



Radu Albu-Comănescu

RESURGENCE

*How Central and Eastern Europe
can shape the 21st century*

Presa Universitară Clujeană

Radu Albu-Comănescu

Resurgence

How Central and Eastern Europe
can shape the 21st century

*Publicarea acestui volum a fost finanțată
prin Fondul de Dezvoltare al Universității Babeș-Bolyai.*

*The publication of this volume has been supported
by the Fund for the Development of the Babeș-Bolyai University.*

Radu Albu-Comănescu

Resurgence

How Central and Eastern Europe
can shape the 21st century

PRESA UNIVERSITARĂ CLUJEANĂ
2026

Referenți științifici:

Conf. univ. dr. Paula Mureșan

Conf. univ. dr. Adrian-Gabriel Corpădean

On the cover: Zdzisław Jasiński - Burza (1925)

The views and opinions expressed in this book are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any organizations, institutions, or affiliations the author may be associated with.

All interpretations, analyses, conclusions and overall content is presented as the author's personal perspective.

ISBN 978-606-37-2280-6

Copyright © 2026 by Radu Albu-Comănescu.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Universitatea Babeș-Bolyai
Presa Universitară Clujeană

Director: Codruța Săcelean

Str. B.P. Hasdeu nr. 51

400371 Cluj-Napoca, România

Tel.: (+40) 744 687 884

E-mail: editura@ubbcluj.ro

editura.ubbcluj.ro | libraria.ubbcluj.ro

Contents

Acknowledgements	13
------------------	----

Part I

1. Introduction	17
A World in Transition	17
On the Importance of Central and Eastern Europe. Kissinger’s Transylvanian Reverie	19
The Kissinger Equation	23
2. Central and Eastern Europe, Scandinavia— drivers of the next phase of EU Integration	29
Beyond the Franco-German engine	29
Europe vs. Europe: The High Costs of Dismissing Eastern and Northern interests	38
“Maybe We Should”. Central Europe and Scandinavia’s Xanadu option: becoming Eurasia’s Western Pillar	44
The Transatlantic Option: Building a Privileged Partnership with the United States	51
Solving the Kissinger Equation. Can France and Germany match the Xanadu and American Options?	59
France’s ‘Europe’	72
<i>À la Recherche du</i> Leadership Lost: A Hypothetical Frame for France’s Revival	77
Central and Eastern Europe, and Scandinavia: Co-architects of Europe’s Sovereignty	89
How can Central and Eastern Europe Shape—and Change— the 21st Century?	93

Appendix	103
Building a European NATO Pillar by Enhancing French Leadership in the European Union and NATO: A Phased Strategic Roadmap	103

Part II

From Paradise Lost to New Regional Designs in Europe Romania and the Visegrad 4	117
Looking for a Partner. A Romanian Outlook on EU's Achilles' Heel	121
Drawing a Defence Line in Europe's East. Imperfect Elections Give a Direction to Romania	125
Building Europe. Can France and Central Europe Truly Reconcile?	133
From Post-Communist Legacy to Democracy and Atlantic Partnership: Central Europe's Relevance in Europe	147
"Carpathian Variations". Romania's Approach to Strategic Autonomy, Security and NATO	158
Build Back Better: Options for Central and Eastern Europe	172
French elections: Macron Reloaded or Macron 2.0? Consequences for France's relations with the Eastern Flank	182
Rebuilding Europe's Security from Scandinavia to the Black Sea	188
EU-NATO cooperation: a European pillar, or pillars of NATO in Europe?	198
In Lieu of Conclusion...	205

L'avenir est un dieu traîné par des tigres.

(Future is a god dragged by tigers.)

Victor Hugo, 1876

To conserve space and maintain a streamlined reading experience, the book does not feature a separately listed ***bibliography***. Instead, all source references and citations are integrated directly into the footnotes throughout the text. This approach allows readers to access relevant bibliographic information at the point of reference, without needing to consult a separate section at the end of the book. While this format diverges from traditional academic structures and layouts, it ensures that the scholarly rigour and source transparency are preserved, while also supporting a more compact and efficient design. Readers interested in full citation details will find them embedded within the footnotes accompanying each relevant passage.

This volume uses the ***Oxford comma***, the final comma in a list of three or more items, placed before a conjunction (typically *and* or *or*). Its use is justified on both grammatical and stylistic grounds, primarily for clarity and precision, preventing misinterpretation and ensuring that each item in a series is distinctly acknowledged. While some style guides omit it for brevity, its consistent use contributes to syntactic clarity and reduces the risk of confusion, making it a preferred choice for the present book.

The preparation of this manuscript involved the use of ***artificial intelligence*** tools to assist. These technologies were employed to collect and process economic and financial data in support of arguments presented. The resulting content has been critically reviewed to ensure integrity, accuracy, and coherence.

To **Pamela Roussos Raḡiu**—

*For your many virtuositities, your sparkling wit
and fascination with knowledge that brightens
each and every of our conversations.*

*To your extraordinary friendship, this book
is dedicated with admiration and gratitude.*

... And to the memory of

Professor Christopher Coker (1953-2023),

*for his providential academic friendship, support
and trust, in souvenir of spellbinding lectures, laughter,
țuică, gummy bears, and captivating conversations
from Transylvania to Iceland...*

Acknowledgements

What you have under your eyes is a book. But what I see in it is a reminder of the people who made it possible. Their contributions have woven the very fabric of this work and are immeasurable. What they bestowed upon me—time, energy, grace, generosity, understanding, insight, and unwavering support—is a treasure that can never be replaced. Working with them and getting to know them better, or interacting for the first time, was the great privilege and the pleasure of the process that resulted in the book itself.

I am deeply grateful to the *Visegrad Insight* team and editors in Warsaw, for their faith in me, their remarkable spirit, flexibility, their guidance, and abundant great disposition. Their warm demeanour and irresistible good humour create an inviting atmosphere, making every engagement a joyful endeavour. As consummate organisers of both public and private debates, conferences, and events, they have orchestrated a vibrant tapestry of ideas and discussions—culminating with *Europe Future Forum*—, from which this book has blossomed over the years. It is from the path they embraced in their analysis of Europe and the world, through foresight and the art of scenario crafting, that I found the muse to undertake a similar method for the pages that follow.

To the Rațiu family, *Centrul Rațiu pentru Democrație* and the *Rațiu Forum* at the *London School of Economics*, my heartfelt appreciation for providing a splendid intellectual haven and an exceptional environment for this work to take root. There is a rare magic in the gatherings they host—no setting quite rivals the discretion and the exclusive charm of a Rațiu Forum lunch, brunch, or the astounding open-air gala dinners under glamorous Italian crystal chandeliers; nor the dialogues in the “executive lounge,” where boundaries between ranks dissolve, as presidential advisors, Prime Ministers, ministers, NATO strategists, globally renowned scholars, reputed think-tank experts, television producers and anchors, ambassadors and diplomats of every stripe meet not in formality, but in candour—exchanging thoughts on global affairs

over a glass of grappa adorned with frozen grapes or frozen chocolate. Such moments are not merely memorable—they are transformative. Pamela, Nicolae, Indrei, thank you for making it possible.

My deepest appreciation to the *Faculty of European Studies* at the *Babeş-Bolyai University* in Cluj, whose wellspring of knowledge, vibrant epistemic community and academic resources offer the fertile ground where this work could come out of its shell. Within its Art Déco setting, critical European thinking is nurtured, dialogue thrives, and the spirit of scholarship is brilliantly represented.

And then there is the category of those absolutely special—sometimes conjunctural yet irreplaceable—interlocutors and circumstantial collaborators who provided me with insight or contributed as catalysts to the ideas, thoughts, notions, and concepts I discuss and, in certain cases, promote. Their sharp-edged perceptiveness and probing questions challenged me to delve deeper and articulate my views and theories in ever-denser manner.

Last, but certainly not least, my heartfelt gratitude is going to my family and friends. Their endlessly recommenced patience, words of encouragement, in-kind assistance and generosity—such as the book design by Danish-Romanian professional and marvellous sister Delia Albu-Comănescu—, their constant encouragement or calming and comforting presence sustained me through countless (and at times frustrating, solitary) hours of research and writing. This book belongs to you as much as to me.

Part I

Introduction

“History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.”—James Joyce, “Ulysses”

A World in Transition

For more than three decades after the Cold War, the world seemed to rest on principles that were thought unshakable: the right of nations to self-determination, the inviolability of borders, the prohibition of aggressive war. These foundations, enshrined in the United Nations Charter, created the impression of a stable order, where international norms could shield nations from the brutalities of history. Yet this vision has been shattered. Before our eyes, the grammar of power is shifting back to an older language, one that pre-dates the twentieth century—where balance, rivalry, and force once again determine the fate of nations.

Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 signalled this return; the full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022 confirmed it. The reality is undeniable: wars of conquest, once thought buried by history, are back. Peace treaties may no longer rest on universal law but on the cold arithmetic of power. Europeans, long sheltered from such realities, must once again learn the forgotten vocabulary of victory, defeat, and negotiation.

At the same time, the shadow of nuclear weapons continues to shape global politics. If the conflict in Ukraine did not escalate into a direct clash between NATO and Russia, it is because nuclear deterrence held. The bomb has become the ceiling of violence, freezing escalation and

pushing states back into the 19th-century patterns of limited war. Yet even here, cracks are showing: missile technology, hypersonic weapons, and the possible resurgence of nuclear proliferation challenge the very framework that has constrained war for decades.

The West, meanwhile, has discovered its own fragility. At the war's outset, commentators proclaimed Russia's isolation. Instead, it was the West that found itself alone. While Moscow relied on tacit support from much of the world, Europe and the United States faced a South increasingly disenchanted with Western lectures and moralising. What was once celebrated as a universal model is now dismissed as cultural neocolonialism. The Western narrative, once dominant, is faltering.

Worse still, the West itself is fracturing. America's turn inward, combined with its obsessive rivalry with China, leaves indolent Europe exposed. NATO has fulfilled its primary role of deterrence, but its future cohesion is uncertain. Can Europeans still rely on the American security guarantee, when even the U.S. president openly questions its value? For Europe, accustomed to believing in a post-historical order governed by norms and dialogue, the shock is profound. It must now confront the hard realities of power, rearmament, and autonomy.

Beyond this transatlantic rupture, the rest of the world is moving in a different direction. The so-called "Global South" is no longer a passive arena for great power competition but an active architect of new systems. Flexible, often informal groupings—BRICS+, OPEC+, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation—are emerging as alternatives to the rigid, bureaucratic institutions of the twentieth century. These arrangements are pragmatic, limited in scope, and above all, independent of Western influence.

We are entering a world that is more fluid, less predictable, and more dangerous. The outcome of the war in Ukraine is unknown. The rivalry between the United States and China could intensify—or shift unexpectedly. Conflicts simmer in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. The structures that once offered clarity are fading, replaced by a landscape of opportunism, shifting alliances, and contested power.

This book explores that transformation. It argues that the post-Cold War order has ended, not with a bang but with a gradual erosion—until reality forced itself back onto the stage. The 21st century is not the continuation of the last, but something far older: a return to the strategic logics of power politics, now complicated by nuclear shadows, technological revolutions, and the rise of new actors.

The world is unsettled, uncertain, unfinished. Welcome to the new century.

On the Importance of Central and Eastern Europe. Kissinger's Transylvanian Reverie

It all began with a phone call one evening in the early days of January 2023.

My cousin, charting her own professional path across the Atlantic, once found herself in the distinguished company of Henry Kissinger. As their conversation meandered through pleasantries, she revealed the thread of her family heritage, speaking of the land she was born and raised in—Transylvania. At this, Kissinger paused and confessed with quiet candour: Transylvania was a place he had long wished to see...

Life and time allowed no such journey before Kissinger's passing that November. Yet, this unforeseen confession lingered in my mind, casting a shadow of unfulfilled desire that stirred within me the possibility of a past where the skilled statesman—just like King Charles III or President Giscard d'Estaing of France—had the opportunity to contemplate this part of Europe...

I imagined Kissinger settled in the subdued glow of his Manhattan apartment, its windows opening to the slow, silvery shimmer of the Hudson and the quiet silhouette of Roosevelt Island. The air is steeped in the perfume of time—aged wood, brittle parchment—while green walls bear their gallery of maps and watercolours, Japanese sketches whispering of distant worlds, all framed by goldenrod drapery. He reclines in a deep armchair. Aside, the fire murmured in low flames, its light dancing

across a Bessarabian rug¹, weaving phantoms of forgotten treaties over leather-bound volumes— pages heavy with the long memory of treaties, triumphs, and betrayals.

Kissinger's thoughts wander and history unfurls like a sumptuous tapestry. In his mind's eye, he sees not the shadowy castles cloaked in fictional Dracula's lore, but the intricate, principled chessboard of seventeenth-century Europe, with Transylvania as a nebulous contender in the grand dance of power. Transylvania, a Principality navigating the treacherous currents of empire with a deftness earning his appreciation. Nominally under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Porte yet wielding a fairly independent foreign policy, it allied with Protestant powers against the Habsburg Crowns, a bulwark of Calvinist fervour opposing Catholic dominions.

Maybe Kissinger envisioned himself not as the wise elder of his years, but as a spectral observer amidst the courts of Bethlen and Rákóczi, where envoys whispered of alliances forged in the crucible of the Thirty Years' War... Here lay Transylvania, which had inscribed its essence upon the Treaties of Westphalia in 1648—pivotal documents that birthed the very notion of state sovereignty, and established the sacrosanct equilibrium around which his magnum opus, *World Order*, revolved. It was within this realm that the Westphalian ideal could find a truest expression: a polity deftly navigating the competing forces of Habsburg power and Protestant insurrection, binding its destiny to the commands that proclaimed national authority supreme, borders inviolable, and non-interference a principle.

Kissinger could have felt a touch of kinship with those long-vanished princes, who manoeuvred amid the shadows of greater powers, much as he had in the bipolar arenas of superpowers. Transylvania's role—a pivot in the scales of European equilibrium, supporting Swedish lions, Dutch burghers and the French *fleur-de-lys* against the eagle's grasp—mirrored the *Realpolitik* he championed: alliances not of ideology alone,

¹ Photos available in “Los Kissinger en su casa de Nueva York”, *¡Hola! Magazine*, unidentified issue in the 1990s; scanned and commented by architect John Tackett on his blog, *The Devout Classicist*, online at <https://tdclassicist.blogspot.com/2011/10/kissingers-at-river-house.html> (accessed September 2025).

but of necessity, where the weak could tip the balance against the strong. Yet, unlike the Prince of Wales, he had never set foot upon its soil, never breathed the air of its highlands, where history's echoes might have whispered more than validations to his creeds; a land of complexity and intricate balance whose valleys echoed with the very ideas he had spent a lifetime defending.

Indeed, Transylvania, nestled in Central Europe², may have served as more than a romantic phantom in Kissinger's reverie; it is a microcosm of the region's enduring geopolitical significance, a theme that threaded through his opus like a recurring motif in a symphony of power. In his seminal work, *Diplomacy*, Kissinger portrayed Central Europe not merely as a geographic midpoint but as the epicentre of Europe's devastating upheavals—the very stage where empires clashed and balances teetered³. Here, amid the fractured principalities and contested borders, the Thirty Years' War raged, a conflagration that engulfed the continent and birthed the Westphalian order, with Transylvania's princes playing their deft hand as signatories, allying with Protestant forces against Habsburg dominion while navigating Ottoman suzerainty. This historical pivot, where a semi-autonomous realm could tip the scales of power, mirrored Kissinger's conviction that Central Europe's fragmentation or unification has perennially determined the stability of the broader European order.

² Romania occupies an intermediate position between Central and South-eastern Europe, with its western regions—particularly Transylvania and Banat—exhibiting strong Central European characteristics rooted in a certain Habsburg heritage and integrated into the Carpathian-Danubian geographic framework. While the country as a whole is often and unnuancedly classified by Western scholars as Southeastern or Eastern European because of historical and cultural ties to the Greek-Byzantine, Slavic and the Orthodox world (Milan Kundera, for instance, excludes it from the “kidnapped Occident” he was pleading for), its possession of defining Central European geographical physical features such as the Carpathians (55%) and the Danube (38%), as well as its participation in Central European political and economic structures (Three Seas Initiative or Visegrad+ formats) justify inclusion within the Central European sphere.

³ Jozef Hrabina, “From bridge to battlefield: re-emergence of Central and Eastern Europe as centre of struggle for power” in *New Eastern Europe*, February 2023, online at <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2023/02/13/from-bridge-to-the-battlefield-re-emergence-of-central-and-eastern-europe-as-centre-of-struggle-for-power/>, accessed September 2025.

Kissinger had long argued that Central Europe functioned as a geopolitical shatter-belt, a zone where the ambitions of flanking giants, be they Russian, German, or in bygone days Ottoman, ignited the sparks of war. It was still in *Diplomacy* that he chronicled how this region's vulnerabilities invited invasions and partitions, from Napoleon's marches to the detonations of World Wars, where Central Europe's control became the prize in the great power struggles that redrew maps and ideologies. Post-Cold War, Kissinger warned of the perils in overlooking this heartland: the dissolution of the Soviet bloc thrust Central Europe back into the fray, a buffer turned battlefield, where NATO's eastward expansion and Russia's revanchist gaze clashed, much as Protestant alliances once defied imperial overreach.

To Kissinger, the importance of Central Europe lay in its embodiment of *Realpolitik's* core tenet—the balance of power⁴. A stable Central Europe, with its mosaic of sovereign states, prevented any single hegemon from dominating the continent, echoing Westphalian principles. Yet instability there, as in the partitions of Poland or the Munich betrayals, invited chaos that rippled outward, engulfing the world in conflict. In an age of resurgent rivalries—from Ukraine's front lines to the rearmament of the region—Kissinger's considerations urged vigilance: Central Europe remains the fulcrum, where the spectres of Westphalia whisper that sovereignty, once forged together with a Transylvanian signature, must be eternally guarded lest the balance fracture anew.

⁴ Kissinger endorses the Westphalian international system – which is founded on state sovereignty, non-intervention, and a balance of power – that arose from the religious wars in Europe, describing it as “the most morally, intellectually, and even aesthetically pleasing” order. This system endured from 1648 to 1914 – a commendable duration – and enabled statesmen with limited objectives to adapt and innovate, as they recognised the requirements of the system rather than solely their own states. The diplomacy that inspired, as articulated by James Traub in a refined manner, was “a combination of fluid dynamics and jazz” (James Traub, “Book Review: ‘World Order’ by Henry Kissinger (The idea that history is tragic does not come naturally to Americans)”, *Wall Street Journal*, September 2014, online at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/book-review-world-order-by-henry-kissinger-1409952751>, accessed September 2025).

My Kissinger—despite showing little interest in wine and spirits⁵—may have raised an imaginary glass and toasted not just a fictional journey, but the timeless vigilance required for Europe’s precarious poise. “Central Europe” he could have murmured, “the everlasting sentinel of order—ignore it, and the world tilts toward abyss.”

The Kissinger Equation

The reverie above is, of course, more than just a contextual reference to Central Europe and its historical heritage or geopolitical projection. There is more to it than Central Europe. Kissinger was conceptualising “three Europes”: the first as a historical source of diplomatic lessons, the second as a junior Cold War ally, and the third as a geopolitical theatre of the post-1945 USA and Soviet Union⁶. They all highlighted the dynamic role of Central and Eastern Europe in shaping the balance of power.

Drawing upon extensive diplomatic expertise and a comprehensive understanding of historical contexts, Kissinger articulates that Europe, particularly Central Europe, has historically served as a focal point for global conflicts, spanning from the Thirty Years’ War to the World Wars. This historical backdrop underscores the imperative that the stability of this region is crucial for maintaining international peace.

He consistently emphasises that the enduring stability and security of Europe hinge on the cooperative engagement of Western Europe with Central and Eastern Europe, advocating against the notion of treating these regions as distinct entities. He posits that the post-Cold War landscape necessitates the incorporation of Central and Eastern European nations into Western institutional frameworks such as NATO

⁵ Stephen Graubard, “Lunch with the FT: Henry Kissinger”, *Financial Times*, May 23, 2008, online at <https://www.ft.com/content/6d4b5fb8-285a-11dd-8f1e-000077b07658>, accessed September 2025.

⁶ Mario Del Pero, “M. Henry Kissinger’s Three Europes”, in *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, n° 17, 2019, pp. 5-21. Caveat: no correlation to Jenő Szűcs’s *Les trois Europes*, L’Harmattan, 1985, a brilliant, wide-ranging and debatable essay attempting to provide an overview, over several centuries, of European development from the birth of the notion of Europe to the final division of the continent into different regions.

and the European Union, a measure aimed at averting the resurgence of historical divides and antagonisms.

In support of this position, Kissinger delineates several interrelated rationales.

Firstly, he warns that the exclusion of Central and Eastern Europe—historically situated as a geopolitical crossroads subject to the ambitions of great powers—could precipitate a destabilising vacuum. Such a scenario risks renewed domination by powers like Russia (via military pressure), thereby threatening the balance of power across the continent.

Secondly, he asserts that a unified Europe, encompassing both Western and Eastern states, is essential for effectively counteracting external influences from entities such as Moscow and Beijing. A fragmented European landscape, he argues, would diminish its credibility and global influence—precisely what we witness in the last couple of years, after the beginning of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.

Thirdly, Kissinger highlights the region’s tumultuous history, noting that unresolved tensions within Central and Eastern Europe have frequently ignited broader European conflicts. Only through political and economic integration can the danger of renewed confrontations be alleviated.

Fourthly, he argues that European unity necessitates both moral and political legitimacy; the exclusion of Central and Eastern states would engender a bifurcated European structure, undermining the foundational principles of solidarity and sovereignty inherent to the European project.

Finally, Kissinger acknowledges the pragmatic economic and strategic advantages of such enlargement, underscoring the significance of shared markets, bolstered collective defence, and the reinforcement of Europe’s security architecture.

In sum, his writings and public declarations manifest a coherent vision: the establishment of a cohesive and inclusive Europe, underpinned by the active participation of Central and Eastern states, is essential for sustaining equilibrium, preventing instability, and reaffirming Europe within the broader international order.

The Three Seas Initiative (3SI) resonates with Henry Kissinger’s observation regarding the role of Central and Eastern Europe as a pivotal factor in power dynamics over the past three centuries. The region’s notable fragmentation had (and has) the potential to create an environment vulnerable to exploitation by more dominant external forces. In contrast, a unified coalition could effectively contest the existing power structures. Thus, the 3SI can be a viable response to this challenge, positioning the region as a balancing coalition against the rapacious inclinations of powers that might exploit its disunity. Although the concept of a balancing coalition remains largely theoretical at this juncture, with the establishment of suitable political and economic frameworks, the synergies present could be developed into a robust international entity.

What seems to be missing from Kissinger’s vision of present-day European dynamics is Scandinavia. Kissinger did not focus extensively on Scandinavia as a distinct geopolitical actor in his major works, but he saw it as part of the stable periphery of Europe, contributing to the overall balance without being central to the major power struggles that defined the continent’s historical volatility. In his conceptualisation of “Three Europes”—Europe as history, as a Cold War partner, and as a geopolitical theatre—, Scandinavia would fall into the category of supportive allies within the transatlantic alliance, and not a primary arena of confrontation or strategic competition.

Kissinger valued countries that could contribute to regional stability and act as buffers or mediators in broader geopolitical tensions. In this sense, Scandinavia’s historical neutrality, strong democratic institutions, and commitment to multilateralism would have aligned well with his realist emphasis on maintaining equilibrium and avoiding ideological overreach. Moreover, Scandinavian nations’ roles in NATO (for Denmark and Norway, and more recently Finland and Sweden⁷)

⁷ In initiatives like the 1973 “Year of Europe”, Kissinger pushed for unified transatlantic relations, viewing Scandinavia as part of a broader European framework where smaller nations supported U.S.-led security without challenging American primacy. In post-Cold War reflections, particularly on the 2022 Ukraine

and their diplomatic engagement in global affairs would have been seen as constructive elements in the European order, helping to reinforce Western cohesion⁸.

crisis, Kissinger noted NATO's strengthening through Finland and Sweden's accession, stating it had "been expanded by the adherence of Finland and Sweden" to achieve strategic objectives against Russian aggression (cf. *Kissinger's Post-War Vision Puts Ukraine in NATO but Also Has an 'Opening to Russia'*, *Russia Matters* [blog of the Belfer Centre for Science and International Affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School], January 2023, online at <https://www.russiamatters.org/blog/kissingers-post-war-vision-puts-ukraine-nato-also-has-opening-russia>, accessed September 2025). This evolution from neutrality to alliance membership aligned with his realist preference for robust deterrence.

⁸ Kissinger saw Scandinavia as strategically important primarily because of its geographic position, its relationship to NATO, and its potential role as a stabilising force on the northern flank of Europe. He recognised that Scandinavia's location gave it outsized importance during the Cold War. Norway bordered the Soviet Union directly (Russia, today), while Denmark controlled access to the Baltic Sea through the Straits—two key pressure points in NATO–Warsaw Pact competition. Sweden, although neutral, also played a critical balancing role by maintaining strong defences that effectively reinforced the security of the Baltic region. For Kissinger, the stability of Scandinavia was therefore inseparable from the balance of power in Northern Europe.—Northern Europe was, to him, both a buffer and a flank. On the one hand, the neutrality of Sweden and Finland reduced direct East–West confrontation in the region. On the other hand, NATO's Scandinavian members (Norway, Denmark, and later Iceland in terms of base rights) were critical to maintaining Western access to the North Atlantic and to preventing Soviet expansion through the Arctic and North Sea. In this sense, Scandinavia was a crucial part of NATO's "northern tier," complementing the alliance's central and southern flanks. Beyond military-strategic considerations, Kissinger often pointed to the Scandinavian states as models of political stability, democratic governance, and economic resilience. In his view, their pragmatic foreign policies and emphasis on consensus politics contributed to Europe's overall cohesion. Sweden's active diplomacy and mediation efforts, while sometimes critical of U.S. policy, nonetheless reinforced a European culture of negotiation and compromise that Kissinger valued. He was pragmatic about Scandinavian neutrality, especially in Sweden and Finland. Rather than pressuring them into NATO membership, he understood that their neutral status lent legitimacy to the European security order by demonstrating that non-aligned states could coexist with alliance blocs. This neutrality helped reduce the risk of escalation in Northern Europe, even as the region's defence policies implicitly supported Western security. Of course, these views were expressed before Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO in 2023 and 2024, respectively. In short, Kissinger saw Scandinavia less as a driver of European

In a manner analogous to Denis de Rougemont’s reconfiguration of Einstein’s relativity equation $E = mc^2$ through a redefinition of its components⁹, the intricate array of factors from Kissinger’s concepts concerning the balance of power in Europe invites a systematic amalgamation of these elements, aiming to elucidate critical components that—if and when appropriately organised—possess the potential to elevate Europe’s coherence and enhance its influence within the international system.

$$E = WE(CEE + S)^2 - R$$

(AI generated equation^{10,11})

geopolitics than as a strategically located region whose stability, neutrality, and limited but significant military contributions were vital to the balance of power. It functioned as both a northern security shield and a political stabiliser, reinforcing his broader vision of a cohesive yet flexible European order.

⁹ “Europe = continental mass multiplied by intensive culture”, in Denis de Rougemont, *Les chances de l’Europe*, Neuchâtel, La Baconnière, 1962, pp. 38-39; Rougemont met Einstein at Princeton University in 1947. *E* being Europe, or rather the energy that Europe releases, which is the product of a relatively small mass *m* in terms of surface area, population, and raw materials, multiplied by an intensive culture *c*, which is why *c* is squared: c^2 .

¹⁰ AI generated equation following instructions given by the author for a polynomial structure: Europe (E) equals Western Europe multiplied by (Central and Eastern Europe [CEE] and Scandinavia [S]) square, subtracting Russia, where E = “Europe” (overall outcome/index); WE = Western Europe (in a collective sense that refers to the countries with democratic systems and a market economy before 1989, thus comprising Southern Europe); CEE = Central & Eastern Europe; S = Scandinavia; R = Russia (the part to subtract). A reminder of the order of operations: the core, Central and Eastern Europe plus Scandinavia (inside the parentheses) is resolved first, then squared (reinforced by U.S. presence), then scaled by Western Europe; finally, Russia is subtracted, as Moscow opted for a different course.

¹¹ Quoting Kissinger, “When this war is over, the issue will be whether Russia achieves a coherent relationship with Europe—which it has always sought—or whether it will become an outpost of Asia at the border of Europe.” (Bernhard Zand, interview with Henry Kissinger, “‘There Is No Good Historical Example’ for War in Ukraine” in *Der Spiegel*, July 2022, online at <https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-henry-kissinger-for-war-in-ukraine-there-is-no-good-historical-example-a-64b77d41-5b60-497e-8d2f-9041a73b1892>, accessed September 2025).

Central and Eastern Europe, Scandinavia— drivers of the next phase of EU Integration

Beyond the Franco-German engine

For decades, the “Franco-German motor” has served as the shorthand for European integration. The Élysée Treaty of 1963 institutionalised coordination between Paris and Berlin, and their compromises paved the way for milestones from the Single European Act to the Maastricht Treaty¹². Yet in the 2020s, this engine shows signs of fatigue. Divergent economic models, contrasting fiscal preferences, and political asymmetries increasingly hinder Franco-German alignment.

Meanwhile, the European Union has both enlarged and diversified. With twenty-seven members, a single axis of leadership no longer suffices. The geopolitical centre of gravity has shifted eastward and northward. Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine has starkly underlined this reality: the states of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and Scandinavia are no longer “peripheral,” but essential to Europe’s security, connectivity, and resilience¹³.

These states are not waiting passively. The Three Seas Initiative (3SI), created in 2016, unites twelve CEE countries to promote cross-border

¹² Ulrich Krotz, Joachim Schild, *Shaping Europe: France, Germany, and Embedded Bilateralism from the Elysée Treaty to Twenty-First Century Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.

¹³ Ivan Krastev, Mark Leonard, *The Crisis of European Security*, European Council on Foreign Relations Policy Brief, February 2022, available at <https://ecfr.eu/publication/the-crisis-of-european-security-what-europeans-think-about-the-war-in-ukraine/>, last accessed August 2025.

infrastructure, digital integration, and energy security¹⁴. The Bucharest Nine (B9), launched in 2015, aligns NATO's eastern flank states around collective defence and deterrence¹⁵. In the north, the Nordic Council and Nordic-Baltic formats offer decades of experience in pragmatic, project-oriented regionalism.

In its pursuit of resilience and progressive evolution, the European Union must transcend its historical dependence on France and Germany; it is a transition that calls for an inclusive coalition comprising capable and strategically positioned member states. Countries from Central and Eastern Europe, in conjunction with Nordic and Scandinavian partners, offer a distinctive blend of geographic advantages, political determination, and operational expertise that can facilitate effective integration in critical areas such as infrastructure, energy, defence, and regulatory alignment.

When these states collaborate through established platforms like the ones mentioned above, they can move beyond spontaneous efforts to develop a structured, results-focused coalition model. The implementation of pilot projects, collective financial resource pooling, and the provision of mutually beneficial institutional incentives can enable this macro-regional bloc to catalyse EU-wide reforms while ensuring inclusivity and adherence to existing EU treaties.

Central and Eastern Europe and Scandinavian states can, together, become a new motor of EU integration—not replacing Franco-German leadership¹⁶, but complementing and inviting it (or even coercing it) to

¹⁴ Matthias Matthijs, “The Three Seas Initiative and Europe’s Periphery Problem,” in *Survival*, 63, no. 6, 2021, pp. 139–156.

¹⁵ Tomáš A. Nagy, *The Bucharest Nine: Enhancing Security on NATO’s Eastern Flank*, German Marshall Fund United States, March 18, 2024, available online at <https://www.gmfus.org/news/bucharest-nine-enhancing-security-natos-eastern-flank>, last accessed July 2025.

¹⁶ I invite the reader to an intellectual exercise destined to emphasise how responsibly France and Germany should behave based on the power they can generate jointly. A unified France-Germany entity—which I will designate by the name “Carolingia”—would be an unrestrained global powerhouse. In terms of economic weight, Germany’s nominal GDP in 2023 was approximately \$4.18 trillion, and France’s was around \$2.71 trillion (World Bank/IMF data, hence the expression in US\$; for illustrative purposes, the approximate average exchange rate for 2023 of 1 US\$ = 0.925 €, and for 2024, 1 US\$ = 0.91 € (reflecting slight euro appreciation noted in 2024; the 2024 figures are based on estimates from World Economics, which incorporate Purchasing Power Parity adjustments and account for informal

practice responsibility, demanding accountability from Paris-Berlin by underlining the immense, and politically unaffordable, costs of acting against the interests of EU member states from Europe's East and North. Their comparative advantages—geography, urgency, pragmatism, and reinvigorated credibility—position them to drive progress where Europe needs it most: transport and energy connectivity, defence and resilience, and digital innovation.

The Northern–Eastern bloc within the European Union possesses a set of distinctive strategic assets that justify its growing relevance in

economies, leading to higher values than nominal GDP figures reported by IMF/World Bank; ergo, such nominal GDP estimates for 2024 are: Germany ~\$4.59 trillion (€4.1769 trillion) and France ~\$3.0 trillion (€2.73 trillion). Their combined GDP would be roughly US\$6.89 trillion (2023), making “Carolingia” the world's third-largest economy, behind the U.S. (~\$25.5 trillion) and China (~\$18.3 trillion) but ahead of Japan (~\$4.2 trillion). As the core of the EU, the entity would dominate absolutely the EU decision-making process, reshaping policies on trade, defence, and foreign affairs, probably pushing for deeper integration or acting as a resourceful counterbalance to U.S. and Chinese influence. Germany's industrial base (automotive, machinery, chemicals) and France's strengths in aerospace, luxury goods, and energy (nuclear power) would create a diversified economic engine, and the combined entity would lead in sectors like automotive (Volkswagen, BMW, Stellantis), aerospace (Airbus), and pharmaceuticals. “Carolingia” would be a dominating force in global trade, leveraging Germany's export-driven economy (world's 3rd largest exporter) and France's strategic ports and global trade networks, clearly a key player in the EU single market and a hub for foreign investment. Both nations have robust Research & Development ecosystems; a Franco-German entity could pool resources for cutting-edge advancements in AI, renewable energy, and biotech, challenging U.S. and Chinese innovation hubs. In terms of geopolitics, it would amplify Europe's voice in global institutions like the UN, G7, G20, and WTO. With France's permanent UN Security Council seat and nuclear capabilities, combined with Germany's economic weight, it would wield significant diplomatic leverage. France's nuclear arsenal, advanced military (e.g., the exceptionally efficient Rafale jets, aircraft carriers), and global military presence, paired with Germany's growing defence investments, would create a formidable military force, rivalling other global powers in conventional capabilities. Additionally, France's cultural influence (language prestige, media products, glamour events, diplomacy), next to Germany's reputation for steadiness, engineering and economic stability would enhance their global soft power, making the state a leader in cultural and economic diplomacy.—Of course, challenges would be hardly excluded; aside the differences in political systems, economic philosophies, regional economic disparities, and cultural identities hindering all potential unity, “Carolingia” might face pushback from other powers (e.g., U.S., China, Russia) wary of a stronger Europe, while within the EU, 25 other nations will resent and attack such domination.

continental policymaking¹⁷. Geographically, the 3SI corridor—spanning the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Seas—constitutes a north–south axis that has historically been underutilised in favour of west–east routes. The CEE region functions as a physical and geopolitical conduit between Northern and Southern Europe, additionally serving as a frontline against energy and security vulnerabilities that have come to light since 2022. In the current geopolitical context, however, the Baltic – Black Seas corridor has emerged as a critical infrastructure for EU energy diversification, NATO reinforcement, and global supply chain resilience¹⁸. Scandinavia, similarly, leverages numerous geographic advantages, including access to the Arctic, substantial offshore wind resources, and a position of leadership in maritime transport, thus establishing itself as a pivotal contributor to both European and global sustainability initiatives¹⁹.

The geostrategic positioning and accompanying sense of urgency provide a robust foundation for leadership.

The strategic urgency inherent within this bloc is particularly pronounced; Central and Eastern European nations and the Baltic states have been at the forefront of confronting various forms of Russian aggression, including energy coercion, cyber threats, and territorial revisionism²⁰ and challenges (the latter, with a deep historical background). This climate of urgency stands in stark contrast to the more impassive strategic approach often observed in Western European capitals. The Nordic states, specifically Finland and Sweden, have also illustrated their commitment through significant actions, exemplified by

¹⁷ Emma Nix, Ian Brzezinski, *The Three Seas Initiative stands at an inflection point*, Atlantic Council paper, March 2025, online at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/the-three-seas-initiative-stands-at-an-inflection-point>, last access September 2025.

¹⁸ European Commission, *Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T)*, Policy Review, Brussels, 2021-2025, available at https://transport.ec.europa.eu/transport-themes/infrastructure-and-investment/trans-european-transport-network-ten-t_en, accessed August 2025.

¹⁹ Arctic Council, *The Arctic and Europe: Strategic Connectivity*, 2020; EU Commission, European Union External Action, *The EU and the Arctic*, 2025, online at https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-arctic_en (accessed July 2025).

²⁰ Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War: Putin's Russia and the Threat to the West*, New York, Palgrave, 2014.

their historic applications for NATO membership in 2022, which signal a pivotal transformation in their security postures²¹.

Moreover, the bloc's commitment to pragmatic regionalism is reflected in its reliance on functional cooperation formats rather than formal treaty revisions²². Initiatives such as the 3SI, B9, and the Nordic Council exemplify a model of “minilateralism” that emphasises targeted, scalable, and project-driven integration. The 3SI targets specific energy and transport projects; the B9 coordinates NATO priorities; the Nordic Council harmonises labour markets, environmental standards, and free movement²³. This framework closely aligns with the current requirements of the EU, providing a flexible and results-oriented approach to advancing strategic objectives amidst an ever-evolving geopolitical context.

For Central and Eastern Europe and Scandinavia to emerge as a pivotal force within the European Union, three interconnected transformations in regional governance and integration are essential.

Firstly, regional initiatives must progress from being merely conceptual models to becoming effective mechanisms of implementation. For instance, the Three Seas Initiative has identified over 90 infrastructure projects; however, the implementation of these projects has been inconsistent²⁴. The institutionalisation of the Initiative, which would involve establishing a streamlined secretariat equipped with technical expertise, capabilities for investment bundling, and formal connections to EU agencies, is crucial for enhancing both operational capacity and credibility. The Nordic Council exemplifies effective institutional functioning, while the B9 adds significant political influence in defence coordination.

²¹ Tony Lawrence, Tomas Jermalavičius, *The Newest Allies. Finland and Sweden in NATO*, report for the International Centre for Defence and Security, Estonia, March 2024, available online at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/379155737_The_Newest_Allies_Finland_and_Sweden_in_NATO (last accessed July 2025); Charly Salonijs-Pasternak, “From Reluctance to Readiness: Finland, Sweden, and NATO”, Finnish Institute of International Affairs Report, 2022.

²² Anna Wieslander, *How the Nordic-Baltic states are leading the way on European security*, Atlantic Council paper, December 2024, online at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/how-the-nordic-baltic-states-are-leading-the-way-on-european-security>, last accessed July 2025

²³ More specific in Johan Strang, *Nordic Cooperation: A European Region in Transition*, Routledge, 2016.

²⁴ See annual reports of the Three Seas Initiative, available at <https://3seas.eu/about/research-papers>.

Secondly, regional initiatives can be naturally grounded within the legal and financial frameworks of the European Union. Integrating 3SI projects within established EU mechanisms—such as enhanced cooperation, Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), and the Connecting Europe Facility—will ensure satisfactory and appropriate legal coherence, as well as a useful alignment of policies²⁵. Utilising EU funding mechanisms, which include InvestEU, the European Investment Bank (EIB), and the Recovery and Resilience Facility, can amplify the scale of regional initiatives. But additionally, it is imperative to foster partnerships with non-EU, external actors like the United States, Japan, with sovereign investment funds, and multilateral development banks that can further strengthen regional resilience²⁶.

Lastly, the discourse surrounding CEE-Nordic collaboration could replicate the Franco-German one, not of regional self-interest (even though...), but towards one centred on serving the broader European agenda. To secure wider acceptance, initiatives should be articulated as contributions to overarching EU objectives. After all, Rail Baltica is not simply as an infrastructure project for the Baltic region, but a Single Marke spine; the liquefied natural gas terminals in Poland and Lithuania are not national assets, but European energy security; and the digital identity systems in Estonia and Finland are not Nordic luxuries, but blueprints for the EU Digital Decade²⁷. Collectively, these strategic shifts have the potential to enable the Northern–Eastern bloc to function not as a peripheral coalition, but as a central driver of European integration and strategic renewal.

The bloc possesses a compelling potential to assume a leading role in various strategic realms vital for the Union’s future competitiveness and cohesion. As previously mentioned, in the domain of transport

²⁵ *The Next Level of Europe How the Pandemic and Putin’s War Create a European Moment Which Offers New Ways Forward*, joint paper of the Centres for European Policy Network, n° 7/2022, available online at https://www.cep.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/cep.eu/cepInput_The_Next_Level_of_Europe.pdf (last accessed August 2025).

²⁶ Daniel S. Hamilton, *The Three Seas Initiative: A Geostrategic Assessment*, Centre for European Policy Analysis, 2021.

²⁷ European Commission, *2030 Digital Compass: The European Way for the Digital Decade*, available online at https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/europes-digital-decade-digital-targets-2030_en, last accessed July 2025.

and infrastructure, the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) presently exhibits a pronounced bias toward west–east corridors²⁸, which inadvertently constrains the opportunities for north–south connectivity. The successful realisation of critical projects such as Rail Baltica, Via Carpathia, and the modernisation of the Danube corridor would markedly enhance intra-European mobility, bolster the Single Market, and fortify NATO’s logistical capabilities.

In the energy and climate sector, the CEE and Nordic regions present complementary resources that can collaboratively propel the EU’s green transition forward. Initiatives such as hydrogen corridors, liquefied natural gas (LNG) integration, and the development of smart grids²⁹—coupled with offshore wind energy in the Baltic Sea, hydroelectric power in Scandinavia, and trans-boundary interconnections across the Carpathians—constitute a resilient energy framework. The alignment of these efforts with the EU’s decarbonisation objectives would not only reinforce European green policies but also deliver a security benefit by decreasing reliance on external suppliers.

Defence and resilience emerge as another imperative area, wherein the Bucharest Nine (B9), closely synchronised with NATO, serves as a vital platform for addressing regional security concerns in conjunction with EU defence policy. The establishment of cross-border logistics hubs, integrated air systems, and collaborative procurement mechanisms under Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) can enhance deterrent capabilities while stimulating industrial innovation³⁰. The contributions of Finland and Sweden in advanced technologies complement Poland’s substantial investments in military infrastructure.

Lastly, concerning digital governance and regulatory alignment, the Nordic and Baltic states have exemplified leadership in e-governance,

²⁸ *Regional connectivity through an adequate transport infrastructure*, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies Directorate-General for Internal Policies, European Parliament, February 2024, available online at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/747286/IPOL_STU\(2024\)747286_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2024/747286/IPOL_STU(2024)747286_EN.pdf), accessed August 2025.

²⁹ International Energy Agency, “Hydrogen in Europe: Infrastructure Pathways” in *Global Hydrogen Review*, Paris, 2022, online at <https://www.iea.org/reports/global-hydrogen-review-2022>, last accessed July 2025.

³⁰ Sven Biscop, *European Strategy in the 21st Century: New Future for Old Power*, Routledge, London, 2019.

cybersecurity, and data trust frameworks³¹. The scaling of digital identity systems, cross-border e-health services, and standardised 5G protocols would yield significant advancements for the EU's Digital Compass strategy, thereby reinforcing the bloc's technological sovereignty and administrative efficiency. Collectively, these priority areas illuminate the Northern-Eastern bloc's aptitude to foster strategic integration and innovation within the European Union.

To foster the success and cohesion of an alliance between Scandinavian and Central and Eastern European nations, it is imperative to develop a well-structured political strategy that prioritises persuasion and inclusivity. The potential for fragmentation within such a bloc would be a legitimate and pressing concern; hence, the alliance could (and should strategically) embrace three foundational rhetorical principles:

- inclusion, which entails keeping initiatives accessible to all EU member states and actively encouraging participation from France, Germany, and southern Europe as partners;
- complementarity, stressing alignment with essential EU objectives; and
- delivery, ensuring that strategic communications are matched with concrete outcomes, including completed rail connections, operational energy interconnectors, and finalised defence contracts³².

This initiative would undoubtedly encounter criticism, particularly regarding fears that a focus on regionalism may undermine the unity of the EU, alongside apprehensions about funding and regulatory discrepancies. These challenges can be addressed by firmly anchoring projects within EU legal frameworks, maintaining open partnership criteria, integrating financing from various sources (EU, private, and transatlantic), and implementing expedited mutual recognition processes to circumvent regulatory obstacles.

³¹ Katrin Nyman-Metcalf, "How to build eGovernance in a Digital Society: The Case of Estonia", in *Revista Catalana de dret públic*, 58/2019, pp. 1-12, available online at <https://scispace.com/pdf/e-governance-in-law-and-by-law-8rf6qjimxp.pdf> (accessed July 2025).

³² Michael Leigh, "New approaches to EU governance and enlargement", and *eadem* "The European Union's federal dilemma", Geopolitical Intelligence Services Contribution, online at <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/eu-governance-enlargement/> and <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/federal-eu/> respectively (last accessed August 2025).

From this perspective, success metrics should be explicitly articulated: within a three- or five-year timeframe, evidence of progress should be observable through the financing and execution of a couple of flagship projects in the domains of transport, energy, and defence; the establishment of a recognised delivery framework; quantifiable improvements in cross-border energy and freight movement³³; and the formal incorporation of these initiatives into the European Commission’s work program.

In the long run, a the Northern–Eastern bloc would signify a departure from Europe’s historically Western-centric perspective, transitioning towards a model of integration that is necessitated by the urgencies of the East and the pragmatic interests of the North. Central and Eastern European and Nordic nations have already displayed strategic acumen—anticipating Russian revisionism, adapting effectively to energy crises, and leading in digital innovation. Now, the challenge is to transform urgency into leadership. If the bloc succeeds, Europe gains not only new corridors, terminals, and data systems, but a renewed model of integration: one based on delivery, resilience, and shared security. The Franco-German motor is not obsolete, but it is insufficient. A new

³³ Easier to achieve since January 1, 2025, when Romania and Bulgaria joined the Schengen area—with a 14-year delay because of unwisely politicised and successive vetoes of France, Germany, the Netherlands and Austria. Romania’s exclusion from the Schengen Area until 2024–2025 contributed to anti-EU feelings by reinforcing perceptions of unfair treatment (an average of 66% of Romanians aged 18–35 viewed these delays as subjective/unfair actions limiting their rights as EU citizens), imposing economic costs (estimated at 2% of Romania’s GDP annually by some calculations), and providing ammunition for nationalist rhetoric. While this fuelled disillusionment, particularly among those affected by border delays or sensitive to narratives of “second-class” status, Romania’s overall pro-EU orientation remained strong, pragmatically driven by economic benefits and strategic alignment. The partial and full Schengen accessions in 2024 and 2025 likely mitigated much of this sentiment, but lingering frustrations highlight the need for the EU to address perceptions of inequity to prevent further erosion of trust. See: “Examining the Detrimental Consequences of Delaying Romania’s Full Accession to the Schengen Area: A Security-Centric Approach Aligned with Sustainable Development and Quality of Life” in *Sustainability*, MDPI, vol. 16 (13), pp. 1–41, June 2024, <https://ideas.repec.org/a/gam/jsusta/v16y2024i13p5494-d1424019.html> (accessed July 2025); Pavel Marinov, “Second-class Europeans? The vetoing of Bulgaria and Romania’s accession into the Schengen area”, European Generation, December 2023 (<https://www.europeangeneration.eu/single-post/second-class-europeans-the-vetoing-of-bulgaria-and-romania-s-accession-into-the-schengen-area>) (accessed July 2025).

engine—forged from the urgency of the East and the pragmatism of the North—is ready to propel Europe forward.

Europe vs. Europe: The High Costs of Dismissing Eastern and Northern interests

An alliance of Scandinavian and Central and Eastern European countries could potentially challenge the Franco-German leadership within the EU drawing on the dynamics of EU power structures, economic weight, and geopolitical shifts, with its ability to hinder the Franco-German motor depending on the cohesion, strategic alignment, and influence of such an alliance.

It is by now common knowledge that, politically and diplomatically, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, CEE countries, particularly Poland, have gained prominence due to their proactive support for Ukraine (financial, military, and political) and their strategic position near the conflict. Scandinavian countries, known for their robust defence policies and NATO alignment, share concerns about Russian aggression, and so does Romania. This has led to perceptions that the EU’s “centre of gravity” tilted eastward substantially more, challenging the traditional Franco-German dominance. Furthermore, CEE states, especially Poland and the Baltic countries, have criticised France and Germany for perceived hesitancy in supporting Ukraine, particularly regarding military aid like Germany’s reluctance to supply military equipment, or France’s initial outreach to Russia. This has stimulated distrust, on the rise since the 2019 Franco-German-Russian rapprochement, and emboldened CEE countries to assert alternative leadership roles.

The new players are hardly negligible. Scandinavian countries bring strong and competitive economies³⁴, high governance standards, and a

³⁴ The World Economic Forum emphasises the success and equity of the Scandinavian economies—Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden—frequently leading the charts in prosperity, social mobility, and gender equality, although there have been significant fluctuations in competitiveness over the years. The Nordic model, characterised by high taxation, robust welfare systems, and social safety nets, is frequently referenced as a framework for sustainable development, even in light of certain challenges regarding market efficiency encountered in the last ten years. Cf. World Economic Forum (2015, 2020), citing the Legatum Institute Prosperity Report, available at <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2015/11/the-worlds-most-prosperous-economy-the-answer-might-surprise-you>, retrieved August 2025. As of 2023, the world’s most

commitment to security, reflected by Finland and Sweden’s recent NATO membership. Their alignment with CEE states amplified a rising counter-narrative to the long-time Russia-friendly Franco-German leadership, especially on security and foreign policy.

While individually smaller, the Scandinavian-CEE countries can collectively wield significant economic influence. Poland’s 2024 GDP is estimated at ~\$1.7 trillion, Romania’s at ~\$0.89 trillion, Sweden’s at ~\$0.62 trillion, and others like the Czech Republic and Finland add further weight. Together, their GDP could approach €3-4 trillion, rivalling France or Germany individually.

Scandinavian countries often align with the “frugal” bloc (such as the Netherlands, Austria), favouring fiscal discipline, which clashes with France’s push for EU-level borrowing and Germany’s mixed stance. CEE countries, meanwhile, prioritise security and energy independence, often opposing Franco-German energy policies (e.g., Germany’s past reliance on Russian gas or France’s nuclear focus). These differences led—and could further lead—to alternative coalitions challenging constantly the Franco-German initiatives.

CEE countries, supported by Scandinavian states, could form new cooperation formats and regional accords or partnerships—focusing on matters of high interest from infrastructure and energy to defence; and while not designed for EU-wide leadership, such platforms could dilute Franco-German influence by fostering regional priorities that easily bypass Paris and Berlin and are discussed exclusively between, say, Stockholm, Warsaw and Bucharest (based on the existing trilateral), or Warsaw, Bucharest and Ankara (another trilateral). Moreover, U.S. policies and approaches bolstered CEE influence, particularly Poland, through military and political support in the Ukraine context; Romania is building on the same strategic Partnership with the U.S., while Scandinavian countries reinforced their bilateral relation with the States by adding a security component. This external backing could empower

prosperous nations—based on economic quality, business environment, governance, education, health, safety & security, personal freedom, social capital, and natural environment—are Denmark (1st), Sweden (2nd), Norway (3rd), Finland (4th), Iceland (8th), followed by Germany (9th), United Kingdom (12th) but also Estonia (21st), ahead of France (23rd). Most of the former Communist European countries from Central and Eastern Europe rank between the 30th and the 40th, Hungary and Romania excepted (42nd and 45th respectively). Qatar is ranked 46th. Cf. *Legatum Prosperity Index* at <https://index.prosperity.com>.

a Scandinavian-CEE bloc to challenge Franco-German proposals, especially if U.S. under leaders like Donald Trump encourage positions seeking to separate the EU bilaterally.

On the other hand, a more inclusive EU leadership is not—truth be told—considered ideal by Paris and Berlin, compared to the “good old days” of uncontested primacy; proposals for Weimar or a Weimar+ group including not only Poland but Scandinavian states (e.g., Sweden) and Romania (next to Italy and Spain) devalue the Franco-German exclusivity, forcing the two to compromise with a wider array of interests, and reducing their ability to determine EU agendas.

Some specific policies illustrate these challenges; notoriously so, Defence and Security. France’s push for EU’s “strategic autonomy” is not compatible with Germany’s fundamentally NATO-centric approach (with a recent opening to discuss the above-mentioned autonomy in certain frameworks), and—despite a certain degree of acceptance or at least tolerance for the narrative—was (and is still) conflicting with CEE and Scandinavian priorities, which emphasise NATO and U.S. support. Initiatives like Germany’s European Sky Shield, excluding France (for pertinent reasons), or France’s resistance to Germany’s F-35 purchases and the difficulties related to the emergence of Europe’s Future Combat Air System³⁵ highlight bilateral tensions that a Scandinavian-CEE alliance

³⁵ The Future Combat Air System (FCAS), also known as *Système de Combat Aérien du Futur (SCAF)*, is a collaborative European defence program led by France, Germany, and Spain to develop a next-generation air combat system. It endeavours to replace the existing aircraft fleet (France’s Rafale, Germany and Spain’s Eurofighter Typhoon) by around 2040. FCAS comes as an ecosystem integrating multiple components to ensure European air superiority and strategic autonomy. Objectively, it is a bold attempt to secure Europe’s autonomy through a cutting-edge air combat system, but the project is hampered by industrial disputes (disagreements over the division of labour among France, Germany, and Spain, intellectual property concerns by France as Paris is reluctant to share sensitive technology that could undermine its industrial edge), political misalignments (national priorities are divisive, with France emphasising strategic autonomy and a nuclear deterrence role that requires aircraft to be a nuclear-capable platforms, thus complicating certification and technology sharing with Germany, where nuclear roles are contentious), technological complexity (integrating AI, cybersecurity, and a combat cloud, is unprecedentedly complex, requiring significant advancements in data management and cybersecurity to ensure secure, real-time connectivity across jets and platforms), and financial burdens (the estimated cost go beyond €100 billion and potentially up to €1 trillion over its lifetime, straining national budgets, especially amid present-day economic pressures). The FCAS also faces

could legitimately use as a pretext to promote and push for pragmatically alternative defence frameworks, more reactive and more suitable to their regional interests.

A second, crucial policy, is energy related: Germany's past dependence on Russian gas and France's nuclear-heavy energy mix have frustrated CEE states reliant on diversified energy sources. Scandinavian countries, with advanced renewable energy sectors, could align with CEE to advocate for EU-wide energy diversification, countering Franco-German energy policies and turning this vast geographic area into a market profitable to their corporate initiatives.

Thirdly, in terms of EU institutional reform and enlargement, Central and Eastern Europe has been previously taken aback by a Franco-German paper on EU decision-making reform (e.g., four-tier integration),

competition from the UK-Italy-Japan Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP), which aims to deliver a similar sixth-generation fighter (Tempest) by 2035—a rivalry that risks fragmenting European defence efforts, diluting available resources. While progress is being made (such as Phase 1B contracts and planned 2028–2029 demonstrator flights), the program's success depends on resolving internal conflicts, securing long-term funding, and aligning with broader European goals. See: Nicholas Lokker and CEPA Editorial Board, *The Future Combat Air System and the EU's Strategic Autonomy Malaise*, Centre for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), April 8, 2021, available at <https://cepa.org/article/the-future-combat-air-system-and-the-eus-strategic-autonomy-malaise/>, accessed August 2025.—As of late September 2025, FCAS is facing serious internal tensions that threaten its future. A radical, core dispute emerged between Germany and France, over work share and governance. France, through Dassault Aviation, is reportedly demanding up to 80% of the workload for the New Generation Fighter, the centrepiece of FCAS, which has sparked backlash from German officials who argue this undermines the original trilateral balance with Spain. Berlin is now actively exploring alternatives, including potentially continuing the FCAS program without France, possibly in partnership with Spain and Belgium, while another option under consideration is joining the UK-led Global Combat Air Program (GCAP), which includes Italy and Japan and centres around the Tempest fighter. German and Swedish defence ministers recently clarified that no formal discussions are underway between their countries regarding a new FCAS partnership. France, meanwhile, has signalled its readiness to proceed alone if no agreement is reached. French officials and Dassault CEO Éric Trappier have stated that France has the technical capability to build the next-generation fighter independently, potentially involving a broader European subcontractor ecosystem. France insists on maintaining the 2040 deadline for replacing its Rafale fleet, citing strategic needs including its nuclear deterrent. Cf. *Politico Europe*, “France ready to make next-gen fighter jet alone if talks with Germany fail”, <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-ready-to-make-next-gen-fighter-jet-alone-if-talks-with-germany-fail/>, retrieved September 2025.

seen less as an indicator of the Paris-Berlin appetite for reform and more an instrument to marginalise smaller member states in a multi-speed Europe. CEE and Scandinavian countries would justifiably resist and further oppose such proposals, advocating for inclusive decision-making that challenges Franco-German dominance or their attempt to hierarchise the EU based on their dual national interests. It would also imply stalling or openly blocking the process of decision-making within EU institutions.

Such concertation is, however, limited in real terms. The twelve CEE countries and Scandinavian states have national interests diverse enough to be sometimes at odds or even conflicting (e.g. Hungary's Russian sympathies contrast with Poland's pugnacious anti-Russia position; or Denmark's EU mild scepticism contrasting Sweden's pro-integrationist stance). This fragmentation limits the ability to form a coherent counterweight, even more so if considering the economic disparities: while significant, the combined GDP of a Scandinavian-CEE bloc (~€3-4 trillion) is far from the Franco-German economies put together (€9.31 trillion, PPP-adjusted). Besides, historically, France and Germany have driven EU integration through initiatives like the €750 billion Recovery Plan (2020), leveraging their economic and political weight—implying that Central and Eastern Europe and Scandinavian states rely largely on Franco-German resources for EU-wide projects, diminishing their ability to fully sideline the tandem. While a Scandinavian-CEE alliance could moreover exploit Franco-German vulnerabilities (Germany's political and economic difficulties, France's fiscal challenges and deep political instability), these weaknesses also paradoxically make the EU more reliant on Franco-German compromise to avoid paralysis. The 2025-born “Merzcron” partnership has revitalised some aspects of the Franco-German coordination, enough to potentially countering alternative blocs³⁶.

And the EU's unanimity requirement for key decisions (e.g., treaty changes, defence policy) means Franco-German agreement remains critical, even if challenged by other blocs. The Three Seas Initiative,

³⁶ “Merz and Macron vowed to restart the Franco-German engine”, *Politico Europe*, 25 July 2025, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-friedrich-merz-franco-german-europe-berlin/>, accessed August 2025. The process started symbolically with an article co-penned by the two for the French Journal *Le Figaro* on May 7, 2025: “A Franco-German reset for Europe”, available at <https://www.lefigaro.fr/en/a-franco-german-reset-for-europe-20250507>, accessed August 2025.

while promising, has not constituted itself into a political unit willing to exert any kind of leadership, as it focuses on regional infrastructure rather than supranational governance. Ergo, France and Germany's financial resources, industrial base, and institutional influence give them incomparable leverage.

Leverage, yes; but that is far from being enough as trust put in the Paris-Berlin choices and judgement, individually and in tandem, has faded away—or, at best, is under constant scrutiny and suspicion.

In practical terms, obstructing Franco-German leadership is feasible and should serve as tactful warning. If confronted on the basis of strategic interests (as was the case with the relationship with Russia...), a united Scandinavian-CEE bloc could exercise veto power within the EU Council to obstruct Franco-German initiatives, particularly regarding contentious matters such as EU debt issuance or energy policy. The “Frugal” Scandinavian nations and the prudent CEE countries could oppose France's advocacy for collective borrowing.

By aligning themselves closer to the United States—in mutually beneficial, reinforced bilateral partnerships—Central and Eastern European and Scandinavian nations would demonstrate a rejection of France's concepts and policies related to EU strategic autonomy or common defence, weakening such initiatives. Playing the American card against Paris, Berlin and Brussels could help the Northern and Central-Eastern alliance to amplify their own priorities in EU summits, forcing France and Germany to negotiate with a broader coalition rather than dictating terms to “lesser” EU members, creating openings to push alternative agendas, especially if supported by external actors like London or Washington.

In a short conclusion, a Scandinavian-CEE alliance—whose interests are not consistently taken into account by the Franco-German EU motor—could legitimately decide to focus on regional priorities, amplifying them by leveraging external support (e.g., U.S., United Kingdom, NATO but also Russia, China and the Middle East), and exploiting Franco-German domestic weaknesses. It could challenge leadership on security, energy, and EU reform by forming alternative international coalitions or blocking Franco-German initiatives, even if the alliance's impact may be constrained by internal divisions, smaller

economic weight, and the EU's structural reliance on various forms of Franco-German compromise.

“Maybe We Should”.
Central Europe and Scandinavia's Xanadu option:
becoming Eurasia's Western Pillar

I was tempted to use the term “double Orbán/ Xanadu” in referring to the pragmatic approach taken by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and his political director, Balázs Orbán³⁷ with regard to multilateralism. This strategy is characterised by a stance that is not aligned with the Paris-Berlin-Brussels triangle, aiming to position Hungary as a resolute and independent entity, avoiding affiliations with existing political, diplomatic, or economic blocs, whether they be Eastern or Western, Northern or Southern. Instead, it focuses on navigating international relations solely through the lens of Hungary's national interests, thereby striving to maintain a de-ideologised engagement with non-Western states, organisations, and institutions.

The Hungarian political narrative devalues the European Union based on two matter-of-fact considerations: compared to other poles of global economic growth, and because of its uncreative policies, routines, dogmas and lack of flexibility, the EU lost the ability to contribute to Hungary's wealth, success and security. Activism in favour of a larger Eurasian space of prosperity—having Beijing, Moscow, Delhi, Turkic Central Asia and the affluent monarchies of the Gulf for directions, partners and pillars—characterise Hungary's expansive foreign policy; hence my figurative use of “Xanadu”, stemming from the historical summer capital of the Mongol Empire's Yuan dynasty, amplified by the imagery of grandeur, pleasure and dreamlike splendour in Coleridge's poem *Kubla Khan*. The Eurasia that Hungary intends to do business with echoes such a place of beauty, achievement and contentment, an impressive, idyllic area that the country can wisely benefit from in trade, technology, global alliances and politics... This projection of Eurasia, from Hungary and Moscow to Astana, Hong-Kong and New Delhi, coincides sufficiently enough with the limits of the 13th century Mongol

³⁷ Balázs Orbán, *The Hungarian Way of Strategy*, MCC Press, Budapest, 2021.

Empire steered from Xanadu; Budapest would be its Western herald and gate to Europe.

The depiction of Asia's economies is edulcorated, to fit the optimistic narrative; but the reality is that Russia's mineral and energy resources, the trade routes and connectivity provided by Central Asia and the promising-enough Arctic route, China's technological advancements, and the financial assets of the Gulf create a significant allure for investors and economic stakeholders.

Let's now rephrase.

If disappointed by a Western Europe perceived as self-righteous, self-centred, self-serving and dedicated to double standards, why not seize this alternative opportunity and begin redirecting trade and economic priorities towards the East?

A Eurasian/Scandinavian–Central-Eastern European platform, sort of extended revival of the 16+1 cooperation initiative, would sit in a unique position between Western Europe, Russia, and the broader Eurasian space; partnering strategically with Russia, China, and the Middle Eastern states could create opportunities, not just risks.

While members of the EU, the bloc would act as a bridge between two large global economic centres, Western Europe and Indo-Pacific Eurasia, giving it leverage in negotiations with both Brussels/Washington and Moscow/Beijing. In strict geographic terms, it could serve as a logistical corridor for trade between China (via the Belt and Road), Russia, and Western markets.

Economic and trade gains would take at least four initial directions:

1. energy security (Russia, Azerbaijan and the Middle East could supply hydrocarbons, gas, and hydrogen, reducing energy price volatility),
2. investment flows (sovereign wealth funds from Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia could invest in infrastructure, technology, and green transition projects);
3. market access (closer trade with China, India and Russia could expand export opportunities for industrial goods, agriculture, and technology from Central/Eastern Europe and Scandinavia); and
4. diversification: less dependence on Western Europe or the US as sole trade and investment partners.

A strategic energy partnership combining Scandinavian renewable energy capabilities with Russian and Middle Eastern hydrocarbon

resources could create a balanced and resilient energy ecosystem, positioning the region as a pivotal hub for both the green transition and long-term energy security. Complementing this, the expansion of transport and logistics infrastructure—including railways, ports, and digital corridors—linking China through Central Asia and Russia to Central and Eastern Europe, Scandinavia, and ultimately Arctic routes, would significantly enhance regional connectivity and trade. As Arctic ice continues to melt, the Northern Sea Route—the new holy Grail of American, Russian and Chinese geopolitics—offers a faster maritime link between Asia and Europe, presenting a unique opportunity for the region to emerge as a primary transit hub for Arctic shipping, further reinforcing its strategic importance in global supply chains and energy flows³⁸.

³⁸ The Northern Sea Route constitutes a significant maritime corridor spanning approximately 5,600 kilometres, recognised as the most direct shipping route connecting the western regions of Eurasia with the Asia-Pacific area. This route is entirely situated within Arctic waters and falls within the jurisdiction of Russia's exclusive economic zone. Notably, the route does not extend into the Barents Sea, thereby excluding access to the Atlantic Ocean. China perceives the Northern Sea Route as a strategically important alternative pathway for global trade, viewing it as a means to ensure seamless commercial exchanges between Europe and Asia. This perspective has contributed to the establishment of the China Subcommission on Cooperation on the Northern Sea Route in collaboration with Russia, initiated in 2024. The Russian delegation is led by *Rosatom*, while the Chinese counterpart is overseen by the Minister of Transport. The principal areas of collaborative effort include ensuring navigation safety, managing cargo traffic along the NSR, fostering the development of logistics routes, and facilitating the exchange of information pertaining to ice and meteorological conditions. In consequence, China describes itself as a “near-Arctic” country (900 km separate its territory from the icy waters of the ocean) and rebranded the route as the “Polar Silk Road”. In August 2025, Beijing launched its first express service to Europe via the alleged Polar Silk Road: 18 days door-to-door from Ningbo to Felixstowe in Suffolk, UK (“Ningbo unveils 18-day China-Europe Express route to UK” in *China Daily*, online at <https://cceeccc.org/1169122016.html>, retrieved September 2025). While this development has not yet transformed the global logistics landscape, it serves as a corridor to offset potential losses from adverse movements. For Russia, the Northern Sea Route serves as a strategic avenue for reinforcing its status as a pivotal actor in Arctic affairs. By exercising control over access to and operations along this maritime corridor, Moscow is positioned to generate significant revenue through various services, including icebreaker escort, pilotage, and port facilities. It also allows Russia to improve the competitiveness of its resource exports, especially liquefied natural gas (LNG) and oil sourced from the Yamal Peninsula and additional Arctic initiatives, by streamlining transportation times to potential (Eur)Asian and European markets. In a broader geopolitical context, the NSR reinforces Russia's ambitions, establishing Moscow's role as the gatekeeper of Arctic navigation and enhancing its influence within international trade and security discussions. Domestically, the advancement

of Arctic infrastructure stimulates economic activities in remote northern areas, promoting industrial expansion and aiding in population retention.

In contrast, China's objectives are primarily associated with global trade dynamics and energy security. The NSR presents an opportunity to significantly reduce shipping durations between Chinese ports and Europe—by as much as 30 to 40 percent compared to the conventional Suez Canal route—thereby yielding reduced fuel expenditures and expedited delivery times. This route also diversifies China's maritime capabilities, decreasing reliance on vulnerable choke points such as the Malacca Strait, the Bab-el-Mandeb and the Suez Canal. China also perceives the NSR as a conduit for enhancing access to Arctic resources, notably Russian LNG and minerals, and positions itself for participation in Arctic infrastructure initiatives as part of the Polar Silk Road framework. More broadly, the NSR contributes to China's aspiration of being acknowledged as a legitimate "near-Arctic state," thereby extending its geopolitical influence in a region primarily dominated by Arctic coastal nations.

Yet, there are substantial risks and challenges in relation to these projected advantages. For Russia, the principal challenge lies in the significant financial burdens associated with the development and upkeep of Arctic infrastructure. The operation of icebreakers, the establishment of functional ports, and the provision of search-and-rescue capabilities within the Arctic climate demand considerable capital investment. Additionally, despite trends indicating climatic warming, the NSR remains only seasonally navigable without icebreaker assistance, thereby restricting its effectiveness as a year-round alternative to established maritime routes. Moreover, the imposition of Western sanctions since 2014, which have intensified following 2022, further complicates these issues by limiting Russia's access to Western financial resources, technology, and expert knowledge. Finally, the ecological sensitivity of the Arctic presents reputational and environmental challenges, as any maritime accidents or oil spills in these conditions would result in catastrophic consequences that are exceedingly difficult to manage.

China's involvement with the Northern Sea Route (NSR) is subject to a distinct array of challenges. Access to this route is heavily reliant on the cooperation of Russia, thereby placing Beijing in a dependent position that may hinder its strategic autonomy. The seasonal characteristics of the route, alongside the necessity for specialised ice-class vessels or Russian icebreaker escorts, elevate operational costs and complicate insurance arrangements. This makes the NSR a less appealing option for commercial shipping enterprises. China's expanding presence in the Arctic is often met with skepticism from other Arctic nations, raising concerns about potential geopolitical ramifications. The ambiguous commercial viability of the NSR reinforces a cautious approach, as global shipping entities typically favour the reliability and capacity offered by the Suez Canal and other established maritime routes. (Cf. C.Y. Ng, Y. Wu, W. Zhang, S. Jigeer, J. Zhang, H. Yu, "China-Russia Cooperation in the Northern Sea Route Development", in *International Organisations Research Journal*, 2025, vol. 20, n° 1, pp. 46–74, https://iorj.hse.ru/data/2025/05/23/1997624169/3%20Ng%20et%20al.%20OF_A%26R.pdf, retrieved September 2025.)

Beyond state-specific issues, both Russia and China face shared risks in the Arctic region. The area's climate, despite warming trends, remains highly unpredictable; fluctuating ice conditions and extreme weather phenomena pose threats to navigational safety. Additionally, environmental considerations are significant, as the development of the NSR has sparked global criticism regarding the exploitation

China's advancements in infrastructure, artificial intelligence, 5G, and green technologies, combined with Scandinavia's strengths in innovation, digitalisation, and sustainability, create a powerful foundation for cross-regional collaboration. Central and Eastern Europe contributes to a competitive industrial base and a growing IT-AI sector, while the Middle East offers substantial capital and a high tolerance for investment risk, particularly in emerging technologies. Together, these complementary assets could catalyse joint initiatives in cutting-edge fields such as artificial intelligence, biotechnology, energy storage, green hydrogen, and digital infrastructure, fostering a dynamic ecosystem of innovation and sustainable development across Eurasia and beyond.

Such an alliance would enable participating states to strategically hedge between Eastern and Western blocs, thereby reducing overdependence on either NATO and the European Union or Russia and China. By positioning themselves as a cohesive and pragmatic coalition, these countries could enhance their bargaining power within key international organisations such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, and global climate negotiation platforms.

Furthermore, the alliance could function as a non-aligned "third force" in the evolving multipolar global order, offering a stabilising counterbalance and fostering dialogue among competing powers while advancing their own collective interests.

A certain degree of soft power and cultural and diplomatic influence would not be negligible: Scandinavia's well-established soft power, rooted in its global reputation for excellence in education, governance, and sustainability, complements the unique position of Central and Eastern Europe, aware of its historical and cultural ties with both Eastern and Western spheres. Cultivated properly, this dual orientation would enable the region to serve as a bridge in international diplomacy. By fostering

of climate change and the endangerment of fragile ecosystems. The increasing involvement of Russia and China in Arctic affairs may also intensify tensions with NATO and other Arctic stakeholders, embedding the NSR within broader frameworks of geopolitical rivalry. In conclusion, while the Northern Sea Route presents substantial economic, strategic, and geopolitical potential for both Russia and China, these opportunities are counterbalanced by considerable challenges. For Russia, the NSR represents a strategic asset laced with significant risk, whereas for China, it emerges as an attractive yet uncertain prospect that is largely contingent upon effective Russian collaboration and broader international acceptance.

cooperation with influential Middle Eastern and Asian powers, such an alliance would not only enhance global diplomatic visibility but also position itself as a credible mediator in East–West disputes, contributing meaningfully to global stability and dialogue in the multipolar world ahead.

While the formation of such an alliance would undoubtedly face significant challenges—including internal political divisions, potential backlash from NATO and the European Union, deep historical distrust of Russia, and the risk of overreliance on China³⁹—it nonetheless presents compelling strategic benefits. Chief among these is the potential to emerge as a geopolitical swing bloc, capable of influencing global power dynamics without being tethered to any single hegemonic actor. Additionally, the alliance could serve as a vital energy and logistics hub, leveraging its geographic position and infrastructure to facilitate trade and resource flows between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Finally, by integrating technological expertise with investment capital, the bloc could become a dynamic tech–investment bridge, fostering innovation and sustainable development across regions.

³⁹ The countries involved would encounter a multifaceted set of risks and challenges, especially regarding its interactions with NATO, the European Union, and Russia itself. One of the foremost difficulties would be the political fragmentation within the alliance, as member nations possess varying historical experiences, strategic priorities, and degrees of trust towards Russia and China. This internal divergence has the potential to weaken cohesion and thwart decision-making. From the standpoint of NATO and the EU, such an alliance may be viewed as a departure from established Western security and economic structures. This perception could elicit institutional backlash, including diminished support, diplomatic pressure, or even sanctions, particularly if the alliance is regarded as undermining transatlantic unity or compromising EU norms and values. The danger of strategic ambiguity—where alliance members strive to balance relations with both East and West—could also foster mistrust from both sides, thereby diminishing the alliance's credibility. In its dealings with Russia, the most significant barrier remains the entrenched trust deficit, which is rooted in historical grievances, recent conflicts (such as Ukraine), and ongoing worries regarding Russian interference in domestic matters. In the absence of substantial concessions from Moscow, scepticism among Central and Eastern European countries is likely to endure, constraining the potential for cooperation. Moreover, excessive dependence on China—especially in sectors like infrastructure, technology, and investment—could render alliance members vulnerable to economic coercion, surveillance threats, and political influence, particularly if Chinese interests clash with national or EU regulations. Effectively balancing these relationships while preserving strategic autonomy would necessitate meticulous diplomacy, strong institutional safeguards, and a well-defined long-term vision.

“Xanadu” is worth the chance, especially as long as France and Germany fail to change political mindset, and as long as Western Europe’s attitude towards the Centre and the Eastern part of the continent remains largely one of trivialisation and underestimation⁴⁰. The double-Orbán question retains legitimacy, especially at a time of EU contestation by nationalist-populist and sovereigntist parties: why should one continue to engage with institutional structures and an increasingly unattractive market overseen by political, economic, and diplomatic elites entrenched in a mindset that is incapable of unleashing Europe’s full potential, sacrificed to provincial views, uncompetitive practices, and still exhibiting nationalistic defensive reactions, with a notable lack of commitment? After all, it was—once upon a time...— about advancing European integration and development to a level that would enable the region to compete effectively on a global scale.

⁴⁰ The best and most recent example: the Draghi-Letta reports have been produced without serious insight from the markets of Central and Eastern Europe. In the Draghi Report on EU competitiveness, CEE countries are referenced in a manner that has elicited considerable critique regarding the depth and equity of their inclusion. While the report outlines a vision for a more integrated and strategically autonomous European economy, its emphasis on centralised industrial policy and increased reliance on state aid mechanisms has raised concerns among policymakers and scholars from the CEE region because of the potential for such policies to disproportionately benefit wealthier Western European states, which possess greater fiscal capacity and institutional infrastructure to implement the proposed measures. Ministers from several CEE countries have publicly expressed dissatisfaction with the report, noting that their perspectives were insufficiently considered during its drafting and warning that the recommendations could exacerbate existing economic disparities within the Union. Furthermore, the report has been interpreted by some analysts as reinforcing a core-periphery dynamic, serving mainly and largely the interests of Western Europe, wherein the structural challenges and developmental trajectories of CEE economies are not adequately addressed. This imbalance is set to undermine EU’s cohesion and the legitimacy of its competitiveness agenda. (See: Michal Hrubý, “The Draghi Report’s Mixed Picture for Central and Eastern Europe”, German Marshall Fund of United States, September 27, 2024, available at <https://www.gmfus.org/news/draghi-reports-mixed-picture-central-and-eastern-europe>, accessed August 2025, and Malgorzata Kozak, “Draghi’s Report: (Again) A Tale of Two (or More) Europes”, The European Law Blog, March 28, 2025, available at <https://www.europeanlawblog.eu/pub/7sk418fi>, accessed August 2025.) The Draghi Report, while ambitious in scope, imperatively requires adaptation to ensure that its strategic objectives are inclusive and responsive to the diverse economic realities across the European Union.

The Transatlantic Option: Building a Privileged Partnership with the United States

A privileged U.S.–CEE and Scandinavian partnership is feasible, politically valuable to both sides, and can be built rapidly on existing initiatives (3SI, B9) and legal templates: Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCAs), as well as bipartisan congressional support. Success depends on NATO-anchoring, modularity, transparency, and blended finance that brings private capital to regionally essential projects. If implemented carefully, the partnership will strengthen deterrence, secure critical supply chains, and accelerate regional development—serving both American strategic goals and the resilience of European allies.

Central and Eastern European countries, along with Scandinavian nations, are strategically situated to enhance resilience and influence within the framework of transatlantic security and economic integration. Their preference for a partnership with the United States, their involvement in U.S.-backed regional initiatives, positions them as pivotal players in these efforts.

The following paragraphs will propose a formal partnership with the United States, aiming to significantly bolster deterrence capabilities, safeguard critical energy and supply chains, foster defence-industrial collaboration, and attract U.S. investments in infrastructure and innovation sectors.

The proposed framework builds on existing bipartisan support within the U.S. Congress for the 3SI and acknowledges recent agreements regarding U.S.–Nordic defence cooperation. It can be structured around NATO principles, designed to be modular, and remains transparent to both EU and NATO allies. The focus lies on achieving practical outcomes in six principal areas:

- the establishment of a U.S.–3SI/B9 Strategic Compact intended as a political charter⁴¹;

⁴¹ For the definition of the Compact, I preferred the one issued by Richard L. Kugler and Hans Binnendijk from the Centre for Technology and National Security Policy at the National Defence University in *Toward a New Transatlantic Compact* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2012), policy paper from August 2008: “... a solid political agreement, and broadgauged understanding between the United States and its European allies regarding how they are to collaborate closely, especially politically, in future security affairs. Such a compact is needed to create the widespread

- the implementation of defensive deterrence measures comprising logistics hubs, force prepositioning, and coordinated military exercises;
- the formulation of an energy and critical minerals security compact;
- the creation of a consortium for defence-industrial research, development, and procurement;

consensus that makes a new NATO strategic concept not only possible, but also effective” (p. v; pp. 15-16). A strategic compact is defined by several distinctive characteristics that set it apart from conventional treaties or alliances. Primarily, it aims to synchronise the mutual strategic objectives of the participating entities, which may include areas such as economic advancement, defence collaboration, or infrastructure integration, in order to tackle shared challenges and seize common opportunities. Unlike short-term agreements, strategic compacts possess an intrinsic long-term orientation, frequently addressing systemic concerns such as energy security, digital transformation, or geopolitical stability. Flexibility serves as another hallmark of strategic compacts; rather than adhering to rigid legal structures, these agreements commonly feature non-binding commitments, memoranda of understanding, or joint declarations, thereby permitting adaptability in light of changing circumstances. The breadth of a strategic compact is multidimensional, spanning a diverse array of sectors, including trade, security, technology, and cultural exchange, which underscores a comprehensive approach to partnership. The efficacy of a strategic compact depends on elements of trust and reciprocity, necessitating that all parties prioritise collective benefits over unilateral advantages; the navigation of historical and political sensitivities must occur with mutual respect and transparency. The Strategic Compact may however come with financial restrictions and limitations of expenses coming from the American counterpart, such as introduced by the Pentagon. The United States is set to gradually eliminate financial support for security initiatives aimed at training and equipping Eastern European military forces situated along the border with Russia: Washington wishes to encourage the EU to increase its own defence expenditures. The potential reduction of U.S. financial assistance has been a persistent subject of discussion since the commencement of Donald Trump’s presidency, during which Washington started urging its allies to take on a greater share of the military responsibilities. At the conclusion of August 2025, officials from the Pentagon notified European diplomats that the United States would cease funding programs aimed at training and equipping military forces in Eastern European nations situated on the frontline of any potential conflict with Russia. The financial resources allocated for the Pentagon program, which operates under an authority referred to as section 333, necessitate approval from the U.S. Congress; however, the Trump administration has not sought additional funding. Funds that have already been approved will remain accessible until the end of September 2026. The reduction of section 333 funding would impact a program with a global budget exceeding \$1 billion and could particularly adversely affect the Baltic Security Initiative (est. 2020, aiming to bolster the military capabilities of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania). See “US to cut some security funds for European countries bordering Russia” in *Financial Times* (September 4, 2025) available at <https://www.ft.com/content/0157d5f9-1b27-4d6c-b44e-f0a77da59b5d>, and *Politico* USA, available at <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/national-security-daily/2025/09/05/gop-balancing-act-on-cuts-to-baltics-security-funding-00547489>, accessed September 2025.

- the introduction of a Transatlantic Resilience Investment Facility (TRIF, similar to the existent Transatlantic Resilient Infrastructure Alliance) as a blended-finance mechanism; and
- the initiation of a dedicated track for Arctic, Baltic and Black Sea security cooperation.

Collectively, these initiatives aim to enhance regional stability, strengthen transatlantic relationships, and position the Northern–Eastern axis as a fundamental catalyst for European strategic renewal.

Central and Eastern European and Scandinavian nations hold a vital geostrategic position, particularly along NATO’s eastern flank. These regions contend with ongoing security threats that encompass coercive energy tactics, hybrid warfare, and the potential for conventional military escalation. Enhancing relations with the United States serves as a strategic deterrent and bolsters transatlantic solidarity. Initiatives like the B9 have effectively cultivated coordinated security postures among regional states, positioning them as suitable platforms for further cooperation.

In the political sphere, momentum is coalescing: the first Trump Administration already acknowledged the strategic importance of the Three Seas Initiative, which has garnered in the meanwhile bipartisan support in Congress, and endorsements from high-ranking officials during the Biden Administration, all affirming its objective to improve regional infrastructure and connectivity. Furthermore, U.S.–Nordic Defence Cooperation Agreements establish legal frameworks for interoperable military operations, serving as models for broader regional collaborations.

Economically, the CEE and Nordic regions are integral to vital infrastructure corridors across Europe, present opportunities for energy diversification, and host essential mineral resources. Positioning with the United States to safeguard these assets aligns with mutual strategic and economic interests. To ensure the sustainability of such partnerships, they should be anchored in NATO and sufficiently complementary to European Union initiatives, thus mitigating the risks of duplication or division, particularly concerning the former.

The Strategic Pillar should be designed to be modular, facilitating opt-in participation by domain in order to align with domestic political preferences, and must maintain transparency and inclusivity towards

other European partners. Financing strategies should integrate both public and private capital, catalysed by support from the United States, while legal robustness can be assured through host nation agreements and existing bilateral frameworks. Collectively, these principles constitute the groundwork for a resilient and adaptable transatlantic compact.

The foundational elements of cooperation between the United States and CEE-Scandinavia can be centred on the creation of the above-mentioned U.S.-3SI+B9 Strategic Compact. Articulated as a political charter at the leaders' level, the Compact would be underpinned by detailed technical work plans across critical domains, aiming to transform the existing goodwill into concrete, actionable outcomes within a defined time horizon (for instance, up to three years, which marks the end of the Trump ii Administration).

In the domains of defence and deterrence, the framework anticipates the establishment of U.S. prepositioned stockpiles and logistics hubs, as well as joint procurement efforts concentrated on air systems and unmanned aerial vehicles. Furthermore, it envisions the expansion of interoperability exercises, notably in the Arctic, Baltic, and Black Sea regions.

To enhance energy security and safeguard essential minerals, the initiative would incorporate U.S. diplomatic engagement coupled with partial credit guarantees for crucial infrastructure projects. Additionally, it would secure supply contracts and equity investments in regional processing facilities, thereby fortifying the supply chain.

The proposal to establish a defence-industrial research and development consortium focused on procurement aims to stimulate innovation in dual-use technologies while facilitating the co-location of production facilities with U.S. enterprises, thus bolstering regional industrial capacity.

The Transatlantic Resilience Investment Facility is an initiative designed to harness blended financing from both U.S. and European public and private sectors to enhance infrastructure in energy, transportation, and digital connectivity.

Cooperation regarding security in the Baltic, Black Sea, Arctic, and northern regions will aim to broaden pre-existing U.S. agreements by incorporating subregional initiatives that address undersea cable security,

domain awareness, and environmental resilience. This cooperation will allow for the complementary integration of partners where applicable.

In conclusion, improved coordination in aspects related to cybersecurity, intelligence sharing, and sanctions enforcement can considerably enhance collective resilience to hybrid threats and foster greater policy coherence. Collectively, these pillars form a modular framework that is anchored in NATO principles and complement EU objectives, thereby serving to advance mutual strategic interests of the parties involved, strengthening a transatlantic solidarity that pivoted to the North and East.

Because there is no time to lose, the implementation roadmap delineating a strategic compact between the U.S. and the CEE/Nordic regions can be organised into three distinct yet interrelated phases, each tailored to enhance both momentum and institutional capacity.

The first phase could be centred on convening a leadership summit (virtual or in-person format), whose primary objective would be to formalise the Compact and disseminate accompanying work plans that outline sector-specific priorities. Concurrently, initial legal frameworks supporting cooperation, including agreements on prepositioning (such as DCAs and SOFAs – Status Of Forces Agreements), will be established. This phase will also involve identifying potential logistics hubs and fostering early engagement with entities such as the U.S. Development Finance Corporation (DFC), EXIM Bank, and regional development banks to initiate the groundwork for blended-finance mechanisms.

A second phase would correspond to the pilot deployment (up to, say, 18 months), and it will aim to operationalise two to three pilot infrastructure projects within the framework of the TRIF, with a focus on rail, energy, and port development. During this phase, logistics hubs are expected to be fully operational, enabling the preliminary prepositioning of material. Additionally, the establishment of a regional innovation hub will be pursued. Joint exercises in the Northern, Baltic and Black Sea regions, featuring participation from U.S. forces, would be conducted to improve interoperability among coalition partners.

The last phase would correspond to consolidation and scaling (18–36 months), focusing on the formalisation of joint procurement consortium agreements and the expansion of defence-industrial collaboration through various workshare projects. The portfolio of the TRIF would

also be broadened, with a rigorous assessment of private investment flows to evaluate their impact. Initiatives aimed at regional cooperation will commence, emphasising domain awareness and enhancing environmental resilience. This phase would culminate in the publication of a comprehensive public evaluation report, which will include key performance indicators (KPIs) and insights gained throughout the process, thereby ensuring transparency and accountability in the implementation of the compact.

The establishment of the U.S.–CEE/Nordic strategic compact will evidently necessitate a thorough evaluation of the associated political risks, and the formulation of corresponding mitigation strategies to ensure its long-term viability and the cohesion. A primary concern pertains to the potential mistrust from or adversity of the European Union and, individually, of NATO member states, particularly if the compact is construed as fostering an exclusive bloc (which should largely be its nature, to compensate for the insufficient partnership offered by Paris and Berlin). To alleviate this concern, it will be useful to anchor all engagements within NATO frameworks, highlight the complementarity with existing EU initiatives, and uphold open-door protocols for other European nations (on the model applied to Greece when it joined the 3SI platform).

Another significant challenge resides in the realm of U.S. policy uncertainty and the possibility of future disengagement. To counter this risk, the compact should aim to secure multi-year financing commitments, establish legally binding agreements with host nations, and adopt blended capital structures that ensure operational continuity. Moreover, any domestic political backlash in participating countries—especially regarding perceived U.S. influence—can be addressed by emphasising the reinforcement of national sovereignty, mutual advantages, and local economic benefits, while simultaneously encouraging inclusive engagement within parliamentary systems.

The potential of inciting adversarial responses, particularly from Russia, necessitates a defensive posture that should be anchored in principles of transparency, adherence to international law (and its leading interpretations), and, if possible, alignment with NATO unity. Finally, apprehensions regarding the legal and competitive frameworks of the EU can be effectively mitigated through early coordination with the European Commission on certain levels, thereby ensuring that the

funding from the TRIF is compatible to EU state-aid regulations and complements existing financial instruments such as Cohesion Policy, the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), and the European Defence Fund (EDF). Collectively, these strategies may provide a solid foundation for navigating the political complexities inherent in such a strategic initiative.

By the conclusion of the 36-month implementation period (say, the end of 2029 or mid-2030) the efficacy of the U.S.–CEE/Nordic strategic compact is anticipated to manifest in various tangible outcomes. A formally ratified compact, receiving public endorsement from a minimum of eight to ten regional capitals alongside the United States, will establish a foundational political commitment. The establishment of operational logistics hubs will be imperative, including at least one site designated for U.S. equipment prepositioning and the initiation of a jointly funded infrastructure project currently in progress. In the domains of innovation and defence procurement, the commencement of a collaborative research and development initiative, coupled with the successful negotiation of a multi-state procurement agreement, will serve as indicators of effective partnership. Furthermore, investment flows via the TRIF must exhibit discernible commitments from both public and private sectors toward high-quality regional infrastructure projects. Collaborative efforts in Arctic, the Baltic and the Black Sea, and cyber domains are expected to produce at least one operational initiative dedicated to domain monitoring or rescue capabilities. Ultimately, a regionally published evaluation report should assess KPIs across all areas, ensuring transparency and establishing a framework for the potential expansion and refinement of the compact in the future.

One can categorically state that Central-Eastern Europeans and Nordics are pivotal to Europe's resilience—both from a security and economic standpoint. A structured, privileged partnership with the United States—anchored in the U.S.–3SI/B9 Strategic Compact and built on practical cooperation across defence, infrastructure, energy, investment, and security—could deepen deterrence, foster economic development, and foster regional integration. By designing a modular, NATO-anchored framework that accommodates domestic politics, leverages U.S. legal engagement tools, uses blended finance, and ensures transparency and open pathways for expansion, the region can become a vibrant, strategic hub of transatlantic synergy. Implementation would demonstrate both

impact and sustainability—setting a durable foundation for an enduring U.S.–CEE/Nordic partnership that strengthens transatlantic security.

Being aware of the advantages of the Arctic – Baltic – Black Sea area is crucial. The inclination of Paris and Berlin to engage more actively with Russia⁴², rather than collaborating with EU’s Central and Eastern member states⁴³ for establishing a new “Europe 2.0.,” underscores an opportunity

⁴² And entire series of non-European actors. See the following footnote.

⁴³ The African preference of the French diplomacy looked perplexing to analysts following France’s strategy of building Europe, as former communist countries were noticeably less appealing to Paris politicians and strategists than the former French Africa. In the aftermath of the Cold War and the subsequent geopolitical transformation in Europe, French diplomacy experienced a notable strategic recalibration, reflecting divergent priorities in its interactions with Africa compared to Central and Eastern Europe. Africa has remained a pivotal focus of French foreign policy, deeply influenced by historical connections, post-colonial frameworks, and strategic interests. France has sustained a robust engagement in Francophone Africa, characterised by military partnerships, development assistance, and cultural diplomacy, often situated within the contentious legacy of *Françafrique*. Nonetheless, this approach has increasingly encountered criticism, especially in the Sahel region, where French military interventions—such as Operation Barkhane—have been perceived as paternalistic and insufficient in addressing the fundamental causes of regional instability. The deterioration of relations with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger between 2021 and 2023, culminating in the expulsion of French forces and diplomats, underscored the fragility of France’s African strategy and its failure to adapt to rising nationalist and anti-French sentiments. An extensive report by Alain Antil, Thierry Vircoulon, “After the Failure in Sahel, Rethinking French Policy in Africa”, Institut Français des relations internationales IFRI, MEMOS Sub-Saharan Africa Center, April, 2024, available at https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/migrated_files/documents/atoms/files/ifri_antil_vircoulon_french_policy_africa_2024.pdf, accessed August 2025. Ironically, the country that fuelled the most the anti-French feelings and eventually took over the military partnership with the states that hosted French presence was Russia.—In contrast, France’s engagement with CEE countries after 1989 was more cautious and secondary in its foreign policy hierarchy. Initially sceptical of the region’s rapid transformation and EU accession ambitions, France acknowledged a certain importance of CEE states only after their integration into the European Union, when a series of strategic Partnerships were concluded with, e.g., Poland, Romania and Slovakia (2008). Nevertheless, the region was not elevated to a priority status in French foreign policy. France often deferred leadership in CEE relations to Germany and focused selectively on bilateral ties, with Poland for instance being included in frameworks like the Weimar Triangle (Marlena Drygiel-Bielińska, “Central and Eastern Europe in France’s Foreign Policy”, in Zięba, R. (eds) *Politics and Security of Central and Eastern Europe. Contributions to Political Science*, Springer, 2023, pp. 317-333). French strategic documents, including the 2021 Defence and Security Review

missed by Paris and Berlin to leverage the overall potential of the nations living between Europe's North and East, a failure to assimilate their vast historical and political experience into a strategic framework for securing Europe's stability and prosperity, a failure to benefit from their market dynamics, resources and capacities. Furthermore, this approach, far from illustrating the trust-building virtues of Paris and Berlin, ultimately undermines contributions Central Europe and Scandinavia can have to the strategic advancement of the European Union.

Ergo, while the Franco-German tandem, revitalised under leaders like Merz and Macron, remains “doomed” to lead due to their resources and institutional roles, a robust Scandinavian-Central and Eastern European coalition could and should compel a shift towards a more inclusive, multipolar model of EU leadership.

Solving the Kissinger Equation. Can France and Germany match the Xanadu and American Options?

“The responsibility of great states is to serve and not to dominate (...).”—Harry S. Truman

The aforementioned options possess potential and can be implemented in a realistic, rational, and even cynical manner. These serve

(available at https://cd-geneve.delegfrance.org/IMG/pdf/strategic_review_2021-3.pdf, accessed July 2023), largely omitted specific references to CEE countries, reflecting their peripheral status in France's global security outlook as France was de facto recognising the influence of Russia in the region and the implications for European stability (with emphatic voices of the Quai d'Orsay even mentioning “natural spheres of influence”...), its engagement remained reactive rather than proactive, shaped by what Paris considered to be much needed EU dynamics centred on France's national interests in Gaullist perspective, than by a distinct national strategy.

The divergence in diplomatic priorities reflects France's persistent post-colonial entanglements in Africa and its ambiguous role within the shifting landscape of European politics. While Africa has been perceived as a domain for strategic influence and projection, the approach to Central and Eastern Europe has been characterised by a hierarchical understanding of their EU integration, favouring Franco-German cooperation and multilateral initiatives at the EU level. This contrast highlights the asymmetry present in France's foreign policy orientations and underscores the challenges associated with reconciling historical legacies with current geopolitical dynamics.

as strategies to counter a Franco-German motor that has disregarded the fact that Europe is a political (or, more accurately, a meta-political) community to be constructed, rather than merely a fluctuating political and economic landscape of approximately thirty nations to be exploited based on the interests of just two.

Is awakening possible, a common Franco-German *Zeitenwende* leading to the renovation of political interaction amongst the 27 EU member states? That would need to include a profound reform of the education of French and German elites—particularly those in diplomacy, defence, and policymaking—toward a more nuanced and constructive understanding of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). A multi-layered approach is needed.

The geopolitical dynamics among French and German elites vis-à-vis CEE nations have traditionally been informed by a confluence of strategic pragmatism, institutional inertia, and at times, a deficiency in genuine engagement with the region's specific historical experiences and security apprehensions. While both Paris and Berlin acknowledge the strategic relevance of CEE countries—especially within the framework of NATO's eastern flank and the internal cohesion of the European Union—their methodologies have frequently exhibited tendencies towards paternalism and strategic ambiguity.

France has placed its emphasis on the notion of “European Europe” (strategic autonomy, that is) with roots in a constant rejection of the U.S. influence on this side of the Atlantic since the 1960s, prioritising Russia in order to “balance” and marginalised the threat perceptions harboured by CEE states, precisely those related to Russia. Conversely, Germany has leaned on economic interdependence and cautious diplomatic initiatives since the 1970s *Ostpolitik*, which may have led to a serious underappreciation of the pressing nature of Northern, Central and Eastern European security issues.

Recent geopolitical developments, particularly the conflict in Ukraine and the perceived reduction of U.S. security assurances, have compelled both Paris and Berlin to reevaluate their stances. French and German decision-makers are increasingly cognizant of the necessity for effective European leadership to involve close coordination with Nordic

and Central-Eastern European allies. However, this awareness did not fully manifest in a thoroughly inclusive or empathetic strategic culture⁴⁴.

⁴⁴ The political, diplomatic, and military actions of French and German elites toward Central and Eastern European nations reflect a complex interplay of historical legacies, strategic priorities, and evolving geopolitical realities.—For obvious geographic and historical reasons pertaining to the post-1945 Europe, French elites have prioritised Western European integration and global influence, often viewing CEE nations as secondary to their strategic interests in the Mediterranean, Africa, and the Indo-Pacific (see above my previous observations). Since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, France has undergone a significant shift, increasingly engaging with CEE countries to bolster what the Elysée calls “European sovereignty” and support Ukraine. France has bolstered its military presence on NATO’s Eastern Flank, deploying troops to Romania and integrating its aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle under NATO command in 2024. Its withdrawal from the Sahel has freed resources for CEE engagement, but its military contributions to Ukraine remain modest compared to its economic capacity, drawing criticism from CEE allies. Macron’s calls for a European army and increased spending signal ambition, but implementation lags. His “Bratislava agenda” (2023) emphasised strategic solidarity with CEE nations, acknowledging past French neglect of Eastern European security concerns. France has endorsed Ukraine’s EU and NATO membership aspirations, a stark contrast to its earlier hesitance to expand NATO eastward. Yet, despite this pivot, CEE countries remain sceptical of France’s intentions, perceiving its rhetoric of “European sovereignty” as a cover for French national interests. Pre-2022, France advocated vividly for a European security architecture that included Russia first and foremost, as seen in President Emmanuel Macron’s overtures to Putin post-Crimea annexation (2014). It took Russia’s war crimes and aggression in Ukraine to prompt a certain reassessment, with France prioritising—at least temporarily—support for Ukraine and for allies from NATO’s Eastern Flank. Macron’s diplomatic efforts across Central and Eastern Europe reflect this shift at least in theory; yet, CEE nations remain wary of France’s Gaullist instincts, which prioritise French autonomy and interests over collective EU action and European security. See Teona Giuashvili, *France’s Eastern Zeitenwende?*, paper for Elcano Royal Institute for International and Strategic Studies, online at <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/frances-eastern-zeitenwende/>, accessed August 2025; Agnia Grigas, *Europe has the resources to defend itself and back Ukraine against Russia*, Atlantic Council paper, March 2025, online at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/europe-has-the-resources-to-defend-itself-and-back-ukraine-against-russia/>, accessed August 2025; and Gesine Weber, *Give France Credit for Its Strategic Change*, paper for War On The Rocks, available online at <https://warontherocks.com/2024/05/31143>, accessed August 2025.—German elites have focused on post-1990 economic ties and dialogue with Russia, often prioritising stability over confrontation. Germany’s diplomacy has been shaped by its post-WWII anti-militarist stance and (injudiciously increasing) economic interdependence with Russia. Its hesitance to confront Moscow decisively pre-2022 (in the Normandy format, for instance) alienated CEE countries, who saw Berlin as too accommodating. The Nord Stream pipelines and Germany’s initial reluctance to supply heavy weapons to Ukraine reflected a cautious approach,

To ameliorate the disconnect, it is imperative to reform educational and diplomatic training frameworks within both nations to encompass a more profound historical understanding of Northern, Central and Eastern Europe. This should involve enhanced exposure to CEE political and geopolitical doctrines, and more substantial engagement with regional perspectives on statecraft, power, sovereignty, resilience, and their geopolitical legacies in relation to Russia and the Islamic world (formerly the Ottoman empire). Academic curricula in elite institutions—encompassing diplomatic academies, military educational establishments, and public administration schools—ought to incorporate modules dedicated to Northern, Central and Eastern European history, security challenges, and cultural-political dynamics. Furthermore, promoting exchange programs and collaborative strategic planning exercises with CEE counterparts could facilitate the dismantling of enduring stereotypes and advance the formation of a more cohesive European strategic community—if done in

which frustrated NATO's Eastern Flank nations, who have long warned of Russian aggression. Germany's *Zeitenwende* (turning point) announced in 2022 marked a (very slow) shift toward greater defence spending and engagement with CEE, but its hesitance to fully embrace a Ukrainian military victory or rapid NATO expansion has strained relations with CEE states during Chancellor Olaf Scholz's mandate. Germany's military engagement in CEE has grown since the *Zeitenwende*, with commitments to NATO's Eastern Flank (the Lithuania brigade, for instance) and increased defence budgets, but its initial disinclination to supply heavy weapons to Ukraine and the preference for U.S.-made F-35s over European systems have frustrated CEE nations and France, who sees this as undermining European autonomy. Poland's demand for WWII reparations and preference for South Korean arms over German ones highlighted ongoing tensions (Caroline L. Kapp, Liana Fix, "German, French, and Polish Perspectives on the War in Ukraine", in Mihr, A., Pierobon, C. (eds) *Polarization, Shifting Borders and Liquid Governance*, Springer, Cham, 2024, pp. 321-333, available online at https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-44584-2_19, last accessed August 2025.—Both France and Germany leverage their economic and political weight (together accounting for ~50% of the EU's GDP) to lead EU crisis management, as seen in the Aachen Treaty (2019) and joint initiatives like the European Defence Fund. But Central and Eastern European nations, or some of the Northern, perceive Franco-German leadership as insufficiently attentive to their security concerns, particularly regarding Russia, with the "embedded bilateralism" of France and Germany marginalising CEE voices and fostering distrust (Lucas Schramm, Ulrich Krotz, "Leadership in European crisis politics: France, Germany, and the difficult quest for regional stabilization and integration", in *Journal of European Public Policy*, 31 (5), 2023, pp. 1153-1178, online at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13501763.2023.2169742> (accessed August 2025).

good faith and with the awareness that such approaches contribute to the emergence of a credible Europe⁴⁵.

⁴⁵ Elite training institutions, including France's former *École nationale d'administration* (ENA, now *L'Institut national du service public*, INSP), Sciences Po, and Germany's diplomatic academies, have historically focused on Western European history and global power dynamics, often overlooking the distinctive security challenges and historical contexts of the region between the Baltic and the Black Seas. To remedy this incapacitating omission, it is imperative that curricula be revised to integrate compulsory modules on Central and Eastern European history. This should encompass significant topics such as the effects and legacies of Russian invasions, of Soviet domination, the 1989 revolutions, and the post-Cold War integration processes associated with NATO and the EU, incorporating sociological and economic dimensions. Furthermore, the establishment of exchange programs with regional institutions—such as governmental bodies, non-governmental organisations, think tanks, universities, and civic platforms engaged in European integration—could greatly enhance mutual understanding, maybe foster cultural empathy (cf. Elisabeth Piller, “The Transatlantic Dynamics of European Cultural Diplomacy: Germany, France and the Battle for US Affections in the 1920s”, in *Contemporary European History*, 30(2), 2021, pp. 248-264). Additionally, strategic studies must adapt to give precedence to Eastern threats, with particular emphasis on Russia's hybrid warfare strategies and disinformation tactics; these threats must not be dismissed as mere exaggerations (see Giushvili, art. cit). The formation of joint Franco-German-Central and Eastern European strategic institutes could significantly augment expertise and facilitate policy alignment in addressing these complex issues.

A paradigm shift in perception is essential for advancing the relationship between Western European and Central and Eastern European nations. The French and German elites have to incontrovertibly reconceptualise Europe's Centre-East, North and South-East not as a peripheral buffer zone, but as a foundational element of European security, giving strategic depth to the security of the continent. The establishment of regular summits among France, Germany, and CEE partners, such as the expansion of the Weimar Triangle in “Plus” versions, would much serve to bolster this strategic realignment (see Kapp & Fix, op. cit.). Moreover, historical preconceptions shaped by France's Gaullist legacy and Germany's post-war anti-militarism must be reconciled with Europe's East focus on NATO and security imperatives. In this context, French stakeholders should absolutely revise the notion of “European sovereignty” to encompass the security interests of Central, Eastern and Nordic Europe, while German leaders must adopt a more assertive posture regarding Russian aggression, paying heed to the foresight demonstrated by at least 10 nations from the Baltic to the Black Sea; this would probably reduce CEE perceptions of a Franco-German self-serving hegemony and lead to foster trust in joint EU initiatives (see, despite some candid proposals and slightly excessive trust in the virtues and effects of the 2023 Bratislava speech of Emmanuel Macron on the nations of Central and Eastern Europe, Gesine Weber, Jacob Ross, *Untangling the Transatlantic Knot: Germany, France, and the United States*, German Marshall Fund United States paper, online at <https://www.gmfus.org/news/untangling-transatlantic-knot-germany-france-and-united-states>, last access August 2025). An adaptation to multipolar geopolitical dynamics is increasingly vital. French and German elites

But this will not happen overnight.

What could and should occur in the shortest time frame is the significant transformation of the Franco-German motor and its role in Europe.

The capacity of France and Germany to spearhead reforms and strategic initiatives within Europe is increasingly stalled by a confluence of economic challenges and domestic political dynamics. Germany has experienced a protracted period characterised by sluggish economic growth, while France grapples with fiscal difficulties, both of which have led to fluctuating public sentiment. As a result, the joint risk-taking and reform leadership potential of these two nations has waned, creating credibility gaps not merely within their own jurisdictions but also throughout the broader European Union. Strategic divergence complicates endeavours for coordination, as the two countries face differing perceptions of threats and asynchronous electoral cycles, culminating in misaligned priorities—particularly evident in discussions surrounding defence spending, strategic autonomy, and instruments of fiscal policy. There is also a palpable sense of institutional fatigue; treaties, such as the Élysée and Aachen agreements, have laid the groundwork for bilateral cooperation but have frequently fallen short of yielding tangible results, particularly when intricate implementation efforts are necessitated⁴⁶. The revitalisation of the Franco-German engine driving

frequently undervalue the significance of non-Western actors, such as China and Turkey, within the Central and Eastern Europe's context (see Ulrike Franke, Tara Varma, *Independence play: Europe's pursuit of strategic autonomy*, European Council on Foreign Relations paper, July 2019, available online at https://ecfr.eu/special/independence_play_europes_pursuit_of_strategic_autonomy/, accessed August 2025). Developing a multipolar analytical framework and creating joint task forces to address and counter hybrid threats would not only enhance strategic competitiveness, but a broader geopolitical perspective would enhance France and Germany's ability to compete for influence in Central and Eastern Europe against extra-European actors whose presence comes with the Eurasian or Atlantic temptation and strengthen EU cohesion. Such reforms stand to improve policy coherence and foster a more inclusive and resilient European strategic community.

⁴⁶ Barbara Kunz, Ronja Kempin, *The Treaty of Aachen. New Impetus for Franco-German Defense Cooperation?*, Institut français des relations internationales paper, January 2019, online at <https://www.ifri.org/en/editorials/treaty-aachen-new-impetus-franco-german-defense-cooperation>, accessed August 2025; Mathieu Droin, *Rebooting the Franco-German Engine*, Centre for Strategic and International Studies paper, October 2022, online at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/rebooting-franco-german-engine>, accessed August 2025; Joseph de Weck, *Franco-German Couple: Duo-Duel at the Helm of the European Union*, Institut Montaigne (Paris) commentary, May

European integration necessitates more than mere symbolic actions—it requires substantive operational solutions, pragmatic alignment of interests, and a recommitment to mutually beneficial strategic outcomes; all this in relation to the exigent demands of regional European actors to be included in the broader process of Europe-building that Paris and Berlin hold the keys of.

The strategic objective of revitalising Franco-German leadership within the European Union necessitates a dual-track strategy that harmonises swift operational advancements with a commitment to broader institutional inclusivity. In the short term (6–12 months), the reconstruction of bilateral trust and capacity should concentrate on a limited selection of high-probability, high-visibility initiatives that yield tangible results and restore credibility. Simultaneously, endeavours should be undertaken to institutionalise expanded minilateral formats—such as the Weimar Triangle⁴⁷ and a Weimar+, Benelux cooperation, and

2024, online at <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/franco-german-couple-duo-duel-helm-european-union>, accessed August 2025; Rym Momtaz, *France and Germany Are Staring Into the Abyss*, Carnegie Endowment paper, April 2025, online at <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2025/04/france-and-germany-are-staring-into-the-abyss>, accessed August 2025.

⁴⁷ Judy Dempsey, *The Weimar Triangle's Moment to Lead*, Carnegie Endowment paper, March 2024, online at <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2024/03/the-weimar-triangles-moment-to-lead>, accessed August 2025.— In the meanwhile, France and Poland signed the Treaty of Nancy on May 9, 2025. It represents a landmark advancement in Franco-Polish relations, elevating Poland to the status of one of France's closest European partners alongside Germany, Italy, and Spain. The treaty formalises a comprehensive framework for bilateral cooperation across security, economic, technological, and cultural domains. Central to the agreement is a mutual defence clause, grounded in NATO's Article 5 and the EU's Article 42, which commits both nations to provide military assistance in the event of an armed attack. This provision reinforces existing alliance obligations and reflects growing concerns over Russian aggression, particularly in light of Poland's proximity to the Kaliningrad exclave. Macron emphasised the treaty's role in operationalising NATO and EU commitments, while Tusk described the mutual support clause as the “very essence” of the agreement. Beyond defence, the treaty outlines multifaceted cooperation in key sectors. It includes joint armament programs and the development of a European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (DTIB), a civilian nuclear energy cooperation plan, and initiatives in economy, agriculture, and scientific exchange. The agreement also builds on existing space collaboration, notably Poland's acquisition of French observation satellites, and establishes a Polish-French Friendship Day to commemorate shared cultural heritage. Strategically, the treaty underscores a shared vision for strengthening the European pillar within NATO, particularly in response to concerns about U.S. reliability following President Donald

partnerships with Spain, Italy, Scandinavia and the B9—thus allowing the Franco-German axis to evolve into the responsible, multilateral core of EU action rather than attempting to remain its singular (but mistrusted) driving force. This diversification of leadership structures enhances resilience against potential political or economic disruptions originating in either Paris or Berlin, while also promoting a more distributed and adaptable model of European governance. By integrating targeted deliverables with inclusive coalition-building, the Franco-

Trump's re-election in 2024. The preamble explicitly acknowledges the persistent threat posed by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, situating the treaty within a broader European security context. Overall, the Treaty of Nancy marks a significant recalibration of Franco-Polish relations, embedding Poland more deeply into the core of European strategic planning and cooperation.

From the viewpoint of Poland, the Treaty of Nancy was celebrated by Prime Minister Donald Tusk as "groundbreaking," indicating a notable transformation in Poland's role from a subordinate ally seeking assurances to an equal participant in European security. This redefinition of bilateral relations illustrates Poland's increasing strategic significance and its aspiration for acknowledgment within the European security framework. Nevertheless, some Polish analysts voiced reservations, highlighting France's limited ability to replace U.S. security assurances and pointing out the symbolic intricacies of Nancy, historically linked to Stanisław Leszczyński—a Polish monarch often regarded as politically ineffectual. At the European level, the treaty signifies a transition towards a more resilient and independent defence structure, with France and Poland—two of the EU's foremost conventional military powers—strengthening their relationship amid rising uncertainties about transatlantic dependability, especially in light of President Donald Trump's re-election in 2024. However, the treaty encounters several obstacles. Historical frictions, such as France's inadequate support during the 1939 German invasion, continue to breed suspicion in Poland's public opinion regarding French dependability. Conflicting strategic priorities also remain, with Poland's strong Atlanticist inclination and preference for U.S. alliances historically at odds with France's focus on European strategic independence. The treaty aims to reconcile these disparities but will necessitate ongoing political commitment and practical execution, including collaborative initiatives and heightened French involvement in Central and Eastern Europe. Its success will depend on overcoming historical mistrust, aligning strategic priorities, and delivering tangible outcomes—positioning the treaty as a cornerstone of a more inclusive and resilient European identity (See: Alexander Olech, *Premium Treaty? France, Poland, and the Game of Interests*, May 8, 2025, Defense24, online at <https://defence24.com/geopolitics/premium-treaty-france-poland-and-the-game-of-interests>, accessed August 2025; *Poland and France sign "groundbreaking" treaty, including mutual security guarantees*, Notes from Poland, online at <https://notesfrompoland.com/2025/05/09/poland-and-france-sign-groundbreaking-treaty-including-mutual-security-guarantees/>, accessed August 2025; Marianne Paire, *The Nancy Treaty: A French-Polish Alliance for European Security*, Estonia's International Centre For Defence and Security paper, May 2025, online at <https://icds.ee/en/the-nancy-treaty-a-french-polish-alliance-for-european-security/>, accessed August 2025.

German partnership can reclaim its strategic relevance and legitimacy within an increasingly dynamic geopolitical landscape.

Given the time constraints because of the international context, a roadmap for revitalising Franco-German leadership within the European Union should take the least time possible and be systematically organised into distinct phases, aimed at re-establishing trust, fostering cooperation, and institutionalising strategic capacities—in *correlation* to European partners, not against them (as was the case of the Moscow-friendly policy of Paris-Berlin after 2014 and 2019 respectively).

The first phase could concentrate on the swift enhancement of both mutual and of “euro”-trust through the creation of a Franco-German Joint Security Council (JSC)⁴⁸. This permanent, ministerial-level forum is tasked with defining joint EU defence priorities, aligning NATO and EU commitments, and supervising procurement initiatives. The formation of this council would serve in time as an immediate indicator of shared strategic intent and develop a quick roadmap consisting of three principal projects: (1) the establishment of a rapid-deployment brigade, (2) the development of common logistical infrastructure, and (3) collaborative procurement of vital capabilities. The actors involved should be, for high visibility and priority, the French President, the German Chancellor, the Defence and Foreign ministers, while several other countries (Italy, Spain, Poland, the Netherlands, Romania, Sweden) should be invited for specific projects where useful. Supplementary industrial initiatives would receive co-funding from France and Germany, thereby generating employment opportunities and political leverage, starting with signed Memoranda of Understanding, notifying the EU Commission for state aid where necessary, with an initial tranche of joint investment. Consistent cabinet-level coordination, entailing monthly ministerial meetings with clearly articulated deliverables, would serve to institutionalise alignment, reducing surprise policy divergence and building a habit of coordination.

⁴⁸ EuroNews (Sophia Khatsenkova), *Merz-Macron meeting: Germany and France to set up 'joint defence and security council'*, May 7, 2025, online at <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/05/07/germany-and-france-to-set-up-joint-defence-and-security-council>, accessed August 2025. The first meeting took place at Toulon on August 29, 2025. See <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/992814/2382174/4910aee81bb069bcc995a06e69a1601c/2025-08-29-dt-fr-sicherheit-verteidigung-data.pdf?download=1> (accessed September 2025).

A second phase could span to the next year and a half, seeks to enhance the Franco-German “motor” by using the Weimar Triangle and the Weimar+ format as a conduit to Central and Eastern Europe, with a focus on security, energy, and connectivity, thus bringing Poland and other key regional actors from CEE into core initiatives that add responsibility to their European credentials and membership⁴⁹. A portfolio of collaborative projects, supported by pooled funding and a rotating technical secretariat, would ensure inclusivity and maintain operational momentum. Concurrently, “coalitions of the willing”, aligned within EU legal frameworks such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and enhanced cooperation, would be initiated to advance joint defence and industrial undertakings, thereby circumventing potential gridlock stemming from unanimity requirements⁵⁰. Two pilot projects involving France, Germany and three or four more countries—for instance on joint procurement of air systems and the establishment of a cross-border battery supply chain—would serve as practical demonstrations of feasibility. Shared leadership roles, with Germany co-chairing industrial ventures and France spearheading defence initiatives, would be augmented by incentives aimed at engaging southern, Central, Eastern, Benelux, and Nordic partners, with clear payoff packages (procurement orders, investment, tech transfer), thus reducing zero-sum perceptions.

A third phase, extended to 2027-2028 (Emmanuel Macron’s end of mandate) should emphasise the consolidation of institutions. A proposal for a Euro-resilience pilot instrument would be introduced as a narrowly focused fiscal facility (investment-only, shock cushion for green/defence projects), incorporating stringent governance mechanisms and a sunset clause to garner domestic approval from Germany while assisting Southern and Eastern partners. Far from being debt mutualisation, it should be regarded as investment.

A permanent multilateral secretariat—alternately headquartered in Paris and Berlin—would manage joint projects, provide transparency, and monitor delivery, professionalising cooperation and maintaining

⁴⁹ The Rheinmetall investments in Hungary and Romania can be regarded as parts of such an agenda.

⁵⁰ Guntram B. Wolff, Armin Steinbach, Jeromin Zettelmeyer, *The governance and funding of European rearmament*, Bruegel think-tank paper, April 2025, online at <https://www.bruegel.org/policy-brief/governance-and-funding-european-rearmament>, accessed August 2025.

continuity across political cycles. Finally, a norm diffusion initiative would be initiated, with France taking the lead on regulatory standards (e.g. pertaining to industrial decarbonisation, nuclear energy, hydrogen, etc.) while Germany would focus on enhancing industrial competitiveness. Partner nations would be encouraged to adopt these standards via market incentives and conditional access (objectively applied⁵¹).

To effectively promote a renewed Franco-German strategic initiative within the European Union, it is imperative to adopt a series of pragmatic political strategies aimed at securing both domestic and international support. The prevailing narrative surrounding this cooperation must transition from one emphasising dominance to one centred on mutual economic opportunity and job creation, emphasising the tangible local benefits for partner states.

Engagement at the initial stages through socialisation and parliamentary involvement is crucial; actively including opposition leaders and regional economic and political actors in the governance of such Franco-German projects can mitigate political resistance and cultivate a broader consensus⁵². Furthermore, innovative instruments

⁵¹ The danger of politicisation of standards and criteria in order to keep EU members “out” while others are allowed “in”, because of domestic politics in EU member states, is never reduced. See above the accession to the Schengen area by Romania and Bulgaria.

⁵² At the time when these lines are written, following the election of a new Polish president, Karol Nawrocki, and the conflict opposing him to Prime Minister Donald Tusk, the Weimar Triangle’s relevance seems to be fading again. Tusk, a former European Council president, has worked to realign Poland with the EU mainstream, securing billions in previously frozen EU funds by addressing rule-of-law concerns and championing European defence initiatives. His efforts to revive the Weimar Triangle reflect a vision of Poland as a central player in a united Europe, collaborating closely with France and Germany on issues like Ukraine, energy security, and EU integration. Nawrocki, a conservative nationalist, is distrustful of deeper EU integration, opposing policies like the EU Green Deal, migration pacts, and treaty reforms that centralise power in Brussels. He advocates for Polish sovereignty and prioritises bilateral ties with non-EU partners like the U.S. and regional allies like Hungary over Western European frameworks like the Weimar Triangle. His alignment with Eurosceptic leaders like Orbán and his focus on national interests over EU cohesion directly challenge Tusk’s European ambitions. Recent developments indicate that the Weimar Triangle is “withering” as France and Germany strengthen bilateral ties without Poland, partly due to Warsaw’s internal divisions. For example, Poland’s absence, in August 2015, from a White House crisis meeting on Ukraine involving European leaders highlights its diminished influence, attributed to the Tusk-Nawrocki rift. Nawrocki’s predilection for regional alliances

should be conceptualised as pilot initiatives, complete with sunset clauses and rigorous evaluation mechanisms to alleviate scepticism within the German parliament and public.

Several potential risks must be proactively addressed. German domestic apprehensions regarding joint fiscal initiatives can be eased by ensuring that pilot funding is designated for investment purposes only, limited in duration, and subject to strict audits. In order to counteract perceptions of exclusion among other EU member states, it is essential to prioritise early outreach to significant EU partners coupled with concrete procurement and investment incentives.

To avoid excessive project scope, efforts should be systematically phased, concentrating on three key deliverables within the first twelve months, with expansion contingent upon the successful outcomes of these pilots⁵³. Success over a 12–36 month timeframe will therefore be measured by (1) the operations of the Joint Security Council (JSC)

like the Visegrád Group (with Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic) could shift Poland's focus away from the Weimar Triangle, aligning it with Eurosceptic governments less invested in EU unity. The W3 can technically continue, as Tusk's constitutionally granted control over foreign policy ensures Poland's participation, and shared security interests provide a basis for cooperation. However, Poland's internal divisions between Tusk's pro-EU government and Nawrocki's Eurosceptic presidency significantly undermine the Triangle's effectiveness. Nawrocki's veto power, alignment with similar leaders, and attempts to assert an independent foreign policy risk projecting a fractured Poland, weakening its influence in the Triangle and potentially leading France and Germany to prioritise other partnerships. For the W3 to thrive, Tusk must navigate domestic challenges to maintain a coherent foreign policy, while France and Germany must remain committed to engaging Poland despite its divisions. Without these conditions, the Triangle may persist in name but lose its barely regained strategic weight. Cf. Oscar Luigi Guccione, *Poland's Political Pendulum: President Nawrocki will test Prime Minister Tusk's 2023 victory*, German Marshall Fund US paper, June 2025, online at <https://www.gmfus.org/news/polands-political-pendulum>, accessed September 2025 ; Mateusz Mazzini, *Why Poland's 'Return to Europe' Won't Be So Smooth*, Foreign Policy, April 2024, online at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/04/01/poland-eu-duda-tusk-sikorski-domestic-politics> (accessed September 2025); Marta Prochwicz Jazowska, *Not so fast: How Poland's next president could hamper its foreign policy ambitions*, ECFR Commentary, 16 May 2025, online at <https://ecfr.eu/article/not-so-fast-how-polands-next-president-could-hamper-its-foreign-policy-ambitions> (accessed September 2025). ; Wojciech Kość, *From hero to zero: Poland's foreign policy fizzle*, Politico Europe, September 2025, online at <https://www.politico.eu/article/poland-foreign-policy-donald-tusk-karol-nawrocki-donald-trump/> (accessed September 2025).

⁵³ *The governance and funding...*, Bruegel paper, loc. cit.

accompanied by a publicly disseminated roadmap and at least one executed joint procurement contract; (2) the initiation of two minilateral projects within the industrial and defence sectors with dedicated financing; (3) formal commitments from Poland and at least two other EU member states evidenced through signed memoranda of understanding⁵⁴; and (4) the establishment of a rotating secretariat that ensures transparent delivery reporting.

Collectively, these measures serve to ensure that the proposed initiative is not only politically tenable but also strategically inclusive and operationally credible.

This conveys to Paris and Berlin that “being European” does not equate to aligning with Russia due to some geographic determinism (whose benefits would be open to Western Europe exclusively, while the costs are supported uniquely by Europe’s East). Additionally, there is an intellectual shortcoming in failing to move beyond the Gaullist/neo-Gaullist-Chiraquist paradigm, with its Russia-friendly concepts⁵⁵.

⁵⁴ *The Timely Revival...*, Carnegie Endowment, loc. cit.

⁵⁵ It is enough to read the November 1st, 1996 interview given by the French minister of Foreign Affairs, Hervé de Charette, to the Russian magazine *Business in Russia*, where he expressed the position of the French Presidency (at that time, Jacques Chirac): “[Chirac] has a true vision of Russia, of its role in the world, of what the Franco-Russian relationship should be. France’s desire today—and I believe Russia’s too, meaning the privileged partnership I discussed with Yevgeny Primakov—is to jointly design the European architecture of tomorrow, one that, beyond the year 2000, will ensure our nations’ security, stability, and, I hope, prosperity. This is why you need a very intense bilateral relationship, not only politically but also economically and culturally. (...) There is also a tremendous intellectual curiosity on both sides. Our cultures intersected very early on. They continue to do so, in a sort of mutual fascination between two countries, each located at opposite ends of Europe. Let us take advantage of this long-standing friendship, this ever-present curiosity, to work together towards the new Europe to which we all aspire” (<https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/248779-herve-de-charette-01111996-relations-franco-russes>, accessed August 2025). Charette added, on November 26, a few other remarks: “France intends to have an attitude of listening and understanding toward Russia, and the very clear intention of taking into consideration, whenever possible, Russian concerns. (...) The Russia of today is, by the nature of things, a people friendly to France, and therefore we must talk about everything. We must therefore have a very in-depth political dialogue; we must strengthen economic relations (...). France, given its economic weight, could be more present, and vice versa. And we must naturally take an interest in cultural relations. (I mentioned earlier the richness of Russia’s cultural heritage, and France, from this point of view, is not poor either.) So, we have a lot to say to each other. Russia is a great nation. France too. I believe that Russia is quite sensitive about its independence

Being European does not imply opposing the U.S. either; rather, it entails the ability to know how to collaborate effectively with other European nations. Ironically, while advocating for multipolarity and embracing diversity to garner support globally—especially against U.S. initiatives—, France’s political and diplomatic leaders have consistently neglected to apply these principles to Central and Eastern Europe.

France’s ‘Europe’

Between Paris and Berlin, notable discrepancies persist in the process and goals of European integration.

France’s profound attachment to the European project—and the reason it often holds deeper political significance for Paris than for Berlin—can be attributed to a confluence of historical, strategic, and identity-related factors. Historically and strategically, France emerged as a principal architect of European integration, with well-known visionary figures instrumental in establishing the European Coal and Steel Community, the foundational precursor to the European Union. This initiative was designed not only to avert the recurrence of devastating Franco-German conflicts but also to foster continental stability through economic interdependence. In the postwar era, particularly following German reunification, France viewed integration as a mechanism to embed Germany within a supranational structure, thereby mitigating the risk of renewed German hegemony. Moreover, amid France’s relative decline as a global power—marked by the dissolution of its overseas empire and the ascendancy of U.S. influence during the Cold War—the EU served as an amplifier of French authority, enabling Paris to extend

and its authority, its influence. The French too. Deep down, I believe that we are similar. This is a good reason to talk to each other and to have in mind that we can do a lot of things together in the years to come” (<https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/228534-herve-de-charette-2011996-relations-france-russie>, accessed August 2025). A narrative of Franco-Russian cultural and spiritual proximity was assiduously cultivated in Paris and Moscow with a disconcerting lack of measure, nurtured during the successive presidencies of Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy. The illusion lasted during the 2014 Crimean crisis and was rejuvenated with gusto by Emmanuel Macron, whose initial admonishing of the Kremlin for attempted interference in the 2017 French elections left place to an increasingly enthusiastic attitude, and set up an entire list of Russia aficionados (H. Védrine, J.P. Chevenement, etc.) serving his *rapprochement* projects.

its leadership beyond its inherent national capabilities. A united Europe became a multiplier of French power, allowing Paris to project its interests and potential leadership beyond its national weight, on a supranational scale⁵⁶. The European project became synonymous with France's quest for "*grandeur*", a concept Charles de Gaulle held a torch for, gracefully augmented and transubstantiated by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in *rayonnement*⁵⁷.

⁵⁶ Maxime Lefebvre, *France and Europe: an ambivalent relationship*, Brookings Institute paper, October 2004, online at <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/lefebvre20040901.pdf>, accessed September 2025 ; Piers Ludlow, "The Schuman Plan and the Start of Supranational European Integration", in Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Politics, May 2019, retrieved September 2025, online at <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-1119> ; Jacob Ross, *France, Germany, and the Nature of Europe*, Internationale Politik Quarterly, June 2024, online at <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/france-germany-and-nature-europe>, accessed September 2025.

⁵⁷ The concepts of *grandeur* and *rayonnement* represent interconnected yet evolving facets of French foreign policy, both aimed at preserving and projecting France's exceptional global role amid postwar regression and geopolitical shifts. De Gaulle's *grandeur*, articulated during his presidency (1959–1969), embodied a visionary nationalism that positioned France as an independent power broker, transcending its material limitations through assertive sovereignty, military autonomy, and a rejection of bipolar Cold War alignments. Rooted in his wartime leadership and a romanticised view of French history, *grandeur* manifested in policies such as the development of an independent nuclear *force de frappe*, withdrawal from NATO's integrated command in 1966 (with NATO's headquarters moving from Paris to Brussels), and vetoes within the United Nations to assert France's veto power and moral authority. This approach was not merely pragmatic but existential, framing France's "vocation for *grandeur*" as an attitude of self-belief and defiance against subordination to superpowers like the United States or the Soviet Union, thereby restoring national pride and influence (cf. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, volume E–15, part 2, Documents on Western Europe, 1973–1976, n° 328. Telegram 2935 From the Embassy in France to the Department of State, 4 February 1975, online <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve15p2/d328>, accessed September 2025); Davis Reed, "A Once and Future Greatness: Raymond Aron, Charles de Gaulle and the Politics of Grandeur", in *The International History Review*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2011, pp. 27–41 (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23033140>, accessed September 2025).—Giscard d'Estaing, a brilliant finance minister under De Gaulle and later president (1974–1981), adapted this legacy through his emphasis on *rayonnement*, a term denoting the "radiance" or diffusion of French cultural, political, and economic influence abroad. While *grandeur* evoked a bold, often confrontational pursuit of prestige and independence, *rayonnement* represented a more subtle, collaborative, and soft-power-oriented strategy, leveraging diplomacy, aid, and partnerships to extend France's global footprint. This evolution reflected Giscard's centrist-liberal

Politically and in terms of national identity, France perceives Europe not merely as an economic consortium but as a profound political and civilisational endeavour, aspiring to forge a “Europe puissance”—a powerful entity capable of achieving strategic autonomy in defence, diplomacy, and industry. This perspective is embedded in the prevailing French narrative surrounding EU membership, which underscores four core elements: France’s status as a founding member, its position as a major state, its co-leadership alongside Germany, and the imperative that the Union serves and maximises French national interests⁵⁸.

orientation, which sought to modernise Gaullism by integrating France more deeply into European structures (reinforcing the Franco-German partnership), while maintaining its worldwide ambitions and prominence. For instance, Giscard perpetuated de Gaulle’s African policy through personal ties with leaders, using investments, military interventions, and foreign aid as instruments of cultural and political *rayonnement* to secure economic benefits like oil supplies and strategic alliances. His outreach to Middle Eastern Islamic countries aimed at energy security echoed grandeur’s globalist aspirations but prioritised pragmatic economic interdependence over ideological posturing. The correlation between the two concepts lies in their shared objective of compensating for France’s relative decline—post-colonial transitions and U.S. dominance—by affirming its cultural-civilisational mission and international relevance. Grandeur provided the ideological foundation, portraying France as a beacon of universal values and an alternative pole in a multipolar world, while *rayonnement* operationalised this through astute globalism, divesting it of De Gaulle’s more theatrical elements in favour of liberal reforms, European integration (such as the European Monetary System or the G5-7 summits), and cultural diffusion. Giscard’s approach thus represented a continuity of Gaullist exceptionalism but in a post-1968 context of economic liberalisation and détente, where influence was cultivated through “rank and *rayonnement*” via aid and alliances rather than unilateral assertions of power. This shift marked a pragmatic refinement: where de Gaulle’s grandeur was an end in itself, symbolising national revival, Giscard’s *rayonnement* served as a means to sustain it in an interconnected era, ultimately bridging traditional French identity with emerging European federalism. See: Anne Dulphy, *La politique extérieure de la France depuis 1945*, Nathan, Paris, 1994; Stanley Hoffmann, “La Politique étrangère de Valéry Giscard d’Estaing” in *The Tocqueville Review*, vol. 2, n° 2-3, 1980, pp. 162-170; Jean-Christian Petitfils, *La démocratie giscardienne* (Collection “Politique d’aujourd’hui”), Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1981; Carol Lancaster, “France: Rank et Rayonnement”, in *Foreign Aid: Diplomacy, Development, Domestic Politics*, University of Chicago Press, 2006 and Chicago Scholarship Online, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226470627.003.0005>. accessed September 2025.

⁵⁸ Lefebvre, op. cit., loc. cit; Christian Lequesne, Avtansh Behal, “France and the European Union”, in *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Politics*, retrieved September 2025, online at <https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/>

Politically, Europe holds greater significance for France than for Germany because it serves as a vital arena for geopolitical ambition and identity preservation, whereas Germany approaches the EU more pragmatically, as an economic and legal framework for ensuring stability and prosperity, with an emphasis on stability and consensus-building. For France, a united Europe is existentially tied to its intellectual and historical self-conception, articulated in various French presidential speeches (among which Macron's 2017 and 2024 at the Sorbonne were the latest, most representative—and somewhat radical—additions⁵⁹). France's top policy priorities include defence and geopolitical issues, and Paris demonstrated being unilaterally more willing to pursue initiatives with small groups of member states (such as the flawed concept of the European Intervention Initiative...), to advance a vision of Europe as a global actor independent of superpowers like the US and China.

This political weight is amplified when contrasted with Germany's more pragmatic orientation toward the EU. Germany's engagement with the EU is rooted in postwar rehabilitation and economic reintegration, serving as a means of atonement for World War II and ensuring stability through multilateralism. Troubled by historical self-reproach, Germany

acrefore-9780190228637-e-1146.—This requirement led to a “detrimental ambiguity”, that my articles (in the second part of the present book) emphasise and criticise especially because they led to a significant diminishment of France's political, diplomatic and cultural authority, standing and reliability.

⁵⁹ While Macon sympathisers underline the president's intellectual engagement with Europe, incorporating conceptual contributions from thinkers such as Gramsci, Ricœur, Habermas, and Sloterdijk, it is useful to notice that connoisseurs of Paul Ricœur's system of ideas express significant critique towards Emmanuel Macron's reductionist manner of applying political philosophy within the realm of political practice: François Dosse (Ricœur's friend, collaborator and biographer), *Macron ou les illusions perdues - Les larmes de Paul Ricœur*, Le Passeur, 2022; Roger-Pol Droit, *Macron et Ricoeur. Une filiation à l'épreuve du pouvoir*, Les Echos (weekend issue: Business Story), November 21, 2020, pp. 17-24.—Peter Sloterdijk regards Emmanuel Macron as possessing a visionary perspective regarding the geopolitical landscape of Europe. Currently serving as a professor at the Collège de France in Paris, Sloterdijk inaugurated the lecture series titled “The Invention of Europe through Languages and Cultures” in early April 2024. His inaugural lecture, “The Continent without Qualities: Bookmarks in the Book of Europe,” likely resonated with Macron, as evidenced by the president's remarks a few days later during his second speech at the Sorbonne, when he articulated a sentiment echoing Sloterdijk's themes: the European Union “no longer produces grand narratives” and lacks the capacity to envision a future; it engages in a process of consumption rather than production.

maintains a restrained international profile, prioritising economic leadership—as Europe’s largest economy—and transatlantic alliances for security, rather than bold political projections, with consensus-building and adherence to rules leading Berlin to position itself as an impartial mediator instead of advocating for a geopolitically assertive Europe. Its overarching objective is the preservation of EU cohesion and keeping Europe together, rather than its evolution into a political union involving extensive sovereignty sharing⁶⁰—though Chancellor Merz might alter this long-standing strategy, which is deemed unproductive due to the pressing international circumstances⁶¹.

⁶⁰ Jana Puglierin, Ulrike Esther Franke, *The Big Engine That Might: How France and Germany Can Build A Geopolitical Europe*, ECFR paper, July 2020, online at https://ecfr.eu/archive/page/-/the_big_engine_that_might_how_france_and_germany.pdf, accessed September 2025.

⁶¹ Chancellor Friedrich Merz’s perspective on Europe’s strategic autonomy and sovereignty signifies a noteworthy departure from the policies of prior German administrations. Merz contends that Europe can no longer depend entirely on U.S. security guarantees, particularly considering former President Trump’s transactional diplomacy and implications of a diminished commitment to NATO. This evolution in geopolitical dynamics serves as a call to action for Europe to assume responsibility for its own security. Merz’s vision encompasses several key components: 1. The establishment of an independent European defence capability, which may need to supplant NATO in its existing configuration if the situation demands; 2. Collaborative military procurement initiatives within the EU to decrease reliance on suppliers from the United States; 3. The introduction of common EU defence bonds, intended to finance modernisation efforts, thereby diverging from Germany’s historical resistance to the concept of shared EU debt; 4. Enhanced nuclear cooperation with France and the United Kingdom, including deliberations on extending their deterrence frameworks to encompass Germany. In his discourse, Merz advocates for a conception of sovereignty that transcends national isolation, instead promoting the idea of collective European power. He posits the necessity for a “new European security architecture” that, while rooted in NATO, incorporates a robust European component, with Germany assuming a central leadership role (which could create friction with French aspirations). Moreover, Merz underscores the importance of economic sovereignty, emphasising the diversification of supply chains, the reduction of dependence on China and Russia, and the aspiration to construct a new global trading system that operates independently of ineffective structures such as the World Trade Organisation. While he maintains that the United States remains Germany’s primary non-European ally, Merz advocates for a process of “emancipation”, where Europe must decisively pursue its own interests and adapt to shifting dynamics in Washington’s approach. Merz has raised critical questions concerning the future viability of NATO in its present form post-next summit, indicating a willingness to explore the establishment of an alternative European defence framework. In

For France, however, the stakes are existential: the EU is inextricably linked to its strategic identity and sustained global relevance, without which France might devolve into a secondary power eclipsed by Germany and superpowers such as the United States and China. This disparity accounts for France's proactive stance on initiatives like the Common Foreign and Security Policy and enhanced European defence autonomy—domains where Germany exercises greater caution.

In essence, while France envisions Europe as an indispensable political and strategic instrument for safeguarding influence and independence, Germany prioritises it as a bulwark for stability and economic well-being, thereby rendering European integration a more profoundly political imperative for Paris, where it embodies a pathway to sustained global relevance amid national decline. This asymmetry underscores the Franco-German “engine” of Europe, with France driving political vision and Germany anchoring economic realism, though recent instabilities in both nations highlight the fragility of this dynamic⁶².

À la Recherche du Leadership Lost: A Hypothetical Frame for France's Revival

Je dédie ce chapitre à mes amis français depuis toujours, remarquables par leur esprit et leur fidélité, ainsi qu'à la mémoire précieuse de ceux qui sont passés Au-Delà... Leur empreinte demeure vive et florissante.

summary, Merz's stance resonates with France's longstanding appeal for enhanced European strategic autonomy, but it infuses a sense of urgency and a distinct German perspective, merging defence integration with economic sovereignty and pragmatic engagement on the global stage. Cf. Anna Kwiatkowska, *The Outline of the Merz doctrine: Germany as a global player*, analysis for The Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), Warsaw, Poland, online at <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2025-09-09/outline-merz-doctrine-germany-a-global-player>, retrieved September 2025; Judy Dempsey, *Germany's Long-Awaited Pivot to Leading Europe*, Carnegie Endowment paper, June 2025, online at <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2025/06/germanys-long-awaited-pivot-to-leading-europe?lang=en>, accessed September 2025.

⁶² Matthias Matthijs, *What Does France's Political Instability Mean for Europe?*, Council on Foreign Relations paper, December 2024, online at <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/what-does-frances-political-instability-mean-europe>, retrieved September 2025.

Gratitude à mes collaborateurs de France, et pensées aux ancêtres français qui—de Henri II à la Troisième République—ont su maîtriser tout à tour le gouvernail, l'épée, l'intrigue, puis les finances et les arts, âmes résolues rêvant de tisser la prospérité de leur patrie aux vastes échanges avec les Carpates et la mer Noire.

Leadership of the EU encompasses the capacity to set agendas both within Brussels and on the international stage, which includes influencing the priorities and results of the European Commission and the Council. It requires credible economic and fiscal management within the eurozone, an ability to project defence and diplomatic power, and the adeptness to forge coalitions that transform proposals into majority-backed outcomes. France possesses significant advantages—but...

France's diplomatic positioning on the global stage is shaped by a combination of inherent strengths and notable constraints, reflecting its economic, political, and strategic landscape as of 2025. Among its key assets is a solid economy, ranked as the 7th largest globally by nominal GDP, bolstered by strategic industries such as defence, nuclear energy, and aerospace⁶³. Complementing this economic prowess is France's prominent role within the European Union, affording it influential seats at major international forums. Furthermore, France maintains an independent strategic profile, characterised by a "balanced power" approach in diplomacy, particularly in engagements with the United States and China, supported by the third-largest diplomatic network worldwide after those of China and the US. This autonomy is enhanced by President Macron's (by now) wide-ranging dynamic on the international stage, in the attempt to facilitate nuanced partnerships across diverse geopolitical contexts⁶⁴.

⁶³ For instance, France's defence sector benefits from a record €47.2 billion budget allocation in 2025, representing a 7.4% increase from the previous year, while its nuclear arsenal remains stable at approximately 290 warheads amid ongoing modernisation efforts. See: European Commission, Economy and Finance. Economic surveillance of EU economies: France. Economic forecast for France, May 2025. Available at https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/economic-surveillance-eu-economies/france/economic-forecast-france_en, accessed September 2025.

⁶⁴ Paul Cormarie, *Can Macron Be Europe's Delegate?*, RAND Corporation report, February 2025, online at <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2025/02/can-macron-be-europes-delegate.html>, retrieved September 2025.

However, these strengths are tempered by significant constraints that undermine France's bargaining credibility and leadership aspirations. Domestic political instability, exacerbated since the 2024 snap elections following European Parliament setbacks, has led to fragile parliamentary majorities and repeated government upheavals, including the ousting of multiple prime ministers within a short span⁶⁵. As of mid-2025, this fragmentation has deepened rifts between the population and political elites, hindering cohesive policy implementation. Economically, slowing growth—projected at a mere 0.6% for 2025—and a high public spending ratio approaching 57% of GDP severely limit fiscal manoeuvrability and the capacity to exemplify fiscal prudence internationally. Reports from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) highlight the necessity of rationalising expenditures and improving competitiveness to mitigate prevailing vulnerabilities⁶⁶. Furthermore, tensions within the Franco-German partnership, as previously noted, represent a structural obstacle to France's strategic objectives; although recent measures proposed by Chancellor Friedrich Merz seek to rejuvenate the alliance through the establishment of joint councils and economic agendas, persistent political frictions and differing priorities (particularly in the realms of defence and security) serve to underscore the inherent fragility of this collaboration.

For France to consolidate its role as a central actor within the European Union, it must adopt a comprehensive strategy anchored in what I see as six possible mutually reinforcing pillars⁶⁷. These pillars bridge domestic credibility, industrial leadership, coalition-building, economic governance, defence, and the projection of regulatory and

⁶⁵ Tara Varma (ECFR), Caroline Grassmuck, *What is going on in France?*, Brookings Institution report, December 2024, online at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-is-going-on-in-france/>, accessed September 2025.

⁶⁶ European Commission, Business, Economy, *Euro: Economic recovery, Recovery and Resilience Facility. Country pages: France's recovery and resilience plan*. Available at https://commission.europa.eu/business-economy-euro/economic-recovery/recovery-and-resilience-facility/country-pages/frances-recovery-and-resilience-plan_en, accessed September 2025.

⁶⁷ They originate in my initial article for Visegrad Insight, concerning France's relationship to Central and Eastern Europe. See below.

cultural influence. Together, they may outline a roadmap for France to enhance both its national standing and its European leverage.

1st. Restoring Domestic Credibility

European leadership begins at home: credibility in the EU requires robust growth, fiscal stability, and sustained reform momentum. International institutions such as the IMF and OECD consistently underline the need for spending rationalisation and competitiveness-enhancing measures⁶⁸. To this end, France should publish a credible fiscal consolidation plan, prioritising efficiency rather than blunt social spending cuts. Savings could be achieved by improving the coordination of local government and by streamlining the administration of health and welfare systems. Framing these measures as safeguards for the long-term sustainability of France's social model would enhance political acceptability.

In parallel, France should accelerate supply-side reforms by simplifying permits, encouraging private investment in industry and research, and easing labour regulations where politically feasible. Temporary, targeted tax incentives could be deployed to foster R&D and green investment. The outcome of these actions would be a stronger growth trajectory, a reduction in sovereign risk premiums, and greater influence in EU-level fiscal debates.

2nd. Leading EU Industrial and Technological Sovereignty

Europe's pursuit of competitiveness and strategic autonomy creates an opening for French leadership. France is uniquely positioned to leverage its strengths in nuclear energy, aerospace, defence, and renewable

⁶⁸ OECD Economic Outlook, Volume 2025 Issue 1, "Tackling Uncertainty, Reviving Growth", France. Online at https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/2025/06/oecd-economic-outlook-volume-2025-issue-1_1fd979a8/full-report/france_f5ba9a68.html, retrieved September 2025; International Monetary Fund, *France: Staff Concluding Statement of the 2025 Article IV Mission*, report issued on May 22, 2025, available at <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2025/05/22/CS-France-2025>, accessed September 2025.

industries to drive a continental industrial strategy⁶⁹. Paris could propose a high-ambition EU Industrial Pact, combining co-funding for strategic technologies—such as semiconductors, batteries, green hydrogen, and AI chips—with conditional market access rules to prevent destructive subsidy races; and offering France as headquarters for such an EU industrial coordination office—maybe in one of the ever-taller towers reshaping the skyline of La Défense Paris.

France could further consolidate its position by using institutional weight and their European Council presidencies to secure a Commission work programme centred on “strategic value chains” and joint procurement in defence and green technologies; it would not only create high-value jobs in France but also generate political capital across member states, positioning Paris as the hub of European industrial policy.

3rd. Re-energising the Franco-German Partnership and Building Flexible Coalitions

Historically, cooperation between France and Germany has served as a fundamental pillar of European Union integration; yet recent tensions necessitate that France not only restore its bilateral relations but also expand its coalition-building approach. In the immediate future, it is advisable for Paris to engage in concerted diplomatic initiatives, which should culminate in a bilateral summit with Berlin, focused on establishing a limited number of priority projects—open to the interests and interventions of stakeholders—, for instance stringent reforms to the governance of the Eurozone and strategies for joint defence procurement.

In the medium term, France could sagaciously institutionalise a rotating mini-summit format involving five to eight like-minded states to build momentum behind priority projects and push them in the Council. The inclusion of Central and Eastern Europe, and of Scandinavia, would be a sign of maturity and lessons learned. By embracing the “coalition of the willing” model, which has historically driven advances, France could

⁶⁹ Mario Draghi & alii, *The future of European competitiveness. (Part A). A competitiveness strategy for Europe*, September 2024, online at https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/97e481fd-2dc3-412d-be4c-f152a8232961_en, accessed September 2025.

secure bloc voting and accelerate EU decision-making processes, rather than insisting on unanimity.

4th. Advancing Realistic Eurozone Governance Reforms

Credibility in the euro area depends on sound economic governance, and the EU's 2024 reform of fiscal rules offers a critical window for French influence. Provided that Paris restores its domestic fiscal credibility, it will be well-placed to shape the evolution of eurozone governance⁷⁰. France could advocate for incremental but concrete reforms, including a strengthened fiscal capacity tied to green and defence investments, clearer tools for shock absorption, and stricter—but stabilisation-oriented—enforcement of structural reforms.

To improve political feasibility, reforms should be linked to visible, shared investments, such as a jointly financed “euro resilience fund” with Germany. By positioning itself as a constructive architect of euro stability, France would strengthen its influence both among smaller member states and across Southern Europe.

5th. Driving European Defence and Strategic Autonomy

France's military capabilities—most notably its nuclear deterrent and expeditionary forces—position it as a crucial player in the sphere of European security. With the ongoing conflict born from Russia's aggression towards Ukraine, enhancing European Union defence has emerged as a fundamental area for collective action. It is of the essence for France to capitalise on this momentum by advocating for the establishment of a credible EU rapid-deployment force⁷¹. This initiative should be pursued in conjunction with a *collaborative* defence

⁷⁰ European Commission, Economy and Finance. *Economic and fiscal governance, EU Assessment and monitoring of national economic policies: The Evolution of EU Economic Governance, New economic governance framework*, online at https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/economic-and-fiscal-governance/eu-assessment-and-monitoring-national-economic-policies/evolution-eu-economic-governance/new-economic-governance-framework_en, retrieved September 2025.

⁷¹ Which is in the making, with typically slow progress and recoil from some of the “willing” ...

procurement program, spearheaded by Franco-German and Polish leadership, while also encouraging the engagement of *other* willing member states (—in contrast with the flawed fundamentals of the Franco- and Western-centric European Intervention Initiative).

French defence industries could serve as anchor suppliers for joint projects, while Paris could champion the establishment of an EU defence innovation fund as well⁷², co-financed by France, to stimulate technological development. Diplomatically, France can position itself as a bridge between NATO and the EU, presenting its leadership as complementary to transatlantic security⁷³ while advancing the agenda

⁷² Or transforming the existing, minimalistic EUDIS. The European Union Defence Innovation Scheme (EUDIS) was established as a component of the European Defence Fund (EDF) and is implemented by the European Commission. With an initial budget nearing €2 billion—which is the shadow of a shadow compared to the expenses of the U.S. Department of Defence/War who, in the fiscal year 2024 budget, requested US \$315 billion for weapon systems acquisition (an increase from US \$276 billion in 2023), which includes US \$170 billion for procurement and US \$145 billion for research, development, test and evaluation (R&DTE). EUDIS is designed to support innovative defence initiatives, fortifying the EU's military capabilities and incorporating smaller entities within the defence ecosystem. As of 2025, EUDIS measures are allocated €336.6 million of the total European Defence Fund budget, emphasising the enhancement of participation from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and promoting cross-border innovation throughout Europe.

⁷³ The same complementarity perspective is applied to the debate surrounding France's protective nuclear umbrella extended to Europe; a comprehensive approach by Tobias Wandel, "L'Europe et la dissuasion : quelles options pour aller vers une dissuasion nucléaire européenne?" in *Revue Défense Nationale*, Cahier Choc stratégique, Centre des hautes études militaires, Juillet 2020, pp. 283-298; Emmanuelle Maitre, *La dissuasion nucléaire française et l'enjeu européen*, report for La Fondation pour la recherche stratégique (FRS), June 2024, online at <https://www.frstrategie.org/publications/defense-et-industries/dissuasion-nucleaire-francaise-enjeu-europeen-2024>, retrieved September 2025. France has a total of 290 nuclear warheads compared to Russia's approx. 1,700 deployed warheads and nearly 2,800 stockpiled warheads; enough, however, to devastate vital areas of the Russian state.—On the other hand, competition with the United Kingdom to win the trust of Washington DC as leading partner in European political and military affairs is predetermined to be unwinnable; France built its entire post-1966 identity in the two fields through opposition, sometimes vehement, to American policies or initiatives, for better or for worse. But such a "competition", which tempted the Macron administration during the Biden presidency and at a time when the Brexit was considered to have shattered Britain's international standing, would be also futile. There are several distinct reasons that contribute to the United States' preference for

partnerships with the United Kingdom or a broader European framework, such as NATO or the European Union, rather than France, particularly in contexts involving deep trust. These preferences stem from a combination of historical, structural, and strategic factors. Firstly, the U.S.–UK “special relationship” is grounded in common language, compatible legal traditions, and a history of extensive military collaboration that dates back to World War II, extends through the Cold War, and persists into current conflicts, such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan. This enduring partnership has established a foundational level of trust, which France does not replicate. The discrepancy is primarily attributable to France’s longstanding commitment to strategic autonomy and *esprit d’indépendance* filtered through its status of (former global) great power. Since Charles de Gaulle, France has prioritised national sovereignty and distanced itself from U.S.-led initiatives, with notable examples in the 1966 withdrawal from NATO’s integrated military command, and its opposition to the Iraq War in 2003. Secondly, a notable aspect of institutional variation pertains to intelligence cooperation. The U.S. maintains its most sensitive intelligence-sharing arrangements within the framework of the Five Eyes alliance, which encompasses the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, a collaborative network characterised by shared legal systems, aligned surveillance legislation, and substantial interoperability in areas such as signals intelligence and cybersecurity. France, in contrast, cannot be part of this alliance, a situation attributed in part to differing legal frameworks and historical apprehensions regarding industrial espionage. Thirdly, the United Kingdom’s armed forces exhibit a significant level of integration with those of the United States, particularly in domains such as nuclear deterrence, where the UK’s Trident missile system is fundamentally reliant on American technology. Of course, this integration extends to the operational frameworks of carrier strike groups. In contrast, France maintains a military force that is both capable, competitive and globally deployable; but it adheres to an independent military doctrine and predominantly utilises platforms developed domestically, such as—among many examples—Dassault’s outstanding Rafale fighter jet (instead of American systems like the F-35). This independence constrains the potential for flawless interoperability during joint operations. Fourth, political alignment plays a significant role in reinforcing U.S. trust in the United Kingdom. In the aftermath of Brexit, the UK has maintained a steadfast commitment to Atlanticism and has consistently aligned itself with U.S. strategic priorities. In contrast, France has taken on the role of advocating for European strategic autonomy, which, at times, meant opposing U.S. leadership, ideas and strategic outlook, sometimes at the cost of maintaining credibility among U.S.’s Eastern and Northern European allies. From a U.S. perspective, engaging with NATO or the EU often offers practical advantages. Multilateral frameworks reduce the risk of bilateral friction and enable burden-sharing across multiple European states. France’s advocacy for an autonomous European defence capability can be, and was, perceived in Washington as a potential competitor to NATO, raising concerns about alliance cohesion—which is applicable even during the second Trump presidential mandate, as the White House may interpret it as an attempt to undermine a series of American interests, especially in arms sales. Overall, the

preference of the United States for London over Paris in the context of deep trust partnerships can be attributed to the confluence of historical, legal, and operational affiliations mentioned above, alongside established frameworks for intelligence and cooperation. Although the E.U. presents advantages in terms of scale and efficiency for collective security initiatives, NATO continues to serve as the predominant mechanism for transatlantic defence collaboration. While recognising France as a partner within this landscape (cf. *U.S. Security Cooperation with France. Fact Sheet*, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, January 20, 2025, online at <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-france/>, accessed September 2025), its commitment to maintaining strategic independence may hinder the development of the level of trust and integration that characterises the relationship with the United Kingdom.—Achieving a level of trust with the United States comparable to that enjoyed by the United Kingdom would require France to undertake significant structural, operational, and political adjustments. First, deep intelligence integration is essential. France would need to harmonise its legal frameworks on surveillance and data protection with U.S. standards, enforce rigorous counterintelligence measures to eliminate the risk of leaks, and substantially enhance its cyber and signals intelligence (SIGINT) capabilities to complement U.S. operations. Second, military interoperability would need to be strengthened, with France having to adopt greater interoperability standards, potentially through increased acquisition of U.S. systems or the development of joint force structures, including integrated carrier strike groups and shared logistical frameworks. Third, in terms of political reliability, France would need to temper its autonomy discourse and demonstrate sustained commitment to transatlantic security objectives. Finally, institutionalised defence cooperation would be necessary to formalise this partnership, for instance establishing permanent bilateral mechanisms—such as a Franco-American Defence Council—and launching joint research and development programs in emerging domains like artificial intelligence, cyber warfare, and next-generation weapons systems, that would signal long-term strategic alignment. Collectively, these measures would represent a profound shift in France’s posture, requiring both political will and resource investment to achieve parity with the UK in U.S. trust. Would it be possible? Yes, but with major cultural and strategic shifts: sacrificing autonomy in various areas and align more closely with U.S. global strategy. It would require decades of trust-building and legal harmonisation, while the most considerable obstacle to it is France’s identity as an independent power and leader of European defence. This will not be, structurally and psychologically, the case. However, by creating a Franco-American Defence Council or/and launching joint research and development programs in emerging domains, France could become the U.S.’s top European partner (arguably already competing with the UK and Germany for that spot), strengthening, among others, its role as a leading European pillar of NATO, deepening intelligence ties, and becoming a critical partner.

of European strategic autonomy—as long as it does not serve the predominant, ideologised Francocentric agenda⁷⁴.

The outcome? France anchors Europe's security agenda and gains confidence from member states that want both reinforced security and strategic independence⁷⁵. Leadership is the reward for

⁷⁴ Nor affiliation to the corporate interests of their own “industrial-military complex.” The security of partners and allies cannot be commodified or treated as a transactional relationship without damaging credibility and trust. The notable decline in sympathy for the United States among a surprisingly significant number of European nations in 2025 (cf. Groupe d'études géopolitiques, *In the face of war and Trump, taking the measure of European public opinion*, March 2025, online at <https://geopolitique.eu/en/2025/03/20/in-the-face-of-war-and-trump-taking-the-measure-of-european-public-opinion-10-points-on-our-exclusive-eurobazooka-survey/>, accessed September 2025) should serve as a profound cautionary indicator for the more extreme elements of France's nationalistic elite, who may harbour illusions about the possibility of France acting unilaterally within the framework of the European Union and expect others to accept it.

⁷⁵ For France to emerge as the closest military ally and a de facto coordinator of NATO's Eastern Flank—encompassing states such as Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece—it would need to pursue a comprehensive strategy combining 1° political leadership, 2° capability development, and 3° trust-building measures. This ambition requires a multidimensional approach that addresses operational, institutional, and diplomatic dimensions—practically, acquiring skills for alliance management. The first prerequisite is the articulation of a clear and credible Eastern Flank strategy that aligns with the security concerns of frontline states, particularly their perception of Russia as the primary threat. Steps were taken into that direction, at least in terms of framework. France would need to demonstrate sustained commitment through a permanent or rotational military presence in key regions, notably Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states, serving as tangible evidence of French resolve to contribute to deterrence and defence. In parallel, Paris must intensify diplomatic engagement with Northern, Central and Eastern European capitals, cultivating bilateral and multilateral relationships that position France as a reliable security guarantor rather than the distant, self-centred Western actor it usually is. This strategy implies France operating not only discursive changes, but changes within its own *Weltanschauung* and *raison d'être*. Then, operational credibility hinges on the ability to project and sustain forces rapidly in high-intensity scenarios. France would need to expand its pool of deployable land forces, including armoured brigades and integrated air defence units, capable of reinforcing Eastern Europe on short notice. Complementing land power, enhanced air and naval presence in the Baltic and Black Seas would be essential, alongside closer integration with Nordic defence structures to address Arctic security challenges. Likewise, France could leverage its advanced industry to propose joint procurement and technology-sharing initiatives—covering air systems, drones, and artillery—thereby strengthening interoperability and reducing regional dependence on U.S. platforms. To assume a plenary coordinating role, France must ensure full alignment with NATO standards and operational concepts: standardising equipment and procedures, leading large-scale joint exercises focused on hybrid warfare, cyber defence, and high-intensity conflict, and seeking leadership

duty, accountability, trustworthiness, dependability and strategic management⁷⁶.

positions within NATO's regional command architecture. These steps would not only enhance operational cohesion but also signal France's readiness to shoulder greater responsibility within the Alliance.

Another critical dimension is intelligence sharing and counter-hybrid resilience. France would need to establish secure frameworks for real-time intelligence exchange with Eastern allies, concentrating on Russian military movements and cyber threats. Additionally, using its expertise in cyber defence, France could assist partners in developing improved counter-disinformation and cyberattack mitigation capabilities. Beyond military measures, France could employ political and economic tools to consolidate its influence. Bilateral agreements, complementing NATO's collective security guarantees, would provide additional reassurance to Eastern partners. Simultaneously, defence industrial partnerships—emphasising co-production and technology transfer—could serve as both an economic incentive and a mechanism for deepening strategic interdependence, while augmenting the number of officers from Eastern European allied countries that access and study in French military schools.

Despite these opportunities, significant obstacles remain. Eastern European states traditionally view the United States as the ultimate security guarantor, creating a perception gap that France must overcome through consistent, visible, and long-term credible commitments (questioned by Eastern analysts because of France's political instability and the rise, since 2022, of Russia-friendly parties). Resource constraints pose another challenge, as assuming a leadership role on the Eastern Flank would require substantial increases in defence spending and force projection capabilities. France must also carefully balance its advocacy for European strategic autonomy with its obligations to NATO, framing its initiatives as complementary rather than competitive to the Alliance's core structures.

⁷⁶ Nor a *palme d'or* for grandiloquent orations, as elegant as they may be, nor for anti-Americanism. Paris is invited to learn from the *faux pas* of the past, underlined even 50 years ago: "The object of French foreign policy under de Gaulle was to establish France as the predominant power in Western Europe. His particular vision of France's independence and its grandeur was designed to support that objective. Under de Gaulle, France opposed the political integration of Europe, posed as the sole legitimate spokesman for 'Europe', sought to minimise the role of the United States in Europe (except in defence), and avoided multilateral diplomacy. While Pompidou tailored French goals to a somewhat more realistic appraisal of French resources and interests, his foreign policy conformed to the main thrust of de Gaulle's. Under both de Gaulle and Pompidou the French frequently went out of their way to stimulate mistrust of U.S. objectives in Europe and the world. Beneath their preoccupation with U.S. 'domination' was the Gaullists' concern that the United States opposed their fundamental objective of France's becoming the predominant power in Europe. Ironically, France's strident anti-American tone helped to ensure that France could never dominate Europe. Rather than cementing French leadership in Europe, it often fragmented Europe by forcing the other Europeans to choose between Washington and Paris on major issues where the Europeans had to choose Washington" (1975), in: *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, loc. cit., ut supra. Readers can compare to the following text (2023): "Today, NATO's new direction offers an opportunity for France to make

6th. *Harnessing Regulatory Power and Soft Power (immediate and ongoing)*

Finally, France could leverage Europe's regulatory capacity and cultural diplomacy to extend its influence. The EU has established itself as a global standard-setter in areas such as digital governance and environmental policy. France, with its expertise in AI, industrial decarbonisation, and nuclear technologies, could take the lead in drafting ambitious yet pragmatic regulatory proposals, particularly in

better use of the Alliance and increase its influence within it. To do this, it must focus on greater investment in its existing levers of influence and systematic and sustained promotion of French contributions, such as its commitment on the Eastern flank via the French battalion deployed in Romania. Paris has a number of strengths: its army model is almost complete, and it is continually engaged in military operations. France is also an endowed nuclear power, a country with a solid defence technological and industrial base (DTIB) and is listened to on issues relating to Africa or the Indo-Pacific. There are two possible scenarios for reinventing its role within NATO: 1) A sub-optimal role where France is confined to “guarding the southern flank” of the Alliance. France would probably be marginalised if a major crisis occurred on the eastern flank [=which is what happened during the first year and a half of Russia's war against Ukraine]. 2) France assumes more extensive responsibilities on the Eastern flank. It actively participates in the global deterrence and defence posture. The south-eastern flank could provide an opportunity for France to become a framework nation, at this regional level [=by now, accomplished]. Already involved in Romania, Paris could find another advantage in this geographical area in that it borders the Mediterranean. The French Navy has a greater presence in the southern area than on the seas adjacent to the northern and eastern flanks [= strategic weakness]; the Air Force and Space Force know the area well, having intervened there regularly, and two countries (Greece and Croatia) now have Rafales. Assuming greater responsibility within NATO would generate additional influence that would allow France to put forward once again its aspiration to build a ‘European pillar’ within the Atlantic Alliance. This ambition is all the more legitimate given that the Americans may feel that Europe must now take over and ensure the core of NATO posture in the face of Russia” (Guillaume Garnier, *France's Place Within NATO: Toward a Strategic Aggiornamento?*, report for IFRI, June 2023, online at <https://www.ifri.org/en/studies/frances-place-within-nato-toward-strategic-aggiornamento-0>, accessed September 2025). Reading these lines, the legitimate question of any Central and Eastern European analyst aware of France's historical choices is whether the Hexagon's interest in asserting itself as a leader of European security stems primarily for nationalist-Gaullist motivations—where posturing comes as an ingredient—or from an authentic, unpretentious commitment to enhancing the security of the continent. *À bon entendeur...*

fields such as AI safety standards, certification for green hydrogen, and industrial emissions rules⁷⁷.

Complementing this regulatory role, France should expand its investment in EU-wide cultural and educational initiatives—such as the Erasmus programme—and strengthen francophone networks and public diplomacy campaigns, particularly in candidate countries and smaller member states. These measures would not only reinforce France’s reputation as a thought leader but also build enduring goodwill across the Union.

The six strategic pillars outlined herein collectively form a coherent framework for France’s pursuit of European leadership. The restoration of domestic credibility, the establishment of industrial sovereignty, the revitalisation of coalitions, the advancement of eurozone reforms, the enhancement of defence capabilities, and the assertion of regulatory and cultural influence are interdependent efforts. By implementing this comprehensive strategy, France is poised to buttress its standing and authority within the European Union, secure economic and geopolitical objectives, and emerge as a pivotal architect in shaping the future of Europe.

Central and Eastern Europe, and Scandinavia: Co-architects of Europe’s Sovereignty

Midway between the Xanadu and the American options, if France and Germany demonstrate adequate political maturity, the third way corresponds to the reinforcement of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) as an EU priority equal to what Kissinger was calling *Westbindung*. As it happens, it would also advance the interests of the United States.

In doing so, it is imperative to pursue two strategic pathways.

First, positioning the 3SI as the *foundational element for NATO’s military mobility corridors* along the expanded Eastern Flank from Finland to Romania is essential. A collaborative effort involving NATO, the European Commission, and member states of the 3SI should be initiated to assess and prioritise critical infrastructure and transport corridors that maximise both economic and security outcomes. The enhancement of road and rail networks that connect NATO’s front lines to significant economic centres and strategic ports—specifically Trieste

⁷⁷ M. Draghi et alii, op. cit., loc. cit.

(Adriatic), Gdańsk (Baltic), and Constanța (Black Sea)—is vital. Such improvements will not only facilitate connectivity across the three seas but will also serve to reinforce deterrence against Russian aggression and support the reconstruction of Ukraine in the post-war context. This strategic alignment of the 3SI with Europe's broader security and economic framework will establish it as a foundation for Europe's Eastern regional stability.

Second, the establishment of the 3SI as the principal framework for the European Global Gateway initiative⁷⁸, in collaboration with the European Commission, is necessary to nurture trusted connectivity with adjacent regions.

To the south, the 3SI has the potential to utilise Trieste as a linkage to the Indo-Mediterranean trade corridor, propelled by nations such as India, the Gulf monarchies, and Israel, thereby integrating with the

⁷⁸ The Global Gateway is positioned as Europe's strategic response to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Launched in 2021 with the goal of mobilising investment of up to €300 billion by 2027, the initiative introduced its first series of flagship projects in Africa and Latin America in 2023, with a notable emphasis on aligning with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, the effort of balancing competition with the BRI while adhering to the principles of the SDGs presents significant challenges. Internal divisions within the European Union and pressures from traditional allies in the Global South further complicate this landscape. Obstacles arise from multiple fronts: within the EU, divergent viewpoints frequently result in conflicting policies. A commitment to development entails prioritising the SDGs in investment decisions, while also focusing on the green transition, technology and knowledge transfer, and socioeconomic goals such as job creation in partner countries. Furthermore, it is crucial that partner nations share comparable political values (see Alicia García-Herrero, *David and Goliath: The EU's Global Gateway versus China's Belt and Road Initiative*, Bruegel think-tank paper, December 2024, online at <https://www.bruegel.org/newsletter/david-and-goliath-eus-global-gateway-versus-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative>, accessed September 2025.) On the other hand, the pursuit of strategic autonomy requires careful consideration of the needs for bolstering European industries and their positions within global value chains: this is why it would be an oversimplification to assert that the Global Gateway serves solely as an antithesis to China's BRI (a perspective often held by partner nations). Presently, while the initiative ostensibly prioritises development, the flagship projects do not entirely fulfil expectations, as they have been designed to support the objective of strategic autonomy. Hence the need to connect the Gateway to Europe's Centre, East and North—it would regenerate and stabilise the entire initiative in ways that would serve the triple purpose of reinforcing Europe's autonomy, NATO's efficiency and the integration of Central, Eastern and Northern Europe in the Union's extended core.

India-Middle East-European Economic Corridor (IMEC) to foster a “New Golden Road” for trade between India and Europe⁷⁹.

To the east, the advancement of a Central Asia-Caucasus-Europe Economic Corridor (CACE)⁸⁰ could enhance navigation within the Black Sea and establish connections between Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Europe⁸¹.

⁷⁹ The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor is a planned economic corridor that aims to bolster economic development by fostering connectivity and economic integration between Subcontinental Asia, the Persian Gulf and Europe, on a proposed route from India to Europe through the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Italy or Greece (thus avoiding sensitive areas like Iran, Syria, Lebanon, bypassing the Houthi blockade of the Red Sea, and also contributing to the consolidation of the Abraham Accords). The project had been delayed due to the ongoing Gaza war.

⁸⁰ The Central Asia-Caucasus-Europe Economic Corridor is a multimodal route connecting China and Central Asia to Europe via the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus (Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Turkey), offering an alternative to Russian-controlled routes. See: Kaush Arha, George Scutaru, Mamuka Tsereteli, *The Case for CACE*, National Interest, February 2025, online at <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/silk-road-rivalries/the-case-for-cace>, accessed September 2025.

⁸¹ The Indo-Pacific would not be a stretch. Despite the geographic distance between them, Central and Eastern Europe and the Indo-Pacific region encounter comparable economic, political, and security challenges, because of the present of authoritarian neighbouring countries. As regional conflicts grow more intertwined, the ongoing war in Ukraine provides essential lessons not only for Taiwan but also for the wider Indo-Pacific area. For CEE nations, particularly those most vulnerable to Russian actions—such as Poland, the Baltic states, and the Czech Republic—China’s position on Ukraine, increasingly pro-Russian, has markedly transformed their perception of Beijing. Strategies previously aimed to balance relationships with the “Middle Empire” as a means of countering Russian influence have largely been discarded, as these countries increasingly acknowledge Beijing as a facilitator of Russian aggression (with one notable exception: Hungary, open to Chinese banking and business). This evolving viewpoint is indicative of a broader trend within the CEE region since the first Trump Administration, where initial enthusiasm regarding Chinese investment has transitioned into considerable frustration due to a series of unmet economic expectations. The cooperation framework between China and CEE has effectively become dormant and dented, particularly following the withdrawal of the Baltic states. China’s overall influence in the region appears to be waning, attributed to its tacit support for Russia and the intensifying divisions among regional players. Consequently, Beijing has placed greater emphasis on cultivating bilateral relations with specific nations, such as Hungary, while others have fortified their alignment with the policies of the European Union (EU) and NATO. CEE states have consequently gravitated towards constructive collaborations with Indo-Pacific middle powers like Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, perceived as reliable partners that share commitments to democratic values and the rule of law. The Czech Republic even formulated an Indo-Pacific strategy aimed at

Furthermore, to the north, the 3SI can create linkages with Baltic and Arctic NATO states, ensuring the security of critical infrastructure and resources in the Grand Arctic North that includes Scandinavia and Greenland⁸², as well as critical infrastructure for the security of Europe and of its NATO grand ally.

This is why the Greek membership of the 3SI in 2023—and the announced intention of Italy to join the group—was a *coup de maître*, capable of transforming the 3SI into a pivotal force for security and prosperity in Europe. To finance this vision, the 3SI should endeavour to attract private investment by leveraging matching sovereign funds, offering advantageous financing options, and providing credit assurances.

A dedicated 3SI-NATO Fund could be established to support dual-use infrastructure, while the formation of two 3SI-G7 and 3SI-G20⁸³ respectively working groups could facilitate the coordination of financing from development finance corporations.

If effectively executed, the expanded strategy of the 3SI could yield transformative outcomes for Europe's North, Centre and East, reminiscent of the wide-ranging impact of the Marshall Plan in Europe's

reducing its economic dependence on China, especially by diversifying its ties with Taiwan. Taiwan itself has secured allies within CEE, highlighted by the 2020 visit of Czech Senate President Miloš Vystrčil to Taipei. Furthermore, Taiwan's Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) has initiated the construction of a semiconductor manufacturing plant in Germany, with the Czech Republic and other members of the Visegrad Group anticipated to serve as critical component suppliers. Japan has forged a cooperative platform with the Visegrad countries, while South Korean enterprises have made noteworthy investments in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland. In 2024, the Czech government opted for South Korea's KHNP over France's EDF to undertake the construction of new nuclear reactors at the Dukovany power station. For a more detailed perspective, see Pavel Havlíček, Ivana Karásková, Danila Naumov, *Interlinked Instability: Central and Eastern Europe and the Indo-Pacific in a Changing Geopolitical Landscape*, Association for International Affairs paper, February 2025, online at <https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Interdependence-between-Indopacific-and-Eastern-Europe.pdf> (accessed September 2025).

⁸² Whose strategic value was, yet again, sharply amplified by the U.S. vocal interest to acquire it—compared to EU's quiescent stance... (Kaush Arha, Alexander B. Gray, Tom Dans, *It's Time for a U.S.-Greenland Free Association Agreement*, National Interest, October 2024, online at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/its-time-us-greenland-free-association-agreement-213327>, accessed September 2025).

⁸³ Minus Russia.

West decades ago. It would also leave an enduring legacy for prominent leaders, including Presidents Donald Trump, Emmanuel Macron, chancellor Fridrich Merz, in the enhancement of the transatlantic alliance. The Kissinger equation would be finally solved—with Europe and the Atlantic community reinforced and successful.

How can Central and Eastern Europe Shape—and Change—the 21st Century?

After 35 years, Central and Eastern Europe has evolved from post-Soviet reconstruction to a dynamic influencer of European and global affairs. As seen above, its potential impact on the 21st century arises from geopolitical leverage, economic resilience, technological innovation, energy transitions, and a certain cultural endurance.

As of September 2025, current trends suggest that CEE could redefine global multipolarity amid U.S.-China rivalries, Russian aggression, and climate imperatives, though its trajectory depends on overcoming internal challenges and external pressures.

Geopolitically, CEE has shifted from periphery to power broker, reshaping security dynamics in Europe and beyond. As frontline NATO members, countries like Poland and the Baltic states have exceeded the alliance's 2% GDP defence spending target, with Poland targeting 4.8% by 2026⁸⁴, thereby strengthening deterrence against Russian threats. In the context of the ongoing Ukraine conflict, CEE could drive NATO's eastward expansion and hybrid defence strategies, influencing international norms on sovereignty and potentially facilitating post-war reconstruction to integrate Ukraine into the EU.

Ultimately, by exporting models like Estonia's cyber defence, CEE can influence global security paradigms, compelling a reassessment of spheres of influence in a multipolar era⁸⁵.

⁸⁴ *Poland plans record defence spending of 4.8% GDP in 2026 budget along with lower deficit*, Notes from Poland, online at <https://notesfrompoland.com/2025/08/29/poland-plans-record-defence-spending-of-4-8-gdp-in-2026-budget-along-with-lower-deficit/>, accessed September 2025.

⁸⁵ Ted Galen Carpenter, *Accepting Spheres of Influence in the 21st Century*, Cato Institute paper, May 2014, online at <https://www.cato.org/commentary/accepting-spheres-influence-21st-century>, accessed September 2025.

Initiatives such as the Three Seas project, linking the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas, aim to diminish dependence on Russian energy and Chinese infrastructure, fostering a north-south axis that counters Beijing's Belt and Road ambitions. Yet, internal divisions—exemplified by Hungary's pro-Russia/China orientation—pose risks, potentially fracturing the region into contested spheres amid a U.S.-led versus China-Russia alignment.

Demographic declines, projected at 30-50% by 2100 in some states, could erode military and economic strength unless mitigated by immigration or technological solutions.

Economically, CEE serves as Europe's growth engine, driving convergence and resilience in an era of global fragmentation. Post-1989 reforms have propelled economies toward EU standards, with Poland's GDP reaching \$1 trillion and Romania's \$370 billion. EU integration has attracted substantial foreign direct investment⁸⁶, transforming the region into a hub for manufacturing in automobiles, electronics, and renewables, thereby enhancing intra-EU trade which should offer sufficient buffering against U.S. tariffs⁸⁷.

A more structured Central and Eastern Europe could amplify this, generating over \$1.5 trillion in combined GDP and shaping digital trade standards. Innovation, though reliant on Western technology adaptation, is accelerating in AI, fintech, and venture capital, with centres in Warsaw and Tallinn drawing billions in funding⁸⁸. Nations like the Czech Republic

⁸⁶ *Central and Eastern Europe: going for growth*, BNP Paribas report, January 2025, online at <https://cib.bnpparibas/central-and-eastern-europe-going-for-growth/>, accessed September 2025.

⁸⁷ Peter Virovacz, Kinga Havasi, *CEE countries could be more resilient to the tariff threat than you might think*, ING Bank Hungary report, online at <https://think.ing.com/articles/cee-tariff-pressure-progress-growth-trade/>, accessed September 2025.

⁸⁸ *The Rise of Central and Eastern Europe in Venture Capital and AI Innovation*, online report available at <https://complexdiscovery.com/the-rise-of-central-and-eastern-europe-in-venture-capital-and-ai-innovation/>, examining the insights from Forbes' "Midas List Europe 2024" and The Recursive's "State of AI in Central and Eastern Europe 2024", offering a concise look at the evolution of Europe's venture capital and AI ecosystems. While the rise of Central and Eastern Europe has garnered attention, this progress represents a broadening of Europe's innovation landscape rather than a shift away from traditional hubs. See *Forbes unveils the 2024 Midas List Europe: The definitive ranking of the top 25 venture capital investors in Europe and the Middle East* (Forbes, December 2024, retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com>),

and Hungary link such advancements to growth, potentially exporting models to the Global South through EU-Africa collaborations⁸⁹. By 2030, CEE might account for 20% of Europe's tech output, influencing global AI ethics and supply chains⁹⁰.

and The Recursive, *The state of AI in CEE 2024*, retrieved from <https://therecursive.com> (accessed September 2025).—On CEE innovation, with limits and potential, see Matteo Ferrazzi (European Investment Bank), Jochen Schanz (idem), Francesca Guadagno (Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies), Tomas Slacik (Oesterreichische Nationalbank), *The future of EU competitiveness: the role of Central Eastern European countries*, SUELF Policy Brief, n° 1016 / 31 October 2024, online at <https://www.suerf.org/publications/suerf-policy-notes-and-briefs/the-future-of-eu-competitiveness-the-role-of-central-eastern-european-countries/>, accessed September 2025. The report emphasises potential growth opportunities and recommends strategies to mitigate obstacles to innovation, identifying three key areas: enhancing human capital, promoting innovation, and tackling energy intensity along with its comparatively high expenses. Essential actions involve boosting labour market participation, facilitating access to start-up funding and risk capital, and decreasing the region's dependence on brown energy, especially by investing in grid and generation infrastructure and fostering the establishment of more sustainable businesses.

⁸⁹ These pass largely unnoticed. Trade relations between Central and Eastern Europe and sub-Saharan Africa have seen a notable increase over the past 20 years: a compelling argument for enhanced economic re-engagement, particularly regarding investment, which could foster inclusive growth in both areas. “Businesses in Central and Eastern European countries bring to the table a mix of advantages as part of the private sector of developed economies but having emerged out of transition experiences. While the Central and Eastern European private sector offers the technologies, and skills in sectors such as agribusiness and ICT, that are important to development in Africa, it also offers advantages that some other players might lack, such as the ability to navigate difficult markets (an area in which it already has experience), and a positive image created through a meaningful contribution to African development in the past, as well as a lack of colonial ‘baggage’” cf. Damir Kurtagic, *Central and Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa. The Potential of Investment Partnerships for Mutual Benefit*, Chatham House report, October 2019, online at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2019/10/central-and-eastern-europe-and-sub-saharan-africa> (accessed September 2025); Stefan Cibian, *Central and Eastern Europe and EU–Africa Relations After 2020*, Chatham House paper, online at <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/11/central-and-eastern-europe-and-eu-africa-relations-after-2020>, accessed September 2025.

⁹⁰ *Central and Eastern Europe: A rising force in global tech and innovation*, Absolvo Budapest report, online at <https://www.absolvo.eu/insights/central-and-eastern-europe-a-rising-force-in-global-tech-and-innovation> (accessed September 2025). For instance, Poland's strengths in manufacturing, defence, and technology could reshape EU supply chains amid U.S.-China decoupling; Romania's IT outsourcing and renewables might drive digital services and energy diversification; the Czech Republic's automotive and innovation sectors could facilitate tech adaptation for

While energy volatility and deindustrialisation present hurdles, CEE's adaptability offers a blueprint for resilient globalisation in developing contexts. In the realm of energy and climate, CEE's historical vulnerabilities position it to pioneer Europe's energy transition, with broader global implications. Efforts to diversify from Russian gas through LNG imports, nuclear power, and renewables frame clean energy as a geopolitical imperative⁹¹. Nuclear initiatives in Poland and Romania could slash EU emissions by 10-15% by 2040, setting precedents for fossil fuel phase-outs worldwide. Leveraging its manufacturing prowess, the region might foster "green industrial innovation," exporting technologies to Asia and Africa in high-ambition scenarios. CEE's advocacy for balanced transitions—prioritising security alongside decarbonisation—could moderate EU climate policies and global Paris Agreement applications⁹². This *just transition* approach⁹³, integrating equity with energy shifts, may inspire coal-reliant countries like India.

However, overdependence on U.S. LNG risks new vulnerabilities, though successful navigation could hasten global carbon neutrality by exemplifying viable paths for emerging economies.

Central and Eastern Europe's cultural soft power, while often understated, draws upon a rich tapestry of historical resilience (that facilitates the return of nationalism), and conservative or traditional values, generating a counter-narrative to alleged or perceived Western

emerging markets; and Hungary's pharmaceuticals and electric vehicles, despite attracting Chinese investment, hold potential for green industrial pivots. See as well: Jason Wardell, *CEE in the spotlight. Macroeconomic insights for decision making in Central and Eastern Europe*, PwC CEE Energy, Utility & Resources paper, PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2024, online at <https://cee.pwc.com/cee-in-the-spotlight/the-energy-transition-in-cee-balancing-energy-security-growth-and-the-green-agenda.html>, accessed September 2025.

⁹¹ *Strategy at the Geopolitical Crossroads: The Imperative for Secure and Clean Energy in Central and Eastern Europe*, Clean Air Task Force report, Boston USA, June 2025, online at <https://cdn.catf.us/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/27134635/cee-geopolitics-report.pdf>, accessed September 2025.

⁹² For Central and Eastern Europe's position on the Agreement, Tomas Maltby, Matúš Mišík, "The Influence of CEE Countries on EU Climate and Energy Policy", in *Energy Transitions in Central and Eastern Europe: The Political Economy of Climate and Energy Policy*, Cambridge Studies on Environment, Energy and Natural Resources Governance, Cambridge University Press, 2024, pp.129-151.

⁹³ Darren McCauley, Raphael Heffron, "Just transition: Integrating climate, energy and environmental justice", in *Energy Policy*, volume 119, August 2018, pp. 1-7.

“decadence”. The region’s cultural model is largely rooted in the Christian heritage and a certain legacy of anti-authoritarianism, which significantly influences discussions surrounding identity within the European Union⁹⁴. Therefore, CEE’s alignment with “traditionalism”—or rather *neotraditionalism*—may resonate less at home for the younger generations, but it does with conservative movements internationally, reshaping the trajectories of cultural globalisation⁹⁵ and establishing CEE as a potentially significant reservoir of conservative ideas.

⁹⁴ Hungary’s Orbán says Meloni is ‘Christian sister’ who shares cultural roots, Reuters, September 6, 2024, online at <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/hungarys-orban-says-meloni-is-christian-sister-who-shares-cultural-roots-2024-09-06/>, accessed September 2025; Francesca De Benedetti, *Giorgia Meloni Is Orbánizing the EU*, Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) paper, April 2024, online at <https://www.iwm.at/publication/iwmpost-article/giorgia-meloni-is-orbanizing-the-eu>, accessed September 2025.

⁹⁵ The recent resurgence of traditionalism and conservatism in Central and Eastern Europe is often interpreted as a cultural counter-response to the rapid processes of modernisation, globalisation, and the influence of external factors. Scholars frequently characterise this phenomenon as a populist rebellion against modernity, in which tradition is conceived as a defence against open societies and cosmopolitan values. Within this context, Western liberal ideologies are portrayed as foreign or threatening, prompting a revival of mythologised historical narratives and symbols integral to national identity. Several fundamental factors contribute to this conservative shift. Historical legacies are particularly significant; the communist period failed to entirely obliterate preexisting cultural traditions; instead, these societies retained strong ties to family, religion, and national identity—valued as shelters against totalitarian ideologies and generating bonds that resurface prominently following the political transformations of 1989. Moreover, while globalisation and integration into the European Union have provided economic benefits, they have also induced anxieties regarding cultural homogenisation and the erosion of a certain interpretation of national sovereignty, intensifying conservative responses. In times of uncertainty, traditional values are increasingly regarded as stabilising forces that offer continuity. The national / conservative / sovereigntist trend manifests through a pronounced emphasis on family values, religious doctrines, and national heritage, frequently accompanied by scepticism toward certain versions of multiculturalism and “liberal-progressive” social norms. However, these tendencies are not uniform across the region; they display considerable variation that is shaped by unique national histories and political contexts. Furthermore, these dynamics are closely intertwined with populism, as populist movements leverage traditionalist rhetoric to position themselves as protectors of an “authentic” national culture in opposition to perceived corrupt elites and external influences. This interaction has led to what some analysts refer to as “neo-feudal” tendencies, where personal loyalties and informal networks increasingly overshadow established institutional frameworks. See Anna Aspelund, *Conservative values have a different effect on political orientation in Central and*

In summation, CEE possesses the potential to exert considerable influence by exemplifying endurance and adaptability. Its capacity to redefine 21st-century Europe as increasingly eastward-focused hinges on overcoming both internal divisions and external pressures. In more optimistic scenarios, CEE could become a driving force for a multipolar and resilient world; conversely, in a more pessimistic view, it risks becoming a contested area that exacerbates global instability, though intermediate developments can also be conceived.

1. An *optimistic scenario* would involve Central and Eastern Europe undergoing a transformative pivot, emerging as a central force in reinigorating the European Union-NATO alliance and reshaping the continent's trajectory, thus global interaction. This evolution positions the region— potentially encompassing a post-conflict Ukraine—not merely as a peripheral buffer but as the foundational pillars of Europe's defence architecture. Drawing on its historical encounters with Russian aggression, CEE contributes to a robust deterrence strategy that considerably impacts on the EU foreign policy (even against attempts of “historical reconciliation” with Russia by France and Germany), and—together with the U.S.—cultivates a cohesive security community, enhancing the region's (and Europe's) resilience against external threats. Economically, the region capitalises on its dynamic information technology sectors, a highly skilled workforce, and significant investments (partly originating in Brussels) to drive innovation and growth. Key initiatives in sustainable energy, including nuclear advancements in Romania, Hungary and Poland, and hydrogen production, establish CEE as a vanguard in the global energy transition. Complementary infrastructure endeavours, such as the Rail Baltica high-speed rail network and the Three Seas Initiative, bolster intra-EU connectivity,

Eastern European countries than they do in the West, London School of Economics blog, European Politics and Policy, July 2013, online at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2013/07/31/conservative-values-have-a-different-effect-on-political-orientation-in-central-and-eastern-european-countries-than-they-do-in-the-west/>, accessed September 2025; for neotraditionalism, Francesco Melito, “Anti-colonial neo-traditionalism in Central-Eastern Europe: A theoretical examination”, in *New Perspectives* 30 (1), October 2022, online at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/364352196_Anti-colonial_neo-traditionalism_in_Central-Eastern_Europe_A_theoretical_examination, accessed September 2025.

fostering economic interdependence and positioning the region as a hub for technological and industrial progress. Politically and socially, while nationalist-populist currents may well endure, they mature into a pragmatic emphasis on national sovereignty that eschews illiberal excesses. In this framework, the region offers a vital counterweight within the EU, tempering tendencies toward over-centralisation while upholding democratic principles and the rule of law. This balanced approach not only stabilises internal governance but also enriches the broader European discourse on integration and autonomy, recovering policies intended to be applied since the early 1990s. These developments could culminate in CEE's transcendence of its historical marginality, assuming a leadership role in continental renewal. Through spearheading advancements in defence, digital governance, and energy transformation, the region elevates Europe's global stature, enabling it to navigate relations with major powers such as the United States, China, and Russia with greater assertiveness and strategic depth.

2. In a *worst-case scenario*, Central and Eastern Europe may find itself in a state of heightened vulnerability and fragmentation, which could exacerbate existing instabilities at both European and global levels. This trajectory, characterised by prolonged conflicts and internal disintegration, could position the region as a liability within the international political landscape, ultimately undermining its capacity to function as a strategic connector between Eastern and Western nations. Geopolitically, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine may either extend indefinitely or settle into a stalemate, which could strain the cohesion of NATO and catalyse a U.S. shift of focus towards Asia. This pivot would leave Central and Eastern Europe increasingly susceptible to aggression from Russia, known to employ hybrid warfare tactics such as cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and paramilitary incursions. In response, certain states within the region might pursue aggressive militarisation to enhance their defences, while others may lean towards neutrality or develop pro-Russian stances, resulting in further fragmentation of alliances and intensifying security dilemmas across Europe. Economically, the region continues to grapple with persistent issues such as brain drain, demographic decline, and reliance on outdated

energy infrastructure, which may trap it in a cycle of stagnation, diminishing its competitive edge on the global stage. As foreign direct investment shifts toward more rule-of-law compliant regions such as Western Europe and Asia, Central and Eastern Europe becomes increasingly vulnerable to exploitative influences, including Chinese debt diplomacy and leverage from Russia through renewed energy dependency. This vulnerability not only stifles innovation in critical sectors like information technology and green energy but also perpetuates a cycle of underdevelopment, rendering the region an economic drag on the European Union. Politically and socially, the rise of illiberalism erodes democratic institutions within the region, fostering trends toward authoritarianism that create deepening rifts between European Union structures in Brussels and national governments. These conflicts may paralyse EU decision-making processes, solidifying east-west divisions within the bloc and inhibiting any collective advancement. Additionally, societal polarisation, driven by nationalist rhetoric and external interference, undermines social cohesion and hampers efforts to effectively manage demographic and migratory challenges. On a global scale, rather than acting as a constructive intermediary, Central and Eastern Europe risks evolving into a zone of chronic instability, lacking full alignment with Western frameworks and the capability to resist external influence. Its role in the geopolitical context of the 21st century may become predominantly negative, serving as a catalyst for continental fragmentation, recurrent conflicts, and economic liabilities that impede Europe's ability to assert itself amid rivalries with major powers such as the United States, China, and Russia.

3. In the *middle-path scenario*, Central and Eastern Europe represents a region similar to contested crossroads, wherein strategic ambiguity prevails as it navigates competing influences. This situation results in neither significant transformation nor outright fragmentation. Geopolitically, the sustained presence of NATO contributes a degree of stability to the region; however, CEE continues to confront uncertainties arising from the variability of U.S. commitments. Although the European Union is making strides toward partial defence integration, comprehensive cohesion remains elusive, and CEE primarily assumes a reactive posture in response to external

pressures exerted by powers such as Russia and China. Economically, the region would be characterised by moderate growth, bolstered by investments in technology and manufacturing sectors. Nevertheless, demographic challenges and governance inconsistencies impose constraints on long-term economic vitality. While advancements in energy diversification are evident, reliance on coal persists in key economies, including Poland, which consequently tempers the pace of innovation and moves toward sustainability. Politically and socially, the landscape exhibits oscillations between pro-European orientations and resurgences of nationalist or sovereigntist governance. Periodic disputes regarding the rule of law strain relations with Brussels; however, outright rupture is averted. In this milieu, CEE plays a significant role in EU deliberations, operating more as a veto-wielding counterbalance than as a proactive, visionary force. Globally, CEE would remain a pivotal swing region, alternating between close alignment with Western Europe and the United States and adopting hedging strategies that can impede collective action. Its influence is notable in modulating the pace of European integration and the continent's overall trajectory.

Central and Eastern Europe plays a pivotal role in enhancing the European Union's overall significance by endowing it with essential strategic depth across geographical, security, and economic dimensions, extending organically from the Atlantic Ocean to the Black and Baltic Seas. Should the interests of CEE remain sidelined or inadequately integrated into the priorities of the Franco-German axis and its Western counterparts, the region's nations possess the capacity to cultivate alternative alliances with other global actors, including the United States or various Eurasian entities.

For Central and Eastern European nations, pursuing comprehensive cooperation with the United States through a formal compact or investigating partnership paradigms like the "Xanadu" initiative in conjunction with an expanded Eurasian framework could yield substantial geopolitical and geoeconomic benefits. Moreover, unburdened by a colonial heritage, these European states are uniquely equipped to interact with the Global South through innovative lenses and methodologies, distinct from those historically adopted by Western Europe, even if such engagements necessitate unconventional tactics.

In light of this, it is imperative for Paris and Berlin to reassess key elements of their approach: first, ensuring the consistent inclusion of principal CEE stakeholders in any frameworks for joint governance; and second, refraining from amicable engagements with political actors whose strategic objectives threaten the sovereignty of Central and Eastern Europe, and of Scandinavia. Without the incorporation of the Three Seas region, the European Union hazards regression into a geopolitically attenuated entity, relegated to a peripheral status within Western Eurasia. This outcome would evoke the pre-mid-1990s era yet stripped of the aspirational momentum once provided by the European integration process, rendering it a dispiriting vestige of a political endeavour that, under Franco-German stewardship, failed to secure enduring allegiance across two generations of Europeans.

Appendix

Building a European NATO Pillar by Enhancing French Leadership in the European Union and NATO: A Phased Strategic Roadmap

In an era of geopolitical uncertainty, France stands poised to assert a pivotal role in shaping the future of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. This strategic vision encompasses domestic reforms to bolster credibility, deepened cooperation within the EU, and targeted military engagements to position France as the de facto coordinator among Eastern-flank NATO allies—Sweden, Finland, Poland, Romania, and Greece. Leveraging France’s substantial industrial capabilities and military assets, which include nuclear deterrent systems and expeditionary forces, this strategy underscores the importance of multilateral engagement, adherence to NATO’s priorities, and conformity with established frameworks such as the EU’s Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and NATO’s Strategic Concept. This text below endeavours to delineate a thorough, phased implementation plan that integrates risk management strategies and success metrics, thereby facilitating the realisation of this vision into a sustained sphere of influence for France within these critical geopolitical institutions.

A. Potential Roadmap for French Leadership

A credible pathway to EU leadership begins with sequenced reforms that link domestic modernisation to broader European objectives. This strategy prioritises fiscal credibility, industrial resilience, and security

cooperation, while addressing potential challenges through proactive mitigation.

Short-Term Priorities (6–12 Months): France should initiate reforms by announcing a comprehensive domestic package with explicit timelines, framing these as essential for EU-wide stability and aligning with International Monetary Fund (IMF) recommendations. Concurrently, a Franco-German bilateral workstream would reset cooperation, complemented by a five- or six-state “industrial resilience” mini-summit to foster early momentum. In the security realm, proposing a European Defence Procurement Initiative—for instance—, complete with scope and budget details, would reinforce France’s role. Additional actions include launching a Domestic Reform Communication Strategy and hosting a Franco-German mini-summit on industrial and eurozone agendas.

Medium-Term Priorities (1–3 Years): Building on initial gains, France should advocate for a eurozone governance package featuring conditional investment instruments, as highlighted in ongoing policy debates. Securing agreements for multi-country projects in strategic sectors—such as semiconductors, batteries, hydrogen, and artificial intelligence—would align with the European Commission’s technological sovereignty goals. Further steps involve pushing for the adoption of a Euro-Resilience Fund, formalising an EU Rapid Deployment Unit, and establishing joint procurement pipelines.

Long-Term Priorities (3+ Years): To ensure durability, France should institutionalise achievements by creating joint procurement agencies, permanent funds, and rotating expert summits for ongoing cooperation. This may well enhance France’s influence in Commission agenda-setting, portfolio allocations, and Council decisions, cementing its position within an evolving EU architecture.

Several challenges could impede progress, of which the most frequent and internationally known is domestic backlash to reforms that risks eroding furthermore France’s political capital. This can be mitigated by framing initiatives as safeguards for the social model, with gradual implementation and protections for vulnerable groups—in line with IMF guidance, if necessary. The resistance exhibited by Germany and other major states underscores the need for the establishment of co-leadership roles and the formation of multipolar coalitions with nations such as Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and various Nordic

partners. Furthermore, potential future enlargement of the European Union may once again be viewed as a dilution of France's influence; this situation necessitates proactive engagement with candidate states, positioning them as integration partners rather than merely as actors with veto power. Institutional inertia can be countered through pilot projects demonstrating effective feasibility.

Progress will be evaluated through specific, measurable benchmarks. Within a span of two years, it is anticipated that a minimum of two significant initiatives, spearheaded by France within the European Union, will be adopted in areas such as industrial policy, defence, or governance of the eurozone. The assessment of fiscal credibility will be conducted through an analysis of improvements in sovereign risk indicators, alongside evaluations of sustainability and growth from the OECD and IMF. The efficacy of coalitions will be exemplified by the achievement of qualified majorities on key strategic files within the Council, whereas the diffusion of norms will be indicated by the adoption of regulations authored by French entities and the expansion of France's cultural and educational programs.

*B. Potential Phased Roadmap for France as Close(st)
Military Ally and De Facto Coordinator with Eastern-Flank
NATO Allies (2025–2035) within NATO structures—
not in lieu of them*

The ensuing chapter is to be regarded as an intellectual exploration aiming primarily to elucidate potential frameworks rather than to advocate for immediate policy implementation. I acknowledge that for France to feasibly adopt such a strategy, a substantial transformation—in political vision, along with shifts in military and diplomatic approaches, and a considerable enhancement of its economic foundations—would be necessary.

Consequently, the proposals delineated herein are exploratory in character, intended to foster reflection and engage in discourse, rather than to imply that the present conditions are conducive to their direct application.

The proposals build on existing NATO command arrangements, France's current leadership in Romania (Mission AIGLE), and EU defence-cooperation instruments, while staying anchored in NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept and the Alliance's "360degree" approach⁹⁶.

Guiding principles (before initiation)

- *NATO-first framing.* Publish a French *Eastern Flank Engagement Concept* that explicitly subordinates all initiatives to NATO plans and command relationships (Joined Force Command / JFC Brunssum; HQ Multinational Corps Northeast in Szczecin; HQ Multinational Division Southeast in Bucharest). This avoids duplication and signals that France seeks to reinforce NATO's posture rather than create parallel structures⁹⁷.
- *Work with all target Allies symmetrically.* Sweden (NATO member since 7 March 2024) and Finland (since 2023) should be integrated from the outset in air-maritime and Arctic/Baltic planning lines; Poland and Romania in heavy land/air defence and Black Sea lines; Greece in Mediterranean/SE flank and air-naval lines.
- *Resource realism.* Tie commitments to France's 2024–2030 *Military Programming Law (LPM)*, which sets priorities, funding envelopes, and emphasises a strong European pillar within NATO—then plan a midterm LPM update to sustain Eastern flank posture beyond 2030⁹⁸.

⁹⁶ I express my entire appreciation for the contributions of a young Romanian military specialist engaged within NATO structures, member of an U.S.-based think-tank, and of a French academic affiliated to the HEC. They provided significant expertise and insights that guided the development of this chapter, based on an outline I proposed. Their professionalism, strategic clarity, and nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding NATO cooperation proved essential. The subtle yet substantial support they offered not only underscores dedication to the Alliance but also reinforces the importance of strengthening relationships between Western and Eastern allies in the forthcoming years.—See *NATO 2022 Strategic Concept*, adopted by Heads of State and Government at the NATO Summit in Madrid, 29 June 2022, online at https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf, accessed September 2025; *NATO Readiness Action Plan*, April 2025, at <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/119353.htm>, accessed September 2025.

⁹⁷ *NATO's military presence in the east of the Alliance*, last updated 19 September 2025, online at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm, retrieved September 2025; *Readiness Plan...*, ut supra.

⁹⁸ *Loi de Programmation Militaire*, Assemblée nationale, Ministère de la Défense, online at https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/16/textes/116t0155_texte-adopte

PHASE I (1-2 YEARS)**Demonstrate commitment and lock in access****1. Force posture and persistent presence**

- *Romania as the anchor.* Convert the French-led AIGLE multinational battalion in Romania into a brigade-ready nucleus—keep the MAMBA (SAMP/T) air-defence battery deployed, add a rotational second battery during high-risk windows, and preposition a brigade set of equipment in eastern Romania⁹⁹.
- *Nordic Baltic integration.* Schedule annual Charles de Gaulle carrier strike group deployments to the Baltic and High North for combined ops with Sweden and Finland, synchronised with JFC Brunssum’s calendar and MNCNE training cycles. (The four northeastern battlegroups are commanded through MNCNE Szczecin, which France should support by filling senior staff billets)¹⁰⁰.
- *Exercise leadership.* Create an annual French-led, multidomain series—Carpathian Shield (Romania / Black Sea) and Baltic Sentinel (Nordic Baltic)—focused on IAMD, long-range fires, and heavy armour reinforcement timelines aligned to NATO plans. (NATO’s Readiness Action Plan and follow-on adaptation already frame such activities)¹⁰¹

2. Command, C2 and liaison

- Seek Deputy Commander/Chief of Staff positions at Multinational Corps Northeast / MNCNE Szczecin and Multinational Division South-East / MNDSE Bucharest; embed permanent French liaison teams at Warsaw, Bucharest, Helsinki, Stockholm, and Athens operational HQs to speed decision-making in crises¹⁰².
- Create an Eastern Flank Coordination Cell (EFCC) under the French *Chef d’état-major des armées*, co-located with MNDSE Bucharest, to fuse logistics/RSOM (Reception, Staging, and Onward Movement),

provisoire.pdf [*Projet de loi relatif à la programmation militaire pour les années 2024 à 2030 et portant diverses dispositions intéressant la défense*]; <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/ministere/politique-defense/loi-programmation-militaire-2024-2030>; accessed September 2025.

⁹⁹ *Présentation de la Mission Aigle*, Ministère des Armées, online at https://www.defense.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/operations/20240219_cabcemacom_dp_aigle_uk_.pdf, retrieved September 2025.

¹⁰⁰ NATO’s military presence in the east of the Alliance..., ut supra.

¹⁰¹ Readiness Action Plan, April 2025, ut supra.

¹⁰² Multinational Corps Northeast, online at <https://mncne.nato.int/l/>; Readiness Action Plan, April 2025.

air-defence scheduling, and exercise planning with host nation and NATO staff (no new NATO HQ—a French coordination layer that plugs into existing NATO Command and Control (C2)¹⁰³.

3. Intelligence, cyber, and counter-hybrid

- *Standing intel fusion with partners.* Establish a Franco-Nordic-Danubian fusion cell (Paris–Bucharest–Stockholm) focused on Russian order of battle, Black Sea/Baltic maritime domain awareness, and long-lead indicators of hybrid activities—integrated with NATO’s structures.
- *Cyber uplift.* Have ANSSI (*Agence nationale de la sécurité des systèmes d’information*) lead joint training and incident-response frameworks with national CSIRTs (Computer Security Incident Response Team, either in Romania CERTRO, or Poland CERTPL), using EU/NIS2¹⁰⁴ and NATO cyber-resilience baselines. France should share APT28 TTPs (Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures) and mitigation packages with Eastern partners on a routine basis to raise the whole flank’s cyber posture¹⁰⁵.

4. Industrial, logistics and munitions

- *Coproduction commitments.* Table offers to coproduce CAESAR howitzers, SAMP/T interceptors (Aster), and Mistral/remote carriers in Poland and Romania, backed by EU PESCO munitions and EW

¹⁰³ Readiness Action Plan, April 2025.

¹⁰⁴ The EU NIS2 Directive (Directive (EU) 2022/2555) constitutes a comprehensive regulatory framework aimed at bolstering cybersecurity standards across the European Union. This directive supersedes the original NIS directive, thereby elevating the level of cybersecurity protection within critical sectors of member states. Furthermore, it broadens the scope of covered entities and introduces more stringent enforcement mechanisms. The directive obliges member states to implement robust cybersecurity risk-management protocols, establish incident reporting procedures, and enhance supervisory and enforcement capabilities of national authorities. These measures are designed to ensure a uniform and high standard of cybersecurity is maintained throughout the Union.

¹⁰⁵ ANSSI France, *Cooperation and solidarity: cybersecurity is being built at the European Union level*, online at <https://cyber.gouv.fr/publications/cooperation-and-solidarity-cybersecurity-being-built-european-union-level>, retrieved October 2025. On Russia’s APT28 and their cyber warfare against France, see <https://www.cert.ssi.gouv.fr/uploads/CERTFR-2025-CTI-007.pdf> (accessed October 2025).

projects to ensure scale. The May 2025 PESCO wave (75 projects total) shows the vehicle for such cooperation and standardisation¹⁰⁶.

- *Black Sea sustainment*. Expand pre-clearance, rail/river corridors, and host nation support nodes (Constanța–Craiova–Cluj–Oradea lines; Gdańsk–Suwalki corridor) under a French-led logistics MOU nested in the U.S.–Romania/Allied rotational presence that already uses Romanian basing.

Deliverables by Month 24

- French senior posts at MNCNE/MNDSE filled; EFCC stood up in Bucharest¹⁰⁷.
- AIGLE scaled to brigade-ready force with persistent MAMBA; two new annual exercise brands running (Baltic and the Black Sea).
- Signed coproduction Letters of Intent (Poland/Romania) under PESCO umbrellas¹⁰⁸.

PHASE II (FROM 2 TO 5 YEARS)

Institutionalise leadership & interoperability

1. From battlegroup to brigade (South-East)

- With Romania, formalise a French-led multinational brigade under MNDSE command, with prepositioned stocks, divisional enablers (GBAD, engineer, EW), and a joint logistics support cell to shorten RSOM to <5 days for follow-on French heavy forces. (MNDSE was created to command forces in the region as part of NATO's adaptation.)¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Council of the EU, *EU defence readiness: Council launches 6th wave of new PESCO projects*, online at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/05/27/eu-defence-readiness-council-launches-6th-wave-of-new-pesco-projects/>, accessed October 2025.

¹⁰⁷ Multinational Corps Northeast, online at <https://mncne.nato.int/l/>; Readiness Action Plan, April 2025.

¹⁰⁸ Council of the EU, *EU defence readiness: Council launches 6th wave of new PESCO projects*, see above.

¹⁰⁹ Readiness Action Plan, April 2025, see above, loc. cit. Additionally, *France calls for EU military mobility coordinator to slash troops' transit time across Europe*, <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/10/02/france-calls-for-eu-military-mobility-coordinator-to-slash-troops-transit-time-across-euro>, October 2, 2025, retrieved October 2025.

2. Eastern Flank Integrated Air & Missile Defence (EFIAMD)

- Build a coordinated IAMD “mesh”¹¹⁰ linking MAMBA/SAMPT, NASAMS, and Patriot across Poland–Romania–Greece, integrating Nordic sensors via ACC&S/Link16¹¹¹ and NATO’s IAMD architecture; aim for common TTPs and shared spares. Use PESCO to finance radar upgrades, Electronic Warfare convergence, and InfNav (Infantry Navigation) without GNSS (Global Navigation Satellite Systems) redundancy for GBAD (Ground-Based Air Defence) units¹¹².

3. Air & maritime enablers with Sweden/Finland/Greece

- With Sweden and Finland, co-develop Baltic/Arctic MDA and ASW packages¹¹³ (P3 / ATL2 / shipborne helicopters; UUVs), plus undersea-infrastructure protection (energy / data cables). With Greece, establish

¹¹⁰ Mesh Sensing for Integrated Air and Missile Defense. It represents a novel approach to constructing resilient and widespread passive sensor networks aimed at enhancing situational awareness and defence against aerial threats. Unlike conventional active sensors, mesh sensing employs a variety of passive data sources to identify potential threats, direct defensive resources, and amalgamate information into a holistic IAMD framework, thereby improving resilience, particularly in the face of cyber threats and within resource-limited settings. Cf. Masao Dahlgren, Patrycja Bazylczyk, and Tom Karako, *Mesh Sensing for Air and Missile Defense A Vision for Passive, Proliferated Sensor Networks*, report for Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), online at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/mesh-sensing-air-and-missile-defense>, 21 July 2025, accessed October 2025.

¹¹¹ Air Command and Control System (ACC&S). Link 16 serves as a military tactical data link network utilised by NATO member countries, as permitted by the MIDS International Program Office (IPO). Its specifications are included in the family of Tactical Data Links. Link 16 facilitates the near-real-time exchange of tactical information among military aircraft, naval vessels, and ground forces; it also allows for the transmission of text messages, images, and voice communications (the latter occurring over two digital channels: 2.4 kbit/s or 16 kbit/s in any combination).

¹¹² Council of the EU, EU defence readiness: Council launches 6th wave of new PESCO projects, see above; Infantry Navigation w/o GNSS (InfNav w/o GNSS), online at <https://www.pesco.europa.eu/project/infantry-navigation-gnss/>, accessed October 2025.

¹¹³ MDA and ASW packages denote the integrated deployment of Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) capabilities alongside Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) systems. This often involves the use of autonomous platforms such as SAILDRONE’s Surveyor-class USVs, which incorporate sensors, machine learning, and acoustics to enable ongoing undersea surveillance and threat identification. The objective of these solutions is to deliver uninterrupted, extensive awareness of both maritime and

SE Aegean–Ionian airnaval rotation windows for French FREMM/ FDI frigates and RafaleM detachments aligned to NATO¹¹⁴.

- Use NATO DIANA and the NATO Innovation Fund to run challenge calls on counter UAS swarms, contested logistics autonomy, ice/winter mobility, and counter EW navigation—prioritising test sites in Sweden / Finland / Poland / Romania¹¹⁵.

4. Education, training, and talent pipelines

- Launch a Franco-Eastern Officers' Exchange (two-year cycles) and a bilingual (EN/FR) major-staff course hosted in Bucharest/Szczecin geared to operational planners for the flank HQs. (MNCNE and MNDSE are the natural homes for this pipeline.)¹¹⁶

5. Policy & signalling

- Sign bilateral Defence Cooperation Roadmaps (SE, FI, PL, RO, GR) that commit to joint exercises, IAMD integration, industrial projects, and crisis-coordination protocols—and then table them at the North Atlantic Council as contributions under NATO's defence planning process. (This keeps North Atlantic Council visibility and buy-in.)¹¹⁷

6. Milestones by Year 5

- French-led multinational brigade IOC under MNDSE; EFIAMD initial cross-border data-sharing and common TTPs; two DIANA challenge cohorts with Eastern flank test sites; five bilateral roadmaps signed and lodged with North Atlantic Council¹¹⁸.

underwater environments, facilitating the detection and mitigation of threats posed by submersible capabilities.

¹¹⁴ See NATO 2022 Strategic Concept..., ut supra.

¹¹⁵ See Accélérateur d'innovation de défense pour l'Atlantique Nord (DIANA) at https://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/topics_216199.htm as well as Defence Innovation Accelerator for the North Atlantic at <https://www.diana.nato.int/>, accessed October 2025.

¹¹⁶ Readiness Action Plan, April 2025, see above, loc. cit.

¹¹⁷ NATO 2022 Strategic Concept.

¹¹⁸ Readiness Action Plan, April 2025; EU defence readiness, see above; Accélérateur d'innovation de défense pour l'Atlantique Nord (DIANA), ut supra.

PHASE III (YEARS 5-10)

Assume recognised framework-nation roles

1. Framework Nation status in the South East

- Secure formal designation as Framework Nation for a CJTF (Combined Joint Task Force) Southeast contingency package (HQ nucleus, division-level enablers, RSOM (Reception, Staging and Onward Movement) / logistics, IAMD coordination), operating under NATO OPCON (Operational Control) and designed to plug into MNDSE rapidly. (This builds on Readiness Action Plan (RAP) evolution and NATO's adaptation to forward defence)¹¹⁹.

2. Industrial & munitions ecosystem for the flank

- Deliver coproduction lines (artillery shells, GBAD interceptors, loitering munitions) in Poland/Romania, with joint stockpiles and interchangeable QA standards; expand to Sweden / Finland for naval sensors / Unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs) and to Greece for shipyard sustainment. Use PESCO as the legal/financing scaffolding for multinational lots and maintenance consortia¹²⁰.

3. End-to-end readiness metrics

- Commit to measurable outputs:
 - ▶ Reinforcement time (France-to-Romania heavy armour) cut by >30%;
 - ▶ IAMD cross-border engagements validated annually in a NATO-certified live-fly¹²¹;
 - ▶ Joint sortie generation (Nordic-Baltic) raised by >25% during carrier strike group windows;
 - ▶ Two DIANA-derived capabilities fielded to units on the flank.

4. Political architecture

- Convene a Quarterly Eastern Flank Defence Council (EFDC) at minister/CHOD level, rotating venues, to lock in

¹¹⁹ Readiness Action Plan, April 2025.

¹²⁰ NATO 2022 Strategic Concept.

¹²¹ A NATO certified live fly denotes the official validation of an aircraft or system's preparedness and technical suitability for live-fly exercises. These exercises are actual operations and training scenarios carried out by NATO forces to evaluate and enhance their capabilities.

priorities ahead of NATO ministerials and ensure the French coordination role remains *within* NATO, not alongside it.

Risk management (throughout)

- Likely U.S. sensitivities: Emphasise NATO-first and burden-sharing narratives; brief SACEUR/JFCs early on brigade/IAMD plans; use NAC-endorsed frameworks (RAP evolution, IAMD architecture) to avoid duplication.
- Resource strain: Phase commitments against the Loi de Programmation Militaire glidepath; plan a 2030 LPM update that ring-fences funds for brigade, IAMD, stockpiles, and mobility corridors.
- Divergent threat perceptions: The EFDC and bilateral roadmaps keep capitals aligned and provide venues to adjudicate priorities before they reach North Atlantic Council bottlenecks.

Why this is feasible

- Existing footholds: France already leads in Romania (AIGLE) and has deployed MAMBA/SAMPT, proving management capabilities as a framework nation in the South-East.
- NATO structures to plug into: The MNCNE/MNDSE command chain and NATO's adaptation since the 2014 RAP provide exactly the C2 scaffolding a coordinator role requires.
- EU instruments to scale industry: PESCO's expanding portfolio shows a ready legal and financial channel to standardise capabilities and scale production with Eastern partners.
- Innovation pipelines: DIANA and the NATO Innovation Fund can be steered toward flank-specific challenges, accelerating fielding of dual-use tech where it's most needed.

Part II

The pages that follow bring together articles written over nearly five years, from December 2019 to September 2024—a span marked by profound shifts in international affairs, in Romania’s trajectory, and across the heart of Central and Eastern Europe, with NATO’s Eastern Flank at the centre of attention.

These articles are not mere reflections of passing events; they chart the evolution of ideas that would later crystallise into the arguments and perspectives presented in the first part of this book. Though born of their moment, they retain their relevance not only as witnesses to a time of fracture and metamorphosis, but for the insights and explanations they offer, the solutions they propose, and the approaches they dare to imagine—voices from a moment when the future seemed uncertain yet demanded clarity, markers of how ideas take shape in the midst of history unfolding.

January 2020

From Paradise Lost to New Regional Designs in Europe Romania and the Visegrad 4

Unable to join the Visegrad Group in 1991, Romania (second largest country of Central-Eastern Europe) had to create its own path to European integration. Difficult as it was, and still is, this brought a series of lessons that enables the new generation of Romanians to better define their political interest and turn the country into a more active regional player.

Once upon a time, joining the Visegrad Group (V4) was Romania's impossible dream. Scarred by a Maoist political regime, with a collapsing economy, Stalinised institutions and a political elite emerged from the secondary ranks of the Communist Party, 1990 Romania was only half-way out Communism and incapable to join the alliance launched by Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, all having initiated reforms since the 1980s. Political instability and hesitation in the 1990s diminished Romania's ability to restructure faster and be, even separately, an equal of the four Visegrad countries. Paths diverged visibly, with the V4 integrating sooner both in NATO and the EU.

Following the 2015 migrants' crisis and building on top of gradual discontent with their position in the EU, the V4 governments not only changed the nature of their approach to European integration but also looked for possible allies. The same year, Polish President Andrzej Duda and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán spoke both about the Group's need for a better coordinated partnership with other regional actors, Romania included. The Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Péter Szijjártó joined and invoked mutual interdependency as a pragmatic reason for Romania to become a partner of the V4, in a close relation to

Hungary. Viktor Orbán repeated the offer in 2017 and December 2019, with the same message of “creating prosperity together”. The nationalism and partial Euroscepticism of the V4 countries greatly pleased the Social-Democrat/Liberal-Democrat (PSD/ALDE) alliance in power in Bucharest; born from the 1980s nationalist Communism, PSD wanted to seize the double opportunity to make Romania join the exclusive-looking Visegrad club and legitimise their own anti-EU stance.

Not surprisingly, opposition came from President Klaus Iohannis, the civil society and the business milieus.

Not the Visegrad Dreamt of

Romanians are immune to the promises of the “illiberal democracy” because they almost lived in one until 2012-2014. The paternalist presidencies of Ion Iliescu (1990-1992-1996, 2000-2004), the authoritative methods of Traian Băsescu (2004-2009-2014), the PSD’s attempt to find inspiration in Erdogan’s Turkey (under Prime Minister Victor Ponta, 2012-2015) or install ‘democrature’ and tolerate corruption (2016-2019) – all endured and fought against –, were the best treatment against illiberalism.

In Romania, the political trends of the V4 collided with the resilience of President Iohannis (elected in 2014) to defend the democratic acquis and to anchor Romania in the West. He is supported by the majority of the civil society. Fighting against undemocratic actors woke up in time a new generation of proactive leaders in the civil society and the business milieus. While not yet fully coordinated, they were capable to produce political platforms and building strategically intimate alliances between social entrepreneurs, trend-setters and the private sector, with mutual empowerment, putting pressure on the government. It is a new generation that does not wish to lose the benefits of the EU membership. In a powerful mobilisation during the elections of 2019 (both European and presidential), they managed to change the political course that, under PSD guidance, was putting at risk Romania’s relationship with the European institutions.

Anti-Brussels message fell flat because of various reasons. Romanians are Europhiles. While in Hungary or Poland national

governance is promoted as more trustworthy than the European one, in Romania, European and Atlantic institutions are perceived as being more efficient and more reliable than the national, ruled by reviled politicians, identified as incompetent and corrupt. The White, Christian future of Europe or the need to defend the Eastern frontier from Muslim migration are of very little concern for the Romanians who have to focus on internal political instability and economic insecurity because of the last government's populist erraticism. The only frontier Romanians consider that needs defence is the one with Russia, running through the Black Sea – which turns Bucharest into an ally of Warsaw but in opposition with a Russia-friendly Hungary. On the other hand, Hungary's repeated outbreaks against Bucharest in 2019, with nationalism piqued by political declarations on both sides, do not contribute to mutual confidence. And so, the voice of Viktor Orbán was not the one tailored to address the V4 messages to Romania, neither in 2017, nor in 2019 – except if it only targeted the Transylvanian electorate with Hungarian citizenship for the upcoming elections.

Developing Regional Alliances

Romanians does not want to return to attitudes and economic problems that placed the country to the margins of political Europe in the 1990s; on the contrary, they wish to display a good example of Euro-Atlantic credentials just like the initial V4. Relations to Hungary bear the seal of a tumultuous past; those with the Czech Republic and Slovakia are objectively positive; but it is the Polish model of economic development and geopolitical strategy that interests Romania the most. Aside 600 years of interaction as neighbours (that only recent frontiers changed), Romania and Poland share similar geopolitical interests vis-à-vis Russia and a consolidated relationship with the United States. Perceptive observers in pro-Euro-Atlantic milieus welcome the idea of a reinforced partnership between the Romania and Poland in order to strengthen the Eastern areas of the EU in a sort of Baltic-Black Sea “dumbbell connection”. Poland is present in Romania's economy by trade and investment, including in strategic fields (gas extraction from the Black Sea). The two countries are both members of the Three

Seas Initiative and the only to contribute to the creation of a regional investment fund through the Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego of Poland and Export–Import Bank of Romania.

This positive example is understood in Bucharest as a manner of enhancing the European Union cohesion and supporting regional convergence. As President Iohannis stated repeatedly in his replies to Viktor Orbán’s offer, Romania does not want to be part of any division of Europe in rival subunits. Being the sixth largest EU nation (after the Brexit), Romania seeks to join the European core and become a convincing partner of the EU’s first five. Various proposals of cooperation were coined, among which a partnership with the Weimar Triangle (a “Weimar Plus”) or a trilateral with Poland and Germany (Romania’s largest economic partner as well as a military one within NATO’s framework nation concept). Romania also opted for a strong bilateral alliance with the USA. This renewed proximity to Washington DC and the will to bring more in the relationship to Brussels helped the pro-European parties shape a country project, metaphorically expressed as “Romania, pillar of the Atlantic world at the Black Sea”. Long time absorbed by domestic affairs and by a much-needed renewal, Romania did not play an active European role, punching below its weight.

This new ambition does not exclude cooperation with the V4; on the contrary, in economic terms, as Hungary rightly estimated, it will likely increase. Politically however, distances were taken. At this moment, the V4 is seen as a fairly positive story that Romania could not join initially because of political circumstances – but whose recent transformation made the Presidency think of alternatives that preserve or reinforce the Euro-Atlantic benefits Romania had to fight for in time, with considerable difficulty.

June 2020

Looking for a Partner. A Romanian Outlook on EU's Achilles' Heel

The Black Sea is crucial for EU's and NATO's security yet placed low down on Europe's agenda. Romania attempted to take the lead in the past and act as vector for rapprochement – but without EU substantial involvement, the region will turn into Europe's Achilles' heel.

So, it is going to be June 24. An Orwellian touch of Kremlin deletes timelines so that it can fit a reshaped narrative. The Victory fête must shine and be a renewed expression of Russia's projection of "power", of "respectability" and capacity to "inspire fear". While this policy sets the country's resources and international reputation on fire for decades, it also comes as a provocation. It coincides with a time when Europe's political metamorphosis is generated by the impact of international changes (centred on the US-China rivalry) and of a triple catalyst: a nationalist-populist American presidency, a France-induced impetus for EU sovereignty and a change in the German mindset.

Adding to previous episodes, the defence ministers of France, Germany, Italy and Spain (a sort of EU-4) jointly signed a letter on May 29th for the attention of their colleagues from the other 23 Member States and of Josep Borrell, EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy; the call was again for reinforcing the Permanent Structured Cooperation.

These are, militarily, the strongest countries of the EU, with the largest defence industry (and subsequent interests). Despite pleading for a European pillar of NATO, the letter lacks concrete proposals in this field; and while the four countries involved might wish to see it as a "new step towards (something)", the very lack of propositions makes the letter little relevant to those who must cope with potential hybrid aggression from Russia.

Seen from the Baltic/Black Sea, the text might be criticised as another example of the “happy few” acting unilaterally “in the name of Europe” while aiming at their own interests. Was the letter an invitation or just a notification? Not a single word on the EU/broader-East interaction, most probably left for NATO. The focus is to the South. This is fair only if the East is not expected to contribute to that area, consecrating not only the divide between the two parts of Europe, but also a PESCO reduced *ad usum Occidentis*.

Europe’s East is a composite area. To the Russian pressure the entire region feels via Ukraine (with Belarus not eager to become a new Kremlin dependency), the Black Sea adds Turkey’s double-edged position within NATO, Moldova’s vulnerability and tensions in the Caucasus and the Middle East.

This is Europe’s immediate neighbourhood, included in the Eastern Partnership. The limited success of the latter arises not only from the insufficient instruments the EU used in the area, or the traditional hostility of Russia, but also from the fruitless experience of the “Black Sea Forum for Partnership and Dialogue” (2006), following which Romania and Bulgaria refrain from engaging in the volatile Eastern vicinity.

Black Sea Caballero

After joining the European Union in 2007 and benefiting from a few years of economic growth, Romania attempted to play the card of the lone ranger and build its own network at the Black Sea, in connection to Georgia and Azerbaijan.

Known for his staunch anti-Russian position, a reliable Atlanticist, President Traian Băsescu’s offered to open Romanian trade and infrastructure to Georgian business and Azeri petroleum as an alternative to the Russian markets. This is how project AGRI (Azerbaijan–Georgia–Romania Interconnector) was born in 2010, a competitor for Nabucco, the White Stream, the South Stream, the TransAdriatic and the Turkey–Greece–Italy Interconnector, all destined to diminish EU dependence on Russian gas.

As designed by Bucharest, AGRI would have been mutually beneficial, linking the Caucasus and Central Asia to the EU, turning

the Romanian city of Constanța into the EU's largest eastern seaport, and aligning Bucharest to the US-UK policy of Kremlin containment. (In reply, Russia promoted in Kyiv and Chișinău a media narrative about irredentist Romania, according to which Bucharest was acting in imperial manner, hunting for territories from Ukraine and Moldova.)

Turkey's position was ambiguous: a sign of what was going to come a decade later. The reticence to join the Black Sea Forum seemed initially determined by the wish to appease Russia's aching suspicions after the Orange Revolution, but in 2010 it became clear that Turkey considered Romanian initiatives at the Black Sea as incompatible with its interests.

The reasons were less related to the pipeline competition and more to Ankara's concern of seeing the US become an actor at the Black Sea via Bucharest, diminishing Turkey's influence, next to losing importance as NATO member in the region. The Romanian offer to conclude a strategic partnership between the two countries was at first watered-down by Ankara, before accepting an "Action Plan" for its implementation in 2011. It also gave birth to a Poland-Romania-Turkey trilateral in 2012, with regular consultations but no strategic coordination.

Uncertain Horizon

Today's context is much more demanding. While Romanian home affairs are as troubled as before, international context after 2014 hardly encourages external action. The safe decade of 2004-2014 is gone.

With Russia occupying Crimea, an equivocal Turkey, fragile countries (Ukraine, Moldova) in the immediate neighbourhood and the EU-4 tempted by a Mediterranean focus, Bucharest chose an unprovocative position, with a double sense of patience and of limited resources. The national Security Strategy adopted in May 2020 endorses it; it does not nominate Russia as a threat (like Poland did in 2014) but takes into account the deterioration of NATO-Russia relationship. This turns the Black Sea into an area of vigilance that – compared to the Baltic – Bucharest would like to see better defended, in order to avoiding asymmetry on the Eastern Flank.

A few steps were taken. The enlargement and development of two NATO bases is envisaged, one in central Transylvania, the other at the

Black Sea, 390 km west from the Russian-occupied Crimea. An increased military presence of the USA in the country is being discussed, while Romania was chosen to host NATO's Multinational Corps South-East (HQ MNC-SE) in Sibiu. Already in possession of Patriot missiles, the country is interested in additionally acquiring A2AD capabilities and face up to the Russian similar system in Crimea. While the government and the presidency of Romania are aware of structural weaknesses, think-tanks emphasise the outdated concepts used and stress upon the need to revise the approach of power the country has.

Romania should not be regarded as a country in seek of military might; it hardly matches the nation's own perception of itself, its ethos and historical experience. Yet, the country is willing to bulk up, dissuade and be a reliable security provider.

In doing so, Bucharest needs responsible partners. Poland and the Baltic States are a like-minded group, engaged in a similar effort; the US constantly contribute. But there is no political and military acknowledgment from the very EU-4 that call upon solidarity and sovereignty. This rather demonstrates that even at difficult times the EU is far from building a common strategic culture and a common approach of threats – which only increases the risk of seeing weak spots exploited by rancorous rivals. Just like Achilles' heel.

December 2020

Drawing a Defence Line in Europe's East. Imperfect Elections Give a Direction to Romania

What just happened in Romania impacts on the evolution of Central and Eastern Europe in terms of geopolitics, alliances, and defence. But what just happened in Romania? Following the December elections, can Central Europe's second largest country appropriate the much-admired Polish model and join Poland in reinforcing NATO's Eastern Flank?

Readers are certainly more acquainted with Schrödinger's cat dilemma than Eugene Ionesco's *théâtre de l'absurde*, but here is something new: Schrödinger can be applied to election results. Never in the history of Romania has the outcome of parliamentary elections been so negatively positive and positively negative simultaneously, with frustrating failures and yet a fairly optimistic evaluation. Observers have to deal with two opposing realities at the same time and try to understand the grounds of this conundrum.

Unfolding Paradoxes

The Social-Democrats (PSD, whose origins stem in secondary ranks of the former Communist Party) are in a leading position in the Parliament, followed by the Liberals (PNL), the USR-Plus (political alliance created by civil society engagement), a surprising newcomer (AUR, Alliance for the Unity of Romanians, self-described as conservative, traditionalist, patriotic and unionist, aiming at the union of the Republic of Moldova with Romania), and UDMR (the regional party of the Hungarian minority in Transylvania). The political map of the country still largely matches the frontiers of the former Austrian-Hungarian Empire: PNL-USR-Plus are leaders mostly inside the Carpathians, while PSD is leading the South

and the East (with a few exceptions, Bucharest and Iași included). But the split is not just a historical heritage related to different governance styles and social values across the Carpathians; economically, it matches areas of prosperity and development versus areas of indigence, while socio-demographically it demonstrates that the latter vastly correspond to rural Romania. It is from here (46% of the country's population) that PSD – so skilled in political-economic paternalism – manages to collect votes, while PNL-USR-Plus attracts the support of the urban, well-to-do younger generations (X, Y and the Millennials), better integrated into the European lifestyle, with open-society values through education, travel or family experience.

The turnout was a historical minimum of 31.84%, explained by disinterest for parliamentary elections (the Parliament is seen as a nest of corruption and inefficiency), the lack of genuine political campaigning (no sharp, piercing messages), the politicisation of the Covid crisis and the cold response of some parts of the population to the restriction measures related to the pandemic. It is therefore a third of the Romanian electorate who decided how the country will be governed: 29-30% elected the PSD, 25%+ the Liberals, 15% USR-Plus, AUR 9% and UDMR ca. 6%.

To this outline, Schrödinger's dilemma strongly applies, because every result contains a positive and negative. PSD is leading but lost 15% compared to the 2016 results. PNL is second, but it gained a stable 5% to 25, in a constant increase since Romania's accession to the EU, and 10% higher than their best scores of the early and mid-2000s. USR-Plus almost doubled from 8 to 15% (which eroded the Liberal electorate). AUR rather stands for anti-system votes – yet their nationalistic message damaged the PSD (itself promoter of nationalism and ersatz Euroscepticism). UDMR, always giving a voice to the Hungarian minority in Transylvania, shall likely play once more the role of arbiter and prop-up for the future government: but how trustworthy can be a party who was a PSD ally for two years and supported with FIDESZ-like lack of remorse the alterations brought to the rule of law and to the State institutions?...

But the crucial question that needs to be asked given the context is the following: how is it possible that PSD gets re-elected twice in 5 years after massive public demonstrations against them, linked to institutional scandals and corruption?

Schrödinger applies again: the answers are negative but outline a positive prospective.

(Slow) Progression of the New Generation

Heir to one-party autocratic attitudes, with local power feudally built, PSD has a considerable ability to mobilise a devout electorate: country-dwellers, crofters, always early voters. Ideology and political doctrine, bending the rule of law or the definition of corruption are irrelevant to their fidelity; their patron-client mindset has a deep historical background and is today used to mitigate needs that local authorities can largely cater for, “by grace of God and the Party”.

What is problematic is the inability of the PNL-USR-Plus supporters to mobilise in a similar manner, which, by now, can be explained only by having misjudged what leads to good governance. Long term disappointment and distaste for narrow-interest party politics separated large portions of the Romanian society from their state institutions, of which the Parliament is the most disreputable. The emotional critique applied makes them overlook the fact that a President cannot work with a hostile Parliament, and that only mobilisation of their own electorate can lead to compatible, coordinated policies. To this moody approach, a layer of excessive ethicism is added by a civil society that can be accused both of surrealist vanity and unacceptable naïveté: they look for perfect politicians, dedicated, erudite, competent, credible, loyal, honest, fair, providential, incorruptible – and their vote is conditioned by the existence of these miraculous archangels... Such expectations tend to prove lack of experience and cast doubt on their grasp on how a country can realistically be ruled when human nature kicks in. The ability of the civil society to put pressure on the government, together with the private sector, exists – but is circumstantial and varies in intensity. It is highly recommendable that – while being vigilant with regard to public ethics and high standards –, the civil society also becomes proficient in governance by gathering around constructive projects in politics, society and economy; initiative, practice and shared responsibility pave the way to the much-desired renewal of the political class.

And yet, in this uncertain atmosphere emerge sociological facts with political bearings. The country's profile has demonstrably shifted as the generations changed; the electorate rejecting PSD's nature and demeanour is now reaching 50%. They are divided between multiple options, but in terms of political values and search for satisfactory governance they are leading. Like Molière's Monsieur Jourdain who "has been speaking in prose without knowing it", Romania's new generation has built a social-political majority without being actually aware. The civil society and the new generation reached a demonstrably critical mass – what they lack is a strategy to positively influence the political processes.

As the most recent study demonstrates¹²² the modernity index of Romania (based on how Romanians relate to four dimensions defining the spirit of a modern society: collectivism/individualism, trust/distrust, duty/enjoyment and life satisfaction) increased by 9 points from 1993 to 2018. This means that Romania is becoming more Western-European-like, but slower than expected or desired. Modernisation is related to the increasing influence of the post-1980 generations, who (the study noticed) "*can change older social institutions and are an opportunity to better integrate new Romanian [social and political] institutions in the frame of the EU and NATO.*" However, what is still missing in order to make this process equal to the social evolution of Western Europe after 1945 is an education "*focusing on emancipatory values (autonomy, trust, broad-mindedness) and social-economic development that generates respectable jobs*".

The new PNL-USR-Plus-UDMR government (to be invested before Christmas), shall have to face all these increasing expectations, as well as restore the international credibility of Romania's economy and the rule of law, while continuing to consolidate NATO's Eastern Flank in partnership with the USA and regional allies.

¹²² Index Modernity of Romania, Cluj-Napoca "Babeş-Bolyai" University: <http://ropsy.granturi.ubbcluj.ro/2020/11/21/research-report-the-modernity-index-of-romania/> (last accessed May 2023).

Restoring the Economy

Chaotic, pretentious and improvised, serving economic populism, PSD's management of the economy and of economic legislation increased deficit, unbalanced the budget, pushed up inflation and deteriorated purchase power. With salaries and pensions devouring 90% of public revenue, investments were suspended, which is unique for a social-democrat party. Financially paralysed, the government looked for alternative sources: seizure of pension funds, Venezuela-inspired projects to repatriate gold, over-taxation of banks, etc., rigging legislation and statistics as weeks went by, in order to suit context and critics. The country took a blow, but, as the head of the National Bank commented, "it still stands on its feet". Years of growth (4-7% after joining the EU) elevated the country's rank to the world's 35th economy PPP (\$585 bn.), with the GDP/capita reaching 69% of EU's average. Foreign direct investments oscillate between €4.5 and €5bn./year, mostly from the Netherlands, Germany, Austria and Italy. In 2020 for the first time, based on the 2019 data, Romania was classified by the World Bank as a high-income country, a positive signal for investors and for accession negotiations to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

But last week S&P's graded Romania with a BBB-/A-3 rating, compatible to Fitch's BBB- and Moody's BAA-, all with negative perspective. These are the last category recommended to investors and reflect not the Orbán government's performance but are inherited from PSD's Dăncilă. (With PSD dominating the parliament and the Covid crisis, Orbán's team had little chances to be effective in terms of governance, as legislation could not be changed; in addition, an electoral year like 2020 was not the proper context to apply cuts and restrictive policies in public spending...) The credit rating agencies anticipate a contraction of 5+% of the GDP, next to a 9.5% budget deficit, with a 4% growth next year and complete recovery in 2022.

The next government will consequently have to be patient, informative, committed and transparent. Agencies correctly estimate that stabilising national debt (40%, under the Maastricht limit of 60) will be a priority – until now impossible given the political volatility. The negative perspective is based on the risks impacting the budgetary balance in the following 12 months, if the government will not be able

to reframe fiscal policies. As a result, EU funds absorption (€80bn.) will prove crucial for the economic health of the country, deprived of investment policies for years. In this field, Poland's development roadmap is largely an inspiration; from State officials and business milieus to public administration, there is an admiring consensus regarding Poland's economic rise that empowered more institutional and geopolitical weight. Because, after all, only an efficient economy provides enough resources to improve a nation's security, resilience and global standing.

3D Geopolitics: the Washington-Warsaw-Bucharest Triangle

With the economy still standing on its feet and with 2% of the budget assigned to defence, the effort to improve security and contribute to NATO's Eastern Flank stability continued. This year, however, came with considerable steps forward: the fall of the PSD government in May 2019 and the appointment of a new US ambassador created the ground for a deeper collaboration. In a couple of weeks during the summer of 2020, on topics that made the Euro-Atlantic agenda, Romania shifted from ambivalent cautiousness (destined to keep all possibilities open) to a defined direction. In doing so, it chose a clear path for mid- and long-term development, if no black swan imposes radical changes to the course. Bucharest also opted to prioritise the Strategic Partnership with the USA as fundamental to the country's development strategy.

Delivery of Patriot missiles, extension of two most important military bases (one in central Transylvania, the other at the Black Sea) and political cooperation on 5G issues were already on the bilateral agenda. September brought two new agreements: an \$8bn. investment plan in Romania's energy security (focusing on the Cernavodă nuclear power-plant), the other being a roadmap on defence cooperation for the next decade. This is largely due to the intense activity of the US Embassy in the last couple of years, delivering results in Donald Trump's last moments at the White House.

For Central and Eastern Europe – and for what is today the Three Seas Initiative –, the Trump presidency was far from negative. In the case of Romania, it helped building an ever-closer transatlantic

relationship; in 2017, Klaus Iohannis, the country's President, was the first Central and Eastern European head of state received at the White House. A renewed visit in 2019 emphasised, for Romanian analysts, the importance of a Washington-Warsaw-Bucharest triangle that was taking shape. One year later, the construction of the submarine pipeline of Medgidia at the Black Sea – destined to transport gas from the bn. 270m³ reservoirs confirmed in 2014 and contribute to the energy security in the EU – started; Bucharest and Washington coordinated not only in giving an answer to the geopolitically contestable Nord Stream 2 but also contributing with a solution. The \$8bn. financial package destined for Cernavodă is the largest ever received by Romania and was approved by the European Commission as it also includes French and Canadian partners. Negotiations were held with the China General Nuclear Power since 2016; as the process lingered with no results, the Orban government in Bucharest decided to terminate it. The verdict was doubled by the rejecting Huawei technology for the country's future 5G network. Going against a generally positive Romanian-Chinese relationship was explained by the need to preserve the democratic *acquis* of the country, incompatible now with the principles of a state corporation controlled by a hard-line Communist government.

A vast infrastructure plan to build a highway and a railway connecting Gdansk and Constanța was announced by US diplomats, with anticipatable economic benefits for both Poland and Romania. It is also a strong signal that for Washington the two countries are of vital importance for the defence of the Eastern Flank. Infrastructure connections also serve military logistics.

Within the Washington-Warsaw-Bucharest triangle, the US offer adapted yet equal opportunities to the two partners (enhanced defence cooperation, increased rotation of soldiers, expanded military bases, resilience consolidation, missile defence, economic growth, energy security, etc.), essential to projecting power in the Baltic and the Black Seas. Both countries are now in possession of Patriot missiles and developed a regional system of alliances that draw a defence line in Europe's East; both are each other's strategic partner (since 2009) and have trilateral meetings with Turkey and Sweden respectively. A keen sense of geopolitical interests is undeniably shared by Bucharest and Warsaw.

Values, Trust and Credibility

These elections, imperfect as they were, finally give a direction and a structure to Romania, as the voters opted for a country that is anchored in the Euro-Atlantic sphere, with a rule-of-law-based society and functional, predictable economy. In a conference held this Tuesday with European ambassadors in Bucharest, President Iohannis stated that the new government shall have for objective State reconstruction, respecting EU values, and a more vocal, trustworthy role of Romania in the EU. While future initiatives will be submitted to clash with the opposition, one thing is certain: the election defined the type of society and Euro-Atlantic connections the new generations want for themselves. This meets the position of the PNL government, expressed in an op-ed by Bogdan Aurescu, minister of foreign affairs¹²³. The strategic interests of Romania are described as being *“inseparable from the values of a free, democratic society, respectful of the rule of law, of international law and of multilateralism”*, with alliances and partnerships that should not be circumstantial, *“but perennial, reflecting values that energise a community”*. Such choices are made to contribute to the *“complex architecture of durable values contributing to Romania’s central pillars: EU membership, NATO participation and the strategic partnership with the USA.”* Strong support was expressed for the Three Seas Initiative, the best framework to improve infrastructure development and regional interconnectivity. Less was given to the *“strategic autonomy”*, considered to need an improved definition, in complementarity to the Atlantic structures and which should preferably focus on EU resilience.

Romania turns once more in a construction site, but questions arise; some regard the civil society’s future involvement, their ability to understand that rebuilding a country is a matter of collective, responsible, smart-targeted effort; other regard the ability of the new government coalition to maturely work together and dedicate their effort not to party politics but to good governance and long-term development.

Answers will come only in time – of course, with proportional consequences.

¹²³ *Valorile comune în spațiul transatlantic – Coerență în politica externă a României și contribuția la rolul global și reziliența strategică ale UE* [Common values in the transatlantic space - Coherence in Romania’s foreign policy and contribution to the EU’s global role and strategic resilience], November 2020, available at <https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/op-ed-bogdan-aurescu-valorile-comune-in-spatiul-transatlantic-coerenta-in-politica-externa-a-romaniei-si-contributia-la-rolul-global-si-reziliencia-strategica-ale-ue/> (last accessed May 2023).

February 2021

Building Europe. Can France and Central Europe Truly Reconcile?

At a time when solidarity is fundamental in building global relevance for Europe, relations between France and Central European nations are at a lowest point of trust in recent history. Nuancing the depth of their divergence and highlighting opportunities for a reset might help rebuilding what is today an ineffective rapport.

February 1813

When perusing his diplomatic correspondence, the blue eyes of the duke of Bassano, Napoleon's Minister of Foreign Affairs, fell on this insightful phrase: "*En un mot, ce prince sera tout ce que les circonstances exigeront*"... The words concerned the newly elected sovereign of a Danube Principality; but reading them two centuries later, it was the current leader of the duke's homeland that emerged as most suitable to this description.

Given the circumstances, President Emmanuel Macron made efforts to adapt France's input to the European construction, and there is something dramatic in his efforts to promote *Power Europe*. France tries to convince reluctant others (and parts of herself) on the benefits of a renewed architecture. But the perceptive regard of analysts noticed¹²⁴ that the discourse of Prague, held by the French Minister of Foreign Affairs in December 2019, signalling to Central and Eastern Europeans that

¹²⁴ Nicolas Bauquet, *Le Drian à Prague: un discours dans le vide?*, Institut Montaigne, Paris, 17 December 2019, available at <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/blog/le-drian-prague-un-discours-dans-le-vide> (last accessed May 2023).

France is open to dialogue on the project designed by Macron's Sorbonne speech – stirred no debate. There was indeed no echo, no official or public answer... The appeal was not appealing.

The Apples of Discord

It would be futile to inventory the repeated clashes between the Élysée and Central Europe, old or new; but one must emphasise *why* and *what* in France's proposals and deportment were so unforthcomingly taken. The core of the dispute is less about European sovereignty and more about how Paris started to work on it. It triggered entrenched dysfunctionalities in a relationship that was never really built: the one of France with eleven nations of Central and Eastern Europe.

The timing was wrong, a few weeks after Emmanuel Macron's comments about the 'brain-dead' NATO. Adding to the progressively Russophile attitude of the Élysée since 2018, such a speech had little chances to attract when France embraced a direction incompatible to the interests of NATO's Eastern Flank. Macron's comment reflected a reality perceived mostly by France, but not shared by countries on this side of Europe, who work close with the United States of America on bilateral basis. Seen from Paris, even these bilateral approaches were a confirmation of Macron's remark: while military cooperation (NATO's body) was fine, the political direction (NATO's brain) proved ineffective, as President Trump's comments (and Obama's earlier positions) demonstrated. Questioning NATO's direction was objectively legitimate; but the problem is that the comment came – once more – from Paris...

France's reputed unease with a US-dominated NATO goes back for decades¹²⁵, an image worsened by the dialogue initiated with Russia for an "architecture of trust and security". The combination fuelled reticence on the Eastern Flank, a cold reception of France's European designs and showed that despite being reintegrated into NATO's military commandment since 2009, Paris did not acquire a sufficient degree of trustworthiness in Central Europe.

¹²⁵ Maurice Vaisse, "La France et l'OTAN : une histoire", *Politique étrangère*, no 4, 2009, pp. 861-872, available at <https://www.cairn.info/revue-politique-etrangere-2009-4-page-861.htm> (last accessed May 2023).

A few facts explain it, starting with the modicum military cooperation between France and the region (and not explained by distance if one takes into account the US presence). Secondly, France is known to boldly value her sovereignty and independence, with national interests prioritised in ways that include (when considered necessary) discarding alliances, aborting projects, shifting positions, overestimating means or taking initiatives without any prior consultations with European partners¹²⁶. And given the recent past, France is also known to manifest irritation when other EU members – in Central and Eastern Europe, to name them – make use of the same right to express sovereign options in foreign affairs. Critics do not hesitate to label this “double standards”, fundamentally disliked as rebounds of the pre-1989 Soviet pressure.

France’s generous approach of Russia – filled with surprisingly lavish compliments¹²⁷ and indulgence – incorporated the Kremlin political narrative¹²⁸ to a degree that the Élysée’s discernment and pertinence became questionable. In speeches held in Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, generous phrases pointed towards Franco-Baltic understanding and reconciliation, but the Russian question was central and ultimately dissatisfactory¹²⁹. Putting the Kremlin on the first place and contradicting NATO partners in the East was the way to lose interest. Rest assured,

¹²⁶ Shahin Vallée, “L’Union par la gauche. Par l’analyse informée de ses réussites et de ses errements, une critique pro-européenne de la doctrine Macron en Europe est un préalable pour réunir la gauche en 2022”, in *Le Grand Continent*, available at <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2020/12/18/bilan-europe-macron/> (last accessed May 2023).

¹²⁷ Culminating with enthusiastic public thanks to Vladimir Putin and an extravagant “la France aime la Russie et la Russie aime la France” [France loves Russia and Russia loves France] uttered by Emmanuel Macron in September 2021 during the inauguration of a Russian exhibition in Paris, “Collection Morozov : Emmanuel Macron remercie Vladimir Poutine”, available at <https://www.leparisien.fr/culture-loisirs/collection-morozov-emmanuel-macron-remercie-vladimir-poutine-21-09-2021-V732BN6QK5ANFF7JDZTG7C5ITA.php> (last accessed January 2025). The embarrassing line gradually disappeared from public articles as texts were archived.

¹²⁸ Françoise Thom, “France-Russie : les liaisons dangereuses ?”, *Diploweb.com—La Revue géopolitique*, 15 February 2020, available at <https://www.diploweb.com/france-russie-les-liaisons-dangereuses.html> (last accessed May 2023).

¹²⁹ Romain Le Quiniou, *Mission Unaccomplished: France’s Monsieur Macron Visits the Baltics*, for The Royal United Services Institute, 9 October 2020, available at <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/mission-unaccomplished-frances-monsieur-macron-visits-baltics> (last accessed May 2023).

Russia-reluctant Europeans do not ask Paris to cease dialogue but they reject labelling it as ‘European’ as long as their countries – effective neighbours of Russia and of the former Soviet space, with the highest stakes in Eastern Flank security –, were not included in the French initiative. (In addition, Macron’s “*quand la France agit, l’Europe agit*” [When France acts, Europe acts] formula is to be regarded as abusive and confiscatory – unless the same principle can be applied to other countries that act...)

Exclusion and disregard of geographic realities were sufficient in demonstrating that Paris does not consider including in its blueprints Eastern Europe’s interests. Partnership and confidence cannot be built on such attitude; if this was demonstrated in the mere case of intra-EU dialogue, how can be France trusted¹³⁰ with more sensitive issues, i.e. assuming responsibilities related to the security of Europe’s East? In case of conflict, how far would the Élysée go to accommodate Russia’s interests?... Paris offered the Kremlin a sense of cardinal importance that played well with Putin’s power projection. Despite Macron watering down the initiative (but not officially ending it), what the Centre-East remembers is France’s immediate penchant for a Russian partnership, the disregard of NATO’s Eastern Flank and the assumption that others will lessen their sovereign interests in ways compatible to France’s designs.

To go deeper into the issue, an ill-defined ‘something’ affects France’s political world perception of former Communist Europe being entitled to sovereign choices. When the narrative of the NATO enlargement as “unfair” to Russia is being embraced, they attack the sovereign option these countries made to join the most powerful military alliance in the world, for legitimate security concerns and with a sense of civilisational belongingness. If Jacques Chirac’s 2003 remark is still remembered and cited, it is less because it was his, but because it resumed in seven words France’s vision: unquestioned leadership in the West, French, and a deferential hinterland.

¹³⁰ Gustav Gressel, Kadri Liik, Jeremy Shapiro, Tara Varma, “Emmanuel Macron’s very big idea on Russia”, the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), available at https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_emmanuel_macrons_very_big_idea_on_russia/ (last accessed May 2023).

Appeasement with Russia included some less avowed ingredients: during a parliamentary hearing in November 2019¹³¹ it was suggested a taking over of the Eastern Partnership by France, because the Polish, Swedish and Baltic States management gave it “especially an anti-Russian image”. Even as a project, this demonstrates the length France’s political milieus would go to in order to comfort the Kremlin – against other EU members.

Paris did not react to the Eastern Flank’s preference for a common EU approach on Russia¹³², which would politically legitimise France’s initiative as a European one and actually bring value to Macron’s offer¹³³. The East’s approval would have given Paris more weight in the dialogue with Moscow. The Élysée missed understanding this logic, and misses understanding the corollary: all bilateral dialogue with Russia “in the name of Europe”, without prior talks to countries that have immediate and very high stake in the EU-NATO-Russia relations, will trigger an even closer rapprochement of the Baltic-Black Seas with Washington. The relationship of this area with Russia has numerous red lines which are neither imaginary, nor negotiable; all attempt by third parties to diminish their importance leads to fracture and division.

More recently, Hubert Védrine (an Élysée *éminence grise*) portrayed Macron’s controversial NATO statement from November 2019 as a constructive aggression¹³⁴, and the 138 proposals for the NATO renewal

¹³¹ Published June 2020: *Rapport d’information [...] par la Commission de la défense nationale des des forces armées portant recueil d’auditions de la commission sur l’évolution de la conflictualité dans le monde*, French Senate, available at https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/15/rapports/cion_def/115b3283_rapport-information (last accessed May 2023).

¹³² Ulrike Franke, Jana Puglierin, “The big engine that might: How France and Germany can build a geopolitical Europe”, ECFR Berlin, Policy Brief, 14 July 2020, available at https://ecfr.eu/publication/the_big_engine_that_might_how_france_and_germany_can_build_a_geopolitical_e/ (last accessed May 2023).

¹³³ Yegor Vasylyev, “Russia’s 2021 strategy in its European neighbourhood: The Kremlin’s vision and ‘the game of games’”, *New Eastern Europe*, 1 February 2021, available at <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2021/02/01/russias-2021-strategy-in-its-european-neighbourhood-the-kremlins-vision-and-the-game-of-games/> (last accessed May 2023).

¹³⁴ “Nato: Macrons ‘konstruktive Aggression’ hat sich gelohnt”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2 December 2020, available at <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/nato-macrons-konstruktive-aggression-hat-sich-gelohnt-17081777.html> (last accessed May 2023).

as a “good compromise”. Védérine admits that the strategic autonomy is still a red cloth but is satisfied with seeing more willingness of European allies to regard EU common defence as a means to reinforce NATO... East of Szczecin, such comments are seen as deceptive; Paris imagined that France will be able to provoke a chain-reaction and determine a group of countries to join the pro-Russian dynamic. The opposing West-East optics give Paris no leverage in influencing the strategic autonomy conversation, which in itself was declared a satisfactory outcome by the French part... Alas, it is not a formula that helps; for the Eastern Flank defence is a stringent matter, not an ethereal project revolving around faraway *débats*.

The non-inclusion of the Centre-East in France’s strategies was also emphasised in a tribune of 2020 by Clément Beaune¹³⁵, Minister of State for European Affairs. His words endorse Chirac’s view, revealing that the French Presidency is not concerned with consecrated institutional formulas, nor with consensus or partnership building:

“Not all European cooperation should require its own treaty and its own institutions. Nor should all European projects have to wait for everyone to agree. (...) Those who move forward will bring along those who wait (...). Institutions need to facilitate the European project, making it more adaptable, rather than seeking to embody it alone. Only one avant-garde pair remains necessary, ultimately, and must shoulder the responsibility: the Franco-German base.”

What seems justified by the need to improve efficiency will multiply centrifuge tendencies and disunity. This “golf club policy” is indeed an opportunity for flexible alliances to pursue shared interests through cooperative agreements, with non-participants unable to share the benefits as long as they stay aside. But it also means that any EU member can set the grounds for such a club, around a project, immediately conflicting with France’s narrative on European solidarity.

Overall, no wonder that by July 2020 France acquired the highest negative political reputation in the EU¹³⁶, with a rejection ratio going from 8% in Germany to a mild 11% in Romania and up to 33% in the

¹³⁵ Clément Beaune, *Europe after COVID*, Atlantic Council, 14 September 2020, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/feature/europe-after-covid/> (last accessed May 2023).

¹³⁶ Ulrike Franke, Jana Puglierin, art. cit., ut supra., tables.

Czech Republic or 37% in Poland. France's European policies got closer and closer to being labelled as "systemic adversity" with the Eastern Flank – a formula Paris might not like but will have to keep in mind.

How did we get here?...

Cultural Divides and Misperceptions

Comforting political legends circulating in French political milieus say that Central Europe is too pro-American to be genuinely devoted to Europe. Aside being wrong (given how the idea of European belongingness nurtured anti-Communist opposition and identity reconstruction after 1989), this urban tale *ad usum Delphini* vindicates the Élysée's behaviour. It was France's absenteeism since the mid-1990s that widened the grounds for American and German presence in such ways that today's degree of collaboration with Washington comes with significant cultural affinity.

Adding to the organic differences between East and West generated by Europe's complex geography and diverse statecraft praxes, Central Europe was terraformed by the American presence in the 1990s and 2000s. The word is correct. As the area received increasing attention from Washington, elites grew up with Anglo-American practices and their views on economy and civil society. More important, Central Europe got used to being regarded as partner (as the US administration treats them), to having their word equitably listened to or consulted. They are used to seeing the US contributing with shoulder-to-shoulder efforts, building together when the situation requires it, working out solutions, mutually defining interests, integrating them in a common position or agreeing to disagree with an objectivity that excludes rancour and does not exclude future cooperation. In full transformation after 1989, needing to adapt, the Central Europeans welcomed the US flexibility and constructive approach, as Washington's optics was to create partnerships in the area, strong enough to foster enduring alliances.

The US acted on inclusiveness, generated a sense of camaraderie (by a win-win mutualisation of interests) and is pro-active in the area. A striking opposition to France's course of action: exclusion, distancing and non-participation, uncharacteristic if compared to France's activism in the 1920s-1930s... This increases Central Europe's exigence exponentially when the Élysée fervidly advises a diminishment of the

transatlantic connection, especially because the counteroffer is reduced to speculative projects and no means.

Unlike Western Europe after 1945, the Centre-East is (again) in reconstruction: the fourth time in 100 years that the area has to rebuild state, economy and society, define operating public values and focus on how to achieve good governance. This Sisyphean effort is more than enough to exhaust the patience of four generations – yet also demonstrates a capacity of resilience that surpasses some of the Western societies' (un)willingness to reform.

In dealing with ethnic and confessional diversity, post-1989 multinational, multicultural Central Europe – successor to four continental empires spreading from the Adriatic to the Baltic and the Black Sea –, grew with social and economic models inspired by Anglo-Saxon Liberal debates and interpretations. Leftism, still active in France's political spectrum, did not survive 1989: therefore, values that animate the French public sphere and shaped the society for decades are perceived with scepticism... Hayek, Nozick, Dworkin, Berlin, Ackerman, Walzer, Kymlicka, Galston substantially impacted in an area where Havel, Wałęsa or Rațiu were already promoters of the open, democratic, tolerant, liberal society. (And I'm asking impartially: what if today's illiberal moment represents the region's own attempt to define liberal values somewhere between authoritarianism and a disorienting libertinism?)

Central Europe grew up in a trending economic liberalism that, yes, admittedly needs moderation, but by *Ordnung*, not by ever-controlling *étatisme*, too similar to the Communist planning. Guizot, Tocqueville, Bastiat, Say, Louis-Philippe and Napoléon III are closer to Central Europe's contemporary disposition – and, truth be told, the France that inspired us used to be the one of Liberal achievements, of daring innovation triumphing among exquisite grand traditions, universalist and (f)actually ambitious.

It would take too much to examine the reasons why France gradually lost positions in Central and Eastern Europe, even if, initially, Paris took supportive action, such as the European Confederation project of 1989-1991, the Phare funding, the creation of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Stability Pact of May 1994 and the creation of Weimar Triangle in 1995. Two decades later, especially after 2002-2003 and the 2004 enlargement, it became clear that the French

political class acts based on conceptions that grant little value to Europe's Centre, East and South-East. Gaullist Chirac (and his entourage) was in this respect the cultivator of a sternness (to put it mildly), seen as giving content to France's grandeur and leadership... The hierarchic view the Élysée placed on the international system was expressed in tutorial ways too close to self-importance, overconfidence and self-righteousness. If Trump's four years presidency is said to have changed the nature of the transatlantic relationship, one can imagine how Central Europe's relationship to France changed after twelve years of Chirac – with Sarkozy conveniently navigating in the same waters after 2010 and Macron averring Gaullism (or a debated Gaullo-Mitterrandisme¹³⁷) to be an inspiration.

In terms of misconceptions, the worst of all was to take Eastern Europe's economic disarray and social backwardness of the 1990s, after decades of imposed totalitarian regime, as consubstantial to their 'Eastness', instead of understanding them as inflicted by political and military circumstances. The error was major: it not only overlooked the desire of these nations to rebuild themselves, but also ignored the ever-developing experience accumulated by their civil societies through questioning and resistance in pre-1989 times, fertile ingredients for revival and action. Unlike Washington, Paris persisted with non-inclusive patterns, meant to underline that former Communist Europe was a 'junior member', little capable of contribution to the European project. In doing so, France self-excluded from the possibility to be a partner of Central-Eastern Europe's growth and leave a print on the social, economic, cultural and political rise of nations who did not need France's approval to re-emerge as regional European actors.

¹³⁷ In favour of its existence: Pascal Boniface, *Why the concept of Gaullo-Mitterrandism is still relevant*, Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques, April 2019, available at <https://www.iris-france.org/136272-why-the-concept-of-gaullo-mitterrandism-is-still-relevant/>, version of a previous article, "Le gaullo-mitterrandisme, un concept toujours pertinent", *Revue internationale et stratégique*, vol. 109, n° 1, 2018, pp. 22-35. Contesting the concept, Michel Duclos, *Gaullo-Mitterrandisme contre néo-conservateurs à la française – un vrai-faux débat ?*, Institut Montaigne, 3 August 2017, available at <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/blog/2017/08/03/Gaullo-Mitterrandisme-contre-n%C3%A9o-conservateurs-%C3%A0-la-fran%C3%A7aise-%E2%80%93-un-vrai-faux-d%C3%A9bat> (last accessed May 2023).

Rather than initiating a goodwill chain that enables trust building, France took the opposite direction. The late 1990s and the 2000s saw political mythologies tenaciously built around Central Europe's nations for electoral purposes, alternatively stressing the social dumping they would inflict to France's labour force (the Left), the inconvenient pro-Americanism of the New Europe (the Right) or (both sides) the foreseeable migratory invasion putting pressure on France's welfare and identity.

This came, moreover, with a cultural deprecation of nations historically Francophile and the creation of lasting, negative stereotypes in the French mass-media – active to this day. France became a challenger, limited in her will to constitute a source of positive input. In accordance, for more than a decade, being able to avoid further tensions and frictions was considered having “good relations” with France; building together was highly unlikely, despite strategic partnerships being signed with Romania, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia in 2008. Germany's role of mediator maximised Berlin's presence, giving them an overall unrivalled amount of reliability before 2015, doubled by the powerful, increasing presence of the German economy.

Why did France's political elites prefer demoting eleven nations of Europe to marginal ranks is something that French connoisseurs might explain better – even if too late to be useful. The demotion was visible and felt with a proportional degree of displeasure. It affected France's imagine in the public eye of Central Europeans, associating it – retaliatory and as malevolently – to social, cultural and economic decomposition, decadence and structural feebleness; in other words, a country with a compromised future, whose message can be neglected.

After more than 20 years, French and Central Europeans ended up seeing each other mostly through the mutual prism of deficiencies, of what they allegedly lack, instead of what they complementarily share... A more rational attitude would match the wise saying “the devil is not as black as he is painted”.

What Now?

What was undone in three decades cannot be suddenly remedied. There is more to do on the French side to dismantle the barricades of misconceptions, self-consoling stereotypes and edges of animosity. It

would also mark the beginning of a new mindset, hopefully convincing enough to France's reluctant colleagues. But this is not an easy task and France will have to spend years and years in order to reinsert herself firmly in the American-German-dominated nexus of Central Europe's politics, economy and society. France will also need to cultivate a new generation of diplomats, with substantial openness, preparation and awareness of the area's self-affirmation and interests.

One might argue that it is too soon to see the Centre-East capable of becoming a pro-active contributor to the European integration – but this is not the issue, and one would easily fall again into the trap of false negatives. What Paris needs to rationally understand is that their geographic location, their strategic set in Europe's tectonic East, offers these countries an indisputable impact on the evolution of the EU. (The very process of Euro-Atlantic enlargement was determined by this implacable reality, whose dimensions France refused to fully assume¹³⁸.) Geopolitical pivots, these countries – especially Poland, the Baltic States and Romania – constitute geostrategic actors not just emerging but incontrovertible, as they prove capable, in non-negligible degrees, of influencing and shaping their environment. Their power is therefore less related to economic might and more to geography, strongly intertwined to historical memories and geopolitical representations. Their states might be “new”, but the nations are longstanding and richly experienced, sharing mutual interests and able to generate regional ensembles such as the 17+1¹³⁹, the Bucharest9 or the Three Seas Initiative.

¹³⁸ With regard to the next steps of enlargement in the Western Balkans, see Laura-Maria Herta, Adrian-Gabriel Corpădean, “Europeanisation in the Western Balkans: Challenges and Pitfalls”, in *Europe: Critical Thinking in Critical Times* (ed. M. Sette), London Centre for Interdisciplinary Research, 2021, pp. 25-41; Diana Reianu, “EU Enlargement in the Western Balkans: fabricating reforms in public administration”, in *The Call for More Europe: Ambitions and Realities. Papers from the Eight International Scientific Conference of the European Studies Department*, Faculty of Philosophy at Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, December 2021, pp. 169-180.

¹³⁹ Formula applying to the cooperative endeavours between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (China-CEE, China-CEEC, also 14+1; formerly 17+1 from 2019 to 2021 and 16+1 from 2021 to 2022). The initiative, spearheaded by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, aimed to foster business and investment relations between China and 14 countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE, CEEC): Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia,

Central Europe and the Eastern Flank countries joined the European defence and security structures in order to avoid marginalisation but will not consider relying on these as long as Paris-Berlin will not establish credible and functional frameworks. The Baltic/Black Sea area is aware that the EU lost 20% of its military throw-weight with the Brexit; the margins for the strategic autonomy are very modest. They do not reject the idea of a powerful, capable Europe, but reject: (1) decoupling from NATO (perceived as a constant French temptation, worsened by the Russian one); (2) the vague proposals of the Élysée with no definition, no organised approach, no timeline; (3) any institutional design of European defence that create conflict of prerogatives with the existing ones, dilute or duplicate the EU's.

The invitation-based concept of the French-led European Intervention Initiative (E2I) is precisely the type of project that, despite all claims, undermines the fostering of a European strategic culture: not only it is centred on French interests, but, in the name of fast decision-making, it excludes key actors of Central Europe and the Eastern Flank. It might be the smartest concept of European defence launched to this date – because the most flexible –, but ill-advised: a more integrative E2I, preserving suppleness and openness, could be a craftier instrument gradually leading to a more efficient Permanent Structured Cooperation within the EU's security and defence policy... France's wish to push integration further is reasonable; yet “coalitions of the willing”, seen as panacea to quicker decision-making, are not enough for bringing progress. The formula itself is improper: there are willing who were excluded, and there are willing with less means – case in which the ‘will’ should be put to smarter use by developing proportionate and complementary instruments of inclusion. The Élysée did not take time to consider this by far more valuable option. This also explains why “buying European” is not a priority. On the other hand, connecting the progress of European common defence to “buying European French” is twice unconstructive: security cannot be reduced to ‘fighting merchandise’, no

Slovakia, and Slovenia. Prior to their 2022 withdrawal, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were also members of the initiative. In the case of Romania, following the shift in government structure from the pre-2015 left-wing cabinet led by Victor Ponta to a predominantly right-wing after 2019-2020, the projects pertaining to China-Romania relations were terminated in order to prioritise the strengthening of ties with the United States.

matter how much frustration it causes in Paris. In addition, it is difficult to sell these to clients France ignored for decades.

Central and Eastern Europe has reasons to stand up and defend their influence, and while they do not accumulate the amount of power of the Franco-German duopoly, they dispose of a critical power of obstruction that can erode and impede Paris-Berlin plans, thwarting their success.

Some cooperation recommendations compatible to the region's interests are the following:

- Capitalise on existing institutions and structures such as Weimar; amplify Weimar with an additional Plus format including the Baltic States, Sweden and Romania (Poland, Sweden and Romania are strategically connected by trilateral consultations);
- Get closer to The Bucharest9 and the Three Seas Initiative (though the United Kingdom might do it first because, if France keeps options closed, Central Europe keeps them open: working with London is appealing, especially because they seek international relevance, are dedicated to security issues and are supple);
- Multiply meetings in bilateral or regional format; the Quadrilateral with the Baltic States is an example (however, strategic dialogue with Romania had been dormant since Hollande and it was Romania, not France, who took the initiative to ask for renewed 2+2 reunions);
- Become pro-active in the area's defence, both via NATO and on bilateral or trilateral basis (may it be next to the US in their rotational presence, the Germans or with German financial support¹⁴⁰); a French or Franco-German military settlement at the Black Sea will offer advantage in dealing with Russia and Turkey. (With prospects for an increased and closer French-American cooperation seeming realistic¹⁴¹, the US presence might serve as a bridge for improved France-Germany-Eastern Flank coordination and teamwork. At least for the beginning, the USA are likely to be the accepted mediator between the two parts of Europe).

¹⁴⁰ Justyna Gotkowska (Centre for Eastern Studies, Warsaw), *Beyond Multilateralism as We Know It*, 26 November 2020, available at <https://peacelab.blog/2020/11/defence-and-deterrence-in-europe-beyond-multilateralism-as-we-know-it> (last accessed May 2023).

¹⁴¹ Jeffrey Lightfoot, Olivier-Rémy Bel, *Sovereign solidarity: France, the US, and alliances in a post-COVID world*, Atlantic Council, 11 November 2020, available at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/sovereign-solidarity-france-the-us-and-alliances-in-a-post-covid-world/> (last accessed May 2023).

- Deploy your cultural and public diplomacy at your most seductive; put in touch the civil societies and the private sectors, which are reliable elements of growth and innovation; connect to influencers and build networks of mavens; create regional antennas of French business schools, foundations and think-tanks; contribute to networking around vectors and policies of shared interest. High culture is the field where France still retains unchallenged appreciation.
- Act like an authentic partner, with constant and constructive input based on political and cultural presence.

If France wishes to become the political, diplomatic and military leader of the EU, there is no alternative but to work together. (When the task means reaching a common target, the two sides do not even have to like each other – functional trust can be achieved by mutual acknowledgement and adequate fairness.) Paris has the option to demonstrate a genuine European reasoning by contributing to a regional system that involves cooperation among a critical mass of European nations.

This is the *only* possibility to embody constant leadership in the EU and transform Paris in the powerhouse of European authority: integrating a maximum of interests, acting for convergence, shaping maximal coalitions by using diverse vectors of influence and stimulus. These require constant dialogue and *very* credible commitment. It shall not be easy, but it shall be immensely rewarding.

Et c'est à prendre ou à laisser.

2025 afterthought

And then there was Macron's Bratislava speech (May 31, 2023) at the GLOBSEC Forum, a symbolic pivot toward "Eastern Europe". He acknowledged past French neglect of the region and rejected the old "Old vs. New Europe" divide, calling for unity and quoting Milan Kundera's "kidnapped West" metaphor. Macron acknowledged that Europe's security future was being shaped in the East and promised deeper engagement, including NATO solidarity⁴² and credible security guarantees for Ukraine.

¹⁴² Tara Varma, 'We lost an opportunity to listen to you': Why Macron is embracing Eastern Europe, commentary for Brookings Institute, June 6, 2023, online at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/we-lost-an-opportunity-to-listen-to-you-why-macron-is-embracing-eastern-europe/>, retrieved August 2025.

May 2021

From Post-Communist Legacy to Democracy and Atlantic Partnership: Central Europe's Relevance in Europe

Central Europe is confronted with subversive Russian military aggression, Middle East instability and the high appetite of China's financial empire. To external vulnerability adds deep-state corruption, institutional rigging, and restrictions of individual rights by law or even Constitution. The contrast with the bright hopes of the post-Communist '90s could not be starker. But now that the United States returned as a willing coagulator of the world's democracies, will our societies react by more tenacious civic engagement, reassessing Liberalism and giving Central Europe credibility as democratic partner?

A Parable for Prologue

The impressive walls of the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence were looking ghastly, and it was Da Vinci's fault. The frustration was proportional. Him, of all people, with a contract approved by Niccolò Machiavelli, the Republic's much esteemed official. Not only the fresco of the battle of Anghinari—meant to opulently decorate the Hall of the Five Hundred—was left incomplete, but it started to degrade. Da Vinci was famously experimenting with fresco painting techniques, using tempera and gesso; yet, in this case, paint began to drip after he added colour to the walls; and his attempt to salvage what he could by heating up the space turned to disaster: humidity made colours blend... When dry, exfoliation ensued. Bitterly displeased, the City of Florence replaced him by commissioning Giorgio Vasari. He did so after appraising Da Vinci's sketches and eulogising the “inventiveness of Leonardo's design”, his “incredible skill”

and the “graceful beauty” of the characters. Alas, his tribute was all that was left behind. Da Vinci’s attempted composition survived only in copies – prompting Rubens to brilliantly try his hand at it a century later.

Fast forward to the 1990s: replace Da Vinci with the civil society of Central and Eastern Europe; the proposed fresco with much expected social-cultural accomplishments; his experimenting techniques with the process of post-Communist transition, fully unprecedented; and the request of the City of Florence with the hopes of Central Europe’s nations. It will give you an image of the disappointment that comes once we assess today the path taken by our societies and governments after the accession to the EU. The exfoliation stands for the decaying rule of law and degraded state of democracy: a sign of us having failed to properly understand and master the system we wanted to make ours.

The Labyrinth of Post-Communism

Once the accession to the EU was formally completed, Milan Kundera’s “abducted Occident” stopped midway in the evolution towards a Western society. The spirit of 1989 was infiltrated by fatigue and lost amidst undeniable power brokerage and economic unsettlement. The drive of the civic society evanesced, as if it served as a pretext only, a limited intellectual fuel for sprinting towards the Union. Belongingness to Occident, credentials of Europeaness, compatibility in spirit and values, the cultural battle successfully long waged to justify insertion in the united Europe, all ceased to illuminate the former Communist countries. To the surprise of the watchers, as well as to our critical self, the European project of the entire region was proven in time as flawed as Da Vinci’s Anghinari fresco.

In the 1990s, one could easily oppose Europe’s West, of increasing integration and harmonisation, to Europe’s East. The latter was fragmented, underperforming, with scientific, technical and social handicaps, an asynchronous political conduct, formerly “unified” by Soviet political and military command, with a doubtful economic “integration” labelled Comecon. The enfeebled democratic traditions east of the Iron Curtain were not singular on the Continent (Spain, Greece, Portugal were themselves newcomers in the club of Liberal democracies),

but, at the time, the cultural power of dissidents and émigrés was playing an awakening, energising role.

Yet, judging from today's perspective, it cannot be denied that nationalism—national optics, not the exclusive identitarian emotion—remained the privileged path. The romantic content that Central and Eastern Europe gave to European integration was not only stronger than the rationalisation of what integration meant, but also akin to feelings nurtured for the concept of nation, and as easily irascible. Laudable historical and moral reasons were brought forward in order to anchor our part of Europe in the collective effort of the European construction; but after thirty years, triggered by recent geopolitical context and dissatisfaction with the dynamics of the European society and institutions¹⁴³, the nationalist narrative prevailed almost exclusively and turned against integration itself. The latter is depicted as an outcome of a technocratic, unimaginative, one-measure-fits-all Commission. At the same time, political nationalism was, and still is, veiled in Europeanism: “*we are part of Europe; we defend Europe!*”, the argument goes. Most certainly: but *which* Europe?

Repeating constantly the phrase above does not make it valid. Critical exigency imposes a *distinguo* between geographical belongingness, the historical and the institutional, reflecting similarity of political cultures. The belongingness to Europe, in terms discussed after 1945, is neither limited, nor defined by the geographic and historical criteria; both are indispensable, but post-1945 European integration is a cultural-institutional process where integration is defined by assimilation of values, of institutions, of social-cultural practices which, next to Europe's historical and intellectual profile¹⁴⁴, shape a specific lifestyle. (In addition, scientific and technical competence, economic behaviour, administrative efficiency, political action, and intellectual performance are subsystems of European living our countries have to perform within.)

What we see today in our societies is a technical concept of European belongingness, and, because of it, a considerably reductive concept of Europe. To the public eye and in the public discourse, a certain degree

¹⁴³ Ivan T. Berend, *Against European Integration: The European Union and its Discontents*, Routledge, London, 2019, *passim*.

¹⁴⁴ Yves Hersant, Fabienne Durand-Bogaert, *Europes de l'Antiquité au XXe siècle*, Robert Laffont, Paris, 2000.

of satisfaction comes from merely being a part of political and military Euro-Atlantic alliances, with their normative organisations. Of course, no reasonable argument could diminish the importance of such structures, as integration is enrooted in institutional arrangements; however, our part of Europe needs to develop an understanding of the EU not only as a state of institutional fact, but of self-defining ideals and self-constructing projects.

Our lack of direction was quickly detectable because of the *lack of profound renewal in political values*. It might be too easy to forget today that soon after 1990, within half a decade, questions about the democratic changes in Central and Eastern Europe rose. The hopeful euphoria of 1989 was replaced by perplexity when elections in Poland, Bulgaria and Slovakia brought back Socialists to power, while Romania was still attached to Communist reformists as late as 1996. It should have been the first indicator of the deep imperfections of 1989, as well as of the powerful grasp of the recent past on our societies¹⁴⁵.

Corrosive Past, Troubled Future

Time – Chronos – is metaphorically known to devour his own progeny. In Central and Eastern Europe, the battle of Time was given between memory and current history. Civil society was largely in need to confront a Past abducted by Communism, condemn it, integrate and digest the trauma of a political experiment whose corrosiveness is slowly revealed, year after year. Victim of a two-generation long oppression, nationhood returned as the major framework of politics. Herder's paradigm¹⁴⁶ won an unexpected victory at the very moment when Fukuyama was hoping for a different world. Much was invested in the reconstruction of a new national profile; to the best, it led to ambitious country strategies – otherwise, to boiling speeches. Once forbidden, Enlightened Liberalism, Romantic Nationalism and Christian Democracy were revived from the 1930s, when our History stopped; yet, the restoration of this triarchy

¹⁴⁵ See, for instance, Heinrich Best, Agnieszka Wenninger, *Landmark 1989: Central and Eastern European Societies Twenty Years After the System Change*, LIT Verlag Münster, 2010.

¹⁴⁶ Frederick M. Barnard, *Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History*, McGill-Queen's Press - MQUP, 2003.

implied at the same time not paying attention to the economic and sociological postulates shaping the non-Communist world. The interest for novelty, for large, comprehensive socio-institutional systems, for the global and the universal were diverted by our attention focused on how to manage the collapsing Communism and re-become ourselves.

With a long duty of defending memory, civil societies were better prepared for a Restoration, not a transformation; the Europe they conceived, or expected to see, was theoretical, a *livresque* reconstitution, rather poetic, but not the *genuine* Europe of the Late Modernity, with its new political motivation, pooled sovereignties and good governance principles. Our preparedness to assume and incorporate the new European living was minimal: and so was the understanding of the transformations that occurred in the Free World after 1945. The pressure of the Past and the needs of the Present made us rewrite our narrative, but generated a palimpsest: while adding new chapters to our European path, we never properly washed off the pages left by Communism on our mental canvas.

Inversely, because of the Cold War, Western Europe's new postulates were never confronted with the pre-war realities of Central and Eastern Europe, nor with the Communist ones. These never incorporated after 1989—in a critical self-assessment—Central and Eastern Europe's early response to the said transformations; and thus the value of Western Europe's social, political and cultural experiences became a target of contestation for some of Central Europe's political movements.

The integration in the EU, with its changes of rhythm, are accused of being part of an imposed, centralised agenda, not far from Soviet-like directives. The same generation who was willing to “return to Europe” has doubts in confronting the double revolution they are living: its own, with a conversion to liberty, with freedoms in need to be handled in order to create stability; and the West's, who is in a quest for improved social and economic inclusiveness, redefining liberties and rights in ways that generate dissolution of social structures classically known to us.

And so, the transformations occurring in the West are not seen as a metamorphosis but as disintegration: the West renouncing its own nature. While the West is attempting to shape a (certain) future, the East attempts to shape the past it was deprived of; both try to remodel: the first by deconstructing, the second by reconstructing. Asynchrony could

not be more pronounced. Yet, both share a distaste for a Europe reduced to jurists, experts and economists, with no emotion and no epos; and while the West is still looking to get reacquainted with a the concepts of narrative, power and territory¹⁴⁷ in order to face today's challenges, the Centre-East thrives exclusively on them, almost in tunnel vision. Both East and West face difficulties with accepting the necessary change, the nationalist reflex being embraced simultaneously; in both cases, the political process was appropriated by groups who insist on pursuing it, each with a different direction¹⁴⁸ and claiming they took the right path while demonising the other.

One major difference: the democratic and liberal praxis of the West endowed them by now with more resilience. In today's world, with giant actors shaping the agenda, it is Europe's Centre and East who still need to find a credible, stable and rewarding place.

The Rise of An Alliance of Democracies

The US alliance of democracies¹⁴⁹ is not a project deriving from American Neoconservatism; President Joseph Biden's project dates from 2018¹⁵⁰ and is centred on a collaborative, multilateral involvement of democracies in the management of global affairs.

The world has changed profoundly in the last decade, and even more in the last five years. The situation in the Middle East and North Africa, the digital revolution, the steroid-rise of authoritarian regimes,

¹⁴⁷ Luuk van Middelaar, "Le réveil géopolitique de l'Europe", *Le Grand Continent*, April 15, 2021, available at <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2021/04/15/le-reveil-geopolitique-de-leurope/> (last accessed June 2023).

¹⁴⁸ Anne-Charlotte Dusseaulx, "Macron remet sur la table l'opposition entre progressistes et nationalistes", *Le Journal de Dimanche*, May 13, 2019, available at <https://www.lejdd.fr/Politique/europeennes-pourquoi-macron-remet-sur-la-table-lopposition-progressiste-nationaliste-3898307> (accessed June 2023).

¹⁴⁹ Frederick Kempe, *Op-Ed: Biden has a plan to rally the world's democracies and tackle threats together*, September 13, 2020, available at <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/09/13/op-ed-bidens-plan-to-rally-worlds-democracies-at-2021-summit.html> (last accessed June 2023).

¹⁵⁰ *Democracy in an Age of Authoritarianism*, remarks of Vice President Joe Biden at the Copenhagen Democracy Summit, Copenhagen, Denmark, June 22, 2018, text available at <https://www.allianceofdemocracies.org/speech-by-joe-biden/> (last accessed June 2023).

the overconfidence of China and the Covid19 pandemic created a context where, after four years of self-centred Trumpism, the USA understood that the Western world needs to strategically involve democracies in multilateral initiatives. In doing so, it revives the most important elements of NATO's largely forgotten political identity: standing for liberal democracy and open societies, a "Mont-Pèlerin acquis"¹⁵¹, the very kind that defined the objectives former Communist Europe set for itself after 1989.

We have seen the Biden administration opting for a reconstruction of the Atlantic Alliance based on a triptych: 1. global relevance for NATO, 2. the alliance of democracies, and 3. the defence of a rules-based global society. Gone are the days of "promoting democracy" through ill-famed military interventions; the circumstances make it both implausible and impossible. The novelty of the US-suggested system comes with the intrinsic necessity to reshape multilateralism, geopolitical actors participating according to their size and their own strategy. While the benefits of integrating such a community¹⁵² were underlined for the great European powers (without ignoring critique from the same¹⁵³), it is even more important for us, Europe's middle powers, to seize momentum and maturely reformulate our understanding of democracy.

In the ecosystem of the proposed alliance, democracy and partnership are elements of a circular economy where middle democratic powers are called to assist the greater ones in an effort to reshape the world order with mutual benefits. The "new world order" implies not just diplomatic efforts from Washington, but new action concepts and adjustment from the allies. It is either the democracies who design and

¹⁵¹ In reference to the Mount Pèlerin Society conference (originally named Acton-Tocqueville, revealing thus a classic Liberal profile) from 1947. The Mount Pèlerin Society is an international organisation gathering economists, business leaders, historians, intellectuals and philosophers, advocating freedom of expression, free market economic policies and the political values of an open society.

¹⁵² Jamie Shea (former Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Emerging Security Challenges at the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation), *The alliance of democracies: is it feasible? Is it sensible?*, Friends of Europe (think-tank), February 19, 2021, available at <https://www.friendsofeurope.org/insights/the-alliance-of-democracies-is-it-feasible-is-it-sensible/> (last accessed June 2023).

¹⁵³ Michel Duclos, Bruno Tertrais, *Do We Need a Global Alliance of Democracies?*, Institut Montaigne, January 7, 2021, available at <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/do-we-need-global-alliance-democracies> (last accessed June 2023).

organise international society in a liberal spirit, or they submit to rules imposed by unfriendly¹⁵⁴, hostile, aggressive regimes. What is at stake is the personal dignity and living standards of each and every European.

No democracy – not even the USA – has the luxury of choosing to play the card of an imaginary tactic ambivalence¹⁵⁵, shifting between collusion with authoritarian regimes for economic purposes and the claim to be a faithful member of the democratic world. The costs translate by losing on both sides in dedication *and* trustworthiness. First, the US needs to have a profound conversation with its divided political self; then, with their allies in order to decide which integrative leadership formula is the most suitable. The USA is not the hyperpower of the 1990s or early 2000s; they cannot determine anymore the trajectory of global politics. Threatened themselves, the USA has to engage into shaping the world of tomorrow against regimes who filled the void created by many years of American non-involvement.

The need to partner up with middle powers will not make “Great Power politics” less relevant; but there is a clear shift from unilateralist and hegemonic approaches to substantial multilateralism, with polylatéralism¹⁵⁶ serving as a maximiser of influence and impact. The world system creates both greater opportunity and greater incentive for middle powers to assert their interests and influence global norms; they will be critical components of any balance of power in the international system, which is crucial for Central and Eastern Europe.

Multilateralism is born from conjugating the interests of democracies with the desire and the willpower to build a community of shared values. The closest the USA and Europe got to such a development was in the early 1960s, when President Kennedy suggested “a Declaration

¹⁵⁴ Philippe Rater for AFP, “Russia Slams U.S. Proposal for ‘Summit for Democracy’”, *Moscow Times*, May 7, 2021, available at <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/05/07/russia-slams-us-proposal-for-summit-for-democracy-a73839> (last accessed June 2023).

¹⁵⁵ Theresa Fallon, “The Impossible Triangle: China, the US, and the EU”, *Observer Research Foundation*, May 5, 2021, available at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/the-impossible-triangle-china-the-us-and-the-eu/> (last accessed June 2023).

¹⁵⁶ “Polylatéralisme ou chaos, une conversation avec Pascal Lamy”, *Le Grand Continent*, November 11, 2020, available at <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2020/11/11/polylatéralisme-pascal-lamy/> (last accessed June 2023).

of Interdependence”¹⁵⁷ of the USA with a United Europe. (Kennedy’s statements were tools for 1962 domestic policy, but Monnet, Eden, Adenauer, Nixon, Rockefeller, F.J. Strauss and Kissinger, among others, approved¹⁵⁸.) Yesterday like today, however, what needs to be clarified is if the US and Europe can move from an “Atlantic community” (based on the many bilateral relationships America built with the European states) to an “Atlantic partnership” (designating the relationship between the US and Europe as a united, single actor). *Le Grand Dessein* of the 1960s is a demonstration that those times had already found an answer to a problem not solved in six decades.

The US-China rivalry – next to reducing the range of action of the world’s main powers – leads to the exponential increase in importance of the middle ones, themselves in full process of reorganisation because of the need to be a part of the new global architecture. Despite official comments rejecting the idea, it *does* look like the Cold War again¹⁵⁹, as the two confronting poles are the free world and a communist regime¹⁶⁰; once more, a community of values is needed at the heart of the alliance.

Central and Eastern Europe in the New Global System

If we want to be relevant in the European equation as well as a valued player in the concert of democracies, Central and Eastern Europe has to become more compatible with what defines middle Powers¹⁶¹ to their

¹⁵⁷ John F. Kennedy, *Address at Independence Hall*, Philadelphia, July 04, 1962, available at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-independence-hall-philadelphia> (last accessed June 2023).

¹⁵⁸ E.R. Goodman, *The Fate of the Atlantic Community*, Praeger Publishers, 1975.

¹⁵⁹ Gideon Rachman, “A second cold war is tracking the first”, *Financial Times*, March 29, 2021, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/b724fbb0-6c62-4175-85c9-b17ac98dde7d> (last accessed June 2023).

¹⁶⁰ Timothy Garton Ash, “The US and China are entering a new cold war. Where does that leave the rest of us?”, *The Guardian*, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/20/us-china-cold-war-liberal-de> (last accessed June 2023).

¹⁶¹ Andrew Fenton Cooper, Richard A. Higgott, Kim Richard Nossal, *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order*, UBC Press, Vancouver, 1993.

best: laws, norms and behaviour, not only position and geography¹⁶². Normatively, middle powers can be potentially wiser, more virtuous, and more trustworthy because of their recourse to diplomatic influence rather than to force, and more proactive when taking responsibility for the creation and maintenance of the global order. Behaviourally, middle powers tend to engage in *middlepowermanship*, defined as pursuing multilateral solutions to international problems, embracing compromise positions in international disputes¹⁶³ or adopting notions of “good international citizenship”¹⁶⁴ to guide their diplomacy.

Our civil society is pivotal in shaping such mindset, with an imperious need to see Liberal and pro-open society actors taking back the stage. The work has to continue not by hashtag activism, but by rational persuasion. Democracy does come with a price: of constant care and vigilance, of continuous exigence and scrutiny, of imperative quality and careful institutional innovation. People chose the democratic alternative in 1989 not necessarily based on the revenues it brings¹⁶⁵, but on the values they wanted at the base of their society. Democracy is not the proverbial chaos, nor is Liberalism reducible to wild business and low corporate taxation. Both are a social and cultural state of mind, an exploration of potential, a transformation of freedom into the liberty to improve and demonstrate a nation’s excellence.

The civil society from our part of Europe needs to finish the unfinished revolution. First, we have to admit we largely failed to produce functioning democracies, open society or reflexive Liberalism (the latter implying the social construction of political spaces, subjects and institutions to which a functioning democracy can be linked, and where it is itself generated in a virtuous circle). Then, we need to convert our

¹⁶² See my previous article, “Building Europe. Can France and Central Europe Truly Reconcile?”, online at <https://visegradinsight.eu/building-europe-can-france-and-central-europe-truly-reconcile/> (last accessed May 2023).

¹⁶³ William T. R. Fox, review of “Canada as a Principal Power: A Study in Foreign Policy and International Relations by David B. Dewitt, John J. Kirton”, *International Journal*, vol. 39, no. 1, Domestic Sources of Canada’s Foreign Policy (Winter, 1983/1984), pp. 214-216, Sage Publications, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4020227>

¹⁶⁴ Peyton V. Lyon, Brian W. Tomlin, *Canada as an International Actor*, Macmillan-Canada, Toronto, 1979.

¹⁶⁵ Romain Le Quiniou, *Ce que 1989 peut (et ne peut pas) nous apprendre*, Euro-Créative (think-tank), available at <http://eurocreative.fr/ce-que-1989-peut-et-ne-peut-pas-nous-apprendre/> (last accessed June 2023).

agenda in ways to organise a future, with focus on value construction able to generate durable good governance. The effort is (once more) double: not just denouncing wrong-doing, but identifying solutions, allying civic platforms via transnational frames (the Three Seas Initiative is an ideal one), mobilising like-minded actors from the private sector, building common projects and acting on these. Past traumas have to become engines of the fight for pluralism and for open society.

The concern with the Past and with history, validated as so honourably primordial, should itself be upgraded to serve a certain concept of Europe, with time invested into designing the ensemble we want to live in and stand for. The Conference on the Future of Europe would be a recommendable start. Otherwise, the space that our part of Europe does not fill in the political and civil debate about the nature of the Union is occupied by more active players.

There is not much sand left in the hourglass. In such decisive times, rethinking and rebuilding societies here, at home, is hardly a matter of prestige; for us, by now, it is a matter of survival.

December 2020 & April 2023

“Carpathian Variations”. Romania’s Approach to Strategic Autonomy, Security and NATO

Romania is the civilisational product of centuries of geopolitical stress, never absent from its historical evolution. The country therefore has an acute sense of security and survival, with both the public opinion and the political elites focusing predominantly on these topics. There is a certain fascination with the exertion of power, force and might, the United States and the Soviet Union being, for contemporary adult generations, the main detainers of it, for better (the US) or for worse (the Kremlin). In the political sphere, the absence of this feature from the European integration project is largely at the origin of Romania’s subconsciously passive belongingness to the EU, generating a divergence between the economic integration in the Union (by context and inertia) and the non-participation to the European construction, with Brussels not being perceived as a generator of power or security. This was ascribable to the attention granted to the partnership concluded with the United States, and to the limited definition given to security by the Bucharest governments until recently, when the global dynamics of China and Russia—political, military and economic—impacted on Romania’s foreign policy.

Romania’s Position in EU Strategic Autonomy

When the concept of “strategic autonomy” became the most active vector of what the French President Emmanuel Macron described as Europe’s sovereignty, the reaction of the Romanian diplomacy was of initial deep silence. With its typical moderation (both a virtue and an impediment), Bucharest took time and searched for supplementary clues, hints and indirect definitions of the much-invoked label. It was therefore only in November 2020—after the “braindead NATO” comment by Emmanuel Macron in the previous year, after steps taken by the same

to initiate a unilateral dialogue with Russia for a “new architecture of trust and security”, the eruption of the pandemic and the publication of the 2020-2024 National Defence Strategy (where Russia’s aggressiveness was identified as a threat)—that Romania’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bogdan Aurescu, published an op-ed offering the country’s take on strategic autonomy¹⁶⁶.

The extensive text started with a trilateration of Romania’s foreign policy pillars: the bilateral partnership with the USA, the NATO membership and the EU membership, described in terms of values, not only of circumstantial benefits. Aurescu rhetorically indicated Romania’s attachment to a free and democratic society, the rule of law, acceptance of international law and support for multilateralism.

The text was a polite rejection of any suggested alliance with a country that embraces opposite views; Russia could not be seen as a partner in any architecture of trust and security if the Kremlin does not change behaviour. Bucharest thus discarded France’s initiative. But this led to a more wide-ranging analysis of what the strategic autonomy could mean in terms of outcome, if the Elysée project was eventually embraced.

First, it was excluded by principle that Romania diminishes connections with NATO or the United States. Instead of acting in favour of a transatlantic divorce—as unequivocally suggested by Emmanuel Macron at the time when Donald Trump was still acting president—, Bucharest expressed preference for a process of negotiations addressing the divergent topics in order to attenuate differences and integrate them into a new approach of NATO’s role, with a different distribution of responsibilities on the two sides of the Atlantic. It is why Romania supported discussions about an improved strategic concept of the alliance and the future of Europe: “it is in the interest of Romania to generate an

¹⁶⁶ Op-ed Calea Europeană. Bogdan Aurescu: *Valorile comune în spațiul transatlantic – Coerență în politica externă a României și contribuția la rolul global și reziliența strategică ale UE* [Op-ed Bogdan Aurescu: Common values in the transatlantic area - coherence in Romania’s foreign policy and the contribution to the global role and the strategic resilience of the EU], online at <https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/op-ed-bogdan-aurescu-valorile-comune-in-spatiul-transatlantic-coerenta-in-politica-externa-a-romaniei-si-contributia-la-rolul-global-si-rezilienta-strategica-ale-ue/>, last accessed May 2023. Bogdan Aurescu ended his second mandate as Minister of Foreign Affairs in June 2023.

adaptation of the two organisations to present and future challenges but also maintain the fundamental elements making them viable¹⁶⁷.

This value-based state-building epiphany started with Romania holding the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2019; a time when Bucharest mobilised expert human resources into a European direction that has been long eclipsed by the transatlantic priority and by a limited, techno-economic understanding of the EU membership. It was a premiere, because, since 2007, the country has largely been a passive member, focused on domestic affairs, on economic growth (yet not coherent and not aiming at convergence), little interested in (and therefore incapable of) shaping European policies¹⁶⁸. After 2019, traditional band-wagoning was abandoned; proactivity seemed *de rigueur*, coinciding with changes in the national political landscape¹⁶⁹ and a new dynamic in the relations with the US¹⁷⁰. The substance of the latter influenced the understanding of how the Atlantic alliance should evolve, and consequently on the amount of interest generated by the strategic autonomy concept¹⁷¹.

Minister Aurescu insisted on the reinforcement of the transatlantic alliance as a community of values and security, underlining elements of division were only temporary and stressing on the personal role that Joseph Biden—winning Democrat President in 2021—, had in shaping

¹⁶⁷ Aurescu, op. cit. All quotations in this chapter have the same source.

¹⁶⁸ Romania largely perceived as a country which is punching below its weight, in: Claire Busse, Ulrike Franke, Rafael Loss, Jana Puglierin, Marlene Riedel, Pawel Zerka, *EU Coalition Explorer*, July 2020, special report online at: <https://ecfr.eu/special/eucoalitionexplorer/>, accessed February 2022.

¹⁶⁹ At the end of May 2019, Liviu Dragnea, mastermind of the PSD-led governmental coalition—getting closer to illiberal patterns of governance and altering the rule of law—was arrested in a civil case opened against him.

¹⁷⁰ See below, the next chapter.

¹⁷¹ The Presidency never addressed the subject, which was tacitly set aside as excessive. None of the former or current presidential counsellors on defence and security supported, in public or private, the project of European autonomy, nor the rapprochement with Russia; none of the leading political parties in the country included the concept on their agenda, except for a few voices in USR, a centrist political group temporarily part of the government coalition (December 2020-September 2021). The consensus on a strong, privileged relationship with the USA is bipartisan. It also reflects (or reflected before January 2022) the lack of depth in the French-Romanian relations, the outcome of an ever-increasing distance created by the 2nd Iraq War of 2003.

a US policy at the Black Sea during his vice-presidential mandate from 2013-2017.

Aurescu underlined that the concept *per se* was left undefined, involving the use of several indicators such as autonomy, sovereignty or responsibility. In security and defence areas, “despite the extensive interpretations of some”, Romania will understand autonomy as an indicator of the EU’s “capacity to act, whenever possible, in coordination, cooperation and complementarity with its partners, the US and NATO (...), and, when necessary, on its own.” Bucharest rejected all institutional framework that would challenge or double NATO’s.

Beyond these aspects, Aurescu considers that “subsequent developments, not least the crises (...) have shown that (...) other fields are of interest, perhaps even more so, for the debate on strategic autonomy: such are the financial, economic-industrial, scientific and technological or health fields.” The minister extended his judgement:

We are in fact talking about two sides of the same coin, and the concept of autonomy must be discussed both from the EU’s internal perspective and from that of the Union’s external action. From the internal perspective, the concept is linked to that of resilience, insofar as it is about avoiding massive dependence on external actors that do not share our values and interests in areas such as strategic industries, defence, supply chains, digital, connectivity, and strengthening links with like-minded partners and actors. (...) The Union should be resilient enough to maintain the functionality of the economy and the Single Market even in adverse global conditions (...). From this point of view, I think we should rather talk about the EU’s strategic resilience, a concept that can partially replace that of autonomy.

Therefore, Romania assumes that the effectiveness of promoting these interests depends on the solidarity of EU Member States and their concerted action, which in turn depends on each Member State’s feeling that European interest can be identified with and reflects its own national interest, based on a process of negotiation completed in good faith and leading to an integration of interests. A strong transatlantic partnership and NATO’s augmented capacity to perform its tasks are central and non-negotiable interests, a reality that Romania considers to be also relevant in the European context. Romania does not refute however that the EU is entitled to assume a leading role in international relations—

based on economic weight, population size, military strength held by some Member States, and, above all, “because of a system of values that underpins the Union”, defined by the defence of human rights, the rule of law and the democratic model.

For this reason—Aurescu emphasised—

... the construction of a distinct European profile must take place without accentuating differences with close partners, and within the broader framework of actors that are part of what we have called the political ‘West’.

Putting in opposition, as was done by the promoters of the strategic autonomy, the two shores of the Atlantic, “risks ultimately reducing the chances of success of [Europe’s] own solutions and, further, undermining the very framework that is being sought.” Strategic autonomy, whichever might be its outline, “can only be the result of a process of evolution involving all Member States”, with Romania being “interested in participating in this process by expressing values that define us and by pursuing our national interests.” But these interests must be subsumed to a normative global order, underlines Aurescu:

For a country with Romania’s geography, the means and responses to challenges are not limited but enhanced by the European frame. The credibility of the voice of an EU Member State receives added value because it is multiplied by the EU membership and by the set of values coming with a global order based on rules.

Romania and the Future of Transatlantic Relations

In truth, the new global order, the future of the transatlantic relations and the potential institutional design of this partnership are not topics of public discussion in Romania, nor integral to the conversation regarding strategic autonomy, even if the latter—as seen above—is considered as a mandatory part of the first and only within its framework. The explanation for such context resides within Romania granting equal importance to the US-EU-NATO triad that constitutes the pillars of its foreign policy; but two of these gravitate around Washington. Consequently, less focus was given to adjusting the EU-US/NATO relationship.

Investing in the transatlantic partnership was Romania’s most intense and constant strategic effort after 1989. Unable to join the first group of NATO enlargement in 1997, Bucharest considered a strategic bilateral partnership with the US as the next best thing¹⁷².

It was officially launched on 11 July 1997, when US President William J. Clinton visited the country and addressed a message of support for Romania’s commitment to the Euro-Atlantic integration and for the efforts to become a pillar of stability and security in a very troubled Southeast Europe. By October, the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Canadian Affairs, Marc Grossman, visited Bucharest to identify areas of common interest to the partnership, and this is crucial in understanding why, since the late 1990s—preceding the accession to the EU—the relationship with the US became a landmark in Romania’s foreign policy, as well as the first and effective instrument to support efforts in political, economic, military and administrative reform.

Economic reforms and the contribution to the war on terrorism after 2001 shaped US support for Romania’s integration into NATO¹⁷³. Romania provided significant assistance to the US-led international coalition, including support to operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, with an increased bilateral cooperation in specific counter-terrorism actions. Joining NATO in March 2004 was followed by the signing of the Agreement on the Activities of US Forces Stationed on Romanian Territory (a.k.a. *Access Agreement*, December 2005/July 2006), another important bilateral step¹⁷⁴.

¹⁷² From November 1996 to December 2000, Romania was governed by the Democratic Convention, an alliance of several democratic, anti-Communist and centre-right political parties in Romania, active from 1991 until 2000 and whose leading representatives (Ion Rațiu, Radu Câmpeanu, Gh. Coposu, Mircea Ionescu-Quintus, etc) had been active on the political and diplomatic scene of the Kingdom of Romania before 1947. The Convention’s presidential candidate, Emil Constantinescu, was elected president in November 1996.

¹⁷³ In addition, the high level of bilateral cooperation in the fight against unconventional risks (such as drug and human trafficking, financial crime, etc.) led to the opening of the FBI office in Bucharest in May 2001.

¹⁷⁴ By this time, the President of Romania, Traian Băsescu (2004-2009, 2009-2014), has positioned himself as a resolute Atlanticist, maximising cooperation with London and Washington, with vivid positions against Russia, a unilateral—and unsuccessful—attempt at becoming a regional leader in the Black Sea area, and a pronounced disregard for the European affairs.

The negotiations on the legal framework for the deployment of US missile defence components in Europe, on Romanian territory, started in June 2010, the final draft being completed a year later at the level of negotiating delegations and experts. The bilateral Agreement on the Deployment of the US Ballistic Missile Defence System was signed by the Foreign Ministers of the two countries during the visit of Romanian President to Washington on 13 September 2011 and entered into force in December. It was on the same day that Romania and the US signed a *Joint Declaration on the Strategic Partnership for the 21st Century*¹⁷⁵, confirming the “excellent, long-term and growing partnership between the two countries”. It set out eight pillars of co-operation: political dialogue, security, economy, people-to-people contacts, science and technology, research, education, culture. In addition, a strategic dialogue was established in 2012 and, ever since, it takes place in two formats: political-strategic meetings and intermediate-strategic meetings at technical level. A Task Force was set to implement the principles agreed in this document—its comprehensive membership reveals the extent of US-Romanian collaboration¹⁷⁶. It was also agreed to set up sectoral working groups on political and military issues, cybersecurity and digital affairs, economic and trade issues, energy security, education, science, innovation, technological cooperation and culture, etc., starting with October 2012, while sectoral working group on economic and trade issues commenced in January 2013. This latter is meant to deepen the economic dimension of the Strategic Partnership, in terms of investment and bilateral trade, identifying areas of common economic interest and

¹⁷⁵ Full text in Romanian on the website of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: http://www.mae.ro/sites/default/files/file/2011.09.13_declaratie.pdf (last accessed May 2023).

¹⁷⁶ The Task Force involves representatives of the following State institutions : Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Ministry of National Defence; Ministry of Internal Affairs; Ministry of Public Finance; Ministry of Economy; Ministry of Justice; Ministry of Information; Ministry of Culture; Ministry of National Education; Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration; Ministry of Transport; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development; the Romanian Information Service; Romanian Office for Adoptions; Department of Energy; Department of SMEs, Business Environment and Tourism; Department of Infrastructure and Strategic Investments, respectively of the US Embassy and US government agencies represented in Bucharest. The American Chamber of Commerce in Romania (AmCham) and the American-Romanian Business Council (AMRO) may also be invited to participate in Task Force meetings.

facilitating interaction between Romanian and American businesses. The kick-off meeting of June 2013 launched a working group dedicated to energy security—which was going to become crucial by the end of the decade.

Subsequent meetings were dedicated to the implementation of the Joint Declaration (November 2013, September 2014), attended by the American-Romanian Business Council (AMRO), while the November 2015 one was turned into an opportunity to review the state of bilateral cooperation in the political-military and economic components¹⁷⁷. A new dimension was reached in May 2016, when the operational capability of the Aegis Ashore Missile Defence System (AAMDS) at the Deveselu Military Base was certified; a month later, the NATO Summit in Warsaw announced the takeover and transition of the US Deveselu facility under Allied command. By September, the fifth Task Force meeting took place: the two countries adopted a Joint Declaration on the implementation of the Strategic Partnership for the 21st Century between Romania and the United States of America¹⁷⁸.

The election of Donald Trump in the US required a more tenacious and different approach of the White House by the Bucharest executive, who—confronted with the Trump anti-NATO stance—emphasised the benefits of a reinforced bilateral relationship: a formula that gained Trump’s support. It would be excessive and incorrect to say that Romania was trading off NATO for alternative gains; Bucharest was only

¹⁷⁷ It brought together the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs of the US Secretary of State, the US Ambassador to Romania and representatives of the Presidential Administration, ministries, institutions and specialised agencies, etc. The in-depth level of cooperation is to be noticed and can be compared to the multiple fields that the EU governance implies.

¹⁷⁸ Available at <https://www.mae.ro/node/38549>, accessed March 2022. The event was attended by high-level representatives of the Prime Minister’s Chancellery, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Energy, the Ministry of National Defence, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Business Environment, as well as other Romanian officials, a renewed sign of the importance of this bilateral relationship.—The sixth annual dialogue was held in June 2018, with delegations led by the Deputy Prime Minister for the Implementation of Romania’s Strategic Partnerships, and the Assistant for European and Eurasian Affairs to the US Secretary of State. One year later, in July 2019, the Romanian-US Intermediate Strategic Dialogue Meeting took place, with Romania represented by the Deputy Prime Minister and Acting Minister of Justice.

vigilantly adapting its approach of the transatlantic relationship to the peculiar vision of the new American president. It ultimately worked, as demonstrated by the high-level dialogue between the Romanian President Iohannis and Trump, proving fruitful during Iohannis' visits to Washington in June 2017 and August 2019. The last one meeting proved to be of essence, because it allowed the two countries to add a medium-term development roadmap to the new Joint Declaration adopted by the presidents¹⁷⁹. The new text covers all the main areas of the Strategic Partnership (defence, energy security, trade and investment, good governance and the fight against corruption) and introduced two new areas of cooperation, 5G network security and the civil nuclear sector, formalised through Memoranda of Understanding concluded in August and September 2019¹⁸⁰.

This chronological review was necessary to understand why the bilateral relationship with the US and NATO—corresponding to Romania's firm needs in terms of hard power—took precedence over the involvement in the process of European integration and the relationship with the EU; as well as why Romania did not dedicate time, in real terms, to broader debates on the US-NATO-EU relations and their institutional construct, except if is concerned the future of NATO.

If the topic of enhancing the US-NATO-EU partnership would arise, Bucharest would most likely prefer solutions based on the existing institutional status quo, such as a redo of the TTIP or increasing the political role of NATO's Parliamentary Assembly. Bucharest reacted positively to subregional security and economic arrangements, bi-, tri- or multilateral, being itself a promoter, as the creation of the

¹⁷⁹ Full text in Romanian, on the website of the Presidency of Romania, available at <https://www.presidency.ro/ro/media/comunicate-de-presa/declaratia-comuna-a-presedintelui-romaniei-domnul-klaus-iohannis-si-a-presedintelui-statorilor-unite-ale-americii-domnul-donald-j-trump> (accessed March 2022).

¹⁸⁰ The year 2020 marked, in the context of the pandemic, new ways of strengthening the Strategic Partnership, through mutual aid, including facilitation of air transport of medical materials to Romania, repatriations of citizens, exchange of good practices and support through the deployment of a medical team of the Ministry of National Defense in the US state of Alabama. By September, in a quick shift from a paper-only investment agreement with China, Romania signed a cooperation and financing agreement with the US regarding the construction of two nuclear reactors at the Cernavodă powerplant on the Danube. The \$8 billion project is the largest financing package in energy that the country ever received and is the framework for future Romanian-American economic and energy development.

Bucharest 9 platform demonstrates. It would also not hesitate embracing *minilateralism* within the larger frame of transatlantic relations if this supposes coordination and partnership with already established key regional players¹⁸¹, under US aegis. The proactive participation in the Three Seas Initiative—who enjoys bipartisan American support¹⁸²—is, from this point of view, illustrative.

Assessment of Vulnerabilities and Threats; Defining Priorities

Romania’s need for security, that the Partnership with the US and the NATO membership cover, derives from the perception of a series of vulnerabilities, factors of risk and threats surrounding the country’s territory. The National Defence Strategy¹⁸³ is by far the most illustrative

¹⁸¹ For instance, the Poland-Romania-Turkey trilateral; see the statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2018, available at <https://www.mae.ro/node/46833> (in Romanian, accessed March 2022).

¹⁸² “H[ouse’s]. Res[olution]. 672 of November 18, 2020, “expressing support of the Three Seas Initiative in its efforts to increase energy independence and infrastructure connectivity thereby strengthening the United States and European national security”, at <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/672/text> (accessed March 2022).

¹⁸³ National Defence Strategy (hereafter NDS), available in Romanian at https://www.presidency.ro/files/userfiles/Documente/Strategia_Nationala_de_Aparare_a_Tarii_2020_2024.pdf, website of the Presidency of Romania (accessed March 2022). According to the document, the concepts of threat, risk and vulnerability have a meaning identical to those promoted by the previous National Defence Strategy (2015-2019) and its Guide. They are as follows:

Threats: Actions, facts or states of affairs, capabilities, strategies, intentions or plans that may affect national security values, interests and objectives and/or are likely to directly or indirectly jeopardise national security, affecting national character, sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity, the normal functioning of state institutions, the life and physical integrity of citizens and the organisation of human communities.

Risks: Probabilities of the production or manifestation of any event, situation, condition with potential uncertain manifestation, whose materialisation would lead to any effect on the normal functioning of state institutions, the organisation and functioning of human communities, as well as of the life, physical integrity of citizens, in a given or specific context.

Vulnerabilities: Functional-systemic/structural deficiencies that can be exploited or contribute to the materialisation of threats or risks, weakening the state’s capacity to mitigate the impact of events with potential to seriously affect the normal

document examining these. It structures a list of national strategic interests, starting with the defence of sovereignty, of the national character, the independence, the territorial integrity, unity and indivisibility of the State, as well as defending and strengthening constitutional democracy and the rule of law¹⁸⁴. These interests are partitioned in three categories, of which the most visible pertains to territorial defence and security; the other two are dedicated to the efficient functioning of state institutions and subsequent policies¹⁸⁵ and to “strengthening Romania’s profile within the transatlantic system of alliances, partnerships and collective defence”¹⁸⁶, including by effectively using the advantages derived from Romania’s geostrategic position.

Romania is aware that it brings 238,000 km² of European territory into the defence and security system of NATO, centred on the natural fortress of the Carpathian Mountains and the control of half of EU’s largest river, the Danube. The tripartite opening of the country’s territory towards Eurasia and the Caucasus via the Black Sea, towards South-eastern Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean (via the same), next to Central Europe (through Transylvania), makes it crucial for NATO logistics.

functioning of its institutions, the life and physical integrity of citizens and the organisation of human communities, as well as the capacity to protect, defend and promote national security values, interests and objectives.

Additionally, the Military Strategy of Romania, issued in 2021 (available in Romanian), <https://sgg.gov.ro/1/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/strategia-militara-a-romaniei-1.pdf> (accessed March 2021)

¹⁸⁴ Implying the safeguard, defence and guarantee of the fundamental rights and liberties of citizens, with their individual and collective security.

¹⁸⁵ I.e. guaranteeing the right to preserve, develop and express the ethnic, cultural and religious identity of national ethnic groups, according to the existing laws and constitutional democracy; sustainable economic development by judiciously managing the resources in order to provide well-being for the citizens; guaranteeing the right to education and health care; bridging development gaps and upgrading the major public systems (health, education, social care and transport), in order to ensure the provision of high-quality services to citizens, etc. Source: NDS, *ut supra*.

¹⁸⁶ By actively participating in the reinforcement of the EU and the development of the EU integration processes; by strengthening NATO’s capacity to efficiently respond to current and future security threats and challenges, based staying committed to a “strong transatlantic relationship and the indivisible security of the allied states”; the enhancement of EU’s contribution to security and defence in complementarity and synergy with NATO (once more underlined) “in order to ensure the security and stability of Europe”; and strengthening multilateralism and an international order based on the rules, such as consecrated by the UN Charter and by the OSCE founding documents. Source: NDS, *ut supra*.

Last but not last, because it is interested in building stability in an area shaken by warfare and frozen conflicts¹⁸⁷, Romania understands to build on a set of foreign policy values defined by the following:

- efficiency (“aiming at continuously adapting the response to the existing security threats and challenges”);
- trust (defined internally as the citizens’ trust in the Romanian State’s institutions, the trust of these very institutions in their own mission, and externally, as Romania’s trust in its partners, alliances and communities of values to which it belongs, and the allied trust in Romania in terms of responsibilities and obligations);
- pragmatism (entailing decisions tailored to the concrete nature of a situation, bringing together all institutional actors in order to efficiently implement defence and security policies);
- professionalism and compliance with the experts’ knowledge;
- prevention and anticipation (focused on identifying and employing the necessary means to counter risks, threats and vulnerabilities through an integrated civilian-military approach);
- a pro-active attitude (aiming to identify and take responsibility for choosing the appropriate response in accordance with the threats, risks and vulnerabilities, addressing them as early as possible);
- the judicious management of national wealth (referring to “the entirety of the material and spiritual values of Romania, including our cultural heritage”).

Yet, the quality of being a NATO member does not exclude the strategic flaws that the government is much aware of.

The National Defence Strategy identifies 17 points catalogued as threats. They could be partitioned in three classic categories—(1) geopolitical (most known and discussed), (2) cyber-threats, and (3) economic (plus, circumstantially, the pandemic¹⁸⁸).

Dominating the list, six concerns. Of these, two are related to Russia’s post-2014 posture: the strengthening of the military potential in the vicinity of Romania and NATO’s Eastern Flank (militarisation of

¹⁸⁷ The disintegration of Yugoslavia for half of the 1990s, the war in Transnistria, the intervention in Kosovo, the war in Georgia, the war in Ukraine; for the larger vicinity, the war in Syria, the emergence of ISIL, the consequent wave of refugees, etc.

¹⁸⁸ This is mentioned only in one article (§ 118) as capable of severely affecting the world economy and test transatlantic and EU cohesion. President Trump was still in the White House at that time.

Crimea and in general of the Black Sea area by the Russian Federation, with military exercises and reinforcement of military capabilities destined for offensive and defensive operations); the (yet not named, now indisputably Russia's) offensive/aggressive behaviour, labelled "adversary of our country", whose behaviour creates "economic instability [that] may result in negative developments with security impact in the vicinity of Romania and in the Black Sea Region". Romania did not refrain from underlining that the delays in NATO's adaptation to these threats, "the imbalances along the Eastern Flank" and "the positions of some allies regarding the Russian Federation", negatively influencing Romania's security situation, were admissible as a threat. Bucharest showed restraint in nominating those pro-Russian EU governments who professed a concerning degree of openness towards Russia: France and Hungary, Italy and Germany, Austria and Bulgaria, with Czechia and Slovakia still on the list back then. This explains the rejection of Emmanuel Macron's designs for an "architecture of trust and security" in Europe based on a Russian alliance, and the resulting "autonomy" that was a purported outcome.

Romania also acquiesced that instability in the Middle East and North Africa projects a "major security threats in the European and particularly Western areas, mainly associated with Islamic radicalisation¹⁸⁹", adding a worried regard upon the volatile situation in the Western Balkans. This one is correlated with "the limited prospects for solving the frozen conflicts in the region [= Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo-Serbia], the South Caucasus included", factors of regional instability just like those from the Middle East and North Africa that project "security threats in the European Western areas, associated with Islamic radicalisation".

The list is completed with state and non-state entities (information entities, interest groups or pressure groups etc.) attempting to exploit the limited capacity of the society in general to react when confronted with

¹⁸⁹ Separately, Romanian authorities consider that "the terrorist threat features a menacing and diversifying dynamic that generates persistent risks to civilian and military personnel deployed in theatres of operations, in accordance with Romania's Euro-Atlantic commitments"; thus, the country is concerned by the consequences of potential retaliation against civilians or in situ military forces. "In Romania, the terrorist phenomenon maintains its circumstantial character influenced by the evolutions abroad. Indirectly exposed, our country remains a target of opportunity by its relation to NATO, EU, the USA and the European states involved in combating the scourge", the document adds.

hostile interference; this “hostile intelligence” is reflected by propaganda channels targeting Romania’s strategic projects and state decisions, especially partnerships and policies related to the country’s EU and NATO membership. Despite no names being given, Russia is portrayed indirectly.

Cyber-attacks launched by state and non-state entities on critical information and communications infrastructures, disruptive technologies multiplying the sources of threat, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, organised crime (Romania being a transit space for illegal migration and international trafficking of high-risk drugs), financial cybercrime: all constitute a class of threats of its own. So are the “actions, facts, strategies, intentions or plans of states and non-state actors, aimed at undermining Romanian state’s authority and affecting its fundamental attributes”¹⁹⁰ or “incitement to acts that could negatively affect the rule of law”. Subsequently, here are included the distortions in energy markets and the actions (or their lack) damaging Romania’s strategic economic interests, and the undesirable interference and hostile foreign takeovers of national interest economic operators and vital processes such as telecommunications, energy and ports. The identity of Russia and China can be read between the lines.

A few aspects can be underlined conclusively. The first is that there is a higher degree of maturity in Romania’s latest assessment of threats and of security in general, likely the outcome of the extended contact with US methodology. The NDS manages to reunite continuity and stability with flexibility, adaptability and resilience, based on extended security concepts, with a liberal approach that places the citizen at the core of security endeavours. However, what can constitute a substantial vulnerability is absent from the strategy and was not defined or discussed: the political security. This concerns the absence of criteria applied to the human resource involved in political practice, affecting leadership models, political processes and the quality of democracy, with risks and threats related to corruption, partitocracy, illiberalism and improvisation, leading to deeper fractures between political institutions and society. The 2025 edition should therefore be completed with a new chapter.

¹⁹⁰ Source: NDS, *ut supra*.

June 2021

Build Back Better: Options for Central and Eastern Europe

Our region seems to be placed between a rock and a hard place; the NATO summit and the Biden-Putin meeting in Geneva tend to underline it. Next to Russia's and China's assaultive conduct, the Franco-German stewardship of Europe became an additional risk for Central and Eastern Europe, by its limited nature and objectives. Furthermore, as the North Atlantic alliance reboots, difficulties in reaching common positions among the White House, Western Europe, the Southern and the Eastern Flank rise. In this context, Central our part of Europe needs to build forms of deeper cooperation.

An Alternative Past: Weimar+ with Key Players

2021 and 2022 are critical years for Europe. A new American administration spreads its wings with the desire to consolidate democracies. Elections take place in Germany this fall, and in France next spring. This triangle, though formed by allied countries, is not entirely compatible in concepts, directions or conduct; their dynamics diverge, and so do their modi operandi. While the USA returns to a style meant to reassure, both familiar and traditional in relationship with Europe, Germany struggles with undecidedness, old patterns and a lack of long-term strategy¹⁹¹. At the opposite end, France, since the election of Emmanuel Macron, became the solitary engine of a project to renew the European Union in depth, with a doctrinal set of concepts¹⁹² and

¹⁹¹ Stefanie Babst, "Germany Is Unprepared for Strategic Simultaneity", *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, June 4, 2021, available at <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/germany-unprepared-strategic-simultaneity> (last accessed June 2023).

¹⁹² "10 points sur la doctrine Macron", *Le Grand Continent*, available at <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2020/11/16/10-points-macron/> (last accessed June 2023).

the visible will to become renovator-and-arbiter in fields Paris considers strategic for global governance. In doing so, French unilateralism became more pronounced (with consequent isolation), obstructing their ability to carry through their policy blueprints, and the collaborative input of many EU member states from Central and Eastern Europe. The double waste was an unhappy match for Macron's 2017 electoral motto *en même temps*.

But as the incumbent French president has high chances of being re-elected, our region will have to challenge the same fruitless method Paris applies since 2017; also, Germany's trust-eroding¹⁹³ relationship with Russia and China¹⁹⁴; and maybe even that American belief that concessions¹⁹⁵ to unsettled friends can bring up a more virtuous behaviour.

Truth is, the EU could have been in a different and better place by now, had the Élysée leader understood Europe's complexity.

Assessing reality comes with a simple task: consider the alternatives. Kissinger expressed it well when he invoked crises *avoided*. To paraphrase him, and also join Niall Ferguson's alternative history exercise¹⁹⁶, here is an outline of how the EU could have evolved in terms of defence and security since 2017.

After a bright beginning, France starts consultations with EU-member states located in strategic areas of Europe. The Élysée later suggests the creation of an EU security and defence council based on a Weimar Plus format, including Spain and Italy in the West, Sweden, Poland, Romania and Greece in the East. Geographically and demographically justified, it would have delimited *the* European defence perimeter (and offered France – if it were to be – the position of centre in this “architecture of trust and security”). Even if reluctant at first – as it was for years after the Sorbonne moment –, Germany would have been put in the position to decide; and

¹⁹³ Michael Rubin, “Germany Is a Bad Ally”, *National Interest*, June 10, 2021, available at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/germany-bad-ally-187371> (last accessed June 2023).

¹⁹⁴ Matthew Karnitschnig, “How Germany opened the door to China—and threw away the key”, *Politico Europe*, September 10, 2020, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-china-economy-business-technology-industry-trade-security/> (last accessed June 2023).

¹⁹⁵ Melvyn Krauss, “Biden's Great Game”, *Project Syndicate*, June 3, 2021, available at <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/biden-nord-stream-2-part-of-broader-china-strategy-by-melvyn-krauss-2021-06> (last accessed June 2023).

¹⁹⁶ Niall Ferguson, *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, Basic Books, New York, 2000.

maybe the wisest move for a country that hesitates to involve militarily is at least supporting by financial investment the willingness of others to engage. (Much more is expected from the EU's most influential member state; that is a different topic, but at least Berlin could have been presented with the most comfortable of the responsible options.)

It is on this foundation that discussions about the commitment to (a form of) "European sovereignty" would have optimally started, with regional stakeholders involved in defining its features while engaging resources. It would have given substance to a formula that no speech, however exhortative and repetitive, will otherwise grant credibility.

This alternative history is meant to underline the limits of the Sorbonne proposals, to which Berlin adhered to¹⁹⁷ without much contribution, except for ideas already expressed in the 1990s¹⁹⁸.

The focus on the Franco-German engine is comprehensible and historically legitimate, but the European equation is far from complete as it does not integrate Paris-Berlin into what the EU became *after* the 2004 big-bang and as a consequence of the more recent crises. A stabilising factor and politically moderate actor, integrative and nuanced by virtue of its own political system, Germany objectively remains the main EU partner for Central and Eastern Europe, whose growth needs predictability and good anchoring. But what makes Germany's strength also makes its weakness in times when changes are imperiously necessary, opportunities need to be seized and momentum fructified. Not very used to radical changes that imply reconstruction of priorities as well as of the mindset, the German society feels considerable stress¹⁹⁹, while the political milieus are indubitably unprepared²⁰⁰.

¹⁹⁷ Joseph de Weck, "Germany Is Becoming More French—and Paris Is Loving It", *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, June 30, 2020, available at <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/germany-becoming-more-french-and-paris-loving-it> (accessed June 2023).

¹⁹⁸ *German parliament leader urges EU economic union*, Deutsche Welle, July 6, 2020, available at <https://www.dw.com/en/german-parliament-leader-urges-fresh-push-for-eu-economic-unionamid-pandemic/a-54061503> (last accessed June 2023).

¹⁹⁹ Mark Leonard, Jana Puglierin, "How to prevent Germany from becoming Eurosceptic" ECFR Policy Brief, 9 June 2021, available at <https://ecfr.eu/publication/how-to-prevent-germany-from-becoming-eurosceptic/>, last accessed June 2023.

²⁰⁰ S. Babst, art. cit., ut supra.

The limits of the Franco-German stratagems were more recently underlined by Spain²⁰¹ among others, as Madrid – just like NATO’s Eastern Flank – stresses the need for a European approach to global issues, with more than two actors involved²⁰². With threats coming from East, South and North (the Arctic chapter only starts unfolding), with an ever more complex interaction with its neighbours, European countries of the “Weimar Plus” are not willing to wait on the sidelines for Paris-Berlin to decide and act. These are countries with an invigorated sense of agency, of fostering and empowerment.

The major *faux pas* of the Sorbonne plan (largely deriving from France’s political reflexes) was to act based on a preference for working with Europe’s powers, conceived hierarchically, instead of identifying Europe’s *key players*. The list is therefore different²⁰³. Without being

²⁰¹ José Ignacio Torreblanca, ECFR Madrid, , “*Spain is back*”: *An interview with Arancha González Laya*, ECFR, video of 9 March 2021, available at <https://ecfr.eu/article/spain-is-back-an-interview-with-arancha-gonzalez-laya/> (last accessed June 2023).

²⁰² In May 2023, Spain, Romania and Poland set up a trilateral named after the city where the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the three countries met and issued a joint statement: the Valencia Trio.

²⁰³ Years later, in January 2025, under the second presidential mandate of Donald Trump, James Carafano—vice-president of the White House-influential Heritage Foundation—expressed a point of view that embraced a natural, geographic rationale and which lacked from France’s approach of European security: “Romania is a vital strategic point for the United States. But the one thing the Trump administration wants, and this is non-negotiable, is a secure transatlantic community (...) with an Eastern front that is 100% secure. The two most important countries are Ukraine (it doesn’t matter whether Ukraine is on that front or not, but if you have a strong Ukrainian army, the Russians can’t just walk in), and then Poland; and I think we’re going to have a strong Polish defence commitment. And then Romania is the anchor, right? You have Norway and Finland and Sweden in the north, and Romania anchors the south. In my view, in terms of our partnerships in Central Europe, Romania is absolutely shoulder to shoulder with Poland and Ukraine as countries that have to be successful in their own self-defence because they are critical to NATO; Romania and Poland today are like West Germany was during the Cold War.” (Carafano also added: “it doesn’t matter whether Ukraine is in NATO or not, if there is a standing army in Ukraine that could defend itself, this is an obstacle for Putin. And just as powerful as if it were in NATO. Putin does not respect [NATO’s] article 5. He respects power.”). See Digi24 *Special report from the US: Trump’s plans for Ukraine and surrounding states. “Romania is the anchor in the south”* , available at <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/sua/corespondenta-speciala-digi-24-din-sua-planurile-lui-trump-pentru-ucraina-si-statele-din-jur-romania-este-ancora-in-sud-3087487>.

powers on par with France, Great Britain or Germany, the Weimar Plus states are the indispensable key players for Europe's general security.

This opens the doors to the next inquiry.

Alternative Future(s): Differentiation for Integration, or Separation?

The project of European sovereignty is destined, ultimately, to generate more leverage for the EU in terms of adaptability and ability to confront global challenges. Both Europe's East and West agree, in principle, it is necessary – the lowest common denominator being better risk management. Disagreement arises with regard to the content, methods, direction and the extent of this sovereignty, the narrative connected to its development, and the finality of such a status. The latter should mean the building of a new type of political community, able to manage our deep interdependence, integrate it functionally, preserve diversity (not by differentiation) while creating competitive advantages for the EU, globally.

And yet, achieving sovereignty was related by the French president to a concept of differentiated integration, either based on the Eurozone, on a group of willing, or both (with the Biblical rhetoric separating “progressivists” and black-sheep “nationalists”). This idea precedes his election²⁰⁴; was firmly expressed in the Sorbonne speech; was constantly revived²⁰⁵ or even put in practice with the French-centred EI2, whose concept by invitation keeps out indeterminately²⁰⁶ – but of course, not officially – Central and Eastern Europe.

²⁰⁴ “Macron: «il faut accepter que l'Europe se fasse à deux vitesses»”, *La Tribune*, May 31, 2015, available at <https://www.latribune.fr/economie/france/macron-il-faut-accepter-que-l-europe-se-fasse-a-deux-vitesses-480278.html> (last accessed June 2023).

²⁰⁵ Alexandra Brzozowski, “*En Belgique, Macron plaide pour une «Europe à deux ou trois vitesses»*”, *Euractiv*, November 21, 2018, available at <https://www.euractiv.fr/section/avenir-de-l-ue/news/in-belgium-macron-pleads-for-two-or-three-speed-europe-treaty-change/> (last accessed June 2023).

²⁰⁶ Initiative européenne d'intervention / European Intervention Initiative (EI2), available on the website of the French Ministry of the Armies at <https://archives.defense.gouv.fr/dgris/action-internationale/l-ieil-initiative-europeenne-d-intervention.html> (last accessed June 2023); “une relation particulière avec les forces armées françaises est proposée à un nombre limité de pays européens dotés

The creation of a *core Europe* in an ever closer union, *Kerneuropa*, was a German idea of the late 1980s and early 1990s²⁰⁷, intended to have a centripetal effect on the rest of the EU members. Germany rapidly abandoned²⁰⁸ the suggestion, aware it would generate disparities and disunity, a “Europe of Olympic circles” instead of concentric. Yet, the French elites saw in it the opportunity to cut through the EU their own *pré carré*, a private preserve resembling the Europe of the 1980s, where Gallic influence would be primordially exerted. France’s political spectrum today (divided, volatile, incorporating various forms of nationalism and protectionism, with undeniable authoritarian inclinations) offers *no guarantee* that the “EU circles” would not be constantly used against non-included member states in order to diminish their impact on the Union’s evolution and governance.

Germany’s support for such divisive differentiation is not in France’s favour. If it would create a core EU, comforting France’s pre-2004 sense of power, it would also alter Germany’s own relationship with the centre and the east of the continent. And that is not an issue taken lightly. The Élysée wrote off the Three Seas Initiative, with a touch of obstinacy; but for Germany the Baltic-Black Sea area is of certified importance. Leaving aside industrial investments made in three decades, the Visegrad Group plus Romania alone surpass in terms of trade²⁰⁹ Berlin’s exchanges with China, the US or France: €336.1 billion in 2018-2019 versus €199.3 billion,

de la volonté politique de s’engager en opération et des moyens pour le faire” [a special relationship with the French armed forces is offered to a limited number of European countries, (those) with political will and resources to commit to operations]. By principle, France excluded Central and Eastern Europe, resolute supporters of NATO. Alternatively, see Jean-Pierre Maulny, “The European Intervention Initiative (EI2). Emmanuel Macron’s desire for a more autonomous Europe”, *L’Europe en formation*, vol. 389, no. 2, 2019, pp. 51-66.

²⁰⁷ Wolfgang Schäuble: *Überlegungen zur europäischen Politik*, Position Paper of the CDU/CSU Parliamentary Group of 1 September 1994, available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20160318173446/https://www.cducsu.de/upload/schaeublelamers94.pdf> (last accessed June 2023).

²⁰⁸ Michael Mertes, Norbert J. Prill, “Es wächst zusammen, was zusammengehören will. ‘Maastricht Zwei’ muss die Europäische Union flexibel machen”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 9 December 1994, available at https://fazarchiv.faz.net/dokument/FAZ_19941209EURO13-100 (last accessed June 2021).

²⁰⁹ Tomasz Żornaczuk, *Germany and the Three Seas Initiative*, Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), issue 120 (1868)/2019 (August 22, 2019), available at https://pism.pl/publications/Germany_and_the_Three_Seas_Initiative (last accessed June 2023).

€177.8 billion or €170.5 billion respectively. Investments are announced to be coming from Japan, South Korea and Qatar²¹⁰, augmenting the value of this 12-countries forum. Becoming a more resolute stakeholder in the region, as the German officials confirm²¹¹, can partly compensate for a diminishment in the relationship with China and constitute a *blue ocean strategy*²¹² Germany is in much need of.

Paris and Berlin need otherwise to answer a few questions: how productive is the overall exclusion of Central and Eastern Europe from a “core”? What is to prefer: multiplying fracture lines, defiance, rancour, obstruction and crises within and outside the EU, or an appeased and integrated region brought in, with its fundamental interests protected? Are France and Germany ready to pay the price of having to confront an even more complicated geopolitical and institutional environment, with no means of intervention unless the Union breaks down? Turkey was only a taste of the problems that a discontented and unsecure(d) Central and Eastern Europe can cause to the EU on a wider scale.

Which would be the global relevance of an EU reduced to half a peninsula, with the other half estranged, freer to explore new options with the US, China or even Russia – opportunistically friendlier, rest assured –, with a competitive-adversarial spirit of the Brexit kind? It is interesting to see that arguments like “Russia being pushed in the arms of China” (coined by Paris, adopted by Berlin²¹³) stay higher on the agenda of the two countries than the political fracture with Central and Eastern members of the EU.

²¹⁰ *Bulgarian President: Japan, South Korea, Qatar Will Join Three Seas Initiative*, 20 Novinite.com, May 19, 2021, available at <https://www.novinite.com/articles/209568/Bulgarian+President%3A+Japan%2C+South+Korea%2C+Qatar+Will+Join+Three+Seas+Initiative>(last accessed June 2023).

²¹¹ *President of Germany: the initiative has huge potential to create synergies and thus provide important added value to the region*, Three Seas news platform, available at <https://3seas.eu/media/news/president-of-germany-the-initiative-has-huge-potential-to-create-synergies-and-thus-provide-important-added-value-to-the-region> (last accessed June 2023).

²¹² *What is blue ocean strategy*, available at <https://www.blueoceanstrategy.com/what-is-blue-ocean-strategy/> (last accessed June 2023).

²¹³ Speech by Foreign Minister Heiko Maas to the German Bundestag at the debate held at the request of the parliamentary group of Alliance 90/The Greens: “*What consequences should the Federal Government draw from violence, arbitrary acts and repression in Russia?*”, February 10, 2021, available at <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/maas-russia/2441452> (last accessed June 2023).

Our region is aware that, in reality, both France and Germany, while major players in Europe, have limited influence in the world and cannot act as unilaterally as they often consider possible, lacking means and leverage. Their only realistic option is to *build back better* by reinforcing European cohesion and transform, together with key players, the EU into an entity capable of shaping the world in ways more compatible to its interests.

Options for the Eastern Flank: A New Security Belt

Why is Central and Eastern Europe so exigent? Because the 20th century brought upon the countries in the region severe experiences, turned into lessons about behaviour, about the meaning of rules in the international society, of values-based multilateralism, of alliances and partnerships. It brought lessons about loyalty, resilience and character, for better to some, for worse to others. From 1914 to 1945, the world wars and their tough *intermezzo* taught us how to conceive and invest in long term alliances, with trustworthiness (read: responsibility) occupying a crucial place.

As most countries of the area are not in the position to fully stand by themselves if attacked (but who can stand alone today?), exigence is measured by the contribution one brings to the security of their partners, while also possessing the necessary instruments to defend one's own citizens and territory until allied support comes. We have seen it expressed in Normandy in 1944 and Berlin in 1948, before the Iron Curtain offered us the very opposite in 1956 and 1968.

The Cold War left us with a full rejection of the idea of spheres of influence (even if skilfully relabelled "spheres of interest"²¹⁴), so dear to the Kremlin. The temptation to polarise the world by creating such spheres paves an easier way to conflict. Central and Eastern Europe understands multilateralism as an expression of equal state sovereignty,

²¹⁴ Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Spheres of Interest, not Influence", *Washington Quarterly*, 2009, 32:4, pp. 3-22, available at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/01636600903231089> (last accessed June 2023).

with approaches *in toto*, coalescing middle powers interests while refraining from the creation of great power directories.

But, while it is a truism to say that bargains and transactions are rejected – given the attachment to international law –, it is advisable *en même temps* for the countries in the region to be prepared to confront situations where allies might provide less, or less willingly, or find themselves in difficult circumstances.

Central and Eastern Europe should reinforce cooperation in ways that augment their collective value and their capacity to act in case of necessity; if the Three Seas Initiative is compatible with these requirements²¹⁵, it might be also the time to create a regional security belt, with a flexible structure replicating the very outlines of E2I. Poland, the Baltic States, Romania, Ukraine and Turkey – with doors open to Scandinavia – should enhance interaction on intelligence sharing, scenario planning, support operations and generate their own common strategic culture. This *entente* would also be a way to build a flexible, productive relationship with a valued partner like Turkey outside the NATO frame, giving the members more options for multilateral operations and more attractiveness in terms of expanded capacities. This is no revolution: arrangements of this kind are already practiced by other members of the EU: the cooperation between Greece, Cyprus, the UAE and Israel is an example²¹⁶.

This approach of our common destiny should be doubled by a more concerted diplomacy – economic, cultural and public – meant to facilitate communication and exchanges among our civil societies. These themselves, faced with the increasingly wider European responsibility of their countries, would find it easier (and naturally so) to engage in the process of reasoning about European integration, about Europe’s becoming, with clearer direction and based on an indispensable agenda. Such interaction can take place regularly in the generous frame of a forum, facilitated by the Three Seas Initiative, for instance.

²¹⁵ Bogdan Aurescu, Zbigniew Rau (ministers of foreign affairs of Romania, respectively Poland in June 2021) “Setting Sail on the Three Seas” in *American Purpose*, available online at <https://www.americanpurpose.com/articles/setting-sail-on-the-three-seas/> (last accessed June 2023).

²¹⁶ Cyprus meeting of UAE, Israel, Greece showcases ‘new narrative’, *Arab Weekly*, April 17, 2021, available at <https://theArabweekly.com/cyprus-meeting-uae-israel-greece-showcases-new-narrative> (last accessed June 2023).

The recent past could have included better options to renew European integration, but the process ongoing after 2017 encounters drawbacks as long as Central and Eastern Europe will not be consistently involved in designing the new architecture. It depends on the countries in our region to react and deepen cooperation in order to maximise leverage in relation to the rest of the EU, the USA, as well as to unfriendly countries from other horizons.

This needs high focus and is compelling. History makes no gifts to the unprepared.

April 2022

French elections: Macron Reloaded or Macron 2.0? Consequences for France's relations with the Eastern Flank

It might be that Lord Acton was right (“*power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely*”) but allow me to add: it also transforms. Absolute, radical power does so absolutely. Putin's personalist power regime transformed Russia and impacted on Europe; so would any candidate reaching the top job in one of Europe's core nations: France. Past week's elections demonstrated it like never before.

The Russian Ghost

Elections in France included an outstanding external presence: Russia. It revolved around the relationship the Hexagon and the EU should entertain with something that can be only described as a profoundly unsettled, unadapted, corrupt, aggressive and decomposing political regime. Needless to insist on how and why the old tropes of 1960s Gaullism, with a few variables, explain Moscow's cardinal presence on the charts of France's foreign policy; the zeal put in it remarkable, yet the degree of inexactness of this judgement does not seem to strike the circles of power in Paris, Left or Right.

Today's option of staying close to Russia looks born not from Gaullism but from the reduction of Europe to a questionable “balance of power” where American prominence needs to be counterweighted by anchoring Russia to the European project. This means forgetting that Europe needs to be first built with European partners, integrating their interests, not comforting the interests of unfriendly outsiders; between the US and Soviet or post-Soviet Russia, the latter cannot be

described as euro-friendly, no matter how intense the critique addressed to Washington DC.

If Gaullism were to be the main reference of European construction, then Paris quickly forgot that it was to Poland and Romania that De Gaulle addressed his 1967-1968 messages for the resurrection of a European Europe²¹⁷ through the rejection of the existing blocs. He did so because he was aware of a reality that post-1989 France failed to capitalise on: not only the two were the largest countries of Central Europe, but also the region's most Francophile nations, a 19th and pre-1945 20th century heritage. Bucharest and Warsaw could have been turned into natural partners for building a *Francosphère* that would lead to the reinforcement of Europe from the inside. External (and hostile) props like Russia aren't mandatory.

The more the French democracy perceives itself as fragile and concessive, the more an imaginary picture of a Providential Man is constructed as a De Gaulle replacement. Putin contextually rose as a match of this imaginary character. While the Left keeps the memories of Moscow as an anti-capitalist contender of the USA (with Mélenchon accepting Russian imperialism while denouncing the American one with a discrediting impulsiveness), on the Right (where anti-Americanism is an active ingredient in promoting sovereignty and independence), Chirac and Sarkozy did not avoid embracing the Kremlin man as a fellow and peer; so did Macron, with unparalleled, insistent eulogy. But what a *faux pas* it is, and what ignorance, to mistake the French perfectionist need for symphonic balance, order and stability with the Russian exertion of power as a mix of Soviet autocracy and archaic tsarism! How can a political system that embodied liberty, ambition and excellence, now gravitate, cultivate and even accommodate a regime of repression, brutality and palpable fascism while pretending to contribute to the construction of a values-based Europe? Deportations, massacres, war crimes growing into genocide: is this the mindset that "Macron France" looks for in a partner?

What can Russia still mean for France in terms of partnership, when Russia goes through both a full and willing anti-Western metamorphosis, and a delayed decomposition of its statehood? This is why Russia acts preventively, and this is why the political narrative shifted to "survival" themes. What took a considerable blow (or maybe collapsed?) in this

²¹⁷ E.R. Goodman, op. cit., *passim*.

conflict, is the image Russia longtime promoted and has of itself: of an irreplaceable power, of crushing military might, feared and unshakeable. The army failed massively in helping revert the territorial disintegration of the Russian World (be it imperial or soviet). Putting pressure on former Soviet republics (nations or regional civilisations) ceased to be credible, or feasible. With that, Russia loses its main national myth: of glorious, messianic presence.

An entire flow of articles, on various Russian expert platforms, preach and support Russia's historical divorce with the Western world²¹⁸. The frenzy of phrases officialises and radicalises at the same time what has been for centuries the fracture between the Russian Eurasia (continental, inward-looking) and Europe proper (a wide, complex, interactive peninsula), setting up a dichotomy built on isolation reflexes. It leaves no doubt that geoculturally, the empire led by Moscow was profoundly altered by communism; De Gaulle's famous line about Russia absorbing communism in its organic structures "like a blotter drinks ink" is certainly true but does not anticipate the consequences of it.

Russia's European direction changed in 1917. Saint-Petersburg, as a capital city anchored in the Western Russia, symbolised the desire to integrate in the community of European states, adopting their values to certain and various degrees, maybe even harmonise positions; anti-Western Moscow chosen for the capital-city by the Communists quintessentially sends a different message. Unfolding under our eyes is the possibility that 21st century Russia grows in rancour, resenting not only the West (historical scapegoat unwilling to "welcome" it), but also itself a self-proclaimed "civilisation state" failing to succeed in controlling the Occidental archenemy, and China (that considers Russia a junior partner, their mineral and agricultural periphery). In the same way Japan, South Korea and other Asian states are integrated in a Western, Liberal, democratic system, Russia can integrate the authoritarian systems of power of Asia. After all, it's Moscow's anti-Petrovian movement.

²¹⁸ Bruno Maçães, "Russia cannot afford to lose, so we need a kind of a victory": Sergey Karaganov on what Putin wants, *New Statesman*, February 23, 2023, available at <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/europe/ukraine/2023/02/russia-cannot-afford-lose-need-victory-sergey-karaganov-what-putin-wants> (last accessed June 2023).

Signs of Renewal?

It is from this point of view that the elections in France were of concern to Central Europe, Scandinavia and especially NATO's Eastern Flank. Russia was and is central to France's arguments of rebuilding Europe, both in Emmanuel Macron's and Marine Le Pen's political offer. Surprises are not excluded in the future; Macron is much of a Russophile (personally and politically) and sees himself too much as a providential man not to attempt yet one more dramatic gesture, of "saving Russia": insisting to protect its interests and include it in the *grand dessein* he would promote for Europe, thinking of reconciliation. He would plausibly be accompanied by "realists" and "peaceniks".

Marine Le Pen went even further; her entire offer is more or less supported by 42% of the French electorate, and one of the rising questions is how will Macron reconcile his political project with the favoured RN narrative of a sovereign, anti-EU, anti-NATO France? That one is not a luminous, lucid project, based on her country's potential, but a narrow, autarchic, inner-oriented, revanchist opium; how to control public emotions with conspirationist views of the world²¹⁹ and a deep, revisionist anger willing to go as far as dismantling the Franco-German special relationship? (The two countries do need retuning both between themselves and with the rest of the EU but dismembering the Rhenish partnership would eviscerate Europe of a powerful historical symbol, discredit the idea of reconciliation, much needed in the Western Balkans, and tear down the most viable political partnership in vigour.)

A product of the French political realities, and not an Atlanticist by conviction, Emmanuel Macron was not able to persuade EU partners that the Elysée can provide an appropriate alternative to European security. France was not prepared for the aggressive shift of Moscow (the French intelligence is known to have failed to predict the war²²⁰); it has to demonstrate that it understands the unquestionable need for US and

²¹⁹ "Présidentielle 2022 : pour 14% des Français, l'élection serait ou pourrait être truquée", *Le Figaro*, April 19, 2022, available at <https://www.lefigaro.fr/elections/presidentielles/presidentielle-2022-pour-14-des-francais-l-election-serait-ou-pourrait-etre-truquee-20220419> (last accessed June 2023).

²²⁰ Maïa de La Baume, "France spooked by intelligence failures", *Politico Europe*, April 6, 2022, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-military-intelligence-failure-russia-invasion-ukraine/> (last accessed 2023).

NATO presence in Europe; to close the Russian chapter and all illusory projects related to a Paris-Moscow partnership until the regime changes convincingly (if ever...); to convert and re-educate their political elites into a much broader sense and understanding of Europe by developing a strategy of relating to the key strategic players in the EU.

Certain positive signs came *in extremis*, with the U-turn taken by France at the end of 2021, signalling comprehension of the Eastern Flank's security concerns and providing support²²¹. But will this be a first step and a credible constant of France's European policy, or a circumstantial choice to be replaced in the future by *rapprochement*, dialogue and "historical conciliation" with the Kremlin?

It would be going against the *Zeitgeist*, defined now by the clear opposition between democracy and revisionist autocracies, with these contesting the very multilateral system that France defended internationally; persisting in sterile dialogue that legitimises their claim; not being up to the expectations of solidarity and trustworthiness that France endeavours and struggles to illustrate; repeating mistakes of the kind that led to the creation of AUKUS; and failing to build in-depth strategic partnerships.

All this while the rest of us would move on. By will, by need.

Options for Central and Eastern Europe

If Macron France does not reposition itself with credible firmness, the Eastern Flank's choices would lay outside the EU, as Germany's dedication to EU security is critically questioned²²² following Berlin's position during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The options the Eastern Flank has do not vary from those configured at the time when Paris was displaying vigorous anti-NATO criticism while suggesting a security alternative with Russia. With Scandinavia convinced of the need

²²¹ "Un déploiement de troupes françaises en Roumanie pour dissiper les «malentendus»", *Euractiv*, January 21, 2022, available at <https://www.euractiv.fr/section/politique/news/un-deploiement-de-troupes-francaises-en-roumanie-pour-dissiper-les-%E2%80%89malentendus%E2%80%89/> (last accessed June 2023).

²²² Matthew Karnitschnig, "Putin's useful German idiots", in *Politico*, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/putin-merkel-germany-scholz-foreign-policy-ukraine-war-invasion-nord-stream-2/> (last accessed June 2023).

to integrate itself into the Atlantic structures and designating Moscow as a threat, the Eastern Flank can either engage in regional security initiatives (for instance: transforming the Bucharest Nine format into a structured defence organisation), or accelerate pivoting towards London and Washington, reinforcing the Anglosphere and validating security arrangements that include the two but exclude Berlin and Paris.

After all, it would not fracture Europe more than it already is, because of Paris unilateral initiatives or Berlin's reluctance; it would only make sure that the existing division also works for the East's and North's interests.

In a mature EU, however, it should become clear that the past radical positions embraced by both France and the Atlanticist countries of Central and Eastern Europe are not compatible with the geostrategic needs of the EU. The two sides should meet in the middle. The Eastern Flank and Scandinavia were proven right in pointing out for decades that the main danger for European security comes from Russia. The French point of view is also proven right, that a stronger European Union would serve as a deterrent to unfriendly third parties; and that instead of avoiding the topic of European sovereignty, our part of Europe should largely (and legitimately) contribute to it.

Awareness, a rational approach, avoidance of double standards and a sense of mutual responsibility towards Europe might well renew one day, despite today's reasonable scepticism, the Latin saying on memorable moments: *albo signanda lapillo dies*.

October & November 2022

Rebuilding Europe's Security from Scandinavia to the Black Sea

“Two ways. Gradually, then suddenly.” Hemingway’s line from *The Sun Also Rises* came to illustrate the metamorphosis of Europe between 2021 and 2022: tectonic, obliterating much of the previous realities, accelerating change that truly escape forecast. The war reduced Europe to a crucible where its own destiny is being forged through fire, if not for the benefit of all, then for the benefit of some. The Eastern Flank should take advantage.

Electrified by Russian violence, a Northern-Eastern alliance of interests surged as a regional ensemble with London and Warsaw as leading poles, encompassing Scandinavia and the Black Sea. France and Germany need time to take in the collapse of decades-long friendly policies and openness to Russia, reassert their position, calculate the losses deriving from their preference for Moscow, as well from the lack of leadership today. After months of hesitation, both practice damage control. The rest of the EU floats in-between, from a deeply unsympathetic Orbán Hungary to economically opportunistic Greek shipowners.

East by Northeast: Bucharest 9, Sweden and Finland

In a joint statement²²³ by the defence ministers of the Bucharest 9 countries, following a meeting on October 13 co-chaired by Poland and Romania, NATO’s Eastern Flank stated they are counting on allies to contribute with robust, highly operational additional forces that can be resized from existing battle group level to brigade level. The meeting

²²³ Ministry of Defence, *Romania: Co-chairs statement of the Bucharest 9 Format, Defence ministers meeting*, available at https://www.mapn.ro/cpresa/17650_co-chairs-statement-bucharest-9-format-defence-ministers-meeting (last accessed June 2023).

took place on the margins of the NATO defence ministers' meeting in Bucharest and was attended by US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg.

It has been preceded by the October 11 Declaration of the Nine, supported by North Macedonia and Montenegro, condemning Russia²²⁴. The wording is eloquent: the Nine “call on all NATO and EU member states and like-minded partners to maintain their continued contribution to this crucial and urgent effort”. Which means, implicitly, that the European solidarity created circumstantially by the war is still under scrutiny given the positions of France and Germany. “The transatlantic connection remains indispensable for strengthening [Europe's] credible deterrence and defence”, the Nine added in a message that refuses any type of disconnection from NATO, even if they would ultimately concede contributing to a European system of collective defence.

It is a strong signal. Bucharest 9 (B9) gradually turned into an instrument of harmonising positions, and of building a common approach. Initial validation received from the platform's main supporter, the United States, explains the deep connection maintained with the DC. Founded in 2015, the group was cast aside (but undeterred) by countries already engaged in what they called a European common defence project: politically and militarily by France, and politically by Germany. The latter, however, had previously engaged in a framework nation initiative²²⁵ with various EU member states, the East included, yet in complete disconnection from Europe's economic security; the former organised, during the French rotating presidency of the EU Council, a B9-France meeting in January 2022 at the level of ministers of defence. It was the only one taking place, and, as war broke out in the Ukraine, an indicator of Paris' unease and unpreparedness to involve simultaneously

²²⁴ Calea Europeană: *Leaders of NATO countries in the “Bucharest 9”, supported by counterparts from Montenegro and North Macedonia, condemn Russia's bombing of Ukraine: These are “war crimes”*, available at <https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/liderii-tarilor-nato-din-cadrul-bucuresti-9-sustinuti-de-omologii-din-muntenegru-si-macedonia-de-nord-condamna-bombardamentele-rusiei-in-ucraina-acestea-sunt-crime-de-razboi/> (last accessed June 2023).

²²⁵ Rainer L. Glatz, Martin Zapfe, “NATO's Framework Nations Concept”, in Centre for Security Studies, *Analyses in Security Policy*, ETH Zurich/Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zürich, no. 218, December 2017, available at <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CSSAnalyse218-EN.pdf> (last accessed June 2023).

with multiple stakeholders in Europe's security when their interests and vision do not converge with France's. A certain irritation of being sidelined by a pro-Ukrainian active group, part of the B9, became visible as—at times, impulsively or bitterly, in French or German political, economic or think-tank milieus—these countries were labelled irresponsible or warmongers²²⁶.

Between the promoters of a European common defence (turned into strategic autonomy, with various definitions) and the full supporters of NATO, the rift is increasing considerably, despite most reasonable—and mainly French—pleas²²⁷ to take a long-term view and invest in Europe's defence. It is neither the long term, nor the concept of European defence that creates reticence on the Eastern Flank, and now in the North, but a striking reality: those who promote it barely invest anything in the concept—because of limitation of means, obsolete defence doctrines or sheer political unwillingness.

The entry of Sweden and Finland in NATO consolidates less the European 'pillar' of NATO and more the Eastern Flank, now extended to the North by 1,300 km. Both countries are part of the French-led European Intervention Initiative and have signed military²²⁸ or security agreements with France²²⁹; yet, in 2022, France took (twice) decisions that can certainly impact the value of these agreements and the credibility it can be granted to the Elysée's intention to stand up for Europe *whole and free*: first, by attempting to preserve its relationship with the aggressor state (after trying for years to appease it and accommodate its interests);

²²⁶ Annick Berger, "Au-delà de la guerre, c'est un risque de division qui se joue" : l'avertissement d'Emmanuel Macron à l'ONU", 20-21 September 2022, available at <https://www.tfl.info.fr/international/guerre-en-ukraine-au-dela-de-la-guerre-c-est-un-risque-de-division-qui-se-joue-l-avertissement-d-emmanuel-macron-devant-l-onu-2232909.html> (last accessed June 2023).

²²⁷ Philippe Maze-Sencier, "Has European Strategic Autonomy Crashed Over Ukraine?", for Institut Montaigne, July 13, 2022, available at <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/has-european-strategic-autonomy-crashed-over-ukraine> (last accessed, June 2023)

²²⁸ Laurent Lagneau, "La France et la Suède ont l'intention de développer davantage leur coopération militaire", *Zone Militaire Opex360*, October 4, 2021, available at <http://www.opex360.com/2021/10/04/la-france-et-la-suede-ont-lintention-de-developper-davantage-leur-cooperation-militaire/> (last accessed June 2023).

²²⁹ Eadem, "La France et la Finlande renforcent leurs liens militaires", *Zone Militaire Opex360*, October 4, 2018, available at <http://www.opex360.com/2018/10/04/la-france-et-la-finlande-renforcent-leurs-liens-militaires/> (last accessed June 2023).

second, days ago, by announcing that France will not use its nuclear arsenal in case of Russian nuclear strikes in Ukraine or “in the region”. By definition (if the French president is aware of Europe’s geography he much invokes when arguing for dialogue with Russia), this means the Baltic-Black Sea area.

While perfectly justified from a strictly national point of view (prevalent in French politics), Paris paradoxically ignored, once again, that it belongs to a political community France endeavours to convince it can take the leadership of. Macron’s declaration—meant to emphasise his country’s role as a responsible²³⁰ global Power—puts an end to any realistic possibility of seeing the Hexagon reach the position of trusted European leader, and raises questions on the consistency of the “European dimension” of French nuclear deterrence²³¹; even on its recent military engagement on the Eastern Flank. To careful eyes, the August 2022 remarks²³² of the Prime Minister of Romania—founding member of the B9 and hosting French NATO troops since February—still highlight a certain distress related to the long-term commitment to the war effort of Western allies who, by yesterday, were seeing Russia as a security partner to be cultivated. Sweden and Finland, like Romania—and maybe Poland in the future—, while welcoming the increased interaction with France, consider it subsidiary and contingent to NATO guarantees, not a point of departure for the building of a different, alternative structure.

However, if European collective defence were to be built in present-day circumstances, it would not be based on the Paris-Berlin dual core, but on the nascent compact between the new North and the Eastern Flank. Depending on the depth of Germany’s *Zeitenwende* awakening,

²³⁰ Tweet of the French President Emmanuel Macron on October 13, 2022: “We do not want a world war” (<https://twitter.com/emmanuelmacron/status/1580504648821387268>, last accessed June 2023).

²³¹ Bruno Tertrais, *French Nuclear Deterrence Policy, Forces, And Future: A Handbook*, Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, Recherches & Documents, N°4/2020, February 2020, available online at <https://www.frstrategie.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/recherches-et-documents/2020/202004.pdf> (last accessed June 2023).

²³² Michael Winfrey, Andra Timu, *NATO Must Dig In for Long Deployment in East, Romania Warns*, Bloomberg, August 3, 2022, available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-08-03/nato-must-dig-in-for-long-deployment-in-east-romania-warns> (last accessed June 2023).

this can put enough pressure on Berlin to make it decide taking sides: either with France, managing the (controversial) Franco-German engine of Europe, or engaging with the rising league of the East and North, endorsed by the US and Britain.

The Franco-German engine shows enough signs²³³ of erosion²³⁴ to generate a plausible scenario based on the division of defence responsibilities within the EU:

- NATO's Eastern Flank, articulated around the B9, with Fennoscandia and the UK, interested in deterring Russia;
- France, with Italy, Spain and Greece, interested in Europe's south, with a lighter burden and away from the risk of confronting a nuclear power;
- Germany, in the middle, contributing to both, alternatively, if and when necessary.

In September, at the joint initiative of Czechia and Romania, Sweden and Finland were invited²³⁵ to be a part of B9 "at least as guests", the doors being open for permanent participation. The two would consolidate not the legitimacy of the platform (nothing is more legitimate than self-defence) but its political voice and weight, enabling it to shape Europe's security architecture in ways suitable to the members' interests.

²³³ Marie-Catherine Beuth, "Paris-Berlin, le péril d'un couple qui ne marche plus", in *L'Opinion*, October 2, 2022, available at <https://www.lopinion.fr/international/paris-berlin-le-peril-dun-couple-qui-ne-marche-plus> (last accessed June 2023).

²³⁴ Ernest Stetter, *European Skyshield: Why Germany Launches A European Anti-Missile Shield Without France*, Foundation Jean Jaurès, November 11, 2022, available at <https://www.jean-jaures.org/publication/european-skyshield-pourquoi-lallemagne-lance-un-bouclier-anti-missile-europeen-sans-la-france/> (last accessed June 2023).—Both countries made subsequent efforts to keep under control political divergences, yet it is clear that the relationship needs reconstruction in a Europe of change (i.e. Camille Grand, "The Missing European Dimension of Germany's *Zeitenwende*: A View from France", in *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, February 23, 2023, <https://ip-quarterly.com/en/missing-european-dimension-germanys-zeitenwende-view-france>, last accessed June 2023).

²³⁵ Calea Europeană, *The Czech Republic suggests to Romania the invitation of Finland and Sweden in the Bucharest Format 9. Bogdan Aurescu: We have the same strategic perspective*, September 8, 2022, available at <https://www.caleaeuropeana.ro/cehia-sugereaza-romaniei-invitatea-finlandei-si-suediei-in-formatul-bucuresti-9-bogdan-aurescu-avem-aceiasi-perspectiva-strategica/> (last accessed June 2023).

Not the Europe, but the Europes of Defence

If we were to say the truth, in 2022 Europe cancelled its common geopolitical future because of deep divisions, some of which meticulously cultivated in the past. The EU cannot move beyond the level of economic construction—or perhaps geoeconomic, if the much-claimed strategy of decoupling, autonomy and resilience is put in practice despite Germany's pleas for China.

Rhetoric and recurrent lamentations on Europe's failure will be frequent, but this is not a drama. Division would allow better regional alliances, with regional specialisation; NATO itself was initially structured 1949 on Regional Planning Groups²³⁶ (RPGs) destined to produce local contingency plans for defence against Soviet aggression, replaced in 1951 by a new integrated command structure. RPGs did not lose strategic importance, and today's British-led Joint Expeditionary Force NATO framework is rooted in the former Northern Europe RPG.

Accordingly, France could have its own supervision area in the south and south-west, with an intergovernmental approach, preserving its autonomy of decision in Gaullist fashion. Europe's north, centre and east can associate and work closely, B9 being a platform apt to foster a more consistent foundation for regional security, using the framework nation concept (with Britain, Sweden, Poland) and certainly benefiting from Finland's 'new school' of defence practices.

Like-mindedness being essential, it is excessive and useless to expect strategic empathy to emerge between nations fundamentally divided, only for the sake of having some "European unity" to talk about. Disunion is the absolute and constant norm; policies should take it into account, master it, and put it to good use instead of attempting to disguise it with blatant lack of success. If any, Europe's unity will involuntarily result from the mutual coordination of these regional frameworks.

In an ideal world, Paris-Berlin would have shown strategic maturity. They would have both had elites educated in order to understand that size does not automatically translate into influence, nor impact in building a system of continental security; that defence is built on trust; and trust is

²³⁶ NATO (the website), *Did you know that NATO has not always had an integrated military command structure with supreme commanders?*, available at <https://shape.nato.int/page214835531> (last accessed June 2023).

built through honest, constant, unwavering shoulder-to-shoulder effort *among equals*—because in frameworks, as in NATO, nations contribute *proportionately* to their means, with added value and expertise based on their own, unique historical experience, complementary to others. Hence sufficient elements of equality in status, if not capabilities.

Ideal Franco-German elites would have also understood that the future will be shaped not by ‘great Power’ unilateralism and interaction (the shared illusion of Paris, Moscow and Beijing), but by the support Powers obtain from middle powers, regional key players, with interests as legitimate as their own and capable of agency. Washington and London demonstrated they are already aware, with NATO’s proactive Joint Expeditionary Force framework proving to be of considerable value during each stage²³⁷ of the war²³⁸ in Ukraine. The model developed by Britain was sufficiently attractive to grow from seven members in 2014 to eleven by adding Finland and Sweden in 2017 (earlier than the agreements signed by the two with France) and Iceland in 2021.

Time for an Eastern Flank Framework Nation

While for the B9 *Zeitenwende* can turn into an opportunity to grow institutionally, politically and in terms of capabilities, for France and Germany it comes with the requirement of a cultural shift within the political elites, the government and the military, to successfully transform their countries’ defence policy and protect the remains of their standing and trustworthiness. The German government discovered the implementation of the *Zeitenwende* to be by far more difficult than the political decision and statement, but Berlin might use their own framework nation concept (FNC) to assuage worries about its previous unwillingness to commit forces to multinational operations as well as to mend reputational damage caused by its perceived lack of support

²³⁷ British Ministry of Defence, March 28, 2022, *UK delivers NATO supplies and conducts patrols with JEF partners*, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-delivers-nato-supplies-and-conducts-patrols-with-jef-partners> (last accessed June 2023).

²³⁸ Sean Monaghan, *The Joint Expeditionary Force: Global Britain in Northern Europe?* March 25, 2022, Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, USA, available online at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/joint-expeditionary-force-global-britain-northern-europe> (last accessed June 2023).

for Ukraine, and for previous foreign policy toward Russia²³⁹. The membership of the German FNC grew from 10 to 20, but a defined goal, a political identity and brand, a steady stream of activity, and visible political direction appear to be lacking, the sizable membership representing itself a challenge to the FNC's mission and identity, especially when compared to the Eastern Flank.

The Black Sea region—where Russian dominance means instability—should receive priority for the addition of another framework nation concept, given at least the importance of the Black Sea for the Ukrainian economy and, beyond, for the world's food supply. As NATO presence in Romania and Bulgaria has already been strengthened, there is a need for a proportionately stronger maritime footprint in the area; but it is difficult to identify the group's potential lead nation. The Black Sea is of great relevance to the United Kingdom, which has nine Royal Navy deployments since 2017 as part of Operation Orbital, designed to help Ukraine. In order to operate across the Euro-Atlantic region, the UK additionally established the Littoral Response Group North; therefore, heading a FNC in the Black Sea may be a stretch for the British capabilities.

If political difficulties between France and Turkey were better controlled, the two would be in pole position to lead. France—in charge of the NATO multinational battlegroup in Romania—could extend security coverage to the Black Sea, a move facilitated by Romania's project to acquire four French corvettes. Turkey should participate because of its geostrategic significance in governing access to the Black Sea; but the relationship developed by President Erdogan with Putin's Russia raises questions on how such a FNC responsibility would be exploited by the Ankara regime and become leverage in Erdogan's power play. In addition, on different issues, both France and Turkey grant Russia attention and act(ed) as facilitators of its interests, either in the very recent past or at present.

The new FNC should aim at creating a rapidly deployable force capable of conducting the full spectrum of operations. Regional focus should concern the Baltic and the Black Seas, with an extra-focus on the latter, a true Achilles' heel. This priority on addressing the security concerns of the wide area between the two seas will provide a natural motivation

²³⁹ Frank Hofmann, *Germany's epochal change: Parting company with Russia*, Deutsche Welle, May 7, 2022, available at <https://www.dw.com/en/russias-war-in-ukraine-germany-faces-a-reckoning/a-61713248> (accessed June 2023).

for its members to collaborate and develop a cohesive approach, with a shared identity related to Three Seas Initiative and Scandinavia, retaining the ambition to act further afield if its members so choose. The FNC ought to rely on the already-existing shared operational experience and shared beliefs of its members to form its political and military strategic foundations. The spirit of the Three Seas, of the Northern Council and past common military exercises can certainly contribute to and facilitate the political cohesiveness of the new FNC nations.

A political identity may be easily formed thanks to the FNC's clear purpose, regional focus, and shared foundations. The member countries can deepen and demonstrate their political coherence through regular high-level meetings, political directives, public statements, letters of intent, memoranda, and strategic communication campaigns to strengthen the common brand. This contributes to enhancing the group's political identity and has potentially strong impact. (Consider the promptness of British security assurances given to Finland and Sweden before their accession to NATO: this was possible because Helsinki and Stockholm had developed trust for London through their participation in the British-led Joint Expeditionary Force. In Europe, only two other countries showed such political will and put it into practice: Poland and Czechia²⁴⁰. According to sources close to the process, France and Romania discussed security assurances in the early summer of 2021, related to Russia's aggressive behaviour at the Black Sea; a moment unique in France's approach of NATO's Eastern Flank before the Ukraine war.)

The new FNC could engage into a consistent program of activity, ranging from large scale exercises to smaller presence and logistics operations carried out under its banner, so as to develop interoperability and the readiness of its forces to cooperate in a crisis. Driving development through a constant cycle of exercise, maturing and political direction would generate supplementary advantage, if national policy directors and ministers were to meet regularly.

At the same time, following NATO's paradigm of generating non-public military-strategic guidance while disclosing strategic concepts, the new FNC could employ the same methodology to increase public

²⁴⁰ *Poland, Czechia to protect Slovakia's airspace*, Deutsche Welle, August 27, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/poland-czechia-to-protect-slovak-airspace-as-soviet-made-jets-retired/a-62952215> (last accessed June 2023).

knowledge of its goals and mandate, while sending a message to allies and foes alike about the partner countries' adherence to a set of shared values regarding the growth and employment of the NFC.

For it to function, a framework nation must take the helm, bearing both political and operational responsibility, dedicating significant political and military resources. The deployable headquarters of the FNC would need to be located there, while the lead force elements for operations and training are to be provided by the same.

Last but not least, the FNC should be designed to be adaptable and relevant. It has to evolve with the security environment, in terms of capabilities and, why not, able to also become a thematic FNC²⁴¹ based on NATO necessities: cyber hubs, centres of excellence, health management, space, air and missile defence, special operations forces.

To close therefore, one question: is Poland willing to become a framework nation, pivotal to the defence of the Eastern Flank?

The answer will only come from Warsaw. But it will be one reshaping Europe in depth.

²⁴¹ Sophie Arts, Steven Keil, *Flexible Security Arrangements and the Future of NATO Partnerships*, Policy Paper, German Marshall Fund, February 2021, available at <https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Arts%2520%2526%2520Keil%2520-%2520NATO%2520partnerships%2520formats.pdf> (last accessed June 2023).

September 2024

EU-NATO cooperation: a European pillar, or pillars of NATO in Europe?

The following text is based on the observations and comments of experts in international relations and defence from certain European countries, gathered at the Visegrad Insight's "Europe Future Forum", held in Warsaw on September 16-18, 2024. Chatham House rules applied.

"—Take the bloody shot!"
James Bond 'Skyfall', 2012

The cooperation between the European Union (EU) and NATO has become more synchronised due to the ongoing war context, and it matches the "shield and spear" metaphor of Han Fei's book, partly solving the proverbial paradox it classically illustrates. First, by an increase of NATO's role: the Alliance has significantly ramped up its military presence and readiness, acting as the "shield" in this approach. Second, the EU has taken a more offensive stance by imposing a regime of sanctions, leveraging its economic power as the "spear". Yet, the leadership of the United States remains crucial, just as it was in the early days of the conflict, to maintain unity and direction among NATO members who still need to establish clear goals and a unified strategy concerning victory over Russia. This "shield and spear" strategy highlights the complementary roles of NATO and the EU in addressing the conflict, with the EU's economic measures supporting NATO's military efforts; yet Europe's multiple divisions (political, diplomatic and military on an East-West, North-South basis) undermine a most necessary coherence and solidarity.

Potential Areas of Cooperation

Four areas of cooperation between NATO and the EU can be identified. 1) security of the European Union; 2) supporting Ukraine; 3) supporting other partners of the EU and NATO; and 4) containing Russia.

The security of the EU is inextricably linked to enhancing its defence capabilities; Europe needs to significantly boost its defence spending to address current gaps and future threats, which includes investing in infrastructure and defence capabilities with the (crucial) possibility of providing incentives for member states to make national decisions that align with collective goals. By meeting a minimum of security requirements and ensuring at least transnational mobility, the EU could complement NATO and structure its action as a reinforcer of NATO. An additional layer in Europe's contribution could be embodied by the regional co-financing of defence projects, enhancing the supply chain for Allied troops which are defending Europe. Developing capabilities, especially in ammunition production, is essential for maintaining readiness; the reduction of costs, going together with an increase in efficiency, should be pragmatically considered by encouraging joint procurement. This cannot be achieved without strategic political guidance, bold enough, integrative by consensus of regional interests, much needed to navigate the complex defence landscape.

Together with enhancing resilience to hybrid threats via more cooperation between NATO and the Union in this field, EU's active participation and investment would considerably reinforce (and thus act as a deterrent) the credibility of the North Atlantic Alliance.

The same principle of complementarity has to be applied, effectively and efficiently, in the North Atlantic aid and support to Ukraine, as well as to vulnerable partners such as Moldova and Western Balkan countries, using NATO and EU instruments.

Containing Russia implies a combination of military, economic, and diplomatic strategies that are far from acquiring the necessary consensus within NATO or/and the EU. While deploying troops, military jets, naval vessels, air defence systems and anti-missile systems in critical locations on both a permanent and rotational basis, and increasing the frequency

and complexity of military exercises or patrols to maintain readiness and deter aggression is largely accepted, especially on NATO's Eastern Flank, imposing increasingly severe economic sanctions on Russia, targeting key sectors—energy, finance, and technology—to weaken and limit its ability to fund military operations is far from being unanimously endorsed. Nor is the support for Ukraine. Therefore, political cooperation becomes essential and indispensable to the EU NATO joint action.

High risk of Transatlantic Rift

The political cooperation is weakened not only by Europe's divisions; the metamorphosis of the US foreign policy, under the pressure of a more isolationist electorate has to be dealt with. If Donald Trump wins the elections in November 2024, the 2% spending target on defence will not keep the American president at the table; and while the US withdrawal from NATO may have become more difficult to enact unilaterally, Europe risks to be confronted to a “dormant NATO” scenario—meaning not just halting enlargement, expecting Europeans to take on more responsibility for logistics, infantry, armour and intelligence, and returning NATO to its strict original purpose as a defensive alliance (with the US providing the nuclear umbrella), but the consequences of it: reduced deterrence (increasing the likelihood of aggressive actions against NATO countries), weakened unity (political distancing and increased disparities in defence capabilities), economic and political costs (defence spending could strain EU national economies and lead to political backlash domestically), cybersecurity vulnerabilities (because of a reduced focus on proactive measures, risking disruption of critical infrastructure and military operations), and loss of global influence (the ability to shape international security policies would largely disappear). And, to call a spade a spade, there was no effort to establish a European pillar of NATO in the last two years; as for the joint procurements, they are still subject to national preferences and become the time-consuming topic of a “European preference”...

Missing Elements

Only the process of Europeanising NATO will entail an increase in the influence of the European Union within the Atlantic Alliance and a better rapport de force with the United States. Offering the advantage of size and of a double complementarity (both with NATO and among national capabilities), the EU represents the sole viable means of enhancing collective defence. But despite the availability of some financial resources—themselves the object of politicisation and of excessive marketisation serving domestic or electoral purposes—, there is a(n additional) shortage of military equipment, emphasising the well-known European deficiency in production. The utilisation of the EU as a conduit for overcoming such realities is, therefore, a necessity; and it can be reasonably argued that the creation of common tools and capabilities will diminish costs. Defence would otherwise be prohibitively expensive for each nation.

The EU should ascertain NATO's requirements and determine how it can contribute. But a question arises as to whether the EU turned a blind eye to NATO's needs. In answer to this, it can be stated that there is no concrete, fully assumed methodology in place that sets out how the EU can work with NATO and contribute to NATO's objectives.

Additionally, the lack of methodology is amplified by the impact of long-term economic and social policies that eroded the financial strength of actors considered capable of leading the geopolitical EU. Germany and France already have problems contributing more; they illustrate the political difficulty of explaining to national electorates why ever larger sums have to be spent on defence at a time of public deficit and following a pandemic. Thirdly, if the relationship of the EU with NATO were to be established primarily under an economic and financial angle, working together with NATO's Economic Committee could prove constructive, as some of the committee's key functions include defence economics (covering defence expenditures, industries, burden-sharing), facilitating coordination.

Moreover, from the diversity of national strategic interests a multitude of strategic scenarios originate; the enlargement of the EU will serve only to multiply this aspect. While there is—and will be—some cooperation between NATO and the EU, as well as among the EU member states, there

is a lack of a solid foundation upon which to build a more robust, coherent, unwavering and unified approach. For the moment, cooperation is contingent upon the geopolitical and military circumstances in Ukraine, and is highly likely to cease as a result of national diversity and the inability to maintain even today's concert. In order to face fragmentation and organise it in ways compatible with Europe's security interests, it is necessary to consider the possibility of using it to establish regional coalitions and multiple national frameworks. To what extent might these be incorporated into the NATO-EU relationship?

Not a Pillar but Regional Pillars of NATO?

While it may not be an effective strategy to reinforce the EU-NATO relationship, regional coalitions, frameworks and alliances may be a most viable approach to defending at least the region between the Baltic and the Black Seas. The establishment of adequate infrastructure, fostering energy security, production of military equipment, joint procurement, etc., all at a transnational or/and multinational level, are key areas where collaboration is essential. The Three Seas Initiative and the Bucharest9 format serve as convenient platforms to such missions.

While there is a sense of optimism at the appointment of a Defence Commissioner, it will be challenging to define his prerogatives, which are closer to managing the European arms industry—not Europe's defence itself—, and having to push the arms industries of several European nations toward a more standardised and coordinated production, and cooperative purchasing power. The EU portfolio thus excludes the political dimension of Europe's security, which remains in the hands of nation states—especially those with an ambition to lead. Of these, France (relentless and plausible candidate to EU leadership) is far from possessing the necessary economic and military means, and is only just beginning to grasp the Central and Eastern security dimension of Europe, diplomatically, politically and militarily.

At the intersection of the economic and political axis of EU-NATO cooperation, the question of burden-sharing—pertaining to both fields—remains unanswered: who will assume overall responsibility for Europe's defence (one country, a directorate of countries partitioning competences

and responsibilities, or regional alliances?) and how? Is an overall responsibility politically acceptable, or should the EU acknowledge that NATO-coordinated regional collective arrangements (overlapping geographically in pivot countries) are the key to enhance the continent's security? How will the reasonable need to identify a common enemy be managed within NATO and the EU, and build a common position? Are EU common positions realistic or—ultimately—overrated in illustrating unity?

At least for the beginning, it would be prudent to suggest that the EU-NATO collaboration should endeavour to reconcile the disparate, divergent interests of countries and regions. The allocation of significant financial resources could serve to enhance the industrial substance of the defence portfolio, alongside providing impetus for the development of a wider range of security infrastructure across Europe. However, this is contingent upon the existence of a conducive political environment, and upon political will.

With respect to the latter, some countries demonstrate a sense of urgency when it comes to designing a security approach that works nationally or in a regional context—largely on NATO's Eastern Flank and in collaboration with the United States—, whereas others do not. It is imperative for both parties to exercise caution and avoid the assumption that US policies favourable to Europe will safeguard Europe. Security begins at home. Europeans must address the intricacies of their security landscape, the divergence of perspectives, the deficit of mutual trust, and also disavow sovereigntist narratives that undermined for decades cohesion and unity. If security is now, finally, a target, somebody needs to take the shot.

Regions may do it best.

In Lieu of Conclusion...

Taken together, these texts invite the reader not only to revisit the past half-decade with the benefit of hindsight, but also to recognise the enduring patterns that continue to shape our present and will likely define the decade ahead. They underscore how the interplay of vision and circumstance can generate both opportunity and constraint, reminding us that ideas are forged not in isolation but through dialogue with the turbulence of their time. As such, the collection stands less as a final word than as a point of departure—an invitation to refine, contest, and build upon these arguments in pursuit of a more coherent and resilient strategic posture for Romania and for the Eastern Flank within NATO. If the first part of this book lays out a roadmap, the second offers the terrain from which that path emerged, a reminder that the future must always be grounded in the lessons, debates, and aspirations of the recent past.

These writings serve not only as a chronicle of a restless and transformative period but as a testament to the enduring power of wide-ranging analysis in times of uncertainty. They reveal how ideas forged in the crucible of crisis can illuminate paths forward, offering frameworks for understanding and action that transcend the immediacy of their origin. As Romania and its regional partners continue to navigate the shifting contours of power, the reflections contained herein remain necessary—not as static records, but as contributions to an ongoing dialogue about security, integration, sovereignty, and the role of democratic resilience in shaping the future. In revisiting these texts, we may be reminded that history is not merely observed—it is interpreted, challenged, and ultimately shaped by those who dare to think critically and act decisively.

Radu Albu-Comănescu

"We are entering a world that is more fluid, less predictable, and more dangerous. The outcome of the war in Ukraine is unknown. The rivalry between the United States and China could intensify—or shift unexpectedly. Conflicts simmer in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. The structures that once offered clarity are fading, replaced by a landscape of opportunism, shifting alliances, and contested power.

This book explores that transformation. It argues that the post-Cold War order has ended, not with a bang but with a gradual erosion—until reality forced itself back onto the stage. The 21st century is not the continuation of the last, but something far older: a return to the strategic logics of power politics, now complicated by nuclear shadows, technological revolutions, and the rise of new actors.

The world is unsettled, uncertain, unfinished.

Welcome to the new century."

Radu Albu-Comănescu is a Romanian scholar and historian, currently serving as Assistant Professor within the Faculty of European Studies at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca. He graduated European Studies at the same institution and completed the Intelligence de l'Europe programme at the Université Marne-la-Vallée / Paris-Est in France, under the coordination of Professor Chantal Delsol (of the Institut de France).

His teaching portfolio includes courses on EU governance and theories of European integration, European negotiation processes, and cultural heritage management.

He is a member of the Advisory Board of the Rațiu Forum at the London School of Economics (United Kingdom) and a Visegrad Insight Fellow in Warsaw (Poland).

His research interests encompass European history, the history of political and religious thought, cultural diplomacy, governance, state-building, and the configuration of power networks.

He is actively engaged in various international and Romanian policy initiatives, and contributes periodically as a columnist to journals, documentaries, as well as serving as a political commentator on television.



ISBN 978-606-37-2280-6