess cross-national consistency, the correlation was also calculated separately for each country in the dataset. As shown in Table 1, the relationship was statistically significant in all observed countries except Slovenia, where the correlation was not significant ($r = .049$, ns). The strongest correlation was observed in Bulgaria ($r = .166$, $p < .01$), followed by Hungary ($r = .127$, $p < .01$) and Romania ($r = .116$, $p < .01$). These findings support H1, that misogyny is positively associated with approval of political violence across most national contexts in the Central-Eastern European region.

TABLE 1: CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS (R), VARIABLES: REGR FACTOR SCORE (MISOGYNY), JUSTIFIABLE: POLITICAL VIOLENCE, JOINT EVS-WVS 2017-2022

Country	Coefficient
Bulgaria	.166**
Croatia	.097**
Czech Republic	.114**
Hungary	.127**
Poland	.079*
Romania	.116**
Slovakia	.085**
Slovenia	.049 (ns)
ALL	.147**

Note: $p < .05$ (*), $p < .01$ (**), ns = not significant.

To test H2: men are more likely than women to justify political violence, a correlation analysis was conducted using sex and *Justifiable: Political violence* as

the dependent variable. Across the full sample, the analysis revealed a statistically significant but weak negative correlation ($r = -.050$, $p < .01$), indicating that male respondents are slightly more inclined than female respondents to approve of political violence. Country-level analyses yielded mixed results. As shown in Table 2, statistically significant correlations were observed in five of the eight countries: Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland (though Poland's result was not statistically significant). The strongest correlation was found in Slovakia ($r = -.075$, $p < .01$). In contrast, Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovenia did not show significant associations. These findings suggest that while the overall trend supports H2, the strength and significance of the relationship vary across national contexts.

TABLE 2: CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS (R), VARIABLES: SEX, JUSTIFIABLE: POLITICAL VIOLENCE, JOINT EVS-WVS 2017-2022

Country	Coefficient
Bulgaria	-.040 (ns)
Croatia	-.075*
Czech Republic	-.050*
Hungary	-.071*
Poland	-.053 (ns)
Romania	-.035 (ns)
Slovakia	-.075**
Slovenia	-.022 (ns)
ALL	-.050**

Note: $p < .05$ (*), $p < .01$ (**), ns = not significant.

Regression analyses were conducted to test H3 and H4, using *Justifiable: Political Violence* as the dependent variable and including predictors such as misogyny, support for authoritarian governance, sex, age, and income. The model was run for Bulgaria (BG), Croatia (HR), Czech Republic (CZ), Hungary (HU), Poland (PL), Romania (RO), Slovakia (SK), and Slovenia (SI), as well as a pooled regional model (ALL). Standardized regression coefficients (β) and model fit statistics are reported below.

TABLE 3: STANDARDIZED REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS (ß), DEPENDENT VARIABLE: JUSTIFIABLE: POLITICAL VIOLENCE, JOINT EVS-WVS 2017-2022

Predictor	BG	HR	CZ	HU	PL	RO	SK	SL	ALL
REGR factor score (Misogyny)	.136*	.105*	.037 (ns)	.073 (ns)	.148*	170*	-.012 (ns)	.025 (ns)	.164**
Having a strong leader	-.027 (ns)	.037 (ns)	.170*	.090 (ns)	.119 (ns)	-.179*	.429**	.076 (ns)	.044*
Having experts make decisions	-.025 (ns)	-.041 (ns)	-.116 (ns)	-.006 (ns)	-.046 (ns)	-.089 (ns)	-.248*	.039 (ns)	-.104**
Having the army rule	.109*	.014 (ns)	.473**	.178*	.052 (ns)	.182*	.539**	.338**	.206**
Having a democratic political system	-.438**	-.083 (ns)	-.269*	-.138*	-.117 (ns)	-.332*	-.372**	-.166*	-.306**
Sex	-.088 (ns)	-.165*	-.255*	-.082 (ns)	-.114 (ns)	.091 (ns)	-.388*	-.029 (ns)	-.108*
Age	-.005 (ns)	-.005*	-013**	-.005*	-.013*	-.019*	-.002 (ns)	-.002 (ns)	-.009**
Scale of incomes	-.022 (ns)	-.019 (ns)	-.023 (ns)	-.008 (ns)	-.006 (ns)	.014 (ns)	.031 (ns)	.001 (ns)	-.018*
Model R^2	.102	.023	.089	.049	.050	.089	.193	.073	.76

Note: $p < .05$ (*), $p < .01$ (**), ns = not significant.

Model fit statistics (R^2) varied across countries, with the highest explanatory power in Slovakia ($R^2 = .193$) and Bulgaria ($R^2 = .102$), while Croatia and Poland showed relatively low fit ($R^2 = .023$ and .050, respectively). The pooled model demonstrated strong overall fit ($R^2 = .76$), indicating that the combined

predictors offer substantial explanatory value when applied across the region. Misogyny emerged as a statistically significant positive predictor of political violence in four of the eight countries: Bulgaria (.136), Croatia (.105), Poland (.148), Romania (.170). The strongest effect was observed in Romania ($\beta = .170$, $p < .05$) and in the regional model ($\beta = .164$, $p < .01$), reinforcing the hypothesis that gendered resentment is a meaningful ideological driver of political violence. However, the lack of significance in countries like Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia indicates that this relationship may be mediated by national context, cultural norms, or differing levels of gender equality and political polarization.

Support for authoritarian governance was consistently associated with higher justification of political violence. The variable "Having the army rule" was a significant positive predictor in Bulgaria (.109), Czech Republic (.473), Hungary (.178), Romania (.182), Slovakia (.539), and Slovenia (.338). Inversely, support for a democratic political system is a significant negative predictor in the same six countries: Bulgaria (-.438), Czech Republic (-.269), Hungary (-.138), Romania (-.332), Slovakia (-.372), and Slovenia (-.166), findings suggesting that democratic commitment acts as a protective factor against the endorsement of political violence, aligning with broader literature on democratic norms and political tolerance. Moreso, these results suggest that authoritarian attitudes, especially those favouring military control, are strongly linked to violent political sentiments across the region, possibly reflecting a broader acceptance of coercive state power. Interestingly, *Having a strong leader* yielded mixed results. It was significant in the Czech Republic ($\beta = .170$, $p < .05$) and Slovakia ($\beta = .429$, $p < .01$), but not in most other countries. This may indicate that the appeal of strongman leadership varies across national contexts and is not uniformly linked to violence approval.

In contrast, *Having experts make decisions* was negatively associated with political violence justification in Slovakia ($\beta = –.248$, $p < .05$) and in the pooled model ($\beta = –.104$, $p < .01$), suggesting that technocratic governance is perceived as a stabilizing force that discourages violent political expression.

Testing H6, age showed a small but consistent negative association with political violence justification in most countries and in the pooled model ($\beta = –.009$, $p < .01$), indicating that younger individuals are slightly more inclined to endorse political violence. This may reflect generational differences in political engagement or exposure to radicalizing content online.

Income (H5), however, did not emerge as a significant predictor in most models, with only a weak negative association in the pooled analysis ($\beta = –.018$, $p < .05$). Although other studies found that the economic background can influence far right political views (Plešivčák 2023) our results suggest that economic status may be less influential than ideological and identity-based factors in shaping attitudes toward political violence.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

These study findings are aligned with the body of research that show that misogyny, when situated within broader political and ideological orientations, plays a meaningful, though complex, role in shaping public support for political violence (Hawley 2023; Matsunaga 2025; Parsons 2023), and suggest misogyny to be a component of broader antidemocratic tendencies, that consolidates

support for political violence (Díaz and Valji 2019; Gentry 2022; Windisch 2023; Wintemute et al. 2023).

Across the region, misogynistic attitudes show a consistent positive association with the justification of political violence, with Slovenia as the only exception. Although these correlations are modest in magnitude, they indicate that misogyny functions as part of a wider attitudinal constellation linked to hierarchical worldviews, illiberal values, and diminished commitment to democratic norms. While misogyny manifests at a social and individual level, a specific focus on the different violent expressions of misogyny in the private and public spheres in the region is necessary, as misogyny may be a part of a larger set of attitudes that are also likely to predict the justification of political violence.

Gender differences in support for political violence are present but limited. Men are somewhat more likely than women to justify political violence, yet the effect varies across national contexts and remains relatively small. These patterns underscore that gender, while relevant, is not the dominant demographic factor shaping attitudes toward political violence, such as in previous studies (Bardall et al. 2020).

The country-level analysis revealed further nuances (Hypothesis 4). Statistically significant correlations were observed in five of the eight countries, with the strongest effect in Slovakia. However, in countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovenia, the relationship was not significant, suggesting that gendered attitudes toward political violence may be shaped by national context, cultural norms, or differing levels of political polarization. These variations underscore the importance of disaggregating cross-national data and avoiding over-generalisation. They also point to the need for more complex models that account for intersecting factors such as education, political ideology, exposure to violence, and media consumption.

Misogynistic attitudes and the tendency to justify political violence are significantly correlated on regional and most country levels (with Slovenia being the exception) (Hypothesis 4). Furthermore, at the level of region, misogynistic attitudes, and a preference for authoritarian forms of government are shown to be predictors of a justification of political violence (Hypothesis 3). However, when looking at individual country-level data, the findings are not conclusive.

Misogyny and a preference towards more authoritarian forms of government are statistically significant, alongside the demographic factors (apart from education). The results would indicate that holding misogynistic or anti-democratic opinions, as well as being a younger man in lower economic strata are predictors for justifying political violence. At the same time, this does not hold across all countries' contexts. Gender alone is only significantly correlated to the justification of political violence in half of the country contexts. Income seems to have little to no significant predictive power across individual countries, while gender and age seem to be more relevant demographic factors (Hypotheses 2, 5 and 6). Preference towards certain forms of government seems to be a relevant factor across most countries' contexts, though with the caveat being those specific preferences, such as one's attitude towards army rule and democracy, seem to be relevant across most states (Hypothesis 3). Misogyny was only statistically significant across half of the cases, with those indicating a positive relation to political violence.

To conclude, the findings should be interpreted in the context of the rise of populist-authoritarian parties that mobilize anti-gender, anti-democratic, and

nationalist discourses (Darakchi 2019; Enyedi 2020; Grudzinska 2021) across Europe, that frame national identity in opposition to liberal democratic norms, often using misogyny and militarism as ideological tools. The present study shows that these discourses are not only politically salient but also predictive of public support for political violence, underscoring the need to treat misogynist ideology as a central component of extremist mobilization.

By foregrounding the gendered dimensions of radicalization, the analysis highlights how addressing misogyny is essential for strengthening democratic resilience and developing more effective prevention strategies. Studying and recognizing the full extent of the issue and the dangers presented facilitates the creation and adoption of targeted measures that aim to curb extremist violence. Furthermore, recognizing the widespread and indiscriminate nature of extremist violence and misogyny opens researchers and policy makers to taking specific actions and approaches that aim to tackle the underlying societal ills that bring about such attitudes, as well as those that directly target the would-be perpetrators of political violence.

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NELIBERALNA STALIŠČA IN UPRAVIČEVANJE NASILJA: VLOGA MIZOGINIJE PRI SPODKOPAVANJU DEMOKRACIJE

V zadnjih letih je ponoven vzpon avtoritarnih teženj in političnega ekstremizma v Srednji in Vzhodni Evropi spodbudil obnovljeno znanstveno pozornost do sociokulturnih dejavnikov, ki vzdržujejo takšne ideologije. Med njimi se je mizoginija izkazala kot pomemben ideološki spremljevalec avtoritarizma in političnega nasilja. Prispevek preučuje preplet mizoginije in političnega radikalizma na podlagi podatkov iz raziskave Joint European Values Study/World Values Survey (EVS/WVS 2024). Ugotovitve kažejo, da je mizoginija pomemben napovednik političnega nasilja v petih državah ter v združenem regionalnem modelu, medtem ko podpora vojaški oblasti dosledno korelira z nasilnimi političnimi stališči. Demokratične vrednote so negativno povezane s političnim nasiljem. Sociodemografski dejavniki, kot sta spol in starost, kažejo omejene in kontekstualno pogojene učinke, medtem ko raven dohodka ni pomemben napovednik. Rezultati poudarjajo konvergenco spolnih predsodkov in avtoritarizma kot destabilizacijske sile v postkomunističnih demokracijah, ki prispeva k demokratičnemu nazadovanju in družbenopolitični polarizaciji.

Ključne besede: mizoginija; protispolna mobilizacija; avtoritarizem; spolni predsodki; postkomunistične družbe; politično nasilje.

LIFE SATISFACTION AMONG RESIDENTS OF SLOVAK-UKRAINIAN BORDERLANDS

Martin LAČNÝ and Jozef DŽUKA[1]

The aim of the research was to assess how satisfied the residents of border regions are with significant areas of their lives. In a study comparing life satisfaction among residents living in the western part of Ukraine (N = 267) and residents of eastern Slovakia (N = 245), individual characteristics, self-efficacy, and positive affect were interpreted in accordance with the homeostatically protected mood hypothesis. Life satisfaction was assessed using an index, a hybrid reflective-formative construct aggregating four significant areas of life. The effect of commonly surveyed demographic characteristics was controlled while the influence of two personal characteristics was tested: general self-efficacy as a direct factor and positive affect as a moderator of life satisfaction. The results indicate higher level of life satisfaction among Ukrainian residents, with the moderator effect being insignificant.

Key words: index; life satisfaction; Slovakia; Ukraine; borderlands; HPMood; PLS-SEM.

1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this work was to assess the subjective reality of people living in a specific geographical area as well as to analyse personal characteristics as probable factors of life satisfaction. Existing composite indices were not suitable for this purpose (see Land and Michalos 2018, for five examples), as they are oriented towards assessing well-being in a broad sense, or subjective well-being, which is an abstract assessment of one's own satisfaction or happiness based on a positive and abstract view of oneself. As a result, the path of constructing an original life satisfaction index was chosen for the purposes of the research project,

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in which the concept of life satisfaction was defined as a subjective assessment of objective living conditions. Given that the assessed living conditions represented four significant areas of life, aggregated into an overall score, a hybrid reflective-formative measurement model was chosen for the construct measured in this way (further details in the methodology). The structure of this article is as follows: second section presents the theoretical background and proposed research model. Section 2.1 briefly characterizes the living conditions of the inhabitants in two self-governing regions in Slovakia bordering Ukraine as well as the inhabitants of the Transcarpathian region of Ukraine. Section 2.2 defines life satisfaction as a hybrid reflective-formative construct, section 2.3 defines personal characteristics – self-efficacy and positive affect as presumed factors of life satisfaction and section 2.4 presents the proposed research model. Third section covers methodology, fourth the results and final section the discussion and conclusion.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND PROPOSED RESEARCH MODEL

2.1 The living conditions of the inhabitants in two self-governing regions in Slovakia bordering Ukraine as well as the inhabitants of the Transcarpathian region of Ukraine

Economic conditions in both countries. While Ukraine has long been among the lower middle-income countries, reaching the upper middle-income category in 2023, Slovakia has been among high-income countries for over a decade (World Bank 2025). In saying that, the Prešov and Košice self-governing regions in Slovakia and the Transcarpathian region in Ukraine produced GDP per capita below the national average in their respective countries (i.e. the Prešov region reaches around 60% of Slovak per capita GDP, the Košice region around 80% and the Transcarpathian region around 33% of Ukrainian per capita GDP). Their development potential largely depends on the nature of the border and the conditions for mutual trade and cross-border cooperation as they can draw productive advantages and economic development opportunities from their mutual proximity and connections. Within the past decade, both the Prešov and Košice regions reported continuous growth, while the regional economy of Transcarpathia has experienced severe shrinkage since 2014. It still lags significantly behind the performance of regional economies in eastern Slovakia, reaching around 10-15% of regional per capita GDP in Prešov or Košice regions (CESCI 2020; Brenzovych, Lačný and Tsalan 2023). In addition, unemployment persistently exceeds national averages (3-5 percentage points above the national average for both eastern Slovak regions and 1-3 percentage points above the national average for the Transcarpathian region in Ukraine) and contributes to the relatively low level of purchasing power in these regions. The lack of cross-border transport connectivity and long waiting times at border crossings have not been conducive to collaborations requiring physical contact, including labour market commuting, small cross-border trade and face-to-face meetings. The obstacles related to cross-border economic relations are still hindering factors regarding foreign investment, trade relations, value chains, supplier networks and business development (CESCI 2020; Duleba, Lendel and Oravcová 2023).

Environmental conditions in both countries. Among the most significant environmental issues in both the Slovak and Ukrainian border regions, is the need to complete adequate environment protection and eliminate the negative environmental cross-border impacts resulting from the different environmental infrastructure of both counties. This is especially with regards to waste

management infrastructure. The recycling rate is much higher in the EU-28 than in both Slovak border regions (where it counts for up to 40%), while its extent is negligible in Transcarpathia. Another issue is wastewater treatment which is unresolved in many Ukrainian settlements. Although the level of greenhouse gas emissions has decreased, these regions have been able to show little progress in terms of joint energy management, efficiency and renewable energy resources (CESCI 2020; Brenzovych et al. 2023).

Local governments in both countries. In terms of local government in Ukraine and Slovakia, the fundamental difference is in the lower flexibility and degree of autonomy of Ukrainian local and regional governments. The administrative-territorial structure and distribution of powers between the different levels of government in Ukraine still bears a strong centralisation as a legacy of the Soviet past. The system comprises four levels (centre, oblasts, raions and municipalities) with no clear delineation of responsibilities and powers between them. A very fragmented settlement structure with thousands of municipal councils without sufficient resources for service delivery and project implementation remains a persistent problem. On the other hand, the fundamental decentralisation of public administration in Slovakia has already taken place in 1998–2005. A significant set of competences, assets and liabilities has been transferred from central institutions to self-governing regions, municipalities and towns. Within the scope of its competences, a self-governing region may cooperate with territorial and administrative units or with authorities of other states performing regional functions. It has the right to become a member of an international association of territorial units or territorial authorities (Cirner 2023). Recently, there has been low trust displayed in private and public entities operating at the local level across all population groups in Ukraine. Indeed, 47% of respondents reported having very little or no trust in local authorities (IOM 2025). According to the OECD survey on drivers of trust in public institutions for 2024, around 40% of respondents in Slovakia had trust in the regional and local government (OECD 2024). Residents' satisfaction with the work and services of local government in border regions is linked especially to their bottom-up response during crisis situations (Ručinská, Fečko, Mitaľ and Jesenko 2023), cross-border public services (Mariančíková and Király 2022; Toplak Petrovič and Tomažič 2023) and their impact on transition processes and Europeanization (Reiners 2025).

2.2 Life satisfaction as a hybrid reflective-formative construct

The term “life satisfaction” is often used as part of three frequently used terms: quality of life, well-being and happiness. These are sometimes understood interchangeably. Glatzer, Camfield, Møller and Rojas (2015, 2) have noted that “The mixture of terms was introduced at the beginning of this research direction in the US. One of the first main studies spoke of ‘Quality of Life’ (Campbell et al. 1976) and the other of ‘Wellbeing’ and ‘Life quality’ (Andrews and Withey 1976); ‘Wellbeing’ was used later by Campbell (1981)." As far as life satisfaction and happiness are concerned, conceptual and semantic connections can be identified. According to Veenhoven (2015, 222): “The view that we ‘calculate’ happiness from the plusses and minuses of life fits the cognitive component I called ‘contentment’. The view that life-satisfaction is inferred from how we feel most of the time fits the affective component, which I called ‘hedonic level of affect’.” In addition to these three terms, another term used in research is “subjective wellbeing” which also includes life satisfaction. Easterlin (2015, 283) has stated that “the term ‘subjective wellbeing’ encompasses a variety of measures of feelings of wellbeing – happiness, life satisfaction, ladder-of-life –which are treated here as interchangeable.”

The focus of this analysis is not conceptual but factual. In other words, it aims to find out how satisfied individuals are with their lives, what their subjectively assessed life reality looks like in a specific geographical area, and how their personal characteristics relate to their satisfaction. This focus corresponds to that posed by Land and Michalos (2018, 859) who "...measure psychological satisfaction, happiness, and life fulfilment by using survey research instruments that ascertain the subjective reality in which people live." To assess the well-being of the population in a broader sense, tools are used that cover a wide range of areas integrating material living conditions and quality of life. The OECD assesses 11 different areas ranging from health to subjective well-being and work-life balance. There are important tools with a very broad understanding of well-being such as The Canadian Index of Well-Being (CIW), where "...a broad understanding of well-being, regarded by its developers as roughly synonymous with 'overall quality of life'." (Land and Michalos 2018, 856). This broad conceptualization includes eight equally weighted domains, ranging from living standards and democratic engagement to the environment.

While approaches to quality of life and subjective wellbeing, which also includes life satisfaction, use scales that assume a reflective measurement model for their assessment, our work assumes that how satisfied individuals are with their lives, what their subjectively assessed life reality looks like, should be determined using an index. In both cases, the constructs surveyed represent the sum of the scores of responses to the items on the scale or index, but there are two different approaches to justifying the combination of responses to individual questionnaire items into an overall score. These are based on conceptually different assumptions: (a) when items share a common cause and (b) when items share a common consequence. If several items originate from the same underlying cause, they reflect the variable that drives them. Conversely, if they lead to a shared consequence, they collectively define or constitute the aggregate variable (DeVellis and Thorpe 2021, 183). The first approach usually uses the term scale, while the second uses the term index. In the case of the index, two alternatives are used. The first is a formative composite index, which consists of a list of items that do not have conceptual unity, while the second is a formative causal index, which contains items conceptually linked by theory. The current study is based on the idea that the satisfaction of residents living in the Slovak-Ukrainian borderlands is a concept composed of several specific areas of satisfaction. It is therefore a summary of various specific satisfactions that can be aggregated into an overall score using a formative causal index. The items that make up the index are not interchangeable, unlike scales in which responses are the product of a single latent variable and responses have a common cause. In other words, if a person evaluates their satisfaction with their life in general or in one specific area of life, then it is very likely that their answers will represent one common factor, a common cause for evaluation. If a person expresses their subjective assessment of different areas of their life in which they currently live or have lived for a long time, then the assessments may be relatively independent depending on which areas of assessment were selected for the questionnaire. The items in the index that represent different areas relate to different things and are therefore not interchangeable. When considering an instrument where each domain is represented by only one item, changing any item would change the aggregate variable, while the other items would remain unaffected. If individual specific domains consist of multiple items, they may have scale properties, while the combination of different domains into an overall score may have index properties. In this case, it is a higher-order construct (HOC) whose domains are reflexive in nature, and the overall score is formative in nature. It is therefore a hybrid measurement with a reflexive-formative nature.

2.3 Personal characteristics – self-efficacy and positive affect as factors of life satisfaction

Land and Michalos (2018) have noted five insufficiently researched factors with regards to life satisfaction. The first is failing to look at human activity. As has been pointed out, many studies repeatedly rely on demographic characteristics such as age, income, gender, ethnicity, or race as the main explanatory or predictive variables, even though their explanatory power tends to be relatively limited. They add that it is impossible to gain a reliable understanding of people's quality of life without knowing how individuals think and feel. As such, the current study examined what residents living in regions on both sides of the Slovak-Ukrainian border think and feel by looking at two variables: what they thought about themselves in terms of their own self-efficacy and how they felt during the day when they answered the questionnaire. General self-efficacy can be described as a stable expectation of a person that "...expresses a subjective belief that they can cope with demanding requirements through their own actions.... Confidence in one's own abilities and skills should be understood as a stable personal resource for coping with stress" (Schwarzer 1993, 188–189). Unlike specific self-efficacy expectations (Bandura 1997), general self-efficacy expectations are understood as the sum of several self-efficacy expectations in different areas. Schwarzer (1993) assumes that general self-efficacy expectations can be a personal protective factor.

While self-efficacy can be considered a relatively persistent characteristic of a person, affective responses, depending on the method of questioning, may reflect the current or more distant effects of living conditions. Based on studies in different cultures, Watson, Clark and Tellegen (1988) concluded that affective structure is predominantly formed by two dimensions—positive affect (PA) and negative affect (NA). In their concept however, PA and NA express the characteristics of a person that correspond to positive and negative emotionality, expressing "individual differences in positive and negative emotional reactivity" (ibid., 1063). The authors assess both dimensions using 20 items from two PANAS scales with questions regarding the intensity of experience. This survey format relates more to a person's temperamental characteristics which are related to extraversion or neuroticism. Given that this, in addition to the scope of PA, are less suitable for the purposes of the planned research, a shorter PA alternative was chosen. This has 5 items in its original version (Džuka and Dalbert 2002). At the same time, positive affect was interpreted in accordance with the homeostatically protected mood hypothesis (Capic, Li and Cummins 2018). This explains why people usually feel positive, which is related to the assumption of the existence and functioning of so-called set-points "...set-points account for the normal positivity of SWB while its stability is accounted for by homeostatic processes." (ibid., 1). Capic, Li and Cummins (2018) expanded this assumption to say that it is homeostasis that protects and maintains a "homeostatically protected mood (HPMood)" at positive values. The emotional responses with which people react to the realities of life are short-lived and result in short-term deviations from the set point. As a result of homeostasis however, these deviations are repeatedly returned to the set point. Capic, Li and Cummins (2018, 3) state that long-term changes in positive experiences may also occur. These changes "...represent a persistent defeat of homeostasis due to the continued presence of a powerful stressor, such as may be generated by unemployment, persecution, pain, etc." Although the respondents living in western Ukraine are not directly affected by this strong stressor in this study, it

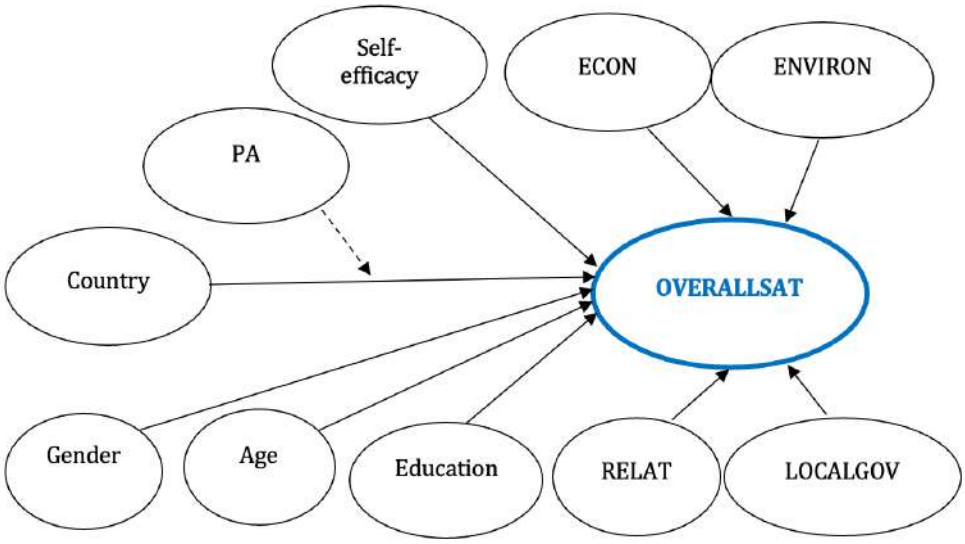
can be assumed that the conflict in the eastern part of the country threatens their affective system.

2.4 Proposed research model

The aim of the research was to determine the life satisfaction of residents in two self-governing regions in Slovakia bordering Ukraine as well as the residents of the Transcarpathian region in Ukraine. In order to address the objective of our research, life satisfaction was measured using an index in which overall satisfaction (OVERALLSAT) was an aggregate of four areas of life: Satisfaction with the economic situation (ECON), Satisfaction with the state of the environment (ENVIRON), Satisfaction with relationships between people in the region (RELAT) and Satisfaction with how local authority offices work in the city/municipality (LOCALGOV). In addition to checking gender, age, and education, general self-efficacy and how people felt on the day of the survey (PA) were also surveyed. Overall, the aim was to better understand people's satisfaction with life in Ukraine and to use the relational context of life satisfaction among Slovak residents for comparison purposes. While there was no hypothesis formulated regarding the differences between Ukrainians and Slovaks, two hypotheses were formulated concerning the personal characteristics examined that could influence life satisfaction:

1. It was assumed that general self-efficacy would facilitate coping with problems and promote life satisfaction, and that its effect would be significantly positive in relation to overall life satisfaction among residents in both countries.
2. Regarding the relationship of positive affect as a moderator influencing the relationship between country affiliation and overall life satisfaction, it was assumed that positive affect, would have a positive effect as a moderating factor in both countries. This is believed to be the result of the homeostatically protected mood mechanism. A worsening effect because of persistent defeat of homeostasis due to the continued presence of a powerful stressor was not predicted for residents of either country. The moderating (not mediating) effect of PA on the relationship between the two variables was preferred because it is not a matter of temporal sequence of variables, but of a plausible simultaneous reinforcing or weakening the effect on life satisfaction. As has been noted, “whereas mediation analysis focuses on how a causal effect operates, moderation analysis is used to address, when, or under what circumstances, or for what types of people that effect exists or does not and in what magnitude” (Hayes and Rockwood 2017, 47). Therefore, in accordance with the HPMood hypothesis, PA is shown as a moderator in the model (Figure 1) and should positively influence the relationship between affiliation with the country and life satisfaction.

FIGURE 1: PATH MODEL UNDER CONSIDERATION



3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Measurement

The electronically administered questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part included questions regarding demographic characteristics: gender, age, and education (primary education, secondary without A-Levels, secondary with A-Levels and university). In the second part of the questionnaire, there were questions representing the three assessed constructs. Due to space reasons the English version of the questionnaire, as well as the Slovak and Ukrainian versions are available upon request from the authors.

Life satisfaction was measured using twelve items from the life satisfaction index in the self-governing regions of Slovakia bordering Ukraine. The index was preferred over the scale as it was assumed that satisfaction with different areas of life does not have a single common cause but rather generates a common effect (for the difference and need to distinguish between the scale and the index, see MacKenzie and Podsakoff 2005). Due to the scope of the work described elsewhere (Lačný and Džuka 2025), only basic information will be outlined here. The twelve items in the questionnaire represent four areas of satisfaction: satisfaction with the economic situation, satisfaction with the state of the environment, satisfaction with relationships between people in the region, and satisfaction with how local authority offices work in the city/municipality. Each area is represented by three items that have reflective scale properties. For each item, the participants indicated their agreement on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 = no satisfaction to 10 = complete satisfaction. To obtain an overall score, the values of the individual domains representing lower-order constructs (LOC) were aggregated to form a higher-order construct (HOC). Such a measurement model is considered a reflective-formative higher-order construct (HOC, Type II) where the domains (lower-order constructs, LOC) are reflective and the total score is formative (cf. DeVellis and Thorpe 2021; Becker, Cheah, Gholamzade, Ringle and Sarstedt 2023).

General self-efficacy expectations (Schwarzer and Jerusalem 1999, 16) were assessed using ten items. For each item, the participants indicated their

agreement on an eleven-point scale ranging from not true at all to completely true.

Positive affect (PA) was measured using five items adapted from the original five-item SEHP scale (Džuka and Dalbert 2002). The participants expressed how they felt on the day of the study using five descriptive words (I am in a good mood, I am satisfied, I am happy, I experience joy, and I am excited) and expressed their agreement on an 11-point scale. This ranged from not true at all to completely true.

The Slovak versions of the instruments, including the demographic questions, were translated into Ukrainian. In accordance with good translation practice (see Brislin 1980), two bilingual translators familiar with the research were involved in the translation. One of them did the translation forward and the other back into the original language without seeing the original text.

3.2 Data and procedure

The data were collected through an agency. The respondents (N = 245 from Slovakia and N = 267 from Ukraine) had online access to the questionnaire through the agency's email. The sample selection ensured proportional representation of people from the two self-governing regions in Slovakia bordering Ukraine - the Prešov Self-Governing Region (793,182 inhabitants) and the Košice Self-Governing Region (767,685 inhabitants) as well as from the Transcarpathian Region (1,244,476 inhabitants, data from before 2022) in Ukraine.

TABLE 1: SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS (N = 512)

	Slovakia		Ukraine	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Persons	245	48	267	52
Gender				
Women	142	58	148	55
Men	103	42	119	45
Age				
18 – 29	51	21	55	21
30 – 39	56	23	54	20
40 – 49	59	24	57	21
50 – 59	45	18	55	21
60 and over	34	14	46	17
Education				
Primary	14	6	25	9
Secondary without A-Levels	50	20	45	17
Secondary with A-Levels	113	46	59	22
University	68	28	138	52
Type of economic activity				
Student	14	6	19	7
Permanent employment	143	58	108	40
Unemployed	24	10	43	16
Self-employed	18	7	36	14
Pensioner	37	15	42	16
Other	9	4	19	7

In addition to the proportional representation of the population from both countries, a quota selection was applied in relation to age. People from five age categories (18–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, and 60 and over) were proportionally represented. There were no quotas used to select people based on their education or type of economic activity, although approximate ratios in relation to the size of their place of residence were considered. The data collection took

place in both countries simultaneously from 18 November to 10 December 2024. The sociodemographic characteristics of respondents from both countries are shown in Table 1.

3.3 Analytical approach

The data analysis was performed in two steps. Firstly, a descriptive analysis of all the variables was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics 29. In the second step, an analysis of the complex relationships in the conceptual model was carried out using PLS-SEM. The choice of analysis was based on the research objective which was to assess the PLS path model's explanatory variables power. This is in line with the recommendations posed by Hair, Hult, Ringle and Sarstedt (2022, 31) who claim that in case the main goal of the research is to predict and explain the target constructs, PLS-SEM should be preferred. SmartPLS 4 software was used for the statistical analysis (Ringle, Wende and Becker 2024).

4 RESULTS

4.1 Descriptive statistics

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics. The average scores for all the variables surveyed are higher in favour of Ukraine, except for PA (positive affect).

TABLE 2: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

	Slovakia		Ukraine	
Variables	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Age	43.0	14.52	43.3	14.88
PA	5.95	2.12	5.62	2.29
SELFEFF	5.80	1.88	6.08	1.95
ECON	4.84	2.14	5.53	2.15
ENVIRON	6.05	2.22	6.80	2.27
RELAT	5.03	2.13	5.94	2.28
LOCALGOV	4.59	2.32	4.72	2.39
OVERALLSAT	20.45	6.66	22.94	7.31

Note: M and SD are used to represent the mean and standard deviation, respectively. PA – Positive affect, SELFEFF – general self-efficacy, ECON - Satisfaction with the economic situation, ENVIRON – Satisfaction with the state of the environment, RELAT – Satisfaction with relationships between people in the region, LOCALGOV – Satisfaction with how local authority offices work in the city/municipality, OVERALLSAT – Overall life satisfaction.

Table 3 shows the results of the evaluation of measurement models in terms of the loading indicators, reliability and convergent validity (AVE) for all the latent variables.

TABLE 3: ASSESSMENT OF INTERNAL CONSISTENCY RELIABILITY AND CONVERGENT VALIDITY (AVE) OF THE SCALES

Scala/Items	Loading	Cronbach's alpha	rhoA	rhoC	AVE
PA		0.911	0.921	0.933	0.736
Good Mood1	0.850				
Satisfied2	0.866				
Happy3	0.882				
Joy4	0.890				
Excited5	0.798				
ECON		0.785	0.785	0.875	0.700
Econ1	0.854				
Econ2	0.805				
Econ3	0.850				
ENVIRON		0.859	0.885	0.913	0.779
Environ1	0.912				
Environ2	0.854				
Environ3	0.881				
RELAT		0.922	0.922	0.950	0.864
Relat1	0.917				
Relat2	0.943				
Relat3	0.928				
LOCALGOV		0.914	0.928	0.946	0.853
Localgov1	0.944				
Localgov2	0.936				
Localgov3	0.889				
SELFEFF		0.944	0.953	0.953	0.673
Selfefficacy1	0.522				
Selfefficacy2	0.791				
Selfefficacy3	0.811				
Selfefficacy4	0.829				
Selfefficacy5	0.861				
Selfefficacy6	0.863				
Selfefficacy7	0.873				
Selfefficacy8	0.864				
Selfefficacy9	0.861				
Selfefficacy10	0.868				

Note: See Table 2.

The results (Table 3) show that all the reflectively measured constructs (PA, self-efficacy, ECON, ENVIRON, RELAT and LOCALGOV as LOC (low order constructs)) are reliable and valid. There was only one loading of the SELFEFF (Selfefficacy1) which did not exceed the threshold value of 0.708. The average variance extracted (AVE) was higher than the critical value of 0.5, and all the construct reliabilities i.e. Cronbach's alpha, the coefficients rhoA, and the composite reliability rhoC had values above 0.7 (Sarstedt, Hair, Pick, Liengaad, Radomir and Ringle 2022).

The discriminant validity assessment, based on the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of the correlations measure (Henseler, Ringle and Sarstedt 2015) showed that all the HTMT values were significantly lower than 0.85. This supports the discriminant validity of the measures (Table 4). "Discriminant validity ensures that a construct measure is empirically unique and represents phenomena of interest that other measures in a structural equation model do not capture (Hair et al. 2010)." (ibid., 116). The discriminant validity values of all measures in the tested structural model met the required criteria. This means that each construct is empirically unique and captures a phenomenon that other constructs in the PLS path model do not represent (Franke and Sarstedt 2019).

TABLE 4: ASSESSMENT OF DISCRIMINANT VALIDITY USING THE HETEROTRAIT-MONOTRAIT RATIO OF CORRELATIONS CRITERION

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. ECON	-					
2.ENVIRON	0.414	-				
3. LOCALGOV	0.591	0.470	-			
4. RELAT	0.617	0.535	0.648	-		
5. PA	0.567	0.296	0.355	0.434	-	
6. SELFEFF	0.450	0.364	0.311	0.379	0.514	-
7. PAxCOUNTRY	0.416	0194	0.271	0.319	0.784	0.342

4.3 Structural equation modelling analysis

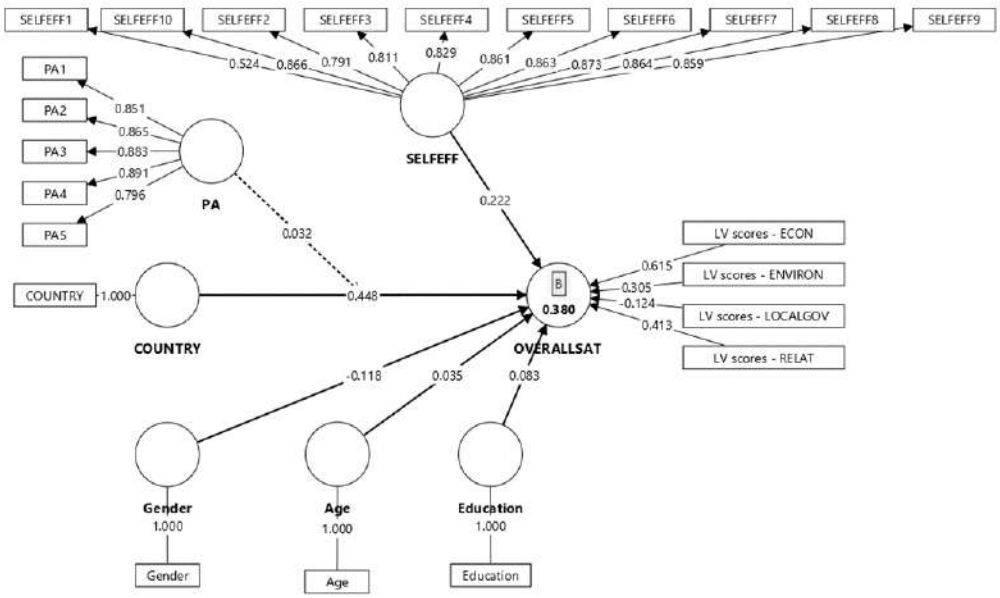
4.3.1 Collinearity

The structural model was firstly assessed for collinearity issues by examining the variance inflation factor (VIF) values of all the predictor constructs in the model. Table 5 shows the VIF values of all predictors in the model. All values were less than 3 which indicates that collinearity was not a problem.

4.3.2 Assessment of the higher-order model with moderation

As recommended by Becker et al. (2023), the disjoint two-stage approach was used. In the first stage, the disjoint two-stage approach only draws on the LOCs and connects them to all constructs in the model which are antecedents and consequences of the higher-order construct. It should only continue with the second stage if the LOCs meet the measurement model evaluation criteria. As can be seen in Table 3, all LOC met the criteria. The second stage of the disjoint two-stage approach uses the latent variable scores from Stage 1 as the HOC indicators, and all the other (non-hierarchical) constructs are measured with their original indicators (Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: TESTED MODEL AND ESTIMATION IN THE SECOND STAGE. BOOTSTRAP T-STATISTICS BASED ON 10,000 REPLICATIONS



One global item was used as an alternative measure of the higher-order construct as a criterion in the redundancy analysis: "How satisfied are you overall with your life in the area where you live?" The path coefficient value of 0.688 can be considered close to the threshold value of 0.7.

4.3.3 Significance and relevance of the path coefficients (standardized regression coefficients)

TABLE 5: ASSESSMENT OF THE MODEL BASED ON THE RESULTS OF THE SECOND STAGE OF THE DISJUNCTIVE TWO-STAGE APPROACH (BECKER ET AL. 2023)

Relationship	Std beta	p	2.5%	97.5%	VIF	f^2	R^2
COUNTRY→ OVERALLSAT	.448	.000	.297	.589	1.031	.08	.380
SELFEFF→ OVERALLSAT	.222	.000	.129	.308	1.345	.06	
Gender → OVERALLSAT	-.118	.146	-.276	.043	1.097	.01	
Age → OVERALLSAT	.035	.347	-.036	.112	1.129	.00	
Education → OVERALLSAT	.083	.044	.004	.165	1.119	.00	
PA→OVERALLSAT	.404	.000	.291	.512	2.708	.10	
PAxCOUNTRY→ OVERALLSAT	.032	.679	-.121	.179	2.388	.00	

Note: COUNTRY, 0 = Slovakia, 1 = Ukraine. Gender, 0 = male, 1 = female. Education, 1 = Primary, 2 = Secondary without A-Levels, 3 = Secondary with A-Levels, 4 = University. Ratings of SELFEFF, PA and OVERALLSAT range from 0 to 10, higher value indicates stronger endorsement of the construct

Table 5 shows the results of the analyses of the tested model. The HOC measurement model (OVERALLSAT) was assessed along with all other measurement models and the structural model by applying the usual evaluation criteria for PLS-SEM. The R-square value indicates that 38% of the variance was explained by the model. A (non-parametric) percentile bootstrapping method with 10,000 subsamples was used to test the significance of the tested variables. The results have revealed that four path coefficients of the seven tested life satisfaction factors were significant (Table 5). The only exceptions to this were age (0.035, $p > 0.10$) and gender (-0.118, $p > 0.10$). The effects of country 0.448 ($p<0.01$), two personal factors, self-efficacy 0.222 ($p<0.01$) and the direct effect of positive affect 0.404 ($p<0.01$) were found to be highly significant. Education was found to be marginally significant (0.083, $p<0.05$). With regards to the tested moderation of PA, the effect was not significant (0.032, $p > 0.10$). The confidence interval values confirm the significance of the effects. Table 5 also shows the effect size coefficients f^2. Values f^2 from 0.02/0.15/0.35 can be considered weak/medium/strong effect sizes (Chin 2010). The direct effect of PA is close to a medium effect size, country and self-efficacy also reach values greater than a small effect while education has zero effect.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results show a somewhat surprising difference between the inhabitants of Slovakia and Ukraine with those in the Transcarpathian region of Ukraine showing a significantly higher score in terms of overall life satisfaction. Both general self-efficacy and positive affect contributed significantly to 38% of the explained variance in life satisfaction among residents of both countries. The influence of gender and age was found to be insignificant and the effect of education marginal. The moderating relationship of PA as a possible additional factor influencing the relationship between country and overall life satisfaction was shown to be insignificant. In other words, the influence of the positive experiences of the inhabitants in both countries was about the same and did not influence life satisfaction in a specific way beyond the identified main effect.

Land and Michalos (2018) have highlighted the frequent research into the relationship between demographic factors and life satisfaction in the context of quality-of-life assessment and the neglect of personal characteristics. While the tested model verified the influence of three specific demographic factors (gender, age and education), their contribution to the overall life satisfaction of residents

in Ukraine and Slovakia was insignificant after taking personal factors into account. On the contrary, general self-efficacy (how well the respondents are equipped to cope with the demands of life) and how they feel emotionally on the day of the survey were confirmed as being significant and efficient factors of overall life satisfaction for those in both countries. As noted by Ferguson (2009), R-squared greater than 25% in the case of social science data is considered a moderate effect. While the 38% found in the research can be considered as such, it is not close to 64% which is the value of a strong effect. It can be assumed that there are additional factors of life satisfaction that were not considered in this research.

A direct and positive influence of general self-efficacy was confirmed and in line with expectations. The insignificant moderating relationship between positive affect and differences between countries in overall life satisfaction is consistent with the theory of homeostatically protected mood (Capic et al. 2018). Although a deterioration in positive experiences could be expected among the population in Ukraine due to less favourable economic and environmental living conditions and a lower degree of autonomy of Ukrainian local and regional governments, the interaction between positive affect and country (moderating effect) was insignificant. This can be interpreted in the sense that the levels of positive affect among the populations of both countries were about the same. In other words, the homeostatic mechanism of positive affect remained at a comparable level and was not burdened to such an extent among those in Ukraine that its beneficial effect on the assessment of overall life satisfaction was weakened. This means that homeostatic processes maintained positive affect at favourable levels thanks to the individual set point. While this protective function may fail under stressful circumstances, it did not threaten the respondents in either country to such an extent that this effect would manifest itself (compare Capic et al. 2018).

It is necessary to interpret the result in terms of what caused the lower score among Slovak residents, who live in a more favourable economic and environmental reality and in a decentralized form of public administration. The two self-governing regions studied are in the eastern part of Slovakia which is relatively less developed than other parts of the country. Indeed, the Slovak-Ukrainian borderlands includes regions with lower per capita GDP in comparison to more developed regions in Slovakia. In addition to high unemployment, average incomes below national income levels, is another factor contributing to the lower level of purchasing power in eastern Slovak regions. While the current research compared residents in two different countries, the residents in eastern Slovakia do not subjectively compare themselves with residents of Ukraine in terms of satisfaction with the areas of life surveyed, but rather with groups of residents in their own country. The context for assessing their own situation could be represented by the more prosperous regions of Slovakia, especially the western part of the country, with which the inhabitants of the east tend to compare themselves. As such, this may have influenced the less favourable assessment of their own life satisfaction.

In a similar respect, it is important to consider the subjectively represented context of the assessment of satisfaction among residents in the Transcarpathian region where the conflict did not directly take place. The relational framework of the inhabitants in this part of the country may provide a sense of privilege and influence their responses in their subjective assessment of life satisfaction. If the social relational framework was behind the differences, then it would seem appropriate to take in future research social representations into account.

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ZADOVOLJSTVO Z ŽIVLJENJEM MED PREBIVALCI SLOVAŠKO-UKRAJINSKEGA OBMEJNEGA OBMOČJA

Cilj raziskave je bil oceniti, kako zadovoljni so prebivalci obmejnih regij s pomembnimi področji svojega življenja. V študiji, ki primerja zadovoljstvo z življenjem med prebivalci zahodnega dela Ukrajine (N = 267) in prebivalci vzhodne Slovaške (N = 245), so bile individualne značilnosti, samoučinkovitost in pozitivni afekt interpretirani v skladu s hipotezo homeostatsko zaščitenega razpoloženja. Zadovoljstvo z življenjem je bilo merjeno z indeksom, hibridnim refleksivno-formativnim konstruktom, ki združuje štiri pomembna področja. Učinek običajno obravnavanih demografskih značilnosti je bil kontroliran, medtem ko je bil preizkušen vpliv dveh osebnostnih značilnosti: splošne samoučinkovitosti kot neposrednega dejavnika in pozitivnega afekta kot moderatorja zadovoljstva z življenjem. Rezultati kažejo višjo raven zadovoljstva z življenjem med ukrajinskimi prebivalci, pri čemer se moderatorski učinek ni izkazal za statistično pomembnega.

Ključne besede: indeks; zadovoljstvo z življenjem; Slovaška; Ukrajina; obmejno območje; HPMood; PLS-SEM.

GEOPOLITICISING NORMATIVE POWER: POLITICAL ADAPTATION AND STRATEGIC TRANSFORMATION IN EU FOREIGN POLICY

Radoslav IVANČÍK[1]

This article analyses the discourse on a 'geopolitical Europe' and examines whether it represents a transformation of European Union foreign policy or a strategic adaptation of its normative project to conditions of great-power rivalry. Integrating theories of normative power, realist critique, and European integration, the study addresses a gap in the literature by focusing on long-term political and institutional dynamics rather than isolated crises. Based on qualitative analysis of EU strategic documents and scholarly sources, the article identifies three phases: the development of strategic capacity, the pragmatic turn after 2016, and the acceleration of geopolitical discourse following the war in Ukraine. It argues that the EU's geopoliticisation reflects incremental political adaptation rather than a paradigmatic shift. The Union is thus emerging as a hybrid actor combining normative ambitions with strategic instruments of power, while the limits of this transformation remain rooted in its intergovernmental decision-making structure.

Key words: European Union; foreign policy; normative power; hybrid actorness; strategic adaptation.

1 INTRODUCTION

The shifting international environment of the first decades of the 21st century has fundamentally altered the character of the European Union's foreign and security policy. While the post-Cold War era saw the Union frequently interpreted as a normative or civilian actor—whose influence derived primarily from economic regulation, multilateral diplomacy, and the promotion of liberal values—contemporary scholarly discourse increasingly points towards its 'geopolitical awakening' (Manners 2002; Smith 2008; Hyde-Price 2006). This shift reflects not only a change in the discourse of European leaders but also broader structural

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transformations of the global system, characterised by the return of power rivalry, regional fragmentation, and intensifying strategic competition (Biscop 2016; Riddervold and Rieker 2024). From an analytical perspective, however, this is not merely a reaction to external threats; it is also a consequence of the gradual politicisation of European integration, in which questions of identity, sovereignty, and strategic autonomy have become subjects of domestic political contestation and the redefinition of collective European actorness.

The debate over the EU's geopolitical transformation further reflects broader theoretical tensions between different interpretations of European integration and its international agency. Within the literature on European studies, two dominant analytical frameworks can be identified. The first, represented by the concept of Normative Power Europe, emphasises the Union's capacity to shape the international environment through norms, rules, and economic integration, where the legitimisation of European actorness is closely intertwined with a value-based discourse (Manners 2002; Sjursen 2006). The second approach, which has gained prominence in recent years, interprets the EU's development through a more realist geopolitical framework, highlighting power competition, security threats, and strategic autonomy (Kagan 2007; Hyde-Price 2013; Biscop 2016; Keukeleire and Delreux 2022; Šrobárova and Belan 2026). The rising popularity of this perspective is linked to shifts in the global distribution of power and the increasing pressure on the EU to respond to a conflictual environment without relying exclusively on multilateral mechanisms.

Despite the growing body of literature, the question remains whether the discourse on a 'geopolitical Europe' represents a genuine transformation of the Union's foreign and security policy or rather an adaptation of the existing normative project to the new conditions of the international system. Significantly, a substantial portion of research focuses on individual strategic documents or specific crises, while paying less attention to the long-term political processes unfolding within European institutions and among Member States (Hooghe and Marks 2019; Schimmelfennig 2024). Consequently, the broader context of the transformation of European actorness is often lost—a context that includes internal conflicts over the direction of integration, diverging strategic cultures, and the shifting political priorities of national governments. It is precisely this domestic political dimension that is crucial for understanding both the limits and possibilities of the EU's geopolitical turn.

Existing research largely concentrates on individual crises or specific policies, often failing to reflect the cumulative impact of systemic factors—multipolar competition, regional instability, and internal political divergences between Member States—on the long-term transformation of the Union's foreign policy identity. The synthesis of these dimensions represents the analytical gap that this article seeks to fill. The objective is to examine the extent to which current developments can be understood as a shift from a normative model towards a hybrid form of geopolitical actorness, in which elements of value-oriented policy and realist strategic rationality converge (Biscop 2016; Tocci 2017). Thus, this analytical framework links the discussion on geopolitics with questions of power, legitimacy, and collective decision-making within integration projects.

Considering the above, the primary research question of this article is: To what extent does the geopolitical awakening of the European Union represent a structural transformation of its foreign and security policy, and to what extent is it a discursive adaptation of its normative identity to a changing global environment? The article argues that the geopolitical turn should not be understood as a radical rupture, but rather as a process of incremental strategic

adaptation, in which normative elements are combined with pragmatic and power-oriented instruments (Blockmans and Koutrakos 2018; Voskopoulos 2020). Such an argument allows for the analysis of European policy development not only as a response to external threats but also as the result of domestic political negotiations, discursive shifts, and institutional evolution.

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative analysis based on the content-related and comparative interpretation of primary EU strategic documents and relevant scholarly literature. The analytical framework bridges theories of normative power, realist approaches to geopolitics, and perspectives on European integration, enabling an examination of not only discursive changes but also their translation into specific policy and institutional measures (Manners 2002; Hyde-Price 2013; Moravcsik 1998). The emphasis on interpreting decision-making processes reflects the multi-level nature of European governance, where national interests, supranational institutions, and broader geopolitical pressures intersect.

The research framework designed in this manner allows for the identification of long-term trends in the transformation of EU foreign and security policy, while simultaneously assessing the limits of its geopolitical ambition. From a political science perspective, the contribution of this article lies in connecting the geopolitical debate with the analysis of European integration and in the argument that the geopolitical awakening cannot be understood in isolation from the Union's internal political dynamics. Thus, the article contributes to the broader academic discourse on the nature of European actorness and the adaptation of regional integration projects to a changing global order (Westlake 2020; van Middelaar 2021).

The article is structured as follows. The first section develops the theoretical framework and analyses the transition from the concept of normative power to a geopolitical interpretation of European actorness. The second section examines the institutional and strategic development of EU foreign and security policy. The third section explores pragmatic adaptation following the adoption of the EU Global Strategy and the strengthening of the concepts of resilience and the integrated approach. The fourth section analyses the acceleration of geopolitical transformation in the context of contemporary global crises and military conflicts. Finally, the conclusion synthesises the main findings and discusses the implications for the future trajectory of the EU as a political actor.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FROM NORMATIVE POWER TO THE GEOPOLITICAL ACTORNESS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

The question of the European Union's nature as an international actor represents one of the most widely debated topics within the literature of European studies and international relations theory. Since the inception of the integration project, debates on European actorness have fluctuated between interpreting the Union as a unique normative project and a more realist understanding of its behaviour as a response to the structural pressures of the international system. Following the end of the Cold War, the EU was frequently interpreted through the concepts of civilian and normative power, which emphasised its capacity to shape the international environment through rules, norms, and economic integration rather than the traditional instruments of military force (Smith 2008; Sjursen 2006).

The most significant contribution to this debate is the concept of 'Normative Power Europe', formulated by Ian Manners, which highlights the Union's ability to promote its values through the diffusion of norms and the social transformation of the international environment (Manners 2002; Manners 2006). From a political science perspective, the EU appeared as an actor whose identity was closely intertwined with the project of post-sovereign integration and the notion that the legitimacy of international action could derive from rules and values rather than material power.

This normative interpretation of European actorness assumed that the integration project represented an alternative to traditional power politics founded on rivalry and security dilemmas. Scholars such as Karen E. Smith and Nathalie Tocci have pointed out that EU foreign policy is inextricably linked to multilateralism, the promotion of democracy, and the rule of law, with its legitimacy stemming from a combination of economic influence and regulatory capacity (Smith 2008; Tocci 2017). In this view, the Union was understood as an actor whose power originated from institutionalised cooperation and normative attractiveness rather than military dominance. This created an image of the EU as a 'post-Westphalian' actor that challenged classical realist understandings of international politics (Manners 2002). This approach dominated particularly during periods of relative stability in the global order, when liberal multilateralism appeared to provide a sufficient framework for European foreign policy, allowing European actorness to be interpreted as a model of normatively oriented integration.

However, with the gradual return of geopolitical rivalry, a systematic critique of the normative approach began to emerge. Adrian Hyde-Price and other realist-oriented authors cautioned that interpreting the EU as a normative actor underestimates the significance of power, security, and strategic interests (Hyde-Price 2006; Hyde-Price 2013). According to this perspective, while the Union is a unique political entity, it remains part of an anarchic international system that compels it to respond to power challenges in a manner like traditional states. Significantly, realist critique does not dispute the existence of normative elements in European policy; rather, it highlights their limited effectiveness in an environment of escalating strategic competition. The growing rivalry between great powers, the destabilisation of neighbouring regions, and the weakening of multilateral institutions have gradually created conditions in which a purely normative model has proven analytically insufficient to explain the EU's behaviour. This has opened the way for a reinterpretation of European actorness in geopolitical categories (Kagan 2007; Riddervold and Rieker 2024).

Authors examining the Union's strategic culture and political identity have also responded to this shift. Sven Biscop and Steven Blockmans emphasise that European foreign policy is progressively moving towards a more realist understanding of security, while simultaneously retaining its normative elements (Biscop 2016; Blockmans and Koutrakos 2018). Similarly, Koops and Pacheco Pardo point to the growing geopolitisation of European policy, manifested not only in the discourse on strategic autonomy but also in the nexus of economic, technological, and security instruments (Peráček 2021; Koops and Pacheco Pardo 2023; Šrobárova and Belan 2026). These analyses suggest that the EU is increasingly oscillating between two analytical poles—normative identity and geopolitical rationality—where the resulting form of its actorness emerges through political compromises between Member States and institutional processes typical of multi-level governance.

From a theoretical perspective, the current transformation can thus be

interpreted as a tension between constructivist and realist approaches. The constructivist perspective highlights the role of identity, values, and social norms in shaping EU external policy, whereas the realist tradition underscores the structural limits of the normative project in an environment of strategic competition. Several scholars, including Tocci and others, therefore propose understanding the EU's development not as a transition from one paradigm to another, but as the gradual formation of a hybrid model of actorness, in which normative and geopolitical elements complement each other (Tocci 2017). This is a process of redefining the Union's identity resulting from the interaction between internal institutional dynamics and external geopolitical pressures, further suggesting a need to transcend traditional dichotomies between idealism and realism in the analysis of European integration.

The concept of a geopolitical turn, therefore, does not signify a total abandonment of normative power, but rather its reinterpretation within the context of power politics. The discourse on strategic autonomy, resilience, and the 'language of power' promoted by EU officials indicates a shift towards a more pragmatic approach, where normative goals are intertwined with geopolitical interests. As Biscop notes, European strategy is increasingly oriented towards protecting its own interests and stabilising the neighbourhood, reflecting a more realist understanding of the international environment (Biscop 2016). Analytically significant is the fact that this shift is occurring within existing EU institutional structures, which continue to emphasise consensual decision-making and a multilateral approach, thereby creating tension between geopolitical ambition and normative identity.

Furthermore, it must be emphasised that the EU's hybrid nature as both a supranational and intergovernmental actor creates specific limits to its geopolitical agency. Unlike traditional states, the Union does not derive its actions from a singular strategic culture, but from pluralistic national perspectives that shape its foreign policy (Hooghe and Marks 2019; Brhlíková and Kočnerová 2020). It is precisely this institutional context that explains why the EU's geopolitical ambitions often coexist with a continued emphasis on norms and multilateral rules. Consequently, any analysis must account not only for theoretical debates on power and identity but also for the internal dynamics of European integration, which determine the possibilities for collective action and limit the pace of strategic adaptation.

Based on these theoretical discussions, this article operates on the assumption that the EU's geopolitical awakening represents a process of the gradual geopolitisation of a normative project, rather than its replacement by a realist logic. The analytical framework thus combines the concept of normative power (Manners), realist critique (Hyde-Price), and the perspective of strategic adaptation (Tocci, Biscop), enabling the examination of the transformation of European foreign policy as a hybrid process unfolding between values and power (Manners 2002; Hyde-Price 2013; Biscop 2016; Tocci 2017). This theoretical framework also provides an analytical bridge to the subsequent chapter, which demonstrates how these theoretical tensions have translated into the specific institutional and strategic development of the European Union's foreign and security policy.

3 INSTITUTIONAL AND STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION'S FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY

The institutional development of the European Union's foreign and security policy represents a key prerequisite for its gradual transformation from a normatively oriented actor into an entity with growing geopolitical ambitions. Since the early 1990s, Member States have sought to create a framework that would allow the Union to act in a more coordinated manner within the international environment while simultaneously maintaining the intergovernmental nature of decision-making. This duality—between the logic of integration and the sovereignty of Member States—has fundamentally shaped the pace and direction of the strategic evolution of European foreign policy (Moravcsik 1998; Blockmans and Koutrakos 2018; Westlake 2020). It constitutes a classic example of multi-level governance, where supranational ambitions intersect with national preferences and domestic political constraints (Hooghe and Marks 2019). The tension between these two logics explains why EU institutional innovations often manifest as incremental adjustments to existing mechanisms rather than radical reforms aimed at centralising foreign policy. This evolutionary character of integration further suggests that the Union's geopolitical transformation is inextricably linked to the political dynamics of its Member States and their willingness to delegate competences to the European level.

The establishment of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) following the adoption of the Maastricht Treaty represented the first systematic attempt at the political coordination of the Union's external action (Smith 2008; Hill and Smith 2017). Despite ambitious rhetoric, however, practical implementation revealed significant limits to collective action, arising from the diverging strategic cultures and security priorities of individual states. The experience of the Balkan conflicts in the 1990s underscored a lack of both operational capacity and political cohesion, thereby stimulating debate on the need to develop common defence instruments and to institutionally strengthen the foreign policy dimension of integration (Howorth 2014; Biscop 2016). These events also demonstrated that the normative discourse on European actorness must be complemented by a political capacity to act in crisis situations, which gradually led to a redefinition of expectations regarding the Union as a political actor. Analytically, this moment can be understood as the first significant shift from symbolic diplomacy towards the strategic operationalisation of shared goals (Hyde-Price 2013).

The subsequent period was characterised by the gradual construction of an institutional architecture designed to enhance the coherence of European actorness. The creation of the position of High Representative, the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS), and the development of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) represented an attempt to overcome the fragmentation between diplomatic, security, and developmental instruments (Blockmans and Koutrakos 2018; Duke 2019). Crucially, these reforms signalled an effort to move from purely interstate coordination towards a hybrid model of governance, in which European institutions gain a greater role in formulating strategic priorities, while Member States retain the final word. This hybrid model also reflects the broader evolution of European integration, where the legitimisation of common policies relies on a combination of supranational expertise and national political control (Hooghe and Marks 2019). In a broader context, this involves the gradual formation of an institutional

infrastructure that, while not moving the Union towards a federal model of foreign policy, nevertheless increases its capacity for strategic coordination.

From a theoretical perspective, this development can be interpreted as a gradual shift from a purely normative model towards strategic adaptation. As Biscop points out, European strategic documents as early as the first decade of the 21st century indicated a more realist perception of the security environment, even though the language of multilateral cooperation remained dominant (Biscop 2016). The development of civilian and military missions, as well as the creation of EU Battlegroups, signalled an ambition to expand the spectrum of foreign policy instruments beyond economic and regulatory power (Koops and Pacheco Pardo 2023). These steps can be interpreted as a process of the gradual socialisation of Member States into a common strategic mindset, which, however, unfolded within existing institutional limits and never fully replaced national security paradigms. This process also demonstrates that the EU's strategic culture does not emerge through one-off decisions but rather as the result of long-term political interactions between Member States and European institutions.

The Lisbon Treaty represented another significant milestone, as it strengthened institutional cohesion and created new mechanisms for coordination between Member States and European institutions. The unification of the roles of High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission was intended to enhance strategic coherence and link various dimensions of external policy. The Lisbon reform can thus be understood as an attempt to bridge the tension between supranational and intergovernmental models of integration; the result was a compromise institutional design that bolstered coordination without fundamentally undermining national sovereignty (Blockmans and Koutrakos 2018; Westlake 2020). Despite these reforms, however, foreign and security policy remained an area heavily dependent on the political will of Member States, which continued to limit the EU's ability to act swiftly and decisively in situations requiring strategic decisions (Hyde-Price 2013). This paradox—growing institutional capacity coupled with persistent political fragmentation—represents one of the defining characteristics of European geopolitical actorness.

An important element of institutional development was also the gradual formation of a strategic culture. The 2003 European Security Strategy represented an attempt to define a shared perception of threats and the EU's role in the international environment. The document reflected the post-Cold War optimism and emphasised the Union's role as a promoter of stability and a multilateral order (Council of the European Union 2003; Biscop 2016). Subsequent strategic initiatives, however, progressively shifted the focus towards the protection of European interests and the strengthening of defence capabilities, thereby paving the way for the pragmatic turn that fully manifested after 2016 (Tocci 2017). This evolution suggests that the EU’s geopolitical awakening was not a sudden rupture but the result of a long-term process of political adaptation, involving changes not only in rhetoric but also in institutional expectations regarding the Union as an actor capable of responding to an unstable international environment.

Institutional development thus laid the foundation for geopolitical transformation yet simultaneously revealed its structural limits. The intergovernmental nature of decision-making, multi-level governance, differing strategic priorities, and the asymmetry of military capabilities among Member States mean that the EU remains a hybrid actor whose geopolitical ambitions are

always contingent upon internal consensus (Brhlíková and Kočnerová 2020; Riddervold and Rieker 2024). This state can be interpreted because of the specific nature of European integration, which combines elements of federal and interstate models, creating a dynamic of constant negotiation between effectiveness and legitimacy (Hooghe and Marks 2019). It is this combination of increasing strategic capacity and persistent institutional constraints that explains why the Union's geopolitical awakening manifests as incremental adaptations rather than radical transformation, and why its foreign policy remains firmly anchored in the political dynamics of the Member States. This institutional context also provides an analytical bridge to the following chapter, which demonstrates how these long-term structural changes translated into the pragmatic adaptation of European foreign policy after 2016.

4 PRAGMATIC ADAPTATION OF EU FOREIGN POLICY: FROM MULTILATERALISM TO STRATEGIC RESILIENCE

While the previous chapter analysed the institutional and strategic prerequisites for the gradual geopolitisation of European actorness, the following section focuses on the moment when this process began to manifest in concrete strategic practice and the discursive adaptation of EU foreign policy. The period following the mid-2010s represents a significant juncture in the evolution of the European Union's foreign and security policy, as normative discourse began to be progressively complemented by a more pragmatic understanding of strategic interests (Biscop 2016; Tocci 2017). This development cannot be explained solely by changes in the international environment; it is also a product of the Union's internal political dynamics, which responded to a cumulative series of economic, migration, and security crises.

Analytically, it is significant that this involves not only a change in instruments but a transformation in how the EU defines its role within the international system and how Member States interpret shared strategic priorities. The pragmatic turn can thus be understood as the result of an interaction between external geopolitical pressures and internal processes of political coordination, which are gradually shifting the balance between normative identity and strategic realism (Ilik and Adamczyk 2025; Costa and Barbé 2025). Furthermore, this process highlights the overall developmental dynamics of the EU, in which the integration project adapts to the changing expectations of domestic political actors, party systems, and voter preferences within Member States, thereby influencing the redefinition of foreign policy priorities at the European level (Riddervold and Rieker 2024).

The adoption of the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) in 2016 can be interpreted as an attempt to redefine European actorness under conditions of increasing geopolitical uncertainty. The document explicitly characterised the international environment as more complex and conflict-prone, signalling a departure from the optimistic vision of a multilateral order characteristic of the preceding period (European External Action Service 2016). Importantly, the strategy did not abandon the normative foundations of European policy but reinterpreted them through the concept of pragmatism. As Tocci points out, the pragmatic turn represented an effort to combine value-based ambitions with a realistic assessment of the strategic environment (Tocci 2017).

This shift can also be understood as an attempt to bridge the diverging strategic preferences of Member States, which, following a series of crises, increasingly

sought a more flexible framework for collective action. At the same time, it serves as an example of discursive adaptation, where new concepts and strategic frameworks facilitate the legitimisation of an incremental shift in political priorities without an explicit rejection of prior normative principles (Costa and Barbé 2025). In this sense, the Global Strategy did not represent a radical rupture but rather a redefinition of the existing political consensus through a new analytical language.

Resilience emerged as the pivotal analytical concept of this period, gradually superseding the more ambitious discourse of transforming neighbouring regions (Juncos 2017). Resilience was defined as the capacity of states and societies to manage crises and adapt to an unstable environment (Juncos 2017; Rehak et al. 2024), thereby shifting EU foreign policy from the normative export of models towards the promotion of stability. This shift can be interpreted as a reaction to the limits of European transformative power and, simultaneously, as an adaptation to a pluralistic international system in which the EU lacks the capacity for the unilateral shaping of the external environment (Hyde-Price 2013). Furthermore, the concept of resilience reflects a broader trend in European policy, where emphasis is moving away from the ambition to change the external environment towards an effort to manage uncertainty and reduce political and economic vulnerabilities. From a theoretical perspective, this shift can also be interpreted as a transition from a transformative logic to a logic of risk management, which is characteristic of contemporary forms of global governance and alters expectations of the Union as an external actor (Koops and Pacheco Pardo 2023).

Concurrently, the nature of the Union's multilateral orientation underwent a gradual transformation. In place of the universalist promotion of global rules, a 'selective multilateralism' based on strategic partnerships and regional stabilisation increasingly took hold (Biscop 2018). This trend reflects the growing geopolitisation of European policy, as decision-making began to account more heavily for issues of security, energy dependence, and technological competition. However, the pragmatic turn did not signify an abandonment of multilateralism; rather, it represented its reformulation within an environment of power rivalry. This evolution suggests a shift from normative universalism towards a more contextual form of cooperation, in which strategic interests and value-based principles are mutually contingent, creating a hybrid model of foreign policy behaviour. This hybrid approach enables Member States to maintain a degree of strategic flexibility without the need for total institutional centralisation (Riddervold and Rieker 2024).

From the perspective of EU institutional politics, the pragmatic shift also represented an effort to achieve better coordination among various foreign policy instruments. The 'integrated approach' to conflict and crisis resolution emphasised the nexus between diplomacy, development cooperation, security measures, and economic policy (European External Action Service 2016). Crucially, this process also revealed the persistent limits of the decision-making system, as Member States frequently interpreted strategic priorities differently and preferred varying forms of engagement in neighbouring regions. Pragmatic adaptation, therefore, did not lead to the full centralisation of foreign policy but rather to a more flexible model of coordination that allows for the combination of supranational initiatives with national strategies, reflecting the pluralistic nature of the European political space (Hooghe and Marks 2019). This model further indicates that the EU's geopolitical transformation is closely intertwined with political compromises between Member States, which remain the primary bearers of strategic legitimacy and decision-making authority.

The transformation of discourse after 2016 thus suggests the emergence of a hybrid model of European actorness that fuses normative values with a more realist understanding of geopolitics (Manners 2002; Tocci 2017). The concepts of resilience and selective multilateralism can be seen as indicators of this transformation, demonstrating how the EU seeks to adapt to a world characterised by strategic competition without entirely abandoning its identity as a normative actor (Biscop 2018; Costa and Barbé 2025). This development also paved the way for more pronounced geopolitical rhetoric and concrete policy measures that fully manifested in response to the global crises of the early 2020s. Within the analytical logic of this article, pragmatic adaptation represents a transitional phase between long-term institutional development and the accelerated geopolitical transformation that will be the subject of the following chapter.

5 THE GEOPOLITICAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION IN THE CONTEXT OF WAR AND SYSTEMIC RIVALRY

While the third chapter demonstrated how pragmatic adaptation and the concept of resilience became established within the Union's strategic discourse, the following section analyses the moment when external systemic shocks accelerated the geopolitisation of European policy, shifting it from strategic reflection to concrete political action. The beginning of the third decade of the 21st century represents a turning point in the debate over the nature of the European Union's foreign and security policy. A combination of the COVID-19 pandemic, deepening technological and economic rivalry between great powers, and, most significantly, Russia's full-scale military aggression against Ukraine has fundamentally altered the strategic environment in which the EU operates (Schimmelfennig 2024; Riddervold and Rieker 2024; Kirkegaard 2025).

Significantly, it is not merely the events themselves that matter, but the way these crises have redefined the understanding of European actorness and legitimised the discourse on a 'geopolitical Europe'. This involves a process in which geopolitical language is progressively becoming part of the Union's political identity and, simultaneously, a tool for mobilising political support among Member States (Hoeffler, Hofmann and Mérand 2024; Håkansson 2024). This discursive shift also reflects a broader trend of the politicisation of EU foreign policy, as issues of security, energy sovereignty, and strategic autonomy move to the centre of domestic political debates and influence the dynamics of European integration.

From a theoretical perspective, the war in Ukraine can be interpreted as an external shock that accelerated the process of the geopolitisation of European policy (Riddervold and Rieker 2024; Schimmelfennig 2024; Hoeffler, Hofmann and Mérand 2024). According to realist approaches, such systemic events represent moments when international actors re-evaluate their strategies and identities in response to shifts in the balance of power. In the case of the EU, this process has manifested not only in political decisions but also in a change in the discursive framework, as Union officials began to openly speak about the need to 'learn the language of power' (Borrell 2020a; Borrell 2020b). This shift suggests that geopolitical rationality is increasingly becoming a legitimate component of European foreign policy, with the discourse of geopolitics serving to overcome long-standing political divisions between Member States and to forge a minimum consensus on strategic priorities. This process should be understood as a form of

discursive institutionalisation, in which the language of geopolitics legitimises new political expectations without the need for fundamental institutional reform.

One of the most visible manifestations of this transformation has been the reinterpretation of economic and energy interdependence (Sapir, Kirkegaard and Zettelmeyer 2025). While in previous decades, interdependence was perceived primarily as a tool for stability and peace, contemporary debate increasingly views it as a potential source of vulnerability. This represents a significant shift from the liberal logic of economic cooperation towards a more realist perception of international political economy, in which trade, investment, and technological supply chains acquire a security dimension. This process of the geopolitisation of economic policy further suggests an expansion of the spectrum of instruments through which the EU promotes its strategic interests, as the boundary between economic regulation and security policy progressively blurs. This development can also be understood as a manifestation of the securitisation of economic policies, which alters the way decisions are legitimised at the European level and strengthens the role of executive institutions in defining strategic priorities.

The war in Ukraine has also bolstered the discourse on strategic autonomy, which is gradually moving from academic debate into practical policy. The acceleration of this geopolitical turn, however, remains unevenly distributed across the Union, reflecting divergent strategic priorities and historical experiences of Member States. While the frontline states in Central and Eastern Europe—driven by an existential perception of the Russian threat—advocate for a rapid expansion of hard power instruments and a robust enlargement policy, traditional neutral states or those in the Southern neighbourhood often prioritize a more cautious approach, emphasizing the preservation of economic stability and non-military crisis management. These internal cleavages create a 'variable geometry' of geopoliticisation, where the pace of collective action is frequently dictated by the need to find a minimum common denominator between those pushing for a 'geopolitical awakening' and those wary of undermining long-standing strategic cultures.

Beyond traditional security concerns, the EU's ability to act as a cohesive geopolitical actor is further strained by the proliferation of disinformation and conspiracy theories that undermine the democratic foundations of Member States (Kukovič et al. 2024; Ivančík and Andrassy 2024), disrupt the functioning of democratic institutions, increase polarization in society, and at the same time arouse distrust in governments and public authorities in their ability to address emerging problems (Haček 2024; Ivančík and Andrassy 2025). These narratives often exploit societal divisions, fostering scepticism towards European institutions and complicating the formation of a unified strategic response to external threats (Beňuška and Nečas 2021; Csanyi and Kucharčík 2023). As research suggests, the demographic susceptibility to such conspiratorial beliefs varies significantly across the Union, creating additional internal friction points that hinder the implementation of a robust and coherent foreign policy). Consequently, the geopolitisation of the Union is not merely an external challenge but is deeply intertwined with the task of safeguarding domestic political stability against manipulative information environments.

The adoption of the Strategic Compass and the increased emphasis on defence investments can be interpreted as an effort by the EU to respond to a changing security environment without entirely abandoning the transatlantic framework of cooperation (European Union 2022; Koops and Pacheco Pardo 2023). In this context, it is significant that strategic autonomy does not manifest as a quest for

total independence, but rather as a process of redefining relations between Member States and external partners under conditions of geopolitical rivalry (Ilik and Adamczyk 2025). This discourse simultaneously creates a new space for domestic political negotiation regarding the level of integration in the fields of defence and security, highlighting the enduring significance of national political preferences, coalition compromises, and domestic political calculations in shaping common policy.

Furthermore, the character of enlargement and neighbourhood policy is also changing, as these are increasingly interpreted as instruments of geopolitical leverage. Granting candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova can be understood not only as a normative gesture of solidarity but also as a strategic step aimed at stabilising the Eastern Neighbourhood and strengthening the EU's political presence in the region (Anghel 2025). This development confirms the argument that the EU's geopolitical turn does not consist in replacing normative identity with a realist logic, but in their gradual synthesis. Enlargement is thus once again becoming a political tool that links the integration project with geopolitical considerations of stability and security, while simultaneously strengthening the internal legitimacy of European integration by redefining its strategic borders.

Despite these shifts, however, the Union's geopolitical transformation remains limited by its institutional nature. Decision-making in the field of foreign and security policy is still largely dependent on the consensus of Member States, creating tension between the ambition to act as a geopolitical actor and the reality of pluralistic national interests (Bickerton, Hodson and Puetter 2015; Keukeleire and Delreux 2022). The hybrid nature of the EU is thus also evident in its response to the war: on the one hand, there is unprecedented coordination of sanctions and security support; on the other, differences in strategic priorities and threat perceptions persist (Riddervold and Rieker 2024; Håkansson 2024). This illustrates that geopolitical transformation unfolds within existing institutional constraints and is the result of incremental political compromises that define the pace and scope of integration.

The EU's geopolitical awakening can thus be interpreted as a process of the gradual institutionalisation of realist elements within the normative project of European integration. The war in Ukraine does not represent the start of this transformation, but rather a moment that accelerated it and simultaneously revealed its limits. The EU is thus increasingly positioning itself as a hybrid actor moving between normative identity and geopolitical rationality, while the resulting form of its foreign policy remains a subject of ongoing political and academic debate. This development also creates an analytical bridge to the article's final synthesis, which evaluates the Union's geopolitical awakening as a political process occurring at the intersection of integration, identity, and strategic adaptation.

6 CONCLUSION

The synthesis of the theoretical, institutional, and empirical analysis presented in the preceding chapters demonstrates that the geopolitical awakening of the European Union should not be understood as a radical departure from its normative identity, but rather as a gradual process shaped by the interaction of identity, power, and institutional adaptation to a changing international environment. At the core of this transformation lies the tension between the normative tradition of European integration and the increasing necessity to

respond to geopolitical rivalry, regional instability, and the internal political divergences of Member States. The developments of recent years confirm that the EU is not shifting from one paradigm to another but is progressively forming a hybrid model of actorness that combines value-based ambitions with pragmatic instruments of power. This hybrid character can be understood as a specific response to the dilemma between integration and sovereignty—a tension that has long been constitutive of the European project and which simultaneously defines both the limits and the possibilities of the Union's geopolitical transformation. From this perspective, geopoliticisation does not represent the negation of the integration project, but rather its evolutionary adaptation to the conditions of a shifting global order.

In this context, it is crucial to recognise that the Union's geopolitical transformation is not the result of a single strategic decision, but the consequence of the cumulative impact of external shocks and internal institutional changes. Institutional development—from the Maastricht Treaty through the Lisbon reforms to current strategic initiatives—has created a framework that allows the EU to respond more flexibly to crisis situations while preserving its intergovernmental character. This duality explains why the Union's geopolitical ambitions often coexist with persistent limits on collective decision-making, and why geopolitical rationality asserts itself through gradual discursive and institutional shifts rather than fundamental ruptures. The geopoliticisation of European policy, therefore, does not signify a weakening of the integration project, but its adaptation to the conditions of a pluralistic and conflict-prone international environment, where political legitimacy derives from the capacity to respond to uncertainty.

The pragmatic turn following the adoption of the EU Global Strategy and the subsequent geopoliticisation of economic, energy, and security policy indicates a shift towards a more realist perception of the international environment. The concepts of resilience and selective multilateralism further suggest that the EU is attempting to adapt without entirely abandoning its normative foundations. The war in Ukraine has accelerated this process by legitimising the discourse of strategic autonomy and strengthening the perception of the Union as a political actor capable of coordinated action. Nevertheless, the response of Member States has shown that the geopolitical awakening remains contingent upon an internal plurality of strategic preferences, which is an inherent part of the European political system and will continue to shape the pace of further integration in foreign policy.

The acceleration of this geopolitical turn, however, remains unevenly distributed across the Union, reflecting divergent strategic priorities and historical experiences of Member States. While the frontline states in Central and Eastern Europe—driven by an existential perception of the Russian threat—advocate for a rapid expansion of hard power instruments, traditional neutral states or those in the Southern neighbourhood often prioritise a more cautious approach. These internal cleavages are further complicated by domestic political dynamics, where institutional (dis)trust and the rise of alternative political narratives can influence national positions on collective European security measures. This creates a 'variable geometry' of geopoliticisation, where the pace of strategic adaptation is frequently dictated by the need to find a minimum common denominator between those pushing for a 'geopolitical awakening' and those wary of undermining long-standing strategic cultures. This evolution reveals that the EU's geopolitical transformation is primarily a political process of negotiation and compromise, rather than a linear transition to a realist paradigm.

The contribution of this article lies in its interpretation of the EU's geopolitical transformation not as a transition from normative power to realist actorness, but as a process of the geopoliticisation of the normative project itself. Such an analytical framework allows for the transcendence of the dichotomy between idealistic and realistic interpretations of European foreign policy, while highlighting the political nature of the decision-making processes that shape the resulting form of European actorness. In the broader context of European studies, this approach underscores the importance of internal political dynamics, discursive shifts, and institutional compromises, which often remain in the shadow of discussions focused exclusively on geopolitical factors. The article thus contributes to the ongoing discourse on how regional integration projects respond to the changing distribution of power in the international system and how their identity is transformed under conditions of systemic rivalry.

The findings of this article suggest that the future development of EU foreign and security policy will depend primarily on the ability of Member States to forge a political consensus on strategic priorities, rather than merely on the adoption of new strategic documents. At the same time, the analysis indicates that it remains an open question whether the emerging hybrid model of actorness represents a stable long-term configuration or rather a transitional phase shaped by current systemic pressures and crises. For future research, this implies a need for greater attention to the nexus between domestic political processes within Member States and the formation of common foreign policy, as well as an exploration of the conditions under which this hybrid model can be sustained over time. The European Union thus remains a unique political project, whose geopolitical transformation is an open-ended process rather than a closed phase of integration, offering a vital empirical case for broader academic discussions on the adaptation of regional organisations to a changing world order.

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GEOPOLITIZACIJA NORMATIVNE MOČI: POLITIČNA ADAPTACIJA IN STRATEŠKA TRANSFORMACIJA V ZUNANJI POLITIKI EU

Članek analizira naraščajoči diskurz o »geopolitični Evropi« in preučuje, ali to predstavlja temeljno preobrazbo zunanje politike Evropske unije ali strateško prilagoditev njenega normativnega projekta razmeram zaostrenega rivalstva med velesilami in večpolarne konkurence. S povezovanjem teorij normativne moči, realističnih kritik in pristopov k evropskemu povezovanju prispevek naslavlja raziskovalno vrzel v obstoječi literaturi in dokazuje, da je geopolitizacija Unije rezultat postopne politične adaptacije in ne paradigmatskega premika. Na podlagi kvalitativne analize relevantne znanstvene literature, strateških dokumentov in institucionalnih razvojov članek identificira tri ključne faze: izgradnjo strateške zmogljivosti, pragmatični obrat po letu 2016 in pospešitev geopolitičnega diskurza v kontekstu vojne v Ukrajini. Avtor trdi, da se EU razvija v hibridnega akterja, ki združuje normativne ambicije z instrumenti strateške moči, čeprav meje tega premika izvirajo iz medvladne narave odločanja. Posledično prispevek ponuja posodobljeno interpretacijo geopolitizacije evropske akterstva z vidika politologije.

Ključne besede: Evropska unija, zunanja politika, normativna moč, geopolitizacija, hibridno akterstvo, strateška adaptacija.

PARADOXICAL IMPACT OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN DEFENCE, CYBER SECURITY AND MEDIA DIMENSIONS

Ivana LUKNAR and Iztok PREZELJ[1]

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly becoming a key catalyst for transformation within the international system. AI offers both significant potential and serious risks, compelling nations to balance extraordinary opportunities with major challenges. The primary goal of this paper is to analyse and present how AI technologies and their paradoxical socio-technical nature are transforming international relations by accelerating global instability and security threats, and creating new vectors of power, vulnerability, and influence. The paper examines transformative impacts in three critical dimensions: defence, cyber-security, and media. In the defence dimension, we show that emerging autonomous systems across all domains will significantly enhance national warfare capabilities, but will also reinforce strategic competition among states, with episodic live tests in conflicts, and increase the strategic dependency of less capable states. AI will also create more powerful offensive and defensive cyber tools, generating a new cyber-security dilemma, increasing the likelihood of new conflicts, and empowering non-state criminal actors. Additionally, in the media dimension, AI will automate and amplify the production, distribution, and consumption of information and disinformation during peace, crisis, and wartime, influencing public opinion and discourse, and exposing democratic states to informational, political, and diplomatic conflicts with potentially serious effects on inter-state trust and stability.

Key words: artificial intelligence; international relations; defence; cyber-security; media.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Advancements in technology and related innovations have gradually and profoundly affected the dynamics of international relations (IR), the power of states, and their national interests. Artificial intelligence (AI), with its ability to perform tasks associated with intelligent beings – demonstrated by an increasing number of expert systems (applied AI) and general intelligence systems (AGI) – will transform all aspects of human life, including international relations. The adoption of AI systems in decision-making, threat and risk assessment, intelligence, warfare, logistics, weapons production, learning, and trading makes this technology a strategic imperative for all ambitious states. The ability to develop advanced AI systems is often equated with technological sovereignty and national prestige. Major powers, especially the USA and China, invest heavily in AI research as part of a broader competition for global leadership.

The modern world results from the continuous interplay between technological and organisational changes, including innovations. Technological development has demonstrated remarkable transformative potential through three well-known technological revolutions: the steam engine as the basis for the first revolution, electricity and mass assembly lines for the second, and computers and Internet for the third. Artificial intelligence has been recognised as another uniquely transformative technology and the foundation for the fourth revolution, with the potential to change everything. We consider AI a technology of self-adaptive learning with varying levels of independence from human operators and decision-makers, and with extremely high potential to transform most technical, analytical, and decision-making areas, including international relations and related competitive and cooperative processes among all actors. In this paper, we show that the transformative role of AI in international relations may be most effectively illustrated by considering three strategic dimensions: defence, cyber-security, and media. We argue that AI will increasingly play a paradoxical role in international relations by simultaneously producing positive outcomes and less controlled negative effects on relations among key actors. Specifically, AI and the race to adopt it have begun to unleash competitive forces among states for efficiency, influence, and power across several dimensions, including the potential for more destructive conflicts. At the same time, traditional Westphalian state sovereignty is being further eroded by large AI companies that are accumulating knowledge on how to develop, produce, and manage AI systems.

In the defence dimension, emerging autonomous systems in all domains – including decision-making, intelligence, targeting, logistics, training, and electronic warfare – will significantly enhance national warfare capabilities, but will also reinforce strategic competition among states, with episodic live tests in conflicts (such as Ukraine), and increase the strategic asymmetric dependency of less capable states. This also leads to new ethical and legal risks, including the proliferation of AI technology to malicious non-state actors. In the cyber-security dimension, AI will create more powerful offensive and defensive cyber tools, generating a new cyber-security dilemma, increasing the likelihood of new conflicts, and empowering non-state criminal actors in their activities (Luknar 2024a). Additionally, AI use in the media dimension will automate and amplify the production, distribution, and consumption of information and disinformation during peace, crisis, and wartime, influencing public opinion and discourse, and exposing democratic states to informational, political, and diplomatic conflicts with serious potential effects on inter-state trust and stability. The public sphere risks becoming a more automated media battlespace in the future.

These three dimensions illustrate the multifaceted ways in which AI will function as a tool, a strategic vector, and a new source of challenges in global politics and international relations. The presence of AI as both a resourceful tool and a vector of rivalry points to a specific socio-technical paradox that will inevitably affect international relations. The dual nature of AI will simultaneously offer opportunities for advancing human cooperation (e.g. in politics and international relations) and avenues for more or less intense competition among actors. In other words, it will also become a significant source of instability. Scholars (Brooks 1980, 65; Dahlke 2024) suggest that technology should be understood as a socio-technical construct, rather than being viewed as purely technical. This is especially true for AI, which redefines conventional frameworks of control, responsibility, and governance.

This paper first identifies and analyses the opening of Pandora's box in international relations by demonstrating the paradoxical nature of AI. Second, it focuses on three unique dimensions – defence, cyber-security, and media – to present more concrete examples of effects on international relations. We link the paradoxical effects of artificial intelligence with realist theory (Waltz 1979) in the military dimension, constructivist theory (Onuf 1989; Wendt 1992) in the media dimension, and security dilemma theory in the cyber security dimension (Herz 1950; Jervis 1978; Johnson 2023). Finally, we provide a comparative categorisation of AI's positive and negative effects on these three dimensions.

2 AI-INDUCED OPENING OF PANDORA'S BOX IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Several scholars have described Artificial Intelligence as a technology that exists at the intersection of imagination and singularity (Vinge 1993; Kurzweil 1999; Jin, Nicholas and Ghassan 2025). Although this technology has been evolving since the 1950s, it has only recently become 'visible' through increased efficiency, production, and consumption (Лукнар 2024b). The Greek myth of Pandora provides the best illustration of how AI could shape the future trajectory of international relations. Zeus gave her a sealed container (box) with instructions never to open it. Pandora, known for her curiosity, opened it, releasing all existing evils, plagues, and misfortunes into the world. In the modern context of AI, this story symbolises a situation where seemingly small acts of socio-technical progress unwittingly unleash a multitude of unwanted consequences.

Advancements in Artificial Intelligence are already influencing, and will continue to influence, international relations in significant ways. They have become an inevitable part of national security agendas in the global technological race. However, these efforts towards technological advancement are simultaneously perceived as security threats by other nations. At the national level, AI advancements serve to improve security and efficiency for specific countries, but not necessarily for global well-being. Such "short-term" winning strategies for some countries have gradually become a force that continuously fuels the technology race, or technologically-based security race, among nations.

Several countries (USA, China, UK, Canada, EU, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, India, UAE, Israel, Australia, Russia, etc.) have already incorporated AI into their strategic agendas. Each advancement in AI boosts worldwide technological competition and further accelerates the global technological race, while security and defence challenges remain unresolved. Bremmer and Suleyman have

stressed that, across countries, AI will be the focus of intensive geopolitical competition. AI supremacy, or the competition for AI supremacy, will be a strategic objective for every government with the resources to compete. The two key players, the US and China, view AI development as a zero-sum game that will give the winner a decisive strategic edge in the future (Bremmer and Suleyman 2023, 7–8). Nations and organisations best able to anticipate and exploit technological opportunities will likely have a decisive advantage in future competitions, crises, and conflicts. AI will also be the linchpin for achieving military superiority through the use of data – transforming it into relevant information, usable knowledge, and ultimately decision advantage (Thiele 2021, 59). All systems will be used in the pursuit of power. Schmidt et al. fear that all AI tools will become weapons of first resort in future conflicts (Schmidt et al 2021, cited in Thiele 2021, 76). The ability to innovate in this field has become synonymous with international influence, national power, economic competitiveness, political legitimacy, military power and even internal security (Raska and Bitzinger 2023, 2).

The growing importance and use of AI in military and security applications raises several challenges (Prezelj 2024a) and risks in everyday life (Luknar 2024a; Luknar 2025a). These challenges range from various strategic and operational risks to numerous ethical and legal risks, including the danger of uncontrolled and unstoppable development of general AI (Prezelj 2024a). Luberisse (2023, 5–9) wrote an informative book on the geopolitics of AI, in which he addressed its impact on international stability and the risk of accidental use. According to him, the main problem is the geopolitical risk leading to a power struggle between great powers, with implications for the balance of global power.

According to Luberisse (2023), the AI power struggle refers to the ongoing competition among great powers to develop and deploy advanced AI technologies in their military and intelligence operations. This competition is driven by the potential of AI to fundamentally alter the balance of power in the international system. Great powers such as the USA, China, Russia, and several European countries are actively investing in AI to gain an advantage in this ongoing power struggle. These investments include funding AI research and development, deploying AI in military and intelligence operations, and developing AI-powered weapons and surveillance systems. Soare (2023, 81) also stressed that the frontrunners of the global revolution in military affairs, the USA and China, are engaged in a race to adopt AI and other emerging and disruptive technologies. Other authors believe that the USA, Russia, and China have entered a modern-day Space Race-style competition to develop and harness artificial intelligence technologies (Roth 2019).

AI development is often described as driven by capitalist imperatives. As a result, "technology has an impact that goes against people's interests and deprives them of their autonomy" (Winkel 2025, 1949). While AI is frequently praised for its many benefits, critical perspectives suggest these advantages come with hidden geopolitical, security, and social consequences (Luknar 2025b). Economic changes cannot be ignored. PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC)'s Global Artificial Intelligence Study projects that AI will significantly transform global productivity and GDP, adding "up to $15.7 trillion" (PwC 2020, 3) to the world economy by 2030, largely by increasing efficiency, productivity, and consumption. This technology represents a potentially uncontrollable force shaped by profit and political interests (Winkel 2025). We are witnessing a fundamental power shift, as technology giants, rather than sovereign states, now control essential resources such as specialised talent, massive datasets, and vast computational power necessary for AI development. Consequently, a critical dependency has

emerged, with governments reliant on a few technology companies to access AI capabilities considered crucial for national economic competitiveness and security. As a result, these corporations now exercise substantial geopolitical power over governments, frequently operating as entities that can shape international norms and global standards according to their own interests, even when these conflict with nation-state policies. This may affect societal progress; nevertheless, technological advancements can also alter dynamics among countries (Branch 2018). As AI becomes a central tool of statecraft, nations that do not build their own technological capacity or regulatory sovereignty risk becoming data colonies. The consequences of this dynamic are becoming exponentially more complex over time, as we have not yet regulated all AI issues. This positions AI advancements as both a source of power and a source of tension and security threats. The chain reaction triggered by technological development has already begun, and Pandora's box is opening.

The Westphalian state model (Gross 1948) of national "sovereignty" is being eroded. The algorithms that shape what citizens see (public discourse via social media), how the economy functions (via financial and logistics AI), and national security (via cybersecurity, autonomous weapons, and other systems) are created and often operated by large foreign technology companies. These companies are not subject to national laws in the same way as domestic entities. Therefore, a foreign power, through one of its corporations, can exert significant influence within another country, challenging that country's ability to control its own destiny. We will present the early beginnings of such changes through three key dimensions based on recent developments on the international scene.

3 THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN DEFENCE: TRANSFORMING MILITARY POWER AND STRATEGY WITH PARTIALLY CONTROLLED EFFECTS

Technological capabilities play a direct role in determining how effectively countries can succeed in warfare. Among policymakers and analysts, a prevailing belief is emerging that artificial intelligence will bring about a revolution in military affairs, with significant potential to reshape the structure of the international system (Flournoy 2023; Ackerman and Stavridis 2024; Burdette et al 2025).

Major powers in modern society are seeking AI dominance, operating under the strategic assumption that technological superiority is key to future military pre-eminence. While investment continues, the integration of AI into military structures remains limited at present. Current systems offer only limited autonomy and are used in very restricted scenarios. Most ground robots are tele-operated, while military unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) possess only basic functions such as automated navigation, still relying heavily on human control for mission execution. States often use low-cost technologies combined with new approaches to warfare to replace high-cost technologies based on outdated methods. Countries worldwide have recognised AI as an essential tool in the modern military industry; however, they paradoxically do not have equal development dynamics, budgets, access to AI tools, or a sufficient number of expert personnel for AI application in defence. These paradoxical effects can be clearly aligned with the foundational assumptions of realist theory (see Waltz 1979), which holds that governments develop military capabilities as rational instruments to advance national security and strengthen their relative power. Global powers are focused on transforming AI potential into actionable military

tools. The use of AI may serve as a path to military dominance, which can be outlined in seven steps:

1) Autonomous Systems. For example, China's military (PLA) is developing UAVs, ground vehicles, and underwater drones for reconnaissance missions, logistical support, and swarm operations. These technologies are likely to rely on AI for both autonomous manoeuvring and tactical decisions. Key achievements include swarm-capable drones and unmanned surface vessels (USVs) such as the JARI model (The China Briefing 2025).
2) Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR). AI-powered ISR systems process massive datasets in real-time to improve situational awareness. Machine learning enables faster analysis of satellite imagery for target detection. The PLA has invested in geospatial analysis platforms comparable to U.S. systems, such as Descartes Labs, but adapted for its own military requirements. Integrating AI into military operations promises significant gains in situational awareness through advanced data processing. For example, the U.S. military used an AI image classifier to scan large intelligence datasets to detect objects such as vehicles, directly supporting counter-ISIS operations (Scharre 2023, 56–58). A key advantage lies in AI's capacity to process information on a scale and at a speed impossible for humans.
3) Command and Control (C3). The integration of AI into military and strategic domains enhances data-driven decision-making. AI-driven decision-support systems improve battlefield coordination by fusing information from diverse sources. The PLA is developing "command brains" designed to help commanders make swift decisions in complex environments.
4) Logistics and Predictive Maintenance. With AI tools, supply chains can be optimised and equipment breakdowns predicted before they occur. One application is the creation of intelligent warehouses that improve logistical operations.
5) Simulation and Training. Generative AI is used in wargaming and training simulations to prepare troops for "intelligentised" warfare, with particular emphasis on multi-drone swarm simulation systems.
6) Electronic Warfare. AI enhances radar target detection, signal classification, and electromagnetic spectrum operations, playing an essential role in neutralising adversary technologies in challenging operational environments.
7) Automatic Target Recognition (ATR). Advances in ATR use machine learning to quickly, precisely, and reliably identify threats even in noisy or complex environments.

AI is becoming a strategic imperative, but access to and capacity for its exploitation are extremely and paradoxically unequal. This is most evident in the division among modern countries regarding their investments in the application and development of AI. Projections indicate that the AI in military market will expand significantly, from USD 9.2 billion in 2023 to USD 38.8 billion by 2028, reflecting a compound annual growth rate of 33.3% (Research and Markets 2023). Amid this rapid growth, the US Department of Defense (DoD) is making a strategic effort to lead this technological transformation, as shown by its allocation of USD 1.8 billion in 2024 and 2025 (Vincent 2024). Starting at USD 7.9 billion in 2022, the global AI in the military market is projected to reach USD 11.4 billion in 2025 (Pangakar 2025). Also other countries with strong financial and technological bases, such as Russia, Israel, the United Kingdom and the EU, are leading the adoption of this technology as its defence applications expand. Israel, for example, excels at integrating AI into intelligence and precision weapons, while the EU is addressing the gap through collaborative initiatives. Ambitious developing countries such as India, Turkey, Brazil, Singapore, and many others

recognise the importance of AI and are investing in it, but they lack the scale of funding or the technological capabilities of the leading powers. They often focus on specific niches (e.g., AI-enabled drones) or on purchasing technology. A significant segment of the global community simply does not have the financial, technological, or human capacity for serious military AI development. This can lead to new forms of strategic dependency on more technologically advanced allies or arms suppliers.

Accessibility is hindered not only by financial limitations but also by strict export controls imposed by governments concerned about the safety of sophisticated AI algorithms, data sets, and hardware. Civilian AI innovations, from image recognition to autonomous driving, are easily adapted for military applications such as target detection and unmanned drones. As a result, many countries restrict the sale of the most advanced AI tools and equipment. Relying on cloud services or hardware from a major foreign provider can leave a country vulnerable during sanctions or geopolitical tensions. This vulnerability drives the pursuit of technological sovereignty and the creation of domestic alternatives, further stimulating international competition. Countries are increasingly unwilling to depend on foreign platforms.

The rise of AI in military applications has intensified strategic competition between the United States and China, as both nations seek technological dominance in defence capabilities. The PLA has become a central actor in driving global military modernisation. Guided by its New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan and the broader objective of "intelligentised" warfare, China aims to become a global AI leader by 2030 and to build a world-class military by 2049. To achieve this, the PLA is prioritising technological superiority in future conflicts through AI-enabled autonomous systems, battlefield awareness, logistics, and decision-making capabilities. China's significant investment and progress in military AI over the past several years have raised concerns within the US national security establishment (Bresnick 2024a; Metz 2018). "US government leaders and defence industry insiders have sounded the alarm about China's advances in AI, and some now claim that China is outpacing the United States in developing and fielding AI-enabled military systems" (Bresnick 2024b). According to Chinese military strategies, the AI is viewed as a tool to merge diverse data sources into actionable datasets for advanced analysis. It is however unclear whether the Chinese military possesses sufficient technologically skilled workforce needed to create world-class AI military systems. The PLA's centralised decision-making processes may inhibit its ability to leverage AI-enabled decision-support systems (Bresnick 2024b).

The battlefield in Ukraine has become a live laboratory for AI-driven military infrastructure. Ukraine, supported by the United States and Europe, has deployed AI-enhanced drones, computer vision for precision targeting, and machine learning for analysing satellite data to forecast Russian troop activity. Russia, in response, has tested AI-powered electronic warfare systems, loitering munitions, and automated battlefield technologies. The Ukraine war demonstrates that AI is no longer a peripheral technology but a fundamental tool for reshaping the dynamics of the modern battlefield.

Across the Middle East and beyond, countries such as Israel, Turkey, and the UAE are pushing AI-powered drones and defence systems into global markets. Israel's Iron Dome integrates AI for real-time threat identification and more effective interception (BBC 2024). Turkey's Bayraktar drones, equipped with AI-supported targeting systems, have been deployed in Ukraine and Africa, shifting military balances and intensifying international competition over drone exports

(ADF 2025). Meanwhile, Gulf states are investing heavily in AI defence technologies, often in partnership with US and Chinese firms, turning the Middle East into a focal point of AI-military rivalry and proliferation.

The development of lethal autonomous weapons simultaneously creates serious ethical and security dilemmas, including the limited capacity of AI systems to understand and apply international humanitarian law. AI systems raise concerns about their ability to adhere to the principles of distinction and proportionality in combat. Operationally, the "black box" problem can lead to overconfidence in AI systems and incomprehensible decisions, while their narrow training experience increases the risk of decisions with questionable validity. Furthermore, the strategic landscape is threatened by the lower threshold for the use of AI-powered force and the easy proliferation of this technology to malicious state and non-state actors (Prezelj 2024b, 389–390).

If one thinks within a realist framework (e.g. see Waltz 1979), AI advancement leaves states no choice but to acquire AI capabilities for military purposes. Acquisition of AI will create a gap between nations, which can have far-reaching consequences for global security and the balance of power, while also leading to new global realignments. A lack of AI can make a conventional military vulnerable and related countries weak. With advanced AI, actors can undermine an adversary's superior numbers or technology through tactics such as communication jamming, system hacking, or swarming inexpensive autonomous drones. Less developed countries become dependent on imported military technology that includes AI, leaving them more open to influence. The paradoxical nature of AI is most evident in defence, where it serves simultaneously as a strategic asset and a source of tension and rivalry. We are witnessing a major shift in power from governments to technology giants who control essential resources, experts, and datasets. Technology giants are new actors on the international stage who influence international relations and drive AI in the military, even when these actions conflict with nation-state policies. The militarisation of AI is redefining the nature of conflict, while technology companies seek to protect their interests, which may or may not align with state policies, greatly undermining peace and stability.

4 THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN CYBER-SECURITY: SHAPING GLOBAL THREATS AND PROTECTIONS WITH SPIRAL CONSEQUENCES

The integration of Artificial Intelligence into national security is fundamentally reshaping the speed and scale of cyber operations, enabling new forms of espionage, surveillance and other offensive or defensive capabilities, such as proactive threat detection and prevention, phishing and fraud detection, vulnerability management, security automation and orchestration (SOAR), behavioural analytics, etc. The capacity of AI algorithms to analyse massive datasets and real-time user digital interactions allows the uncovering of subtle anomalies and patterns that signal potential cyber intrusions, thereby surpassing the limitations of conventional signature-based defences. The application of machine learning also improves the identification of sophisticated social engineering attempts by critically examining electronic messages for markers of deception, including suspicious phraseology and counterfeit web pages. In safeguarding critical assets, AI performs autonomous scans of digital environments to discover, locate, and rank security weaknesses. These defensive capabilities are enhanced by orchestrated response systems, where AI enables

real-time countermeasures against detected threats, dramatically reducing response times and allowing human specialists to focus on complex threat assessment. AI also employs ongoing behavioural analysis to build adaptive models of typical operations across the digital environment, enabling immediate alerts to significant anomalies that may indicate a security incident.

The integration of AI into cybersecurity frameworks yields substantial offensive operational benefits. However, these advantages are paradoxically escalating significant challenges for international relations, potentially initiating a dangerous spiral of consequences. National efforts to apply AI for defensive superiority, enabling proactive countermeasures and superior operational control, simultaneously accelerate competition for more advanced capabilities. AI advancement appears as a destabilising factor, creating new vulnerabilities and avenues for state-on-state conflict. Interpreted through the lens of classical security dilemma literature, AI development has introduced new uncertainties, leading to a vicious spiral. Worldwide, states feel they inevitably need "self-help" (see Herz 1950) promised through AI, altering "the offence-defence balance" (see Jervis 1978, 187). Johnson (2023) also employed this classic security dilemma theory to explain how AI effects heighten uncertainties, insecurities, and mistrust within strategically competitive relations.

AI advancements have resulted in the development of smarter cyberattacks and the emergence of new serious threats that demand detection and response. This leads to a race for AI tools and compels experts to address more complex issues related to AI risks and attacks. Consequently, existing international laws and norms struggle to keep pace with the ethical and strategic challenges posed by autonomous systems. This technological shift is creating a more complex and unpredictable global security environment, where strategic advantage is increasingly defined by algorithmic dominance. Modern society faces fear, tension, and technological competition at the international level. This creates also a transparency deficit, complicating the demands for regulatory frameworks, international compliance, and post-incident analysis.

In this chapter, we synthetically outline some critical examples of cyberattacks that have occurred since 2009 to demonstrate the ongoing competition, or even conflict, among key global powers in cyberspace. Beginning around 2009, the advanced group known as APT1 executed a large-scale cyber espionage campaign, compromising at least 141 companies and organisations, primarily in the West. The campaign's main objective was industrial espionage, and substantial evidence points to the group's origins in China (National Security Archive, 2013). On the other hand, documents from the Snowden leaks reveal that the US National Security Agency (NSA) systematically targeted China's top-tier Tsinghua University. Tsinghua houses one of the country's six major backbone networks, CERNET, which serves millions of users across hundreds of universities. This demonstrates that Western intelligence agencies have also engaged in sophisticated cyber operations against high-value Chinese targets, including those in the academic sector (Gellman and Soltani 2013). This cyberattack leveraged a sophisticated "computer network exploitation" (CNE) system, which automates the infiltration of foreign networks for computer espionage. CNE involves gaining access to computer systems and retrieving data (Monte 2015, 1) in pursuit of mission objectives. While the specific tools are classified, such a system inherently relies on AI and machine learning for tasks such as automated vulnerability scanning, pattern recognition to identify valuable data, and managing large-scale intrusions with minimal human intervention.

A range of other cyberattacks showed that lists of employees, technology development and system vulnerabilities can be a valuable target (e.g. Chinese operation against the US Office of Personnel Management, American operation "Shotgiant" against Huawei (Congressional Research Service 2015; BBC 2014; Rayman 2014; Sanger and Perlroth 2014)). Some other attacks focused more on corrupting data and disrupting critical systems, such as NotPetya, a Russian-attributed attack in 2017 that used disruptive malware disguised as ransomware (Wolff 2021). Third cluster of attacks focused on payment, internet and television services (see the attack by Ukraine's military intelligence on Russia's SPB fast payment system, a platform used for transferring funds in support of war, denying also internet and television services to hundreds of thousands, and causing economic damages of up to $30 million (Hodunova 2025)). Critical information infrastructures have also been targeted from all sides, aiming to obtain sensitive information, spread instability, and cause disruption in communication systems, and essential infrastructure (e.g. attack on SolarWinds' software platform Orion to obtain access to networks of program users (Center for Internet Security 2021; Temple-Raston 2021). Stuxnet is another example, representing a class of highly complex cyber weapon. It was reportedly developed jointly by the United States and Israel (Sanger 2012) as a malicious computer worm. Its primary function was the physical sabotage of industrial infrastructure, specifically Iran's nuclear centrifuges in their nuclear enrichment programme. The worm deliberately caused the facility's centrifuges to spin unpredictably and self-destruct while feeding normal operating data to plant monitors, thereby crippling Iran's nuclear programme while concealing the cause of the damage. While Stuxnet did not contain self-learning AI algorithms as we know them today, its programmed adaptive behaviour (searching for the right target, exploiting up to four unknown zero-day vulnerabilities in existing computer systems), deceptive behaviour (ability to send false reports to controllers), and unprecedented complexity make it one of the most sophisticated cyber weapons ever made and a true precursor to a new generation of AI cyber weapons.

It appears that many of these incidents (such as APT1, Stuxnet, NotPetya, etc.) were probably launched by government organisations with substantial resources, while others were initiated by criminal actors. These attacks typically affected multiple victims, causing significant inconvenience and, in many cases, substantial financial damage to the affected individuals or organisations. We can also observe growing complexity of cyber-attack tools and methods from relatively simple attacks, exploiting known vulnerabilities, to advanced threats (Stuxnet) and supply chain compromises (SolarWinds case), and finally to AI-driven independent polymorphic (mutating) malware, autonomously exploring the victims' networks, adapting autonomously in real-time, misleading enemy's AI defences, learning from past experiences, etc.

The paradoxical technical nature of AI in the cyber domain, however, shows that AI tools are used not only for attacking (AI-powered offense), but also for defending against non-AI and AI-supported threats (AI-powered defence). In other words, "the role of AI is central to achieving a modern, resilient cybersecurity posture" (Edwards 2025, 97). The Director of the US AI Center stated that we are going to be shocked by the speed, chaos, and bloodiness in the future, as wars and conflicts will be fought by algorithms against algorithms (Rickli and Mantellassi 2023, 20). Additionally, adaptive AI learning systems are designed to customise training to specific team responsibilities and to live threats, aligning adversary tactics with appropriate defensive strategies.

Furthermore, AI systems enable the development of dynamic simulations that challenge security measures to their limits and offer valuable insights for continuous improvement. One such model is MITRE ATT&CK, which stands for Adversarial Tactics, Techniques, and Common Knowledge, created by the MITRE Corporation. The model builds upon knowledge that combines the methods used by adversaries to help defend against persistent threats. By focusing on real attacker patterns, it serves as a guide to help organisations better predict, identify, and respond to cyberattacks more efficiently. A complementary framework that "already provides a robust structure for defensive tactics and techniques" (Edwards 2025, 101) is MITRE DEFEND. Its primary purpose is to mitigate damage more proactively, disrupting and deterring adversaries before they can inflict significant harm. The model is continually improving by integrating feedback and adapting in real-time to address emerging threats. In other words, current observations are likely to improve as the model refines its capability to address modern threats.

The integration of artificial Intelligence is fundamentally and gradually changing the framework for achieving cybersecurity. AI produces a contradictory outcome in cybersecurity by simultaneously strengthening both opposing sides. It enables nations to automate defence against various cyberattacks, identify risks, and analyse threats more efficiently and at unprecedented speed. However, malicious actors also use AI to generate sophisticated cyberattacks. This creates a relentless need for cybersecurity feedback. The paradoxical effects of AI use will create and fuel a specific cybersecurity dilemma, where one state's defensive AI is perceived as a threat by another state, and vice versa. This will induce significant interstate uncertainties about existing capabilities and intentions, consequently leading to a lack of trust (see Prezelj 2024a). AI leads to rapidly escalating tendencies for continuous and automatic improvement of offensive and defensive measures. The same algorithmic efficiency that secures networks also lowers the barrier for launching large-scale, sophisticated attacks. Furthermore, AI systems themselves will become lucrative targets, creating a new critical vulnerability surface. Ultimately, the technology developed to create a more secure environment inherently introduces new and potent threats. AI-driven competition among states will consequently intensify and create new layers of strategic instability and competition among nations.

5 THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN MEDIA DIMENSION: REDEFINING INFLUENCE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

A classic debate in media studies has been the tension between the idealistic-humanistic approach, which characterises international communication as a means of bringing nations and peoples together to increase mutual understanding and world peace, and the political proselytisation approach, which sees international communication as a tool for propaganda, ideological confrontation, advertising, and the creation of myths and clichés (Mowlana 1997, 6, 169). This dichotomy is also reflected in debates on democratic and autocratic communication futures, where serious concerns have been expressed that new technology might not only bring about the democratisation of the communication process, but also several negative effects (Vreg 1990, 11, 324). In these debates, the communication revolution can, from an optimistic perspective, provide solutions to human problems or, alternatively, create new conflicts and crises. Modern states share a theoretical vision for adopting AI in the media sector to foster efficiency through new creative expressions and personalised content.

Public understanding of artificial intelligence is largely articulated and contested within various media sources. The media plays a crucial role in shaping and defining the visibility and sentiments towards AI for public consumption (Nah et al 2020). A well-established pattern in media discourse is the oscillation between utopian and dystopian extremes of AI. This dualistic narrative of salvation versus threat, extensively documented by scholars, directly influences public perception and regulatory debates surrounding the technology.

The application of AI in media may fundamentally transform the mechanisms of international relations within the global community. Onuf (1989; 2013) argued that people inhabit a social reality they create through social interactions, emphasising that social structures and power relations are socially constructed as outcomes of our collective actions and practices. From a constructivist perspective, the integration of artificial intelligence into global media systems produces deeply paradoxical effects that fundamentally reshape and socially reconstruct international political reality in a process that is both similar to and different from that described by Wendt (1992, 1999). The media significantly influences public opinion (Entman 2004) and how governments interpret international risks, opportunities, and policy directions (Robinson 2002; Gilboa 2005). At the same time, critical theorists argue that the media tends to uphold dominant power relations by giving preference to specific narratives while minimising alternatives (Herman and Chomsky 1988). Digital media has further complicated international relations by enabling transnational activism, disinformation campaigns, and new forms of soft power (Nye 2011). Overall, the literature shows that the media is not merely a channel of information but a dynamic actor that shapes global political processes. AI systems are increasingly utilised to automate content production, personalise news distribution, and analyse audience engagement, thereby enhancing efficiency and scalability. However, this technological integration also introduces significant challenges, including the potential for embedding and amplifying societal biases found in training data. The study “The Whiteness of AI” (Cave and Dihal 2020) demonstrates that major search engines, when users search for terms such as “artificial intelligence” or “robot”, typically return stock images overwhelmingly racialised as White, as these tools both mirror and reinforce pre-existing societal biases within their datasets. This algorithmic curation reinforces the association between intelligence, professionalism, and Whiteness for a global audience. Consequently, this biased representation can perpetuate a harmful cycle by influencing public perception, steering research funding, and shaping policy debates around AI to focus on the risks and opportunities for White, middle-class demographics, while marginalising people of colour (Cave and Dihal 2020, 691–693, 699–700). This is only one example confirming that technology platforms not only provide certain services or information; they may also perpetuate existing inequalities or compromise journalistic integrity. Beyond the implementation of AI in media services lies the purpose or directive (input, data, information) that often embodies the institutional authority of the AI tool creator or user. The implemented data content and directives in a given AI system are often good indicators of the investment and policy priorities of its creators.

The strategic use of artificial intelligence, such as social bots and automated accounts, enables the manipulation of digital information flows, thereby threatening democratic integrity and corrupting the public sphere. This degradation of information integrity has profound implications for democratic governance and introduces a critical vulnerability in international communication, where borderless, AI-driven disinformation can directly impact geopolitical stability and diplomatic engagements (Nah et al 2020).

Governments can use AI to deploy highly tailored, transnational propaganda initiatives and international disinformation. AI-powered media can target the unique psychological profiles of users to increase impact and make influence more effective. Furthermore, AI-powered bots and deepfake technologies can artificially amplify specific narratives and construct deceptive content.

This enables contemporary states to engage in a persistent form of informational conflict, with low-cost campaigns that continuously influence the domestic discourse of rival states. AI-tailored media thus allow modern states to achieve strategic objectives while operating below the threshold of conventional warfare. In parallel, analytics powered by AI provide governing bodies with a novel capacity for real-time discernment of international media developments and external public opinion regarding their policies, enabling the pursuit of more dynamic and precisely calibrated diplomatic strategies. However, the technological race also empowers non-state actors, from activist groups to multinational corporations. These groups will increasingly use similar tools and challenge the traditional media dominance of states. The very nature of soft power is thus shifting from the persuasive appeal of culture to the technical prowess of algorithmic distribution and data manipulation. Ultimately, AI is transforming the media from a mere platform for international relations influence into an active, intelligent, and contested battlespace.

Such AI-powered media is playing an increasingly significant role in International Relations by rapidly increasing the flow of information between nations. Positively, AI can enhance diplomatic communication and cross-cultural understanding by powering real-time translation services and facilitating more efficient, data-driven analysis of global media trends for foreign policy makers. Automated analytical technologies will enable diplomats and scholars to identify new international patterns and improve systems that predict potential crises. Through AI-driven monitoring, states can also improve their public diplomacy by adapting communication strategies to diverse international audiences (Bjola and Holmes 2015). However, these benefits are starkly countered by profound negative effects, primarily the strategic weaponisation of AI through social bots and automated accounts that manipulate public opinion, distort the public sphere, and orchestrate disinformation campaigns (Nah et al 2020). AI-generated content can strengthen misinformation campaigns, eroding inter-state trust and heightening geopolitical tensions (Chesney and Citron 2019). The continued use of targeted algorithms can further divide societies by reinforcing echo chambers and influencing political views in ways that are difficult to regulate (Tufekci 2015). Furthermore, authoritarian governments may use AI-enhanced media tools to expand surveillance capabilities and shape narratives that advance their political objectives (Bradshaw and Howard 2019). Eventually, the world risks becoming a place feared by Orwell, where the first victim is truth and objective facts. In that world, two plus two is not necessarily four, everyone believes only in the atrocities of the enemy and not of their own side, and actions are not judged by how good or bad they objectively are, but by who commits them. War becomes peace, freedom is slavery, and ignorance is strength (Orwell 2017).

Automation in media of routine tasks facilitates the high-volume production of data journalism, enhances journalistic practices, and allows cost-effective, tailored adaptation of media content across different linguistic and cultural contexts. On the other hand, the mass generation of algorithmically fabricated media, including deepfakes, creates an asymmetry in scale that exceeds global institutional capacity for authentication. Algorithms enhance content based on individual preferences, increasing engagement and satisfaction. Paradoxically,

content personalisation leads to a dangerous outcome: hyper-personalisation isolates users in ideological bubbles, amplifying extreme views and eroding social cohesion. In the efficient identification and flagging of harmful content, including hate speech, AI systems perform with far greater efficiency than human moderators. This gives rise to dual misuse of AI tools: malicious users exploit AI to falsely flag content, while state actors can weaponize them as instruments for political repression and control. Automated translation and summarisation enhance global communication and understanding by breaking down long-standing language barriers and clarifying dense information. However, the rise of decontextualised information causes the erosion of nuance and results in public misunderstanding of vital issues. Algorithmic curation enables recommendation systems to perform a dual task: identifying user-relevant information and exposing users to a spectrum of media sources. Algorithms optimise content that is sensational, emotive, and divisive, regardless of its veracity. The digital public sphere has assumed prominence as a central arena for information influence in modern geopolitics. AI use in media has fundamentally altered power dynamics and enables state and non-state actors to achieve strategic objectives by leveraging algorithmic biases as instruments of influence. Consequently, the classical imperative to control traditional media has faded. A new generation of creative tools for expressive art, interactive narrative, and experimental media are powerful instruments of "soft power". These tools have become a powerful strategic narrative that is reshaping International Relations in three main ways:

1) Immersive media serve as important tools of modern cultural diplomacy by enabling states and non-state actors to project cultural values, shape global perceptions, and build sentiment. A virtual reality experience of a nation's heritage often holds more demonstrative power than any formal press release or conventional diplomatic conversation.
2) These immersive media tools can be strategically weaponised in geopolitical conflicts, enabling counternarratives, targeted influence on diaspora groups, and more effective manipulation of international public opinion.
3) These tools possess a unique transformative capacity to foster deep empathy and urgency among global audiences. They have the potential to translate sentiment into public pressure that shapes governmental decisions on foreign policy, humanitarian assistance, and sanctions regimes.

The ubiquitous presence of AI-generated media systematically undermines epistemic authority, creating a framework in which the authenticity of any digital evidentiary artefact can be questioned due to its potential artificial generation. In summary, although AI-based media offers significant advantages for global information exchange and analysis, it also introduces notable risks that can affect international stability. This degradation of information integrity erodes trust between nations, complicates diplomatic channels, and poses a direct threat to geopolitical stability by enabling foreign interference that can cross borders and undermine sovereign democratic processes.

6 CONCLUSION WITH COMPARATIVE REFLECTIONS ON THE THREE-DIMENSIONAL PARADOXICAL IMPACTS OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

We have argued and demonstrated in this paper that AI increasingly plays a paradoxical role in international relations by simultaneously producing positive outcomes and less controlled negative effects on relations among key actors. From a historical perspective, this finding is not surprising, as similar effects have accompanied all technological revolutions. However, this paper has shown how the race to adopt AI has specifically begun to unleash competitive forces among states for efficiency, influence, and power across several dimensions. The fundamental assumptions of realist theory align with these paradoxical effects in the military and cyber dimensions. Modern states view the development and deployment of contemporary technologies as a form of self-help that will alter the offence-defence balance. However, such perceptions and efforts systematically undermine the global stability they are intended to achieve. In the defence dimension, we have shown that emerging autonomous systems in all domains – including decision-making, intelligence, targeting, logistics, training, and electronic warfare – have started to enhance national warfare capabilities, while also reinforcing strategic competition among states. It is likely that new AI autonomous systems will be regularly tested in conflicts (such as Ukraine). Each wave of testing will influence regulatory processes, but regulatory processes will likely lag behind technological developments. The AI race will increase international asymmetries in the defence dimension, resulting in more powerful AI-supported states and other, much weaker, peripheral and AI-dependent states.

TABLE 1: PARADOXICAL IMPACT OF AI ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN THREE DIMENSIONS: DEFENCE, CYBER-SECURITY, AND MEDIA

Military	
Positive Outcomes	**Negative Outcomes**
Enhanced Strategic Stability	Accelerated Arms Race
Enhanced Targeting Precision and Civilian Protection	Lowering the Cost of War
Improved National Defense and Resilience	AI Driven Crisis Instability
Enhanced Alliance Capabilities	Erosion of Accountability and Norms
Efficiency in Logistics and Peacekeeping	The Rise of Asymmetric AI Threats
Diplomatic Cooperation through Shared Protocols	Fueling Strategic Mistrust and Secrecy
Cyber-security	
Positive Outcomes	**Negative Outcomes**
Enhanced Defensive Posture	Offensive Arms Race
Improved Attribution	Attribution Problems
Norm Development Catalyst	Erosion of Existing Norms
Power for Smaller States	New Power Asymmetries
Enhanced Crisis Management Tools	Escalation of Destabilizing AI Tools
Securing Global Digital Framework	Weaponization of Interdependence
Media	
Positive Outcomes	**Negative Outcomes**
Enhanced Content Production	Mass-Production of Disinformation
Personalized User Experience	The Paradox of Personalization
Improved Content Moderation Tools	Adversarial Exploitation and Censorship
Information Accessibility	From Decontextualization to Misinformation
Efficiency in Discovery and Recommendation	Algorithmic Amplification as Instrument of Power
Immersive Media	Erosion of Authenticity and Trust

This paradox is also explained by the security dilemma literature, particularly in the cybersecurity dimension. While AI is creating more powerful offensive and defensive cyber tools, it also increases the likelihood of new conflicts among states and between states and non-state actors, resulting in a new cybersecurity dilemma. Finally, we have demonstrated, also by the use of constructivist theoretical framework, that the use of AI in the media dimension will automate and amplify the production, distribution, and consumption of information and disinformation during peace, crisis, and wartime, influencing public opinion and

discourse. This will expose democratic states to informational, political, and diplomatic conflicts with serious potential effects on inter-state trust and stability. The public sphere risks becoming a more automated media battlespace in the future. International relations will also be affected more indirectly by the proliferation of AI technology to large AI multinational companies and malicious non-state actors in all three studied dimensions. This will further erode the traditional Westphalian system of state sovereignty. The interplay between positive and negative forces identified and analysed above can be synthetically presented in Table 1. The table suggests that improving positive outcomes in the three studied dimensions will inevitably bring negative outcomes. This paradoxical nature of AI will have to be incorporated into future policy making.

AI technology is creating a more complex and unpredictable global landscape, where algorithmic speed and data dominance are becoming strategically important. Understanding the implications of AI in the context of International Relations is essential for shaping future developments towards more cooperative international relations, with less destructive competition for power and influence among states and non-state actors. In other words, this theme is important for future stability and peace. Smaller, poorer, budget-limited, and less technologically developed countries are at risk of increasing dependence on future AI superpowers, which could also exacerbate global inequalities. We recommend the following future research directions in this field: (1) case studies on the application of new AI tools, examining both positive and negative effects; (2) studies on the intensification of the race to adopt AI, focusing on which tools were developed by which countries and the threat perceptions driving these developments – an action-reaction analysis; and (3) investigations into the negative effects of AI-generated content on inter-state relations.

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PARADOKSNI VPLIV UMETNE INTELIGENCE NA MEDNARODNE ODNOSE NA PODROČJU OBRAMBE, KIBERNETSKE VARNOSTI IN MEDIJEV

Umetna inteligenca (UI) hitro postaja ključni katalizator preobrazbe znotraj mednarodnega sistema. UI ponuja tako pomemben potencial kot resna tveganja, kar države motivira, da uravnotežijo izjemne priložnosti z velikimi izzivi. Glavni cilj članka je analizirati in predstaviti, kako tehnologije UI in njihova paradoksalna družbeno-tehnična narava spreminjajo mednarodne odnose s pospeševanjem globalne nestabilnosti in varnostnih groženj ter ustvarjanjem novih vektorjev moči, ranljivosti in vpliva. Članek analizira preobrazbene vplive v treh ključnih dimenzijah: obrambi, kibernetski varnosti in medijih. V obrambni dimenziji prikazuje, da bodo nastajajoči avtonomni sistemi na vseh področjih znatno izboljšali nacionalne vojaške zmogljivosti, hkrati pa bodo okrepili strateško konkurenco med državami z epizodnimi preizkusi v živo v konfliktih in povečali strateško odvisnost manj sposobnih držav. Umetna inteligenca bo ustvarila tudi močnejša ofenzivna in obrambna kibernetska orodja, kar bo povzročilo novo dilemo na področju kibernetske varnosti, povečalo verjetnost novih konfliktov in opolnomočilo nedržavne kriminalne akterje. Poleg tega bo umetna inteligenca v medijski dimenziji avtomatizirala in okrepila proizvodnjo, distribucijo in porabo informacij in dezinformacij v miru, krizah in vojni, s čimer bo vplivala na javno mnenje in diskurz ter izpostavila demokratične države informacijskim, političnim in diplomatskim konfliktom, ki bi lahko imeli resne posledice za meddržavno zaupanje in stabilnost.

Ključne besede: umetna inteligenca; mednarodni odnosi; obramba; kibernetska varnost; mediji.

International law- or rules-based international order? The politics of international law in comparative perspective

Milan BRGLEZ[1]

The article analyses contemporary contestation over global order by distinguishing between an international law-based order (ILBO) and a rules-based international order (RBO). It argues that the post-2008 polycrises and the multipolarisation of the international community have weakened the institutional effectiveness of the liberal international order (LIO) and reopened the question of legitimate legality. The article compares the ILBO, anchored in sources doctrine, the Charter of the United Nations, and interpretative methods of international law, with the RBO as a broader and more politically interpretative framework. The comparison is organised around three criteria: normative structure, institutional infrastructure, and enforcement. The article then develops a comparative typology of state strategies and draws on Critical Legal Studies to understand international law as a field of political struggle. It concludes by developing strategic legalism as a way for small states to use international law relationally when managing power asymmetries within the international community.

Key words: comparative politics; international law-based order (ILBO); liberal international order (LIO); rules-based international order (RBO); strategic legalism.

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1 INTRODUCTION TO THE NORMATIVE QUESTION OF GLOBAL ORDER

"There is great disorder under the heavens; the situation is excellent," Mao Zedong proclaimed in a very different historical context (Žižek 2021, 1). The first part of the statement still sounds strikingly relevant. The contemporary international community is marked by overlapping polycrises: the great recession and the long-term consequences of the financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, growing social and global inequalities, accelerated climate and ecological collapse, renewed geopolitical confrontation, and large-scale armed conflicts, including the war in Ukraine and the atrocities in Gaza, where allegations of genocide have been raised in reports by the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur and in proceedings before the International Court of Justice (Albanese 2024a; Albanese 2024b; ICJ 2024a; ICJ 2024b; Albanese 2025a; Albanese 2025b).

These crises reinforce one another and reveal the structural weaknesses of the existing liberal international order (LIO) (Rutar, Hočevar and Lovec 2023; *cf*. Volgy *et al*. 2009). Empirical estimates by the UN further confirm the depth of the disorder. The year 2022 saw the most active and intense armed conflicts since the end of the Cold War, and the upward trend continued in 2023 (Schulenburg 2023). Since 2008, interdependence has also become increasingly weaponised through supply chains, payment systems, energy and food politics, and the fragmentation of multilateral consensus (Farrell and Newman 2023). This reinforces the dispute over who may set the rules of global governance, and on what basis.

The ISPI[2] Report 2026 (Colombo and Magri 2026) sharpens this diagnosis by describing the present moment as a broader 'free-for-all', in which legal, diplomatic, and ethical constraints on international coexistence are increasingly weakened. Its introduction does not claim that international law has disappeared. Rather, it identifies the most acute crisis in the part of international law that regulates and restricts the use of force, while also highlighting the delegitimation of international institutions, the politicisation of trade and tariffs, the hollowing out of environmental governance, and the erosion of arms control arrangements.

Although the post-Cold War period was often described as "the end of history" (Fukuyama 1992), it is now clear that no universal consensus has been achieved. Instead, differences are deepening over sovereignty, human rights, trade fairness, and the legitimacy of the use of force. In a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environment, the LIO appears less as a consolidated constitutional architecture than as a historically conditioned configuration of power and norms. This raises the question of "critical junctures" (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012): does polycrisis create conditions for institutional transformation, or does it reinforce fragmentation and competition between rules?

History provides an instructive reminder. The proposition that commerce and economic interdependence pacify politics is often associated with Montesquieu's (1989 [1748]) *doux commerce* tradition and was later reformulated by Angell (1909). Yet two world wars followed. Today's world is even more interdependent, but conflicts persist and tensions are also escalating within

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states. Social inequalities, political polarisation, and the 'crisis of representation' reduce the ability to form stable domestic coalitions for multilateral cooperation (Piketty 2014; Streeck 2014). The question of global order is therefore both foreign and domestic. It concerns rules between states and the domestic conditions under which those rules are acceptable and enforceable.[3]

The dispute over order is often expressed through two phrases. The United States (US) and several Western allies refer to a "rules-based international order" (RBO), emphasising liberal values, democratic governance, and human rights. China and other rising powers increasingly stress an "international order based on international law", or an international law-based order (ILBO), anchored in the UN Charter, sovereignty, and non-intervention (Cai 2023; *cf.* for a historical comparison Türk 1984). Many countries in the global South highlight historical inequalities, double standards, and selective enforcement of norms. Many non-Western states' restrained response to the Russia–Ukraine war illustrates this legitimacy problem. While few states openly support Russia's invasion, many reject the Western framing of the war as a straightforward defence of the RBO, as they associate this vocabulary with earlier Western violations of international law and selective enforcement (Narine 2023). The legal question is thus translated into a political one. Does legality mean codified, procedural law, or a broader set of 'rules' that may be defined by dominant coalitions?

Normative pluralism further complicates claims of universality (Avbelj 2018; Jaklič 2014). Competition between normative views is not an anomaly but a constant feature of international life. Henrich (2020, 3) shows that Western, educated, industrialised, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) societies are globally unrepresentative in many institutional and psychological characteristics and are often "total outliers". This does not invalidate the universalist tendencies of international law, but it does caution against assuming cultural neutrality. For this reason, the central question becomes which rules are sufficiently precise and procedurally anchored to function as a shared legal denominator across legal-cultural differences.

Crucially, ILBO and RBO are not merely analytical categories, but are part of political practice. Naming an order is also a proposal for a criterion of legitimacy. ILBO implies the primacy of the UN Charter, formal sources of international law, and sovereign equality, while RBO often includes a value-ideological framework in which certain 'rules' are presented as a condition for legitimate membership in the international community. This tension becomes more acute in crises that require swift action, such as the use of force, sanctions, pandemic management, and responses to climate disasters. In such situations, references to 'rules' are often intertwined with pragmatic action justified by necessity. The distinction between legally binding obligations and political standards is therefore not a matter of formalism, but a question of limiting arbitrariness.

The existing literature can be grouped into four broad approaches (Hafner-Burton, Victor and Lupu 2012). Doctrinal international law scholarship examines sources, hierarchy, interpretation, and compliance (Crawford 2019). Liberal-institutionalist and constructivist approaches emphasise institutionalisation, norm dynamics, and legitimacy (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Ikenberry 2011). Realist and international political-economy approach stress hegemony,

[3] Putnam's (1988) model of two-level games shows that the legality of foreign policy is not only systemic, but also domestic. Institutional veto actors, public opinion and coalitions of interest also shape whether a state ratifies a treaty, accepts the jurisdiction of a court, or implements sanctions.

structural power, and material dependence (Strange 1988; Guzzini 1993). Critical Legal Studies (CLS) and Third World Approaches to International Law (TWAIL) highlight indeterminacy, colonial legacies, and distributional asymmetries (Koskenniemi 1990; Anghie 2005; Koskenniemi 2005).

Related debates have also appeared in the *Journal of Comparative Politics* (JoCP). Earlier JoCP contributions examined how multipolarisation, hegemonic change and regional foreign-policy positioning affect the strategies of states in international politics (Udovič 2011; Tamene 2013). Other articles addressed the renewed relevance of demands for a more equitable global economic order (Svetličič 2022b) and the domestic consequences of crisis and autocratisation in East-Central Europe (Ágh 2022). More recent JCP work further shows how small states operate within EU foreign-policy procedures, how courts can structure political coordination through legal reasoning, and how security dependence may produce divergent strategies among otherwise comparable Central European actors (Rechtik and Mareš 2021; Fazekas 2024; Udovič and Žipaj 2025). This article builds on these debates but shifts the focus to the legal-political vocabulary through which global order is justified, contested and strategically mobilised. It therefore connects comparative politics with international legal doctrine and global political economy by analysing the contest between ILBO and RBO.

The article's originality lies in connecting these strands through a single comparative design. The comparative perspective is twofold: it compares the legal and political architectures of ILBO and RBO, and it compares how selected states, international organisations and institutions mobilise these vocabularies in practice. What remains less developed in the literature is precisely this link between a doctrinal comparison of the two vocabularies and a comparative typology of state strategies.

The article does not address this dilemma solely from the perspective of international legal scholarship but develops two interrelated arguments. First, the differences between ILBO and RBO cannot be understood abstractly, because states, international organisations and institutions strategically interpret and apply legality. Their behaviour differs systematically according to their position of power in the global political economy, historical experiences and internal political constraints. Second, drawing primarily on CLS and critical international theory, the article argues that neither ILBO nor RBO operates outside power relations. International law is not an apolitical constraint, but a structured field in which power is translated into demands for universality (Koskenniemi 1990; Koskenniemi 2005). In this environment, the position of small and less powerful states becomes particularly important. As Long (2022) demonstrates, even relationally small states can exert (conditional) influence through institutional levers, coalitions and the mobilisation of strategic norms, but such strategies are highly dependent on the degree of codification, institutionalisation and procedural anchoring of legality.

To reinforce or weaken and thus refine these theses, the article methodologically combines: (i) a doctrinal analysis of sources and interpretations of international law; (ii) an analysis of the global political economy as a material framework of contestation; and (iii) a comparative analysis of state practices and discourses. This combination understands international law as a real but contingent moment in a broader historical process (Sinclair 2021). It rests on the ontological assumption that the global order is constituted by real legal, economic and political structures that function as generative mechanisms (Brglez 2008; Kurki and Sinclair 2010; Lovec 2013). Epistemologically, it rejects both the reduction

of international law to ideology or mere discourse and the normative absolutisation of international law. The following sections develop the argument in sequence: from multipolarisation and the political-economic foundations of contestation to the doctrinal reconstruction of ILBO, the conceptual analysis of RBO, a comparative typology of state strategies, critical legal perspectives and approaches to strategic legalism.

2 FROM LIO TO MULTIPOLAR CONFLICT

After 1945, the LIO combined security arrangements, trade liberalisation, and institutionalised cooperation. The crisis of liberal internationalism is therefore not only a crisis of power transition, but also a crisis in the relationship between liberal principles and the institutional practices of the LIO itself (Lovec and Svetličič 2019). After 1990, the unipolar moment enabled the expansion of liberal norms and consolidated asymmetric interpretative authority. It fostered a Fukuyamian (1992) illusion: that the ideological "end of history" and the apparent absence of a systemic economic alternative after the collapse of state socialism would result in a stable LIO.

The order operated as 'open' and inclusive (Ikenberry 2011), but its practical stability was inseparable from the material hegemony of the US and its capacity to support institutions with security and financial resources (Gilpin 1987). This unipolar configuration reinforced the belief that liberal norms could be enforced even without strict consensus in the Security Council (Slaughter 1997).

Debates on Kosovo, Iraq, and later Libya turned this belief into a tension between the classic interpretation of the prohibition of the use of force and arguments about 'humanitarian intervention' or the responsibility to protect (R2P; Sancin and Kovič Dine 2023). Doctrines for the protection of civilians are also being developed within ILBO. The key dilemma remains the threshold of necessity, the bearer of judgement, and responsibility for the consequences. This leaves room for accusations of selectivity and for subsequent references to RBO as a political framework that should supplement or 'update' international law with value standards. This legitimacy deficit is particularly evident in non-Western responses to the Russia–Ukraine war. Narine (2023; *cf.* Forsberg and Patomäki 2023) argues that Western references to RBO are weakened by the memory of Iraq, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Libya, which many non-Western actors regard as evidence that the West invokes rules selectively while violating international law when its own strategic preferences require it.

Here the ISPI diagnosis of "de-constitutionalisation" strengthens the argument. De Sena and Mauri (2026) argue that the contemporary problem is not the disappearance of all international legal rules, as many treaty regimes continue to function in ordinary practice. The specific issue is the weakening of the constitutional layer of the post-1945 order: the prohibition of the threat or use of force, self-determination, and fundamental human rights constraints no longer discipline political practice with the same authority. This formulation supports the distinction developed here: ILBO remains doctrinally structured, but its higher-order constraints are increasingly bypassed or reinterpreted through political necessity, coalition practice, and strategic discretion.

At the same time, asymmetries in global governance have become entrenched (Popović and Štajner 1981; Simoniti 1989; Gilman 2015; Svetličič 2022a; Svetličič 2022b). The Bretton Woods institutions, trade regime, and security

arrangements functioned as the infrastructure of order, but their policies were often perceived as disciplinary. Fiscal conditions, liberalisation packages, and standards of 'good governance' were linked to the preferences of the dominant economies. RBO can therefore also be understood as a hierarchical order in which authority is unevenly distributed (Lake 2009). Unsurprisingly that part of the global South has remained ambivalent towards the 'rules'. It accepted universality as protection, but at the same time experienced inequality in implementation, which gradually undermined the legitimacy of a unified understanding of order.

After 2008, the role of economics in geopolitics became more pronounced, as disintegration tendencies in the global political economy translated into exits, conflicts, and competing institutional projects (Patomäki 2008; Patomäki 2018; Patomäki 2022). The financial crisis made part of the neoliberal project appear less legitimate and accelerated the use of geo-economic tools: sanctions, technological restrictions, investment controls, and 'security' exceptions in trade. Trade, investment, and finance rules were increasingly treated as instruments of strategic competition rather than as neutral rules of the game (Strange 1988; Cohen 2008).

This shift is legally relevant because it raises the question of whether such instruments remain within ILBO – contractual or treaty law, with clearly defined exceptions and adjudication – or become part of the broader RBO, where 'rules' may be consistent with international law without being legally binding and may be enforced through coalitions, network power and pressure (Farrell and Newman 2019; Jorgensen 2021). At the same time, contradictions within ILBO deepened after 2001. The security agenda reinforced practices of exceptionalism and selective legality, especially in the context of the global war on terror (Hajjar 2019), while the economic agenda intensified internal inequalities through disciplinary neoliberal reforms (Gill 1995; Piketty 2014; Streeck 2014; Patomäki 2018; Patomäki 2022).

Growing inequality and the 'winners' and 'losers' of globalisation have strengthened populist politics and reduced support for multilateral compromises (Banerjee and Duflo 2019). As a result, domestic politics has increasingly determined the extent to which governments can, or are willing to, respect international commitments (Putnam 1988).

Multipolarisation – the rise of China, the strengthening of BRICS[4] and the relative decline of Western hegemony – therefore means more than a redistribution of material capacities; it also rearticulates legitimacy (Arbeiter 2020; Fister 2021). Some emerging actors are betting on reforming existing institutions, especially trade and financial ones. Others are building parallel instruments. The debate on the future of global governance is thus overshadowed by the question of whether the dispute will be conducted within a shared legal denominator or through a competition of discourses and coalitions.

Rachman (2023) describes this shift as a transition to a period in which the 'weight' of the great powers is once again translated into open rivalry. In the absence of a single hegemon capable of stabilising interpretation, interpretative centres multiply. Competing legal and political languages then increase the risk of normative inflation and disputes over who speaks for the 'rules'. These languages are not merely discursive. They are usually grounded in structural

[4] BRICS is an international intergovernmental organisation named after its first (and most important) members: Brazil, the Russian Federation, India, China and South Africa.

power in finance, technology and supply chains, where dependencies are most easily translated into pressure and 'rules'. The next section therefore shows how the global political economy functions as the material axis that feeds the normative dispute between ILBO and RBO.

3 THE GLOBAL POLITICAL ECONOMY AS A STRUCTURE OF NORMATIVE CONFLICT

The dispute over who defines the 'rules' is clearest in the global political economy. Power is often structural and derives from the ability to shape the frameworks within which others make decisions (Strange 1988; Guzzini 1993). In the monetary and financial sphere, currencies, payment systems and credit regimes are not merely technical instruments, but sources of political influence (Cohen 2008). The dollar, access to liquidity, correspondent banking, clearing systems and digital platforms enable sanctions and exclusions with real distributional consequences. Digitalisation strengthens this mechanism because payment infrastructures, cloud services and platform ecosystems transform economic dependencies into political leverage and, ultimately, political conflicts (Cohen 2008; Farrell and Newman 2023).

The question is whether such measures are justified as legally enshrined in the UN Charter or as coalition practice legitimised by the RBO. This is also evident in the EU's attempt to preserve actorness under the weakening LIO, especially in trade, digital sovereignty and conflict resolution, where legal-institutional commitments are increasingly combined with strategic autonomy and regulatory power (Bojinović Fenko and Brsakoska Bazerkoska 2025).

In the era of global value chains, interdependence often becomes dependency. Concentrated supply chains, restricted access to semiconductors or energy resources, and jurisdictionally controlled payment systems create opportunities for 'security' exceptions and exert pressure. Rodrik (2011) warns that globalisation without political compromise produces a trilemma between democracy, national sovereignty, and hyperglobalisation. When compromise fails, states turn to instruments enabled by structural power. The weakening of global value chains, together with nearshoring, friend-shoring and regionalisation, further reinforces deglobalisation and fragmentation, multiplying the arenas in which ILBO and RBO are contested.

The climate, ecological and social crises further strain normative frameworks. Moore (2015) demonstrates that capitalism has historically relied on 'cheap nature', so the transition to a low-carbon economy raises not only technological and financial issues but also disputes over rules and burden sharing. These disputes are inseparable from social inequalities, democratic backsliding, and the radicalisation of domestic conflicts. Chang (2020) advocates pro-development multilateralism, which is only possible if the rules consider development needs and distributive justice.

Digital transformation adds a third layer of conflict. Rules on data, artificial intelligence, and platforms are often established outside traditional treaties: through standards, codes, interoperability regimes, and regulatory dialogues. Zuboff (2018) analyses data as a key resource of surveillance capitalism, while Jorgensen (2021) warns that digital infrastructures create new forms of dependency. Technological giants can thus produce quasi-feudal dependencies among platforms, states, firms, and users, a dynamic that resonates with

Wagenknecht's broader economic conception of neofeudal capitalism (Varoufakis 2023; *cf.* Wagenknecht 2017).

As a result, disputes over 'rules' are increasingly occurring through standardisation bodies, platform policies, and transgovernmental networks. Such rules can be effective, but they have a different legitimacy profile. ILBO emphasises formal sources, while RBO often refers to 'best practices' and the standards of technology and regulatory centres. This shifts the question of legality to one of access to standardisation and democratic accountability.

The ISPI Report 2026 provides concrete examples of this shift across various issue areas. In trade, the move towards politicised tariffs, export controls, regionalisation, and plurilateral arrangements shows how the multilateral legal system is increasingly supplemented – and sometimes displaced – by instruments of strategic competition (Tajoli 2026). In finance, digitalisation, payment systems, and confidence in the dollar demonstrate that apparently technical infrastructures can become vectors of systemic power and vulnerability (Bruni 2026). In artificial intelligence and space, the problem is even clearer: regulatory authority emerges through standards, infrastructure, platforms, procurement and public-private ecosystems rather than classical treaty-making (Aresu 2026; Iacomino 2026). These cases show the ILBO/RBO distinction is not limited to security law. It also structures the material governance of interdependence.

The financial crisis also demonstrated that liberalisation and financial innovation bring not only growth but also fragility and redistribution. Krippner (2011) describes the financial 'reorientation' of countries, Streeck (2014) the crisis of democratic capitalism, and Piketty (2014) the concentration of wealth as a source of political delegitimization of compromises. These tensions are then projected into foreign policy disputes over rules. In a longer-term perspective, Arrighi (1994) and Wallerstein (2004) point out that hegemonies change along with transformations of accumulation regimes, while Gill (1995), Gilman (2015), and Svetličič (2021; 2022a) show that distributive issues, from NIEO[5] to today's reform demands, are returning as the axis of legitimacy of global governance.

As disputes over 'rules' materialise through financial, climate and digital dependencies, the next step is to show how ILBO institutionally produces, interprets and enforces legality.

4 THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE ILBO

When disputes over 'rules' arise through financial, climate and digital dependencies, ILBO typically channels them through formal sources, interpretative rules, and institutional enforcement mechanisms. The legal order comprises formal and informal institutions, ranging from contracts, courts, and sanctions to taboos, customs, and codes of conduct. Formal rules can be changed relatively quickly, whereas informal rules often serve as slower cultural and political constraints (Hirsch 2017). In practice, the two levels are intertwined: law is based on social practices, and social practices can gradually be codified.[6]

[5] Declaration on the New International Economic Order was adopted in the UN General Assembly on 1 May 1974.

[6] Traditional International Relations theory has understood international regimes as sets of principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in specific issue areas (Krasner 1982). The influence of social constructivism and the

In this sense, ILBO is not only a text but an institutional and practical infrastructure of the global order.

The understanding of international law increasingly extends beyond classical, purely contractual logic (Cohen 2012). Part of the literature refers to constitutionalisation: the gradual emergence of hierarchies of norms (*jus cogens*), institutional mechanisms of interpretation, and the spread of *erga omnes* obligations (Klabbers, Peters and Ulfstein 2009; *cf.* Zidar 2009). At the same time, empirical research relativises purely instrumentalist interpretations. Simmons (2009) shows that international legal commitments can mobilise domestic actors, courts, and civil society, thereby increasing compliance even without central coercion. Sceptics, however, argue that compliance often reflects a coincidence between law and interests. Goldsmith and Posner (2005) therefore view international law as a product of rational calculation and repeated interactions.

For analysing ILBO, it is useful to distinguish three levels: (i) the normative structure (sources, hierarchy, interpretation); (ii) the institutional infrastructure (courts, international organisations, control mechanisms); and (iii) enforcement (ranging from diplomatic practice and reciprocity to sanctions). The same three criteria are used also in the following section to evaluate RBO, which makes the comparison between ILBO and RBO explicit. ILBO is relatively strongest at the first level because it offers a clearer doctrine of what counts as law and more stable rules of interpretation.

ILBO is based on a structured doctrine of sources.[7] Article 38(1) of the Statute of the International Court of Justice (United Nations 1945) defines the main sources of international law. International treaties, customary international law and general principles of law are the primary formal sources that may create new rules of international law. Some authors (Degan 2011, 189–203; Corten *et al*. 2019, 359–369) would also include certain unilateral international legal acts of states, such as promises, recognitions, protests, certain statements or declarations, and waivers or renunciations of rights, while others treat these acts separately (Zupančič 2013; Türk 2015, 188–191; Crawford 2019, 401–408). Judicial decisions and legal scholarship are classified as subsidiary means. They do not create new rules, but they can have a decisive influence on which interpretation prevails as convincing.

The model of norm production is, as a rule, consensual. States become bound by ratifying treaties or by contributing to the formation of customary international law, which consists of state practice and *opinio juris*. In disputes about custom, the burden of proof, the uniformity of practice and the status of the persistent objector are often decisive. General principles of law, such as *bona fide*, *lex specialis*, *lex posterior* and the prohibition of abuse of rights, act as a bridge between fragmented issue areas of international law and have historically enabled legal gaps to be filled.

A key advantage of ILBO is the argumentative discipline of interpretation. The Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties (United Nations 1969) sets out

"practical turn" has shifted attention to the contested emergence, diffusion and implementation of norms through normative cycles (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Pouliot 2016; Peez 2022). This approach emphasises the dynamic and often conflictual processes through which norms are constructed, negotiated and institutionalised in world politics (Peter and Brglez 2007).

[7] Koskenniemi (2005, 562–617) points out that the 'internal' view of international lawyers stems either from the doctrine of sources or from the sovereign equality of states. Regardless of the point of departure, both perspectives lead to the relative autonomy of International Law in relation to other social sciences and disciplines.

common rules of interpretation in Articles 31–33, limiting arbitrary readings and allowing reference to the text, context, subsequent practice and other relevant rules of international law.[8] In practice, ILBO is often supplemented by soft law, including declarations, guidelines and resolutions, which is not binding in itself but may influence the formation of customary law or the interpretation of treaties. It is important to note that soft law in ILBO generally serves as a supplement to formal sources, not as a substitute for them. This preserves the distinction between the legal and the political.

The normative basis of ILBO remains the Charter of the UN (United Nations 1945). Article 2(1) codifies the sovereign equality of states, Article 2(4) the prohibition of the threat or use of force, and Article 2(3) the duty to settle disputes peacefully. The classic exceptions to the prohibition of the threat or use of force are individual and collective self-defence (Article 51) and collective security measures under Chapter VII. The prohibition of aggression and, more broadly, the prohibition of the threat or use of force are also established as norms of customary international law. Much of the literature emphasises their peremptory or cogent character (*jus cogens*). However, debates on humanitarian intervention, preventive self-defence and R2P show that interpretative politics also opens within ILBO. Legal arguments about necessity, inevitability, proportionality and collective legitimacy are accompanied by questions of selectivity and distributive costs.

The network of human rights and international humanitarian law standards is also important. The two 1966 Covenants (in force from 1976), one on civil and political rights and the other on economic, social and cultural rights, together with regional systems such as the 1950 European Convention on Human Rights and its (16) protocols, and the four 1949 Geneva Conventions on the protection of victims of war, supplemented by the two 1977 Additional Protocols on international and non-international armed conflicts, codify standards that have become central to legitimacy expectations. This is where ILBO and RBO often overlap. Principles of humanity may function as legal obligations, while standards and exceptions based on military necessity are sometimes applied selectively in practice. For credibility, it is therefore crucial that value standards refer to formal sources and enforcement procedures.

ILBO is not merely a horizontal system of mutual obligations. Article 53 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties recognises *jus cogens* norms from which no derogation is permitted, while *erga omnes* obligations are developed in other instruments and case law. Secondary rules on state responsibility in the draft Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts (International Law Commission 2001) – now practically in the status of customary international law – determine when an unlawful act occurs, what the consequences are and what forms of countermeasures are permitted. The draft

[8] Under Article 31 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, treaties must be interpreted in good faith, in accordance with the ordinary meaning of their terms, in their context and considering their object and purpose. The preamble and annexes, as well as related agreements and instruments adopted at the time of conclusion, must also be considered. Interpretation must further consider subsequent agreements, subsequent practice in the application of the treaty among the parties, and other relevant rules of international law. Article 32 allows recourse to supplementary means of interpretation, including the *travaux préparatoires*, to clarify the meaning of a provision or confirm the parties' historical intent. In practice, as illustrated by the Court of Justice of the European Union, teleological interpretation may, where the object and purpose are clearly defined, also extend beyond a strictly textual reading. Article 33 requires that all authenticated language versions be considered when interpreting a treaty.

thus serves as a reference framework for argumentation and limits what can be presented as a legitimate countermeasure.

Jus cogens has two key functions: (i) it delegitimises certain practices regardless of the consent of individual states, and (ii) it creates an argument that transcends reciprocity. This is evident in the prohibition of aggression, genocide, slavery, torture, racial discrimination and apartheid, as well as in the duty not to recognise an illegal situation resulting from such international crimes. However, the problem of enforcement remains here too. *Jus cogens* is a powerful legal argument that can reinforce coalition pressure, but it cannot replace political will on its own. Another important element of the hierarchy is the primacy of the UN Charter over other treaty obligations (Article 103 of the UN Charter), which in practice raises dilemmas when sanctions regimes, security measures and human rights overlap.

Institutionally, ILBO includes courts and arbitration tribunals. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) remains the central forum, although its binding jurisdiction generally depends on the consent of states. Nevertheless, ICJ advisory opinions can strengthen argumentative pressure (Paulson 2004). In the economic sphere, the World Trade Organization (WTO) dispute settlement mechanism has long been among the most judicialized legal regimes, but the paralysis of the Appellate Body reveals the political conditioning of enforcement (Hopewell 2016). The Multi-Party *Interim* Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA), established in 2020, partially mitigates this problem for participating WTO members but does not replace a universal appellate mechanism (Council of the European Union 2020). Similarly, in investment arbitration – whether through Investor-State Dispute Settlement or an Investment Court System – disputes arise over the relationship between investment protection, public regulatory space and democratic legitimacy (Llamzon 2007). International criminal law is a formally developed but politically controversial case. Not all states recognise the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), and some actors reject or resist its jurisdiction, reducing its universality and reinforcing accusations of selectivity.

More broadly, ILBO operates through several compliance mechanisms: monitoring, reporting, 'naming and shaming', and internal implementation through courts and legislative reforms. Simmons (2009) shows that legal effects often materialise domestically, where domestic actors are activated. This dimension is also important for small(er) states if it strengthens their legitimacy capital and increases their credibility when demanding respect for international law externally.

ILBO's greatest vulnerability is its enforcement deficit. In the absence of a world government (*cf.* Patomäki 2023), global governance institutions have limited power to enforce compliance. Even when international law is clear, sanctions and coercion are fragmented and politically conditioned. The Security Council can, in theory, enforce ICJ judgments (Article 94(2) of the UN Charter), but in practice this does not happen. Instead of automatic coercion, mechanisms of reciprocity, reputation, economic dependence and coalition pressure operate (Guzman 2008).

Another limitation is the built-in institutional hierarchy. The Security Council institutionalises inequality through permanent members and veto power, which affects the use of collective security mechanisms. At the same time, the global legal order also faces fragmentation. The constitutionalisation perspective emphasises the development of *jus cogens* and the strengthening of judicial institutions, while the pluralist perspective points to the dispersion and overlap

of legal regimes (Krisch 2010). In its report on fragmentation, the International Law Commission (2006) highlighted conflicts of norms and jurisdictions and the dynamics of "forum shopping" (Helfer 2004). Recent work on regime complexity and refugee rights similarly shows that international cooperation often takes place at the intersection of overlapping regimes, where legal protection depends on the interaction between different normative frameworks (Hedžet 2025).

This combination of high normative discipline and weak, politically conditioned enforcement creates a space in which 'rules' often begin to take effect outside formal sources. This is the key transition to RBO.

5 RBO: POLITICAL NORMATIVITY AND INTERPRETATIVE AUTHORITY

The previous section presented ILBO as a framework that stabilises legality through sources doctrine and interpretative rules. RBO is primarily a political-discursive construct. The term "rules-based international order" does not appear in the UN Charter, the ICJ Statute (United Nations 1945) or the core universal conventions. RBO refers to a desired way of conducting international relations, in which rules may range from binding legal norms to soft standards and political commitments.[9] Scott (2018) therefore points out that RBO vocabulary often signals a shift from the idea of international law as a relatively autonomous ideal to a more explicitly political articulation of normativity. The following analysis mirrors the ILBO section through the same three criteria: normative structure, institutional infrastructure and enforcement.

The conceptual ambiguity of RBO brings both flexibility and interpretative openness. In terms of normative structure, RBO lacks an agreed doctrine of sources and often combines treaty law, customary law, soft law and politically articulated standards into a single framework. In terms of institutional infrastructure, authority is less centred on universal legal institutions and more dispersed among coalitions, regulatory networks, standard-setting bodies and dominant market or platform actors. In terms of enforcement, RBO relies more on coalition pressure, sanctions, market access and reputational costs than on adjudication. This does not make RBO irrelevant. It means that its legitimacy depends on transparency, consistency and possible impartial review. Talmon (2019) points out that RBO can blur the distinction between binding and non-binding rules and create an impression of universality where political coalition normativity is at stake. Soft law can increase responsiveness, but it is generally more dependent on the interests of politically influential actors (Hafner 2003) and can lead to 'rule inflation'. Vylegzhanin *et al.* (2021) therefore question whether the 'rules' in RBO reflect international law or national preferences.

The main difference between ILBO and RBO is interpretative authority. In ILBO, interpretation is based on recognised sources and codified interpretative rules, while in RBO it is often established through political statements, coalition

[9] To prevent interdisciplinary disputes between International Relations and International Law scholars from obscuring the differences between ILBO and RBO (Koskenniemi 2009), it is useful to distinguish between legal norms and social norms. In the interactional theory of international law, legal norms must not only be socially widespread but must also satisfy the criteria of legality – generality, clarity, accessibility, predictability and consistency with the conduct of officials – which enable the "practice of legality" (Brunnée and Toope 2010; Brunnée and Toope 2017). Law is thus not merely discourse, but an institutionally sustained behavioural pattern that generates a constitutive sense of obligation and legitimacy.

practice and selective institutional support. Mearsheimer (2001) points out that order often reflects power relations, and that this connection can be obscured in RBO discourse by the rhetoric of 'the rule of law'. Selective compliance is particularly evident where rules constrain key preferences (*e.g.*, blocking the WTO Appellate Body, resisting the ICC, or imposing sanctions without broad multilateral consensus). Legality is emphasised when it legitimises preferences and relativised when it restricts them, so RBO can act as a legitimising vocabulary of hierarchy and hegemony.

It is necessary to distinguish between the principle of the rule of law and RBO. The rule of law means the subordination of authority to established legal norms and procedures that limit arbitrariness (Bishop 1961). If RBO is equated with the rule of law, the distinction between legally binding obligations and political standards is blurred. The 'rule' articulated by a strong coalition can take on the appearance of universal legality. ILBO at least argumentatively limits the arbitrary redefinition of rules through sources and interpretation, while RBO, without clear sources and procedures, risks becoming a set of politically contingent 'rules'.

The legitimacy of RBO depends primarily on consistency and distributive justice. If the 'rules' systematically create advantages for developed economies, inequalities are reinforced and political divisions deepen. The global South therefore often perceives RBO as a framework in which double standards are more easily legitimised (Chang 2020). The problem is not merely conceptual ambiguity, but credibility. Narine (2023) shows that many non-Western states interpret Western appeals to RBO through the memory of post-Cold War Western interventions and therefore view RBO less as a neutral legal-political order than as a selective vocabulary of Western authority.

The value dimension adds another complication. The RBO is often associated with liberal-democratic values and human rights, but without a clear legal source, it risks slipping from legal debate into 'civilisational' politics. Vrečko Ilc and Šabič (2021) warn that such references can be used to strategically advance interests and discursively delegitimise opponents. Therefore, the question is not only whether the rule exists, but who defines it and who benefits from it.

RBO discourse is particularly influential in geo-economic policies. Export controls, foreign investment restrictions, sanctions and 'security' exceptions are often justified by the protection of 'rules' and 'values', but in practice they combine legal elements with political standards, such as 'responsible supply chains' and 'reliable partners' (Chatham House 2015). Since such rules are often insufficiently specific, the risk of arbitrariness increases, as does the possibility that they become tools of competition (Nahtigal 2023). At the same time, China also refers to the RBO in certain contexts, emphasising sovereignty, development and non-discrimination. This confirms that the dispute is often not about the idea of order itself, but about the content of the rules and who interprets them (Walt 2021; Rodrik and Walt 2024).

In practice, the RBO can complement the ILBO when the 'rules' are clearly enshrined in treaties, customary law or transparent procedures of international organisations. In such cases, it can increase effectiveness. However, when rules are enforced primarily through coalition practice without a clear legal basis and without the possibility of impartial interpretation, the RBO risks legitimising selectivity. The normative challenge of the future order therefore lies in mechanisms that restore procedural accountability to the RBO.

This conceptual openness translates into differences in state practice. The next section therefore shows how states use legality as a political resource and how their strategies differ in terms of discourse, behaviour and institutional preferences.

6 COMPARATIVE STATE STRATEGIES: LEGALITY AS A SHIELD AND AN INSTRUMENT

The distinction between ILBO and RBO becomes fully meaningful only against the actual practices of states. Order is not merely a normative framework, but the outcome of selective interpretations, institutional preferences, and strategic decisions under conditions of asymmetric power. Rather than a binary of compliance and violation, the article examines how states use legality as a political resource: when they invoke it, reinterpret it, and circumvent it. The comparison considers three dimensions: (1) discursive orientation, (2) practical behaviour, and (3) institutional preferences. The typology in Table 1 is based on the expanded discursive evidence from the Appendix (Table A2),[10] which codes the presence or absence of key terms (RBO/ILBO; UN/UN Charter; rule of law) and extracts representative sentence anchors (predominant and most prominent). The coding is deliberately light: it does not replace a full corpus analysis, but it enables a consistent synthesis of the four ideal-typical strategies. On this basis, Table 1 summarises four ideal-type strategies as recurring combinations of discourse, institutional preferences, and behaviour.

TABLE 1: COMPARATIVE TYPOLOGY OF COUNTRIES' APPROACHES TO ILBO AND RBO

Type of actor	Typical representatives	Dominant discourse	Practical behaviour	Implications for order
Liberal-hegemonic	US (partly United Kingdom)	RBO, liberal values, rule of law	Selective application of international law; instrumental use of institutions (*e.g.*, WTO, ICC)	Normative flexibility; erosion of universality
Normative multilateralists	EU, Canada, smaller European countries	International law as the basis of order	High formal compliance; reliance on adjudication; limited executive power	ILBO as protection, but structural vulnerability
Revisionist legalists	China (partly Russia)	International legal order, sovereignty, UN Charter	Formal support for ILBO; restrictive interpretation; resistance to normative conditioning	Reinterpretation of sovereignty; fragmentation of norms
Pragmatic actors of the global South	Countries of Africa, Asia, Latin America	Sovereignty, distributive justice	Forum shopping; selective institutional commitments	Pluralisation of normative centres

Source: author's own elaboration, based on the documents listed in the Appendix (Table A2).[11]

[10] The empirical corpus of public official documents used for the Appendix is deposited in *Zenodo* (Brglez 2026c). DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.20304876.

[11] Recent strategic texts used in the Appendix (Table A2) and deposited in *Zenodo* (Brglez 2026c) do not fall into a simple legal/non-legal binary. They may also be read as a continuum from the UN-centred legal multilateralism, through value-based coalition order, towards open national-interest balancing. The 2022 US, EU and NATO documents still present RBO as at least partly compatible with the UN Charter and international law, whereas the 2025-2026 US strategic documents move the vocabulary towards sovereignty, burden-shifting, balance of power and military-industrial capacity. This confirms the article's central warning: RBO can be re-anchored

The liberal-hegemonic ideal type is grounded in RBO, presenting liberal values, including democracy, human rights and open markets, as an integral part of the 'rules', while commitment to institutions is often conditional in practice. Mechanisms such as the WTO and ICC are supported when they reinforce expectations *vis-à-vis* others and restricted when they reduce one's own discretion. Instrumentality is also evident in the use of sanctions, references to 'security' exceptions and emphasis on 'coalitions of the willing'. When rules are enforced through coalition pressure rather than broad multilateral consensus, RBO acts as a legitimising framework that undermines the universality of ILBO and reinforces perceptions of double standards in the global South (Scott 2018).

Normative multilateralists build their identity around formal commitment to ILBO: ratification, support for courts and emphasis on procedural legality. A typical example is the European Union (EU), where legal institutionalism is part of the internal constitution (Kelemen 2011). For normative multilateralists, international law is a key safeguard against arbitrariness, but the approach is structurally vulnerable because of limited executive power. International courts clearly depend on the legitimacy and cooperation of major actors, so this type must complement legal commitment with coalition strategy and support for reforms that increase the effectiveness of enforcement (Dunoff and Pollack 2017). The Central European position is especially important because it cannot be reduced to simple rule-taking. The failed-socialisation narrative surrounding Central Europe shows how regional actors may be normatively positioned, labelled and disciplined within broader liberal institutional frameworks (Lovec, Kočí and Šabič 2021).

Revisionist 'legalists' generally defend the international legal order and refer to the UN Charter (sovereignty, non-intervention, non-discrimination), while rejecting liberal normative conditioning and attempts to make value standards function as universal obligations. China's argument often combines formal legality with plurality of modernisation paths (Cai 2023). In practice, the formal language of law can be intertwined with a restrictive interpretation of its scope in 'core' interests of sovereignty and resistance to external control. This can also reinforce 'authoritarian international law' that supports regime security without accepting liberal rights as universal obligations (Biddulph, Cooney and Zhu 2012; Ginsburg 2014; DeLisle 2024).

Pragmatic actors in the global South are a heterogeneous group focused on maximising development space. In discourse, they emphasise sovereignty and redistributive justice, but they combine ILBO and RBO in practice. The restrained response of many non-Western states to the Russia–Ukraine war confirms this pragmatism. Narine (2023) argues that these states do not necessarily support Russia's invasion, but many refuse to subordinate their own economic and strategic interests to a Western RBO narrative that they regard as historically selective. When law acts as a protection against arbitrariness, for example through non-discrimination, development exceptions or protection against the unlawful use of force, they invoke it. When international legal regimes reproduce inequalities, they use forum shopping and parallel coalitions, as seen in climate negotiations, debt debates, trade disputes and demands for financial institution reform (Rajagopal 2013; Acharya 2014; Gilman 2015; Chang 2020; Svetličič 2022a; De Sena and Mauri 2026).

in ILBO, but it can also drift towards post-RBO (illiberal) power politics when 'rules' lose legal traceability and procedural contestability.

The typology confirms that ILBO and RBO are overlapping frameworks that states use according to their position of power and domestic politics. Norm contestation is therefore not necessarily destructive; it may also lead to the adaptation and modernisation of norms (Deitelhoff and Zimmermann 2019). The key question is whether transformation takes place within a shared legal denominator or slips into a fragmented discourse of rules, where authority depends on political superiority. China's position shows formal anchoring in the international legal order with a strong emphasis on sovereignty, while the global South understands international law ambivalently, both as protection against arbitrariness and as a historical instrument of inequality. Forum shopping can therefore be a rational strategy in a fragmented system (Biddulph, Cooney and Zhu 2012; Rajagopal 2013; Acharya 2014; Cai 2023; DeLisle 2024). The section therefore concludes that legality is a political resource. This insight directly opens space for CLS.

7 CRITICAL LEGAL STUDIES: INTERNATIONAL LAW AS A POLITICAL FIELD

Since legality is a political resource rather than merely a normative ideal, the selectivity of state practices cannot be understood without recognising the political nature of international law. Critical Legal Studies (CLS) shows that international law is not a neutral regulator of power, but a discursive field in which power relations are translated into the language of universality (Koskenniemi 1990; Koskenniemi 2005; Kennedy 2017; Koskenniemi 2019). Koskenniemi (1990; 2005) shows that legal argumentation oscillates between "utopia", understood as universal principles or formalism, and "apology", understood as adaptation to the interests and practices of states. International law-based order (ILBO) is often presented as a universalist utopia, while rules-based international order (RBO) is presented as a pragmatic framework in which power asymmetries are more easily rationalised. This also reflects Koskenniemi's (2009) critique of International Relations as a form of new natural law.

Indeterminacy does not make law meaningless, but rather that legal meaning is often the result of dispute.[12] Legal argument is both a technique and a craft: it involves the choice of source, interpretation, framing of facts, and connection to principles. Scicluna (2021) shows that the politics of international law often takes place in 'grey areas' where formal rules are insufficient. The inclusion of RBO expands the range of arguments to standards and values, which may strengthen or weaken the discipline of international law, depending on its procedural anchoring.

Kennedy (2017) emphasises that legal discourse structures the field of political possibility. It does not remove power, but channels it into recognisable forms of argumentation. Cox's thesis[13] that "theory is always for someone and for some purpose" (Cox 1981, 129) also applies to legal regimes. Rules on trade, investment, intellectual property, and finance are often an institutionalisation of specific assumptions about the market, property, and development. Gill (1995) therefore refers to the "constitutional" dimension of neoliberal globalisation. In

[12] This semantic openness can also be linked, to a certain extent, to Pavčnik's (2013) more general study of legal argumentation.

[13] A similar approach can already be found in the foundations of Benko's legacy in Slovenian International Relations scholarship (1977, 187).

this context, RBO can be seen as a language that normalises preferences as 'rules of the game', while ILBO is a framework in which distributive conflicts can be translated into legal requirements and reform programmes.

TWAIL emphasises the colonial legacies of international law (Anghie 2005). Formal doctrines of sovereignty and contractual consent have historically coexisted with unequal treaties, mandates and trusteeships, and their weight is still preserved in customary international law. For many postcolonial states, international law is therefore ambivalent: it is both a shield against unequal negotiations and a legacy of them (Rajagopal 2013). This ambivalence now returns in disputes over climate justice, development finance and sanctions (Gilman 2015; Svetličič 2022a).

However, a critical diagnosis of power does not negate the normative potential of international law. Precisely because law needs legitimacy, powerful actors rarely reject legality outright; more often, they reinterpret it. This confirms that international law retains normative weight (Koskenniemi 2005). It also creates space for mobilisation. Weaker actors can demand compliance, initiate proceedings, form coalitions or increase the reputational costs of violation (Simmons 2009; Brunnée and Toope 2010; Brunnée and Toope 2017). Feminist and broader critical perspectives further reveal what the canon has long excluded (O'Rourke 2018): international law can function simultaneously as a shield and a sword. This ambivalence is the starting point for strategic, rather than naive, legal action by small states, which is developed in the next section.

8 STRATEGIC LEGALISM AND THE RELATIONAL CAPACITY OF SMALL STATES

In a fragmented multipolar system, the key question is what options small and medium-sized states have. Long (2022)[14] shows that their influence does not stem primarily from material power, but from their relational capacity to position themselves within institutional networks, mediations and coalitions. Nexon (2019) similarly emphasises the networked nature of authority. In this sense, strategic legalism means the deliberate and selective use of international law and institutions as instruments of foreign policy, while remaining aware of power asymmetries, executive constraints and the political nature of legality. Formalised rules create at least minimal argumentative constraints even for more powerful actors, so they can be a lever for small states, not merely decoration.

Strategic legalism must be distinguished from both bare legalism, where law is treated as a value, and lawfare, where law is instrumentalised to attack an opponent. It is a reflexive use of law that recognises the overlap between legality and politics. Its purpose is not to abuse procedures, but to create predictable constraints and increase the legitimacy costs of arbitrary behaviour. It is crucial that argumentation be based on recognised sources and procedures (ILBO), even when operating in the broader discourse of RBO (Koskenniemi 2005).

[14] Long successfully synthesises materialist-rationalist approaches to small states, such as those of Keohane (1969), and Udovič and Svetličič (2007), with social-psychological and social-constructivist approaches (Šabič and Brglez 2002; Thorhallsson and Wivel 2006), developing a relational conception of small states and powers in International Relations and Comparative Foreign Policy.

Academically, strategic legalism is situated at the intersection of international regime theory (Krasner 1982), normative entrepreneurship (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998), the judicialization of global governance (Alter 2014) and "regime shifting" (Helfer 2004). Krisch (2010) points out that the contemporary international legal order is pluralistic, making navigation between regimes a key political skill. Operationally, this involves: (i) procedural mobilisation of forums, including the ICJ, WTO, regional courts and arbitration; (ii) normative entrepreneurship, through which standards are transformed into treaty law and then customary international law; (iii) regime switching; (iv) coalition institutionalisation (Tallberg 2008; Panke 2012); and (v) legitimacy capital, understood as consistent compliance with international law as a reputational investment.

Such a strategy requires legal-diplomacy capacities for argumentation, procedural understanding, precedent analysis and alliance building. This means investing in legal services, diplomatic training and systematic monitoring of regime changes, including in the WTO, UNCLOS[15] and environmental regimes. Transgovernmental and regulatory networks are an important channel. Peer-to-peer cooperation, including within the OECD,[16] the EU and similar environments, enables small states to influence standards at an early stage, before they become established as global 'rules'.

Since strategic legalism is both an instrument and a risk, the examples below illustrate typical mechanisms. The first is institutional blockage. In the WTO, a 'rules-based trading system' can be defended as a goal while adjudication is procedurally prevented when it would allegedly 'create' obligations (Office of the United States Trade Representative 2019).[17] The MPIA offers a temporary appellate solution for participating WTO members, but it also demonstrates that enforcement gaps are only partially manageable without universal participation (Council of the European Union 2020).

The second is jurisdictional resistance. In the South China Sea dispute, China's Position Paper rejects the jurisdiction of arbitration and justifies this with international law (Government of the People's Republic of China 2014), while the tribunal documents the public position of China as a "provocation under the guise of law" (Permanent Court of Arbitration 2016).

The third is the implementation gap. The arbitration decision between Slovenia and Croatia is formally final (Permanent Court of Arbitration 2017), but the Court of Justice of the EU emphasises that the "real subject matter" is a dispute that must be resolved under international law, not EU law (Court of Justice of the European Union 2020).

The fourth is procedural pressure through provisional measures. On 26 January 2024, the ICJ indicated provisional measures in Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa *v.* Israel) (ICJ 2024a), and on 24 May 2024 it added provisional measures regarding Rafah (ICJ 2024b), creating sequential costs of non-compliance.

[15] The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

[16] The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

[17] The EU and some of its Member States responded to the blockade of the WTO Appellate Body by establishing a multilateral *interim* appeal arbitration arrangement (MPIA), based on Article 25 of the Dispute Settlement Understanding. This indicates an attempt to preserve key elements of the ILBO – proceduralised interpretation and institutional supervision – through pragmatic institutional innovation (Council of the European Union 2020).

The fifth is the enforcement gap in the individualisation of responsibility. The ICC can issue arrest warrants, but their effect is mediated by the cooperation or non-cooperation of states. In the case of Gaza, on 21 November 2024, the ICC rejected Israeli challenges to its jurisdiction and issued arrest warrants for Netanyahu and Gallant (ICC 2024). This also led to a political backlash, including US sanctions against the ICC prosecutor and judges (United States Department of State 2025). While the EU has institutionally supported the ICC (Council of the European Union 2003; European Union and International Criminal Court 2006), it has been unable or unwilling to respond to the US sanctions.

Strategic legalism thus also has risks: (i) proceedings are slow and expensive; (ii) legal mobilisation may trigger retaliatory measures; and (iii) excessive instrumentalism reduces legitimacy capital. It succeeds only by maintaining a balance between effectiveness, principledness and coalition politics.

For small states, the ILBO/RBO dilemma is not a choice between idealism and realism. ILBO remains their key protection against arbitrary power, but only if they actively use it through careful choice of forums, coalitions, consistent argumentation and investment in reputation. RBO can accelerate coalition dynamics and normative innovation, but without clear sources it increases dependence on interpretative dominance. Strategic legalism is therefore the third way for small states.[18]

The ISPI Report 2026 (Colombo and Magri 2026) makes this dilemma even more urgent. If deregulation, unilateralism and coalition enforcement become the dominant grammar of order, small states lose precisely the procedural density that enables them to transform weakness into legal leverage. Strategic legalism must therefore include a defensive component: preserving adjudication, treaty interpretation and institutional procedures wherever possible, while using RBO language only when it remains legally traceable, procedurally contestable and open to actors beyond the dominant coalition.

9 CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The discussion of ILBO and RBO should conclude with a warning that RBO is neither a neutral nor a self-evident sign of order. 'Rules-based' language can serve as a politically flexible substitute for universal legal standards, creating opportunities for selectivity and double standards (Dugard 2023). Anchoring in the UN Charter and international law therefore remains a key criterion of legitimacy, especially for small and medium-sized states. Trachtenberg's (2025) historical review further demonstrates that the stability of the post-war order resulted not only from institutional liberalism, but also from political agreements on legitimate interests and power relations, as institutions are not necessarily stabilisers but also arenas of contestation. Together, these arguments support the conclusion that strategic legalism is the most realistic third way. It does not idealise international law but uses it as an argumentative and institutional constraint on arbitrary power.

[18] Additional (meta-)theoretical justification for why strategic legalism is, or could be, an appropriate strategic basis for the conduct of small states in an illiberal international order is developed elsewhere (Brglez 2026b). A more empirically detailed case study of Slovenian foreign policy and the notification, or non-notification, of succession to the Austrian State Treaty is likewise provided elsewhere (Brglez 2026a). Among other things, that study substantiates why the use of strategic legalism would be particularly sensible for Slovenia as a small state.

The ISPI material and the comparative reading of recent strategic documents empirically reinforce this conclusion (Colombo and Magri 2026). They show a shift from the 2022 attempt to defend RBO as a coalition-based but still the UN Charter-compatible vocabulary towards a 2025–2026 vocabulary of sovereignty, strategic autonomy, burden-shifting, deterrence, and industrial capacity. This does not mean that ILBO has collapsed, but it does mean that its constitutional and adjudicative elements must now be defended more deliberately if 'rules' are not to become merely the language of the powerful.

The findings of this article confirm both introductory theses. The differences between ILBO and RBO cannot be understood abstractly, because states and international organisations interpret and apply legality strategically, with behaviour varying according to power, historical experience and internal constraints. At the same time, neither ILBO nor RBO operates outside power relations, and international law remains a structured field of political application of legality. The typology in Table 1 shows recurring combinations of discourse, institutional preferences and behaviour: (i) the liberal-hegemonic type relies on RBO and the rule of law, but often combines universalist discourse with selective use of institutions such as the WTO and ICC; (ii) normative multilateralists build on formal commitment to ILBO, but are limited by executive weakness; (iii) revisionist legalists anchor themselves in ILBO, especially the UN Charter and sovereignty, but often use law as a field of restrictive reinterpretation and resistance to control; and (iv) the pragmatic global South links legality to equality, the elimination of historical injustices and the search for the most appropriate forum, with distributive justice as the axis of legitimacy.

The mechanisms of strategic legalism show this operationally. Institutional blockage in the WTO shows how a rules-based framework can exist alongside the delegitimation of quasi-judicial dispute resolution. Jurisdictional resistance in the South China Sea arbitration demonstrates legalistic contestation of jurisdiction. The implementation gap in the Slovenia–Croatia arbitration demonstrates the limits of enforcement. Procedural pressure in South Africa *v*. Israel before the ICJ shows the sequential costs of non-compliance. Finally, the enforcement gap in the Gaza case before the ICC shows that individualised responsibility remains politically conditioned without state cooperation and may trigger backlash.

The argument therefore returns to the question of small states and powers. The choice between ILBO and RBO is not a semantic preference, but a question of access to codified procedures that at least argumentatively limit arbitrariness. Strategic legalism is the third way. It relies on codified and institutionalised international law to create minimal obstacles to the unilateral articulation of 'rules'. It is therefore rational to invest in international legal diplomacy, coalition building and navigation between international legal regimes, while protecting one's own legitimacy capital through consistent respect for international law.

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APPENDIX

TABLE A2: EXTENDED RECORD OF THE ATTITUDES OF COUNTRIES, INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS TOWARDS ILBO OR RBO

Country/organisation	Year	Document (short)	Framework	Anchor (A) – predominant	Anchor (B) – most explicit	Source
African Union	2005	Ezulwini Consensus	ILBO	Reform of global governance through (re)balancing UN institutions (especially the Security Council) + normative requirement for equality/regional representation.	Requirement: "must address the question of veto power ... and ensure full representation."	African Union (2005)
African Union	2023	AU Assembly Decision on C-10 report (UNSC reform)	ILBO	Operationalises Common African Position (CAP): C-10 should step up engagement and mobilise support for comprehensive reform of the UN Security Council.	Requests "concise common language" in national statements at the UNGA to advance the CAP (C-10/UNSC reform).	African Union (2023)
African Union	2024	AU PAPS Press Release (Consultation with CSOs on C-10 / CAM)	ILBO	Coalition building for the CAP through consultations with African civil society; UN Security Council reform is framed as redressing a historical injustice.	Explicitly reiterates CAP: two permanent seats for Africa (with veto) + additional non-permanent seats (as part of comprehensive UN Security Council reform).	African Union (2024)
African Union	2025	AU Assembly Decision on C-10 report (UNSC reform)	ILBO	Reaffirms CAP and demands that UNSC reform be treated as a matter of legitimacy and representation ("historical injustice").	Most explicitly: Africa as a "special case" + elimination of "historical injustice" (linked to the current UN reform process).	African Union (2025)
Brazil	2023	UN General Assembly (GA) statement (Lula)	ILBO core	The speech uses the classic multilateral/Charter framework (peace, legitimacy, reform) and links it to the development/redistribution themes of the global South.	The most explicit anchor in this speech is, as a rule, "UN / international law / peace".	Federal Republic of Brazil (2023)
BRICS	2024	Kazan Declaration	Mixed (ILBO↔RBO)	Typical "global South + multipolarity": reform of global governance, the UN as a foundation, development justice, while at the same time RBO economic anchor (WTO) and criticism of unilateral restrictive measures.	"We reaffirm our commitment to multilateralism and upholding international law, including the Purposes and Principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations (UN) as its indispensable cornerstone ..."	BRICS (2024)

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TABLE A2: EXTENDED RECORD OF THE ATTITUDES OF COUNTRIES, INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS TOWARDS ILBO OR RBO (CONTINUED)

Country/organisation	Year	Document (short)	Framework	Anchor (A) – predominant	Anchor (B) – most explicit	Source
China	2014	Position Paper (jurisdiction – South China See arbitration)	ILBO core	The document is legalistic: jurisdiction, consent, UNCLOS and formal sources (Article 38 of ICJ Statute) as a framework for legitimate adjudication.	In the formulations on "international law" and Article 38 of the ICJ Statute.	Government of the People's Republic of China (2014)
China	2019	China and the United Nations: Position Paper (74th UNGA)	ILBO + RBO (WTO)	Support for multilateralism: the UN as the core of the system, the international law as the foundation of order, the WTO as the centre of the trading system; criticism of unilateralism/bullying.	"International system built around the UN, the international order underpinned by international law, and the multilateral trading system centered around the WTO."	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2019)
China	2025	Concept Paper on the Global Governance Initiative	ILBO	Reform of global governance with greater representation of the Global South; strengthening the effectiveness and authority of multilateral institutions.	"International system with the UN at its core… international order underpinned by international law… norms… based on the purposes and principles of the UN Charter."	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (2025)
EU (Council)	2019	Council Conclusions 10341/19	Mixed (ILBO↔RBO)	The EU positions itself as the champion of multilateralism, understanding the RBO as a political framework that must be disciplined by international law and UN norms.	"We depend on a rules-based international order … [and] must remain true to the rules and principles of the UN Charter."	Council of the European Union (2019)
EU (European Commission)	2021	Trade Policy Review (COM(2021)66)	RBO core	It treats trade policy as a tool of "open strategic autonomy", where stability depends on rules and viable institutions (WTO, supply chains).	"The EU has … supported global efforts in the G20, the WTO … to … ensure fair and equitable access to critical goods." (economic-institutional RBO framework; "rules-based" is also used in the document as the slogan "rules-based cooperation")	European Commission (2021)
EU (Europen Commission + HRFASP)	2021	Strengthening rules-based multilateralism JOIN(2021) 3	Mixed (ILBO↔RBO)	The document frames the EU as a defender of "rules-based multilateralism", capable of reforming institutions (WTO/WHO, etc.) and competing normatively in global governance.	'Firm supporters of the rules-based international order with the UN at its core."	European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2021)
EU (Council)	2022	Strategic Compass (ST 7371/22)	Mixed (ILBO↔RBO)	This is an operational document: toolboxes, resilience, hybrid/cyber; normatively linked to the defence of order and the prohibition of coercion.	"Rules-based international order, based on … universal values and international law … has come under strong questioning …"	Council of the European Union (2022)

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TABLE A2: EXTENDED RECORD OF THE ATTITUDES OF COUNTRIES, INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS TOWARDS ILBO OR RBO (CONTINUED)

Country/organisation	Year	Document (short)	Framework	Anchor (A) – predominant	Anchor (B) – most explicit	Source
France	2022	National Strategic Review	ILBO core	Normative emphasis: "multilateralism + rule of law"; additionally draws attention to "lawfare" as the instrumentalisation of law/norms.	"International order based on multilateralism and the rule of law …"	French Republic (2022)
France	2024	Macron (Rio) – global governance	ILBO core	The speech focuses on reforming global governance and the universality of rules without double standards.	*"Nous sommes tous signataires de la Charte des Nations Unies."*	Macron (2024)
G7	2024	Apulia Leaders' Communiqué	RBO core	The *communiqué* uses "rules-based" primarily as an economic/coalition framework: WTO, rule reforms, enforceability through national legal systems and sanctioning instruments.	"Commitment to the rules-based … multilateral trading system, with the WTO at its core."	Group of Seven (2024)
G77 + China	2025	Ministerial Declaration	Mixed (ILBO↔RBO)	The declaration is ILBO-heavy (UN Charter/ILBO, justice, development), but it also has a clear RBO economic layer (WTO "rules-based multilateral trading system").	"Full respect for … the Charter of the United Nations and international law."	Group of 77 and China (2025)
Germany	2021	Coalition Treaty 2021–2025	Mixed (ILBO↔RBO)	The coalition agreement links the strengthening of the UN with a "rules-based international order" and multilateral institutional reform.	"Strengthening of the United Nations and a rules-based international order."	Federal Republic of Germany (2021a)
Germany	2021	International law and cyberspace (position paper)	ILBO core	The document operationalises ILBO: application of IHL principles (distinction, proportionality, precaution) and restrictions on countermeasures.	"International law as it stands provides binding guidance …" (the text elaborates International Humanitarian Law standards for cyberspace)	Federal Republic of Germany (2021b)
Germany	2023	National Security Strategy	Mixed (ILBO↔RBO)	The security-political order is explicitly "UN Charter + international law", while the economic order is described as "rules-based".	It advocates: "… order based on international law, the United Nations Charter …" and "promote the … rules-based order."	Federal Republic of Germany (2023)
India	2024	Special Committee on the Charter	ILBO core	The document builds on Charter legalism: peaceful dispute resolution, the role of the ICJ, and respect for Charter procedures.	Explicit reference usually in sentences with "UN Charter / Article 2(3) / Article 33."	Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations (2024a)
India	2024	Charter Committee statement	Mixed (ILBO↔RBO)	India subordinates the rules-based framework of the UN Charter/ILBO as a universal foundation; "RBO" is legitimate only if it is Charter-based.	"Strengthening a rules-based international order based on the UN Charter and international law …"	Permanent Mission of India to the United Nations (2024b)
Indonesia	2024	UNGA General Debate	ILBO core	The speech generally justifies multilateralism, humanitarian standards and the legitimacy of solutions through the UN.	Most explicitly, as a rule, "international law / UN Charter".	Republic of Indonesia (2024)
Kenya	2024	UNGA statement	ILBO core	Kenya links stability to the consistent application of Charter norms and international law, with an emphasis on legitimacy and predictability.	"The only guarantee for stability is strict adherence to the UN Charter and the consistent application of international law …"	Republic of Kenya (2024)

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TABLE A2: EXTENDED RECORD OF THE ATTITUDES OF COUNTRIES, INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS TOWARDS ILBO OR RBO (CONTINUED)

Country/organisation	Year	Document (short)	Framework	Anchor (A) – predominant	Anchor (B) – most explicit	Source
NAM	2024	Statement by Indonesia on behalf of NAM	ILBO + criticism of RBO	NAM explicitly rejects unilateral practices "under the guise" of RBO and establishes the Charter/ILBO as the sole universal framework.	"Reject ... under the guise of a so-called 'rules-based international order' ... reaffirm ... the Charter of the United Nations ... and international law."	Non-Aligned Movement (2024)
NATO	2022	Strategic Concept	Mixed (ILBO↔RBO)	It frames strategic competition as a defence of the "open" order and legitimises the strengthening of deterrence and partnerships as safeguards against coercion.	"We will uphold the rules-based international order, including the principles of the UN Charter."	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (2022)
Russia	2022	Putin's Letter to UN Security Council (24 Feb 2022)	ILBO core	The document is formally Charter-procedural: it refers to self-defence and requests distribution to the UN Security Council.	"Measures taken in accordance with Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations in exercise of the right of self-defence ..."	United Nations Security Council (2022)
Russia	2023	Foreign Policy Concept	ILBO + criticism of RBO	The concept builds on ILBO as a foundation, while describing RBO as a project that undermines the legal system and allows for arbitrary interpretations.	"Promotion of a rules-based world order is fraught with the destruction of the international legal system ..."	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2023)
Russia	2023	Lavrov article (5 May 2023)	ILBO + criticism of RBO	The core issue is the delegitimisation of RBO as a "replacement" for the Charter/ILBO and the question of "who sets the rules".	"Replace international law and the UN Charter with some 'rules-based international order' ..."	Lavrov (2023)
Slovenia	2019	Resolution on the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia	ILBO	National security is enshrined in the constitutional order, the rule of law and respect for international obligations; the classification of threats and responses is based on international commitments and regimes.	"We respect the principles of international law and the rights and obligations ... assumed under international treaties."	Republic of Slovenia (2019)
Slovenia	2021	Foreign Policy Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia	ILBO	Multilateral action is the central mechanism for addressing common challenges, with the UN at its core; Slovenia emphasises peaceful dispute resolution and support for international courts.	"Effective multilateral cooperation ... respect for international law, drawing on the UN Charter ... multilateral engagement, with the UN at its core."	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia (2021)
Slovenia	2024	Foreign Policy Strategy of the Republic of Slovenia	Mixed (ILBO-predominant)	The strategy grounds Slovenia's foreign policy in effective multilateralism, sovereign equality, solidarity and respect for international law, with the UN at its core; it also notes the erosion of multilateralism and the RBO in a security-oriented EU/NATO context.	"Effective multilateral cooperation ... respect for international law, drawing on the UN Charter" + "erosion of multilateralism and the rules-based world order."	Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia (2024)
South Africa	2024	UNGA statement	ILBO core	The speech justifies multilateralism, sovereign equality and the legitimacy of solutions through the UN.	The most explicit anchor is the typical "Charter / international law" formulation.	Republic of South Africa (2024)

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TABLE A2: EXTENDED RECORD OF THE ATTITUDES OF COUNTRIES, INTERNATIONAL ORGANISATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS TOWARDS ILBO OR RBO (CONTINUED)

Country/organisation	Year	Document (short)	Framework	Anchor (A) – predominant	Anchor (B) – most explicit	Source
South Africa	2026	Statement to UNSC (Venezuela)	Mixed (ILBO↔RBO)	The ILBO core (sovereign equality, prohibition of force, peaceful settlement of disputes) is enhanced by the explicit formula "rules-based ... based on international law".	"We all benefit from a rules-based international order based on international law."	Republic of South Africa (2026)
UK	2023	Integrated Review Refresh	Mixed (ILBO↔RBO)	The UK frames competition as a battle for "rules/norms/institutions", but explicitly states that defending the post-Cold War RBO alone is no longer sufficient.	It concludes: "... respect for the ... UN Charter and international law" + "defending the post-Cold War 'rules-based international system' are no longer sufficient ..."	HM Government (2023)
UK	2025	House of Lords debate	RBO core	Parliamentary discourse legitimises a modernised RBO as the basis for international responsibility and political community.	"Support to a modernised rules-based international order ..."	House of Lords (2025)
US	2019	Report on the WTO Appellate Body	RBO (trade)	"Rules-based" is used as a justification for reforming/limiting judicial interpretation and "unwritten obligations".	"A critically important component of maintaining confidence in a rules-based trading system ... [is] ... ensuring that ... bodies... do not impose obligations that are not contained in the WTO Agreements."	Office of the United States Trade Representative (2019)
US	2022	National Security Strategy	Mixed (RBO + ILBO)	The NSS legitimises the "rules-based order" as the broad desire of most countries, while the links this to the fundamental principles of the UN and international law.	"The vast majority of countries want a stable and open rules-based order ..." and "uphold the ... principles of the United Nations, including respect for international law."	The White House (2022)
US	2025	National Security Strategy	RBO (critical-defensive)	The document explicitly problematises the "so-called rules-based international order" as a tool/ideology of opponents and places it in a competitive framework.	"Their vision for a future global order is the so-called 'rules-based international order' ..."	The White House (2025)
US	2026	National Defence Strategy	No ILBO/RBO; it is "peace through strength"	The dominant logic is that of geostrategic coercion/deterrence ("peace through strength"), not a normative typology of order.	"This is how we will set conditions for lasting peace through strength ..."	United States Department of War (2026)

Source: author's own elaboration, based on the documents listed in the final column and the accompanying *Zenodo* dataset (Brglez 2026c).

NA MEDNARODNEM PRAVU ALI NA PRAVILIH UTEMELJEN MEDNARODNI RED? POLITIKA MEDNARODNEGA PRAVA V PRIMERJALNI PERSPEKTIVI

Članek analizira sodobno izpodbijanje globalnega reda z razlikovanjem med redom, utemeljenim na mednarodnem pravu (ILBO), in mednarodnim redom, utemeljenim na pravilih (RBO). Zagovarja tezo, da so polikrize po letu 2008 in multipolarizacija mednarodne skupnosti oslabile institucionalno učinkovitost liberalnega mednarodnega reda (LIO) ter ponovno odprle vprašanje legitimne legalnosti. Primerja ILBO, ki je zasidran v doktrini pravnih virov, Ustanovni listini Združenih narodov in metodah tolmačenja mednarodnega prava, z RBO kot širšim in bolj politično interpretativnim okvirom. Primerjava je organizirana okrog treh meril: normativne strukture, institucionalne infrastrukture in izvrševanja. Članek nato v odnosu do problematike razvije primerjalno tipologijo državnih strategij ter se opre na kritične pravne študije, da bi tudi mednarodno pravo razumel kot polje političnega boja. Sklepno razvije strateški legalizem kot način, s katerim lahko male države mednarodno pravo uporabljajo relacijsko pri upravljanju asimetrij moči v mednarodni skupnosti.

Ključne besede: liberalni mednarodni red (LIO); mednarodni red, utemeljen na pravilih (RBO); primerjalna politika; red, utemeljen na mednarodnem pravu (ILBO); strateški legalizem.

FRAGMENTATION AND DIFFERENTIATED INTEGRATION IN EU DEFENCE POLICY

Roman HORÁK[1]

This article analyses the structural and political factors constraining deeper integration in the European Union's security and defence policy after 2014, particularly following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The article argues that the principal obstacle to deeper defence integration is not insufficient military capability, but the persistence of political, strategic, and defence-industrial fragmentation among member states. The study applies a concept-driven qualitative analysis combining comparative political analysis, political economy, and European integration studies. It examines divergent strategic cultures, fragmented defence-industrial structures, and the institutional limitations of major EU defence initiatives. The analysis demonstrates that geopolitical pressure has accelerated defence cooperation without fundamentally overcoming intergovernmentalism or national strategic divergence. Consequently, contemporary EU defence integration is interpreted as a process of differentiated and politically contested integration rather than a linear transition towards a unified European defence union.

Key words: European Union security and defence policy, political economy, strategic autonomy, integration, fragmentation.

1 INTRODUCTION

The deterioration of the European security environment after 2014, particularly following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, fundamentally intensified debates concerning the future of European integration and the geopolitical role of the European Union (EU). For decades, the EU primarily developed as an economic and regulatory power whose international influence relied more on trade, diplomacy, and multilateralism than on military capabilities. Although the gradual institutionalisation of the Common Foreign and Security

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Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) reflected ambitions to strengthen the EU's strategic role, defence cooperation remained sensitive, fragmented, and heavily dependent on NATO and the United States (European Parliament 2025). Consequently, European integration evolved asymmetrically, with economic integration advancing significantly faster than defence integration.

Debates concerning the limitations of European defence integration are not new and have accompanied the integration process since the early post-Cold War period. Earlier discussions frequently focused on the so-called "capability-expectations gap" of the European Union, referring to the discrepancy between the EU's geopolitical ambitions and its limited military capabilities and operational capacities (Hill 1993). Similarly, numerous authors interpreted the weaknesses of European defence cooperation primarily through insufficient defence spending, inadequate military readiness, fragmented force structures, or the absence of credible power-projection capabilities (Howorth 2007; Menon 2011). From this perspective, the principal obstacle to deeper integration was often understood primarily as a military-capability deficit.

The geopolitical consequences of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent war in Ukraine exposed the structural limitations of this model. The conflict revealed Europe's insufficient preparedness for high-intensity military confrontation and intensified debates regarding strategic autonomy, defence-industrial resilience, and the future of European defence cooperation (Masters 2023; Orenstein 2025). Simultaneously, uncertainty surrounding the long-term reliability of American security guarantees, particularly during Donald Trump's presidency, strengthened political demands for a more autonomous European security role (Diamond 2017; Gordon 2017). These developments accelerated the creation of new EU defence initiatives aimed at increasing industrial coordination, strengthening defence production, and improving collective capabilities.

Despite this geopolitical pressure, however, European defence integration remains politically contested and structurally uneven. Divergent strategic cultures, competing national interests, different threat perceptions, and conflicting visions of the relationship between the EU and NATO continue to shape member states' approaches to defence cooperation. Eastern European countries, particularly Poland and the Baltic states, prioritise transatlantic security guarantees and deterrence against Russia, while France increasingly advocates stronger European strategic autonomy (Beaucillon 2023; Abbas 2025). Germany traditionally adopted a more cautious and economically restrained security posture shaped by post-war political culture, whereas Italy and Spain have often prioritised instability in the Mediterranean region, migration pressures, and crisis-management operations in North Africa and the Sahel (Encina 2024). Nordic countries, particularly Finland after 2022, increasingly emphasise territorial defence, societal resilience, and closer NATO integration in response to Russian revisionism. These differences complicate the formation of a common strategic culture while limiting the EU's capacity to function as a coherent security actor (Meyer 2006).

Against this background, the article argues that the principal obstacle to deeper EU defence integration is not merely insufficient military capability or financial resources, but rather the persistence of political, industrial, and strategic fragmentation among member states. In this article, the term "structural fragmentation" refers not simply to temporary political disagreements among governments, but to persistent and institutionalised divisions embedded within

the political, industrial, strategic, and organisational architecture of European defence cooperation. These include nationally organised defence-industrial systems, divergent strategic cultures, fragmented procurement structures, competing understandings of sovereignty, and different geopolitical orientations regarding the role of NATO and the United States in European security. Although the new geopolitical environment has accelerated cooperation and stimulated institutional innovation, it has not fundamentally transformed the intergovernmental logic that continues to dominate European defence policy (Moravcsik 1998; Fazekas 2024). The article therefore interprets current developments not as the emergence of a fully integrated European defence system, but as a process of differentiated and politically contested integration shaped by competing national interests and asymmetrical strategic priorities.

The main objective of the article is to analyse the political and structural factors constraining the development of a more coherent EU security and defence policy in the new geopolitical era. Attention is devoted to three interconnected dimensions: the fragmentation of the European defence industry, divergent strategic cultures and threat perceptions among member states, and the limitations of current EU defence initiatives. Rather than approaching defence integration primarily through military-operational perspectives, the article analyses it as a broader political and institutional process shaped by competing understandings of sovereignty, strategic autonomy, and European integration.

The article contributes to debates on differentiated integration, strategic autonomy, and the political economy of European defence by examining the tension between growing geopolitical pressures for collective action and the persistence of national political and industrial interests. Existing discussions often focus either on the geopolitical necessity of strengthening European defence cooperation or on the institutional development of EU defence instruments. Less attention, however, has been devoted to the structural contradictions limiting deeper integration despite increasing external pressure. The article therefore examines why geopolitical threats alone remain insufficient to overcome political fragmentation within European defence governance.

Methodologically, the study is based on a concept-driven qualitative analysis combining comparative political analysis, political economy, European studies, and security studies. The article relies primarily on the interpretative analysis of academic literature, EU strategic documents, institutional reports, and policy analyses related to European defence cooperation and defence-industrial policy. The concept-driven approach was operationalised through the thematic analysis and comparative interpretation of selected primary and secondary sources structured around three analytical dimensions: strategic fragmentation, defence-industrial organisation, and differentiated integration. The selection of sources reflected both institutional relevance and temporal significance, particularly in relation to the geopolitical turning points of 2014 and 2022. Rather than testing causal hypotheses through quantitative methods, the study focuses on identifying political contradictions, institutional dynamics, and structural patterns shaping the evolution of EU defence integration. The comparative dimension of the analysis is reflected in the examination of different strategic preferences among member states, particularly regarding strategic autonomy, defence-industrial cooperation, and relations with NATO.

Several research limitations should also be acknowledged. First, the rapidly evolving geopolitical environment means that many current defence initiatives remain institutionally incomplete, limiting the possibility of evaluating their long-term effectiveness. Second, the article does not attempt to provide

quantitative measurements of military capabilities or defence expenditures. Third, the analysis focuses primarily on political and institutional dimensions of integration rather than operational military planning or technological aspects of defence production.

The article is structured into four sections. The first section analyses the geopolitical transformation of the European security environment and its implications for EU defence integration. The second section examines the fragmentation of the European defence industry and the political economy of defence-industrial cooperation. The third section evaluates major EU defence initiatives and their institutional limitations. The fourth section analyses the future prospects and structural constraints of European defence integration in the context of differentiated integration and strategic autonomy. The conclusion summarises the main findings and reflects on the broader implications of fragmented defence integration for the future of the European Union.

2 METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The transformation of the European Union's security and defence policy after 2014, particularly following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, intensified debates concerning European defence integration, strategic autonomy, and the geopolitical role of the EU. Despite the growing number of studies devoted to European defence cooperation, significant disagreements persist regarding whether current developments represent deeper political integration or primarily a geopolitical adaptation to external pressure. This article approaches these debates from the perspective of comparative political analysis and political economy, arguing that EU defence integration must be understood not only as a security issue but also as a politically contested process shaped by divergent national interests, strategic cultures, and institutional preferences.

The article also builds upon earlier theoretical debates concerning the nature and limits of European integration in sovereignty-sensitive policy areas. Classical integration theories frequently assumed that functional cooperation and economic interdependence would gradually stimulate political integration across broader policy domains (Haas 1958; Keohane and Nye 1977). However, security and defence policy historically remained resistant to supranationalisation due to its direct connection to state sovereignty, national strategic cultures, and the legitimate use of force (Hoffmann 1966). Consequently, defence integration has long represented one of the most politically contested dimensions of the European integration process.

The theoretical framework of the article draws upon three interconnected analytical perspectives: differentiated integration, strategic autonomy, and the political economy of defence integration. Together, these approaches explain why the European Union simultaneously demonstrates growing geopolitical ambitions and persistent structural fragmentation.

The first analytical approach is differentiated integration, reflecting the uneven development of European integration across policy areas and member states (Schimmelfennig et al. 2015). Defence policy remains one of the most sovereignty-sensitive domains of European cooperation, limiting the prospects for full supranational integration. In practice, this has produced a selective and asymmetric model of cooperation in which member states participate in defence initiatives according to different strategic priorities and political preferences.

Instruments such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) illustrate this logic by enabling flexible participation in selected projects (EDA 2025b). While differentiated integration facilitates cooperation and reduces institutional deadlock, it also reinforces fragmentation by institutionalising varying levels of political commitment.

From this perspective, fragmentation should not be interpreted merely as a temporary failure of political coordination, but rather as an institutionalised feature of the European integration model itself. Defence integration evolves unevenly because member states retain different levels of willingness to transfer authority, coordinate procurement policies, or align strategic priorities. Structural fragmentation therefore reflects the coexistence of partially integrated European institutions with persistent national control over strategic decision-making and defence-industrial organisation.

The second analytical dimension is strategic autonomy, which has become a central concept in contemporary debates on European defence. Strategic autonomy generally refers to the EU's ability to act independently in security, and defence matters without excessive dependence on external actors, particularly the United States (Beaucillon 2023). However, the concept remains politically contested. France traditionally interprets strategic autonomy as a prerequisite for European geopolitical sovereignty, whereas many Central and Eastern European states continue to perceive transatlantic relations and American military presence as indispensable security guarantees against Russia (Fiott 2018). Strategic autonomy therefore functions not only as a policy objective but also as a source of political disagreement regarding the future direction of European integration (Biscop 2022).

At the same time, the concept itself reflects broader tensions between supranational ambitions and national strategic traditions. While some member states perceive strategic autonomy as necessary for strengthening Europe's geopolitical relevance, others interpret it more cautiously due to fears that greater European autonomy could weaken NATO cohesion or reduce American strategic engagement in Europe. Strategic autonomy therefore represents not only a geopolitical objective but also a contested political framework through which member states negotiate the future balance between European integration and transatlantic dependence.

The third analytical dimension is grounded in the political economy of defence integration. From this perspective, defence cooperation is shaped not only by shared security concerns but also by industrial competition, economic interests, and national political priorities. The European defence sector remains fragmented and dominated by nationally protected defence-industrial actors competing for contracts, technological leadership, and political influence (Borrell 2024; Mueller 2024). National governments frequently prioritise domestic defence industries and employment over deeper market integration, contributing to fragmented procurement processes, duplicated military systems, and limited interoperability. Defence-industrial fragmentation is therefore interpreted not merely as a technical inefficiency, but as a structural manifestation of broader political and economic divisions within European integration.

The article conceptualises these structural divisions as historically embedded and institutionally reproduced patterns rather than short-term political disagreements. In this context, "structural" refers to persistent organisational arrangements, procurement systems, industrial dependencies, alliance

preferences, and strategic cultures that systematically shape the behaviour of member states within the European defence framework. Political contradictions become structural when they are repeatedly reproduced through institutional practices, nationally organised defence markets, divergent strategic doctrines, and competing understandings of sovereignty and geopolitical responsibility.

These three perspectives are closely interconnected. Geopolitical pressures generated by the war in Ukraine have intensified demands for stronger European defence cooperation, yet integration continues to be constrained by divergent strategic cultures and competing national interests. The article therefore conceptualises EU defence integration as a politically contested process situated between geopolitical necessity and institutional fragmentation. Rather than moving linearly towards a unified European defence union, the EU is developing a hybrid model characterised by selective cooperation, partial integration, and persistent intergovernmentalism (Schimmelfennig et al. 2015; Moravcsik 1998).

Methodologically, the article applies a concept-driven qualitative analysis based on the interpretative examination of academic literature, political documents, institutional reports, and policy analyses related to European defence cooperation and defence-industrial policy. The application of this qualitative approach was operationalised through a systematic coding and thematic categorisation of the selected material based on the pre-defined analytical pillars: industrial fragmentation, strategic sovereignty, and geopolitical divergence. This process allowed for the identification of recurring patterns and structural tensions across different levels of EU governance.

More specifically, the analytical procedure focused on identifying recurring political and institutional patterns related to four dimensions:

- the persistence of nationally organised defence-industrial structures;
- divergent threat perceptions among member states;
- varying interpretations of strategic autonomy;
- and tensions between supranational coordination and intergovernmental control.

The selected sources were comparatively analysed to identify how these themes evolved before and after the geopolitical turning points of 2014 and 2022. This methodological approach enabled the article to examine not only policy developments themselves but also the deeper institutional and political contradictions shaping the evolution of EU defence integration.

The study relies primarily on qualitative secondary sources, including EU strategic frameworks such as the Strategic Compass, EDF, PESCO, ASAP, EDIRPA, and ReArm Europe. The selection of these primary and secondary sources followed the criteria of institutional representativeness and temporal relevance, ensuring that the analysis captures the critical shifts in EU defence policy following the milestones of 2014 and 2022. Rather than testing causal hypotheses through quantitative methods, the analysis focuses on identifying political contradictions, institutional dynamics, and structural constraints shaping the evolution of EU defence integration.

The comparative dimension of the article is reflected in the analysis of differing strategic approaches among member states, particularly between Eastern European countries prioritising deterrence against Russia and strong transatlantic ties, Western European actors advocating stronger strategic autonomy, and Southern European states emphasising instability in the Mediterranean and North Africa. These differences demonstrate that the EU does

not operate as a strategically homogeneous actor but as a framework shaped by competing geopolitical experiences and political priorities. The divergent strategic orientations of these member state groups, which underpin the current structural fragmentation, are synthesised in Table 1.

TABLE 1: STRATEGIC ORIENTATIONS AND DEFENCE PRIORITIES OF EU MEMBER STATE GROUPS

Strategic Group	Primary Security Threats	Key Defence Priorities	Relation to NATO & USA
Eastern Member States (e.g. Poland, Baltic States)	Russian revisionism, conventional high-intensity warfare	Deterrence, territorial defence, rapid military modernisation	Absolute priority; US security guarantees are seen as existential.
Western Member States (e.g. France, Germany)	Geopolitical irrelevance, industrial fragmentation, global instability	Strategic autonomy, European sovereignty, industrial integration	Complementary; seeking to reduce over-reliance on the US
Southern Member States (e.g. Italy, Spain, Greece)	Instability in the Sahel/MENA region, migration, hybrid threats	Crisis management, maritime security, Mediterranean stability	Supportive; focused on the '360-degree approach' to security

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Beaucillon (2023), Biscop (2022), and EDA (2025b).

The article deliberately avoids several methodological assumptions common in debates on European defence integration. First, it does not assume that geopolitical pressure automatically produces deeper political integration. Second, it does not interpret EU defence initiatives such as EDF or PESCO as evidence of irreversible integration. Third, the analysis avoids normative assumptions regarding the desirability of a European Defence Union and instead focuses on the political and institutional conditions facilitating or constraining integration.

This distinction is important because a significant part of the contemporary debate on European defence policy remains strongly normative, frequently presenting deeper defence integration as both strategically necessary and politically inevitable. In contrast, this article approaches defence integration primarily as an empirically contingent and politically contested process shaped by competing institutional interests, differentiated strategic cultures, and uneven geopolitical pressures.

Several limitations should also be acknowledged. The rapidly evolving geopolitical environment means that many current defence initiatives remain in an early stage of implementation, limiting the possibility of evaluating their long-term effectiveness. Furthermore, the article focuses primarily on political and institutional dynamics rather than operational military planning or technological aspects of defence production. Nevertheless, the chosen methodological framework allows for an analytically coherent examination of the structural tensions shaping the future of European defence integration.

3 GEOPOLITICAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE EVOLUTION OF EU SECURITY AND DEFENCE POLICY

The development of the European Union's security and defence policy has historically reflected a tension between deepening economic integration and the persistence of national sovereignty in security affairs. While post-war European integration produced extensive economic and institutional interdependence, defence policy remained closely linked to NATO and the transatlantic security architecture dominated by the United States. Consequently, the EU evolved primarily as an economic and regulatory actor rather than as an autonomous

geopolitical power (Hyde-Price 2007). The transformation of the international environment after 2014, however, increasingly challenged this model and intensified debates concerning the future role of the EU in a changing global order.

The origins of these debates can be traced much earlier than the contemporary geopolitical crises of the 2020s. Since the early stages of European integration, defence cooperation represented one of the most politically sensitive areas of integration due to its direct connection to sovereignty and national strategic autonomy. While economic integration gradually expanded through supranational institutions, defence cooperation remained largely intergovernmental and dependent on the transatlantic security framework established during the Cold War. Early attempts to create a European Defence Community in the 1950s failed precisely because member states were unwilling to transfer control over military affairs to supranational structures. This historical legacy significantly shaped the later evolution of European security and defence cooperation.

The institutional foundations of European defence cooperation emerged after the Cold War, particularly through the Maastricht Treaty and the establishment of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) (European Parliament 2025). Nevertheless, the wars in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s exposed Europe's limited capacity for autonomous crisis management and reinforced dependence on American military capabilities. These conflicts stimulated broader debates regarding the so-called "capability-expectations gap," referring to the discrepancy between the EU's growing political ambitions and its limited military and operational capacities (Hill 1993). In many respects, the Balkan crises demonstrated that the EU possessed increasing political aspirations but lacked the institutional coordination, military capabilities, and strategic coherence necessary for independent geopolitical action.

Subsequent initiatives within the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), including EU battlegroups and institutional coordination mechanisms, sought to improve European crisis-management capacities without fundamentally challenging NATO's dominant role. The 1998 Saint-Malo Declaration between France and the United Kingdom represented another important milestone, as it explicitly recognised the necessity for the European Union to develop autonomous military capabilities where NATO was not engaged. However, despite subsequent institutional developments, defence cooperation continued to evolve cautiously and unevenly due to persistent disagreements concerning sovereignty, burden-sharing, and the future relationship between the EU and NATO (Howorth 2007).

This dual structure became a defining feature of European defence integration. Although the EU gradually expanded its institutional framework, NATO remained the primary guarantor of territorial defence and strategic deterrence. The "Berlin Plus" arrangements institutionalised this relationship by enabling the EU to utilise NATO assets for EU-led operations (European Union 2007). While this strengthened operational cooperation, it also reinforced Europe's strategic dependence on the transatlantic alliance.

The geopolitical consequences of the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 significantly altered the European security debate. The crisis challenged assumptions about the stability of the post-Cold War European order and exposed structural weaknesses within European defence systems, including fragmented procurement, limited industrial coordination, and insufficient military preparedness (Masters 2023). Importantly, the crisis did not create

these structural weaknesses but rather exposed and intensified long-standing institutional and political contradictions within European defence cooperation. Problems such as fragmented procurement systems, divergent strategic cultures, and dependence on American military capabilities had been present for decades but became significantly more visible under conditions of renewed geopolitical confrontation.

Although the EU responded through sanctions against Russia and closer cooperation with NATO (European Council 2025), the crisis intensified discussions regarding strategic autonomy, defence-industrial resilience, and the future of European defence cooperation. At the same time, the EU faced growing security pressures extending beyond Eastern Europe, including migration crises, hybrid threats, cyberattacks, instability in North Africa, and broader geopolitical competition (Orenstein 2025). However, member states interpreted these challenges differently according to their geographical position, historical experience, and strategic priorities. Eastern European states primarily perceived Russia as the central security threat, while Southern European countries focused more on instability in the Mediterranean and migration-related pressures (Encina 2024). France increasingly promoted stronger European strategic autonomy, whereas Poland and the Baltic states continued to prioritise NATO and American military guarantees as indispensable components of deterrence against Russia (Abbas 2025).

These divergent threat perceptions complicated the emergence of a common European strategic culture (Meyer 2006). The structure of the European defence industry reflects broader political and economic divisions within the European integration project (Ivančík and Majchút 2026). Germany, for example, traditionally adopted a more cautious and economically oriented security approach shaped by post-war political constraints, while France pursued a more interventionist and sovereignty-oriented conception of European defence. Italy and Spain frequently emphasised Mediterranean instability, migration management, and crisis-response operations in North Africa, whereas Nordic states increasingly prioritised territorial defence, resilience, and hybrid-threat preparedness after the deterioration of relations with Russia. These differences demonstrate that European defence integration remains shaped by multiple regional security logics rather than by a single shared strategic vision.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 represented a major turning point in this process. The war demonstrated that conventional interstate conflict had returned to Europe and exposed both Europe's military vulnerabilities and the limitations of its defence-industrial base. European states rapidly depleted ammunition stockpiles while supporting Ukraine, revealing insufficient production capacities and limited industrial coordination (European Commission 2024). As a result, debates concerning strategic autonomy, defence-industrial resilience, and European defence cooperation intensified significantly.

One of the most important institutional responses was the adoption of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence in 2022 (EEAS 2022). The document represented the EU's most comprehensive attempt to define a shared strategic framework by emphasising military mobility, defence investment, cyber resilience, and defence-industrial cooperation. More broadly, it symbolised a shift from viewing the EU primarily as a normative or civilian power towards a more geopolitical understanding of European integration (Ivančík and Andrassy 2025).

At the same time, however, the Strategic Compass also reflected the limits of European strategic convergence. Although the document articulated common objectives, member states continued to differ substantially regarding the meaning of strategic autonomy, the relationship with NATO, and the prioritisation of security threats. Consequently, the Strategic Compass represented less a fully unified strategic doctrine than a compromise framework balancing different geopolitical preferences within the Union.

Despite this transformation, however, structural limitations remain substantial. Geopolitical pressures strengthened incentives for cooperation but did not fundamentally alter the intergovernmental nature of European defence policy (Moravcsik 1998; Fazekas 2024). Member states continue to prioritise national procurement strategies, domestic defence industries, and distinct strategic preferences. Consequently, divergent strategic cultures and fragmented governance continue to limit the emergence of a coherent European defence framework.

The transatlantic dimension further complicates these dynamics. During Donald Trump's presidency, uncertainty regarding the reliability of American security commitments strengthened calls for greater European strategic autonomy (Diamond 2017; Gordon 2017). Although the Biden administration partially restored confidence in transatlantic relations (Latici 2021), many European policymakers increasingly recognise that future American strategic priorities are likely to focus more heavily on competition with China and the Indo-Pacific region. This perception has strengthened arguments for increasing Europe's autonomous defence capacity. Nevertheless, many Central and Eastern European states continue to view strategic autonomy cautiously, fearing that it could weaken NATO and reduce American engagement in European security.

China's growing geopolitical role has further intensified these debates (Hyde-Price 2007). The EU increasingly perceives China simultaneously as an economic partner, technological competitor, and systemic rival (Stahl 2024). Dependence on Chinese supply chains and critical raw materials has therefore become linked not only to economic policy but also to questions of security and defence-industrial resilience (Dempsey 2023). European defence policy is thus increasingly shaped by broader geo-economic competition rather than by military considerations alone.

This broader geopolitical transformation has contributed to the gradual "geopoliticisation" of European integration itself. Security, industrial resilience, technological sovereignty, energy dependence, and supply-chain security increasingly overlap within a single strategic framework. As a result, European defence policy can no longer be analysed exclusively through traditional military or alliance perspectives but must also be understood within the wider context of geo-economic competition and systemic geopolitical rivalry (Balfour et al. 2024; Ivančík and Andrassy 2025).

The contemporary geopolitical transformation of the EU therefore reflects a paradoxical dynamic. External pressures have accelerated defence cooperation and strengthened the political legitimacy of a more active European security role. Simultaneously, however, they have exposed persistent structural divisions concerning sovereignty, strategic priorities, industrial policy, and the relationship between the EU and NATO. Rather than producing a unified defence actor, the new geopolitical environment has intensified a process of

differentiated and politically contested integration shaped by competing national interests and asymmetrical security perceptions.

4 FRAGMENTATION AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE EUROPEAN DEFENCE INDUSTRY

One of the principal structural obstacles limiting the development of a more coherent European security and defence policy is the persistent fragmentation of the European defence-industrial sector. Although the war in Ukraine intensified political demands for stronger defence cooperation and strategic autonomy, the European defence market remains characterised by institutional fragmentation, industrial nationalism, and competing national interests. As a result, the EU faces a paradoxical situation in which growing geopolitical ambitions coexist with a defence-industrial structure that undermines collective efficiency, interoperability, and long-term strategic resilience.

The fragmentation of the European defence industry reflects broader political and economic divisions within the European integration project (Ivančík and Majchút 2026). Defence production has historically been closely connected to national sovereignty, domestic employment, and technological autonomy (Hartley 2011). Consequently, member states have traditionally prioritised the protection of national defence industries over deeper market integration and supranational coordination. This logic has produced a highly decentralised defence market in which national governments remain the dominant regulators, investors, and purchasers of military equipment.

Historically, European governments have regarded defence industries not merely as economic sectors but as strategic components of state sovereignty and geopolitical autonomy. Defence-industrial capacities are closely linked to national security planning, technological know-how, employment policy, and export potential. As a result, defence-industrial policy has evolved through nationally organised structures that member states remain reluctant to fully integrate at the supranational level. This institutional path dependency contributes significantly to the persistence of fragmentation within the European defence market.

A direct consequence of this fragmentation is the duplication of defence systems across Europe. European armed forces operate numerous incompatible weapons platforms and procurement systems despite collectively spending substantial resources on defence (Borrell 2024; Bran 2024). Compared to the United States, which benefits from a relatively integrated defence-industrial structure and economies of scale, the European market remains divided into nationally organised production systems shaped by domestic political priorities (Hartley 2011).

This fragmentation is further reinforced by industrial nationalism. Governments frequently perceive defence industries not only as strategic assets but also as instruments of economic policy and technological sovereignty. Because defence production supports domestic employment, innovation, and national supply chains, many governments remain reluctant to expose national industries to full-scale European competition (Biscop 2019). Consequently, procurement decisions are frequently shaped as much by political and economic considerations as by collective European interests.

These dynamics are also reflected in the implementation of recent EU defence initiatives, including the European Defence Fund (EDF). Although the EDF was designed to stimulate cross-border cooperation and reduce industrial fragmentation, participation in EDF-supported projects frequently reflects the existing asymmetries of the European defence-industrial landscape. Larger member states with stronger industrial capacities, particularly France, Germany, Italy, and Spain, often occupy dominant positions within major defence-industrial consortia and strategic technological projects. In practice, EDF cooperation therefore frequently combines supranational coordination with continued competition among national industrial champions seeking technological leadership, export opportunities, and political influence within the evolving European defence market.

The tensions surrounding projects such as the Future Combat Air System (FCAS) involving France, Germany, and Spain, or the Main Ground Combat System (MGCS), illustrate that even highly integrated defence-industrial initiatives remain shaped by disputes over technological control, industrial participation, intellectual property, and leadership distribution. Rather than eliminating national competition, European defence-industrial cooperation often relocates it to the supranational level. Consequently, EDF mechanisms may simultaneously encourage cooperation while reproducing structural competition among member states and defence-industrial actors.

The institutional framework of the EU provides a legal basis for this dynamic. Article 346 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) allows member states to exempt defence procurement from common internal market rules based on national security. Although strategically justified, this provision enables governments to maintain protectionist procurement policies and favour domestic producers, thereby limiting the development of an integrated European defence market.

From a political economy perspective, Article 346 institutionalises the coexistence of market integration and sovereign exemption within European defence governance. While the EU promotes competition and market harmonisation in most economic sectors, defence procurement remains partially shielded from supranational market pressures precisely because military production continues to be perceived as an essential component of national sovereignty. This creates a structurally hybrid system situated between integration and national protectionism (Hartley 2011; Hartley 2024).

Beyond legal and economic factors, differences in strategic culture and threat perception also shape procurement behaviour. States facing immediate security pressures, particularly on NATO's eastern flank, frequently prioritise rapid acquisition and operational reliability over long-term European industrial integration. Since 2022, several Central and Eastern European countries have accelerated defence modernisation through purchases of American and South Korean military systems rather than waiting for European alternatives (Hellberg et al. 2025; Nemeth 2024).

Poland's acquisition of South Korean K2 tanks and K9 howitzers illustrates how urgent security concerns can reinforce dependence on external suppliers while simultaneously exposing the limited responsiveness of the European defence industry. In this context, dependence on non-European military technologies represents a significant structural limitation of European defence integration. Despite political declarations concerning strategic autonomy, many EU member

states continue to rely heavily on American military systems, including F-35 fighter aircraft and Patriot missile defence systems (Anicetti 2025).

This divergence between political declarations and procurement behaviour reveals one of the central contradictions of contemporary European defence integration. While strategic autonomy is increasingly promoted at the institutional level, many national governments continue to prioritise immediate operational effectiveness, alliance compatibility, and rapid delivery timelines over long-term European industrial consolidation (Fiott 2018). Fragmentation is therefore reproduced not only through institutional arrangements but also through rational national security calculations shaped by different geopolitical positions and threat perceptions.

This dependence reflects not only military preferences but also deeper technological and industrial asymmetries. The United States benefits from larger financial investments, integrated procurement structures, and greater production capacity, making American systems more immediately available and often politically attractive for European governments. At the same time, the European defence-industrial sector remains vulnerable to disruptions in global supply chains. Modern defence production depends heavily on semiconductors, rare earth elements, and critical raw materials, many of which originate from geopolitically sensitive regions, particularly China (Ragonnaud 2023).

Strategic autonomy, therefore, increasingly involves not only military capability but also industrial resilience and control over critical supply chains (Ivančík and Dušek 2026). The COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine further exposed these vulnerabilities. For instance, the rapid depletion of ammunition stockpiles during military support for Ukraine demonstrated that European defence industries lacked the production capacity necessary for sustained high-intensity conflict (European Commission 2024). The ammunition crisis thus reflected broader structural weaknesses, including fragmented production systems and limited scalability.

These weaknesses have intensified debates concerning the relationship between strategic autonomy and market integration. While geopolitical pressures strengthened arguments for joint procurement, national governments continue to prioritise domestic control over strategic industries. This tension reflects a fundamental contradiction: although collective action is increasingly necessary in response to external threats, political authority and strategic decision-making remain predominantly national.

From a political economy perspective, fragmentation also reproduces asymmetries among member states. Larger countries with stronger industrial bases, such as France, Germany, and Italy, possess greater capacity to shape the direction of European defence cooperation than smaller member states. Consequently, debates surrounding integration concern not only security policy but also industrial leadership, economic competition, and the distribution of political influence within the EU.

Smaller and medium-sized member states frequently face the risk of becoming technologically dependent on larger European defence-industrial actors, potentially reinforcing internal asymmetries within the Union itself. As a result, resistance to deeper industrial integration may also reflect concerns regarding unequal distribution of economic benefits, technological leadership, and political influence inside the evolving European defence-industrial framework.

Ultimately, fragmentation undermines the EU's credibility as a geopolitical actor. Although the Union increasingly presents itself as a strategic power, its capacity for autonomous action remains constrained by dependence on external suppliers and fragmented procurement systems. The absence of an integrated defence-industrial base restricts Europe's ability to sustain long-term military production and independently manage major security crises.

The debate on strategic autonomy therefore reveals a broader structural dilemma. The EU seeks to strengthen its geopolitical role while simultaneously preserving a decentralised political and industrial structure rooted in national sovereignty (Ivančík and Andrassy 2025). If defence-industrial policy remains primarily shaped by national priorities, the development of a more integrated European defence capacity will continue to face substantial limitations.

In this sense, the fragmentation of the European defence industry should not be interpreted merely as an economic inefficiency but as a structural manifestation of the broader contradictions embedded within the European integration process itself. Defence-industrial fragmentation persists because member states continue to balance two partially conflicting objectives: the pursuit of collective European strategic capacity and the preservation of national political, industrial, and sovereign control over one of the most strategically sensitive sectors of the state.

In conclusion, the fragmentation of the European defence industry represents more than a technical inefficiency; it reflects the deeper political contradictions of the integration project. Although geopolitical pressures after 2022 accelerated cooperation, they did not eliminate the structural tensions between supranational ambitions and national interests that continue to shape the political economy of European defence.

5 EU DEFENCE INITIATIVES BETWEEN INTEGRATION AND INTERGOVERNMENTALISM

The deterioration of the European security environment after 2014 and the escalation of the war in Ukraine after 2022 accelerated the development of new EU defence initiatives aimed at strengthening military cooperation, industrial coordination, and strategic resilience. In recent years, the EU has created a broad set of institutional and financial instruments designed to reduce fragmentation and improve collective defence capacities. These initiatives reflect a broader shift in European political discourse, as defence policy is increasingly understood not only as a national responsibility but also as a strategic European issue. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these initiatives remains constrained by persistent intergovernmentalism, divergent national interests, and limited political cohesion among member states.

Importantly, the proliferation of EU defence initiatives should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of irreversible supranational integration. Rather, many of these initiatives reflect an adaptive institutional response to increasing geopolitical pressure while preserving the underlying intergovernmental structure of European defence governance. In this sense, contemporary EU defence policy increasingly combines elements of supranational coordination with the continued predominance of national political authority in strategically sensitive areas.

One of the most significant developments in this regard was the establishment of the European Defence Fund (EDF), through which the EU began directly financing defence research and development from the common budget for the first time (EDA 2025a). The EDF was intended to encourage cross-border industrial cooperation, reduce duplication, and support the development of common defence technologies. Politically, it symbolised the growing legitimisation of defence policy within the broader European integration process.

Despite its symbolic significance, however, the EDF also illustrates the structural limitations of European defence integration. Its financial resources remain limited compared to American or Chinese defence investments, which reduces its transformative potential. More importantly, participation in EDF projects continues to reflect national industrial priorities and political bargaining among member states. Rather than replacing national defence-industrial strategies, the EDF largely operates within an already fragmented industrial environment.

The implementation of EDF-funded projects demonstrates that supranational financial mechanisms do not automatically eliminate competition among national defence-industrial actors. Instead, governments frequently seek to maximise domestic industrial participation, technological influence, and strategic control within multinational projects. Consequently, EDF cooperation often reflects negotiated compromises among national industrial interests rather than the emergence of a fully integrated European defence-industrial market.

A similar dynamic characterises Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), launched in 2017 as a framework for deeper defence cooperation among participating states (EDA 2025b). PESCO enabled flexible participation in projects related to military mobility, cybersecurity, surveillance systems, and capability development. From the perspective of differentiated integration, it represents an important mechanism for flexible cooperation without requiring full political consensus.

At the same time, however, PESCO also institutionalises the uneven nature of European defence integration. Many projects remain politically symbolic rather than operationally transformative, while member states continue to differ significantly in defence spending, strategic priorities, and political commitment. Consequently, PESCO demonstrates both the possibilities and limitations of differentiated integration: it facilitates cooperation among willing actors without eliminating fragmentation or creating a unified strategic framework.

This selective participation reflects the broader logic of differentiated integration within the European Union. Member states participate in defence initiatives according to varying strategic interests, financial capacities, and geopolitical priorities, resulting in a multilayered and asymmetrical model of cooperation rather than a unified defence architecture. While such flexibility reduces political deadlock, it simultaneously institutionalises differentiated levels of commitment and strategic convergence among participating states.

In response to the logistical challenges of the war in Ukraine, the EU accelerated additional initiatives focused on production and procurement. The Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP), adopted in 2023, sought to expand European ammunition production capacities and strengthen supply chains (European Commission 2023a). Similarly, the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA) aimed to encourage joint

procurement and reduce market fragmentation through financial incentives (European Commission 2023b).

While both initiatives reflected the recognition that strategic autonomy depends on industrial resilience, their implementation exposed further structural weaknesses within European defence governance. Expanding production requires long-term investment and coordinated planning, both of which remain difficult to achieve in a fragmented political environment. Member states often continue to prioritise national procurement decisions, thereby limiting the transformative potential of these common European initiatives.

The implementation of ASAP and EDIRPA further revealed the tension between short-term geopolitical urgency and long-term industrial integration. While the war in Ukraine created strong incentives for collective action, governments simultaneously prioritised rapid national procurement and immediate replenishment of military stockpiles. As a result, emergency-driven procurement behaviour frequently strengthened dependence on external suppliers and nationally organised procurement systems rather than accelerating deeper European market integration.

The same tension is visible in broader frameworks such as ReArm Europe and the Readiness 2030 initiative (Clapp et al. 2025). These initiatives emphasise military readiness and resilient supply chains while reflecting a more geopolitical understanding of European integration. Nevertheless, they also demonstrate the continuing dependence of European defence cooperation on political consensus. Significant disagreements persist regarding burden-sharing, financing mechanisms, and the relationship between EU defence initiatives and NATO.

Debates surrounding common financing mechanisms further illustrate the political sensitivity of defence integration. Proposals involving joint borrowing, common defence bonds, or collective procurement mechanisms raise broader questions concerning fiscal solidarity, political authority, and the distribution of strategic influence within the Union. Consequently, defence integration increasingly intersects with wider debates regarding the future institutional and fiscal architecture of the European project itself.

Furthermore, the growing emphasis on resilience illustrates the changing character of European security policy (Ivančík and Dušek 2026). Hybrid threats, cyberattacks, and supply-chain vulnerabilities increasingly blur the distinction between civilian and military security domains (Svete 2025). Consequently, EU defence initiatives increasingly incorporate broader resilience-oriented policies related to technological sovereignty and infrastructure protection. This reflects a transformation in which geopolitical competition encompasses economic and technological dimensions alongside traditional military concerns.

This evolution reflects the broader "geopoliticisation" of European integration, in which economic security, technological resilience, energy dependence, industrial policy, and defence planning increasingly converge within a single strategic framework (Biscop 2019). European defence policy is therefore no longer confined to traditional military cooperation but increasingly extends into the broader domain of geo-economic governance and strategic resource management (Balfour et al. 2024).

Ultimately, debates concerning the creation of a "European Defence Union" represent the most ambitious expression of these integration dynamics (CESI 2025). Supporters argue that deeper supranational coordination is necessary for

overcoming fragmentation and strengthening geopolitical credibility. Critics, however, maintain that defence policy remains too closely connected to national sovereignty to permit full integration (Moser 2024). Divergent strategic cultures and priorities therefore continue to constrain the emergence of a unified European structure.

The political feasibility of a fully integrated European Defence Union remains uncertain precisely because defence integration touches upon core dimensions of state sovereignty, including military command, procurement authority, strategic doctrine, and the legitimate use of force. Consequently, although geopolitical crises may accelerate institutional innovation, they do not automatically eliminate the historical and political constraints limiting supranationalisation in the security domain. This tension between integration and intergovernmentalism remains the defining characteristic of EU defence policy (Fazekas 2024). The EU has become more institutionally active than at any previous point in its history, yet these developments have not fundamentally displaced the intergovernmental logic dominating defence cooperation. Contemporary EU defence policy therefore reflects a hybrid model situated between supranational ambition and national sovereignty.

In practice, this hybrid model produces a form of defence governance characterised by selective integration, differentiated participation, and overlapping institutional frameworks involving the EU, NATO, national governments, and ad hoc coalitions of member states. While this arrangement enables flexibility and pragmatic adaptation to diverse strategic preferences, it simultaneously limits the emergence of a coherent and unified European strategic actor capable of autonomous geopolitical action.

In conclusion, while European defence initiatives create frameworks for coordination and industrial support, their implementation remains heavily dependent on the political preferences of member states. External geopolitical pressure has accelerated cooperation, yet it has not eliminated the structural fragmentation embedded within the European political order. Consequently, current developments should be interpreted not as a linear transition towards a unified system, but as a process of selective and differentiated integration shaped by persistent strategic divisions.

6 THE POLITICAL ECONOMY AND FUTURE PROSPECTS OF EUROPEAN DEFENCE INTEGRATION

The future of European defence integration will depend not only on the geopolitical environment but also on the ability of the European Union to manage the structural political and economic contradictions embedded within its integration model. The future trajectory of European defence integration will depend less on the existence of geopolitical threats themselves than on the political willingness of member states to institutionalise higher levels of strategic and industrial interdependence. Although the war in Ukraine accelerated defence cooperation and strengthened the geopolitical ambitions of the EU, European defence integration continues to be constrained by divergent strategic cultures, industrial fragmentation, and persistent intergovernmentalism. Consequently, debates on European defence increasingly reflect broader questions concerning the future direction of European integration itself.

Rather than moving towards a fully unified European defence structure, the current trajectory of integration suggests the emergence of a differentiated and multilayered security architecture characterised by varying levels of political commitment, strategic convergence, and industrial cooperation among member states. In this sense, differentiated integration increasingly appears not as a temporary transitional phase, but as the most realistic long-term model of European defence governance.

At the centre of future defence integration lies the problem of political asymmetry among member states. Although geopolitical pressures have strengthened incentives for collective action, states continue to interpret security priorities differently according to their historical experiences and strategic cultures. Eastern European countries primarily perceive defence integration through the lens of deterrence against Russia and therefore prioritise rapid military modernisation and strong transatlantic ties (Abbas 2025). Southern European states focus more heavily on instability in the Mediterranean region and migration-related challenges (Encina, 2024), while France increasingly frames defence integration in terms of European sovereignty and geopolitical autonomy (Beaucillon 2023).

These differences complicate the emergence of a common European strategic identity. External threats may temporarily strengthen political unity, but they do not eliminate deeper historical and political divisions shaping national security preferences (Malešič 2025). European defence integration therefore represents not only a response to geopolitical pressure but also a contested political process involving competing visions of Europe's role in international politics.

From a long-term perspective, these divergent strategic cultures are likely to produce a "core-periphery" dynamic within European defence cooperation (Schimmelfennig et al. 2015). A smaller group of strategically ambitious member states may pursue deeper industrial and operational integration, while others will continue to prioritise NATO-centred security arrangements and nationally controlled defence policies. Such differentiation may improve flexibility and enable more rapid cooperation among willing actors, but it may also deepen asymmetries within the Union itself.

The concept of strategic autonomy illustrates these tensions particularly clearly. Although strategic autonomy has become central to contemporary EU security debates, its practical meaning remains ambiguous. For some member states, it represents Europe's capacity to act independently within the transatlantic alliance; for others, it raises concerns regarding the weakening of NATO and reduced American military engagement in Europe. This ambiguity reflects a broader contradiction within European integration: the EU seeks greater geopolitical influence while remaining structurally dependent on the transatlantic security architecture.

The future development of strategic autonomy will therefore depend heavily on the evolution of transatlantic relations. A stable and predictable American commitment to European security may reduce political pressure for autonomous European defence structures, whereas renewed uncertainty surrounding US strategic priorities could significantly accelerate demands for deeper European defence coordination. In this regard, future changes in American foreign policy may become one of the most important external drivers shaping the pace and scope of European defence integration.

The relationship between the EU and NATO therefore remains one of the key determinants of future defence integration. NATO continues to provide capabilities that European states cannot independently replace, including nuclear deterrence, strategic transport, intelligence, and operational coordination (Taylor 2024). Consequently, even ambitious EU defence initiatives currently function more as complementary mechanisms within the transatlantic framework than as genuine alternatives to NATO.

For this reason, the most probable future scenario is not the replacement of NATO by autonomous European defence structures, but rather the gradual development of a more functionally differentiated transatlantic security system. Within such a framework, NATO would remain responsible for collective territorial defence and high-intensity deterrence, while the EU would increasingly focus on defence-industrial coordination, resilience, technological sovereignty, military mobility, and hybrid-threat management.

From a political economy perspective, the future trajectory of European defence integration will also depend on the EU's capacity to address defence-industrial fragmentation and financing constraints. Although defence spending has increased across Europe since 2022, investments continue to be channelled primarily through national procurement systems rather than coordinated European mechanisms (Centrone and Fernandes 2024). Without deeper market integration and long-term industrial coordination, higher defence expenditures alone are unlikely to significantly improve collective efficiency or interoperability (Ivančík and Majchút 2026).

Debates concerning common European financing mechanisms reflect this challenge. Proposals for defence bonds or joint financing instruments could strengthen industrial investment and encourage more integrated procurement practices (European Commission 2025). However, they also raise politically sensitive questions concerning fiscal solidarity, burden-sharing, and supranational authority. Larger member states may resist financing arrangements perceived as disproportionately benefiting others, while smaller states may fear domination by stronger industrial powers.

Consequently, future defence-industrial integration is likely to remain selective and politically negotiated rather than fully centralised. Cooperation will probably deepen primarily in sectors where member states perceive clear strategic interdependence, such as ammunition production, cybersecurity, military mobility, satellite systems, artificial intelligence, and critical supply chains. By contrast, areas closely connected to national prestige, strategic sovereignty, or domestic industrial employment are likely to remain more resistant to supranational consolidation.

The future of European defence integration is therefore closely connected to the broader political economy of post-crisis European integration. While the EU has increasingly responded to geopolitical and economic pressures through greater coordination and partial centralisation, defence policy remains particularly sensitive because it directly concerns sovereignty and the legitimate use of force. As a result, deeper defence integration is likely to remain gradual, selective, and politically contested.

The defence-industrial dimension further reinforces this dynamic. European defence companies require long-term investment certainty, coordinated industrial planning, and stable procurement commitments to expand production

capacity and compete globally. However, fragmented procurement systems and inconsistent political priorities continue to discourage deeper industrial consolidation (Mueller 2024). The ammunition shortages exposed by the war in Ukraine demonstrated that Europe's defence-industrial base lacks sufficient scalability and resilience for sustained high-intensity conflict. Strengthening strategic autonomy therefore requires not only higher defence spending but also deeper industrial integration capable of reducing dependence on external suppliers and fragmented national production systems.

Dependence on external actors extends beyond military technologies to include critical raw materials, semiconductors, energy security, and technological infrastructure. Strategic autonomy increasingly involves industrial resilience and control over supply chains rather than purely military independence (Ragonnaud 2023). This reflects the broader transformation of international politics, in which economic interdependence itself has become a source of strategic vulnerability (Keohane and Nye 1977).

At the same time, increasing geopolitical competition may paradoxically strengthen pressures for greater European coordination. External dependence on American military technologies, Chinese raw materials, and globally vulnerable supply chains creates incentives for stronger European industrial consolidation and strategic planning. However, whether these pressures will ultimately generate deeper political integration or merely more coordinated intergovernmentalism remains uncertain.

At the same time, the political feasibility of a fully integrated "European Defence Union" remains uncertain (CESI 2025; Moser 2024). Such a transformation would likely require treaty reform, stronger supranational authority, common financing mechanisms, and greater convergence of strategic cultures among member states. Since these conditions remain weak, the most probable trajectory of European defence integration is the continuation of differentiated integration characterised by selective cooperation among states with converging strategic interests.

This would likely produce a multi-layered European defence architecture in which NATO remains the primary framework for territorial defence, the EU expands its role in industrial coordination and resilience, and smaller coalitions of member states pursue deeper operational cooperation in selected areas (Schimmelfennig et al. 2015). Such a model reflects both the strengths and limitations of European integration: it allows flexibility and adaptation to diverse national preferences while simultaneously limiting the emergence of a fully unified strategic actor.

In this sense, the future of European defence integration will likely be defined less by the creation of a single European army or fully supranational defence authority, and more by the gradual consolidation of overlapping institutional networks, industrial partnerships, and differentiated security coalitions. European defence integration is therefore likely to remain evolutionary rather than revolutionary in character.

The future of European defence integration therefore remains politically contingent. Geopolitical pressures generated by the war in Ukraine, strategic competition with China, and uncertainty surrounding transatlantic relations have strengthened the political importance of defence policy within the European project. However, these pressures have not eliminated the structural contradictions shaping European integration in the security domain.

Ultimately, the central challenge facing the EU is not simply the absence of military capabilities, but the difficulty of reconciling national sovereignty, differentiated strategic cultures, and collective geopolitical ambitions within a single institutional framework. European defence integration is therefore likely to continue developing through gradual adaptation rather than revolutionary transformation. External geopolitical pressures may accelerate institutional innovation, but the future of European defence will ultimately depend on whether member states are willing to accept a higher degree of political and industrial interdependence in one of the most sovereignty-sensitive areas of European integration.

7 CONCLUSION

The transformation of the international security environment after 2014, particularly following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, intensified debates concerning the future of European defence integration and the geopolitical role of the European Union. Although the EU increasingly presents itself as a strategic actor capable of strengthening its autonomy in a more unstable international environment, the analysis conducted in this article demonstrates that European defence integration remains constrained by persistent political and institutional fragmentation.

The article argued that the principal obstacle to deeper integration is not simply the lack of military capabilities or financial resources, but rather the persistence of divergent strategic cultures, fragmented defence-industrial structures, and competing national interests among member states. In contrast to approaches interpreting the weaknesses of European defence primarily through capability deficits, the article demonstrated that military shortcomings themselves are closely connected to deeper structural and political fragmentation embedded within the European integration framework. While geopolitical pressures accelerated cooperation and increased the political importance of defence policy within the European project, they did not fundamentally overcome the intergovernmental logic that continues to dominate this policy area.

The analysis demonstrated that the geopolitical transformation of Europe strengthened incentives for defence cooperation, particularly due to the return of interstate conflict, uncertainty surrounding the future of transatlantic relations, and broader geopolitical competition. At the same time, however, member states continue to interpret security priorities differently according to their geographical positions, historical experiences, and strategic cultures. Eastern European countries prioritise deterrence against Russia and strong transatlantic guarantees, while Western European actors increasingly emphasise strategic autonomy and European sovereignty. These differences continue to limit the emergence of a coherent European strategic identity.

The article further demonstrated that fragmentation within the European defence industry reflects broader political and economic contradictions within the European integration process. National governments continue to prioritise domestic industrial interests, sovereign procurement systems, and national control over defence production. Consequently, the European defence market remains fragmented and dependent on external suppliers and technologies. Strategic autonomy therefore increasingly involves not only military capabilities

but also industrial resilience, supply-chain security, and technological sovereignty.

The analysis of initiatives such as the European Defence Fund (EDF), Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), ASAP, EDIRPA, and ReArm Europe illustrated the growing institutionalisation of EU defence policy. However, these initiatives remain constrained by voluntary participation, limited financial resources, and divergent political preferences among member states. Rather than representing a linear transition towards a unified defence union, current developments reflect a model of differentiated and selective integration characterised by partial cooperation without full strategic convergence.

The article further demonstrated that many contemporary EU defence initiatives simultaneously promote cooperation and reproduce fragmentation. Instruments designed to strengthen coordination frequently remain embedded within nationally organised industrial structures, sovereign procurement systems, and differentiated strategic preferences. European defence integration therefore increasingly develops through hybrid forms of governance combining supranational coordination, intergovernmental bargaining, and selective coalition-building among member states.

From a theoretical perspective, the article contributes to debates on differentiated integration, strategic autonomy, and the political economy of European defence by demonstrating that geopolitical pressure alone is insufficient to produce deeper political integration. Although crises may accelerate institutional innovation and strengthen incentives for cooperation, they do not automatically eliminate structural political divisions or competing national interests. European defence integration should therefore be understood not as an inevitable process of supranational consolidation, but as a politically contested and asymmetrical process shaped by tensions between collective geopolitical ambitions and national sovereignty.

The findings of the article suggest that differentiated integration is likely to remain a defining characteristic of European defence governance in the foreseeable future. Rather than evolving towards a single unified military structure, the EU will more likely continue to operate through a multilayered security architecture involving overlapping institutional arrangements between the EU, NATO, national governments, and smaller coalitions of strategically aligned member states. Such a model may improve flexibility and adaptive capacity under conditions of geopolitical uncertainty, yet it simultaneously limits the emergence of a fully coherent and autonomous European strategic actor. The future of European defence integration will depend on whether member states are willing to accept a higher degree of political, industrial, and strategic interdependence in one of the most sovereignty-sensitive areas of European integration. Although the EU has become more strategically ambitious and institutionally active, fragmented governance and differentiated strategic priorities continue to limit its capacity to function as a fully coherent geopolitical actor.

At the same time, increasing geopolitical instability, strategic competition with China, technological dependence, and uncertainty surrounding future American security commitments are likely to sustain political pressure for deeper European coordination in defence and security policy. Whether these pressures will ultimately produce stronger supranational integration or merely more coordinated forms of intergovernmental cooperation remains one of the central unresolved questions of contemporary European politics.

The new geopolitical era has therefore not resolved the structural contradictions of European defence integration; rather, it has intensified them. The European Union increasingly recognises the necessity of collective action in security and defence, yet it remains constrained by the same political and institutional divisions that have historically shaped the integration process itself. Whether the EU will gradually move towards deeper defence integration or continue to operate through a fragmented and differentiated model of cooperation will remain one of the central political questions for the future of European integration in the twenty-first century.

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FRAGMENTACIJA IN DIFERENCIRANA INTEGRACIJA V OBRAMBNI POLITIKI EU

Članek analizira strukturne in politične dejavnike, ki omejujejo globljo integracijo v varnostni in obrambni politiki Evropske unije po letu 2014, zlasti po ruski invaziji na Ukrajino leta 2022. Avtor trdi, da glavna ovira za globljo obrambno integracijo ni nezadostna vojaška zmogljivost, temveč vztrajanje politične, strateške in obrambno-industrijske fragmentacije med državami članicami. Študija uporablja konceptualno usmerjeno kvalitativno analizo, ki združuje primerjalno politično analizo, politično ekonomijo in študije evropskih integracij. Preučuje razhajajoče se strateške kulture, fragmentirane obrambno-industrijske strukture in institucionalne omejitve glavnih obrambnih pobud EU. Analiza kaže, da je geopolitični pritisk pospešil obrambno sodelovanje, ne da bi bistveno presegel medvladni pristop ali nacionalna strateška razhajanja. Posledično se sodobna obrambna integracija EU interpretira kot proces diferencirane in politično oporekane integracije, namesto kot linearni prehod k enotni evropski obrambni uniji.

Ključne besede: varnostna in obrambna politika Evropske unije; politična ekonomija; strateška avtonomija; integracija; fragmentacija.

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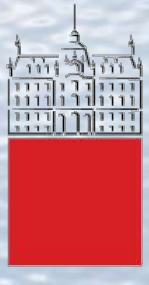

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