

European Studies Review

e-Justice

The Enduring Need for Human Judges

Digital Borders

The Case of eu-LISA

Policy Change

Germany's Crisis Framing of Russia's War on Ukraine



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e-Justice or Ersatz Justice? The Enduring Need for Human Judges

Joel Hames¹

Introduction

In late February 2026, British Deputy Prime Minister David Lammy announced the UK government's intention to expand the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the justice system. AI has come to dominate classrooms, column inches, and the Cabinet Office's drive to reform the state. Individuals, companies, and states alike are all attempting to harness the emerging technology and apply it to complex and mundane problems in equal measure. Those who are bullish on AI extoll its capacity to reason and its efficiency, with some going so far as to view it as a panacea. Equally, many others view it with scepticism, pointing out the possible moral quagmires and descent into a sci-fi dystopia. This article seeks to engage with both the positive utilities of AI, whilst acknowledging the very real and prescient ethical and legal concerns that exist.

Of particular importance to British and wider European audiences is how AI's application and interaction with the judicial system is consistent with citizens' Article 6 Convention rights. Article 6 of the *European Convention of Human Rights* (1950) provides for the "right to a fair trial", specifically worded at sub-section 1 as "*everyone is entitled to a fair and public hearing within a reasonable time by an independent and impartial tribunal established by law.*"² It is both the "publicness" and "impartiality" of this provision that this article seeks to engage with in respect of AI. Of additional concern is whether the advancement of AI in the judicial systems of Europe serves to usurp the underlying

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² European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (European Convention on Human Rights, as amended), Art. 6.

constitutional structures of states. Following previous, equally contentious, proposals from Lammy concerning the scope of and right to jury trials,³ in conjunction with the publication of Sir Brian Leveson's *Independent Review of the Criminal Courts* which also advocates for a departure from constitutional norms in regards to criminal practice and court procedure, invites the question: Does the suggestion from Minister Lammy signal yet another pallet placed atop the pyre of the British Constitution, or rather does it indicate an opportunity to modernise procedure and reach for the cutting edge of technological capacity?⁴ This article will examine the possible provisions outlined by the Minister, compare them to similar trials taking place across Europe, and evaluate the efficacy and propriety of utilising such technology to augment the judicial process.

UK Government Prospectus

Speaking at the “Justice 2026” conference, Lammy outlined a three-pronged prospectus under the banner of a new “Justice AI Unit” (J-AI): back-office transcription tools, drafting assistance for judges, and decision-support optimisation.⁵ Probation services already deploy “Justice Transcribe”, an AI speech-to-text system recording officer-offender meetings, reportedly saving 25,000 staff hours across 150,000 interactions. This technology is now being piloted in courts and tribunals, including the Immigration and Asylum Chamber, where judges use it for real-time note-taking and drafting remarks.⁶ Magistrates' Courts are testing AI to transcribe hearings and summarise judgments, accelerating case progression.⁷ These current provisions are consistent with other trials and experiments occurring in continental Europe, as will be explored subsequently.

Similar to his European counterparts, it seems Minister Lammy's main concern is delay and inefficiencies, he states “*Trials are longer, trials are more complex, and more demanding today than ever before. ... Delays have become normalised ... The average victim today waits over 250 days to see justice done.*”⁸ It is these attempts, however earnest, to accelerate hearings and ameliorate the present backlogs that give rise to potential claims of individual rights incompatibility.

The Minister is clear in his view of delay, stating, “*This is a failure to uphold the basic promise of our justice system. That justice will be fast and justice will be fair.*”⁹ While the

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Sir Brian Leveson, “Independent Review of the Criminal Courts: Part 1,” *Ministry of Justice*, July 9, 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-the-criminal-courts-part-1>.

⁵ David Lammy, “We are calling time on the justice system of the past,” *GOV.UK*, accessed February 25, 2026, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/we-are-calling-time-on-the-justice-system-of-the-past>.

⁶ “Building Better Frontline Services,” Department for Science Innovation and Technology, accessed March 4, 2026, <https://ai.gov.uk/our-work/frontline-services/#:~:text=Justice%20Transcribe,-Supporting%20probation%20officers&text=Probation%20officers%20spend%20a%20significant,reduction%20in%20note%2Dtaking%20time>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

Minister engages significantly with the first portion of his statement, “*fast justice*,” he seemingly declines to engage with the trade-offs this may create with “*fair justice*.”¹⁰ It is possible that in pursuit of fast remedies and case processing volume, individual fundamental rights may be at risk of atrophying. The Minister asserts “[*the provisions*] do not change the fundamental right to a fair trial.”¹¹ However, AI trials in other nations, as will be demonstrated, raise similar questions about the compatibility of fundamental rights and AI integration into judicial practice, showing this issue is one increasingly being grappled with on a pan-European basis. It seems the crux of the issue around AI’s involvement in the justice system is the scope of its application, not necessarily whether it has an application at all.

Estonian AI Courtroom Trials and Judicial Innovations

“*Who would have thought that the government of Estonia would be the most technologically progressive of the European Union?*”¹² This rhetorical question is posed by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair in his book *On Leadership*. In the book, he notes Estonia’s technological rise since the collapse of the former Soviet Union, its innovative application of technology in governance, and the benefits this has brought to the Baltic country. As reported in *150 sec*, leading industry figures note “*Estonia has become one of Europe’s most agile innovation ecosystems*.”¹³ The Estonian Leap Program in Davos 2026 spotlighted how a digitally native nation can influence global tech priorities. They further noted that Estonia’s intentional public sector focus on fast expansion, efficiency, digital governance, and strong public-private collaboration has facilitated an environment that produces scalable, investable, and dynamic companies.

In March 2019, an article in the magazine *Wired* reported that the Estonian Ministry of Justice (MOJ) was working on a project that would make small claims processing fully automatic utilising AI.¹⁴ Much was made of this at the time, and the report was met with both intrigue and apprehension. Since then, Estonia’s AI judgments have frequently been cited as one of the most advanced AI projects in European justice systems.¹⁵ However, the Estonian MOJ refuted the claims fuelled by the article, stating;

As there have been a lot of questions relating the topic of AI Judge, we have to explain that the article about Estonian project of designing a “Robot/Judge” in Wired from 25th of March 2019, is misleading. ... Estonian Ministry of Justice does not develop AI

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Tony Blair, *On Liberty: Lessons for the 21st Century* (Hutchinson Heinemann, 2024), 148.

¹³ Maria Jose Velez, “The hub you’re missing: Estonia’s quiet rise as Eastern Europe’s strategic innovation powerhouse,” *150 Sec*, December 9, 2025, <https://www.150sec.com/the-hub-youre-missing-estonias-quiet-rise-as-eastern-europes-strategic-innovation-powerhouse/20599/>.

¹⁴ Eric Niiler, “Can AI Be a Fair Judge in Court? Estonia Thinks So,” *Wired*, March 25, 2019, <https://www.wired.com/story/can-ai-be-fair-judge-court-estonia-thinks-so/>.

¹⁵ Marco Fabri, “From Court Automation to e-Justice and Beyond in Europe,” *International Journal for Court Administration* 15, no. 3 (2024), <https://iacajournal.org/articles/10.36745/ijca.640#n3>.

*robot judges for small claims procedure nor general court procedures to replace the human judge. We are still searching for ICT means to make court's workload, including administrative burden, more bearable.*¹⁶

While the claims of so-called “robot judges” have been dismissed, it is true that Estonia is seeking to use technology effectively across their judicial system. Given that AI is experiencing rapid growth both in functionality and user numbers, it is not a remote possibility, in the fullness of time, for us to see the introduction of “robot judges”. This claim is bolstered by the fact that individuals are increasingly becoming accustomed to AI usage and presence in their daily lives,¹⁷ as well as the fact that AI supported judgements and reasonings are already used in some jurisdictions outside of Europe, most notably the People’s Republic of China.¹⁸ Given its appetite for technology and strong public policy focus on efficiency through technology, Estonia is a clear entry point for discussion around the adoption of AI, be that wholesale judgments in the future or supplemental usage at present. Therefore, it is right to examine what was proposed back in 2019, what has actually been introduced, and why any pilot schemes were shelved for the time being.

It was suggested by Estonia’s Chief Data Officer, Ott Velsberg, that Estonia would use AI “to hear and decide on small claims disputes less than €7,000.”¹⁹ And to this end, the MOJ appointed Velsberg to conduct an exploration into this as a possibility.²⁰ While ultimately this exploration did not culminate in experimentation with AI judges, it did yield a number of efficiency benefits. As a result of this drive, the Courts in Estonia have adopted a number of innovative measures known as the “e-Justice System.”²¹ This suite of resources and procedures has been described as a “pioneering model in the integration of technology into the judiciary, characterised by its efficiency, accessibility, and transparency.”²² The e-Justice system includes electronic case filing and management, digital access to legal information, video conferencing and remote participation, E-signatures and digital authentication, and AI and machine learning.²³

¹⁶ Republic of Estonia, “Estonia does not develop AI Judge,” *Ministry of Justice and Digital Affairs*, February 16, 2022, <https://www.justdigi.ee/en/news/estonia-does-not-develop-ai-judge>.

¹⁷ Chris Brown, “UK’s AI Adoption Surges in Daily Life,” *Ernst and Young*, April 15, 2025, https://www.ey.com/en_uk/newsroom/2025/04/ey-ai-sentiment-index-2025#:~:text=70%25%20of%20UK%20respondents%20have,in%20the%20UK%20is%20lower.

¹⁸ Straton Papagiannas and Nino Junius, “Fairness and justice through automation in China’s smart courts,” *Computer Law & Security Review* 51 (2023).

¹⁹ Joshua Park, “Your Honor, AI,” *Harvard International Review*, April 3, 2020, <https://hir.harvard.edu/your-honor-ai/>.

²⁰ Victor Tangermann, “Estonia is building a ‘robot judge’ to help clear a legal backlog,” *World Economic Forum*, March 26, 2019, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2019/03/estonia-is-building-a-robot-judge-to-help-clear-legal-backlog/>.

²¹ Merit Kõlvart, *Access to Justice in a Digital Age* (Estonian Ministry of Justice, 2017), https://www.encj.eu/images/stories/pdf/workinggroups/ppt_merit_kolvart_moj_estonia.pdf.

²² Keith Binley, “Digitising Estonia’s Judicial Systems,” *Courts Data Solutions*, March 23, 2025, https://courtsdatasolutions.com/analysing-estonias-approach-to-digitising-judicial-systems/#:~:text=Estonia%20has%20begun%20to%20integrate%20artificial%20intelligence,remote%20participation**%20*%20**E%2Dsignatures%20and%20digital%20authentication**.

²³ *Ibid.*

The case management component of e-Justice is particularly interesting as this is an area of court practice plagued by inefficiencies, labour intensity, and burdensome costs. Estonian courts use AI software “Salme”, a speech recognition assistant that transcribes court proceedings.²⁴ During a court session, Salme generates a transcript of the proceedings and the system operates almost entirely automatically. The Salme system has a reported accuracy of approximately 92%, but it is subject to further human oversight, with clerks reviewing and correcting the prepared text where necessary. The courts also use “Krat”, an anonymisation software which removes participants’ personal data from court judgments,²⁵ as well as a text analytics/administrative tool created by Texta OÜ used by several government institutions to optimise work processes and streamline routine activities.²⁶

In the context of civil proceedings, Estonia has introduced a semi-automated procedure for small claims, in which computer-generated payment orders are automatically issued based on information supplied by the parties. This semi-automated process sees algorithmic preparation create payment orders in small claims proceedings, subsequently relying on human oversight.²⁷ Following a payment order, a clerk must confirm the court has the legal authority to handle the specific case and verify that the debtor has actually received the digital or physical notification before any final judgment is issued. Furthermore, if a debtor submits an objection, the algorithm cannot “decide” the case. Instead, it is immediately routed to a human judge for a standard hearing.²⁸

These payment orders have the legal status of judgments for enforcement purposes. The process applies to monetary claims of up to 8,000 euros. Applications must be submitted exclusively through the national e-File system and are handled by the dedicated Payment Order Department of the Pärnu County Court.²⁹ The system relies on algorithms to prepare the orders, and human oversight is retained for specific functions such as determining jurisdiction and ensuring the proper service of documents. This is the closest approximation to the use of AI in judicial procedure currently in use.

Administrative Concerns and Ethical Quandaries

The adoption of emergent technologies is not without issue. For instance, Kraft, in the initial stages of deployment, was reported to have mistaken names, personal

²⁴ “Estonia,” Oxford Institute of Technology and Justice, accessed December 31, 2025, <https://www.techandjustice.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/estonia>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ European Judicial Network, “Online processing of cases and e-communication with courts,” *European Justice*, January 31, 2023, https://e-justice.europa.eu/topics/court-procedures/civil-cases/online-processing-cases-and-e-communication-courts/ee_en#:~:text=by%20the%20defendant,-,11%20In%20terms%20of%20the%20electronic%20procedure%20what%20happens%20if,cases%20provided%20for%20by%20law.

²⁹ Oxford Institute of Technology and Justice, “Estonia.”

identification numbers, and addresses, leading to the necessity of additional review by court staff.³⁰ The tool struggled to recognise contextual hints and references to identifiable individuals. However, as the system became further integrated, the error rate decreased as the system learned. The automation of small claims is perhaps the most contentious and ethically disputed component. Researcher Jasper Ulenaers identifies a number of potential EU law pitfalls ranging from General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).³¹

Firstly, Article 6 of the ECHR provides for a “*fair and public hearing... by an independent and impartial tribunal established by law.*”³² AI-assisted adjudication threatens to alter the very conception of judgment in trials if the core evaluative functions are materially outsourced to opaque systems. Zou and Lefley advocate for a dignity-based reading of Article 6, attentive to the intrinsic value of human judgment, empathy, and the importance of being heard by a human decision-maker, which implies a right to a human judge at the core of the process.³³ This engages with wider scholarship on procedural justice that looks at parties’ willingness to accept outcomes when they feel heard and consulted, regardless of whether they win or not.³⁴

The European Ethical Charter on the Use of AI in Judicial Systems makes clear that AI tools “*must not undermine the guarantees of the right of access to the judge and the right to a fair trial, equality of arms and respect for the adversarial process;*” and stresses “*user control*” and judges’ independence.³⁵ The Charter warns against AI tools acquiring a prescriptive effect, in so far as AI could apply the law without due regard to the fullness, complexity, and nuance of the facts. Unlike a human judge who has the benefit of taking into account other factors outside of the ones they are prompted to account for, AI is restricted to its inputs and may present inequitable remedies through its limited capacity to understand the fullness of a case. This would constrain judicial discretion, potentially placing indirect pressure on judges and threatening independence and impartiality under Article 6.

The Charter also highlights transparency and explainability as preconditions of fairness and legal certainty. Where decision support systems function as “*black boxes,*” litigants may be denied meaningful reasons and the ability to contest the grounds of decisions, further undermining the Article 6 duty to give a reasoned judgment and the

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Jasper Ulenaers, “The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on the Right to a Fair Trial: Towards a Robot Judge?,” *Asian Journal of Law and Economics* 11, no. 2 (2020).

³² European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Art 6.

³³ Mimi Zou and Ellen Lefley, “Generative AI and Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights: The Right to a Human Judge?,” in Mimi Zou, Cristina Poncibò, Martin Ebers, and Ryan Calo (eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of generative AI and the law* (Cambridge University Press, 2025), 453.

³⁴ Jonathan Jackson *et al.*, “Why Procedural Justice Matters: Legitimacy, Compliance and Cooperation Across Legal Contexts,” *Annual Review of Criminology* 41 (2022).

³⁵ Council of Europe, *European Ethical Charter on the Use of Artificial Intelligence in Judicial Systems and Their Environment (CEPEJ)* (2018), adopted December 3–4, 2018.

corresponding right to be heard.³⁶ Even where AI is formally advisory, there is a danger of “*automation bias*,” in which human decision-makers defer to model outputs that carry a perception of objectivity, blurring the line between “*support*” and *de-facto* decision-making.³⁷

Data protection law adds a further layer of constraint in conjunction with additional ethical considerations. Article 22 (GDPR) gives individuals “*the right not to be subject to a decision based solely on automated processing, including profiling, which produces legal effects ... or similarly significantly affects*” them, subject to limited exceptions and safeguards, including the right to obtain human intervention, express a point of view, and contest the decision.³⁸

The European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice’s (CEPEJ) study expressly connects this to online dispute resolution and predictive tools, warning that automated procedures with only automated opportunities for appeal risk violating both Article 22 and Article 6 unless genuine access to a judge is preserved.³⁹ In *SCHUFA*, the CJEU held that the automated calculation of a credit worthiness “*score*” can fall within Article 22 where third-party decision makers “*draw strongly*” on that score in practice, and emphasised that excluding such scoring from Article 22 would create a “*lacuna in legal protection*,” since neither the scoring agency nor the relying controller would provide the information and safeguards required.⁴⁰ By analogy, AI tools that generate risk assessments or outcome predictions which courts are procedurally incentivised to follow, may functionally be construed as decisions based solely on automated processing, even if a judge signs off at the end. A recent American Arbitration Association (AAA) arbitral award, *LaPaglia v Valve*, saw the vacating of the award following the arbitrator's use of AI in the writing of a final Award.⁴¹ This case clearly demonstrates the grounds for appeal that will inevitably open up if the use of AI is broadened to be used in judgment writing. Furthermore, in this instance, it is indicative of the use of AI in judgment and award-writing sitting *ultra vires* of the tribunal’s power.⁴²

Marcin Górski’s article *Why a Human Court?* reinforces the sense that a purely AI tribunal would undermine both the purpose and function of Article 6.⁴³ Górski contends that the legitimacy of courts rests not only on outcome quality but on their character as human

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Zou and Lefley, “Generative AI and Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights.”

³⁸ Regulation (EU) 2016/679 (General Data Protection Regulation) [2016] OJ L119/1, Art. 22.

³⁹ European Council, *CEPEJ*.

⁴⁰ *Case C-634/21, SCHUFA Holding (Scoring)* [2023], para. 61.

⁴¹ *LaPaglia v. Valve Corp.*, No. 3:2025cv00833, Motion to Vacate, filed April 8, 2025, accessed February 25, 2026, <https://www.acerislaw.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/LaPaglia-v-Valve-Corp.pdf>.

⁴² Ioana Bratu, “LaPaglia v. Valve – Drafted by Whom? Vacating an Award for AI Involvement,” *LinkedIn*, October 16, 2025, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/lapaglia-v-valve-drafted-whom-vacating-award-ai-bratu-mciarb--yulme/>.

⁴³ Marcin Górski, “Why a Human Court? On the Right to a Human Judge in the Context of the Fair Trial Principle,” *eucrim* 18, no. 1 (2023): 83–88, <https://doi.org/10.30709/eucrim-2023-008>.

institutions accountable to constitutional norms.⁴⁴ The Estonian AI innovations and experiments *prima facie* appear compatible with current rights provisions and associated rights, insofar as they remain demonstrably subordinate to human judgement and are affirmed by robust procedural protections. Once automation starts to displace human adjudication at the point where legal rights are finally determined, the combined force of Article 6, GDPR Article 22, and the Council of Europe's ethical framework all pull in the same direction. The only conclusion to be drawn is that AI may help courts to function, but it cannot be the court.

Conclusion

As evidenced by the suggestions outlined by the United Kingdom and the trials conducted in Estonia, the pertinent constitutional question is not whether AI should enter the courtroom, but how far AI integration should go. So far, the most successful and least legally complex utilisations have been those confined to administrative augmentation and transcription. Estonia's e-Justice ecosystem, often misconstrued as a laboratory for "robot judges", in practice remains anchored to human oversight. Similarly, the UK's proposed Justice AI Unit, at least in its present articulation, positions AI as an accelerant of efficiency rather than a substitute for adjudication. These AI supplements to court practice unquestionably pose a number of legal and ethical issues, notwithstanding questions of AI's compatibility with constitutional and human rights jurisprudence. Article 6 of the ECHR, Article 22 of the GDPR provisions, and the Council of Europe's Ethical Charter collectively insist upon human accountability, transparency, and the preservation of judicial independence.

The Deputy Prime Minister's invocation of "*fast and fair*" justice synthesises the tension at the heart of modern judicial practice. Delay corrodes public confidence and inflicts real harm on litigants. However, fairness, understood through Article 6, is not exclusively the product of speed. Speed is but one aspect, it is also grounded in participation and reasoned human judgment. Courts derive their authority not solely from the accuracy of outcomes, but from their character as accountable human institutions embedded within constitutional frameworks. The lesson that can be drawn from Estonia is not that Europe stands on the precipice of AI judgment, but that innovation proceeds most safely when tethered tightly to constitutional fundamentals. AI and its expanded usage is inevitable, and, if appropriately constrained, it can help courts to function more effectively. It is crucial that the adjudicative act itself remains in the hands of human judgment and consideration. In short, while AI may sit beside the bench, it should not and cannot occupy it.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

The Political Economy of the EU's Digital Borders: The Case of eu-LISA

Daniel Levi¹

Introduction

The concept of borders has long been debated, with several branches of scholarship viewing them as complex spaces defined not only by their physical features, but also by related practices, infrastructures and discourses. Over the last two decades, technological innovations have impacted every aspect of society in many different ways. Not extraneous to this trend, borders were also redefined, transformed, and reinvented as digital elements in the process known as border digitalisation. Border digitalisation refers to the increasingly intensive application of digital systems and technologies to (in)securitise, manage, and control the movement of people across and around borders.² To give concrete examples, digital (or smart) borders include IT systems and infrastructure that combine explicit and visible elements, such as e-gates, security cameras, self-service kiosks, fingerprint scanners, self-registration websites. Some of these elements are encountered daily while moving or travelling. On the other hand, digital borders include

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² Anna Bredström et al., "Border Reconfiguration, Migration Governance, and Fundamental Rights: A Scoping Review of EURODAC as a Research Object," *Social Inclusion* 10, no. 3 (2022): 68–81, <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v10i3.5398>; Bruno Oliveira Martins et al., "Border Security and the Digitalisation of Sovereignty: Insights from EU Borderwork," *European Security* 31, no. 3 (2022): 475–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2022.2101884>; Paul Trauttmansdorff and Ulrike Felt, "Between Infrastructural Experimentation and Collective Imagination: The Digital Transformation of the EU Border Regime," *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 48, no. 3 (2023): 635–62, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01622439211057523>; Vassilis S. Tsianos and Brigitta Kuster, "Eurodac in Times of Bigness: The Power of Big Data within the Emerging European IT Agency," *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 31, no. 2 (2016): 235–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08865655.2016.1174606>.

a variety of less visible systems, such as algorithms serving several different purposes, centralised databases (which store travel permits and history, biometric identifiers, and many other kinds of data), research, and verification systems.³ Essentially, borders are not just physical spaces on a map but are continuously being mediated and virtualised through the collection of data by IT companies and the digital systems they develop and manage.⁴

The EU is not extraneous to these developments; in fact, it is one of the leaders in the field of border digitalisation. Some scholars even consider the digitalisation of the Schengen area to be a laboratory in which European borders are understood as spaces for experimentation.⁵ In this context, one of the main actors is the European Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT Systems in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (eu-LISA), established in 2011 by EU regulation 1077/2011 and becoming operational on 31 December 2012, under the supervision of the DG HOME.⁶ The agency was founded with the idea of creating a group of technicians responsible for the operational side of the borders' system. Instead, the political and legislative competencies were supposed to remain within the EU commission jurisdiction.⁷ Two fundamental aspects behind the creation of eu-LISA were the auspices of "*reducing the long-term cost generated by the maintenance of IT systems and increasing the productivity of staff and equipment*" by having a centralised agency.⁸ By showing what the dynamics around eu-LISA functioning and its role within the EU border management are, this paper will demonstrate how this agency is not just a service provider, but has an epistemic power that is exploited for economic gains. Moreover, it will investigate how border infrastructures can be understood as sites of capitalist accumulation and generation that through data extractivism tend to reproduce and exploit postcolonial power asymmetries.

eu-LISA Structure and Governing Dynamics

eu-LISA is now responsible for managing the EU's largest digital systems used for border (in)security and migration management and control.⁹ Initially, the agency administered three core systems: the Schengen Information System (SIS II), the Visa Information

³ Oliveira Martins et al., "Border Security and the Digitalisation of Sovereignty."

⁴ Paul Trauttmansdorff, "The Politics of Digital Borders," in *Border Politics* (Springer International Publishing, 2017).

⁵ Trauttmansdorff and Felt, "Between Infrastructural Experimentation and Collective Imagination."

⁶ Didier Bigo, "Eu-LISA: The Emergence of a Digital Technology Guild and Its Rise in the Field of EU Internal Security," *European Security, Borders, Crime and EU Law*, 2025, 11–33; Georgios Glouftisios, "The Birth of Eu-LISA," in *Engineering Digitised Borders*, by Georgios Glouftisios (Springer Singapore, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-3402-4_6.

⁷ Glouftisios, "The Birth of Eu-LISA."

⁸ Glouftisios, "The Birth of Eu-LISA," 111.

⁹ Eileen Murphy Maguire, "Security-as-Service in the Management of European Border Data Infrastructures," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 62, no. 5 (2024): 1379–94, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13543>.

System (VIS), and the European Asylum Dactyloscopy Database (Eurodac). However, following the 2015 Paris attacks, the push for increasing digital surveillance overcame doubts relating to data protection and personal privacy. Consequently, eu-LISA's funding in 2018 was increased to develop three new systems. First, the European Entry and Exit System (EES), secondly, the European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS), and thirdly, the European Criminal Records Information System for Third Country Nationals (ECRIS-TCN). Moreover, in 2023, the agency took responsibility for managing the cross-border justice tool called e-Justice Communication via Online Data Exchange (e-CODEX).¹⁰ According to the eu-LISA website, the last new database that will enter into function by the first quarter of 2026 is the Joint Investigation Teams Collaboration Platform (JITs CP).

According to the EU institutions, a key function to pursue is to promote the interoperability of databases, ensuring that all databases can communicate fluently.¹¹ The management of eu-LISA is overseen by a management board, responsible for adopting strategic decisions. The board is composed of representatives of the EU Member States and Schengen associated countries, along with two representatives from the European Commission and representatives from relevant EU agencies —namely Eurojust, Europol, Frontex, and the EPPO— responsible respectively for judicial cooperation, law enforcement, border management, and financial crime against the EU.¹²

Eu-LISA defines itself just along the neutral logic of service and promotes itself as a provider of added value for Member States, thereby understanding their role as technical rather than political.¹³ In contrast, Bigo argues that the Agency agrees on a precise understanding of border management and control as a security practice, rather than an illegitimate form of violence; by competing in the struggle to define the field, they organise themselves along specific craft lines.¹⁴ Digital borders have also been conceptualised as a form of social sorting based on profiles built on race, gender, ethnicity, nationality or religion as criteria.¹⁵ Even if formally under the control of the member

¹⁰ Maguire, "Security-as-Service in the Management of European Border Data Infrastructures"; Bigo, "Eu-LISA."

¹¹ Bruno Oliveira Martins et al., "Border Security and the Digitalisation of Sovereignty: Insights from EU Borderwork," *European Security* 31, no. 3 (2022): 475–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2022.2101884>; "Eu-LISA | European Union Agency for the Operational Management of Large-Scale IT Systems in the Area of Freedom, Security and Justice," accessed October 13, 2025, <https://www.eulisa.europa.eu/>.

¹² "Management Board | Eu-LISA," accessed November 19, 2025, <https://www.eulisa.europa.eu/about-us/organisation/eu-lisa-management-board>.

¹³ Eileen Murphy Maguire, "Solidarity through Service: The Role of the Guild of IT Service Managers in the Field of European (in)Security," *Critical Studies on Security* 12, no. 1 (2024): 18–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2023.2278260>.

¹⁴ Didier Bigo, "The Socio-Genesis of a Guild of 'Digital Technologies' Justifying Transnational Interoperable Databases in the Name of Security and Border Purposes: A Reframing of the Field of Security Professionals?," *International Journal of Migration and Border Studies* 6, no. 1/2 (2020): 74, <https://doi.org/10.1504/IJMBS.2020.10030062>; Bigo, "Eu-LISA."

¹⁵ Magdalena König, "The Borders, They Are a-Changin'! The Emergence of Socio-Digital Borders in the EU," *Internet Policy Review* 5, no. 1 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.14763/2016.1.403>.

states and the EC, considering that it is a sufficiently autonomous field, eu-LISA expresses its own form of hierarchies.¹⁶ Indeed, Bigo identifies a “transnational guild” of IT experts managing security, who also exercise an epistemological power over the institutions and the society. This is done by pushing an aggressive technological determinism and a preventive and predictive understanding of security. The increasing size of the agency demonstrates its pivotal role in shaping data infrastructure management strategies, and consequently its significant influence on the notion of borders.¹⁷

Interoperability: A Contested Concept

One of the drivers through which eu-LISA defines its agenda is the concept of interoperability, which refers to the ability to share information seamlessly between different databases to provide comprehensive access to authorities. This concept is widely contested in the literature, mainly because connecting databases originally created for different purposes —such as travel, criminal records, border crossing and judicial cooperation— risks undermining the principle of purpose limitation.¹⁸

This aspect is known as “function creep”, and refers to the use of data for purposes other than those for which they were initially collected.¹⁹ If, on the one hand, this dynamic can increase efficiency, on the other, it poses substantial problems regarding privacy, accountability, and transparency. Respectively, it would violate multiple articles of the GDPR (5 and 89),²⁰ the responsibility on the use of databases would become hard to define, and some useful firewalls would risk being compromised.²¹

The Shared Biometric Matching System (sBMS) is the main tool for achieving interoperability. It is designed to search and cross-match biometric data across different databases, including information on third-country nationals. eu-LISA’s total budget for the period 2017-2024 is significant, amounting to more than 1.5 billion euros, with over

¹⁶ Bigo, “Eu-LISA.”

¹⁷ Bigo, “The Socio-Genesis of a Guild of ‘Digital Technologies’ Justifying Transnational Interoperable Databases in the Name of Security and Border Purposes”; Bigo, “Eu-LISA: The Emergence of a Digital Technology Guild and Its Rise in the Field of EU Internal Security.”

¹⁸ Oliveira Martins et al., “Border Security and the Digitalisation of Sovereignty.”

¹⁹ Bredström et al., “Border Reconfiguration, Migration Governance, and Fundamental Rights”; Oliveira Martins et al., “Border Security and the Digitalisation of Sovereignty.”

²⁰ Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the Protection of Natural Persons with Regard to the Processing of Personal Data and on the Free Movement of Such Data, and Repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation) (Text with EEA Relevance), 119 OJ L (2016), <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2016/679/oj>.

²¹ For a more comprehensive discussion on “function creep”, see Tim Dekkers, “Technology Driven Crimmigration? Function Creep and Mission Creep in Dutch Migration Control,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 46, no. 9 (2020): 1849–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1674134>; Nanou van Iersel and Francien Dechesne, “Changing Lenses on Lenses –Function Creep with Public Camera Surveillance in the Netherlands?,” *Computer Law & Security Review* 59 (November 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clsr.2025.106221>.

150 million euros officially invested in interoperability.²² However, the same concept is also promoted within other contracts, making it difficult to define exactly the total investment. While a smaller portion of the Frontex budget is spent on contracts, almost the entire eu-LISA's budget is dedicated to contracts with private companies. In total, eu-LISA's subcontracting expenditure in 2020 was five times bigger than Frontex's.²³

Some of the biggest contracts relate to the creation of the EES system, totalling around 400 million euros, including a contract worth over 300 million euros awarded to Idemia and Sopra Steria. The second-biggest contract, valued at between 150 and 200 million euros, was awarded to the Bridge 3 consortium (formed by Accenture, Atos, and Morpho) for the management of VIS.²⁴ In contrast to Frontex, where the cooperating companies are much diverse and dispersed, eu-LISA comprises a small "*group of private actors formed by biometric, software and consultancy companies,*" including but not limited to Sopra Steria, 3M Belgium, IDEMIA, Accenture, Atos, Everis, and Thales, which are frequently awarded these contracts.²⁵ Interestingly, rather than competing for these contracts, these private actors cooperate with each other. Concretely, they establish partnership (IDEMIA and Sopra Steria) or joint ventures (such as Athea created by Atos and Tales) to develop systems that will then be applied in the context of digital borders.²⁶ Moreover, the companies that were consulted by the EC —and in particular by the Protection and Security Advisory Group (PASAG)— to define the policies are mostly the same that later won the contracts.²⁷ Substantially, the EC created new markets for advanced security products with high natural entry barriers in order to build an integrated border management system through investments, resulting in a small group of companies exercising monopoly.²⁸ A fundamental concept arising from the demand for interoperability is the lock-in effect, whereby "*each system is used to justify the continuous evolution of the other.*"²⁹ In other words, the update required to one system to achieve interoperability often necessitates further updates in other systems, giving origin to a vicious circle which, in the end, mainly benefits the IT companies.

The political economy of EU interoperability in border management extends beyond eu-LISA's activities, with significant influence being exerted through the strategic funding priorities of FP7 and Horizon 2020. These programmes "*produce knowledge and*

²² eu-LISA, *Report on the Budgetary and Financial Management* (2024).

²³ Ana Valdivia et al., "Neither Opaque nor Transparent: A Transdisciplinary Methodology to Investigate Datafication at the EU Borders," *Big Data & Society* 9, no. 2 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1177/20539517221124586>.

²⁴ Valdivia et al., "Neither Opaque nor Transparent."

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Martin Lemberg-Pedersen et al., *The Political Economy of Entry Governance*, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.30148.58241>.

²⁸ Lemberg-Pedersen et al., *The Political Economy of Entry Governance*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

*imaginaries of possible bordering practices.*³⁰ The European Technology Platforms and Advisory Groups, which comprise industry representatives, shape the EU's research agenda by directing substantial funds toward projects that test and validate interoperable border systems. This aligns with discourses that promote investment and competitiveness in the security and military sectors, which effectively subsidise pre-commercial procurement.³¹ These elements suggest that a few IT companies play a relevant and pivotal role in the constitution of the idea of digital borders, as proposed by Bigo through the concept of a "*guild of digital technologies*"³² Consequently, policymakers face knowledge asymmetries, struggling to identify biased recommendations and lacking critical perspectives on their own priorities.³³

Data Accumulation and extractive practices

In this context, following Sadowski, it is interesting to understand data as a form of capital.³⁴ Data hold value beyond the authorities who collect them for specific informational and governmental ends. They are also gathered and organised before their precise use is determined, which makes interoperability a central consideration. The push by the EC and IT companies to digitalise the border and collect a considerable amount of information can be understood in terms of data extraction. At its core, the driving force is the accumulation of data, which is synonymous with both power and profit. This logic of accumulation can explain both the motivations of the EC and eu-LISA with regard to sustaining and exercising political power. However, for IT companies data serves as a source of profit and a competitive edge in technological and AI development, fields in which many of the aforementioned companies are already leaders. This can be an explanation for the synergies between the IT companies, the EC and eu-LISA, which have led to a surge in investments for border digitalisation.

Understanding data as capital opens the ground for thinking about borders' digitalisation also as a transformation which allows extractive practice that perpetuates colonial dynamics. Often referred to as "accumulation by dispossession" of user-generated information, this data extraction transforms the border itself into a resource-rich space where data is acquired to develop "better services", new systems, and to enhance

³⁰ Clemens Binder, "The Technopolitics of Border Security R&D: Shaping the EU's Border in the Security Research Programme," *Security Dialogue* 55, no. 6 (2024): 554, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09670106241269795>.

³¹ Lemberg-Pedersen et al., *The Political Economy of Entry Governance*.

³² Bigo, "The Socio-Genesis of a Guild of 'Digital Technologies' Justifying Transnational Interoperable Databases in the Name of Security and Border Purposes," 78; Bigo, "Eu-LISA."

³³ Lemberg-Pedersen et al., *The Political Economy of Entry Governance*; Noora Lori and Kaija Schilde, "A Political Economy of Global Security Approach to Migration and Border Control," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, no. 1 (2021): ogaa011, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogaa011>; María-Luisa Sánchez-Barrueco, "Business as Usual? Mapping Outsourcing Practices in Schengen Visa Processing," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44, no. 3 (2018): 382–400, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1301814>.

³⁴ Jathan Sadowski, "When Data Is Capital: Datafication, Accumulation, and Extraction," *Big Data & Society* 6, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951718820549>.

competitiveness in the global technological and AI race.³⁵ The practice of collecting the data on people crossing borders and the related creation of interoperable systems designed to control and block the movement of people resemble a colonial logic of exploiting the peripheries for the benefit of the centre. For instance, *“the idea with the sBMS is that authorities will be able to check whether third-country nationals are the person they claim to be through biometric verification and then ensure they do not overstay.”*³⁶ For marginalised communities like asylum seekers, databases such as EURODAC impose systems of *a priori* suspicion and function as mechanisms of social sorting.³⁷ Moreover, by connecting together databases with different purposes, the EU is pushing for a concrete connection between crime and migration, reinforcing the securitisation of borders and the criminalisation of migrants.

Conclusion

In conclusion, border digitalisation has introduced an additional layer of complexity to the dynamics governing borders by blending physical and virtual control. The EU and IT companies, through agencies such as eu-LISA, are central political and economic actors in the development of digital borders. Importantly, this happens in a market environment characterised by high natural entry barriers, with a few companies exercising an epistemological and material monopoly. By promoting (in)security and competitiveness through a deterministic understanding of technology, they are contributing to the reshaping of borders as sites of exclusion, profit and experimentation. In this context, the “function creep” and interoperability, while framed as means to enhance efficiency and (in)security, often obscures more concerning implications about privacy, equity, and human rights. By centralising and cross-referencing vast amounts of personal data, these systems risk reinforcing pre-existing hierarchies and creating new forms of social sorting. This further reproduces power asymmetries, extractivist practices and colonial dynamics. Indeed, rather than helping to better protect human rights, technology has become a tool to consolidate sovereign power and corporations’ interests.

³⁵ Bigo, “The Socio-Genesis of a Guild of ‘Digital Technologies’ Justifying Transnational Interoperable Databases in the Name of Security and Border Purposes”; Sadowski, “When Data Is Capital”; Tsianos and Kuster, “Eurodac in Times of Bigness.”

³⁶ Oliveira Martins et al., “Border Security and the Digitalisation of Sovereignty,” 481.

³⁷ Bigo, “The Socio-Genesis of a Guild of ‘Digital Technologies’ Justifying Transnational Interoperable Databases in the Name of Security and Border Purposes”; Bredström et al., “Border Reconfiguration, Migration Governance, and Fundamental Rights.”

Brakes on the *Zeitenwende*: Germany's Crisis Framing of Russia's War on Ukraine

Julian Stöckle¹

Introduction

As Europe faces an increasing number of crises that threaten its very existence, analysing leaders' reactions can help shed light on their capacity to resist these forces by advocating and implementing necessary policy change. A case in point is Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, with Germany as a particularly relevant actor given its historical aversion to military means and central role in Europe's security architecture.

Within Germany's three-party coalition government newly in office in 2022, mainstream parties largely agreed on the need for change, but preferences for the extent of change in response diverged greatly. While the chancellor in Germany has a weaker position than presidents or prime ministers elsewhere, it is typically still the chancellor who defines key decisions in the foreign policy arena, including by overruling ministers.²

On February 27, 2022, three days after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, former German chancellor Olaf Scholz reacted to mounting pressure through a hallmark speech in which he pledged weapon deliveries to Ukraine, sanctions on Russia, the phase-out of Russian energy imports, and a special military fund. In doing so, he broke with several long-standing German *modi operandi*, including *change through trade*, *Ostpolitik*, and its non-military foreign policy, whilst reinforcing others like *Westbindung* – integration into the West.³

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² Olivier Schmitt, "Strategic Users of Culture: German Decisions for Military Action," *Contemporary Security Policy* 33, no. 1 (2012): 59–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2012.659586>.

³ Bernhard Blumenau, "Breaking with Convention? *Zeitenwende* and the Traditional Pillars of German Foreign

To what extent this revision constituted fundamental change and yielded success has been the subject of abundant scholarly analysis.⁴ Most have lauded the initial response often referred to as a turning point, but others have criticised the lack of scale, speed, and of a strategic culture regarding military aid to Ukraine that followed the hallmark announcements.⁵ This split in preferences for change is particularly pronounced in the uses of different frames by former chancellor Scholz to communicate and defend his policies.

To illustrate how crisis framing can shift dramatically as political preferences evolve, this article analyses two competing frames and narratives that the German chancellor has used to justify his decisions within the first year following Russia's all-out war (Figure 1). This article argues that first, the chancellor leveraged the watershed moment marked by Russia's invasion to justify major changes to Germany's security policy—that however, do not necessarily represent a paradigm shift. Second, to justify a moderate, more restrained response with limited ambition amidst mounting pressures from vocal parliamentarians, he later capitalised on fears in Germany's population.

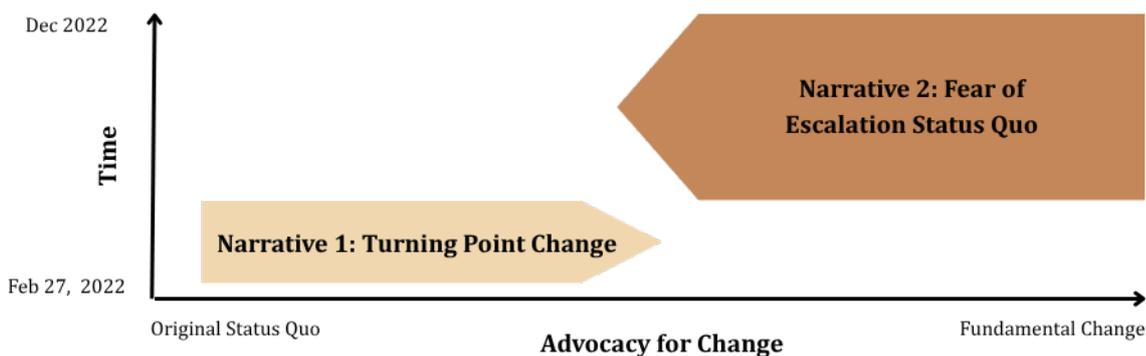


Figure 1: *Evolution of Change Advocacy by Chancellor Scholz in Response to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in 2022* (Own graphic inspired by Boin et al., 2009).

Conceptual Framework: Change Versus Status-Quo Advocates and Crisis Framing

This article draws on two conceptual dimensions. First, the extent of policy change post-crisis depends on the interaction and power balance between policymakers advocating for change and those supportive of the *status quo*.⁶ When the policy change following a

Policy," *International Affairs* 98, no. 6 (2022): 1895–913, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia166>.

⁴ Blumenau, "Breaking with Convention?"; Tobias Bunde, "Lessons (to Be) Learned? Germany's *Zeitenwende* and European Security after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *Contemporary Security Policy* 43, no. 3 (2022): 516–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2022.2092820>; Bastian Giegerich and Ben Schreer, "Zeitenwende One Year On," *Survival* 65, no. 2 (2023): 37–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2023.2193095>; Patrick A. Mello, "Zeitenwende: German Foreign Policy Change in the Wake of Russia's War Against Ukraine," *Politics and Governance* 12, no. 0 (2024), <https://www.cogitatiopress.com/politicsandgovernance/article/view/7346>.

⁵ Aylin Matle, "Germany: *Zeitenwende* (Slowly) in the Making?," *Centre for Grand Strategy, King's College London*, no. War in Ukraine: One Year On (2023): 33–37, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/warstudies/assets/war-in-ukraine-one-year-on.pdf>.

⁶ Arjen Boin et al., "Crisis Exploitation: Political and Policy Impacts of Framing Contests," *Journal of European*

crisis is so fundamental that the overarching policy discourse irreversibly changes with it, scholars speak of a paradigm shift.⁷

Second, policymakers offer meaning to gather support for their crisis response by framing the crisis in a certain way. Meaning-making encompasses their interpretation of the crisis and their vision for a return to normalcy, communicated to the public, which is critical for effective crisis management.⁸ Doing so via targeted framing aims at convincing the public of the leaders' definition of the situation and the required response to increase societal buy-in.⁹

Narrative 1: Turning Point for German Security Policy – Also A Paradigm Shift?

As the convergence of German mainstream political parties towards more military spending and military aid to Ukraine has led to new substantial consensus within days after the invasion, the new dividing line quickly emerged—on how far military aid should go. In the policy crisis exploitation framework by Boin et al. (2009),¹⁰ Scholz's initial response to Russia's invasion best reflects a compromise between change advocates and *status quo* players. On one hand, most leading politicians from mainstream parties acted as change advocates of various ambition levels pressing for a more fundamental policy shift. On the other hand, a few *status quo* players on the fringes of mainstream parties and the overall party spectrum sought to contain change. This led to a major rhetorical and symbolic change, outlined in this section, but a less radical and more limited substantive change, explained in the following section.

Scholz dubbed Germany's need for change following the invasion a *Zeitenwende*, which can be translated as a turning point or watershed moment. Scholz framed the turning point as a result of radically changed exogenous circumstances, the newly perceived stark threat from Russia for Germany's security—“*Putin's warmongering*”, necessitating more investments into collective security, adequate to Germany's size.¹¹

Public Policy 16, no. 1 (2009): 81–106, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760802453221>.

⁷ Peter A. Hall, “Policy Paradigms, Social Learning, and the State: The Case of Economic Policymaking in Britain,” *Comparative Politics* 25, no. 3 (1993): 275, <https://doi.org/10.2307/422246>.

⁸ Arjen Boin et al., “Leadership in Times of Crisis: A Framework for Assessment,” *International Review of Public Administration* 18, no. 1 (2013): 79–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/12294659.2013.10805241>.

⁹ Chris Ansell et al., “Managing Transboundary Crises: Identifying the Building Blocks of an Effective Response System,” *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 18, no. 4 (2010): 195–207, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5973.2010.00620.x>.

¹⁰ Boin et al., “Crisis Exploitation.”

¹¹ Blumenau, “Breaking with Convention?”

“We are living through a watershed era. And that means that the world afterwards will no longer be the same as the world before. [...] This has consequences for security in Europe. That is why I say very clearly that we accept the challenge that now faces us – with clear-headed resolve.”

Olaf Scholz speaking in front of the German parliament on February 27, 2022.¹²

By portraying Russia’s invasion as an exogenous threat that Germany needs to adapt to, he framed the *Zeitenwende* in passive terms as something that happens to you, necessitating a response, rather than something one actively does and steers as one would for a paradigm shift. Thereby, he implied that Germany’s leaders who are “*passive observers*” merely need to adapt to new realities,¹³ which necessitated an “*unequivocal response*” in order to favourably influence the consequences for European security.¹⁴

Establishing this dominant frame was convenient as it established an interpretative lens for Germans that supported the crisis management efforts by the chancellor, which is crucial for sustaining legitimacy for public policies and institutions.¹⁵ In particular, when it comes to active foreign policy via military means, public perception against or in favour of governments’ crisis responses is critical for sustaining political backing to undertake these efforts.¹⁶ In this context, public opinion developed favourably in 2022 compared to 2021, with significantly higher population shares regarding Russia as a threat and supporting a more active foreign policy using military means.¹⁷

In line with the initial framing and the response that followed, Scholz attempted to establish his vision about Europe’s future security. He envisioned Germany’s role in the European security architecture to evolve towards a “*guarantor of European security*”, taking “*leading responsibility for the security of [the] continent*”.¹⁸ This represents a significant shift from the previous self-conception as a non-military civilian power.¹⁹ Yet, whether Germany’s policy response to the *Zeitenwende* constituted a paradigm shift is more obscure.

¹² Federal German Government, “Policy Statement by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany and Member of the German Bundestag, 27 February 2022 in Berlin,” 27 February 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/policy-statement-by-olaf-scholz-chancellor-of-the-federal-republic-of-germany-and-member-of-the-german-bundestag-27-february-2022-in-berlin-2008378>.

¹³ Mario Bisiada, “The Discursive Construction of a New Reality in Olaf Scholz’s *Zeitenwende* Speech,” *Critical Discourse Studies* 21, no. 6 (2024): 629–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2023.2186450>.

¹⁴ Bunde, “Lessons (to Be) Learned?”

¹⁵ Boin *et al.*, “Leadership in Times of Crisis.”

¹⁶ Adam J. Berinsky, “Assuming the Costs of War: Events, Elites, and American Public Support for Military Conflict,” *Journal of Politics* 69, no. 4 (2007): 975–97, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2508.2007.00602.x>.

¹⁷ Timo Graf, “Der Ukraine-Krieg als exogener Schock für das Russlandbild und die Bündnissolidarität in der deutschen Bevölkerung,” in *Russlands Angriffskrieg gegen die Ukraine* (Nomos Verlag, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748933915>.

¹⁸ Rafał Ulatowski, “The Illusion of Germany’s *Zeitenwende*,” *The Washington Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (2024): 59–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2024.2398318>.

¹⁹ Blumenau, “Breaking with Convention?”

Two factors support the view that Germany's policy shift represents such a paradigm shift, in line with Hall's definition (1993). First, the scientific community had long before the 2022 invasion established the need to reform Germany's security policy, especially *vis-à-vis* Russia and Ukraine.²⁰ The sociological element of giving up core beliefs is typically harder than adjusting non-core policy aspects. It is thus to the credit of German chancellor Scholz that he revised such core beliefs, including military restraint and engagement with Russia.²¹

Second, the shift was announced and thus delivered top-down by Germany's chancellor with barely any prior inner-coalition consultation.²² Yet, the lack of agency that would be inherent in a paradigm shift puts into question whether this was an actively steered paradigm shift or merely a turning point followed by a policy adjustment, even if a significant one.²³

Narrative 2: Fears of Escalation as Means to Justify Moderation

The new dividing line among Germany's political mainstream emerged shortly after the *Zeitenwende* speech from February 27. In particular, once the discovery of Russia's atrocities in Bucha in early April led to public outcry across Europe, change advocates raised their ambition levels and pressed for stronger military support of Ukraine. This split was between chancellor Scholz and his Social Democratic Party allies on one side, and both the liberals and the Greens of his coalition government, along with the conservative opposition, on the other side.²⁴ Disagreement spanned both operations and strategy for navigating German security policy in this new watershed era. With his *Zeitenwende* announcements, Scholz at first belonged to the change advocates three days after the war.²⁵

Yet, compared with the baseline of these initially announced changes, he quickly turned into a *status quo* player averse to the kind of far-reaching change advocated by his ideological opponents, in particular regarding deliveries of various German-made heavy weaponry to Ukraine. With the most powerful German political figure advocating for the new status quo, more wide-reaching change was difficult to achieve for ambitious change advocates. At home, these included mostly leading politicians from the other three mainstream parties, while abroad, they were leaders from frontline states in Central and

²⁰ Eva Michaels, "Caught off Guard? Evaluating How External Experts in Germany Warned about Russia's War on Ukraine," *Intelligence and National Security* 39, no. 3 (2024): 420–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2024.2330133>.

²¹ Bunde, "Lessons (to Be) Learned?"

²² Blumenau, "Breaking with Convention?"

²³ Bisiada, "The Discursive Construction of a New Reality in Olaf Scholz's *Zeitenwende* Speech."

²⁴ Jonas J. Driedger, "Inertia and Reactiveness in Germany's Russia Policy: From the 2021 Federal Election to the Invasion of Ukraine in 2022," *German Politics and Society* 40, no. 4 (2022): 135–51, <https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2022.400407>.

²⁵ Boin et al., "Crisis Exploitation."

Eastern Europe, such as Poland.²⁶ Thus, what critics perceived as German “hesitancy” in supporting Ukraine was the result of the powerplay between both groups, a hard-fought gradual, incremental adjustment compared with the new *Zeitenwende* reality from February 27, 2022.²⁷

To contain policy change, Scholz frequently portrayed himself as a *besonnen*—a moderate, considerate, or prudent—voice in German politics that people could hold onto for stability in uncertain times. This is evident in several of his public appearances since the full-scale invasion. For example, when asked in a media interview if he fears a third world war, he stated the obvious, which both *status quo* and change advocates agree on—that a direct conflict with Russia must be avoided—to justify his moderate course.

“In such a dangerous situation, any rash step is out of the question. There must be no direct conflict between Russia and NATO! [...] Many [citizens] think the government's prudent course is the right one.”

Olaf Scholz in an interview with German daily newspaper *Die Welt* on October 22, 2022.²⁸

A common emotional factor driving German public discourse on security policy since 2022 has been the fear of escalation. First, it was the political extremes on the left and right spreading narratives of Western “warmongering” that, they argued, risked an escalation of the conflict.²⁹ However, once he faced fierce criticism from change advocates, the chancellor increasingly used affective control by repeatedly emphasising such fears to justify his *status quo* positioning. In another media interview at the height of heated debates on potential German deliveries of armoured vehicles, shortly after the massacres in Bucha were discovered, he responded to a question on the source of his fear, given his reluctance in supplying Ukraine with weaponry, in the following way:

“I swore an oath of office. I said very early on that we must do everything we can to avoid a direct military confrontation between NATO and a highly armed superpower like Russia, a nuclear power. I am doing everything I can to prevent an escalation that leads to a third world war. There must be no nuclear war.”

Olaf Scholz in an interview with German newspaper *Der Spiegel* on April 22, 2022.³⁰

This demonstrates how the chancellor leveraged fears of a third world war or nuclear war among the German population to justify his *status quo* stance, whereas allies like the

²⁶ Mello, “Zeitenwende.”

²⁷ Driedger, “Inertia and Reactiveness in Germany’s Russia Policy.”

²⁸ Olaf Scholz, “Gemeinsam auf die aktuellen Herausforderungen reagieren,” *Die Welt*, October 22, 2022, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/kanzler-interview-welt-2137196>.

²⁹ Driedger, “Inertia and Reactiveness in Germany’s Russia Policy.”

³⁰ Olaf Scholz, “Es darf keinen Atomkrieg geben,” interview by Melanie Amann and Martin Knobbe, *Der Spiegel*, April 22, 2022, <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/olaf-scholz-und-der-ukraine-krieg-interview-es-darf-keinen-atomkrieg-geben-a-ae2acbf8-8125-4bf5-a273-fbcd0bd8791c>.

Czech Republic and Poland had already sent comparable equipment, notwithstanding common Russian threats of retaliatory action that did not manifest.³¹ By that, he catered to those advocating for as little change as possible in the face of new realities. Connecting overly ambitious military aid to Ukraine with potential escalation aided the manifestation of his vision for maintaining the new normalcy—continued support to Ukraine on a moderate level in a *besonnen* way. This was to reassure and re-legitimise the chancellor's control over the crisis.

Conclusion

Olaf Scholz's turn from acting as a change to a *status quo* advocate may partly be due to structural incentives for a restrained foreign policy after all. They include a favourable geography in the centre of Europe, an ensuing defensive military advantage, powerful alliances such as NATO, and high costs to deliver on ambitious pledges, such as turning into a "*guarantor*" of European security by ramping up its military.³² More fundamentally, though, and connected to the latter, was a deep-rooted aversion to and fear of systemic bipolar bloc competition, instability within Russia, and overcoming Germany's post-heroism.³³

These structural considerations may explain why the chancellor's meaning-making strategies changed so drastically during the course of the war. While both narratives focused on protecting Germany's population from external threats, he initially emphasised the threat posed by *inaction*, before stressing the threat posed by too ambitious *action*. His usage of frames to initially justify disruptive changes, opposed to Germany's long-standing core beliefs, to then reason his preference for maintaining the new *status quo*, is a stark illustration of how leaders may alter their frames fundamentally as political calculus changes. This is especially clear when change advocates' preferences for the extent of change drift apart.

³¹ Liviu Horovitz and Martha Stolze, "Nuclear Rhetoric and Escalation Management in Russia's War against Ukraine: A Chronology," Working Paper Research Division International Security, no. 2 (August 2023), <https://www.swp-berlin.org/publikation/nuclear-rhetoric-and-escalation-management-in-russias-war-against-ukraine>.

³² Ulatowski, "The Illusion of Germany's *Zeitenwende*."

³³ Benjamin Tallis and Julian Stöckle, "Who's Afraid of Ukraine's Victory?," *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, Special Issue (2023), <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/whos-afraid-ukraines-victory>.

From Fragmentation to Autonomy: Building European Resilience through

Gonçalo Oliveira¹

Introduction¹

The international scenario is currently marked by conflict and strategic shifts, representing what Mark Carney has described as a rupture of the liberal international order.² In this volatile environment the EU must be able to navigate the geopolitical shocks, while preserving the values of the European project. The complex nature of today's international order demands a stronger and cohesive Union. For this purpose, it is crucial to address two central and often contentious issues in Transatlantic relations: autonomy and defence industry.

Strategic autonomy has often created misunderstandings across the Atlantic, urging for conceptual clarification. By achieving autonomy, the European Union (EU) empowers itself to deal with the current threats of the global order and, ultimately, to become resilient. In turn, a strong defence industry constitutes a requirement towards autonomy.

The most immediate threat to the EU is Russia's imperial ambitions and militarised policy. The Kremlin relies on a large and mobilised defence industry to generate its battlefield capabilities—a key component of strategic resilience. Power is not an abstract term. Instead, it is rooted in material capacity, which the EU is currently lacking.

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² Mark Carney, "Principled and Pragmatic: Canada's Path", speech at the World Economic Forum, Davos, January 20, 2026, <https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/speeches/2026/01/20/principled-and-pragmatic-canadas-path-prime-minister-carney-addresses>.

The objective of this article is to conceptualise autonomy and resilience and correlate them with industrial defence. This will be followed by an analytical assessment on the current state of the EU's defence industry. Lastly, it proposes policy-oriented solutions for a proper and viable structure that can empower the EU's external action and ensure its security in times of political division.

Conceptualising Resilience and Autonomy for the case of Defence Industry

Resilience and autonomy lie at the centre of the EU's strategic thought. Nevertheless, to make the case for an integrated EU's defence industry, these terms must be defined and analytically connected.

Resilience is established in the EU's Global Strategy, where a broader conceptualisation is adopted: "(...) the ability of states and societies to reform, thus withstanding and recovering from internal and external crises."³ This perspective was complemented by the European Commission in its 2017 Joint Communication "A Strategic Approach to Resilience in EU's External Action," where the ability for adaptation as a response to changes in the international order is emphasised.⁴

The reason for the development of a more comprehensive definition of resilience relates to the strategic environment at that time. The return of an aggressive Russia, the election of Donald Trump as the president of the USA, and Brexit weakened the Union's position in global and security affairs, compromising its capacity to adapt to external pressures. So, within this hostile environment, a holistic approach to resilience was accepted in the matters of EU security. Hence, the focus was on the ability of the EU to confront and adjust to these events, a phenomenon referred to as securitisation of resilience.⁵

To achieve resilience, a flexible approach is necessary. It entails the acquisition of new characteristics and a reconfiguration of the system itself, which implies "(...) the institutional capacity to adjust to challenges and recover from them."⁶ In the face of renewed Russian aggression and antagonistic US rhetoric, the EU is in dire need of strengthening the institutional elements necessary to ensure its resilience. This is particularly urgent in the field of the defence industry, where neither the EU nor its

³ European Union External Action, *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe - A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy*, ST 10715 INIT. (Brussels, European Commission, 2016). https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eugs_review_web_0.pdf.

⁴ European Commission, Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: A Strategic Approach to Resilience in the EU's External Action, 52017JC0021. (Brussels, European Commission, 2017). <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52017JC0021>.

⁵ Nathalie Tocci, "Resilience and the Role of the European Union in the World", *Contemporary Security Policy* 41, no. 2 (2019): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2019.1640342>.

⁶ Florence Gaub and Nicu Florence, "Introduction", in *After the EU Global Strategy: Building Resilience*, ed. Florence Gaub and Nicu Florence (European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2017), 7. https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/After_EU_Global_Strategy_Resilience.pdf.

Member States possess sufficient material capacities to make fully independent decisions. In other words, the EU lacks autonomy, due to the insufficient capabilities.

The concept of autonomy emerged during the Saint-Malo Summit, where the need for autonomous action backed by credible military power was affirmed.⁷ From that point on, the transatlantic relations were divided through different conceptualisations of strategic autonomy.

Washington's view means that in fact the Europeans should spend more on defence, resourcing to the US' defence industry. Per Daniel Fiott, "(...) although Washington has called for a stronger European commitment to defence, it is not willing to entertain greater European autonomy if it means that its defence industry will lose contracts in the EU."⁸

The EU's own interpretation is more nuanced. Autonomy is framed as complementary within the transatlantic partnership, appealing to a stronger and more capable Union.⁹ This approach positions autonomy as the middle ground between full dependence and strategic sovereignty, enabling the EU to develop its own capabilities within the Euro-Atlantic security structures.¹⁰

Both conceptualisations are ultimately framed by transatlantic dynamics, which constrains them by diluting their strategic importance. A more analytically useful definition is provided by Giovanni Grevi who understands the concept as "(...) the ability to set objectives and mobilise the necessary resources in ways that do not primarily depend on the decisions and assets of others."¹¹ From this perspective, autonomy and resilience are mutually reinforcing. Autonomy enables resilience by reducing external vulnerabilities, while resilience strengthens autonomy by ensuring capacity to respond to security challenges.

The EU's dependency on American military capabilities—visible in the context of Ukrainian resistance—exhibits this dynamic. The anxious fears over US support reduction highlights the Union's limited capability to compensate the void left by

⁷ Robert Hunter, *The European Security and Defense Policy: NATO's Companion - or Competitor?* (RAND Corporation, 2002), 31. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mr1463ndri-re>.

⁸ Daniel Fiott, "A clash of concepts? Making sense 'European sovereignty' and 'strategic autonomy'" in *Beyond autonomy: Rethinking Europe as a strategic actor*, ed. Benjamin Martill and Jeroen Dobber (Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, 2021), 9.

⁹ European Union External Action Services, *A Strategic Compass for Security and Defence: For a European Union that protects its civilians, values and interests and contributes to international peace and security*, ST 7371 2022 INIT. (Brussels: European Commission, 2022): 23, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/strategic-compass-security-and-defence-1_en.

¹⁰ Accordingly, in the official documents, despite its autonomous ambition, the EU makes clear the imperative of the transatlantic link and for "(...) a close and mutually beneficial cooperation." See *Ibid*, 53.

¹¹ Giovanni Grevi, "Shaping Power: A Strategic Imperative for Europe," *European Policy Center* (2019), <https://www.epc.eu/publication/Shaping-power-A-strategic-imperative-for-Europe-213018/>.

Washington.¹² Industry dependency, in particular, translates into political vulnerability that constrains Europe's strategic leverage and undermines its resilience. Ultimately, this issue is illustrated by Washington's plan to arm Ukraine. The core of this plan is that the US sends military aid to Ukraine, paid by the EU countries, favouring the American defence industry even more.¹³

In sum, autonomy and resilience must be treated as interdependent capabilities, which become more critical in the defence industry, where the EU suffers from both material and political vulnerabilities. An integrated European defence industry is a matter of both strategic autonomy and resilience in a more unreliable world.

An Analysis of Industrial Integration

The war in Ukraine plainly exposed the limitations of Europe's defence-industrial base. When the war of aggression began, NATO was quick to coordinate, under American leadership, military support to Ukraine.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the matter of sustainability of the support quickly arose. European stocks were low, leading to an unproportional reliance on the US capacity. Evidently, "Ukraine currently relies heavily on US systems, training, intelligence, and logistics, and although European support and Ukraine's defence industry are substantially growing, they cannot fully replace US capabilities."¹⁵ The war in Ukraine clearly exposed the EU's dependency and vulnerabilities, with its industrial resilience being offshored to Washington.

The EU's military-industrial complex is characterised as intergovernmental, liberal, fragmented and transatlantic.¹⁶ Intergovernmental refers to the primacy of national sovereignty in industrial and defence policy, which confines the EU to a limited role largely focused on market liberalisation. In turn, this framework reinforces fragmentation, ultimately rooted in the restricted scale of national markets. As a result, defence firms—such as Dassault, Leonardo, Rheinmetall and Thales—tend to tailor their business strategies to domestic needs, constraining production and preventing

¹² Max Bergmann and Sophia Besch, "Why European Defense Still Depends on America", *Foreign Affairs*, March 7, 2023, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/why-european-defense-still-depends-america?check_logged_in=1.

¹³ Julian Borger, Pjotr Sauer and Luke Harding, "Trump does deal with NATO Allies to arm Ukraine and warns Russia of severe sanctions," *The Guardian*, July 15, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jul/14/trump-does-deal-with-nato-allies-to-arm-ukraine-and-warns-russia-of-severe-sanctions>.

¹⁴ The most prolific example was the creation of the Ramstein Group best known as Ukraine Defence Contact Group, whose objective was the coordination of military support to Ukraine. Consult Lara Seligman and Paul McLeary, "The little-known group that's saving Ukraine," *POLITICO*, May 1, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/05/01/austin-defense-meetings-weapons-ukraine-00089946>.

¹⁵ Iselin Brady *et al*, "Can Ukraine Fight without the US Aid? Seven questions to Ask," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, (2025): 1, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep70368?seq=4>.

¹⁶ Samuel Faure, "EU Defence Industrial Policy: Towards a New European Military-Industrial Regime?," *LUHNIP EU Industrial Policy Report* (2024): 179. <https://leap.luiss.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/WP2.25-EU-Defence-Policy.pdf>.

economies of scale.¹⁷ Consequently, the industrial apparatus operates with insufficient output and slow production, which leads to higher costs of production.

The nationalisation of defence markets leads to a lack of standardisation and interoperability across Member States.¹⁸ The divergent national requirements promote parallel systems, increasing duplication and generating inefficiencies.

The fragmented nature of the European industrial-military complex, ultimately, affects its resilience and competitiveness and undermines autonomy. The overreliance on exports to sustain European strategic demands neglects its potential of an integrated structure, while pooled demand and joint investment could reduce costs, enhance interoperability and ensure autonomous resilience.

Since 2017, with the introduction of several instruments, some developments have occurred that signalled a European intent to pursue integration. The first package of institutional changes came in 2017 with the creation of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), European Defence Fund (EDF) and Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD). These instruments were established to function in a mutually reinforcing manner. CARD serves as a diagnostic mechanism identifying necessities and opportunities for cooperation. The EDF is the financial arm of PESCO, the latter established under the objective of increasing joint and collaborative strategic defence capabilities projects.¹⁹

Taken together, these instruments constitute an endeavour to harmonise Member States positions regarding EU defence capabilities. PESCO constitutes a game-changer in a way that it provides an institutional framework for Member States to increase their cooperation. Unprecedentedly, it envisaged a structured mechanism for cooperation rather than pursuing ad hoc projects. In a comprehensive analysis, by financing and incentivising common projects under the European flag, conditions are created for resilience due to the prioritised development of EU capabilities. Politically, it reveals an attempt to find the right balance on autonomy, without underscoring NATO's importance.

The increased Russian aggression accelerated the need for the EU to be more ambitious. In 2022, European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA) was created to incentivise joint cooperative procurement between Member States to foster competitiveness and streamline supply chains.²⁰ In 2023, the EU

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹⁹ Council of the European Union, Council Decision (CFSP) 2017/2315 of 11 December 2017 establishing permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) and determining the list of participant Member States, *Official Journal of the European Union* L331 (December 14, 2017): 57-77, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017D2315>.

²⁰ European Parliament and Council of the European Union, Regulation (EU) 2023/2418 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 October 2023 on establishing an instrument for the reinforcement of the European defence industry through common procurement (EDIRPA), *Official Journal of the European Union* L

established the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP). It aims to boost European production capabilities to support Ukraine, particularly strengthening the EU's Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB) to ensure the supply of ammunition and missiles.²¹ To achieve this goal, it established a financial instrument of 500 million euros (2023-2025).²² The established Mechanism of Support intends primarily to invest in the expansion of the EDTIB by providing grants for modernisation, supporting joint procurement contracts and incentivising integrated production and supply across the EU.²³

Furthermore, in 2024, the European Commission created a new European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS). It constitutes the first comprehensive EU-level framework to strengthen its EDTIB. It aims to increase production capacity to meet urgent necessities, enhance joint procurement, through incentives for joint acquisition to reduce duplications, promote economies of scale and foster industrial integration.²⁴ To ensure the "Europeanisation" of the defence industry, it strives for larger investments and regulatory support, expanding the strategic reach of the EDF, EDIRPA and EDIP.

At last, in "Preserving Peace – Defence Readiness Map 2030", a European vision of autonomy is promoted. While restating the fragmentation, cost-inflation and lack of interoperability of the European defence industry, the document also embraces pan-European objectives and solutions.²⁵ Based on the funding mechanisms available, such as Security Action for Europe (SAFE) and Defence Readiness Omnibus instruments, it clearly expresses the intention to create a genuine EU-wide market for defence equipment with simplified and harmonised rules.²⁶

However, besides the positive evolution, there are clear limitations. First, the EU Member States still lack true political will. The strategies and instruments adopted, particularly EDIRPA and ASAP, are legally sustained by articles 114 and 173 (3) of the TFEU,²⁷ which

2418 (October 26, 2023), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2023/2418/oj/eng>.

²¹ European Parliament and Council of the European Union, Regulation (EU) 2023/1525 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 July 2023 on supporting ammunition production (ASAP), *Official Journal of the European Union* L 185 (July 24, 2023), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2023/1525/oj/eng>.

²² *Ibid*, Article 5 (1).

²³ *Ibid*, Article 15.

²⁴ European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A New European Defence Industrial Strategy - Achieving EU Readiness through a Responsive and Resilient European Defence Industry, JOIN (2024) 10 final (Brussels, March 5, 2024), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52024JC0010>.

²⁵ European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council: "Preserving Peace – Defence Readiness 2030 Roadmap" (Brussels, October 16, 2025) https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9db42c04-15c2-42e1-8364-60afb0073e68_en?filename=Joint-Communication%20Defence-Readiness-Roadmap-2030.pdf.

²⁶ *Ibid*.

²⁷ The referenced articles are respectively related to internal market and industrial policy, which legitimises EU

according to Federico Fabbrini, “(...) brought industrial policy under EU competences (...) [leaving] the dominant role in this field to the Member States.”²⁸ Therefore, the role of the EU is seconded on the field of defence industry, highlighting perpetual sensitivities regarding sovereignty.

The core of the official documents lie on Member States’ voluntary willingness to cooperate, without establishing the institutional capacities to ensure it. So, it does not produce practical results and the framework for procurement and acquisition will remain fragmented to the extent of deepening the dependency on exports and weakening the European efforts to conjugate its defence industry.

The strategies and instruments at hand target short-term urgencies rather than contributing to structural reform. Another example of the strategic short-sighted vision is the temporary nature of the instruments such as EDIRPA and ASAP. Other reasons include the institutional restraints of the European decision-making process in industry, defence and external relations.²⁹

Lastly, the eponym of the strategic short-sightedness of the EU regards the fact that these instruments were created specifically in the context of the Ukraine aid, ignoring the bigger picture. The scope and context of industrial defence initiatives should be broadened to face the Russian threat, by providing support to Ukraine and preparing the EU and NATO countries to protect themselves.

Policy Recommendations

To address the structural deficiencies, the EU must pursue gradual reform that enhances industrial integration while respecting Member States’ sovereignty. Finding this sensitive balance requires navigating through a political minefield, but the strategic environment urges for a more integrated, resilient and autonomous defence base.

Firstly, a recommendation was already proposed by Sauli Niinistö: implementation of a single market for defence products.³⁰ The creation of such a market would lead to

action, framing the different initiatives as a matter of industrial and not defence policy, a matter where EU intervention is severely more restricted.

²⁸ Federico Fabbrini, “European Defence Union ASAP: The Act in Support of Ammunition Production and the development of EU defence capabilities in response to the war in Ukraine,” *European Foreign Affairs Review* 29, no. 1 (2024): 65. <https://doi.org/10.54648/eerr2024004>.

²⁹ As an example, Article 346 of TFEU expresses a safeguard for EU Member States to preserve their security interests, excluding them from EU procurement rules. Additionally, Article 352 of TFEU allows the Commission to act in matters where the Treaties did not provide the necessary powers. Nevertheless, such action must be unanimously approved by the Council, which is often a great challenge considering some political alignments of the Member-States and their scepticism of deepening integration procedures in the defence industry. See Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), C 202/194, *Official Journal of the European Union* (June 7, 2016), https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/tfeu_2016/art_346/oj.

³⁰ Sauli Niinistö, *Safer Together: Strengthening Europe’s Civilian and Military Preparedness and Readiness* (Brussels: European Commission 2024): 121. <https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/5bb2881f->

harmonisation and standardisation of regulations and requirements, which would reduce procurement fragmentation and duplication. It would also remove barriers and facilitate cross-border procurement within the EU, strengthening the EDTIB by encouraging economies of scale and reducing costs. In the same way, due to confidence building that naturally develops from the commercial relations, interoperability between forces and systems would arise. Overall, it would reduce dependencies and provide the necessary industrial agility for the EU to re(act) in a credible way.

Secondly, considering the dispersion and duplication of financing instruments, a European Investment Bank for Defence Development would be advantageous.³¹ Merging all of these instruments and funds into a single financial platform would facilitate their availability and increase efficiency and coordination. A centralised investment system would facilitate a large-scale market and cost effectiveness, enabling access of smaller states to highly developed projects.³² Horizontal defence spending between Member States would be achieved. Furthermore, it would attract private capital through co-financing and guarantees. The major evolution would be the EU becoming capable of financing its capabilities internally, without resorting to non-EU suppliers during a crisis. The bank could be built upon the EDF, expanding it into a dedicated financial pillar for the EDTIB.

Thirdly, the EU should move toward a semi-integrated governance framework for defence industry by merging the existing structures. Supported by the Commission, a common governance hub would consolidate institutional unity, as well as enhance pooled planning and procurement, simultaneously reducing duplication. Functioning as a central interface for industry, it would reduce bureaucratic duplication, all while respecting national control over defence decisions.

Taken together, these measures would address the structural causes of the EU's defence-industrial weakness. By embedding resilience within industrial structures, the EU can move closer to genuine strategic autonomy and increase its capacity to act in a challenging international system.

9e29-42f2-8b77-8739b19d047c_en?filename=2024_Niinisto-report_Book_VF.pdf.

³¹ Madalina Scipanov, "European Defence Funding Mechanisms", *Technologies - Military Applications, Simulation and Resources*, (Bucharest National Defence University, 2025): 324. <https://www.cceol.com/search/chapter-detail?id=1369337>.

³² Juan Mejino-Lopez and Guntram Wolff, "Boosting the European Defence Industry in a Hostile World," *EU competitiveness: Navigating Challenges and Seizing Opportunities* 60, no. 1. (2025): 37. <https://www.intereconomics.eu/contents/year/2025/number/1/article/boosting-the-european-defence-industry-in-a-hostile-world.html>.

With Arms Wide Open: A Study of the EU Defence and Security Procurement Directive

Beatriz Santos Mayo¹

“Europe is in a fight [...] Only a strong and credible European defence posture will be able to guarantee our security.” – President of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, State of the Union Address of 2025.

It is well-known that the European project was started to maintain peace over the continent by linking together the economic and political sectors of former adversaries.² While sectors such as coal and steel cooperation and integration were flourishing, attempts to extend these to the defence sphere failed. The rejection of the European Defence Community in the 1950s showed how, for Member States (MS), defence matters were still a question under their sovereignty. Again in 1997, the European Commission issued a Communication that encouraged restructuring the defence industries and the creation of a more efficient European defence equipment market.³ The MS considered the

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² Yannis A. Stivachtis, Chris Price, and Mike Habegger, “The European Union as a peace actor,” *Review of European Studies* 5, no. 3 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.5539/res.v5n3p4>.

³ R. Dwan, “Jean Monnet and the European Defence Community, 1950-54,” *Cold War History* 1, no. 3 (2001): 141–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/713999932>; European Commission, “Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on the ‘Communication from the Commission - The challenges facing the European defence-related industry, a contribution for action at European level,’” COM/96/00100, (May 26, 1997), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:51996DC0010>.

actions of the Commission “*premature*”, highlighting the sovereignty concerns over defence procurement.⁴

The asymmetry between the continuation of the deep economic integration and the persistent nationalisation of defence procurement resulted in a fragmented European defence market, with a striking scale. In 2009, only 25.3% of defence procurement took place through collaborative European arrangements.⁵ At the same time, Member States directed nearly 85% of their equipment budgets to domestic suppliers, effectively shutting out producers from other EU countries and severely limiting cross-border competition.⁶

The fragmentation was reinforced by the widespread reliance on Article 296 of the Treaty establishing the European Communities (now Article 346(1)(b) TFEU), which allowed governments to exempt defence contracts from EU procurement rules on the grounds of essential security interests. Although the European Commission sought to curb this practice, clarifying in a 2006 Interpretative Communication that such exemptions required case-by-case justification, the hoped-for restraint largely failed to materialise.⁷

The persistence of these exceptions can be better understood through a political economy lens, which highlights the incentives of Member States to retain control over defence procurement. The political economy perspective explains that governments often prioritise national security but also aim to sustain industrial capacity and technological expertise.⁸ In terms of defence procurement, governments are reluctant to expose domestic firms to external competition and consequently maintain control over the strategic sector, with reduced efficiency and limited market integration.

In response to the rising military equipment costs, the Commission wanted to introduce protective measures for the EU defence industry.⁹ Consequently, it proposed Directive

⁴ European Commission, “Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the coordination of procedures for the award of certain public works contracts, public supply contracts and public service contracts in the fields of defence and security”, {SEC(2007) 1598} {SEC(2007) 1599}, (December 5, 2007), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=COM%3A2007%3A0766%3AFIN>.

⁵ European Defence Agency, European Defence Agency Data 2009, 2009, <https://data.europa.eu/data/datasets/defence-data-2009?locale=en>.

⁶ European Commission, “Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - A strategy for a stronger and more competitive European defence industry,” (SEC(2007) 1596) (SEC(2007) 1597), (December 5, 2007), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52007DC0764>.

⁷ Commission of the European Communities, “Interpretative Communication on the application of Article 296 of the Treaty in the field of defence procurement,” COM(2006) 779, (December 7, 2006), <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2006:0779:FIN:en:PDF>.

⁸ Amy Verdun, “The European Union and the Global Political Economy,” in *International relations and the European Union*, ed. Michael Smith, Christopher Hill, and Sophie Vanhoonacker (Oxford University Press, 2023), 182-206, <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3720130>.

⁹ Jay Edwards, “The EU Defence and Security Procurement Directive: A Step Towards Affordability?” Chatham House, *International Security Programme Paper ISP PP 2011/05*, https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/0811pp_edwards.pdf.

2009/81/EC on defence and security procurement. At the same time, it took into account the specific characteristics of each defence sector (Directive 2009/81/EC).¹⁰

With Russia's war against Ukraine in 2022 and the more recent EU's response to Washington's pressures, its defence policy is undergoing a profound change. With some countries stating that they are going to start to "buy more European", the EU started to rethink its old, outdated Directives.¹¹ In this context, the European Commission on the 17th of June 2025 presented a proposal to amend the EU's procurement framework that was based on Directive 2009/81/EC.¹²

This raises a specific question: how did an instrument designed to open up Europe's defence market end up reinforcing many of its old divisions? To answer this, the article revisits the origins of Directive 2009/81/EC, examining how national interests and European objectives collided during its formulation. It then looks at how the Directive worked in practice, drawing on the experiences of Member States. Finally, the article will review the evaluations published after the implementation of the Directive and the recent developments linked to it. This article mainly argues that the Directive, despite its ambitions, was gradually undermined during the implementation due to sovereignty defence by the Member States, which in turn exposed the structural flaws embedded in the Directive itself.

Setting the Agenda

For decades, defence procurement remained one of the most tightly guarded areas of national competence within the EU. European governments justified domestic purchasing and closed markets by invoking security concerns, relying heavily on Article 296 of the EC Treaty (now Article 346 TFEU) to exempt defence contracts from EU procurement rules. While legally permissible, this practice came at a high price. By the mid-2000s, Europe's defence market was fragmented, inefficient, and increasingly expensive. The European governments routinely excluded competition not only of arms but also of helmets, uniforms, and military catering.¹³ Additionally, they kept the markets closed with offset agreements requiring foreign contractors to reinvest locally and *jus retour* arrangements that disrupted industrial work according to national contribution

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Janeke Skarzynski, "Europe's Defence Billions, but Whose Weapons Are We Buying?," *Belga News Agency*, November 1, 2025, <https://www.belganewsagency.eu/europes-defence-billions-but-whose-weapons-are-we-buying>.

¹² European Commission, "New simplification proposal will speed up defence investments in the EU, Directorate-General for Communication," (June 17, 2025). https://commission.europa.eu/news-and-media/news/new-simplification-proposal-will-speed-defence-investments-eu-2025-06-17_en.

¹³ Clara Marina O'Donnell, "The EU Finally Opens Up the European Defence Market," *Policy Brief, Centre for European Reform*, June 1, 2009, <https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/policy-brief/2009/eu-finally-opens-european-defence-market>.

rather than efficiency.¹⁴ France, for example, consistently channelled major contracts to domestic companies such as Thales and Dassault. The reasons behind this are that French defence exports had been stagnating since the early 2000s despite growing global demand, and the government was looking for funds to maintain production lines and protect them from weak export orders.¹⁵

Early attempts to address the issue focused on defining the problem rather than imposing immediate solutions. In 2003, the Commission published *Towards an EU Defence Equipment Policy*, outlining initiatives to improve efficiency and competitiveness in the defence sector.¹⁶ This was followed in 2004 by a Green Paper on Defence Procurement, which launched a broad consultation on European defence markets and the limits of Article 296 exemptions.¹⁷ Consultations held between January and April 2004 exposed deep divisions. The feedback indicated limited support for purely legislative solutions, as several MS, specifically the United Kingdom, indicated that a new Directive could impose excessive regulatory burdens.¹⁸

The Commission began to argue that the situation was no longer sustainable. In its communication in 2007, the Commission stressed that a more integrated European defence equipment market is essential for strengthening the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB), while respecting that national security remains the responsibility of each Member State (Directive 2009/81/EC, para 2 & 3).¹⁹ That same year, the Commission presented a broader policy package titled *A Strategy for a Stronger and More Competitive European Defence Industry*.²⁰ Presenting the package, the Internal Market Commissioner Charlie McCreevy argued that clearer procurement rules would open national markets, increase efficiency, and ultimately benefit Europe's defence industry as a whole.²¹

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Christian Mölling and Sophie-Charlotte Brune, *The Impact of the Financial Crisis on European Defence, Policy Department DG External Policies*, European Parliament, PE 433.830, April 2011, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/document/activities/cont/201106/20110623ATT22404/20110623ATT22404EN.pdf>.

¹⁶ European Commission, Communication from the European Commission: "Towards a European Union Defence Equipment Policy," COM(2003) 113, (March 11, 2003), <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/towards-a-european-union-defence-equipment-policy.html>.

¹⁷ European Commission, Green Paper: "Defence procurement," COM(2004)608, (September 23, 2004) <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52004DC0608>.

¹⁸ House of Commons, "Thirtieth Report of Session 2006–07, European Scrutiny Committee," (July 11, 2007), <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmeuleg/41-xxx/41-xxx.pdf>.

¹⁹ European Commission, "Directive 2009/81/EC on the coordination of procedures for the award of certain works contracts, supply contracts and service contracts by contracting authorities or entities in the fields of defence and security, and amending Directives 2004/17/EC and 2004/18/EC," Official Journal of the European Union, July 13, 2009, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2009/81/oj/eng>.

²⁰ European Commission, "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - A strategy for a stronger and more competitive European defence industry."

²¹ European Commission, "Commission proposes new competitive measures for defence industries and markets. IP/07/1860," (December 5, 2007), https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_07_1860.

At the centre of the package was the proposal that would become Directive 2009/81/EC. While reactions among Member States remained mixed, the European Defence Agency broadly welcomed the Commission's push, while cautioning that competition alone would not be sufficient and that deeper cooperation between Member States would also be essential.²² On a transatlantic note, the reform effort carried additional strategic logic. The European soldiers had long been deployed in missions under NATO, yet the government continued purchasing defence equipment aligned with national lines.²³ At the same time, the US had come to see a stronger EU defence market as a useful complement to it, and the European Commission hoped the Directive could open the door to more cooperation with the EU, in terms of defence goods as well.²⁴

The Brussels Bargain

Once the decisive phase began, the proposal left the Commission and entered negotiations within the European Parliament (EP) and the Council. The EP's committee in charge was the Internal Market and Consumer Protection Committee (IMCO). By July 2008, its rapporteur, Member of the European Parliament Alexander Graf Lambsdorff, presented his draft report about the Directive.²⁵ Parliament sought to clarify what counted as "*military equipment*", referencing the EU Common Military List and integrating the Council's 1958 list of arms and war material.²⁶ The aim was to reduce ambiguity and prevent Member States from broadly invoking national security exemptions. At the same time, the Foreign Affairs Committee (AFET) endorsed a competitive European Defence Equipment Market but cautioned that entrenched practices like offsets and *juste retour*, which governments used to ensure domestic industrial returns for defence spending, could undermine the efficiency of open competition.²⁷ Despite these concerns, the EP endorsed the amended text by a large majority in January 2009, signalling the political support for a more competitive and transparent defence procurement market.²⁸

²² Giovanni Gasparini and Federica Di Camillo, "Observatory on European Defence, December 2005," *IAI - Istituto Affari Internazionali*, December 15, 2005, <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/c31/observatory-europeancooperationgovernment.same-time-defence-december-2005>.

²³ Clara Marina O'Donnell, "The EU Finally Opens Up the European Defence Market."

²⁴ *Ibid.*; Christian Mölling and Sophie-Charlotte Brune, *The Impact of the Financial Crisis on European Defence*, Policy Department DG External Policies, European Parliament, PE 433.830, April 2011, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/document/activities/cont/201106/20110623ATT22404/20110623ATT22404EN.pdf>.

²⁵ European Parliament, "Draft Report on the proposal for a directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the coordination of procedures for the award of certain public works contracts, public supply contracts and public service contracts in the fields of defence and security," PE407.844, (July 3, 2008), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/IMCO-PR-407844_EN.html.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ European Parliament, "Draft Report on the proposal for a directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the coordination of procedures for the award of certain public works contracts, public supply contracts and public service contracts in the fields of defence signaling and security," PE412.008, (August 29, 2008), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/IMCO-AM-412008_EN.html.

²⁸ European Parliament, "European Parliament legislative resolution of 14 January 2009 on the proposal for a directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the coordination of procedures for the award of certain public works contracts, public supply contracts and public service contracts in the fields of defence and

In the Council, the negotiations moved behind closed doors, and these ones were shaped by diverging national industrial interests. By July 2009, the ministers in their 2954th meeting of Economic and Financial Affairs reached a “*near-consensus*”, allowing the Directive to be adopted.²⁹ However, some governments expressed reservations regarding their domestic defence industries. The Portuguese delegation abstained from the voting. In a formal statement, Portugal argued that the Directive did not sufficiently ensure fair competition in defence markets and urged the EC to submit further legislative proposals.³⁰ Additionally, Portugal emphasised that small and medium-sized enterprises should gain greater access to subcontracting opportunities.³¹

In contrast, the Netherlands welcomed the Directive and remarked that it is an important step not only to enhance transparency and competitiveness, but also to increase the European presence of its firms, like Thales Nederland, thus benefiting from a more integrated defence market.³² Finally, Poland supported the adoption of the Directive but warned that without an impact assessment, the Directive could increase competition, and this could create disadvantages for the less competitive defence sectors in Central and Eastern Europe.³³

Before the Directive was formally signed by the EP and the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) was mandatorily consulted. The EESC welcomed the Commission’s proposal, emphasising the need to reduce fragmentation in the European defence procurement market. The Committee highlighted the need to improve Small and Medium Enterprises’ participation in defence supply chains and supported the gradual establishment of an EDTIB.³⁴ Overall, the EESC’s position reinforced the Commission’s approach.

From Paper to Practice

After Directive 2009/81/EC was published on August 21, 2009, Member States had two years to transpose it into national law.³⁵ However, the process proved slower and more complicated than expected. By the 21 August 2011 deadline, only four countries had fully implemented the Directive.³⁶ As a result, the Commission initiated infringement

security,” T6-0016/2009, (January 14, 2009), <https://oeil.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/en/document-summary?id=1063087>.

²⁹ Council of the European Union, “Addendum to Draft Minutes,” 2954th meeting of the Council of the European Union, 11806/09, (September 8, 2009), <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11806-2009-ADD-1/en/pdf>.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 13.

³³ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Section 2.2.1.

³⁵ European Commission, “Directive 2009/81/EC.”

³⁶ European Commission, “Report from the European Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the implementation of Directive 2009/81/EC on public procurement in the fields of defence and security, to

procedure under Article 258 TFEU against 23 Member States, sending letters of formal notice on 30 September 2011.³⁷

Subsequent enforcement steps targeted the Member States whose responses were considered insufficient.³⁸ As a result, the Commission issued reasoned opinions to Germany and the Netherlands, formally requesting compliance and warning that failure to do so could result in a referral to the Court of Justice of the EU (CJEU) and financial penalties.³⁹ Similarly, Bulgaria, Luxembourg, the United Kingdom, Austria, Poland, Slovenia, and Portugal formally received the request to complete transposition.⁴⁰

Despite these warnings, delays continued. By July 2012, four Member States (Poland, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, and Slovenia) had not notified any transposition measures to the Commission; consequently, on 27 September 2012, the Commission referred these cases to the CJEU.⁴¹ This enforcement prompted action: Poland and Slovenia completed transposition in November 2012, Luxembourg in December 2012, and the Netherlands in February 2013. Portugal concluded its infringement procedure on 26 September 2013 after providing additional explanations to the Commission. Although the Directive was fully transposed, the Commission continued to monitor at the national level the practical application of the Directive, and highlighted that all the exceptions should be justified under Article 346 TFEU.⁴²

comply with Article 73(2) of that DirectiveEvaluation of Directive 2009/43/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 6 May 2009, simplifying terms and conditions of transfers of defence-related products within the Community,” COM(2016) 762, (November 30, 2016)<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0762&qid=1767452953415>.

³⁷ European Commission, “Report from the Commission 29th Annual Report on Monitoring the Application of EU Law,” COM(2012)714, (November 30, 2011) <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52012DC0714>.

³⁸ European Commission, “Report from the European Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the implementation of Directive 2009/81/EC.”

³⁹ European Commission, “Internal Market: Commission acts to ensure implementation of EU rules in the area of defence procurement,” Press Release, (January 26, 2012) https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_12_76.

⁴⁰ European Commission, “Public procurement: Commission acts to ensure implementation of EU rules in the area of defence procurement,” Press Release, (March 22, 2012), https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_12_290; European Commission, “Internal Market: Commission requests the United Kingdom to implement EU rules in the area of defence procurement in Gibraltar,” Press Release, (April 26, 2012) https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_12_416; European Commission, “Internal market: Commission requests Austria and Poland to fully transpose EU rules in the area of defence procurement,” Press Release, (May 31, 2012), https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_12_533; European Commission, “Public procurement: Commission requests Slovenia to implement EU defence procurement,” Press Release, (June 21, 2012), https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_12_1020.

⁴¹ European Commission, “Public procurement: Commission asks Court of Justice to fine Poland, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Slovenia for not implementing defence procurement rules,” Press Release, (September 27, 2012) https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_12_1020.

⁴² European Commission, “Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on transposition of directive 2009/81/EC on Defence and Security Procurement,” COM(2012) 565 final, 2 October 2012, 5-8.

So, What Went Wrong?

Adopting the Directive was only the first step; assessing whether it actually delivers its intended goal is equally important. In November 2016, the Commission acknowledged the difficulties faced by the Directive after its implementation.⁴³ Firstly, the Commission observed that an important share of defence procurement expenditure continued to take place outside the framework of the Directive.

Secondly, the Commission highlighted that some countries had increased the use of EU procurement procedures. In contrast, others made very limited use of the Directives and took advantage of the exceptions of Article 346 TFEU. For instance, between 2011 and 2015, contracting authorities of six Member States (Cyprus, Greece, Ireland, Malta, Luxembourg, and Spain) did not publish any contract notices under the Directive.⁴⁴ Additionally, in high expenditure countries, like France and Germany, total defence budgets remained low, 10.3% and 10%, respectively.⁴⁵ This created legal uncertainty and additional costs for the companies operating in different countries.

Finally, the Commission pointed out that there was limited participation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) because of the high certification costs and the complicated administrative procedures. However, this assessment came shortly after the transposition deadline, so it could not fully capture the long-term effects. Data from 2011 to 2015 showed that 27.9% of contracts were awarded to SMEs, but these represented only 6.1% of the total value, proving that participation did not improve.⁴⁶

In contrast, the IMCO Committee of the EP published an evaluation on 8 March 2021.⁴⁷ The report pointed out that many MS continued to rely extensively on the exceptions mentioned in Article 345 TFEU in order to protect their national security interest, reducing cross-border competition. Moreover, it highlighted that the SMEs still face complex procurement procedures and high certification costs.

In 2025, the security landscape in Europe had changed dramatically because of the 2022 full-scale invasion of Russia in Ukraine. On 17 June 2025, it rolled out the Defence Readiness Omnibus, proposing updates to both Directive 2009/43/EC and Directive 2009/81/EC.⁴⁸ According to the Commission, these Directives were now “*no longer fully*

⁴³ European Commission, “Report from the European Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the implementation of Directive 2009/81/EC.”

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ European Parliament, “Report on the implementation of Directive 2009/81/EC, concerning procurement in the fields of defence and security, and of Directive 2009/43/EC, concerning the transfer of defence-related products,” 2019/2204(INI), (March 8, 2021), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2021-0025_EN.html.

⁴⁸ European Commission, “Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council amending

effective".⁴⁹ The proposals are currently under first reading by the European Parliament's IMCO and SEDE committees, waiting to see if the Commission can finally back up its claims with action.⁵⁰

Conclusion

The policymaking behind Directive 2009/81/EC illustrates the persistent tension between EU ambitions for defence market integration and the sovereignty priorities of its Member States. This demonstrates that national interest continues to shape procurement patterns and restrict integration efforts.

From a political economy perspective, this represents the structural incentives facing the national government.⁵¹ Governments operate in a national context where the costs of opening the procurement market are immediate and politically salient, while the benefits of integration are more diffuse and long-term.⁵² This asymmetry encourages the states to favour nationally and to make use of available legal flexibilities, like in this case, to avoid full market openings.

Moreover, external factors, such as Brexit or the Russian invasion of Ukraine, are expected to be important shocks to the process of market integration. With the exit of the UK, a major opponent to the EU defence collaboration has left, allowing initiatives like the European Defence Fund or PESCO to develop, as well as reducing the competition in the European Market.⁵³ However, the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 highlighted Europe's military weaknesses and increasing pressure on the states to invest in their capabilities at the same time as in their strategic autonomy.⁵⁴

Many European Member States still rely on short-term purchases of United States equipment, which can increase fragmentation and slow the development of the European

Directives 2009/43/EC and 2009/81/EC, as regards the simplification of intra-EU transfers of defence-related products and the simplification of security and defence procurement," 2025/0177 (COD), (June 17, 2025). https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2025-06/Proposal-for-a-directive_defence-simplification.pdf.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ European Parliament, "Simplification of intra-EU transfers of defence-related products and the simplification of security and defence procurement," Legislative Observatory, 2025/0177(COD), 2025, <https://oeil.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/en/procedure-file?reference=2025/0177%28COD%29>.

⁵¹ Amy Verdun, "The European Union and the Global Political Economy."

⁵² Rosa Balfour, Eugenia Baroncelli, Lizza Bomassi, Raluca Csernaton, Andreas Goldthau, Giovanni Grevi, *et al.*, "Geopolitics and Economic Statecraft in the European Union" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 19, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/11/geopolitics-and-economic-statecraft-in-the-european-union>.

⁵³ Tobias Mueller, "Drivers and Impact of European Defence Market Integration: A Literature Meta-Synthesis with Economic Focus." *Defence and Peace Economics* 36 no. 5 (2025): 577–612, doi:10.1080/10242694.2024.2396416.

⁵⁴ William Timmermans and Chiara Martino, "The Future of Defence Procurement: Analysing the Proposed Amendments to European Directive 2009/81/EC," *Altius*, July 28, 2025, <https://www.altius.com/en/news/the-future-of-defence-procurement-analysing-the-proposed-amendments-to-european-directive-2009-81-ec/>.

France and Europe: A Reflection on Political and Economic Integration

Moritz Strecker¹

Introduction¹

When Emmanuel Macron hosted German chancellor Friedrich Merz at his holiday resort at the French Riviera in August 2025, both posed for photographs. It was clear that the French president wanted to display harmony with his most important European partner. Times could be not more challenging: today, the European Union (EU) is facing a fundamental economic transformation and pressure on various fronts. For instance, a significant trade deficit with the Chinese, while simultaneously, wars in Ukraine and Iran threaten global security. Now, more than ever, joint leadership by the French and Germans seems necessary—but history reveals the challenges of this endeavour.

This article analyses France's historic position in the European community and its doubts and considerations regarding European integration. Beside the keystones of institutionalisation, it will also look at the specific political and economic characteristics of France and their impact on shaping political cooperation. In order to achieve this, it will first present crucial events in European integration up until the 1970s, emphasising the intentions and problems of the French government during this process. Secondly, it will outline the domestic arguments and actors which questioned the implementation of a European constitution. Finally, the state-oriented model of France's economy will be

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discussed, in order to underline possible points of friction towards market harmonisation.

Seeds in an Unstable Age

The handshake of Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer over the Elysée Treaty in 1963 is the central symbol of reconciliation after World War II.² Yet during those years, events like the Cold War and France's need to redefine its own role in the international community led to a rearrangement of France's way of interacting with Europe.

Since France was a weakened power post-war with a tradition of fractional politics, its reincarnation into the Fifth Republic during the 1950s was unstable. For instance, France supported an ongoing Allied occupation of the Ruhr and Saar areas which had been crucial for the rearmament of the Third Reich.³ France was also at least temporarily open towards the Soviet idea of a neutral and demilitarised Germany, as some academics suppose that they did not want to be dependent only on the United States.⁴ Even as a cultural and geographic centrepiece of the West, France did not hesitate to keep communication channels towards the Soviets open.

To understand these erratic patterns of behaviour, it is essential to comprehend the French concept of nationhood. The country has always considered itself both a European and overseas power with strong interdependencies between common good, economic, and national power.⁵ When it came to national security, the generation of De Gaulle and other conservative policy makers were haunted by the ghosts of 1815 (the Congress of Vienna) and 1871 (the Franco-Prussian War)—events which led to the reversal of French domination while simultaneously strengthening German power aspirations. Moreover, the harsh conflict lines after 1945 weakened France in contrast to the U.S., offering few options beside a definite, but minor role in the Western hemisphere.⁶ The need to reestablish power was exacerbated when French Indochina and Algeria strived for independence in bloody wars. Finally, De Gaulle confessed: *"It is because we are no longer a great power that we need a great policy"*.⁷

² Ronald Granieri, "More than a Geatric Romance," in *A History of Franco-German Relations in Europe*, ed. Carin Germond and Henning Türk (Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 192.

³ Julian Jackson, *A Certain Idea of France: The Life of Charles de Gaulle* (Allen Lane, 2019), 410.

⁴ Geoffrey Roberts, "Impossible allies? Soviet Views of France and the German question in the 1950s," in *France and the German Question, 1945-1990*, ed. Frédéric Bozo and Christian Wenkel (Berghahn Books, 2019), 78.

⁵ Frédéric Bozo, *French Foreign Policy Since 1945: An Introduction* (Berghahn Books, 2016), 28.

⁶ David Troitiño, "De Gaulle and the European Communities," *Proceedings of the Institute for European Studies* 1, no. 4 (2008): 139-152.

⁷ Philippe de Saint-Robert, *Le Secret de jours: Une chronique sous la Ve République* (Lattés, 1995), 131.

A European Framework?

The plans of Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman for an integrated European decision-making process was a strategy of European consolidation. One of the pillars, the supranational control of coal and steel supply, can be interpreted as a glimpse of French hegemony: German steel production, which was considered the backbone of its potential rearmament, was capped.⁸ Tighter economic control would have embraced the West-German state into a new power block. At the same time, Adenauer's struggles to establish a place under the umbrella of the U.S. may have urged France to safe ties towards its neighbour. The cooperation was the new weapon of choice, an opportunity Adenauer likely accepted since he lacked a second partner.⁹

Yet even as French leaders stimulated further steps towards European integration, politicians at home assessed these developments with scepticism. De Gaulle's *Rassemblement de Peuple Francais* saw the Schuman plan as a wilful loss of sovereignty—especially the European Steel Community of 1952 and the European Defence Union—since they would cut direct and indirect national capabilities, like the Allied occupation power in Germany.¹⁰ It also risked bringing a definite end to French-Soviet intercommunism. The rejection of the Defence Union treaty in the French parliament in August 1954 can therefore be interpreted as a sign of indecisiveness regarding the country's role in the European community. Focused on redefining its own role amongst the powers of its time, France dared to look for new connections, and was the first Western country to recognise the People's Republic of China after the Sino-Soviet split in 1964. In spite of its movement towards its European neighbours, France still attempted to make its own way.¹¹

The French government was keen to ward off impending shifts in power within the European institutions. The withdrawal from NATO's military command in 1966 and the veto against the United Kingdom's integration into the European Common Market in the 1960s were not only issues of national pride. They mirrored centuries old anti-British sentiments, but also the wish to establish France as the sole continental power in defence affairs.¹² However, in the post-War period, it was clear that substantial modernisation of the country was necessary to catalyse economic power into sovereignty.

⁸ Klaus Schwabe, *Jean Monnet: Frankreich, die Deutschen und die Einigung Europas* (Nomos, 2016), 230.

⁹ Hans-Peter Schwarz, *Konrad Adenauer: The Statesman (1952-1967)* (Berghahn Books, 1991), 234.

¹⁰ Maximilian Müller-Herlin, *Nation und Europa in Parlamentsdebatten zur europäischen Integration* (Nomos, 2008), 95.

¹¹ Garret Martin, "Playing the China Card? Revisiting France's Recognition of Communist China, 1963–1964," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 10, no. 1 (2008): 52–80, <https://doi.org/10.1162/jcws.2008.10.1.52>.

¹² Helga Haftendorn, *NATO and the Nuclear Revolution: A Crisis of Credibility 1966–67* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 27.

Integration on Parole

The reality of the common market was in fact saved by the French overseas territories. In a time when colonies were claiming independence, the government in Paris had to ensure that the territories continued to benefit from their motherland to remain loyal. Moreover, entering the common market would provide the traditional French agricultural sector with potential new markets. So, France agreed.¹³ Overall, the European project was a vehicle for developments De Gaulle wished for his country: new outlets for products, steady imports and spill-over modernisation. However, domestic concerns about sharing legislative and executive competences under common rules remained present. De Gaulle therefore backed the 'Fouchet Plan' which aimed for a European market without sharing executive power: Christian Fouchet's initial draft left national power largely untouched—arguing that only a non-executive council of states should negotiate issues.¹⁴

Since implementing the plan proved impossible, De Gaulle retreated to bilateral diplomacy. The Elysée treaty was not only pivotal for Adenauer's *Westbindung*, but also secured a partnership between a military and an economic power. However, true implementation required another decade, when a young, more Europe-friendly generation of politicians like Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and Helmut Schmidt took office. These stakeholders embraced the role of new institutions like the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) to improve relations with the Eastern bloc and to allow them to act more independently of the U.S.¹⁵ In addition, several efforts by French politicians to propel the stabilisation of the European community in political and economic affairs should not be forgotten. Georges Pompidou was much more committed than his predecessor De Gaulle. He withdrew his veto on the market integration of the UK into the European Common Market in 1971, and reached an agreement with British Prime Minister Edward Heath. This harkened a new decade for European integration, but Pompidou also had an ulterior motive: Paris shifted towards London in order to counterweight other economically powerful nations.¹⁶ François Mitterand, who was originally not an advocate for European integration, also understood that the European project was necessary after the end of the Cold War, even though his idea of a borderless economic union reflected a Western-centred ideal of a bloc under French leadership.¹⁷

¹³ Matthias Waechter, *Geschichte Frankreichs im 20. Jahrhundert* (Beck, 2019), 403.

¹⁴ Anthony Teasdale, "The Fouchet Plan: De Gaulle's Intergovernmental Design for Europe," *LEQS Paper*, no. 117 (2016): 1-52, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/european-institute/Assets/Documents/LEQS-Discussion-Papers/LEQSPaper117.pdf>.

¹⁵ Thomas Robb, *A strained partnership? US-UK relations in the era of détente 1969-77* (Manchester University Press, 2013), 50, <https://doi.org/10.7228/manchester/9780719091759.003.0001>.

¹⁶ Patrick Robert, "The Heath-Pompidou Paris 20-21 May 1971 Summit: Franco-British European Honeymoon or Marriage of Convenience?," (University of Reading, 2019), 45, <https://doi.org/10.48683/1926.00096823>.

¹⁷ David Troitiño et al., "Mitterrand and the great European design—from the Cold War to the European Union," *Baltic Journal of European Studies* 7, no. 2 (2017): 132-147, <http://doi.org/10.1515/bjes-2017-0013>.

Into a New Age

If we turn to the state of European integration in the 2000s, France partly shared the eurosceptical sentiments mirrored in other European countries: The rejection of the Constitutional Treaty (2004) and the failure to ratify the Maastricht Treaty (2005) were enabled by relatively low majorities in the French parliament.¹⁸

Yet this time the critics were not conservative policymakers, but a variety of French politicians. For instance, anti-capitalist attitudes played a role on both the right and left wings.¹⁹ When it came to the implementation of the Maastricht Treaty, the socialist party failed to give support. The French left saw the regulation of trade as an attack on the heart of the Fifth Republic. Not only were people proud of the welfare state, they also saw it as the state's responsibility to protect this socioeconomic system from external threats. The identity-giving system behind it is built on the traditional values of the middle-class, working class, and civil servants who tend to be critical of globalisation.²⁰ For example, the vivid role of agrarian lobbyism since the 19th century was the driver of a rigid customs regime in France, before shifting to the high agrarian subsidies in the European Economic Community.²¹ However, it should not be forgotten that right-wing and left-wing forces in other countries also rejected the Maastricht Treaty, such as the Greens in Germany.²² This shows all the more that France was not immune to the friction caused by the transfer of national sovereignty to Europe.

Economics of Yesterday and Today

France and Germany have cultivated two completely different mindsets of how politics and economics interact. The French philosophy was significantly different as their economy was never geared toward exports or steered liberalism. Not only were French products less competitive, but with the end of colonialism, significant markets had disappeared. The state continued to protect goods and companies due to high subsidies and tariffs.²³ Even if enterprises were shifted into *sociétés anonymes*, the rise of crucial industry conglomerates like car manufacturers (Group PSA) or energy suppliers (Total) without the funding by the French state would be unimaginable. The state thus retained

¹⁸ Bruno Jerome and Nicolas G. Vaillant, "The French rejection of the European constitution: An empirical analysis," *European Journal of Political Economy* 21, no. 4 (2005): 1085-1092.

¹⁹ Tamir Bar-On, "The French New Right: Neither Right, nor Left?," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 8, no. 1 (2014): 1-44.

²⁰ Christophe Charle, *Histoire sociale de la France au XIXe siècle* (Ed. du Seuil, 1991), 278.

²¹ Paul Bairoch, "Les trois révolutions agricoles du monde développé: rendements et productivité de 1800 à 1985," *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 44, no. 2 (1989): 317-353.

²² Georgio Grimaldi, "The German Greens' Long March from the Opposition to the European Communities to a Struggle for a More Democratic, Federal and Ecological European Union (1979-2016)," in *Euroscepticisms. Resistance and Opposition to the European Community/European Union*, ed. Guido Levi and Daniela Preda (Mulino, 2019), 345.

²³ Guillaume Thiebault, *Quelle stratégie industrielle pour la France face à la mondialisation?* (Ed. Technip, 2008), 52.

control over the success of critical and profitable industries—a fact that is not uncommon, but particularly noteworthy in times of neoliberal globalisation.

The French economic strategy can also be viewed as an impediment to further market integration. The French approach of controlling economic processes in a top-down manner is evident, for example, in the current debate on common European security. Emmanuel Macron recently criticised Germany when they wanted to buy weapons from Israeli manufacturers, as such business would take place “*at the expense of European sovereignty*”.²⁴ It begs the question of how Macron’s ideal of strategic autonomy is realistic when European values contradict one another.

France’s national debt reached 117% of GDP in 2025— despite the Treaty of Maastricht capping the debt rate at 60%.²⁵ This shows how difficult it can be to hold to the common framework, even when commitment to the European project by France’s leaders is unquestionable. Furthermore, France’s debt crisis shows how difficult it is to connect financial consolidation with preservation of the national fiscal spirit—two core aspects of European integration. This was evident during the Euro crisis of 2010, although French President Nicolas Sarkozy ultimately supported German leadership, when high debt and rising interest rates became a weapon of choice to stabilise the state-economic system. In response, the subsequent President François Hollande attempted to forge an alliance with southern European countries to promote the Eurobonds for joint debt.²⁶ Returning to the present, it would be desirable if France’s recent push for a more deeply integrated Capital Market Union were implemented to prevent similar future threats and to harmonise European business. France would also greatly benefit from the fresh capital and a bolstering of their own financial centres.²⁷

Final Words

As of 2026, although France is not in a crisis on par with that of the 1950s, it is in a particularly insecure position. At the same time, Emmanuel Macron is attempting to reestablish France’s position within global politics as one of the EU’s foremost leaders. Yet, if we look back into the history of European integration, the fear of a loss of sovereignty was a pivotal factor in French political culture. Powers across the political spectrum have never been shy to question further integration into the concept of the European Union, making it difficult for France to cultivate a coherent position.

²⁴ “Arrow and shield,” *The Economist*, September 6, 2025, 51.

²⁵ “At the end of Q3 2025, the Maastricht debt accounted for 117.4% of GDP,” INSEE, accessed February 2, 2026, <https://www.insee.fr/en/statistiques/8688056>.

²⁶ Markus Brunnermeier et al., *The Euro and the Battle of Ideas* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 53.

²⁷ Wolf-Georg Ringe, “The Politics of Capital Markets Union: From Brexit to Eurozone,” in *Capital Markets Union and Beyond*, ed. Franklin Allen, Ester Faia (MIT Press, 2019), 350, https://www.ecgi.global/sites/default/files/working_papers/documents/finalringe.pdf.

Political Attitudes in Moldova Across Ethnolinguistic Groups: Romanian and Russian Speakers' Perspectives

Andriana Celan¹

Introduction

The Republic of Moldova occupies a structurally vulnerable position at the eastern border of Europe, where the competing projects of the European Union (EU) and Russia intersect. This external pressure has shaped Moldova's foreign policy and the internal structure of political competition, which has become increasingly organised around opposing geopolitical orientations. In this context, ethnolinguistic identity constitutes an important lens through which political issues are assessed, with Russian speakers historically having a different perspective on the nation-building project post-independence.²

It is a large and politically significant community that constitutes 11.6% of the population who consider Russian their native language, and 15.9% who use it as their primary language of daily communication.³ Alongside ethnic Russians, it also includes a large number of ethnic Ukrainians, Gagauz, Bulgarians, and Moldovans who mainly speak Russian. As a result, the shared language and cultural space (based on education, social

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² Petru Negură and Svetlana Suveica, "Everyday Ethnicity and Popular Responses to Nation-Building Projects in Moldova After 1989," *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 71, no. 4 (2023): 465–87; Loredana Maria Simionov, "Shifting Attitudes towards Identity, Borders and Geopolitical Choices: The Case of Moldova," *Regional Science Policy & Practice* 15, no. 1 (2023): 200–222.

³ "Rezultatele finale ale Recensământului Populației și Locuințelor 2024: Caracteristici etnoculturale ale populației" ["Final results of the 2024 Population and Housing Census: Ethnocultural characteristics of the population,"] no. RPL24, Biroul Național de Statistică al Republicii Moldova, 2025, https://statistica.gov.md/ro/rezultatele-finale-ale-recensamantului-populatiei-si-locuintelor-2024-caracteris-10121_62043.html.

practices, and media consumption)⁴ create a sociolinguistic community with a distinct identity.⁵

Previous research on affective polarisation suggests that these kinds of stable identities translate into political preferences, where emotional attachments to in-groups influence political behaviour independently of policy considerations.⁶ While in Moldova's case, the existence of different ethnolinguistic identities did not necessarily produce interpersonal conflicts between the minority and majority population,⁷ it created distinct political communities with different understandings of national interest and geopolitical orientation.⁸ For example, a more positive perception of Russia, as the supposed cultural homeland and external patron, could be one manifestation of such in-group bias.

At the same time, the extent of the influence of ethnolinguistic identity on matters outside of geopolitical preferences remains underexplored in the Moldovan context. Existing research typically examines single-year snapshots or tracks one specific issue over time. Furthermore, few studies have used quantitative data to isolate and track the attitudes of the Russian-speaking population as a distinct analytical category. To address this gap, this study systematically analyses eight years (2017-2024) of public opinion data, creating a detailed picture of political attitudes and tracking the differences between the Russian and Romanian speakers across three key domains: geopolitical orientations, support for political institutions, and socioeconomic evaluations. The longitudinal analysis allows us to capture the overall trends and how they evolved in response to major domestic and international events. This approach allows for a systematic assessment of whether ethnolinguistic identity functions as a meaningful predictor of political attitudes or whether its influence is concentrated in specific domains. Distinguishing between these possibilities is essential for understanding the depth of political fragmentation in Moldova and the extent to which language-based divisions affect democratic competition.

Data and Methodology

To examine the structure and evolution of political attitudes across language groups, this study employs a longitudinal analysis using data from the *Barometrul Opiniei Publice* (BOP), conducted annually by the Institute for Public Policy. The study covers eight consecutive survey waves from 2017 to 2024, encompassing a period of substantial

⁴ Ammon Cheskin, "Identity and Integration of Russian Speakers in the Baltic States: A Framework for Analysis," in *Diasporas and Transportation of Homeland Conflicts* (London: Routledge, 2024).

⁵ Matthew H. Ciscel, *The Language of the Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and Identity in an Ex-Soviet Republic* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007).

⁶ James N. Druckman and Matthew S. Levendusky, "What Do We Measure When We Measure Affective Polarization?," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 83, no. 1 (2019): 114–22, <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfz003>.

⁷ Negură and Suveica, "Everyday Ethnicity."

⁸ Mircea Brie and Alexandru Solcan, "Identity and Societal Security in the Republic of Moldova: Civil Society Perceptions and Engagement," *Civil Szemle* 22, no. 1 (2025): 157–75.

domestic and regional instability, including multiple parliamentary and presidential elections, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Unlike a cross-sectional analysis, the longitudinal design allows for the observation of how gaps between groups changed across time and political cycles. Each annual wave contains a stratified random sample, representative of the adult population across Moldova (excluding the Transnistria region) and the total pooled sample exceeds 10,000 respondents.⁹ The study uses the respondent's language choice as the key indicator for ethnolinguistic belonging and divides the respondents into two groups that roughly mirror the language usage across the population recorded in the National Census.¹⁰

Mixed-design Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) allowed us a simultaneous examination of multiple effects:

1. **Between-subjects effect:** Tests for systematic differences between the two language groups across the entire period.
2. **Within-subjects effect:** Analyses how attitudes have changed over time (across the eight survey waves from 2017 to 2024) for the population as a whole.
3. **Interaction effect:** Examines whether the gap between language groups has widened or narrowed over time—that is, whether polarisation has increased, decreased, or remained stable.

The Results of the Analysis

The longitudinal analysis of public opinions demonstrates that overall, the polarisation based on the ethnolinguistic identity is neither uniform nor static over time.

1. The Geopolitical Divide

The most persistent divide between Romanian and Russian speakers lies in their geopolitical orientations, both in international and domestic matters. The ANOVA results show statistically significant differences across both Time and Language Group, as well as a significant Time × Language Group interaction across all measured variables, and indicate that while attitudes fluctuated, the gap between the two groups remained stable over time.

⁹ “Barometrul Opiniei Publice” [“Public Opinion Barometer,”] (Institutul de Politici Publice, 2024), <https://ipp.md/sectiuni/barometrul-opiniei-publice/>.

¹⁰ “Rezultatele finale ale Recensământului Populației și Locuințelor 2024.”

Dimension / Variable	Effect	F-value	df	*p*-value	Partial η^2
Attitudes Toward Russia	Year (Y)	38.687	7, 9077	< .001	.029
	Language Group (L)	1069.102	1, 9077	< .001	.105
	Y \times L	6.397	7, 9077	< .001	.005
Attitudes Toward EU	Year (Y)	25.102	7, 8702	< .001	.020
	Language Group (L)	1253.734	1, 8702	< .001	.126
	Y \times L	4.456	7, 8702	< .001	.004
Support for PSRM	Year (Y)	37.383	7, 9077	< .001	.028
	Language Group (L)	1316.649	1, 9077	< .001	.127
	Y \times L	14.883	7, 9077	< .001	.011
Support for PAS	Year (Y)	45.004	7, 9077	< .001	.034
	Language Group (L)	544.830	1, 9077	< .001	.057
	Y \times L	4.036	7, 9077	< .001	.003

Table 1. ANOVA Results Summary for Geopolitical Dimension

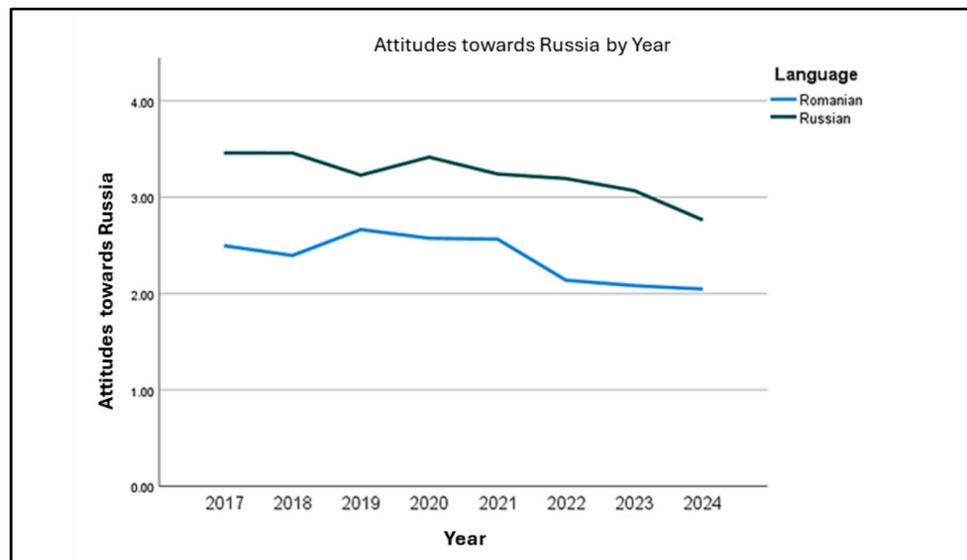


Figure 1. Attitudes towards Russia (2017-2024). Source: Author's elaboration based on national opinion poll analysis

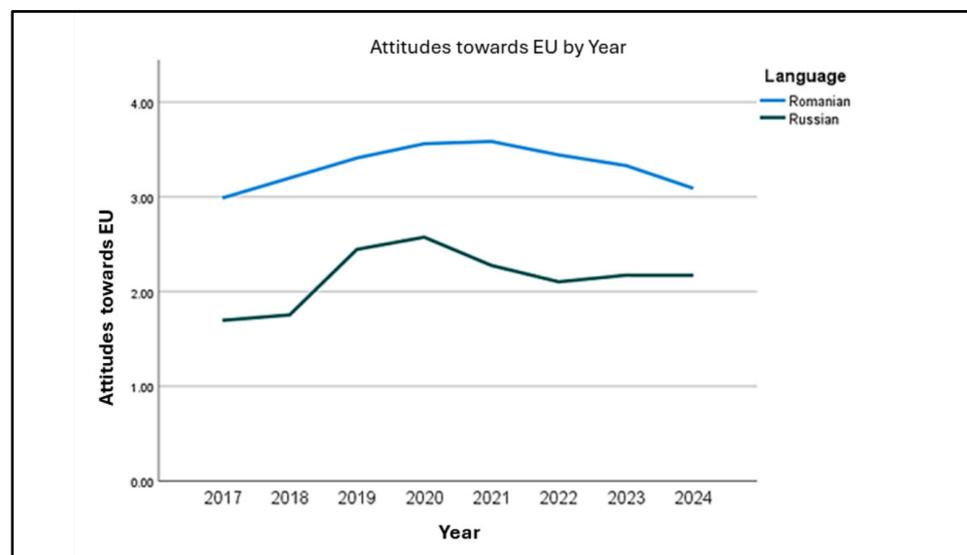


Figure 2. Attitudes towards the EU (2017-2024). Source: Author's elaboration based on national opinion poll analysis

Russian speakers consistently expressed more favourable attitudes toward Russia, coupled with greater scepticism toward European integration, compared to the Romanian speakers. This gap remained substantial throughout the observed period, ranging from 0.71 to 1.06 points on the 4-point scale.

Additionally, the analysis reveals a strong inverse relationship between pro-Russian and pro-European attitudes, suggesting that respondents largely perceive alignment with Russia and alignment with the European Union as mutually exclusive options. This pattern is present among both language groups, but is more pronounced among Romanian speakers. Additionally, the decline in positive attitudes toward Russia may be attributed to the Russian invasion of Ukraine acting as an external shock and temporarily moderating favorable views of Russia among both groups. However, this convergence was

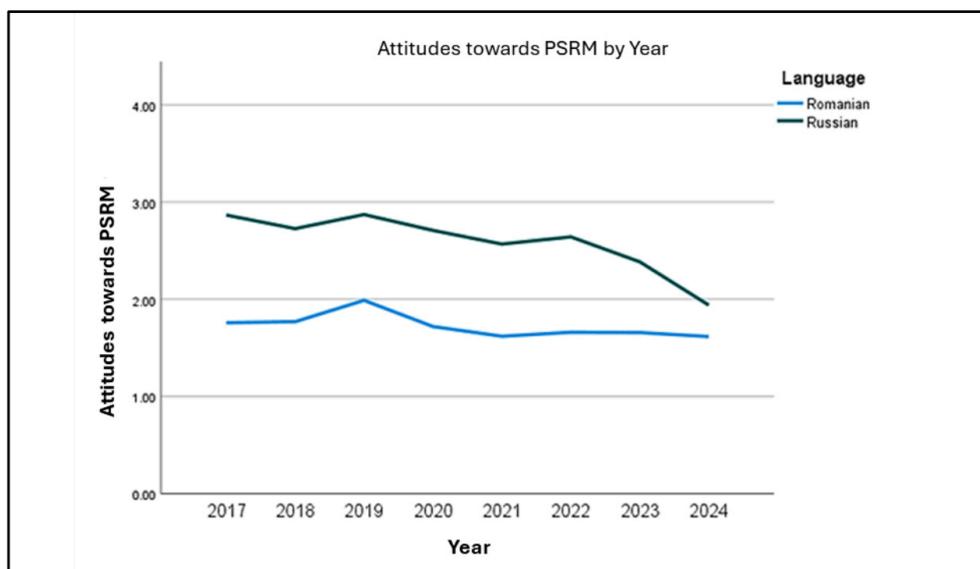


Figure 3. *Attitudes towards PSRM (2017-2024)*. Source: Author's elaboration based on national opinion poll analysis

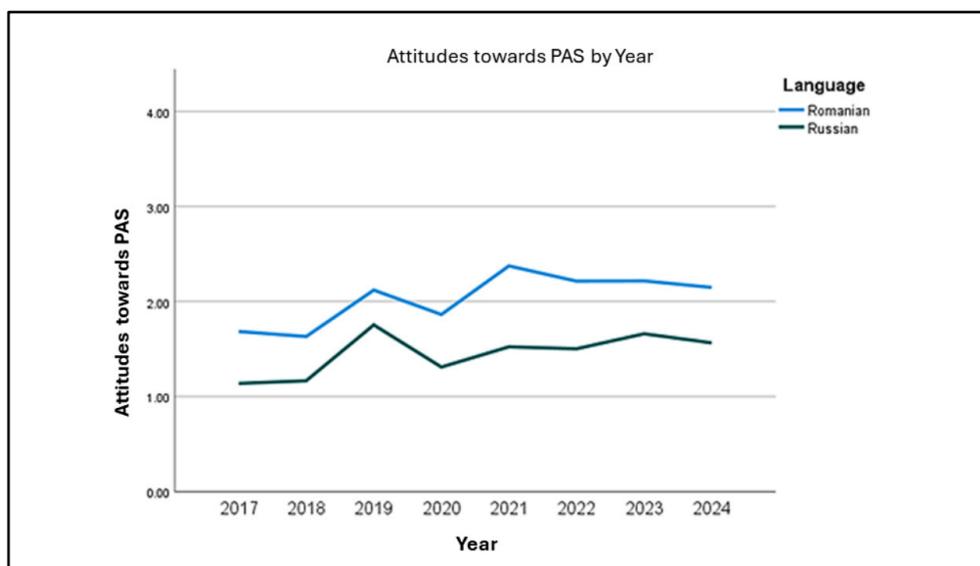


Figure 4. *Attitudes towards PAS (2017-2024)*. Source: Author's elaboration based on national opinion poll analysis

short-lived, and by 2024, the gap between Romanian and Russian speakers had stabilised—narrower than pre-war levels but still statistically and substantively significant.

Regarding the connection between the geopolitical positioning and the attitudes towards domestic political actors, this study analyses the two major political parties that are known for their clear stance: the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) as the largest pro-EU party and the Socialist Party (PSRM) as the largest pro-Russian party in Moldova. While the differences between these two aren't limited to their geopolitical orientation, studies show that it's one of the main elements of their electoral appeal.¹¹ Additionally, both PSRM and PAS were present in every poll across the examined eight-year period.

Support for the PSRM was consistently higher among Russian-speaking respondents. In 2017, the gap between language groups amounted to 1.11 points on the 1-4 favourability scale, indicating a substantial difference in evaluations. By 2024, this difference had narrowed to 0.32 points, primarily due to a sharp decline in support for PSRM among Russian speakers, whose share expressing favourable views of the party (selecting 3 or 4 on the 1-4 scale) had fallen to 28%, representing a 49% decrease compared to 2019. This indicates a weakening of the previously strong alignment between language group and support for the Socialist Party.

The overall trajectory suggests that party support is more responsive than symbolic geopolitical attitudes to performance and external events. In addition to internal corruption scandals further eroding PSRM's credibility, the party's attempt to rhetorically distance itself from Russia in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine likely impacted its standing among the Russophones whose stable affinity for Russia no longer automatically translated into support for the party.

On the other hand, the pro-European PAS maintained a consistently stronger position across the eight years. Unlike PSRM's sharp decline, PAS maintained core support due to its leading role in Moldova's EU integration efforts. By 2024, PAS still held significantly broader appeal than PSRM among the national majority but trailed behind among Russophones. While PAS has declared efforts to build social consensus, the stable gap in support between Romanian and Russian speakers demonstrates that it has so far been unable to significantly attract the Russian-speaking population or bridge the existing divides.¹² The minimal Time × Language interaction indicates that the trajectories for

¹¹ Margherita Gobbat, "Margins of Discontent: Northern Moldova Between Oligarchism, Populism, and EU Scepticism," *Moldovan Analytical Digest*, no. 3 (2025): 13–17.

¹² "Maia Sandu, Întrevedere Cu Reprezentanții Minorităților Naționale: 'În UE, Toate Comunitățile Etnice Sunt Protejate, Își Dezvoltă Cultura, Limba Și Tradițiile,'" ["Maia Sandu, Meeting with Representatives of National Minorities: 'In the EU, All Ethnic Communities Are Protected, Developing Their Culture, Language and Traditions,'"] *Politica, Moldpres*, 8 October 2024, <https://www.moldpres.md/rom/politica/maia-sandu->

both groups remained parallel, with both showing a decline coinciding with rising inflation and corruption scandals involving PAS appointees. Overall, by 2024, the attitudes towards both parties were relatively low among both population groups—a symptom of larger distrust in the Moldovan political system.

2. Regime Support: Shared Distrust, Polarised Representation

When it comes to regime support and views of Moldova's current political system, the analysis shows that ethnolinguistic identity affects attitudes only in some specific contentious areas.

Dimension / Variable	Effect	F-value	df	*p*-value	Partial η^2
Trust in Institutions	Year (Y)	61.655	7, 9077	< .001	.045
	Language Group (L)	12.098	1, 9077	.001	.001
	Y × L	25.982	7, 9077	< .001	.020
Government Evaluation	Year (Y)	63.881	7, 9077	< .001	.047
	Language Group (L)	36.240	1, 9077	< .001	.004
	Y × L	43.014	7, 9077	< .001	.032
Political Representation	Year (Y)	44.777	7, 9077	< .001	.033
	Language Group (L)	8.214	1, 9077	.004	.001
	Y × L	43.141	7, 9077	< .001	.032
Liberty Perceptions	Year (Y)	23.180	7, 9077	< .001	.018
	Language Group (L)	148.123	1, 9077	< .001	.016
	Y × L	4.874	7, 9077	< .001	.004

Table 2. ANOVA Results Summary for Regime Support

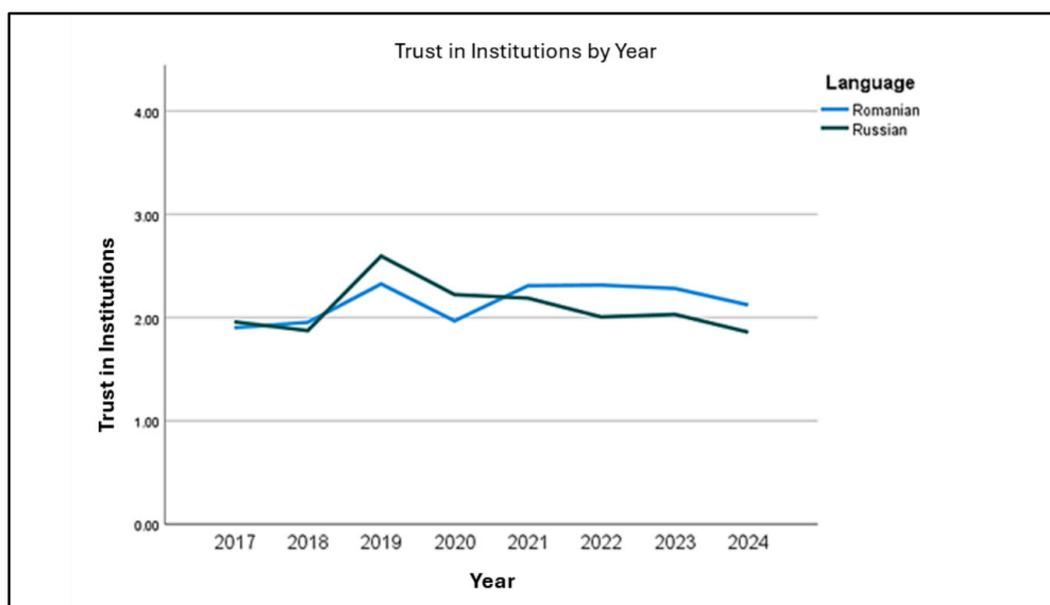


Figure 5. *Trust in Institutions and Government Favourability (2017-2024)*.

Source: Author's elaboration based on national opinion poll analysis.

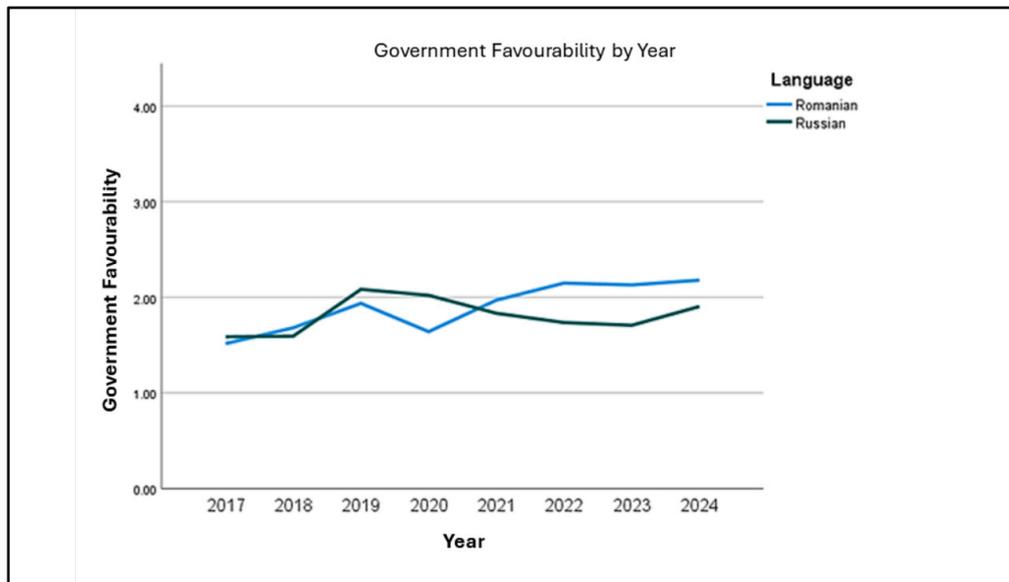


Figure 6. *Government Favourability (2017-2024)*. Source: Author's elaboration based on national opinion poll analysis.

Unlike the pronounced differences observed in geopolitical attitudes, trust in state institutions showed minimal divergence between language groups. Both Romanian and Russian speakers exhibited similarly low evaluations of parliament, the judiciary, and other institutions. The variation across years indicates that trust fluctuated in response to shared national experiences.

The evaluation of the performance of the government in power across years followed a similar pattern. Both groups reported low evaluation of government performance, which declined during economic crises or political scandals and slightly recovered during more stable periods. The significant Time \times Language Group interaction in ANOVA test reflects the shift following the 2020-2021 change in government, whereby the group that previously expressed somewhat more positive evaluations—the Russian speakers under the PSRM government—became more critical once power changed hands, while the overall dissatisfaction remained high in both language groups.

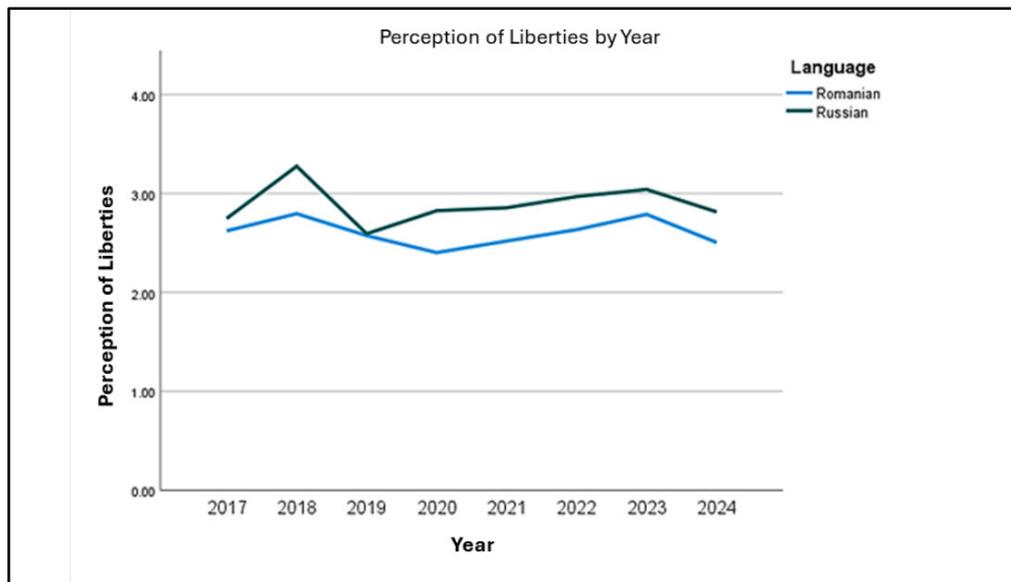


Figure 7. *Perception of Liberties (2017-2024)*. Source: Author's elaboration based on national opinion poll analysis.

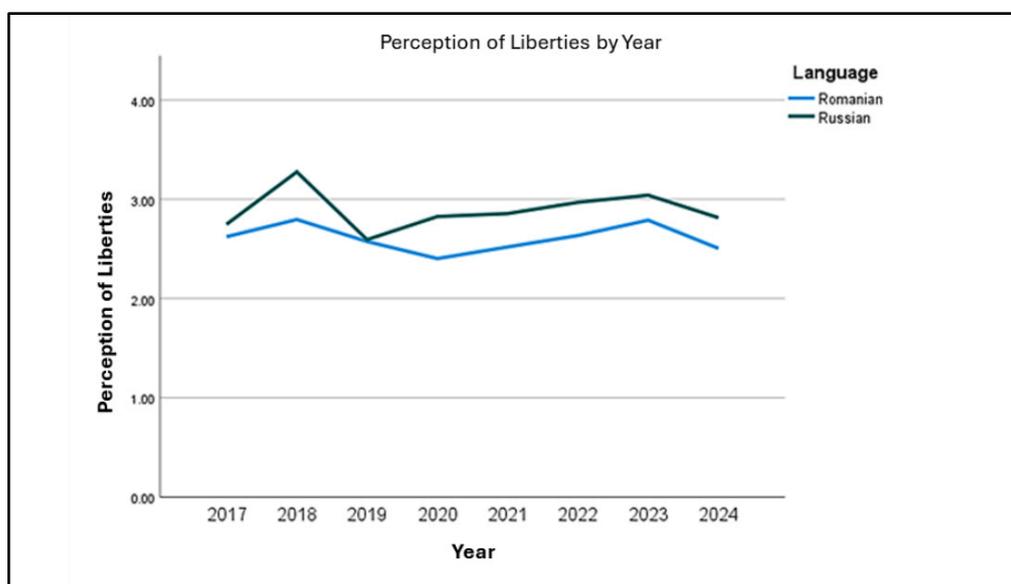


Figure 8. *Perception of Representation (2017-2024)*. Source: Author's elaboration based on national opinion poll analysis.

This common ground also extends to perceptions of civil liberties. Here, the gap between Russian and Romanian speakers was consistently small (averaging 0.30 points) and stable, with no significant widening over time. The minimal Time \times Language interaction confirms that this domain is insulated from the political shifts. The population largely feels that their freedom to criticise the government is assured, while simultaneously believing that the government is doing a poor job, is corrupt, or does not represent their interests.

In contrast to the relatively stable views observed across institutional trust, government performance, and civil liberties, perceptions of political representation display greater

volatility and polarisation. The highly significant Time \times Language Group interaction indicates that feelings of political inclusion are closely linked to which political actors control the government. When the more pro-Russian PSRM held power, Russian speakers reported significantly higher levels of political representation, while Romanian speakers felt more alienated. This pattern was completely inverted after pro-European parties gained power. By 2024, the representation gap had widened to 0.68 points, with Romanian speakers feeling their interests were significantly better represented under the PAS government.

Notably, while each group perceived a government formed by a party they align with as more representative of their interests, this does not translate into a more positive evaluation of the respective government's performance. The feeling of being represented appears to be driven primarily by symbolic affinity. This is in line with Marandici's findings, showing that in hybrid regimes, due to the state being seen as a prize captured by one political power, the alternating alienation experienced by each group reinforces the zero-sum nature of political competition and provides fertile ground for effective polarisation.¹³

3. Socioeconomic Domain: Common Experiences, Divergent Interpretations

The final set of variables captures socioeconomic issues, including satisfaction with personal living standards and household income, perceptions of the national economic situation, and indicators of civic participation.

Dimension / Variable	Effect	F-value	df	*p*-value	Partial η^2
Living Standards Satisfaction	Year (Y)	88.722	7, 9077	< .001	.064
	Language Group (L)	0.477	1, 9077	.490	.000
	Y \times L	3.410	7, 9077	.001	.003
Economy Perceptions	Year (Y)	125.496	7, 9077	< .001	.088
	Language Group (L)	69.278	1, 9077	< .001	.008
	Y \times L	56.666	7, 9077	< .001	.042
Civic Participation	Year (Y)	160.970	7, 9077	< .001	.110
	Language Group (L)	10.584	1, 9077	.001	.001
	Y \times L	1.868	7, 9077	.070	.001

Table 3. ANOVA Results Summary for Socioeconomic Domain

¹³ Ion Marandici, "Legislative Capture and Oligarchic Collusion: Two Pathways of Democratic Backsliding and Recovery in Moldova," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 712, no. 1 (2024): 93–108, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162241307749>.

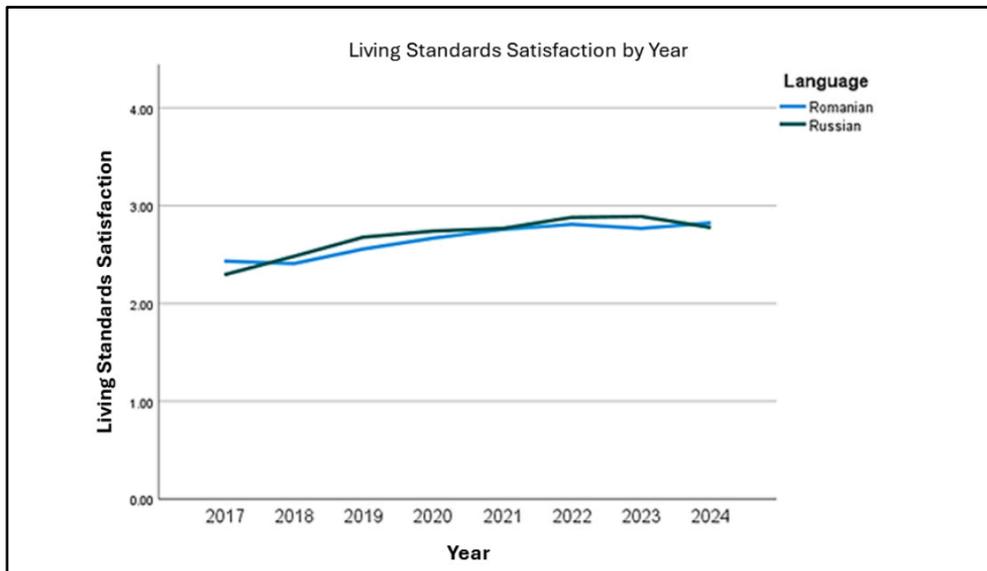


Figure 9. *Living Standards Satisfaction (2017-2024)*. Source: Author's elaboration based on national opinion poll analysis.

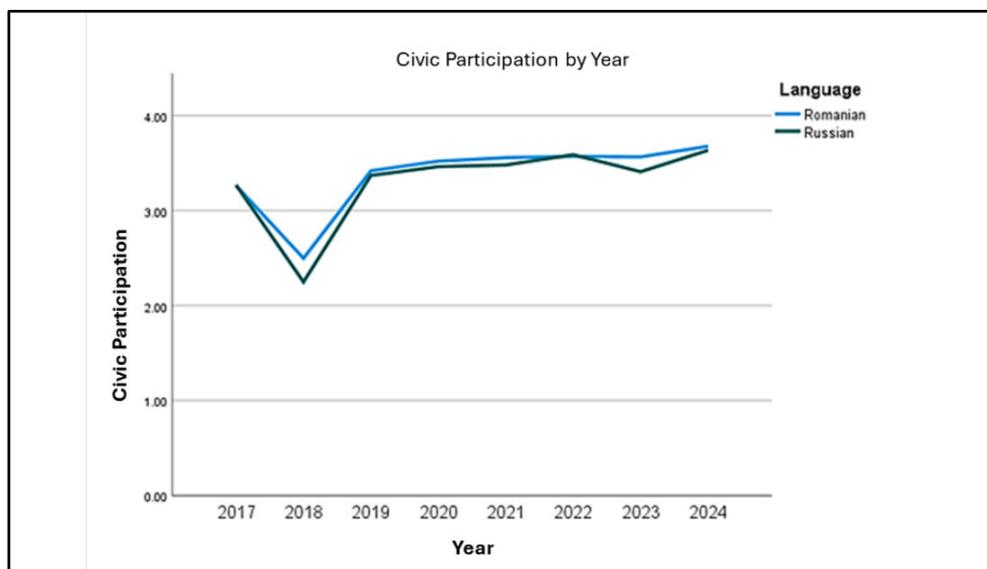


Figure 10. *Civic Participation (2017-2024)*. Source: Author's elaboration based on national opinion poll analysis.

Evaluations of material and socio-economic conditions, including satisfaction with personal living standards, household income, and access to public services, showed minimal divergence between groups. Civic participation is another area of consensus, with both Romanian-speaking and Russian-speaking populations exhibiting nearly identical patterns across the eight years, with differences between groups accounting for only 0.1% of observed variance.

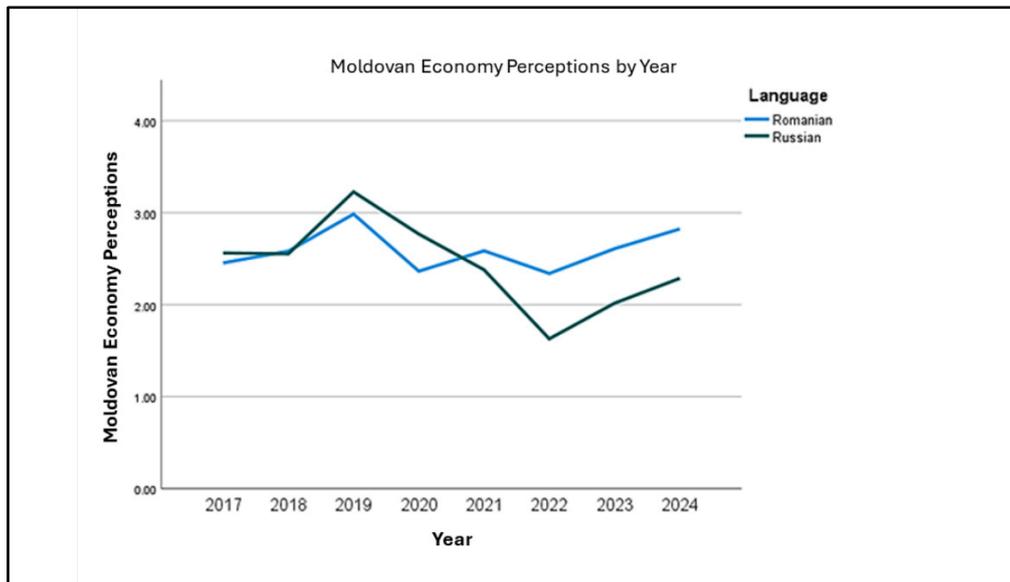


Figure 11. Moldovan *Economy Perceptions* (2017-2024). Source: Author's elaboration based on national opinion poll analysis.

In contrast, the analysis of perceptions of the national economy reveals growing polarisation. While both groups shared similar assessments before 2020, Russian speakers became substantially more pessimistic about Moldova's economic trajectory in the following years. By 2024, Russophones were 24% more pessimistic about the national economy than Romanian speakers, despite reporting similar satisfaction with their personal economic circumstances.

This gap suggests that shared material conditions are interpreted through different narrative lenses. Russian speakers' greater tendency to connect national economic struggles with deteriorating relations with Russia can be attributed to a combination of targeted media framing, historical economic dependencies, and distinct political messaging. For example, former President Igor Dodon frequently claimed that pragmatic cooperation with Russia brings concrete economic benefits, emphasising how restored trade relations would help Moldovan farmers and ensure energy security.¹⁴ These claims resonate with the population in regions with deeper economic ties to Russia and are amplified by Russian-language media outlets that frame the hardships as a direct consequence of the demands for economic restructuring put forward by the EU.¹⁵

¹⁴ RIA Novosti, "Молдавия не выживет без хороших отношений с Россией, заявил Додон," ["Moldova will not survive without good relations with Russia, Dodon said,"] *Новости, RIA Novosti*, 2 September 2023, <https://ria.ru/20230902/moldaviya-1893829396.html>.

¹⁵ Nicolae Arnaut, "The Impact of Russian State Propaganda on Minority Communities in Moldova," *Eurolimes* 33-34 (2023): 175-86.

Conclusion

Overall, the analysis shows that differences in political attitudes that stem from the ethnolinguistic identity are not uniform. Across the eight-year period, gaps between Romanian-speaking and Russian-speaking respondents vary substantially by domains, with the evaluations of personal living standards, institutional trust, and governance showing remarkable consensus. Geopolitical orientation is one of the few areas where attitudes are clearly divided and resistant to change.

Because of how stable these attitudes are, they provide a reliable axis around which political competition can be organised. This poses an additional risk for fragile post-Soviet democracies, as both domestic elites and external actors can leverage the ethnolinguistic polarisation as a political resource, resulting in less attention to the critical issues of governance, such as economic development and anti-corruption.¹⁶

With Moldova striving to join the EU and the full-scale war continuing in neighboring Ukraine, the stakes of the country's internal divisions are particularly high. In this context, identifying the areas where the country remains split, as well as the shared concerns of the population, can help chart a path toward a more integrated society. As this study shows, the country's ethnolinguistic diversity is something that needs to be considered when dealing with specific political issues, like promoting the European partnership projects or addressing the concerns over Russian propaganda. But it is equally important to move beyond the framework that views this diversity through the lens of vulnerability and division.

¹⁶ Lisa Gohlke, "How Do Populist Actors Mobilise Voters' Support? Populist Mobilisation Strategies and Their Appeal to Territorial Identities in the Republic of Moldova," *Territorial Identities in Action* 77 (2021), https://itd.territorial-identity.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Published-Territorial-Identities-in-Action_2927.pdf#page=78concerns.

SCHUMAN INSIGHTS

Can the Labour Party Save Itself? The Strategic Dilemma at the Heart of the British Government

James Kemmy¹

When Sir Keir Starmer led his party to victory in the July 2024 UK General Election, pundits and activists alike were forecasting a two-, if not three-term Labour government, such was the scale of its electoral power. After a decade and a half of tumultuous Conservative rule, the Labour Party swept to office by promising to repair Britain's broken economy and crumbling public services, and to lead with transparent, accountable governance. However, just twenty months later, Labour's political fall

from grace has been devastating and historically unprecedented.

Starmer's Mishaps

From its early days, a series of deeply unpopular policy measures (and subsequent reversals), admitted errors of judgement surrounding financial gifts, and an alleged authoritarian decision-making culture have sullied Starmer's premiership. These blunders, particularly the abrupt removal of winter fuel benefit payments for over 10



¹ * Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this article are strictly personal and do not represent the positions of the European Parliament or the S&D Group. James Kemmy is a political advisor from Ireland working in the EU institutions. He is interested in writing about political strategy and communications, populism, polarisation, and Europe's shifting electoral landscape.



million pensioners,² have driven intense backlash from the public and the Party's own internal forces; backbench MPs and party members alike. In opinion polls, Labour is now regularly languishing more than ten points behind the hard-right Reform UK, led by the anti-immigration populist veteran, Nigel Farage. Meanwhile, a surging Green Party has galvanised a sizeable cohort of voters to the left of Labour, while the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives have stabilised their positions on the centre and centre-right.

A lawyer by profession, Starmer previously showed disdain for the ideological polarisation and political psychodrama that Westminster is notorious for. Upon his election, the former Director of Public Prosecutions was perceived as a pragmatic, rational leader, capable of restoring order and delivering mature technocratic statesmanship in a volatile

period.³ However, it is now those very attributes, initially interpreted as assets, that are proving to be disastrous for Keir Starmer. His detractors on both the right and left decry his fundamental lack of political intuition and grasp on the scale of the crisis Britain faces. Many within his own party, especially his own MPs, have grown exasperated by his caution and aversion to the ambitious progressive politics that drew them to the Labour Party in the first place. Revealing several key insights, the next sections look at the figures driving Keir Starmer's Downing Street operation, highlighting their tactical agendas and intellectual inspirations.

McSweeney and Blue Labour

Morgan McSweeney, Keir Starmer's former chief of staff and campaign director, shaped much of the analytical framework that initially propelled

² Georgina Quach and Stephen Bush, "Winter Fuel Was Labour's Defining Mistake," *Financial Times*, December 29, 2025, <https://www.ft.com/content/5920b93c-497d-4b2a-9962-d50e2f2c700c?syn-25a6b1a6=1>.

³ Eunice Goes, "The Labour Party under Keir Starmer: Plotting the Route to a Shallow Landslide," *Parliamentary Affairs* 78, no. 1 (2025): 65–93, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsaf015>.

In many ways, Blue Labour principles generate an image of “family, faith, flag,” grounded in nostalgia, collectivism, and national pride.

Starmer to the role of UK premier. Despite having recently resigned over the fatal advice to appoint Peter Mandelson, a close associate of Jeffrey Epstein to the role of UK Ambassador to the US, McSweeney undoubtedly left an indelible mark on Labour Party strategy. A crucial element to McSweeney’s original plan was to shift the party in a more centrist, nationalistic direction to win-back traditional “Hero” voters in heartland constituencies who, generally, supported Brexit, voted Conservative for the first time in 2019, and are oriented toward Reform UK’s anti-establishment political brand.⁴ This method paid major dividends in 2024, granting Labour its third-largest majority in history. Under the First Past the Post system, however, parliamentary seat distribution can contrast wildly with vote share, and this was nowhere more apparent than at the last election, when the Labour Party won just a third of all votes (33.7%) yet secured nearly 63% of seats (411/650) in the House of Commons, the lower chamber of the British Parliament. The victory was wide but extremely shallow, mean-

ing that Starmer’s mandate was deceptively fragile. Consequently, it is believed that McSweeney was always very cautious of altering Labour’s 2024 coalition, for fear of jeopardising this precarious electoral alliance.

In seeking to identify his political vision, much of the media and political class has placed the “Blue Labour” label on McSweeney, an emerging faction originated by Baron Maurice Glasman, an English academic and life peer in the House of Lords (the upper chamber of the British Parliament). This is a relatively unconventional Labour school of thought which favours a style of politics “for the common good”.⁵ It is economically interventionist but not statist, favouring decentralisation and local empowerment through a socialist-oriented economy.

Further, Glasman’s philosophy is critical of globalisation and neoliberalism as forces which triggered the demise of Britain’s once-prosperous industrial communities. Most significantly and, controversially, however, Blue Labour is critical

⁴ Emmanuelle Avril, “‘Persuasion Pathways’ to the ‘Hero Voter’: Understanding the Labour Party’s Ground Campaign Approach in the 2024 General Election,” *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* 30, no. 3 (2025): 33–55, <https://doi.org/10.4000/14qka>.

⁵ Maurice Glasman, *Blue Labour: The Politics of the Common Good* (Polity, 2022).

of immigration and multiculturalism, emphasising the centrality of social cohesion to working-class communities. In many ways, Blue Labour principles generate an image of “family, faith, flag,” grounded in nostalgia, collectivism, and national pride.⁶ As a political faction, it is communitarian and traditionalist in its outlook, centring the white-English proletariat class as its core citizenry.

On the immigration question, at least, this political project borrows from that of Danish social democratic thought, which has effectively married interventionist, pro-welfare economics with a much more hardline approach to border security than the European centre-left orthodoxy. Notably, Denmark’s government has justified its actions in the name of social parity and cultural cohesiveness.⁷ Since taking office, the UK Home Office under the Labour Government has radically increased deportations of foreign nationals and has been purposely vocal about such measures, occasionally even equating migrants with rising criminality.⁸ Behind this radical departure on migration policy and the surrounding rhetoric from the Labour Party, an organisation generally favourable to multiculturalism and liberal values, seems to lie an assumption that citizens are profoundly more insecure, fearful,

and nostalgic in this current era compared to previous ones. Given the international volatility and domestic economic disorder in Britain, there is perhaps a case for this sociological analysis, and therefore, for Labour to develop a more insular political brand. However, there is also a large base of younger and more progressive voters in cities and university towns with more internationalist, cosmopolitan outlooks that are completely overlooked in this approach. The strategic gamble from the Labour party is that these types of voters, often young professionals in urban centres, have been so habitually wedded to voting Labour in recent decades that the Party can shift to the right on cultural issues to chase Reform UK and still maintain a strong cohort of liberal support.

Blair and Blairism

Despite pursuing a singular strategy through the Blue Labour ideological lens, however, Starmer and McSweeney have outsourced much of their decision-making and personnel to another Labour school of thought: Blairism. Since becoming Prime Minister, Starmer has sought to replicate Labour’s former popularity by appointing senior aides from the era of Tony Blair, Labour Prime Minister from 1997 to 2007 and winner of

⁶ Helen Charman. “Helen Charman | Of Flags and Families,” *LRB Blog*, September 9, 2025, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2025/september/of-flags-and-families>.

⁷ Ian McManus and Michelle Falkenbach, “A Hollow Victory: Understanding the Anti-Immigration Shift of Denmark’s Social Democrats,” *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 18, no. 1, 2022.

⁸ Rajeev Syal, “Home Office Says Nearly 60,000 People Deported from UK or Left Voluntarily since 2024 Election,” *The Guardian*, February 5, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2026/feb/05/home-office-60000-deported-removed-since-2024-election-migration>.

three consecutive general elections. In the communications sphere, Starmer has recruited several key figures who were central to Blair's sleek political operation over two decades ago. These include former communications director, Tim Allan, speechwriter Peter Hyman, and political director Matthew Doyle. These figures have urged Starmer to exemplify a political and strategic approach still rooted in the context of the Blair era; one marked by moderation and pragmatism, support for business, and an aversion to rigid left-wing ideology.

Likewise, much of the policy muscle of this UK government has come from voices close to former Prime Minister Blair himself, and more broadly, his mega-think tank, the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (TBI). Evolving somewhat from its original mission of international development and humanitarian work, the TBI is now strongly tech and AI-oriented, and promotes policy solutions with a vigorous modernisation agenda and globalist outlook.⁹ One clear example of Blair's influence on the Starmer government in recent times was Digital ID, an ambitious administrative scheme aimed at digitalising citizens' state identification documents into a smartphone-based wallet, verifying a person's right to live and work in the UK. Initially proposed in September of last year, the plan was

subsequently abandoned due to backlash from nearly all political forces claiming that the major bureaucratic overhaul and intrusions upon civil liberties of digitalisation would render the scheme unworkable. Moreover, the ongoing tech-enabled reform of the National Health Service, which is led by prominent Blairite figure, Wes Streeting, also borrows from Tony Blair's distinctive modernisation agenda. Introducing "digital doctor" appointments, developing AI-based diagnostics, and the proposed re-establishing of league tables to monitor and rate the performance of NHS boards are all Health Department measures that strikingly emulate Blair's technocratic, market-oriented approach.¹⁰

Crucially though, the *zeitgeist* has changed since Blair's time at the turn of the 20th century, when the UK and the wider West felt more optimistic and



Tony Blair, 2002 via Flickr.

⁹ "About Us," Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (TBI), accessed March 1, 2026, <https://institute.global/who-we-are/about>.

¹⁰ The Independent, "He Who Blairs: How Tony Took over Keir Starmer's Government by Stealth," *The Independent*, October 2, 2025, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/news/tony-blair-keir-starmer-influence-b2837504.html>.



Keir Starmer, General election campaigning, Reading, UK, June 2024, keir.starmer.mp via flickr.

open to new, progressive ideas. Moreover, Britain's current economic and international standing is far weaker than it was during the Blair years and voters are much more impatient for change. Starmer's blatant reliance on former Labour victors and operators from bygone eras underlines a self-confidence deficiency from the Prime Minister, whereby he does not trust his own instincts and tactics to generate political success. The techno-optimist and corporate solutions espoused by the Tony Blair institute, combined with Starmer's sidelining of the left of the Party, have dampened the radical socialist spirit that many voters expect from the Labour Party. This takes place in an especially harsh economic climate, marked by stagnation and the bruising impacts of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. Crucially, Blair has always wanted to move beyond class, and has

been open that he is more politically interested in fulfilling middle-class aspirations than addressing working-class anxieties.¹¹ Under his leadership, the Labour Party largely rejected state-centred remedies to Britain's problems.¹² However, today's political society is undoubtedly more pessimistic and polarised than during Blair's liberal moment. Therefore, Starmer's unwillingness to channel an authentic progressivism and basic social democratic principles is jeopardising the reception of much-needed support from Labour's traditional voters who are moving to parties on further ends of the political spectrum.

A recent by-election in the Labour heartland of Gorton and Denton in Northern England added to Starmer's political woes and symbolises a new existential threat for the broader Party. In

¹¹ Amol Rajan, "Tony Blair on Keir Starmer, AI and Globalisation," *BBC*, September 3, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c36n2gz8k78o>.

¹² Ben Jackson, "Poverty and the Labour Party," *The Political Quarterly* 96, no. 2 (2025): 233–35, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.13546>.

late February, the rapidly rising Green Party pulled off a shock victory, beating both the Labour Party and Reform UK. Labour came in a distant third place in an area where they have won consecutively for decades. This result represents something seismic; a Green Party win means voters do not need to vote tactically to stop Reform, but can instead vote for an unapologetically left-wing, eco-populist force that is highly critical of Starmer's Labour Party. This local contest, while making little difference to the House of Commons' composition, does serve as a national proxy and reveals further political fragmentation in British society. It also contradicts McSweeney's theory that Labour can continue to win by simply chasing the political energy on its right in appealing to Reform UK voters without facing consequences from its more left-wing voters.

Conclusion

Today, while less visible than in previous generations, politics in the UK remains stubbornly class-based due to persistent equality gaps and regional disparities.¹³ In recent years, culture war issues surrounding Brexit, migration, and the European Convention on Human Rights have further exacerbated political cleavages, while class tensions remain salient.¹⁴ Reform UK and the Green Party, al-

beit with different diagnoses of Britain's predicament, are campaigning on strongly anti-elite platforms and gaining significant traction by doing so. The result is that Labour now faces intense challenges from forces to both their right and left. These developments, along with Labour's hesitation to communicate strongly on the progressive measures they have taken, such as new renters' rights and industrial reforms, seems to portray an ambiguous political message by the government, which is increasingly struggling to command parliamentary majorities for its legislative proposals. In this sense, much of Labour's predicament mirrors that of French President Emmanuel Macron, whose attempt to build a legacy in the centerground has been spoiled by incendiary forces on both the far left and right dominating the political conversation. Hence, Labour will need to more visibly demonstrate that it is addressing the country's structural issues, such as chronic underinvestment, and communicate in more direct egalitarian terms to salvage its political brand and boost electoral momentum.

Ultimately, Keir Starmer's government is floundering due to its strategic and intellectual confusion. In its first year and a half, it has sought to chase the populist right and mirror its harsh language on

¹³ Larry Elliott, "Class Still Matters in Politics – and until Living Standards Improve, Reform Will Continue to Prosper," *The Guardian*, May 8, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/may/08/class-still-matters-in-politics-reform-uk>.

¹⁴ Bobby Duffy, "UK's Sense of Division Reaches New High as Culture War Tensions Grow, Study Finds," King's College London, November 7, 2025, <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/uks-sense-of-division-reaches-new-high-as-culture-war-tensions-grow-study-finds>.

cultural issues, rather than offer a robust progressive alternative. At the same time, on economic questions, Labour is looking to outdated sources of liberal inspiration that too often come across as elitist and out of touch to a disillusioned electorate who, in large parts, are demanding strong public interventions to remedy the effects of economic turbulence and inequality. The overall product is a political executive whose essence is feeble and disoriented. In the meantime, insurgent forces on the political margins are exploiting the opportunity, developing powerful platforms and building upon their electoral support. Such a dilemma has been affecting many moderate and centre-left parties in Europe in recent years, with populists gaining a major foothold among the traditional social democratic voter base in Germany, France, Czechia, Portugal, and Sweden,

whereby working-class voters have been increasingly drawn to the populist, sovereigntist right. Unless the Labour Party undertakes some profound reflection upon its original mission and re-brands as the authentic party of social justice, the UK's political atomisation, and perhaps wider ungovernability, will only escalate.

A photograph of a street sign for Downing Street SW1, City of Westminster. The sign is white with red text. The background is a red-tinted image of a building facade with a decorative railing in the foreground.

DOWNING
STREET SW1
CITY OF WESTMINSTER

