REUNIR

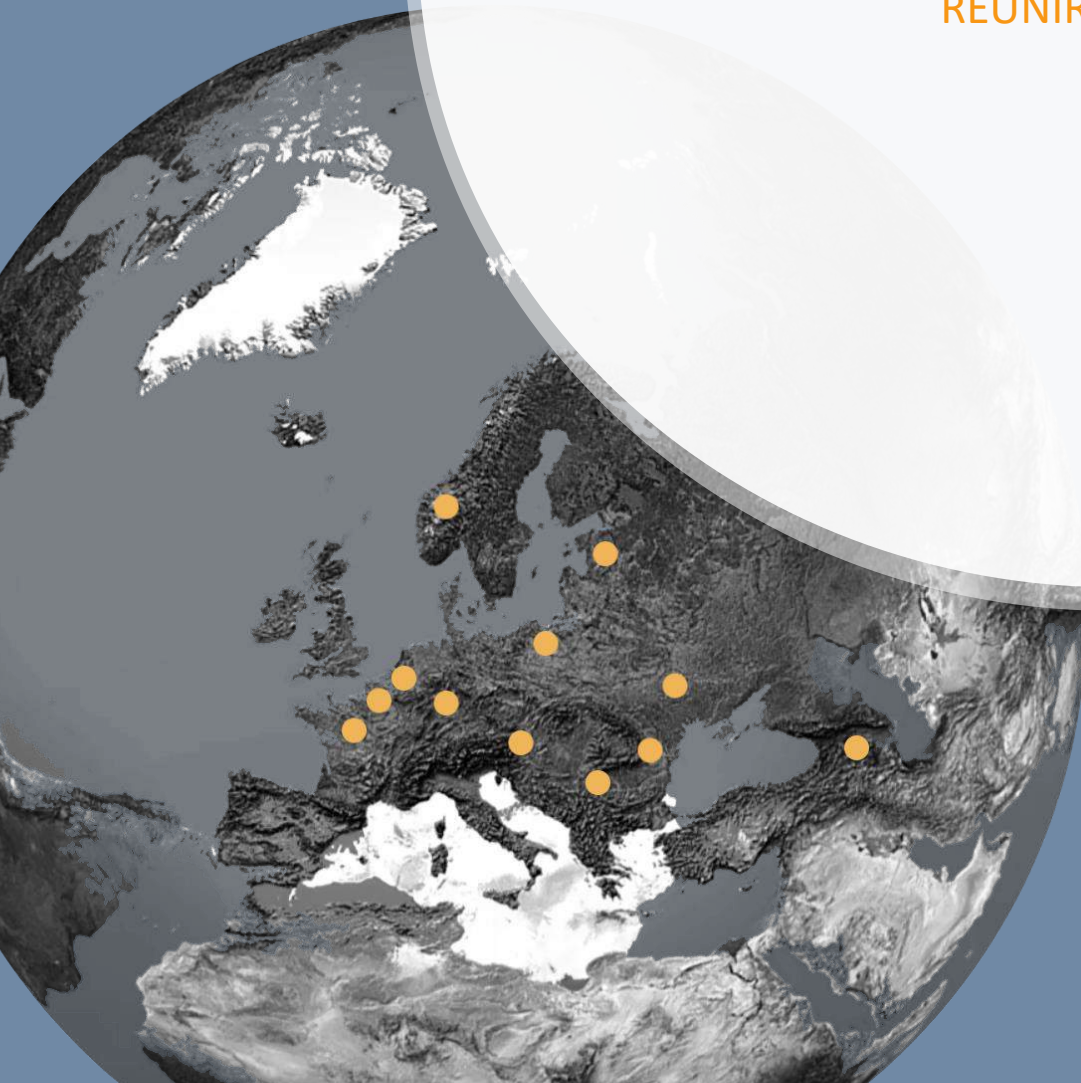# STRENGTHENING EUROPE'S DEMOCRATIC IDENTITY AND SECURITY IN A MORE AUTOCRATIC WORLD

REUNIR – INAUGURAL LECTURE

MICHAEL EMERSON

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Emerson is an Associate Senior Research Fellow at CEPS. His last position at the European Commission was as its first Ambassador to the USSR and then Russia from 1991 to 1995. Thanks are due to Richard Youngs for permission to draw on his forthcoming book cited below, to Steven Blockmans for helpful comments, and to Harry Crichton-Miller for research assistance.

SUMMARY

Much attention is rightly being paid to the well-documented tendencies in most of the world's regions for autocracy to have been gaining some ground in the last two decades at the expense of democracy. Europe has not been immune from the impact of the several megatrends and profound systemic shocks that seem to have been favouring these autocratic tendencies - namely climate change, the Covid pandemic, Western macroeconomic shocks and above all the roles of China and Russia as autocracy's superpowers. But paradoxically these same, extremely heterogenous disorders have seen the EU also responding with unprecedented initiatives, strengthening its powers and competences. However, Putin's attack on Ukraine mounts the case for further steps, notably for the EU's further enlargement now to be cast as a security project, to be supported by major advances in military defence capabilities under the heading of a European Defence Union. The gravity of the threat to democratic Europe from the autocratic superpowers could then result in a strengthening of an integrated Europe to a degree going beyond what has so far been politically feasible.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In his book entitled *'Mahomed and Charlemagne'*, the eminent Belgian historian, Henri Pirenne, famously argued how the rise of Charlemagne and Europe's Christian identity over a millennium ago would have been inconceivable without the Arab aggression[1]. Identity was standing for the coalescence of society's perceptions of its beliefs and values, enhanced to the point of enabling a previously impossible mobilization of power to defend itself against the external threat.

The question today is whether democratic Europe, and the EU in particular, can shape up its democratic identity and geo-political power to the point of stopping Russia's aggression in Ukraine and countering an erosion of European democracy threatened also by China's powerful international presence. Can the current circumstances, with its multiple crises and responses by the EU, crystalize a sufficiently strengthened sense of European democratic identity to enable the organization of the political and military means to defend itself – first of all against the aggressive Russian autocracy on its doorstep?

2. TRENDS IN DEMOCRACY AND AUTOCRACY

Since the contest between democracy and autocracy lies at the heart of our narrative, the basic facts of the matter need to be laid out.

2.1. LONG-TERM TRENDS IN DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE AND THE WORLD

Among the major sources of data about global trends in democracy the Varieties of Democracy project has managed to construct a remarkable time series back to the French Revolution[2]. While the European philosophies of liberalism and enlightenment date back further to the 17th and 18th centuries, major progress in electoral democracy came with the 1848 revolutions and then a strongly rising trend in Western Europe in the following hundred years.

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[1] Henri Pirenne, *'Mahomed and Charlemagne'*, London, 1939, *"The Frankish Empire would probably not have existed without Islam, and Charlemagne without Mahomed would be inconceivable".* The book was published posthumously, but the underlying thesis had been advanced in earlier articles. Quoted in Norman Davies, *'Europe – a history'*, p.258, Pimlico, 1997. It may go without saying, as the text makes clear, but best to be explicit: the contemporary analogue with Charlemagne's Mahomed is the EU threatened by Putin, not Islam.

[2] https://www.v-dem.net; The website includes a graphing facility used in Figures 1 to 3.

However there were breakpoints in the trend. The first was around the first World War and the accompanying collapse of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, which led to several newly formed and more liberal nation states in Central Europe and the Balkans.

The second was the revenge of autocracy that came with the fascist regimes of the inter-war period, often attributed to the unfair reparations extracted from Germany under the 1919 Treaty of Versailles.

Third, upon the end of the second World War, democracy was re-established throughout Western Europe, but not in East-Central Europe upon whom Stalin and Tito between them imposed communist autocracies.

Figure 1: Democracy trends in Europe
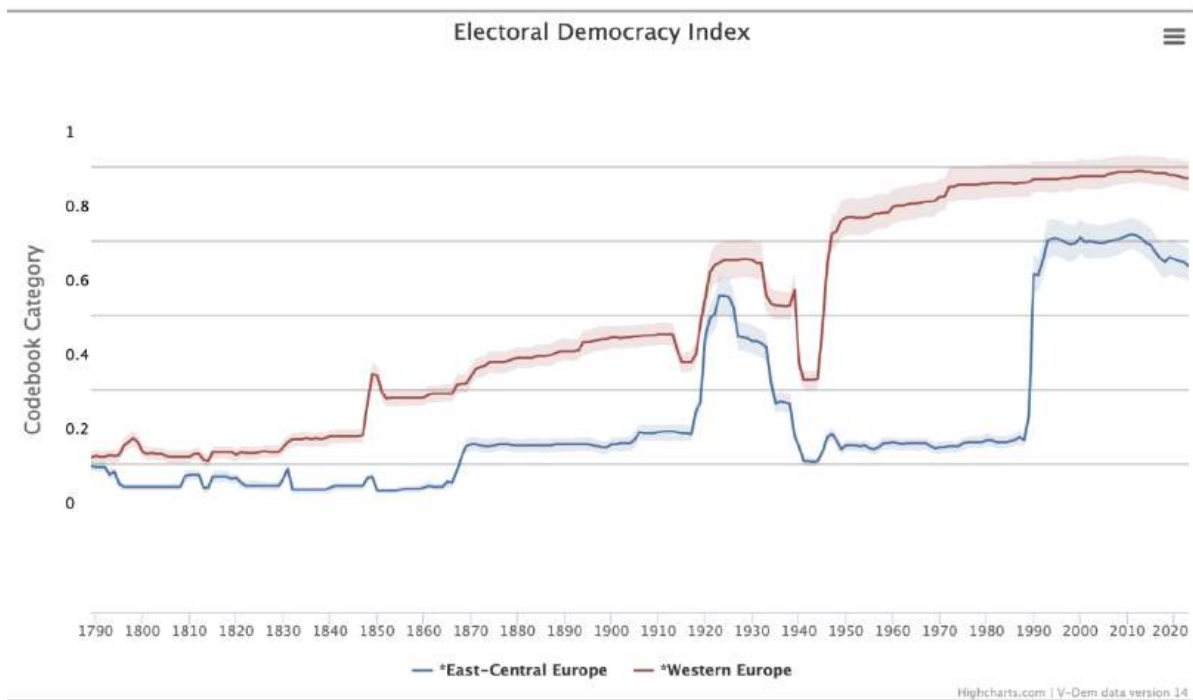
Source: Varieties of Democracy data base and graphing tools.

Fourth was the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 resulting from its deteriorating economic performance and the demise of communist ideology. The newly independent states of central and eastern Europe quickly adopted formal democratic institutions and constitutions. Some matured into

soundly functioning democracies, while others soon degenerated into fake democracies or reverted to outright autocracy.

At the level of the world at large democratization gathered speed and global reach only in the second half of the 20th century, as illustrated in Figures 2 and 3. However this democratic advance has now been halted and even reversed. Figure 2 show the data both for numbers of states and when weighted by population. As for the simple numbers of around 200 states in the world, the trend advance of democracy was halted around in the early 2000s, with a limited downturn. But the population data shows a much more pronounced decline, as illustrated in Figure 3 with the world's most populous states.

China has remained devoid of any Western conceptions of democracy.

Figure 2: World democracy trends
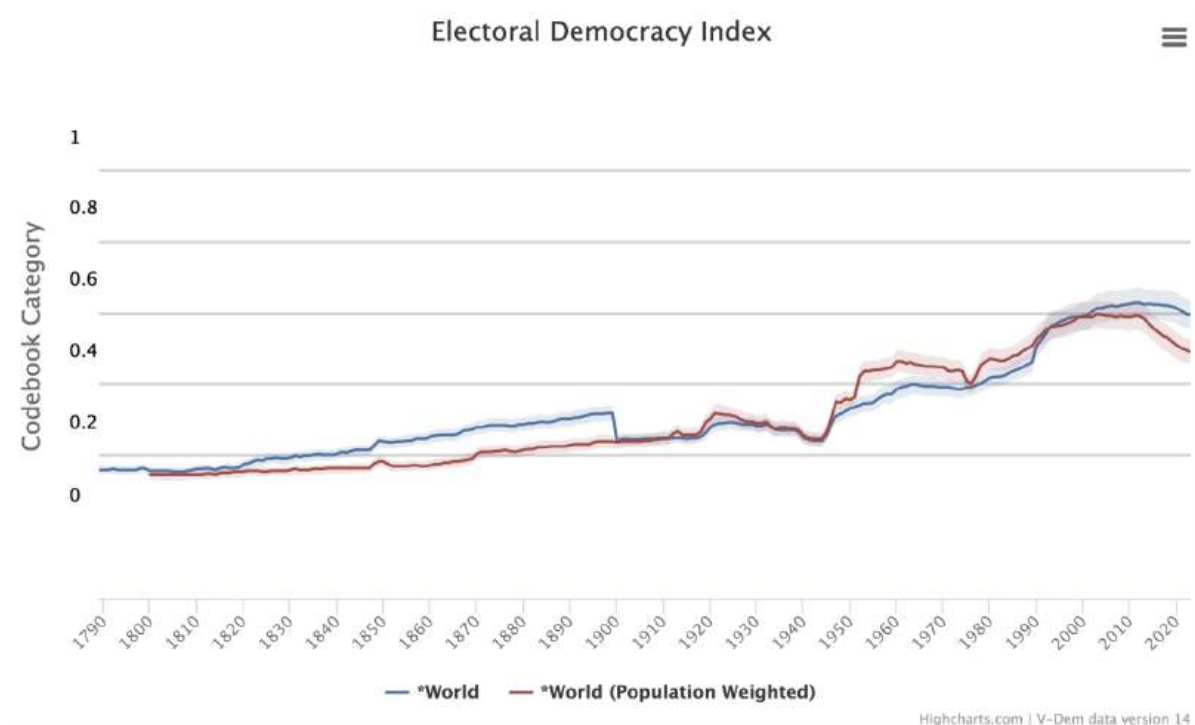
Source: Varieties of Democracy, graphing tools

Figure 3: Democracy trends in China, India, Russia and the United States
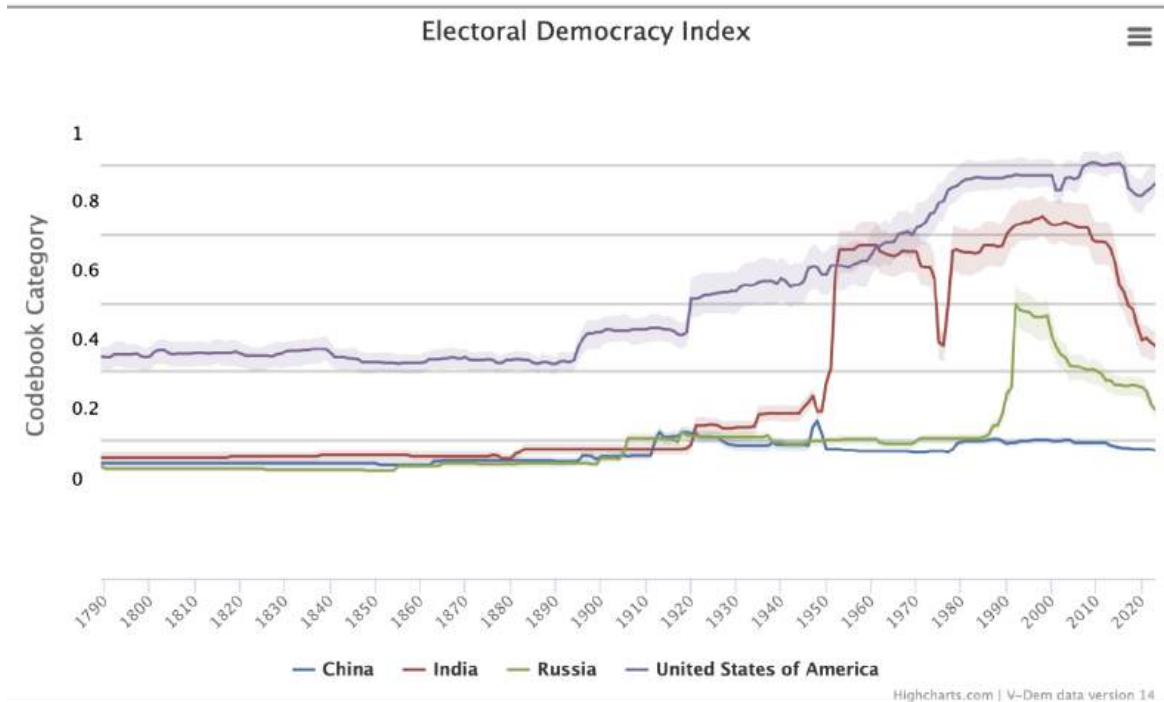
Source: Varieties of Democracy, graphing tools

India saw a huge jump in democratization after its independence in 1948, with the help of some elements of democratic culture having developed in earlier decades. India has retained the epithet of the world's largest democracy, undergoing in May 2024 the world's largest elections. However the quality of its democracy had seriously deteriorated under the leadership of Narendra Modi, now heading for his third term in office, with serious repression of opposition parties and personalities, and enhanced tensions between the dominant Hindu population and the muslim minority.

While Russia saw some limited liberal-democratic tendencies around the turn of the 19th-20th centuries, it saw a bigger but only temporary experiment in democratic upon independence in 1992. This proved to be weakly supported, with an early slide of power into the hands of oligarchs upon which the Yeltsin administration depended financially. Under Putin there has been a steady slide towards absolute autocracy, increasingly resembling the tsarist tradition. The largely passive acceptance of this slide seems to have reflected a combination of dissatisfaction with the early economic hardships of the post-communist transition with the absence of any robust earlier democratic experience, and a sense of loss of Russian great power dignity. Putin has capitalized on these grievances, but pressure for democratic liberalization in recent years could only be held back by

increasing repression, including the assassination of possible rivals (Nemtsov in 2015, Navalny in 2024).

The United States was semi-democratic from its beginnings, while the quality of its democracy rose steadily through the 20th century, only encountering some reversal in the last decade.

According to the Varieties of Democracy data the world's other regions mostly conform to the predominant global pattern of a gradual strengthening of democracy until around the same breakpoint of 2004, when Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and the Middle East and North Africa started to revert to increasing autocratisation. This would support the view that the 2004 breakpoint relates primarily to global influences, as discussed in section 4 below.

2.2. CURRENT TRENDS IN EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY

Bringing the European story up to date in Figure 4, the cleavage is dramatic between the EU and states aspiring to accede to it, versus the other European states (and former Soviet states of Central Asia).

More precisely the pre-2004 EU member states have sustained high standards of democracy with only minor exceptions. Notable are the cases of Spanish and Portuguese democracies, which have sustained sound democratic practice following the end of their fascist regimes in the 1970s, despite having had little or no democratic experience earlier. EU membership consolidated their democracies.

The new member states of Central Europe acceding in 2004 and the Western Balkans followed the end of communist regimes with an immediate democratic bounce, and sustained further improvements in democratic practice until 2004, but then, hardly coincidentally, there was a notable breakpoint. With the incentive of accession conditionality ended for the newly acceding member states there was some democratic back-sliding. Poland and Hungary developed regimes increasingly inconsistent with EU norms for democracy and the rule of law. However Poland's democrats fought back with Donald Tusk returning to power in December 2023, reminding that there can be pendulum movements at work, rather than one-way movements. The Western Balkans also stopped improving their democratic performance since, and seem stuck with lower quality democracy.

For trhe former states of the Soviet Union, all saw a pro-democratic bounce, as formal democratic institutions were established or reformed. But then there was a parting of the ways between those states seeking accession to the EU, and those who with Russia reverted to autocracy.

Figure 4: Democracy trends in Europe and the former Soviet Union

Regional variance in Freedom House scores over time: select European neighbourhood countries
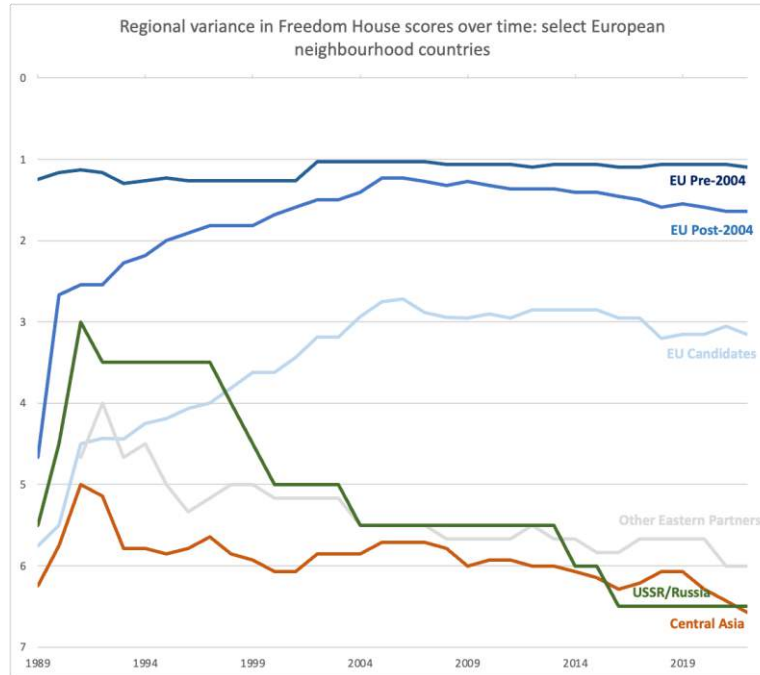
Source: own calculations based on Freedom House data base

Azerbaijan has conformed to the petro-state model of autocracy. Belarus, without natural resources and neighbouring the EU, saw a popular democratic uprising against the Lukashenko dictatorship almost succeed in 2020-21, but the forces of repression were too strong – for the time being. The Central Asian states had been even less prepared for democracy, and local former communist leaders were quickly able to install authoritarian regimes.

3. POLITICAL REGIMES IN COMPETITION AND CONFRONTATION

Between the polar opposites of top quality democracy and absolute autocracy there exist an infinite graduation of intermediate regime types. Is this just a matter of individual preferences of the two hundred state polities in the world, where each state makes up its own sovereign mind, going through its own historical experiences? Is it just a matter of healthy competition and learning by doing and observing others? Or, more sinister, does the co-existence of the polar opposites threaten confrontation, conflict and in the worst case war? Even if general rules or answers to these questions are hard to justify for the world at large, is there something more vivid and compelling to be said for the case of contemporary Europe?

3.1. IN COMPETITION

The opposition between Europe's largely democratic states and the Russian-Chinese autocratic duo could not be more categorical. While Europe contains a large majority of the world's most democratic states, Russia and China rank close to their ally North Korea as the most autocratic[3]. Table 1 exhibits the mature democracies and the absolute autocracies, with continuous graduations of regimes between these polar extremes.

The democracy index may be placed alongside the more recently developed happiness index, also in Table 1, which relies on Gallup poll self-assessments of subjective well-being, thus apart from political-institutional indicators. The notable point is that the top 20 states for happiness are also mainly in Europe, broadly the same as for democracy. For China and Russia, however, this correlation is far weaker, with them placed in the middle of global rankings for happiness, rather than at the bottom as for democracy. Civilisational and historical-cultural differences play their part.

The long-term driving forces behind both democratization and autocratization respectively are evident enough: most people naturally want a say in their governance, while political leaders naturally want to hold on to power.

Details in the graduations in democracy-autocracy spectrum are being thoroughly documented, with one leading source appropriately named 'Varieties of Democracy'[4]. At any one time there will be a certain political condition, depending on the effective weights of the driving forces on the one side and the other. It is not a one-way street. Both democracy and autocracy have their driving forces to win further adherents, as well as defensive mechanisms to push back against contrary forces. Equilibrium points in the spectrum may move over time, possibly in pendular fashion.

Table 1: World Democracy index, and Happiness index, top 20 states and selected others

Rank	Democracy	Value		Rank	Happiness	Value
1	Norway	9.81		1	Finland	7.71
2	*New Zealand*	9.61		2	Denmark	7.58
3	Iceland	9.45		3	Iceland	7.52
4	Sweden	9.39		4	Sweden	7.34
5	Finland	9.30		5	*Israel*	7.34
6	Denmark	9.28		6	Netherlands	7.31
7	Ireland	9.19		7	Norway	7.30
8	Switzerland	9.14		8	Luxembourg	7.11
9	Netherlands	9.00		9	Switzerland	7.06

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[3] The European pre-eminence among the highest quality democracies is even greater if one considers Australia, Canada and New Zealand as virtually part of the European model.

[4] Sources include Varieties of Democracy, https://www.v-dem.net; Freedom House, https://freedomhouse.org; and the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2023/.

10	*Taiwan*	8.99		10	*Australia*	7.05
11	*Uruguay*	8.91		11	*New Zealand*	7.02
12	Luxembourg	8.81		12	*Costa Rica*	6.95
13	Germany	8.80		13	*Kuwait*	6.95
14	*Australia*	8.71		14	Austria	6.90
15	*Canada*	8.69		15	*Canada*	6.90
16	*Japan*	8.33		16	Belgium	6.89
17	United Kingdom	8.28		17	Ireland	6.93
18	Austria	8.28		18	Czechia	6.82
19	Spain	8.07		19	Lithuania	6.81
20	France	8.07		20	United Kingdom	6.79
24	*United States*	7.85		23	*United States*	6.72
151	*Russia*	2.22		60	*China*	5.97
152	*China*	2.12		72	*Russia*	5.78
165	*North Korea*	1.08		143	*Afghanistan*	1.72

Source: EIU Democracy Index 2023; and World Happiness Report 2024

In a little more detail, the eco-system of democratisation and its associated norms of human rights and the rule of law answer to the widespread demands of people as they become better educated and well-off, and as the scourges of poverty and insecurity lower in intensity. These demands become consolidated in political constitutions, traditions and culture, and can be led or supported by philosophical movements and ideology. In Europe liberalism and enlightenment became leading philosophies in the 18th century, and this highlights the significance of the tracking of long-term trends in democratization over the last two centuries (as in Figures 1 to 3).

Autocratisation for its part answers to the urge of political leaders to stay in power, and where necessary to resort to an array of undemocratic methods. These typically start with restrictions on the freedoms of expression and the media, escalating with repressive measures backed by compliant police and judiciary, and leading on to manipulation of the constitution including the 'president-for-life' model. The temptations of autocracy can be boosted by rich natural resource endowments, as in the petro-states, where political leaders can easily appropriate such resources for themselves and supporting bureaucracies and oligarchs. Autocracies have also had supporting ideologies, from communism to fascism and Islamic fundamentalism, often adding personality cults with associated propaganda.

The strongest democracies may be well defended against autocratisation, just as the strongest autocracies can be well-defended against pressures for democracy. Both democracies and

autocracies can be weakened or overthrown by poor performance, while autocracies can hold out longer making their ultimate crash all the more violent.

Both democracy and autocracy can be understood as code words representing broader models and identities. Europe's democratic identity may be defined much more broadly than electoral democracy, human rights and the rule of law, extending into an entire eco-system with social policies providing universal health care and redistribution mechanisms limiting income inequalities, a green identity, and above all the Kantian ideal of 'eternal peace' for states among whom there are zero threat perceptions.

Putin's autocracy goes beyond the absence of meaningfully democratic elections, on into the repression of individual rights, overwhelming propaganda at home and flagrantly dishonest disinformation abroad, political assassination and militarism translating into mass deaths and destruction from Chechnya to Syria and Ukraine.

3.2. IN CONFRONTATION

The crucial question is whether or under what conditions democracies and autocracies can live alongside each other in peace.

It is abundantly argued that democracies do not go to war with each other[5]. As between democracies and autocracies it seems to depend on the circumstances. Between close neighbours the risks may be the sharpest. Post-World War II Europe has seen two models: first a stable cold war co-existence, but now aggression by the autocracy attempting to stamp out democracy leading to war.

Under the Cold War the border between Western Europe and the Soviet block was set at Yalta in 1944 between Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin, and subsequently reinforced by NATO and the Warsaw Pact and the nuclear doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). This assured in effect a cold peace. Following the peaceful end to the Soviet Union in 1991, led by the newly independent Russia, a further step towards a peaceful future was promised in the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 when Russia, the US and the UK guaranteed the borders of Ukraine as reward for its renunciation of nuclear weaponry.

But this did not last long, as Putin in the early 2000s set his sights on the grey area of former Soviet states hesitating between Western and Eastern orientations, undefended by NATO. By 2004 both NATO and the EU had concluded their 'big bang' enlargements in central Europe, including the three Baltic states of the former Soviet Union. But this did not include the other former Soviet states, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia, which were tending towards European democratization.

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[5] A rich branch of international relations is devoted to the Democratic Peace theorem.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratic_peace_theory#:~:text=The%20democratic%20peace%20theory%20posits,better%20than%20democratic%20peace%20theory.

The 'color revolutions' also of 2004, notably in Ukraine and Georgia, were taken as signals by Russia to respond with increasing confrontation. Tensions were heightened with the Bucharest NATO summit of April 2008 which agreed "that these countries will become members of NATO", ambiguously so since this was without saying when, or even triggering Membership Action Plans as next steps[6]. This led on almost immediately in August 2008 to Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008, which in return spurred the EU to prepare with Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and Armenia association agreements, and which were in due course readied for signature in Vilnius November 2013. Putin succeeded in August 2013 to pressurize Armenia into withdrawing from signing its association agreement. At the last minute he then also got President Yanukovic of Ukraine also to renege on signing, leading on to the Maidan uprising in Kyiv, Yanukovic's flight to Russia, and by February 2014 to Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of the Donbas.

There followed between Russia and Ukraine, with participation by the OSCE, France and Germany, the negotiation of the Minsk I agreement of September 2014 and Minsk II of February 2015. These agreements were about stabilising the ceasefire, without providing the basis for a durable peace, as the renewed war from February 2022 showed.

The moral of the story is that grey areas of unclear status between neighbouring democracies on one side and autocracies on the other are recipes for conflict. The comfortably sounding idea of 'buffer zones' to absorb tensions between opposing regimes is a diplomatic illusion or euphemism. With Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia not yet in either the EU or NATO, the grey areas in Europe were persisting for sure in the Kremlin's perceptions.

4. THE WIDENING DEMOCRACY-AUTOCRACY CLEAVAGE

The democracies of Europe are justifiably concerned by the tendencies for more autocratic practice to have been gaining ground in the world at large during the last two decades. Why? What have been the drivers of these trends? The most thorough assessment has been set out by Richard Youngs[7], who identifies the four megatrends, huge shocks, disorders and geopolitical developments hitting the world, which however are of fundamentally different nature:

- the ongoing climate crisis, which is certain to be building up as an existential threat for the whole world for all of this century and beyond,
- the Covid pandemic, a devastating but short-lived event, like the plagues of centuries past, but cut short by the dramatic discovery of new vaccines,
- macroeconomic disorders, including the financial crisis beginning in 2008, corresponding to a familiar pattern of recurrent but unpredictable shocks,

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[6] https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm
[7] R. Youngs, 'Democracy at Crossroads - Transformations in Twenty-First-Century Politics', Oxford University Press, 2024 (forthcoming)

- the new geopolitics, with the rise of China as a new structural reality, compounded for Europe by Chinese-Russian alliance, helping Russia in its war against Ukraine.

These tremors are also to be differentiated by type of impact on political systems, notably as regards:

- Autonomous shocks, in principle unconnected to political systems (e.g. the Covid), but leading on to relevant political narratives and policy reactions impacting political systems;
- Actions not impacting political systems directly, but altering incentive structures (e.g. Chinese project funding, competing in the European neighbourhood for impact with EU policies);
- Direct actions to undermine democracy (Russian Wagner interventions in African Sahel region), or to promote it (EU enlargement conditionality);
- Synergies and summation, on whether the combination of shocks and responses coalesce to produce a qualitatively bigger impact, for example with an overarching anti-Western versus pro-European narrative, or a pro-autocracy versus pro-democracy impact.

As will be shown, these several shocks have not been a one-way street in favour of autocracy. Within democratic Europe these same several driving forces have – at first sight paradoxically - led to unprecedented initiatives by the European Union defending its interests and values. We look at each in turn.

4.1. THE ADVANCE OF AUTOCRACY IN THE WORLD

The geo-political offensive against democracy by China and Russia is being played out comprehensively. China may proclaim a doctrine of non-interference in the political systems of partner states, but this diplomatic formulation hardly hides a geo-political purpose and impact. China makes massive advances in trade, finance and political influence world-wide, with inter alia its Belt and Road initiative. In Europe, both within the EU and its neighbourhood, China has extended funding with no political questions or conditions. While this can be presented as non-political, in practice it is working to undermine European democracy by corroding the incentive effects of conditional funding offered by the EU. Autocratically inclined leaders in Europe find the costs of undemocratic behaviour reduced, or even rewarded. Concrete examples are evident enough, as illustrated provocatively by President Xi on the occasion of his visit to Europe in May 2024, when he followed meetings with Macron and von der Leyen in Paris with visits in the next days to EU member state Hungary and EU candidate state Serbia, encouraging their dissidence from core European values.

Chinese presence elsewhere in the world also sees huge increases in trade and project funding with no political questions asked, for example in Africa where it has since 2000 organised the Forum for China-Africa Cooperation (FOCOC), meeting at summit level with 44 African states each three years.

This disempowers attempts by the EU to accompany its aid programmes with the promotion of human rights and democratic processes.

Russia is even more explicit in its objective to undermine democracy. In Europe it does not have the financial means to compete with China or the EU. Instead it has chosen war in Ukraine, motivated to prevent the emergence of a successful democracy in a state deemed by Putin to be part of a single Russia. It develops political alliances, like China, with the same autocratically inclined Hungarian and Serbian leaderships, motivated to divide the EU and extend the appeal of the strong leader image. Russia aims to disrupt democracy across Europe as a whole through propaganda, disinformation, cyber attacks and trolling the social media, notably with a view to skewing national and European Parliamentary elections – as European security services are revealing.

Russia's actions in Africa aim at continental influence, with a Russia-Africa summit process underway, with 49 states represented at its 2023 session. Beyond this diplomatic framework, core activity includes military cooperation with 19 states, and militia forces in five states (Sudan, Central African Republic, Libya, Mali, Burkina Faso). The militia forces were formerly known as the Wagner group, but following the demise of its leader, Yevgeny Prighozin, is now the Africa Corps. Common features of these interventions are support for putsch leaders, with the military presence funded by the granting of mining concessions. In the Sahel region Russian forces have been welcomed upon arrival, alongside the withdrawal of French forces.

China and Russia use all international fora, including their preferred BRICS multilateral organisation to sell to the Global South the narrative blaming the West for harmful neo-colonial interventions. The charge that the West has caused global warming is objectively justifiable on historical grounds. China for its part can showcase its huge advances in the big green technologies of renewable energy and electric vehicles, and make available lowest cost solar power for rich and poor countries alike, even as it builds more and more coal-burning power stations at home. The narrative is intensified with the argument that the West has been slow in meeting financial pledges made in COP conferences to support climate policies in developing countries, and further aggravated when EU prepares possible trade sanctions against developing countries practicing insufficiently green policies (notably through the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism – CBAM).

The anti-Western narrative also brings in the Covid pandemic, with the complaint of poorer states that, while the US and EU satisfied their own needs for vaccines, they failed to help supplies to developing counties on anywhere near the scale needed. China has also taken its anti-Covid policies to the point of accentuating the reach of its authoritarian state apparatus, with enhanced electronic surveillance mechanisms.

The narrative is intensified by accusation that the West is still pursuing neo-colonial policies. China can easily advance this argument citing its own experience of European colonialism through the centuries into the early 20th century, not forgetting the opium wars of the mid 19th century. Putin

and Lavrov for their part attack Europe and the West with the neo-colonial critique, Russia having never been a global colonial power, forgetting Russia's own ongoing imperialism in the Eurasian space.

The narrative is further broadened with a complex of economic issues, where the collective West stands accused. A first argument stems from the global financial crisis that began with the Lehman Brothers crash in 2008. This spread into harmful impacts on the fragile financial systems of many emerging developing economies. The argument extends into critiques of the 'austerity' policies pushed by the IMF, and the so-called Washington consensus that combined trade policy liberalism with financial stringency. This leads on for China and Russia into the case for a new (unspecified) global financial order to replace the inordinate role of the dollar and the two Washington institutions – World Bank as well as IMF. China has already created its own multilateral institutions with the Asian Development Bank and Asian International Infrastructure Bank. China is saying loud and clear that its political regime has delivered huge economic results.

The World Bank has for its part enriched the controversy over Western economic policies highlighting the issue of world-wide income inequality, notably with its 2022 World Inequality Report[8]. One of its most striking findings is that "Contemporary global inequalities are close to early 20th century levels, at the peak of Western imperialism". Figure 5 illustrates vividly one of the measures of the extreme and growing inequality of wealth in the world, with the richest 0.01% of the world's population seeing a growth in its share of global wealth rise from around 7.5% in 1995 to around 11% in 2021. The World Bank report concludes "We stress that addressing the challenges of the 21st century is not feasible without significant redistribution of income and wealth inequalities". A prime target of their argument appears to be the predominance of billionaires in the US, where three individuals (J. Bezos, W. Buffett, and B. Gates), are estimated to account for more wealth than the whole of the bottom half of the US's population[9].
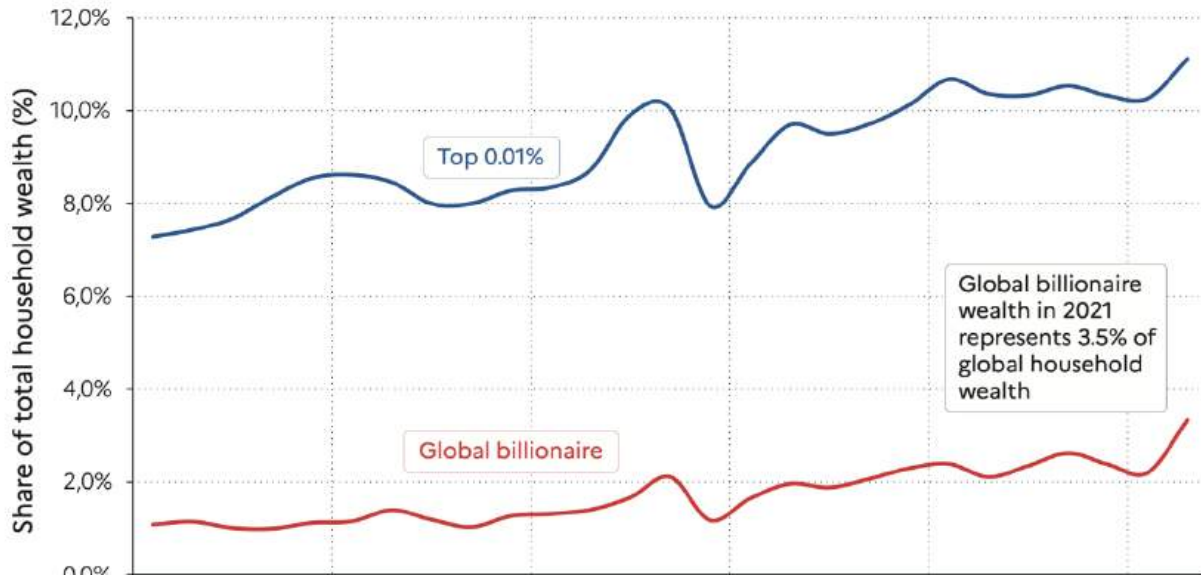
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[8] World Bank, 'World Inequality Report 2022'.
[9] https://inequality.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/BILLIONAIRE-BONANZA-2017-Embargoed.pdf

Figure 5: Extreme wealth inequality – the rise of the global billionaires

Source: World Bank Inequalities Report, 2022

All in all this makes for a formidable charge sheet levied by China and Russia against the liberal-democratic West, even when both China and Russia also exhibit huge income and wealth inequalities themselves.

To this may be added the Trump factor, further damaging the reputation of Western democracy by his contesting democratic processes in the US itself. He professes his admiration for strongman Putin, while having attracted support from the former autocratically inclined President of Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, and now the admiration of President Javier Milei of Argentina. Trump in February 2024 famously encouraged Putin to do "what the hell he likes" in European NATO states not paying enough for their defense. The attempts by the US and EU to get the rest of the world to criticize Russia for its aggression in Ukraine at the UN General Assembly has been only half-successful (half of Africa's states for example).

4.2. THE RESPONSE OF DEMOCRATIC EUROPE

The apparent paradox is how, under the same four sets of global shocks and driving forces, the EU has been building up its identity, powers and resilience.

The broad findings of Eurobarometer opinion polls are supporting this view[10]. The perception of EU citizenship ("do you feel you are a citizen of the EU?") has been on a steady, gradual increase (reaching 74% 'yes', against 25% 'no' in 2024), with majorities also recorded for an optimistic view of the future of the EU (62% optimistic, 35% pessimistic), and for satisfaction with the way democracy works in the EU (57% satisfied, 38% not satisfied).

With regard to both the climate and Covid crises the EU has shown a commendable capacity to act, creating new regulatory powers and mobilizing major financial resources at the level of the new challenges. Together these amount to important advances enhancing the EU's systemic resilience in the face of huge shocks.

To combat global warming the EU has made major advances led by its Emissions Trading System since 2005, and continuously developed since then, alongside growing 'green' activism and citizens' initiatives at local levels. Tensions are alive over how far or fast the EU should achieve its 'Green Deal' and net-zero targets, but still Europe's green-democratic identity is strongly based. The CO2 emissions per capita of the EU are 5.4 tCO2 per capita, one third of the US (15.3), half that of Russia (11.4), and less than China (7.4)[11].

With the 2021-22 Covid pandemic the EU created a new public health competence for vaccine procurement and equal treatment for all citizens and member states. This was followed by the €750 billion post-Covid Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) for the years 2023-2026 as a big act of macro-financial solidarity, partly funded by borrowing on capital markets on an unprecedented scale.

In the macroeconomic policy domain the EU had to face up to the Greek-euro crisis, starting in 2009 in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008. Crisis therapy had to continue for several years, and in the end saw mobilisation of €450 billion to prevent a Eurozone wreckage. EU has had to face up to the austerity policy critique, an ongoing real political debate, but one in which EU (eurozone) has come to allow greater flexibility.

European social policies of income redistribution (avoiding grotesque inequalities as in the US), and the universal welfare state are integral to European identity. In the World Bank study referred to[12] the top 10% of the EU population in income levels obtained 35% of all incomes, significantly less than the US at 45% and 47% for Russia. These facts position the EU well to take the lead in advocating policies to limit inequalities in income and wealth world-wide, and to counter the crude narratives expounded by Russia and China. It is notable that the World Bank Inequality Report has reflected intellectual leadership coming from Europe in path-breaking work[13]. In the same spirit it is notable that the current Brazilian presidency of the G20 has tabled for discussion the EU Tax Observatory's

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[10] https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3216

[11] https://www.iea.org/regions/europe/emissions

[12] World Bank op. cit. https://wir2022.wid.world/www-site/uploads/2021/12/WorldInequalityReport2022_Full_Report.pdf

[13] Thomas Pikkety, Capitalism in the 21st Century, 2015.

report on how to combat tax evasion by the super-rich[14]. This is just one example of how the EU has the potential to take up a more effective role in promoting global policies consistent with its policy experiences and values, ultimately displacing crude anti-Western propaganda.

In response to both Russia's aggression in Ukraine and the rise of Chinese power globally the EU has begun to adopt a geopolitical rhetoric. There is large-scale financial aid to Ukraine, but only limited military aid by the EU and member states combined. Overall the new geopolitical Europe is weak so far in substance and impact. This poses the question how the EU might consolidate and secure the map of democratic-geopolitical Europe. Concretely this points towards major steps for the enlargement process alongside creating a real defence capability, i.e. to identify the outer frontier of democratic Europe and to get organized to defend it.

Enlargement into Eastern Europa as well as the Western Balkans has now become a geopolitical imperative, to mark out the map of democratic Europe with no grey area between the EU and Russia. Enlargement becomes a security project on top of its political values and economic content. The scene is set for enlargement to advance, given the new candidate status for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, the €50 billion of aid package for Ukraine and the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans.

But still the enlargement process is currently stagnant and stuck, for reasons that both the EU and several candidate states are responsible. As for the EU and its member states, behind the technicalities there is political ambiguity with differences between member states blocking the process. The blockage can only be overcome with a real political will on the part of the leaderships of the EU and member states to go ahead, while meeting the most justified reservations of member states over further enlargement. These reservations are essentially around the fear that the new and fragile democracies of the candidate states may result in even more 'Orban-type' problems where the abusive use of veto powers can cripple the cohesive governance of the EU. The precise means to overcome this have been advanced, and with a minimum of political will could be taken up with reform of the enlargement methodology[15], including the now familiar concept of 'Staged Accession'[16].

Among the candidate states in several cases political leaderships are clearly working against European political values and progress towards accession, notably in Georgia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The incentive of accession has to be re-invigorated, as proposed.

This new frontier of democratic Europe would need to be defended by the EU, taking inspiration perhaps from the proposed European Defence Community of 1952, which failed to be ratified. The

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[14] EU Tax Observatory, 'Global Tax Evasion Report, 2024'.

[15] Proposals include the exclusion of veto powers transitionally for new member states, or a reformed Article 7 of the Treaty suspending all voting powers for those in serious breach of EU values, or an Associate Membership regime to cover the time needed for the EU's own institutional reform and 'deepening' to advance sufficiently. See M. Emerson, 'Enlargement Issues for the Next Commission', April 2024, https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/eu-enlargement-issues-for-the-next-commission/

[16] https://www.ceps.eu/ceps-publications/template-2-0-for-staged-accession-to-the-eu/

Russian aggression in Ukraine has already prompted first steps in supplying ammunition funded by the EU budget. Ideas for integrating the industrial-military complex are under debate. The organisation of a significant rapid deployment capacity is discussed. But these are only fragments. The defence domain is now ripe for the EU's tested method of systemic development: setting of the long-term goal, and of short- and medium-term plans for significant operational advances. Alongside the recent Letta report[17] and forthcoming Draghi report, both on the economics of the EU, it is time for a landmark report on a European Defence Union.

Such a report could draw on a study based on an in-depth polling exercise by Bruegel, which sought to identify what kind of European defence would be favoured in a sample of EU states[18]. The study posited two alternative scenarios for the development of the EU's defence, one 'minimalist' and the other 'maximalist'. The contents of each were defined as in Table 2. The essential finding was that the maximalist package was twice as preferred as the minimalist package, which may surprise political leaders preferring to stick closer to the status quo.

Table 2: Minimalist or maximalist profiles for a European defence initiative

Minimalist	Maximalist
National scope	EU scope
Small size	Large size
Intergovernmental governance	Federal (EU) governance
Flat tax increase	Eurobonds
Opt outs allowed	Opt outs not allowed
No joint procurement	Joint procurement

Source: Bruegel, op. cit.

The funding of a major defence initiative will raise crucial issues for which the idea of defence bonds is at least in discussion. For orders of magnitude, EU defence spending might be raised from the present NATO target of 2% of GDP to around 3%, as already undertaken by Poland. But as an EU initiative the needs for funding, with some comibination of own resources and borrowing on capital markets, wouldl becomea big new chapter in the EU's federalizing systemic development.

The advocacy of a common defence and security policy is supported by a large 77% majority in public opinion according to the latest Eurobarometer (op.cit.).

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[17] Enrico Letta, 'Much More Than Market', April 2024.
[18] B. Burgoon, D. Van der Duin, F. Nicoli, 'What would Europeans want a European Defence Union to look like?', Bruegel, June 2023. EU states in the sample were France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands. https://www.bruegel.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/WP%2009_0.pdf

Figure 6

Views on the construction of common European defence
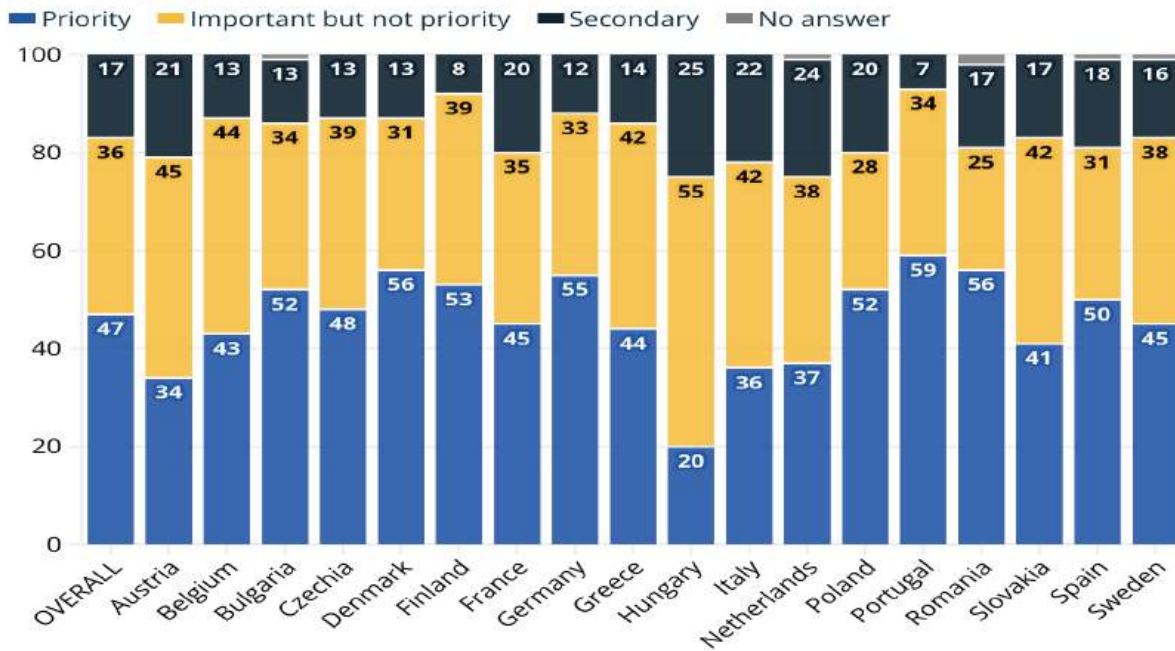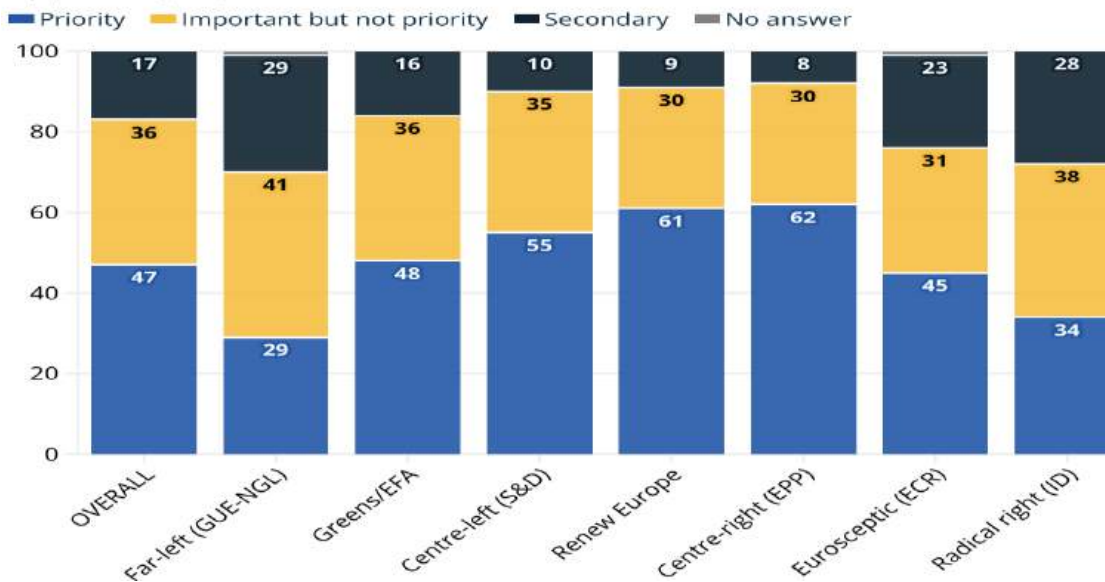By country

Figure 7

Views on the construction of common European defence
By political party

According to a separate poll for Euronews[19] there are comparable majorities favouring the construction of a common European defence, combining those who consider this to be either a 'priority' or an 'important' objective (Figure 6), and with Hungary as the notable dissident outlier in giving defence a low priority.

The poll covered only 18 member states, excluding the three Baltic states, whose vital interests in European defence would surely increase the overall majority. This priority for defence is striking given the usually cited priority concerns such as inflation, housing and migration. At the level of political parties the European centre ground (centre-left, centre, centre-right) show even higher majority support (of around 90% for the 'priority' and 'important' ratings combined - Figure 7). These highly positive views of the three centrist party groups contrast with the weakest support coming from both extreme left and extreme right party groups.

The main point is that with Putin still in power democratic Europe will have to be heavily defended, with EU membership in the pipeline for the East European candidates, and maybe NATO too. The present situation corresponds to the syndrome where a policy prescription can according to the polls be widely supported by the public in both general and quite specific terms, but where the constellation of interests and priorities of political leaders are not yet aligned. Circumstances could prompt the alignment. Will the prospect of a second Trump presidency, alongside Putin's endless reign, suffice?

5. CONCLUSIONS

Democracy was invented in ancient Greece, re-inspired by the English, French and German philosophers of the 17th-18th century Enlightenment, and moved on after the French Revolution to its practical application across Europe and much of the world beyond. After the aberration of Europe's 20th century inter-war fascism, and that of the long communist experiment, the EU took on the formalisation of an expanded concept of democracy, embracing also not only human rights and the rule of law, but also the norms of a social Europe, a green Europe and above all the supreme value – at least for itself - of Kant's *eternal peace*. This has become Europe's choice, extended and still further extending voluntarily beyond Western Europe into its central and eastern regions with the EU's enlargement process.

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[19] Euronews https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/03/27/eu-defence-a-priority-even-for-eurosceptics-exclusive-poll. The poll was based on a sample of 26,000 respondents.

Democracy expanded also in much of the rest of the world over the second half of the 20th century, advocated of course by the United States as well as Europe and other like-minded states. It seemed to be a natural societal choice, of global relevance alongside rising education and living standards.

But then around the turn of the millennium the rise of democracy stopped or even reversed somewhat, led by the growing weight in the world of China that was never democratic in any Western sense, and by Russia which after its failed post-Soviet experiment with democracy has been plunging back towards absolute autocracy reminiscent of tsarist times.

The reasons for this reversal of democratic trends has been attributed to a set of megatrends and recent systemic global shocks, such as the climate crisis, the Covid pandemic, macroeconomic and financial disorders in the West, as well as the rise of China and its Russian accomplice who promote an explicitly anti-Western and implicitly anti-democratic narrative.

The EU for its part responded quite impressively to these same tremors with expanded competences and financial resources, notably in the domains of climate, the Covid pandemic and post-Covid recovery policies.

But these policies have been insufficient to hold back Russia's aggression in the states between it and the EU, perceived by Russia as a geopolitical grey zone. Beyond Russia's military aggression, first in Georgia in 2008, and now on a hugely bigger scale in Ukraine, both Russia and China are engaged in efforts to subvert democracy throughout Europe with, inter alia, economic incentives, new cyber techniques and blatant disinformation.

If the EU is to protect its democratic identity and geopolitical security it would have to make decisive moves to upgrade its defences in at least two respects:

- first, to carry through its enlargement policies to eliminate the grey areas between it and Russia,
- and second, to develop its military capabilities both urgently now to help save Ukraine and in the longer run to constitute a European Defence Union.

This would require the summoning up of a collective political will by the EU on a scale that would have been inconceivable without the threat to Europe posed by Russia with Chinese support. The overarching question is whether the EU now approaches a moment when Putin's aggression in Ukraine, the ominous rise of China, and the uncertain political reliability of the US may combine to crystalise Europe's awareness of its unique identity to the point of empowering a new political will to defend it? Public opinion in the EU increasingly favours something like a Europeran Defence Union, and points the way ahead while their politicians have not yet been able to lead.

ABOUT REUNIR

REUNIR, a Horizon-funded project with 12 partners from across Europe, examines how the EU can strengthen its foreign and security toolboxes to bolster the resilience and transformation of (potential) candidate countries in a new age of international relations. REUNIR's foresight approach takes the fundamental uncertainty and openness of alternative futures seriously. Adding the effects of 'protean power' unleashed in unforeseen circumstances to a multi-disciplinary approach to the research of the EU's 'control power' in relations with strategic rivals, REUNIR empirically assesses foreign threats to the military, socio-economic and democratic resilience of nine neighbouring countries, determines capability shortfalls, maps local perceptions of the EU's support and political perspectives inside the EU on neighbourhood relations. Outlining scenarios up to 2035, REUNIR offers evidence-based policy recommendations to mitigate malign foreign interference and contribute to strengthening the EU's external action.