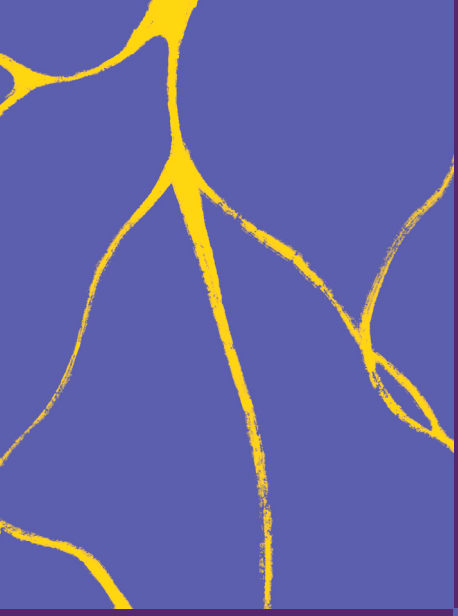
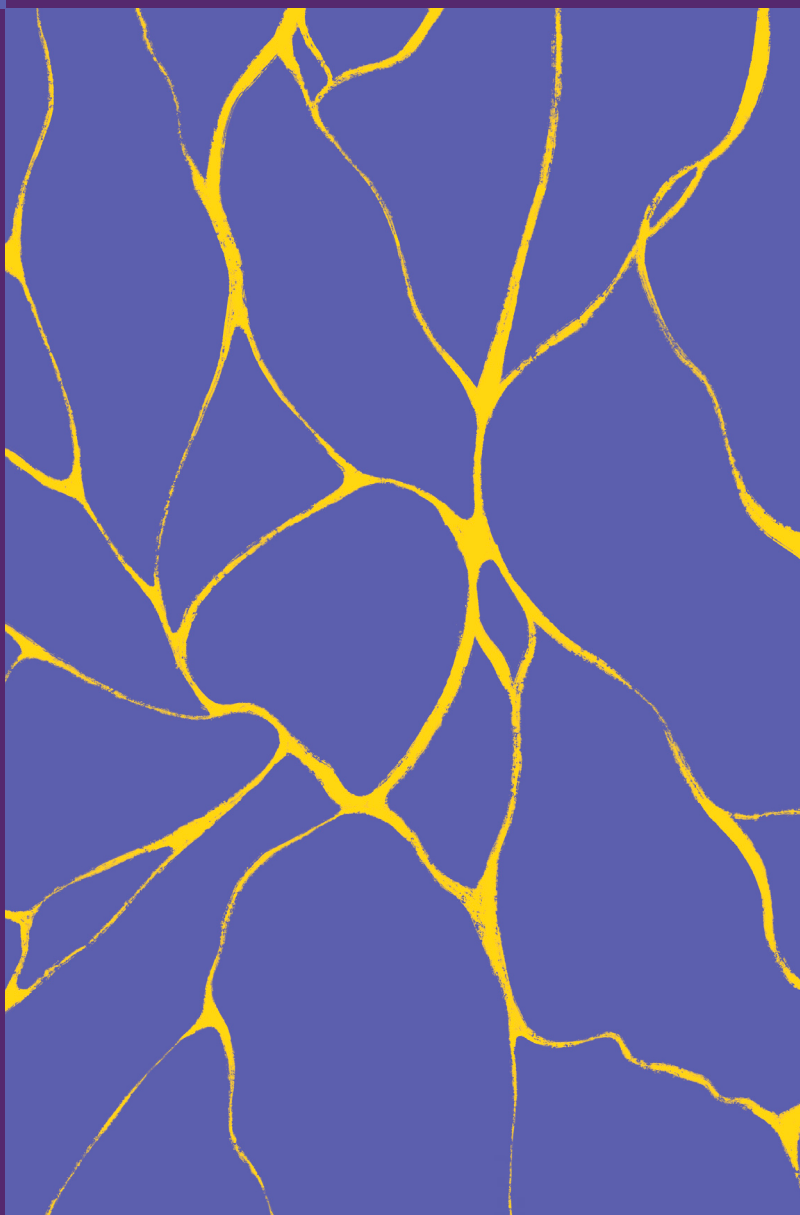
New Idealism for a Disrupted Europe

Building Security Through Values





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The **Green European Foundation** (GEF) is a European political foundation affiliated to the European Green Party. Its mission is to contribute to stronger, more participative, and pluralist democracy in Europe; act as a laboratory for new ideas and a dynamic hub for cross-border debates, training, and exchange that provides political education for European citizens and like-minded green actors; and bridge the gap between grassroots movements, civil society, academics, the private sector, and political actors.

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Foreword

Powering Values

Laurent Standaert

In a world where might makes right, can we do what's right without might? Putin's invasion of Ukraine and Trump's onslaught on the world order are forcing Greens to do some long, hard thinking about power and security. This report does just that, with few taboos. It draws lessons from the experiences of those Central and Eastern European countries that first raised the alarm about the revival of Russian imperialism. These warnings were ignored for too long by the rest of Europe. As a result, we are now scrambling to give Ukraine the support it needs and ensure our own defences are fit for the challenge.

Listening to the eastern frontline states can help us better understand what makes a country resilient – not just its military but also its population. This is all the more relevant when faced with a US administration that scorns Europe and can no longer be trusted as an ally. Europeans, including Greens, need to learn how to defend what they care for.

The report takes the concept of neo-idealism – neatly summarised by security analyst Benjamin Tallis as "our values are our interests" – as a starting point for the pursuit of a robust and comprehensive Green approach to security. The values-driven approach to geopolitics on which the concept is based, demonstrated by Eastern European leaders such as Kaja Kallas and Volodymyr Zelenskyy, is not merely a reflection of the fact that smaller countries need a rules-based order to protect them from aggression by larger powers. It is also an appeal to citizens to be part of something bigger than themselves – to defend the freedom, democracy, and self-determination that lie at the core of their societies.

This approach offers a lesson to all of Europe. People do not put their lives at stake for a single market or standardised smartphone chargers; they fight and die for values. The power of values explains why Thucydides has, at times, been proven wrong by history: the strong don't always get what they want because the weak refuse to suffer what they must. In today's Europe, where else can we find the strength to stand our ground against belligerent autocrats than in the values that most of us share?

The values of neo-idealism are also fundamental to the project of political ecology: autonomy, democracy, and freedom. Still, proponents of neo-idealism may be uncomfortable with the way the concept is used by some of the report's authors to advance a Green vision of geopolitics. A green neo-idealism sets itself apart by stressing the value of justice within and across generations. It recognises that the world is facing multiple, simultaneous crises. In addition to the collapse of international law and the erosion of pluralist democracy, we are undergoing an ecological crisis that cannot simply be put on hold. Climate disruption only highlights the urgency of building a more resilient and just society.

This report contains proposals for strengthening the social fabric that a more centrist neo-idealist may baulk at. But they reflect the fact that diplomats, generals, and business tycoons are no longer the sole actors in geopolitics; societies have agency too. It is for this reason that the exercise of sheer might so often results in chaos and failure. Strong, well-informed societies are the most formidable barrier against hegemons, be they autocrats or plutocrats.

The research project *New Idealism for a Disrupted Europe* was launched in 2025. At the Green European Foundation, we engaged four organisations to hold a series of expert and practitioner meetings, workshops, and interviews, with a focus on Central and Eastern Europe. This report brings together the insights that were harvested. We extend our sincere thanks to all of the participants and interviewees for their contributions.

The report begins with five **essays** that address the resilience of democracies from different perspectives. They contain lessons from Central and Eastern Europe in areas such as defence, diplomacy, and civil preparedness, and underscore the importance of articulating and defending values, not just interests, in all matters of security. Where values clash – within European societies, in relations with partner countries, and even inside Green thinking – they point a way forward.

Alongside these essays, the report presents a selection of the **interviews** that helped serve as their inspiration.[1] It concludes with a series of **recommendations** drafted by the project partners. These are designed to spur political action across a broad range of policy areas.

[1] Further interviews are available at www.gef.eu

Defence, as this report makes clear, is not only about guns and tanks; it also requires us to rearm our minds and our souls. The recent US National Security Strategy, however aberrant, was right about one thing: Europe lacks self-confidence. Empowering it through the strength of its values is a vital mission for Greens and progressives. At the Green European Foundation, we wholeheartedly support that mission.

Laurent Standaert is the director of the Green European Foundation.

Essays

Realism Failed – It's Time for a New Idealism

Essay by
Richard Wouters

Autocrats Putin and Trump are demolishing the world order. Their imperialism is whitewashed by a geopolitical realism that preaches the law of the jungle. "Neo-idealism" offers inspiration for democratic forces, including Greens, to build their resilience.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 came as a surprise to many in Western Europe, myself included. But we had been warned. Politicians and analysts in Central and Eastern Europe had been sounding the alarm[1] for years: on the resurgence of Russian imperialism, on Vladimir Putin's dream of restoring the Russian Empire, and on his determination to demolish the whole edifice of rules and institutions built to ensure peace in Europe in favour of a Russian-dominated "Eurasia". We should have taken better note of our eastern allies' warnings.

Central and Eastern European governments were also the first to supply arms to the Ukrainian military. Even today, in proportion to their GDP, the Baltic countries, Finland, and Poland are among the largest donors to Ukraine in its struggle to survive as an independent and democratic country.[2]

For more than three decades, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, we Western Europeans have been lecturing our Central and Eastern European neighbours on what they should do to become – and remain – responsible members of NATO and the European Union. It is time to reverse the perspective: what can we learn from them?

This is not to suggest that we heed the advice of Viktor Orbán and other Putin cronies but rather of individuals such as Kaja Kallas, the former prime minister of Estonia who is now the EU's foreign policy chief. She is one of the Central and Eastern European leaders who weave their staunch support for Ukraine into a broader narrative on defending democracy, human rights, and the international rule of law – and on the sacrifices we must make to do so. They emphasise that if we give Putin his way in Ukraine, peace will not break out. We should then brace ourselves for new wars of conquest, both by the Putin regime and by autocrats elsewhere who feel emboldened by democratic states' unwillingness to defend each other and the rules-based order.

Politicians like Kallas are sometimes referred to as champions of a "new idealism" in geopolitics. The term was coined by security expert Benjamin Tallis in 2022. Under his definition, neo-idealism is a "morally-based approach to geopolitics, grounded in the power of values conceived as ideals to strive for: human rights and fundamental freedoms, social and cultural

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liberalism, democratic governance; self-determination for democratic societies; and perhaps most importantly, the right of citizens in those societies to a hopeful future".[3]

[3] Note that this definition does not include the international rule of law. However, the leaders Tallis identifies as neo-idealists do put this forward as a key value to uphold.

Moral bankruptcy

Neo-idealism stands in contrast to realism, a widely branched tradition in international relations theory that focuses on competition between great powers. To maintain or increase their might, these powers pursue spheres of influence. If a smaller country happens to be in such a sphere of influence, it has bad luck. Then it is no more than a pawn in the chess game between great powers. A satellite state of one great power, or a buffer state between two. The desires of their citizens become irrelevant. Realists often quote Athenian historian Thucydides: "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."[4]

When this maxim becomes policy, whole nations are denied the right to democratically choose their future – or their allies. Leading realist John Mearsheimer, for example, blames the US and its European allies for the Russian invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022.[5] He argues that the West should not have pushed for Ukrainian membership of NATO and advocates making Ukraine a "neutral country".[6] The fact that Ukraine itself wants to join NATO carries no weight for him.

This realist frame of thought overlooks not only the aspirations but also the agency of smaller countries. Estonian professor of international relations Maria Mälksoo points out that Ukraine isn't meekly suffering its fate. Quite the opposite: it has surprised the world with its tough resistance against the aggressor.[7] Central and Eastern European countries within NATO and the EU have also proved that they are not clueless pawns. By taking the lead in supporting Ukraine, they have built up moral authority – to which Kallas owes her appointment as EU foreign policy chief.

The way Russia is waging the war in Ukraine is difficult to explain from a realist perspective. If Putin's goal is to turn Ukraine into a buffer state, why is his war so genocidal?[8] According to Ukrainian researcher Kseniya Oksamytna, the Ukrainian government realised soon after the invasion that it was not about neutrality.[9] She points to the town of Bucha. The massacre that the Russian army committed there in March 2022 also involved the systematic rape of girls and women. "Russian soldiers told them they would rape them to the point where they wouldn't want sexual contact with any man, to prevent them from having Ukrainian children," the BBC reported.[10] Faced with a murderous great power seeking to erase its identity in the name of a "superior" culture, Ukraine is understandably unwilling to be a lone buffer state and has actively sought the protection of allies.

Great power realism boils down to "might is right". Mälksoo calls on her realist colleagues "to probe the moral weight of asking another state to serve as one's buffer zone".[11] The foreign ministers of seven Central and Eastern European countries have warned that "spheres of influence never bring peace and stability. They bring oppression."[12] For Tallis, Mearsheimer's realism amounts to "moral bankruptcy".[13]

Trump's imperialism

Realism is influential in Western capitals. The awe of great powers partly explains why many Western European governments and the Biden administration remained impervious to the calls of Kallas and other neo-idealists to help Ukraine not just survive but *win*. Under Joe Biden, support for Ukraine's war effort was "always a day

late and a dollar short", writes American neo-idealist Alexander Vindman.[14] The same applies to European aid.

With Donald Trump back in the White House, we are witnessing great power realism on overdrive. On Russia's war on Ukraine, Trump sides with the aggressor: he blames not Moscow but Kyiv for the war. After all, the weak must endure rather than resist. He has all but halted American support for Ukraine. Moreover, Trump is extorting Kyiv to cede land to Russia and natural resources to the US, is hesitant on providing security guarantees, and is blocking Ukraine's accession to NATO. A "peace deal" on such terms would be a prelude to future Russian aggression. It would also risk destabilising Ukraine's fledgling democracy.

Trump has already dealt several severe blows to the international rule of law, notably with his gunboat intervention in Venezuela – replacing one corrupt autocrat with another – and his territorial claims on Greenland, the Panama Canal, and Canada. He sees the entire Western Hemisphere as the United States' backyard, where it is free to subjugate other countries and plunder their natural resources. "The outsized influence of larger, richer, and stronger nations is a timeless truth of international relations," states the new US National Security Strategy.[15] We are a long way from the United States that promoted self-determination and democracy, however inconsistently. This administration preaches lawlessness and coercion – courtesy of the pundits of great power realism.

Trump's mobster imperialism might well embolden China's autocrat Xi Jinping to seize Taiwan, killing off its pluralist democracy. For Putin, it is an encouragement to grab land beyond Ukraine. The Baltic states are right to feel threatened; Russian sabotage in the Baltic Sea and elsewhere has already brought NATO and the EU into a twilight zone between war and peace. To make matters worse, Washington is casting doubt on NATO's core pledge that an attack on one is an attack on all. Team Trump is doing the work for the war criminal in the Kremlin.

Time to push back

Trump's disregard of international law and admiration for Putin, together with the rapid breakdown of US constitutional democracy, means that little to nothing remains of the transatlantic bond. The US under Trump is no longer an ally of Europe. This is a bitter pill to swallow, especially for Central and Eastern Europeans. For decades, NATO under US leadership was their insurance policy against Russia.

Some neo-idealists faced up to the transatlantic rupture early on. After Trump and his vice-president ambushed Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the Oval Office in February 2025, Kallas concluded that the "the free world needs a new leader."[16] For his part, Zelenskyy – the figurehead of neo-idealism, according to Tallis – has argued that it is time for a unified European military. "Europe has everything it takes. Europe just needs to come together and start acting in a way that no one can say 'no' to Europe, boss it around, or treat it like a pushover."[17] These are the words that should be spoken by his European allies who are *within* the EU and NATO.

Instead, European leaders opted to flatter the White House autocrat, leaving Kallas and Zelenskyy no choice but to fall into line. Throughout 2025, leaders engaged in competitive self-humiliation. The eventual winner was NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, for addressing Trump as "Daddy". They often kept quiet about Trump's orgy of cruelties, both abroad and at home. But all they got in return was more betrayal. Skewed trade deals that fail to stop US assaults on tech and sustainability regulation. Repeated threats to seize Greenland from Denmark by force. A US "peace plan" for

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Ukraine written by the Kremlin. A National Security Strategy that aims to divide and weaken the EU by helping the far right into power. If you lick the boots of a bully, don't be surprised to get kicked in the face.

Submissiveness to Trump merely feeds his savagery. It makes European leaders appear spineless and weak, not least in the eyes of their own citizens. It is no surprise that trust in governments is in freefall. It is time to change tack – to push back against Trump, and to be seen to do so. Europe won't gain respect from others unless it respects itself and stands firm on its own values.

As I finish writing this essay in early 2026, this insight appears to be sinking in with European leaders following Trump's escalation of threats to annex Greenland.

At the same time, European allies should step up their military aid to Ukraine – ceasefire or not. The country's survival depends more than ever on combining its willpower and ingenuity with Europe's economic power – all of which surpass Russia's. Lasting peace is only possible if Ukraine has the upper hand.

The stronger its support for Ukraine, the more time Europe will have to strengthen the defence of its eastern borders. NATO's defence spending targets should be maintained – not to please Trump but to safeguard ourselves against future Trumps. 3.5 per cent of GDP is a reasonable estimate of what it would cost to defend Europe conventionally without US assistance.[18] In parallel, the EU should operationalise its mutual defence clause,[19] inviting the UK and Norway to participate. The battle-hardened troops of a free Ukraine on its way to EU membership would be a further welcome boost to European defence.

Europe must also start working on an independent nuclear deterrent, by extending the French and British capabilities into a European nuclear umbrella. Otherwise, we will remain vulnerable to nuclear blackmail by Putin.

To become less prone to coercion and manipulation, Europe needs to build strategic autonomy in other fields too, from digital technologies to critical raw materials. In many cases, cost will come before benefit. Gaining public support for military and economic defence – and for the sacrifices this will require – will succeed only if political leaders are candid about the grim era in which we find ourselves. The days of Pax Americana and the "peace dividend" are over. But leaders must also present the transformation required as the fulfilment of deeply entrenched values, connecting the past, present, and future. Self-determination, democracy, and the rule of law are values that many of our ancestors fought for, as do Ukrainians today, and that we share with others – in Europe and beyond. We draw on these values to imagine a better future; if they were battered and cast aside, we would dearly miss them – look at Russia, the occupied parts of Ukraine, China, and the US under Trump. Neo-idealism reminds us of the power of values.

Democracy vs autocracy

Over the past decade, the global state of democracy has been in decline. The United States crossing over from the democratic to the autocratic camp, joining Russia and China, puts the model of constitutional democracy in a tight spot. Europe cannot reverse this trend on its own, especially in the context of threats from within by far-right parties that are also hostile to pluralist democracy. Europe needs allies and partners – and the additional resources and legitimacy they bring.

See the essay "Europe, Stand Up for Democracy Worldwide" in this report.

Some 35 traditional US allies – including the EU and most of its members, the UK, Canada, Japan, South Korea, and Australia – have come together as the Coalition of the Willing to provide support to Ukraine.

Together with the Global South, they have maintained global efforts against the climate and biodiversity crises, pandemic threats, and tax evasion, despite sabotage by the Trump administration. But in other areas, such as trade and tech, they have failed to unite against the United States' strong-arm tactics. Together, Europe and other Western democracies would be better able to resist Washington's dictates and strike back against sanctions. This is most pressing in the digital realm, where the US administration, at the behest of Big Tech, is rallying against rules that aim to curb disinformation, harmful AI, data extortion, and market abuse. The collusion of nativist, imperialist authoritarianism and tech libertarianism morphing into fascism is the greatest menace to democracy, both inside and outside the US. What radio did for Hitler, social media is now doing for Trump and Musk. Europe and its allies need to urgently restore the integrity of their information ecosystems.

Submissiveness to Trump merely feeds his savagery.

The pervasiveness of American tech also brings a larger security risk. The Ukrainian military experienced that first hand in late 2022, when Elon Musk cut off its access to his Starlink satellite internet system, impeding a counteroffensive. In 2025, by order of the Trump administration, magistrates at the International Criminal Court lost access to their email accounts, credit cards, and more. As Europe works to reduce its dependence on US technology, including arms, it could invite democratic allies to join this de-risking operation. The "EuroStack" – the various layers of technology that Europe needs for digital sovereignty – would become a "DemocracyStack".

A club of democracies would stand stronger against Trump, Putin, Xi, and Big Tech if it had partners in the Global and Plural South. After all, that is where the world's largest (more or less) democratic countries are located, including India and Brazil. Their governments, however, are not keen to be

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drawn into a struggle between autocracy and democracy. Rather, they see the world through the lens of coloniser versus colonised, a distinction that persists in today's inequalities. To protect their sovereignty, they hedge their dependencies, doing business with Russia or China as easily as with the EU. Rapprochement will stand a better chance if Europe employs a narrative that focuses not only on democracy but also on the international rule of law.

Witnessing the bewilderment that Trump's blackmail tactics evoke in Europe, they might say: "Welcome to our world."

Ukraine has already drawn that lesson. "Kyiv's message has been that supporting Ukraine means to stand not by a 'Western' camp but by the UN Charter," notes Polish-Mexican researcher Ivan Kłyszcz.[20] In his 2024 speech to the UN, Zelenskyy put the spotlight on Russia's violation of the right to self-determination and the prohibition of violence between states. "The world has already been through colonial wars and conspiracies of great powers at the expense of those who are smaller. Every country – including China, Brazil, European nations, African nations, Middle East – all understand why this must remain in the past."[21] Since advances in diplomacy require long-term engagement, Ukraine has expanded its diplomatic presence in the Global South, positioning itself as a partner with shared historical experiences of oppression, external domination, and extractivism.

See the essay "Rethinking Solidarity: Lessons from Ukraine's Approach to the Majority World" in this report.

To deepen partnerships with democratic countries in the South, Western democracies will have to rally behind their demand for a greater say in global institutions such as the UN Security Council, the IMF, and the World Bank. Saving these institutions from Trump's wrecking ball will, in any case, require broad coalitions.

In opposition to the resource extractivism so brazenly pursued by Trump, the EU and its allies must promote a model of fair trade – one that assists countries willing to share their natural resources in moving up the value chain. Under this model, they would not simply dig up metal ores but also build batteries and more. "Friendshoring" would still meet the EU's objective of diversifying supply chains away from China.

Furthermore, Europe should not fund extra defence spending at the expense of support for the world's poorest. If we leave it to China to fill the gaps created by the United States' withdrawal from humanitarian aid and development cooperation, global democracy will be in even deeper trouble.

Last but not least, Europe must be careful to avoid double standards. The limp response of many European governments – including neo-idealists – to Israel's genocidal violence in Gaza has undermined their credibility in the South. Do the lives of Ukrainians matter more than those of Palestinians? This selective approach to international and humanitarian law makes it easier for Southern governments to look the other way from Russian imperialism and cosy up to Putin. European double standards, therefore, harm the country that lies at the heart of the neo-idealist project: Ukraine.

In a world facing not only geopolitical but also ecological crises, we cannot always avoid cooperating with autocracies. China, for example, is an indispensable partner in the fight against climate breakdown – especially now Trump has once again stepped out of the Paris Agreement. Paradoxically, in matters of ecology, working with systemic rivals may well help protect democracy. Climate analysts Byford Tsang and Juan Pablo Osornio point out that "runaway climate change is more likely than a stable climate to create the political conditions for authoritarians to thrive."[22]

Neo-idealism can still offer guidance for our approach to autocracies in the Global South. It challenges us to look beyond governments. Even in countries ruled by dictators, there are many who yearn for democracy. How can we amplify their voices? And if it comes to a democratic breakthrough, how can we help democratic institutions take root?

Democracy promotion must be seen as part of security policy, especially since democracy offers the best chance for peace[23] and a sustainable future.[24] This insight should permeate the trade, development, and asylum policies of the EU and its member states. If we need to import green hydrogen or hydrogen-intensive intermediate goods from solar- and wind-rich countries to decarbonise European industry, should we choose to go into business with autocratic Saudi Arabia or democratic Namibia? Should we pay autocrats to block asylum seekers from reaching Europe when almost all refugee crises are caused by authoritarian regimes, or would we rather use those funds to support fragile democracies, human rights activists, and independent media?

Neo-idealism meets Green thinking

The above suggests that Greens and neo-idealists can learn from each other. Neo-idealism calls on Greens to toughen up. Green geopolitics has always championed a broad conception of security, including human and ecological security, which is more relevant than ever in today's polycrisis. But a truly comprehensive security approach must be serious about state security too. Protecting the sovereignty of states, or the EU, requires military muscle. Greens should stress interlinkages between the different facets of security and be frank about trade-offs. Europe's rearmament push, for example, has a considerable ecological footprint. This tension – a conflict of values – must be mitigated. Greens should endeavour to make the European defence sector the greenest in the world.

Neo-idealism, on the other hand, could benefit from Greens' awareness of planetary boundaries and global injustices. However crucial the divide between democracies and autocracies may be, the need to prevent ecological collapse compels us to look beyond it. Additionally, in order to find democratic partners in the Global South, Europe should make a clean break with its colonial past and must refrain from lecturing. It should clearly set itself apart from Trump's gunpoint extortion and demonstrate that, when compared to China, it is both more responsible and more reliable. Proving to the Global South that Europe is not just another aspiring superpower seeking to extend or reclaim its sphere of influence will take time and effort. Equal partnerships, involving a wide range of actors including civil society, offer the best chance of finding common ground among diverse world views.

Domestic politics may also provide fertile conditions for cross-pollination between neo-idealism and Green thinking. A crucial element of neo-idealism, according to Tallis, is the "right to a hopeful future".[25] He insists that democracies must prove both their material and their moral superiority to win the systemic competition with autocracies. But is the promise of material progress still tenable in an era of ecological disruption? A growing number of climate and environmental scientists warn us that continued economic growth in rich countries cannot be reconciled with a liveable Earth.[26] If ecology retaliates so strongly that GDP growth grinds to a halt, democracy will be tested even more severely. Could a "hopeful future" also mean growing our wellbeing rather than our economy? And could this have geopolitical relevance?

Once basic material needs are met, our wellbeing depends more on the quality of relations with other people and living beings than on the consumption of goods and services. Wellbeing policies aim to reinforce the social tissue. Strengthening communities

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and fostering inclusiveness is not only an antidote to consumerism but also a booster for resilience. As such, it is equally relevant for geopolitics as it is for ecology. Crises can arise from ecosystem breakdown as well as from sabotage or outright war. In all cases, individual prepping will only get us so far. Ultimately, our survival depends on the solidarity of others.[1] As demonstrated by Ukraine, strong communities help sustain countries through prolonged war. As such, they may even form an aspect of deterrence.

[1] See the essay "Defence as a Commons: The Estonian Example" in this report.

The power of values such as democracy, rightly highlighted by neo-idealists, is heavily reliant on the communities in which they are practised and nurtured. Citizens bonded together are able to mobilise when politicians stray too far. This is exactly what happened when Ukraine's government and parliament stripped the country's anti-corruption bodies of their independence in mid-2025, raising fears that the diversion of public funds from the war effort for private gain would go unpunished. To defend the rule of law, civil society organisations staged demonstrations in Kyiv and other cities. These protests, together with pressure from Ukraine's allies, forced Zelenskyy and his party to make a U-turn and restore the graft-fighters' independence. It is not a great leap to imagine the Ukrainians who took to the streets in the midst of war to stand up for their values – and those who would have done so had they not been defending these same values on the front line – as the quintessential neo-idealists.

This example should give the European centre-right, which has its own fair share of neo-idealists, pause for thought. Its witch hunt against NGOs,[27] scripted by the far right, is an attack on democracy and the rule of law. Strengthening the resilience of constitutional democracies requires fostering civic engagement, not discrediting it.

If we cringe at a world where the weak are bullied, we need to become strong enough to resist the bullies.

Resilience must also be taken into account when distributing the tax burden of significantly higher defence spending. Tallis observes that, over the past decades, "neo-liberalism selectively enriched particular segments of our populations while entrenching significant income and wealth inequalities in our societies."[28] Indeed, socio-economic fairness is democracy's unfulfilled promise. Democracies, on average, fail to score better on income and wealth equality than autocracies.[29] This is worrisome, as inequality erodes social trust and cohesion[30] and increases the risk of democratic backsliding.[31] Progressive policies that redistribute wealth and income, with a focus on meeting everyone's basic needs, help ward off authoritarianism from within.

It follows that investments in defence should not come at the expense of the most vulnerable in our societies. Our social protection systems are part of what we are defending and in turn strengthen our defence. In the words of Atte Harjanne, a Green MP from Finland, where public willingness to defend the country is exceptionally high: "The welfare state plays a crucial role in our security model, since it fosters mutual trust and common purpose. People must feel they belong to a society where everyone has a role, and no one is left behind. Then they will care not only about their own safety but also about that of their society."

See the interview with Atte Harjanne in this report.

It is primarily up to the wealthy to make a greater contribution to the security of the societies that have enabled them to prosper. This means raising taxes on high wealth, capital growth, and corporate income[32] as well as on the associated luxury consumption that is a key driver of ecological breakdown.[33]

All the more so because the unsustainable lifestyles of the wealthy "set standards of consumption to which those on lower incomes aspire" (Green & Healy, 2022 – see endnote).

Values-driven mission

Putin dreams of a reborn Russian Empire, while Trump seeks new conquests. Their crude imperialism calls for a European counternarrative. That narrative must not beautify the past. World wars, the Holocaust, totalitarian oppression, and colonial exploitation cannot be swept under the carpet. We can, however, draw inspiration from moments of resistance, liberation, and reconciliation and from the lessons that Europeans have learnt the hard way. We must choose cooperation among democracies over authoritarian great power politics, apply the strength of the law instead of the law of the strongest, create and broaden voluntary "spheres of integration"[34] instead of pursuing spheres of influence, and work for human rights and inclusion while opposing dehumanisation and exclusion. Neo-idealism can help us rediscover the EU's founding ideals and those of the international rules-based order. In 2026, the narrative should centre on soft power *and* hard power, and on securing a hopeful future for people *here* and *now* that does not bring hardship to people *elsewhere* and *later*.

I beg Green and left-leaning readers not to circumvent the need for hard power. In progressive circles, even the most vocal critics of Putin and Trump are often unwilling to take the rough with the smooth. Europe cannot fend off aggressive autocrats without strong military defence. Ukraine needs ammo, not prayers. If we cringe at a world where the weak are bullied, we need to become strong enough to resist the bullies.

As such, military security should be as central to Greens as human and ecological security. This would help them make a more convincing case on how deeply these are intertwined. Meeting people's basic needs, from housing to community bonding, bolsters societal resilience in the face of external threats. It nurtures their willingness to defend territory, compatriots, and values. Repairing the damage done by neoliberalism

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to the social tissue cannot be postponed. The way out of the "guns or butter" dilemma is to tax the well-off and end the spurious consumption of natural resources. Greens should keep striving to anchor social and ecological justice, at home and worldwide, in the narrative that drives European action.

Now, more than ever, the EU needs a values-driven mission statement in order to chart a decisive course, honour the hopes its citizens have placed in it, and inspire trust among democratic allies and partners. Such a narrative will gain further traction if Russia, China, and the US step up their aggression towards Europe – or see their status as great powers diminish.

This is not unimaginable. Russia has long been in decline; it is a spoiler state that excels only in death and destruction. China's growth miracle is stalling, and the country's population is ageing at a record pace. It antagonises most of its neighbours and has no formal allies other than North Korea.[35] Autocracies are bad at forging alliances, for lack of mutual trust.

Even the US is not immune to decay. With the erosion of the rule of law, the dismantling of the federal government, unprecedented corruption, the institutionalisation of lying, press intimidation, the censorship of science and the ensuing brain drain, racism thinly veiled as anti-wokeism, the persecution and demonisation of migrants, the erasure of transgender people, the redistribution from poor to rich, the denial of the climate crisis, the betrayal of allies, trade warfare, the gutting of foreign aid, and the loss of soft power, Trump is not only demolishing the world order – he is also destroying his own country.

Thucydides provides a precedent: when powerful Athens, corrupted by "private ambitions and private interests", went fully imperialist, allied city-states turned against it, ultimately leading to its downfall.[36]

Democracy versus autocracy; the outcome is yet to be decided.

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Europe, Stand Up for Democracy Worldwide

Essay by **Sam van der Staak**

A global confrontation between democracies and autocracies is unfolding. For the European Union, investing in democracy beyond its borders is more vital than ever.

"So long as democracy exists, […] totalitarianism is in deadly danger", wrote George Orwell in his renowned essay *The Lion and the Unicorn*.[1] It was 1941, and Europe was shaking under the overwhelming advance of autocratic Italy and Germany, supported by the Soviet Union. The world seemed to be sliding inexorably towards a system of strong totalitarian states flanked by ailing democracies.

Today, many Europeans feel caught in a similar state of free fall. In International IDEA's latest report on the global state of democracy,[2] the trend is negative for the ninth year in a row. In 2024, 54 per cent of all countries slid down the democratic scoreboard, while only 32 per cent made progress in any aspect of democracy. Year on year, there is a growing sense that the system of universal values on which the international legal order is built is slipping away. This is punctuated by the occasional shock of a democratic ally unexpectedly taking an autocratic turn. The least bad scenario seems to be a world of coexistence: a bloc of autocratic superpowers surrounding – and only reluctantly tolerating – a fragile group of European democracies.

Orwell rejected such a scenario. For him, the idea that a system of democratic freedoms and a system that deliberately restricts these values could tolerate each other was contradictory. As the later author of the anti-fascist parables *Animal Farm* and *1984* explained, "The two creeds cannot even, for any length of time, live side by side." Or, as Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov once put it: "A country that does not respect the rights of its own citizens will not respect the rights of its neighbours."[3]

Europe must therefore prepare itself for ongoing conflict over the dominant world order. Wherever the EU is active, it will see its own principles clash with opposing values. As democracy and autocracy are mutually obstructive by nature, this will inevitably lead to competition.

More democracy, fewer wars

Strengthening democracy worldwide is one of the fundamental principles of the EU. Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union states: "The Union's action on the international scene shall be guided by the principles which have inspired its own creation, development and enlargement, and which it seeks to advance in the wider world: democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms […]."[4] The EU therefore has an obligation to promote democracy beyond its borders.

This is more than a matter of principle. The stronger the group of constitutional democracies, the better Europe's interests are served. Robust democratic institutions and strong civil society organisations

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contribute to more ambitious climate targets[5] and more manageable refugee flows, while democratic regression undermines global digital regulation and the investment environment for businesses. The attack on Europe's digital laws and the introduction of trade tariffs since Trump's return to the White House are a case in point.

The more the group of democracies shrinks, the greater the risk of violent conflict. Many wars are preceded by a steady decline in democratic governance on the part of the aggressor. If Russia had been a well-functioning democracy, it would never have invaded Ukraine. Investing in democracy beyond EU borders is therefore vital for the Union.

European instruments

The EU is on the eve of several major decisions that will determine its approach to democracy for the long term. It is setting up a European Democracy Shield[6] within its own borders and will set out its priorities for promoting democracy worldwide in the upcoming update to its Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy.[7] But the most sizeable changes will be financial in nature. These involve the Global Gateway initiative – the EU's new global investment vehicle – and the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). With both instruments, Europe is attempting to hold its own in a rapidly shifting world. But what is at stake here?

Simply put, the position of the Global South in the geopolitical arena. In between world power China, aggressor Russia, the US under Trump, and a questing EU, a large group of emerging countries are trying to find their place in the new world order. Through Global Gateway, the EU, with a budget of three hundred billion euros at its disposal, wants to trigger large-scale investments in the Global South, particularly in areas such as transport, energy supply, and digitalisation. This is Europe's response to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's strategy to increase its economic access and build political goodwill in the Global South through financial injections in developing countries.

The Global Gateway strategy is a comprehensible step in Europe's search for economic opportunity and critical raw materials. But it would be unwise for the EU to simply copy the Chinese model. Due to unfavourable results in low-income countries, where the investment environment is uncertain, China has significantly scaled back its programmes under the BRI in recent years. The EU must learn from this by ensuring parallel investment in transparency, oversight, and the rule of law within partner countries.

More importantly, Global Gateway offers the opportunity to engage partner countries in shaping the future world order. By linking investments to good governance, the EU can serve not only its short-term economic interests but also its geopolitical goals for the coming decades. This involves strengthening alliances along the new geopolitical fault line: between a rules-based order rooted in democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, and a system of authoritarian dominance that operates through the philosophy of 'might is right'.

The MFF is the other financial tool with which the EU can exert influence. It is commendable that the seven-year budget of €2 trillion proposed by Commission president Ursula von der Leyen in July aims to maintain Europe's role on the world stage. Under this proposal, expenditure on external policy will double to €200 billion, although this increase is largely due to a substantial reserve for support to Ukraine. But, as with any budget, the devil is in the detail.

The MFF proposal frequently refers to values such as democracy. Yet while there remains scope for strengthening democracy in geographic programmes, all thematic

programmes in this area would be significantly reduced. It is precisely these thematic programmes that have enabled bold initiatives to be developed in recent years, such as support for NGOs in the Global South that doesn't require the approval of national authorities. Furthermore, no longer will a fixed percentage of the foreign aid budget be earmarked for democratic governance. The European Commission advocates greater flexibility in a world that is lurching from crisis to crisis and therefore refuses to commit to specific amounts. The idea is that in a constantly changing world, greater flexibility better addresses new geopolitical urgencies.

However, strengthening democracy is rarely an urgent matter. Instead, democratic decline is often a process of gradual erosion. Democracy requires ongoing maintenance, not just emergency aid. The MFF must therefore include sufficient long-term investment in democracy promotion. This is all the more urgent now that Trump has eliminated US support for democracy, previously provided via USAID and the State Department.

Alliance of democracies

The world is at a tipping point between a legal order based on democratic values and what is sometimes euphemistically referred to as a "fragmented world" or a "world of parallel orders". Fragmentation and duplication of order are, in fact, synonymous with disorder. Such chaos would neither serve Europe's security and economic prosperity nor help solve the climate crisis.

Europe is faced with a choice. It can take the lead, together with countries in the Global South that also see democratic decision-making as the basis for the international rules-based order. Bringing together major economies such as India, Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia, and Mexico with "middle powers" targeted by Global Gateway and the MFF – from Bangladesh to Colombia – would forge a formidable alliance of democracies. Their combined weight could be decisive in shaping the world order.

It must be acknowledged each of these countries, like Europe itself, has internal problems with its democracy. But in most cases, democratic institutions still form the cornerstone of their political systems, however ailing they may be. It is crucial to keep these countries on board and help strengthen their democratic governance. Europe must not be deterred by the fear of interventionism, an allegation that Russia is keen to spread. Democracy is a not a Western model, but a universal value; human rights activists from Zimbabwe to Belarus can testify to this. Supporting their struggle is in both their and our interest.

The alternative, whereby the EU would neglect its democracy agenda and focus solely on economic interests, would be a fatal mistake. Given the long-term incompatibility of democracy and autocracy, this would mean ultimately surrendering the world order to authoritarian forces. Europe would have itself to blame. In Orwell's words, "If the thing we are fighting for is altogether destroyed, it will have been destroyed partly by our own act."

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Rethinking Solidarity

Lessons from Ukraine's Approach to the Majority World

Essay by
Sofiia Shevchuk

Ukraine's quest to reshape perceptions, build solidarity, and create new partnerships offers valuable insights for the Western European states that are still grappling with post-colonial blind spots and diplomatic double standards.

Ukraine is no longer a passive recipient of aid or a peripheral actor in global affairs. Since the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, the country has undergone not only military and political transformation but also a profound shift in how it positions itself on the international stage. Amid war and crisis, Ukraine has redefined its diplomatic posture by building new partnerships, amplifying its voice in multilateral forums, and engaging more deliberately with countries often sidelined in Western narratives.

This is not a matter of choice but of survival. Kyiv understands that countering Russian influence requires building broad-based solidarity, convincing undecided states of the legitimacy of its struggle against external domination, and securing recognition that its cause is grounded in international law. By deepening ties with the Global Majority,[•] Ukraine is also seeking to discourage practices such as sanctions evasion that indirectly sustain Russia's war machine, while creating new coalitions of support within the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and other multilateral arenas. Zelenskyy's virtual address to the African Union in 2022,[1] his visit to Argentina in 2023,[2] and Kyiv's "Grain from Ukraine" initiative[3] to assist food-insecure countries all underscore how Ukraine is actively seeking to frame its struggle as part of a broader, global fight against imperialism, lawlessness, and inequality.

Through targeted humanitarian aid initiatives, joint infrastructure projects, and public diplomacy in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, Ukraine is also reshaping perceptions of itself: from an appendage of Russia to an autonomous actor, from a country in crisis to a capable, constructive partner. As member of the Ukrainian parliament Mariia Mezentseva asserts, "We are proving that Ukraine is not a buffer zone."[4] In these dealings, Ukraine deliberately positions itself not as a benefactor or power broker but as a partner with shared historical experiences of oppression and external domination – an approach that often earns it a more receptive audience than many Western counterparts.

Faced with stark changes to the global order, Western European countries can draw learnings from Ukraine's engagement with the majority world.

• This essay uses the term "Global Majority" to describe countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and parts of the Middle East that together represent most of the world's population. The term has gained traction as a more inclusive and agency-focused alternative to "Global South" or "developing countries". However, it is not without controversy, as it has also been used in some political and propaganda contexts, including by Russian narratives to frame global divisions in oppositional terms. In this essay, "Global Majority" is used in a neutral, policy-oriented sense to reflect emerging geopolitical shifts and the growing influence of non-Western actors in global governance.

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Idealism

Since 2022, Ukraine has sharpened Europe's moral compass. For a long time, the European security discourse was shaped by pacifist illusions and strategic complacency. Warnings from Central and Eastern Europe about the threat of Russian imperialism were dismissed. Today, Ukraine is at the centre of a process in which European security is being redefined. That definition encompasses both hard power and soft power. It emphasises solidarity and the primacy of agency over appeasement.

Ukraine's fight is not just territorial; it is also epistemological. It rejects the logic of great power realism that renders smaller states disposable. "What is the victory plan?" they ask. Well then, Ukraine aims not only for military victory but also for a just peace based on international law.[5] It thus embodies a new geopolitical idealism, rooted in lived experience, democratic aspiration, and resistance.

This idealism is also operationalised in Ukraine's relations with the Global Majority. Kyiv insists on co-designing initiatives with partners rather than imposing ready-made frameworks. By embedding listening mechanisms and reciprocal learning in its diplomacy, Ukraine challenges the donor-recipient hierarchy that has defined Europe's external relations since decolonisation.

Humanising narratives

Centuries of European colonialism, decades of Western neglect, and persistent Russian propaganda across Africa, Asia, and Latin America put Ukraine's diplomacy vis-à-vis the Global Majority at a disadvantage. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, while Ukraine was rebuilding an independent and sovereign state and moving closer to Europe, Russia claimed the Soviet legacy of supporting anti-colonial independence movements for itself. This historical backdrop makes winning hearts and minds among formerly colonised peoples a catch-up operation for Ukraine. Traditional affinity to Moscow also shapes responses to the war: while many countries in the Global Majority acknowledge that Russia's invasion of Ukraine violates international norms and has created a humanitarian disaster, they have nonetheless chosen not to impose sanctions or cut ties.

As geopolitical analyst Ivan Kłyszcz explains, these positions reflect a broader trend of "active non-alignment" – a proactive foreign policy approach that seeks to safeguard national interests without committing to any of the major powers. This trend is part of a wider global shift: the rise of regional middle powers in Africa, Asia, and Latin America that are increasingly able to chart an independent course, no longer compelled into automatic alignment with Washington, Moscow, Beijing, or Brussels.

See the interview with Ivan Kłyszcz in this report.

For Russia, active non-alignment by governments of the Global Majority means that it can no longer take for granted that historical memory, combined with Moscow's long-standing rhetoric of anti-Western solidarity, will translate into diplomatic loyalty. Few of these governments followed Moscow in voting against subsequent UNGA resolutions demanding Russia's withdrawal from Ukraine; they either voted in favour or abstained. And while countries of the Global Majority have generally refrained from joining the G7-led sanctions regime against Russia, their stance has been driven less by ideological sympathy and more by pragmatic concerns, including economic interdependence and energy security.

For Ukraine, therefore, active non-alignment by the Global Majority creates diplomatic openings. Ukraine's history of imperial domination by Russia and its principled resistance today give it the credibility to engage with the Global Majority on equal terms, something much of Europe has yet to achieve.

Kyiv's diplomats are also getting better at finding the right words. Kłyszcz notes that while Ukrainian officials often frame the war as a colonial conflict – Russia's attempt to "recolonise" Ukraine – they tread carefully when speaking to audiences in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. They have learnt, sometimes the hard way, that drawing direct parallels risks alienating partners who interpret colonial legacies through their own experiences and do not readily accept that Europeans can be victims rather than perpetrators of colonialism. Instead, successful engagement may lie less in rhetoric and more in finding shared interests, building trust, and investing in long-term partnerships, from education to cultural exchange.

Humanising narratives may do more than formal declarations or definitions of colonialism.

Cultural diplomacy, academic exchanges, and multi-faith dialogues are key tools in this bridge-building because they enable storytelling. "It's easier for them to understand us through stories," says Liubov Abravitova, who until recently served as Ukraine's ambassador to South Africa.[6] Humanising narratives may do more than formal declarations or definitions of colonialism. Ukrainian officials and civil society actors have also shown agility in tailoring these narratives to the local historical memory of partner countries, often framing the resistance against Russian aggression not only in geopolitical terms but as part of a universal struggle against oppression and extractivism.

New partnerships

The development of Ukraine's Africa strategy illustrates a shift toward partnership-oriented diplomacy grounded in concrete diplomatic presence and policy prioritisation rather than declaratory engagement alone. Since 2022, Ukraine has significantly expanded its diplomatic footprint, reopening and strengthening embassies and accrediting ambassadors across Africa, despite severe wartime constraints. This expansion matters: diplomacy is relational, and trust builds up through frequent interaction.

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Ukraine's decision to invest in a permanent presence signals long-term commitment rather than episodic outreach. Rather than positioning Africa solely as a source of political support, the strategy reflects an effort to align Ukraine's engagement with the expressed priorities of African partners, including education, skills development, technology cooperation, and climate resilience. The publication of a follow-up communication strategy for Africa in 2024 marked another step toward formalising and deepening diplomatic engagement beyond short-term wartime imperatives.[7]

A central pillar of Ukraine's strategy is investment in education, expertise development, and the training of diplomats to establish long-term, resilient partnerships. By fostering academic programmes and cultivating a professional diplomatic and business community, Ukraine aims to build durable relationships grounded in mutual respect and shared values, which are crucial for counterbalancing Moscow's influence in Africa. Importantly, this approach is explicitly not extractive: rather than pushing for resource access or market dominance, Ukraine frames cooperation around joint capacity building, agricultural resilience, and post-conflict reconstruction – expertise areas in which it can contribute meaningfully while also learning from African partners. Such investments reflect an understanding often lost in contemporary European diplomacy: trade and investment frameworks such as Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA) and Global Gateway are no substitute for diplomacy. Ukraine's emphasis on education partnerships, agricultural cooperation, and post-conflict reconstruction expertise demonstrates a values-based but interest-aware model of engagement. This is particularly visible in food security cooperation, where Ukraine frames itself not as a donor but as a co-producer of resilience. Ukraine's wartime diplomacy in Latin America and the Caribbean reflects similar pragmatism. As documented by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI),[8] Kyiv has tailored its engagement to regional priorities despite limited diplomatic infrastructure, focusing on food security, energy cooperation, and maritime logistics. Sector-specific engagement, from renewable energy dialogue in Chile to port modernisation and demining cooperation with Colombia, illustrates how Ukraine anchors diplomacy in mutual interests rather than symbolic alignment. This continuity across regions reinforces the argument that Ukraine is not improvising diplomacy but developing a coherent, practice-based foreign policy under extreme pressure.

A notable adaptation in Ukraine's outreach has been its effective use of triangular cooperation, long familiar in South–South frameworks. What is new is Ukraine's role within these formats: acting not as a donor or recipient but as an implementing and agenda-setting partner in the geographic North with direct operational experience. Examples such as Ukraine–Kenya–EU agricultural resilience cooperation and Ukraine–Brazil–Spain demining initiatives illustrate how Kyiv positions itself as a connector and co-architect. These arrangements break down the binary of "the West versus the Rest" and offer a model of diplomacy rooted in shared problem-solving rather than hierarchy.

Values and interests

Values matter in geopolitics. Democracies have expressed stronger support for Ukraine than autocracies, though notable exceptions remain where strategic or historical ties with Russia prevail, such as India. Some democracies of the Global Majority have provided tangible support, exemplified by Colombia's deployment of a demining team to Ukraine. Such contributions, though small in scale, often carry outsized symbolic value, demonstrating that solidarity does not have to mean the provision of military aid. It can

also manifest in technical expertise, cultural exchange, and humanitarian partnership.

The varied nature of these responses underscores a reality Ukraine is learning to navigate: solidarity is rarely monolithic, and building coalitions often means working within a spectrum of partial agreements and overlapping interests rather than relying on binary alignments. For instance, while Kenya vocally supported Ukraine's territorial integrity at the UN, it simultaneously maintained agricultural trade with Russia;[9] Türkiye supplied Bayraktar drones to Ukraine but resisted joining Western sanctions;[10] and India expanded humanitarian aid to Kyiv while deepening energy imports from Moscow.[11] These "partial solidarities" require a diplomatic mindset that is values-driven yet pragmatic, capable of sustaining engagement without demanding absolute alignment in relations with the Global Majority.

In this context, Ukraine's diplomacy offers an instructive contrast to much of Western engagement with the majority world. While European states remain heavily invested in aid and trade, in the areas of development and cultural cooperation, they have often lost clarity on the strategic purpose of these tools, allowing diplomacy to become fragmented across trade, development, and security silos. Ukraine, by contrast, has been forced to integrate values and interests under existential pressure. It treats diplomacy not as a moral posture but as a survival strategy.

With uncertainty looming over the US commitment to European security, Ukraine has become a litmus test for Europe's capacity to act with strategic autonomy. The stakes are existential: sovereignty, security, and solidarity can no longer be subcontracted across the Atlantic. In this context, Ukraine's diplomatic style – less encumbered by colonial baggage and more grounded in mutual vulnerability – offers Western Europe an example of how to rebuild geopolitical credibility: not by abandoning values, but by reconnecting them to concrete diplomatic practice.

Rethinking EU diplomacy

Diplomacy rarely yields immediate results; it is a long and grinding exercise. European policymakers, therefore, would do well to enhance support for Ukraine's Global Majority engagement. This means scaling up resources for education, diplomatic training, and business exchanges that allow Ukraine to develop sustained expertise beyond immediate wartime needs. While the EU aims to integrate Ukraine and pursue more unified diplomatic strategies, member states continue to maintain their own embassies, diplomats, and networks. Investing in Ukraine's long-term networks, language skills, and institutional knowledge is thus not about creating a parallel diplomacy but about ensuring Ukraine becomes a resilient and convincing actor within European and global foreign policy.

All EU member states have a role to play in supporting Ukraine's diplomatic outreach, but those without colonial legacies, such as Poland and the Baltic states, can offer added value. Their historical position gives them moral credibility when engaging countries of the Global Majority, while their proximity to Ukraine allows for close cooperation. By sharing diplomatic infrastructure, co-developing triangular cooperation projects, and amplifying Ukraine's voice within multilateral forums, these states can help extend Ukraine's reach in ways that larger Western powers may struggle to achieve.

At the EU level, internal coherence remains the weakest link. Persistent national vetoes, including Hungary's obstruction of Ukraine-related decisions, undermine the Union's strategic credibility. Overcoming these blockages is essential not only to

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support Ukraine but also to enable Europe to project itself as a reliable geopolitical actor. If Ukraine receives the military support it needs to stop Russia's aggression, Europe will gain its most capable armed force – a decisive asset for continental security.

The constant threat of national vetoes was also a contributing factor in the EU's shamefully inadequate response to Israel's genocidal violence in Gaza. European inaction has damaged Ukraine's cause. For example, within the majority world and beyond, many wonder why Russia has been suspended from most international sporting competitions while Israel has not. Moscow's envoys have cleverly exploited this contradiction, which has led to Russia being welcomed back to international Paralympic events, complete with flag, anthem, and army veterans injured while killing Ukrainians. This was a painful diplomatic setback for Kyiv.[12] Restoring trust requires consistency: values cannot be applied selectively without eroding their force.

At the intellectual level, there is much to be gained from facilitating an inclusive dialogue between European "neo-idealists", who focus on defending democracies against autocratic powers, and representatives of the Global Majority who advocate against neo-colonial ideas and practices. The latter group includes civil society leaders, environmental justice and human rights activists, spokespeople for feminist movements, and scholars of decolonial thought. Unlike many of their governments, they stand for the democratic ideals and actions that are so dear to neo-idealists. Building such partnerships will require humility from Western actors, acknowledging where their own approaches have alienated potential allies, and a willingness to learn from Ukraine's example of narrative reframing and partnership-building rooted in shared historical struggles.

Finally, Europe must rethink diplomacy as an expression of its societal model. Ukraine's experience highlights the inseparability of environmental sustainability, social justice, and security. Supporting Ukraine's green reconstruction, decentralised energy systems, climate-resilient infrastructure, and community-led recovery is not only an act of solidarity but also an opportunity for Europe to project a future-oriented model of governance. In a polycentric world, diplomacy must not merely articulate what Europe opposes – it must express what kind of world it seeks to build.

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Values, What Values?

The Potential for a Green Neo-Idealism in the Visegrád Region

Essay by
Petr Kutílek &
Pavlína Janebová

Most Visegrád Group governments have traded values-based foreign policies for pragmatic transactionalism. This presents an opportunity for Greens in Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland to become the standard-bearers of a new idealism, based on a broad notion of security and resilience.

The start of the full-scale Russian war against Ukraine was a turning point for Europe in many ways. Among others, it was claimed to herald a new type of foreign policy. Many observers – not least security policy expert Benjamin Tallis in his seminal 2023 essay[1] – have praised politicians in Central and Eastern Europe for their prescience on European security threats and commitment to promoting human rights and democratic values in their foreign policies. This was seen in contrast to their Western counterparts, who for a long time downplayed the threat posed by Russia and the authoritarian nature of the Putin regime in favour of economic cooperation. But to what extent do these observations actually align with the foreign policies of the four Central European states that form the Visegrád Group? And can the principles mentioned above be usefully integrated into a Green or progressive foreign policy approach?

Neo-idealism or wishful thinking

When the Visegrád Four (V4) countries joined the EU and NATO more than two decades ago, this was expected to increase integration and convergence between Western and Eastern Europe – in terms of economies and living standards but also value systems. In several instances, this assumption remained unfulfilled. Besides the apparent inability of the "new" member states to fully catch up to their Western counterparts economically, a serious divide became apparent in relation to the 2015 migration crisis.[2] Reflecting on these developments, political scientists Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes presented their influential metaphor of Western liberal democracy being "the light that failed" – an example that the post-totalitarian societies once intended to follow but that lost much of its appeal over time.[3] Instead, Poland, in previous years, and especially Hungary departed from the principles of liberal

democracy, with Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán loudly proclaiming his country – and the entire V4 – to be the authentic future of Europe as opposed to the decadent West. In the eyes of Western Europe's liberal political elites, Central and Eastern Europe remained a European periphery.

Russia's all-out war against Ukraine provoked a sea change in these views. The situation in Hungary notwithstanding, the V4 governments – and, crucially, their societies – were quick to welcome Ukrainians displaced by Russian aggression. What's more, their long-term fears of Russian expansionism appeared to be proven justified. Western Europeans' mea culpa came to expression in a speech by French president Emmanuel Macron in 2023: "[E]ven after Slovakia and many other countries joined the Union, we did not always hear the voices you brought, calling for recognition of your painful memories and history. Some told you then that you were missing opportunities to keep quiet – but I believe we sometimes missed opportunities to listen. That time is over, and today, those voices must be all our voices."[4] Once again, the V4 and other Central and Eastern European countries were congratulated on their commitment to freedom and democracy. This even led to prophecies about the "European centre of gravity" shifting eastwards.

But was this moment truly an expression of a new wave of idealism, a "neo-idealism", or rather simply an example of "small country realism" in the face of an existential threat? Wasn't this emphasis on values just a "by-product" of implementing V4's vital security interests, given that in other contexts (Middle East, Africa), some of the V4 chief "neo-idealists" remained indifferent?

The V4's foreign policy agenda

A comparison of the V4 states' official foreign policy documents reveals a clear difference between Czechia and Poland on the one hand and Hungary on the other.[5] While the former emphasise multilateralism, international cooperation, and values, the latter concentrates on promoting national interests.

[5] Slovakia has not issued a new official strategic document for more than a decade, despite the fact that various parties have been in power during this time.

That said, it is clear that the governments of all of these countries – small to medium in size and precariously located – think in terms of securing their national interests. With exceptions, Polish and Czech political leaders have traditionally believed that being firmly anchored in the international institutions of the geopolitical West is the best way of pursuing these interests. In their view, only international rules and the values on which they are based can ensure their prosperity and security in the face of more powerful actors. Hungary saw this in a broadly similar way until Orbán

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decided to try to have his cake and eat it too – by enjoying the advantages of EU and NATO membership and at the same time pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy built on relations with various global actors, including authoritarian ones.

Ever since the days of Czechia's first president Václav Havel, the country's foreign policy approach (as reflected in official documents) has emphasised the values of democracy, human rights, and international law. These documents also acknowledge the dependence of Czechia – as a medium-sized European state with an open economy – on functional international cooperation.[5] They reflect the changing international environment over time, with the current foreign policy framework,[6] adopted by the government of then prime minister Petr Fiala in 2025, being the most security-centred. It remains consistent with previous documents in terms of its focus on upholding and promoting values. Nevertheless, in spite of the persistent emphasis placed on Havel's human rights legacy in Czech foreign policy, the extent to which this resonates in Czech society has been the subject of debate, as has the impact of Czech arms exports on human rights.[7]

In Poland, the foreign minister's annual speech to the Sejm is considered the key guiding framework for the country's foreign policy. According to Radosław Sikorski's April 2025 address,[8] Polish foreign policy is rooted in European unity and transatlantic cooperation, defending Ukraine and deterring Russia through strength and alliances. Poland promotes a rules-based international order, a strong EU within NATO, and engagement with the Global South based on partnership and respect. Polish foreign policy values democracy, the rule of law, solidarity, and responsible leadership and aims to protect the country's independence through collective European and global action. These principles can be interpreted as neo-idealist, even though the current government led by the centre-right Civic Coalition (KO) can hardly be viewed as progressive.

Hungary's foreign policy and trade strategy, adopted in 2015,[9] emphasises the national interest, stability and security, economic strength, and competitiveness. Orbán's Fidesz government has been very active internationally on selected issues; it provides assistance to persecuted Christians worldwide and participates in conservative networks organised around traditional values (but values nonetheless) such as family and religion. However, in maintaining cordial relations with invader state Russia, including energy ties, it has demonstrated a remarkable indifference towards one of the core principles of international law: the inviolability of borders. With parliamentary elections approaching in April 2026, supporters of the two leading parties – Fidesz and Tisza – are deeply divided when it comes to the Russia-Ukraine war. Tisza voters are more likely to support Ukraine, while Fidesz voters tend to favour Russia.[10]

The foreign policy of the populist, socially conservative SMER-led government of Slovakia has also shown interest in strengthening relations with Russia. At the same time, Slovak businesses have benefitted strongly from arms exports to Ukraine. While these weapons are indeed useful to Ukraine, the broader policy certainly cannot be called neo-idealist or values-based.

Looking ahead, the Czech government, inaugurated in December 2025, will be led by the populist ANO party until 2029. ANO favours transactional pragmatism over a values-based approach. A more idealist, let alone progressive update to the country's official foreign policy stance therefore seems unlikely. In Hungary, if centre-right Tisza wins the upcoming elections, this could certainly bring a more cooperative approach.

However, the rhetoric of the party's key figures suggests that it would not guarantee a turn towards idealist values in foreign policy. In Poland, interestingly, after the success of the right-wing populist Law and Justice (PiS) candidate Karol Nawrocki in the 2025 presidential election, the governing Civic Coalition is again heading the polls thanks to Prime Minister Donald Tusk's ability to consolidate the government and demonstrate firmness vis-à-vis international developments. In Slovakia, opposition party Progressive Slovakia (PS) is currently enjoying slightly more electoral support than SMER. Elections in both countries are coming up in 2027; however, it is too early to make predictions.

A different shade of green

There is a considerable gap between the principles of neo-idealism and the reality of Visegrád states' foreign policies. However, elements of neo-idealism are aligned with and could be useful for Green and progressive movements – in the region and in Europe as a whole –, but only if domestic dynamics, as defined by the political histories and value systems, are taken into account.

Green politics in Western Europe emerged in the 1970s under specific historical and cultural conditions. It experienced highs and lows but is now a relatively stable fixture of most Western European political systems.[11] In the V4, the development of Green politics followed a different trajectory. Here, the 1970s were the time of one-party states and fairly rigid control over society. It was only during the mid-to-late 1980s that an independent environmental movement emerged in countries like Czechoslovakia and Hungary. However, translating green activism into electoral politics proved difficult. Across the region, few parties with "green" in their name enjoyed long-term electoral success, let alone had significant impact on foreign policy.

The different historical and cultural starting points of the V4 societies and their political representatives must be acknowledged.

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Green politics thus finds itself in an uneasy situation in the Visegrád region. This suggests that its positions – including on foreign policy – need to be grounded in the somewhat different historical experiences and value systems of the region's societies.

One thing that becomes obvious to any observer of the region is that post-communist Central European societies remain wary of the state intruding on people's individual liberties. This includes the European institutions in Brussels. Fears of over-regulation and social engineering, for example in relation to gender equality policies (such as mandating quotas on women's representation), are widely present and limit debate on many policy measures that are reasonably common in Western Europe. The same is true of the debate on the European Green Deal and other climate-saving measures; there is not much discussion of concepts such as "climate justice" in the region outside of the Green movement.

This impairs the prospects for Green and progressive parties. While the party systems and political realities of V4 states differ in many ways, one thing that they do share is the limited electoral success of the Green/progressive movement.

In recent years, political competition in Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia has changed due to the rise in authoritarian tendencies. Parties are increasingly divided along democratic/authoritarian or pro-Western/anti-Western lines. (The latter does not fully apply to Poland, while in Czechia, ANO is not overtly anti-Western but rather "reactive" in its foreign policy and prioritises domestic goals.) As a result, key socioeconomic themes have been depoliticised. This, together with the existential nature of political discourse ("saving democracy" or "return to democracy"), makes it more difficult for Green parties to distinguish themselves. Classic left-right competition on socioeconomic issues no longer works. Issues like affordable housing are not subject to in-depth political debate, despite voter-side demand.[12] Slovakia is something of an exception here, as Progressive Slovakia is the strongest opposition force. However, the party is not formally aligned with the Green political family.

In Czechia, the Green Party that emerged around the time of the Velvet Revolution in 1989-1990 experienced some ups but mostly downs in terms of its performance at the ballot box. The Greens (Zelení) were only truly successful at the national level for one brief term, from 2006-2010, when their leadership strove to position the party as centrist-liberal, combining the environmentalist approach with an idealist, Havelian human rights-focused foreign policy. The Greens obtained several cabinet posts as part of a centre-right coalition, including that of foreign minister for the independent but Green-nominated Karel Schwarzenberg, a former chief of staff to President Havel. This episode, marked by internal attacks from the party's left wing, ended in a self-inflicted tailspin when some Green MPs supported a motion of no confidence in the government, resulting in its fall during the 2009 Czech EU Council presidency and lasting electoral punishment for the Greens. This continued until the recent Pirate-aligned comeback.

Since its emergence in 2009, the Czech Pirate Party has largely taken over the postmaterialist/Green electorate in Czechia and has joined the Greens/EFA group in the European Parliament. It is careful to position itself in the "liberal" and "centrist" camp. Recent cooperation between the Pirate and Green parties, based on a platform that reintegrates an idealist, Havel-infused foreign policy, resulted in the return of two Green party deputies into parliament in late 2025 and does provide some hope for the future.

In Poland, the Greens made several attempts to enter the Sejm on joint left-leaning tickets, but to no avail. It was only as part of the Civic

Coalition that they finally met with success, gaining three seats in each of the two most recent elections. While the Greens are now formally part of the governing coalition, they do not hold cabinet posts, which limits their visibility and prospects for growth.

In Slovakia, there are currently no Green parties to speak of. The Slovak arm of the Green party that was established during the Velvet Revolution was briefly represented in the state parliament but splintered in 2006 without achieving electoral success at a national level. Progressive Slovakia, a party founded in 2017 whose name and indeed many policy positions suggest closeness to the Green cause, is aligned with the liberal, rather centre-right Renew group in the European Parliament.

In Hungary, Fidesz dominance over the political scene since 2010 has resulted in an essentially two-bloc party system. The two Green parties – Dialogue (Párbeszéd) and LMP – Hungary's Green Party (Magyarország Zöld Pártja) – form part of the opposition. Founded in 2009 as Hungary's first Green party, LMP's programmatic alignment with Green/progressive values has at times been questioned, eventually leading to its membership of the European Green Party being suspended. Dialogue, established by former LMP members in 2013, has become the more popular Green party. However, Green/progressive messaging has not been able to attract much voter interest. This can partly be attributed to the deformed nature of political competition, with key themes raised and framed by Fidesz and amplified by government-aligned media, but also to the inability of the party to "find the switch",[13] i.e. to convince voters of its concept of equality. Dialogue is nevertheless a strong force against Fidesz in Budapest and other cities, with party member Gergely Karácsony holding the office of the mayor of Budapest since 2019. As mayor, Karácsony has even dipped his toe into foreign policy, launching the Pact of Free Cities together with the progressive mayors of Prague, Warsaw, and Bratislava. Pact member cities, of which there are now almost 40, cooperate in areas such as urban development and climate change mitigation, as well as countering illiberal tendencies with progressive values. However, at this time – a few months before the general election –, Dialogue is polling at barely 1 per cent and LMP even lower.[14]

It is clear that, while Greens and progressives in the V4 share the broadly anti-authoritarian attitudes of their Western European counterparts, electoral success at the national level remains quite elusive, and some policy accents will necessarily be different. Generally, parties – and most importantly, electorates – tend to be less progressive – or less outspoken – on the sociocultural dimension of policy and less left-leaning on the economic dimension, than their Western European counterparts.

However, this is not to say that these parties will abandon idealist approaches to foreign policy completely. The different historical and cultural starting points of the V4 societies and their political representatives must be acknowledged. Ideally, they should serve as a source of mutual inspiration, an encouragement to develop a holistic, contextual, and – in the best meaning of the word – pragmatic approach.

A Green take on neo-idealism?

The Russian war against Ukraine and other geopolitical challenges have put pressure on some of the traditional sociocultural assumptions and foreign policy positions of Western European Green parties, especially their long-perceived – though lately modulated – pacifism. This is both a challenge and an opportunity to rethink these positions, throughout Europe.

Greens and progressives must represent their voters' interests while making a convincing argument that these are inherently linked

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with values. When doing so, they must be careful to avoid falling into either naive idealism or cynicism.

Given the domestic challenges faced by the Green/progressive movement, especially in the V4 countries, could an infusion of neo-idealist concepts broaden support and translate into practical foreign policy proposals? This certainly seems to be a path that some parties, such as the Czech Pirates and Greens, are taking. Jan Lipavský, until recently Czechia's foreign minister and one of the original poster boys for Ben Tallis's neo-idealism, has left the Pirates and instead hitched his career to the conservative ODS (Civic Democratic Party) after being accused of moral inconsistency on issues such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Pirate Party leader Zdeněk Hřib and especially Green co-chair Gabriela Svárovská, with her vast diplomatic experience, seem to have taken on the neo-idealist mantle; this move appears to have been rewarded by recent electoral successes.

See the interview with Gabriela Svárovská in this report.

Neo-idealism – being "tough" on values – resonates with the fact that, according to the Eurobarometer, international security threats are a big concern for EU citizens.[15] In the V4, "security and defence" rank among the most important issues, albeit much lower than the cost of living and economy (Polish respondents excepted).[16] Looking at Czechia in particular, foreign interference and cyberattacks are also perceived as likely threats.[17]

In this context, many parties on the right have turned to emphasising the importance of so-called traditional, conservative values for national security.[18] There are also those who consider that the EU Green Deal and the need to increase defence capabilities are mutually exclusive.[19]

The Green movement must reinvent its position on foreign and defence policy and lead on issues related to social and civic resilience.

Conservative dominance over politics in the region has also led to other forms of short-sightedness. For example, the previous Czech government – led by Fiala – failed to respond to hybrid threats during its years in power. It treated Russian propaganda as nothing new, grossly underestimating the extent to which social media enabled the Russian regime to expand the reach of its disinformation campaigns and other malign activities targeting social cohesion.

Against the backdrop of other parties' inadequate responses to these new threats, the Green movement must – and legitimately can – reinvent its position on foreign and defence policy and lead on issues related to social and civic resilience. German Greens were, after all, among the first Western European political actors to identify the threat from Putin's Russia and called for policy adjustments. And Central European Greens and progressives have led in the fight against authoritarianism.

But what would be the contours of a Green security policy, informed by the vision and experiences of both Western Europe and Central Europe?

First of all, it must acknowledge the existence of hard threats to peace, security, democracy, and human rights in Europe, in its immediate neighbourhood, and around the world. The protection of values cannot come without the presence and active service of the armed forces and loyalty between allies.

If Greens wholeheartedly recognise the importance of state security, their efforts to complement conventional defence with a human security approach will be even more credible. Under this approach, human rights and democracy promotion, as well as socio-economic and ecological security, would be mainstreamed in foreign policy, including arms export policies. Democracy promotion and development cooperation would also be better aligned, with gender equality as an explicit goal. Greens should stress that this is not about imposing "wokeness" but about fostering long-term societal resilience which, in turn, is conducive to peace.

Even in complex conflicts, such as those in the Middle East, a Green foreign policy would stick to the principles of international law and aim to protect human lives. It would support local pro-democracy activists and human rights defenders, making use of the EU's toolbox. Overall, this would be a key dimension of a more assertive idealism that promotes values actively, not passively, and which takes all of the available tools into consideration.

Domestically, comprehensive security translates into whole-of-society resilience. Greens often emphasise that the roll-out of renewables increases resilience to geopolitical shocks. But they could stress more emphatically that social cohesion is also indispensable for overall security and call out the oligarchic domination of significant parts of the policy debate. The socioeconomic dimension of politics should be restored to its rightful place in the public debate, certainly in the V4.

Conclusion

It may not be necessary, or even possible, to develop a perfect, holistic foreign policy based solely on values and ideals, that is free of contradictions. Neo-idealism rightly stresses that our values are also our core interests, but there are and always will be trade-offs. This should not be seen as a deal-breaker. We must, however, be honest about how much certain principles are valued and how far we are able – and willing – to go to defend them in a particular context. What differentiates a Green or progressive foreign and security policy from a cynical, realist one is its commitment to going the extra mile here.

Overall, in the current geopolitical climate, we must acknowledge the need to maintain

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an idealistic, values-based strand within foreign policy. Implementing the tried-and-tested values of human rights and democracy leads to thriving societies and, consequently, a peaceful international environment. The alternative is major power competition in an increasingly polarised world. While challenges of authoritarianism will continue to haunt the political landscape in all corners of Europe, especially in the Visegrád region, it is the responsibility of principled policy makers everywhere to prevent a return of cynical realism in full force.

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Defence as a Commons

The Estonian Example

Essay by
Maiko Mathiesen,
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Already a European leader in conventional defence, Estonia is also making progress in strengthening its broader resilience to geopolitical and ecological shocks. Examples include the integration of voluntary organisations and local governments into both military and civil defence and the fostering of community-based crisis preparedness. But the country still has work to do, from increasing trust and participation to redistributing resources, before defence can truly be called a shared resource or "commons".

In the area of defence, Estonia is exemplary in many ways. Upon regaining independence during the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the country introduced mandatory military service. It has among the highest per capita defence spending in Europe. It is a valued member of NATO and a committed ally of Ukraine.[1] Especially in the field of cybersecurity, Estonia has become a producer – not just a consumer – of security.[2] It takes the stockpiling of resources such as food and fuel very seriously, in order to ready itself for supply chain disruptions.[3] And some of its political leaders, notably Kaja Kallas – the former prime minister who is now the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy – have distinguished themselves on the international stage as advocates of a "neo-idealist" foreign and security policy that is both values-based and tough-minded.

See the essay "Realism Failed – It's Time for a New Idealism" in this report.

But in order to boost societal resilience and mitigate today's threats – from climate change and health emergencies to geopolitical conflict –, security should be understood more broadly. In addition to military, supply, and cybersecurity, it must encompass internal safety and law enforcement, societal morale and cohesion, trust in state institutions, and economic wellbeing. Every aspect of society – whether social, political, environmental, or economic – impacts the population's overall sense of security and unity. Within Estonia, the state, municipality, and community levels each have a key role to play in building wide-ranging resilience and cooperation. While the country offers some inspiring examples here, the picture remains mixed.

This essay draws on interviews with Estonian experts, public panels, and workshops, carried out during 2025.

State level

The state should be the key agent in providing the framework for a resilient society. It establishes infrastructure, coordination mechanisms, and trusted institutions that allow communities to organise effectively in times of stress. It also works to ensure

that basic services – such as electricity, fuel, communications, and medical care – remain available in the event of a crisis. While service providers may be private companies, ministries set specific requirements. Without legislation and political prioritisation, agencies cannot act, and funding cannot be allocated. The impetus must come "from the top".[4] General crisis communication is also handled at the national level.

The state also has an important role to play in fostering healthy societies – a key condition for resilience against threats. In such societies, people are in good physical and mental health and enjoy supportive social connections and interactions.[5] State-sponsored sports and cultural activities (e.g. theatres, museums, libraries, dance groups, and choirs) can make a significant contribution to fostering social cohesion, facilitating community-building, and supporting individual wellbeing.[6] The state should also ensure that people have sufficient time and money to engage in activities that connect them with others in their neighbourhood.

Furthermore, each member of society needs to feel that they have something to gain from contributing. To ensure this, the state should make their contribution meaningful, targeted, and organised. In building a framework of volunteer-based defence and crisis management organisations – in the form of the Defence League (Kaitseliit) and the Women's Voluntary Defence Organisation (Naiskodukaitse, WVDO) – Estonia sets an example here. These organisations, of which more than 2 per cent of the Estonian population are members, bring together people of all ages from across the country for routine crisis and military training as well as community service. Their activities range from life-saving first aid, marksmanship, field training, and drone piloting to organising sports events and leadership training. The Defence League and the WVDO play a vital role in community development and resilience-building. Even a single household member, by actively sharing the knowledge they have acquired within these organisations, can significantly improve an entire community's crisis preparedness.

Another valuable contribution made by the WVDO in particular is the tackling of dominant gender stereotypes. This helps establish a "whole-of-society" approach to defence and resilience. WVDO chair Airi Tooming notes that its 4,000 members "know how to shoot a gun, follow military skills courses, and take part in military exercises. Many of them are mothers and therefore role models for their children. I would argue that these children grow up with a very different understanding of gender roles than previous generations."

See the interview with Ilmar Tamm and Airi Tooming in this report.

The skills girls and women learn in military and civil defence training are highly useful for society – especially important in countries with small populations, where every resident counts – and also build personal resilience.

A further move in this direction would be to extend military service to a broader demographic by making it compulsory for both men and women and by allowing conscripts

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to choose between combat and support roles. A conscription policy that goes against dominant gender stereotypes would not only increase the number of helping hands – with the added benefit that many women may be physically and mentally better suited for military roles than some men – but also extend freedom of choice, allowing individuals to accept a non-military role in the war effort if it suited them better.[7]

Ultimately, bottom-up resilience boils down to citizens' trust in the state and its systems. This doesn't come from nowhere. Democratic states should aim to avoid societal polarisation and alienation, which are on the rise around the world. Increasing numbers of people distrust social and state institutions – 59 per cent of Estonians trust neither the government nor parliament[8] – and are only loosely connected to the communities around them. As a result, they are more likely to fall for populist propaganda. The state can counteract these developments through redistributive measures (fair tax policies and quality basic services), inclusive policymaking, and transparent decision-making. Socio-economic equality fosters social cohesion and democratic governance.[9]

On this note, the Estonian government's recent decision to allocate funding to defence by increasing VAT from 22 to 24 per cent (one of the highest rates in the EU) has proved a heavy burden on the lower and middle classes, who are struggling to make ends meet in an inflationary economy.[9] These kinds of political choices work against strengthening societal resilience. An equitable tax policy would require those who profit the most from a country's natural, intellectual, and cultural resources to contribute the most to defending them. Solutions range from windfall and property taxes to making the income tax rates more progressive.

[9] Estonia's average annual inflation rate (consumer prices) in 2022-2024 was 10.7 per cent.

Investing in community is not just a moral imperative; it's a matter of national security and wellbeing.

Municipal level

Local government bodies, which act as a link between the state and self-organised communities, play an important role in increasing resilience. Their knowledge of local circumstances is particularly vital here. It is for this reason that local government has been integrated into the Estonian National Defence Development Plan.[10] Its task is to contribute to national defence, together with the local sections of the Defence League, and to develop evacuation plans in cooperation with the WVDO. Municipalities decide on evacuation locations, while organisations such as WVDO prepare and manage the sites. Members of voluntary organisations are often embedded in municipal crisis committees, illustrating how formal authority and civic capacity are intertwined.

Local government can also make a real contribution to strengthening community resilience. For instance, Estonia's municipalities, in collaboration with the Estonian Rescue Services Agency (Päästeamet, ERSA), have started offering free public courses on crisis preparedness, covering basic first aid, general information on dealing with crisis situations, stockpiling, sheltering, and evacuation. These courses intend to disseminate knowledge through "multipliers" – one person from each apartment complex shall bring the know-how back to their community. Hence, the government doesn't have to reach each individual separately, and instead, an apartment building's residents' meeting can become the first step in crisis preparedness. Case in point: nearly 200 apartment communities have recently acquired, with funding from ERSA, backup diesel generators to secure local water circulation from central heating during power outages.[11]

Mobilisation and participation rely on voluntary leadership and social ties. Rather than attempting to "create" these cohesive communities, local government increasingly functions as the enabler of bottom-up resilience-building by supporting local organisers and community leaders. For example, according to Priit Saar, deputy director of the Security and National Defence Coordination Office, some villages and small towns in Southern Estonia have been exemplary at developing community-level crisis plans on the basis of training and advice from ERSA.

Another key policy area involves investing in local infrastructure, notably resilience centres (kerksuskeskused), which are able to provide assistance in the event of an emergency, for instance in the form of information, drinking water, electricity, accommodation, first aid, and psychosocial help. Schools, sports centres, libraries, and other municipal buildings are often earmarked for this purpose and can be quickly converted. At present, around 300 resilience centres are either in operation or under preparation in Estonia. The concept of these centres is being introduced into Estonian society; the buildings are marked with signs, and their addresses are listed in municipal newsletters. Apartment complexes and neighbourhoods should ideally assign a representative to share information with their dedicated centre. This would help build closer-knit communities and reduce stress and worry among individuals. The establishment of resilience centres also invites cooperation between smaller local authorities and communities. Resources that residents pledge to make available in the event of a crisis – such as power tools, electricity generators, and emergency accommodation – would not need to be secured with public funds.

Local governments across Estonia struggle to organise initiatives that bring people together and build links between communities, such as craft activities, book clubs, sports events, etc. This is partially because of a lack of national government funding. Despite this, there are success stories. In Tallinn, for instance, the city funds over 100 community gardens operating around the capital.[12] All residents have access to a plot to cultivate. In addition to

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bringing people together around an outdoor activity to build community, these gardens also expand participants' knowledge of horticulture, food security, and self-sufficiency, which contributes to crisis preparedness.

Community level

Communities play a central role in coping with any crisis, be it natural or man-made. Governments should thus actively support community-building efforts to strengthen societal resilience.

Rural Estonia is relatively crisis-resilient. Many people in rural areas live in private homes scattered across the land and possess the basic necessities to sustain life for some time. Most rural homes have wood-fired stoves, wells for drinking water (albeit mostly powered by electricity), and substantial stocks of food, often homegrown, kept in cellars or pantries. But even in rural Estonia, inhabitants cannot rely solely on their own resources indefinitely. There will come a time when these are exhausted, or when something breaks (down) that cannot easily be repaired. This is when family and/or community come into play. For example, when the well water of a family living in the northern Estonian village of Valkla was polluted with farm run-off – a small-scale environmental emergency –, neighbours provided them with clean drinking water. This arrangement lasted for several years. And in 2019, when Southeast Estonia was hit by a storm that knocked out power supplies, families that were unable to cook at home were assisted by fellow villagers, who opened soup kitchens.[13]

The longer the crisis, the more important community becomes. Smaller communities in rural Estonia have strong social networks, and it is almost a given that neighbours or fellow villagers will provide help when requested. However, people are often reluctant to ask for help because they don't want to bother others or feel indebted.[14]

Overemphasising individual resilience is not just misguided; it can be harmful. If crisis readiness is conceived as an individual rather than a communal task, there is a risk that people will start to fear one another in times of crisis.[15] Lack of cohesion tends to foster hostility and marginalisation, reducing resilience and increasing the likelihood of social fragmentation.[16]

Because national governments' actions can, at times, be polarising or inadequate, promoting local trust-building networks is one of the most effective ways to improve community response capacity. Ultimately, community is the most available and effective scale at which to intervene in human systems,[17] and this is where crisis-preparedness training can be implemented. Research indicates that people who can relate to each other are more likely to share resources and information on threats and act collectively.[18] Community support reduces psychological strain; people feel reassured when they know there is someone in the community who can help.[19] In short, investing in community is not just a moral imperative; it's a matter of national security and wellbeing.

This holds all the more true for larger towns in Estonia, where the social fabric tends to be weaker than in the countryside, especially in large apartment buildings with tens or hundreds of units. In these isolated "honeycomb cells", residents don't usually know each other and rarely greet each other. There are exceptions, where activists have forged ties between people. To this end, the government funds training for community leaders.[20]

But how can these community leaders build cohesion? Experts stress the need for activities with a low barrier to entry that bring people together, such as the community gardens mentioned above, local repair shops, or shared food events.[21] Kopli 93, a community centre in Tallinn funded by the city, is an inspiring example.[22] There, participants

learn how to plant and grow food and organise events. Kopli 93 also has a repair shop where members of the public can work on their own projects, including repairing or building furniture, with the help of a supervisor. These kinds of activities create valuable social contacts, also across ethnic boundaries (e.g. between Estonians and Russians).

Another example of bridging ethnic divides comes from the Estonian Defence League's youth organisation, which began allowing foreigners to join in 2015. EDL commander Ilmar Tamm describes their experience in Narva, a majority Russian-speaking town, where "only a handful of young people were interested in national defence at first. Today, there are several hundred. They are motivated not so much by patriotism as by other passions, including the desire to have a community of friends to socialise with."

See the interview with Ilmar Tamm and Airi Tooming in this report.

Conclusion

In the context of the ecological crisis and an unstable world order, societal resilience and cooperation at every level are essential. While it is the personal responsibility of every individual and household to be prepared for the worst – as set out in the resilience checklist in the box on the right –, citizens' resilience is closely tied to the resources that are made available to them via the broader framework of community and by local and national governments.

The Estonian example demonstrates success in cultivating a certain level of confidence in the state and in integrating volunteer organisations and local governments into both military and civil defence. However, the country clearly has work to do to further increase trust, boost participation, and redistribute resources, including wealth. The neo-idealism that Estonian leaders promote on the world stage would be better

Resilience Checklist for Individuals and Households

To turn a community or country into a "swarm of bees" that can endure any weather and repel any aggressor, most of its members must be "givers" as opposed to "needers".[23] In terms of individual and/or household preparedness, this means:

- Knowing what to do in the event of a crisis, including tools to manage fear and anxiety.
- Stockpiling sufficient resources, including water, medication, food, and hygiene products, to be self-sufficient for at least 7 days.
- Developing a shelter/evacuation plan and knowing the location of the nearest public shelter or resilience centre.
- Maintaining good relationships with others in the local area.
- Identifying those in the community who hold supplies (e.g. food, tools, power generators, fuel, water) and/or possess important skills, and those who are most in need of help.
- Developing survival and first aid skills.
- Maintaining good health and fitness; this is especially important to ensure survival under harsh conditions (extreme cold or heat).
- Being up to date on trustworthy communication channels and technology, and being capable of using them.
- Preparing to take on a volunteer role in a crisis – or better yet, in everyday life.

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anchored in society if it were coupled with greater efforts to strengthen democracy and equality at home.

Ultimately, to create a resilient population, every individual must feel included and empowered as part of a larger whole. Redefining defence as one of the commons – "a broad set of resources, natural and cultural, that are shared by many people"[24] – would help to achieve this. In demanding shared responsibility, participation, and communication across all layers, this approach would help create resilient societies that are built upon cooperation at every level. Without this societal resilience, crises will become even more dangerous and costly. It must therefore be a requirement, not a second thought.

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Interviews

Preparing for Zero Hour

Values and Geopolitics in Latvia and Lithuania

Interview with **Justīne Panteļējeva** & **Tomas Tomilinas** by **Richard Wouters**

Are values a luxury to be cast aside when your country is under threat of invasion, or is values-based politics part of building resilience? Two Baltic Green politicians discuss their parties' contribution to crisis preparedness and call for European solidarity.

Richard Wouters: Both your parties entered national government after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The Baltic region might well be Putin's next target. Under these conditions, is it possible to put a progressive and Green mark on policies?

Justīne Panteļējeva: The main motivation for my party, the Progressives, to join the Latvian government in 2023 was to ensure the passing of a civil partnership law granting rights to same-sex couples and the ratification of the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. To me, it's obvious that these types of measures lead to a more inclusive society, which in turn strengthens social resilience in times of crisis. Yet we only managed to get the bills through a mostly conservative parliament because we had insisted on including them in the coalition agreement.

We have done a good job in supporting middle- and lower-middle-class households by making the tax system more progressive. 95 per cent of working people now pay lower income tax. This wasn't easy in the context of war in Europe and increased defence spending, but reducing inequality makes Latvian society stronger.

Strengthening our defence and supporting Ukraine are this government's top priorities. Not only do we Progressives support these aims, we also provide the defence minister responsible for the implementation of policies to achieve them. In the coming years, the government aims to ramp up defence spending from the current level of 3.7 per cent of GDP to 5 per cent. That will be a tough debate. My party will stress the need for a balance between spending on defence and funding for social security, education, and healthcare.

As well as holding the defence portfolio, the Progressives also head the transport and culture ministries. Culture in particular is highly relevant for societal resilience, as it deals with media independence and media literacy. In an age where disinformation is a tool of war, people need to be able to read with a critical eye. Our culture minister is also strengthening the protection of cultural heritage, using lessons learned from Ukraine. One of the first things an invader wants to

do is to destroy the culture of the country it has invaded. Without culture, you don't have a shared sense of who you are as a nation. Preserving your culture – from books to monuments – allows you to fight back.

Tomas Tomilinas: My party, Democrats for Lithuania (DSVL), has only been in government since December 2024, so I can't yet present a list of our achievements as a governing party. But around 80 per cent of our manifesto has been integrated into the government's four-year programme. One of our two ministers heads the ministry of energy; their work focuses on the development of renewables, for the sake of both climate protection and energy security.

For me, one of the major topics at present is tax reform. We are learning from our Latvian friends on this. Our aim is to play a leading role in the tax debate, and I think we can do so because we're not afraid to say "tax the rich". Now that we will have to spend so much more money on defence – our government is aiming for 5.5 per cent of GDP by 2030 – wealthy people will need to make a bigger contribution.

Even when DSVL was in opposition, we were able to have an impact. During the Covid-19 pandemic, which required rapid decision-making, we strengthened parliamentary oversight of the government's use of emergency powers. In times of crisis, democracy must not be switched off. We also campaigned for the EU's Nature Restoration Law; as a result, the Lithuanian position changed from "against" to "for". That was crucial for its final adoption by the EU Council of Ministers.

Your countries have brought back compulsory military service in response to the Russian threat. Has that generated a lot of debate?

Justīne Panteļējeva: It did when the decision was taken in 2022. Many young people are unhappy with this move, but most feel that it's necessary. You now see young men who have completed their military service taking on permanent jobs in the armed forces. This is reassuring. Conscription is like the imaginary monster under the bed: in reality, it ends up being just fine. Moreover, those who don't want to take up arms can opt for alternative civilian service. Military service is only compulsory for men, but our minister of defence is now looking into conscription for women, too.

Trump coming back into power, the way he bullied Zelenskyy in the White House: these events were a cold shower for Latvians. They galvanised support for strong national defence, including conscription. At the same time, people are talking to their relatives about what to do when *X stunda* (zero hour) comes – when Russia invades. Should they try to escape, hide, or resist?

Tomas Tomilinas: Zero hour is definitely being talked about in Lithuania as well. Conscription is no longer controversial. We already reinstated it in 2015, after the first Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Governments in Western and Southern Europe have long been deaf to warnings from the Baltic region of Russia's imperialist ambitions. According to Toomas Hendrik Ilves, the former president of Estonia, this was because they saw the Baltic states as second-class EU and NATO members – countries that were only reluctantly admitted and then had to keep quiet. Do you agree?

Tomas Tomilinas: Let me first stress what a great achievement it was for us to join the EU and NATO in 2004. At the time, I thought it was just a matter of fulfilling the criteria for membership. Now I realise that it was a historic event, a once-in-a-century opportunity

that we seized. Ukraine did not get that chance, and you see what happened. Yes, we felt the frustration of not being listened to, but that is less so now. We are quite active within the European foreign policy debate.

Justīne Panteļējeva: Even though we might have been seen as second class, we had politicians who commanded respect. At the time we joined the EU and NATO, we had a wonderful president in Latvia, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, who was a figurehead for all Baltic countries. There was a ceiling, but it was possible for a strong and courageous leader to break through it and voice our perspective. Kaja Kallas, as prime minister of Estonia, did so too, in a powerful and uncompromising way. It landed her the job of EU foreign policy chief. That's a big win for the Baltic states.

Tomas Tomilinas: Kallas is certainly important for us, but her post is not yet fully functional. Because of its weak institutional set-up, with veto rights for every member state, the EU doesn't have an effective common foreign policy. Without this, how can there be a European defence policy? The Baltic states have traditionally opposed EU federalisation for fear of it undermining the power of small countries. Now that we need a strong Europe more than ever, it is really time to rethink that position.

Are Western and Southern Europe starting to learn lessons from the Baltics?

Justīne Panteļējeva: First of all, I think it's important to say that we in Central and Eastern Europe have learned a few things ourselves from Southern Europe since the Ukrainian refugee crisis and the weaponisation of migrants on the Belarusian border. We are facing the same tough political realities as our southern EU partners and may also need additional support with our border situations. We can all learn from each other; it's not a one-way street.

That said, it does feel like we live in two different Europes when it comes to defence. Right now, while northern and eastern member states are arming themselves to defend Europe, those in the south still haven't understood the urgency of the situation, or so it seems. We need to have more conversations. I would like to tell our southern partners, including Greens and the Left, that we are preparing to defend not only ourselves but all of Europe. If we don't manage to understand each other's realities, we are playing into Putin's hands. He's definitely trying to divide Europe.

If you were given a few minutes to address the congress of a party like Sumar in Spain or Europa Verde in Italy, what would you say to them?

Tomas Tomilinas: I would tell the story of old grandmother Europe, who is close to death. To revive her, and ourselves, to keep our civilisation alive, we need new stories – romantic stories that can unite us. Right now, the historic challenge is to defend Ukraine. And we can only rise to this challenge if we no longer see ourselves as mere nation states. Most nation states are easy prey for aggressive autocrats, oligarchs, and multinational corporations. At the very least, we need to be a strong coalition of states. We need to stick together in the face of Putin, Trump, Musk, and the like. And we should allow more countries to join, so we become even stronger. That is what's unique about the EU: you can expand it without hurting anyone. Look at the accession of Central and Eastern European countries: it's a good story, and it underpins the solid support for the EU here in the Baltics. Let's create more of those success stories.

Justīne Panteļējeva: I'm less of a romanticist than Tomas. For a long time, at least in Latvia, talk of European solidarity and the common striving for democracy was dismissed as empty words from Brussels. Instead of daydreaming about Europe, we

needed to pave our roads and tackle the glaring inequalities in our societies. But the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine dramatically changed that. Suddenly, we are mentally, emotionally and financially committed to people we've never met, in a country we've probably never visited, and we are doing everything we can for them. Because they are fighting for what we stand for. I like to think that is something very European. Only now do we feel that we are not alone but part of something greater: the project of Europe.

Is this an expression of the "neo-idealism" that security analyst Benjamin Tallis sees emerging in Central and Eastern Europe? An approach to geopolitics grounded in the power of values such as democracy, human rights, and the right to self-determination, by his definition.

Tomas Tomilinas: I like the concept of neo-idealism, even though it's quite academic. We know it as values-based foreign policy. In many ways, Lithuania is representative of this approach, especially when it comes to Russia and Ukraine. Other foreign policy issues get more easily caught up in political disputes. We might disagree on the values we wish to defend or the sacrifices we are willing to make. For example, our previous government incurred the wrath of autocratic China because it sought rapprochement with democratic Taiwan. I was a fan of this policy, but it was fiercely contested.

Justīne Panteļējeva: I think the rise of populists and outright autocrats calls for a new idealism, as an antidote. Populists and autocrats diminish the role of truth and facts. They exploit and fuel cynicism, detachment from society, in order to create a system that first and foremost benefits themselves. People who refuse to fall for their lies and hatred will be attracted to leaders – not necessarily politicians – who demonstrate bravery, who break through apathy, who create and facilitate hope. Centrist politics will be less in demand.

In my day-to-day politics, there is little room for new ideals. But if I take a step back and think about where we are and what we're going to see over the next few years, about what we as Green and progressive parties should really prioritise, I also come to the conclusion that we need to offer idealistic leadership to citizens. We need leaders who are able to both take on the populists and autocrats and bring people together around bold ideas.

Tomas, you call yourself the only "degrowther" in the Lithuanian parliament. Can degrowth be reconciled with neo-idealism?

Tomas Tomilinas: One of the possible reasons why Europe struggles to unite against autocrats and oligarchs might be our prioritisation of material wealth over the values that constitute our common historical legacy. We must also realise that most future conflicts and wars will be over natural resources. This should force us to rethink our production and consumption and work for a global system that distributes these resources in an equitable way. We could still have a thriving economy if we developed public and private services that are less resource-intensive.

Justīne Panteļējeva: The fact that Latvia's GDP has – like Lithuania's – roughly doubled since EU accession has brought prosperity to many people. It has allowed us to survive in the post-Soviet world and to invest in defence and other public goods. So although there is room for degrowth or post-growth ideas within my party, these ideas will not fly in Latvian politics more broadly. Furthermore, in a globalised economy, a small country like ours cannot effectively pursue degrowth policies. If you want to gradually change ideas, to

mount a challenge to overconsumption, you should perhaps tap into the frugal practicality that can still be seen among our parents and grandparents. In Soviet times, they had to develop a talent for tinkering in order to survive with almost nothing.

Tomas Tomilinas: I would like to add an example from recent debates in the Lithuanian parliament. As Greens, we want to preserve our forests; we emphasise how important they are for biodiversity, health, and tourism. But our proposals to curb logging have long been met with opposition on financial grounds. Now, with the threat of war, that has changed. It has become clear that forests are a natural defence against invading forces. Our parliament has now voted in favour of laws protecting the huge, forested areas on our eastern border. This shows that it is not impossible to convince majorities that there are more important values than economic growth.

Justīne Panteļējeva is secretary-general of the Progressives (Progresīvie), a governing coalition party in Latvia and a member of the European Green Party. She is also a member of Riga City Council. Prior to her career in politics, she worked as an urban planning expert.

Tomas Tomilinas is co-founder of Democrats for Lithuania (Demokratų sąjunga „Vardan Lietuvos“, DSVL), a member of the European Green Party. He has been a member of the Lithuanian parliament since 2016. Tomas has deep roots in the green movement. Among other things, he headed the successful campaign against nuclear power in Lithuania in 2012.

Richard Wouters is a researcher at Wetenschappelijk Bureau GroenLinks, the think tank of the Dutch Green party.

This interview was originally published in the *Green European Journal* on 24 June 2025. Later that year, Tomilinas' party left the Lithuanian governing coalition, out of indignation over the rhetoric of a populist coalition partner.

In Defence of Democracy

Walking the Talk

Interview with **Atte Harjanne** by **Richard Wouters**

Greens are ardent defenders of democracy. But are they willing to back up their words with action when democracies are under attack from aggressive autocrats? Atte Harjanne, a Green member of the Finnish parliament, certainly is, as made clear in this interview. He is not restrained by taboos, whether on a European nuclear umbrella, Finnish boots on the ground in Ukraine, or the re-introduction of landmines.

Richard Wouters: According to security analyst Benjamin Tallis, a new, values-based approach to geopolitics is emerging from Eastern Europe: "neo-idealism". Does this label fit Finland?

Atte Harjanne: I struggle a bit with the prefix "neo". Democracy and the rule of law have a long history as cherished values. What is new is that we are now starting to walk the talk. We're more determined to defend these values, taking inspiration from the Ukrainians.

However, realpolitik is also on the rise. Sometimes, idealists and realists advocate the same policies, so it's not easy to draw a line between them. But as far as I understand neo-idealism, I consider myself part of that school.

One important aspect of neo-idealism is that it rejects a world in which great powers impose their will on smaller states in their "spheres of influence".

If great power politics were all that mattered, for a small nation like Finland, it would mean that our values didn't count. We would end up outsourcing our decision-making to more powerful countries. This is a cynical approach that should not go uncriticised. Of course, great powers have a bigger say in the current world, but we Finns should still speak out about the world we aspire to. We are responsible for our own decisions and for the values on which we base them.

During the Cold War, Finland was a neutral country. This made us self-centred. We shouldn't fall back into that mindset.

Is that why you were an early proponent of Finland joining NATO?

To some extent, yes. But the main reason is that I've long been convinced that Europe must be militarily prepared to protect its values in the face of threats from authoritarian states. Finland being a member of NATO, since 2023, means that we are part of a whole that is greater than its parts.

Remaining outside NATO for so long made Finland into a sort of free rider. While we maintained our defences considerably better than some other countries, NATO was clearly the key security provider in Europe. We acknowledged that, yet somehow thought that we were a separate, special case and decided to stay out. I wasn't surprised when the public mood on NATO changed rapidly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It proved my point that the rationale behind remaining outside NATO was never very strong.

Finnish president Alexander Stubb advocates "values-based realism". How do you assess that approach?

It's a convenient pairing of words. Depending on the situation, more emphasis can be put on values or on realpolitik. The concept is so flexible that it can hardly be called a guiding principle or strategy. But it's a pretty accurate description of Finland's foreign and security policy. We are vocal about our values, but we also need to cooperate with regimes that don't share these values, especially since Trump's re-election.

Was it wise for Stubb to play golf with Trump at Mar-a-Lago?

I think so. It was probably a smart way to convey our views to Trump. But this kind of friendliness isn't without its pitfalls. First, there must be no misunderstanding: we stand firmly to protect the sovereignty of European nations. That of Denmark, for example, which is threatened by Trump now that he wants to annex Greenland, not ruling out military force. The Finnish government should clearly communicate to European allies where we stand.

Second, we must be careful not to mislead people. Some Finnish politicians are reluctant to describe the situation in the US as it is. This creates the danger of underestimating the risks posed by the Trump regime. Some may be led to think that the current US is an ally like any other, that it abides by treaties and agreements. When politicians put on a show, some people may actually believe it – and the politicians may start to believe in it themselves.

As a member of parliament, I don't feel constrained from criticising the Trump administration – or any other government, for that matter. Being able to speak freely is a key element of liberal democracy. However, I have experienced some push-back from colleagues especially in the government parties when I said that the government should consider different scenarios for defence planning, including one under which the US is no longer committed to NATO. Some politicians prefer not to face up to that scenario.

What should we do if the US is no longer willing to come to the defence of its European allies?

We must reinforce European deterrence, build a strong European pillar within NATO.

Strengthening our military capabilities and our defence industry to the point where we are no longer reliant on the US will require a major effort. We should have started much earlier.

The trickiest part, of course, is nuclear deterrence. I'm all for nuclear disarmament, but the chances of that are slim with today's Russia. We need an honest and analytical debate on the role that French and British nuclear weapons could play in defending European NATO. What are the options? Could these weapons form a European nuclear umbrella even if France and the UK keep the final say on their use? If so, what would Paris and London expect from their European partners in terms of burden sharing? After all, it's not cheap to maintain a nuclear arsenal.

Ukraine is our first line of defence against Russian imperialism. Should our goal be to help the Ukrainians defeat Russia in Ukraine?

It should have been our goal. We should have given much more military support to Ukraine before the 2022 full-scale invasion and immediately afterwards. Now it's hard to foresee an outright victory for Ukraine. Even if we sent all our weapons to Ukraine, it would still face a shortage of military personnel. Realistically, the best we can probably achieve now is a stronger position for Ukraine at the negotiating table. This would still require massive arms deliveries, support for Ukraine's defence industry, and tougher sanctions against Russia.

European boots on the ground could alleviate Ukraine's military personnel problem. You have publicly put forward this option.

Indeed, I said my country should be open to this. To free up Ukrainian military personnel, European troops could take over certain tasks, such as air defence, military training inside Ukraine, or the protection of its borders with Belarus and Transnistria – all without directly confronting Russian troops. If there were an international coalition willing to put boots on Ukrainian ground, even without a ceasefire, Finland would do the right thing by taking part. I'm quite frustrated that, in Finland and elsewhere, many politicians and parties refuse to even discuss this. If we say that we will do whatever it takes to defend Ukraine's sovereignty, this option should be on the table.

All of Europe is trying to learn from Finland's comprehensive security model. What lessons would you want to convey?

First of all, a cross-sectoral approach is needed. Not only all branches and levels of government but also the private sector must be part of a country's security strategy, planning for different types of contingencies. Frequent training is also crucial, including tabletop exercises where emergency scenarios are simulated. Even in Finland, we should be practising more. During the Covid-19 pandemic, gaps in preparedness came to light. I worry that we are a bit complacent. Another lesson relates to crisis-proofing infrastructure. You need to go beyond efficiency and build in resilience. This takes time, so start now.

The welfare state plays a crucial role in our security model, since it fosters mutual trust and common purpose. People must feel they belong to a society where everyone has a role, and no one is left behind. Then they will care not only about their own safety but also about that of their society. To be honest, Finland is facing challenges in this regard. We've seen a lot of cuts in social benefits and support systems. We need to ask ourselves whether, by doing this, we are dismantling a key part of our defence.

Finland is committed to the international rule of law. Yet it intends to withdraw from the Ottawa Treaty that bans antipersonnel landmines. Is that a painful step for the Finnish Greens?

Of course it is. Limiting the use of weapons that cause massive civilian casualties was a big step forward for human civilisation. But the problem with the Ottawa Treaty has always been that several key countries are not party to it. These include Russia, an increasingly unfriendly neighbour that could invade us anywhere along our 1,300-kilometre shared border. Landmines are an effective way to slow down the advance of an attacking force.

If it gets to the point where we have to deploy landmines in a war, we must be extremely careful. The most horrible killing and maiming of civilians occurs during or after chaotic, civil-war-like conflicts. If Finland uses landmines, it should do so… I don't like the word "responsibly", but in an orderly way. Still, we shouldn't delude ourselves that the army can perfectly map the mines it plants in the fog of war. There will be some collateral damage.

In the Finnish parliament, I have stated that, while I support our withdrawal from the treaty, we should be aware of the international repercussions of such a move. It's an awkward step to take at a time when we need to fight for the hearts and minds of people all over the world, if only to get support for our sanctions against Russia. Finland's decision to produce and stockpile landmines again will be difficult to understand for many citizens and governments in the Global South, especially in places where landmines from past conflicts still take a human toll. We need to argue our case clearly: we are doing this because it is essential to protect our democracy. We should also assist countries in the Global South with landmine clearance. That would be a form of damage control with respect to human lives, Finland's reputation, and the international order.

Finland faces a similar dilemma regarding the instrumentalisation of migrants. Russia has been funnelling undocumented migrants to Finland in a form of hybrid warfare. Finland's right-wing government has now closed the border crossing points on the land border with Russia. A new border security law empowers the government to turn down asylum applications. What is your opinion on that?

This is another tricky issue. Once again, the threat is real. We must make sure our legal system isn't used against us. But it bothers me that some politicians, both in parliament and in government, have jumped on this issue in order to break away from our country's human rights obligations. My approach is the complete opposite. We should first assess the scale of the threat, analyse different scenarios and ways to prevent or mitigate them.

Say we have a thousand asylum seekers at the border. What if we took them all in, processed their asylum requests, gave refugee status to those who were entitled to it, and tried to repatriate the others? It wouldn't cause our society to collapse. The same applies to 10,000 asylum seekers, or even 100,000. I think we could have made our legal framework more watertight while leaving room for legitimate claims to asylum. With the new legislation, we risk having less control over our borders. If we activated this law, it could incentivise instrumentalised migrants to cross the border outside the border posts and try to avoid our authorities instead of contacting them. Such a scenario could lead to our resources being stretched.

Do you feel inhibited from debating this issue? A culture war over migration that pits Finns against each other might well play into the hands of Putin.

No. In a democracy, one should be able to speak out. What worries me isn't the debate itself, but the hate and agitation around the issue. I've received a lot of this when I criticised the new asylum law. It came from people who were mobilised by right-wing parties. They accused me of being unpatriotic or even an enemy of the state. One MP from the far-right Finns Party went so far as to suggest that I should be stripped of my military rank. Today, the controversy has subsided considerably, not least because our border hasn't been tested to the extent that people feared.

As both a reserve captain in the Finnish Defence Forces and a climate scientist, do you think it is possible to reconcile geopolitical and ecological security?

To some extent, they go hand in hand. Decarbonisation reduces our reliance on fossil fuels that are largely imported from problematic countries. So it's not just a climate imperative; it also improves the global order and our hard security.

On the issue of economic growth, which looks more favourable through a geopolitical than an ecological lens, I'm trying to stall for time, as it were. For the moment, what we need for the green transition is a massive wave of investment. That is, economic activity. So I don't think it's very relevant right now to focus on the question whether economic growth is a good policy objective or not.

It's clear that economic growth as it happens now will hit physical limits. Also, GDP growth is a poor indicator for wellbeing in a prosperous country like Finland. But if these considerations lead us to focus on degrowth or post-growth, this might hinder our ability to invest ourselves out of fossil fuels. We haven't yet really tried to mobilise the market economy to tackle climate change and biodiversity loss; this needs to be done much more firmly. Then we will find out whether the equation holds, or if we should completely transform our economic thinking. Maybe it's my years in parliament that have turned me into a pragmatic incrementalist, but I'm convinced that there is still plenty of room for evolution before we call for revolution.

Atte Harjanne has been an MP for the Finnish Greens (Vihreä liitto) since 2019. He chaired the Green parliamentary group in the Finnish parliament between 2021 and 2024. He is also a member of Helsinki City Council. Before entering parliament, Atte worked as a researcher at the Finnish Meteorological Institute, studying economic and social impacts of climate change. He is a reserve captain in the Finnish Defence Forces.

Richard Wouters is a researcher at Wetenschappelijk Bureau GroenLinks, the think tank of the Dutch Green party.

This interview was originally published in the *Green European Journal* on 10 July 2025.

“Neo-Idealism Confronts Us With the Gap Between Our Words and Our Deeds”

Interview with **Gabriela Svárovská** by **Petr Kutílek** & **Pavlína Janebová**

In Czechia, little remains of the idealist foreign policy conceived under President Václav Havel in the 1990s. According to long-standing democracy and human rights advocate and newly elected MP Gabriela Svárovská, state capture and populism are weakening the country in the face of an aggressive Russia, a crumbling world order, and a worsening climate crisis. She would welcome an injection of new idealism, of the courage to stand up for values, into Czech – and European – politics.

Petr Kutílek and Pavlína Janebová: Have you observed a new idealism in foreign policy? If so, is it really new?

Gabriela Svárovská: In the Czech case, there was much idealism in the foreign policy of Václav Havel, our first president after the Velvet Revolution of 1989. This idealism arose all over Central and Eastern Europe as we liberated ourselves from totalitarianism and stepped onto the path to democracy. When I started working for the Office of the President, under Havel, the universality of human rights, the right to democracy and self-determination, and the protection of civilians were genuine objectives that were set out and pursued in foreign policy strategies. Ditto during the years I worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I remember that, at the time, there was a debate within the European Union on lifting the sanctions imposed on China because of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. Czechia, an EU member by then, wanted the sanctions to be maintained. Even though we were often criticised by more experienced member states for being “unrealistic”, we stood up for the idealist approach.

At EU meetings, when Czechs or Poles took the floor, some of those present would just stop listening, for lack of trust or interest. But then came the first Czech EU presidency, in 2009, which gave us some agenda-setting power in the Council of Ministers. We raised the issue of human rights in Russia and elsewhere. We regularly invited human rights defenders to provide first-hand testimonies during Council meetings. We started implementing the EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders – practical measures to support and protect them. We also pushed through the creation of a civil society forum as part of the EU’s Eastern Partnership agenda. Finally, our voice was being heard and listened to.

Today, Czech politicians still like to speak of Havel’s legacy, but they no longer adhere to its principles. At most, they pay lip service to them in their media statements. Other,

stronger influences have come into play, not least private business interests and populist voices claiming to challenge the establishment, often equated with "Brussels" and its climate policies. Little remains of the idealism that once characterised Czech foreign policy.

After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Czech government came out strongly in support of Ukraine, but this was largely motivated by society's response to the invasion. The first government press conferences were rather lukewarm. This changed after Czechs spontaneously took to the streets in solidarity with Ukraine and started helping Ukrainian refugees. The system started moving largely thanks to bottom-up pressure. It was a narrow political calculation.

The Czech government's 2024 initiative to procure ammunition for Ukraine was important, because every artillery shell counts at the front. However, in my opinion, the initiative was poorly organised. The government's first step was to announce it – for PR purposes, one might say. Only then did it begin to raise money – from other governments in order to avoid putting its own money into it. Predictably, as soon as the buying spree was announced, ammo prices went up. The government's grandstanding turned out to be not such a smart move after all.

We must also ask ourselves whether, prior to 2022, we were sufficiently vigilant in relation to the Russian threat. Were we really doing our homework, in Czechia and Europe, in terms of building societal resilience against disinformation and cyberattacks or reducing fossil fuel dependency? I don't think we were. After Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, who spoke out against Europe's dependence on Russian energy? It was the European Greens, one of a few lone voices. Who, in 2019, imposed sanctions on firms that helped Russia build another gas pipeline, Nord Stream 2? It was Donald Trump – a very uncomfortable fact. Of course he was pursuing US strategic interests. It is a shame that Europe was unable to see, define, and pursue its own.

The reason I welcome the concept of "neo-idealism" is precisely because I see so little of it in current Czech politics. It confronts us with the gap between our words and our deeds. This applies not only to foreign policy, of course, but to politics in general. It is one of the reasons for the crisis of democracy spreading across the West. Elites – and politicians in particular – like to talk about "ordinary people", yet these are no longer their primary concern. Corporate sponsors, marketing advisors, and other influential players come first. Their meddling in decision-making amounts to the privatisation of political power. Let us call those who skilfully convert economic power into political power what they are: oligarchs. Czechia scored highly on the crony-capitalism index drawn up by *The Economist* in 2023. It came in second place after Russia.

What can Europeans learn from each other?

We need each other to be able to better understand the various security threats Europe is facing. Countries such as the Baltic states, Poland, and Czechia, being former satellite states of the Soviet Union, see the threat from Russia and consider it a priority. But have they ever really cared about the Mediterranean aspect of European security? Did they listen to Spain, Italy, and others when they talked about the problems in their region? By this, I don't mean that we should support efforts to stop boats carrying poor migrants across the Mediterranean Sea. It's about developing the Southern dimension of the EU's neighbourhood policy.

The divergence in security threat perceptions is not an issue of double standards per se, rather just a lack of information. We have Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Armenians living in Prague, while other countries have people from North Africa, the Middle East, and other regions. That's why it's so crucial to listen to each other, share expertise and intelligence, and foster connections between our civil societies.

That said, I do think that Russia is the biggest threat at the moment. While its military capabilities may be declining due to massive losses on the front line in terms of both personnel and equipment, it remains a dangerous enemy for a Europe that is witnessing the erosion of the Pax Americana. For decades, we happily relied on NATO, financed in large part by the United States. We lived peacefully under the US nuclear umbrella and with the presence of US troops in Europe. We now have to face up to a new reality. We must become more self-reliant in the area of defence, while keeping in mind that security and resilience are much broader than just defence.

You know a democratic country when you see one.

Weapons cannot guarantee security in Europe if political cohesion continues to be lacking. Without it, how can our armed forces act together? How do we decide on their deployment? Today, we are struggling to even agree on the milder instrument of sanctions. We fail to implement them properly. Friends of Putin are benefitting from the war on our continent, and we are letting them off the hook. We still allow companies that are part of the Russian military complex to operate in the EU.

In Czechia, we host a branch of Rosatom, Russia's nuclear energy company. There may be other companies that are owned by Russian oligarchs, and they might even be sponsoring political parties, but we simply do not know. What we do know though is that they are sponsoring disinformation campaigns, malign influence operations, and cyberattacks. Russia's footprint could be spotted in anti-vax campaigns, climate change denial, conspiracy theories about the war in Ukraine, and anti-gender movements. We are unable to get rid of the presence of Putin's regime on our territory, whereas that should have been the most straightforward part of our commitment to support Ukraine and protect Europe's security.

It is too easy to place the blame solely on holdouts such as Hungary and Slovakia for Europe's lack of political decisiveness. Other countries are hiding behind them to protect partisan interests of their own or cater to the most efficient lobbies.

How should Europe position itself towards the Global South?

In Czechia, there is little reflection on Europe's colonial past. When the director of the National Gallery started to talk about the decolonisation concept in arts, she was ridiculed by politicians. Didn't she know that our country never had any colonies? But we cannot ignore the fact that we have joined a club, the EU, that does include former colonial powers. In these countries, colonialism and the way it carries over into present-day relations with the Global South is discussed in public debate, by civil society, even by politicians.

It is also in our interest for Europe to make things right with the Global South. In today's fragmenting world, we need more allies – also in the South. Today, big corporations from Europe and elsewhere are benefiting from slave labour, deforestation, land grabbing, and mining in these countries. Instead of continued exploitation, we should be offering them partnerships that, when it comes to trade and investment, observe the rights of their populations, including Indigenous peoples, and give them a say, for example in who is allowed to mine minerals on their territory and under what terms.

Should Europe still strive to promote democracy worldwide?

In 2009, in close cooperation with the Swedish EU presidency, we pushed through Council conclusions on democracy support, making this a key objective of the EU's external policies. The preparatory work was a landmark effort, bringing together experts on human rights and on development. These goals are closely linked (if sometimes conflictual), yet these people had never actually sat down together.

Part of this effort was a discussion on whether to speak of "democracy promotion". To avoid giving the impression of imposing our Western ways on other parts of the world, we agreed to use the term "democracy support" instead. I still think supporting democracy, with the involvement of civil society, is very different to colonialism. Of course, we have to recognise that different cultures and regions have their own models

of public participation in government. But we must also keep our distance from those who say that democracy is only suitable for Western societies, and that other societies are not capable of it. That boils down to cultural racism.

Democracy may have different operating modes, different institutions. But you know a democratic country when you see one.

Soft power is an important foreign policy instrument for Europe. To many human rights defenders around the world, Europe remains a model. It has played a leading role in bringing about important international treaties and UN resolutions. Again, when we work in support of human rights protection, it should not be about copying our model, but about participation and cooperation. Context matters.

And what about the international rule of law?

Standing up for international law is not easy. It forces us to be critical of long-standing allies, such as Israel and the US. But if ever there was a time to think deeply about why international law exists, why it is vital to our security, it is now. Czechia is among the countries that should understand that any time in history, when the international order started to crumble, it was a bad time for the country.

In this context, which values should Green parties aim to project in society and politics?

As Greens, we are quite clear and confident in stating what needs to be done. We must combine care for the environment and the climate with proper social policies, while observing human rights. These are the three core values we stand for.

The difficulty is how to make ourselves heard amid a backlash that pushes everything green and social out of the public debate. Should we shy away from anything that may be perceived and portrayed as radicalism in order to avoid being marginalised? Should we be less vocal on certain issues to ensure we remain in the mainstream and keep attracting media coverage? Or should we just decide to say things as they are? This is a major strategic question for all European Greens.

The pendulum will swing back in the end, if only because Europe, including Czechia, will ultimately reap the benefits of climate policies, the more so if they are combined with a fairer distribution of wealth and a transformation of the current extractive economic model into a sustainable one, kinder to both the environment and people's wellbeing. Meanwhile, it is essential that Green, progressive, and left-liberal parties and groups, as well as social movements, work together.

Gabriela Svárovská has been an MP for the Czech Greens (Zelení) since November 2025. She was elected from 12th place of the Pirate Party list thanks to preferential votes. Gabriela is also the co-chair of the Czech Greens. She is a former civil servant, diplomat, journalist, and activist.

Petr Kutílek is a research fellow at the Prague-based Association for International Affairs (Asociace pro mezinárodní otázky, AMO).

Pavlína Janebová is AMO's research director.

This interview was conducted prior to Gabriela's election to the Czech parliament in October 2025. It was originally published in the *Green European Journal* on 26 February 2026.

Engaging With the Global South on Russia's War Against Ukraine

Interview with **Ivan Kłyszcz** by **Sofiia Shevchuk** & **Richard Wouters**

Met with almost universal condemnation and economic sanctions in the West, Russia's war against Ukraine received more mixed responses in the Global South. While it is tempting to frame this difference in terms of democracy versus autocracy, the reality is more nuanced. How can Ukraine – and Europe – improve their diplomatic outreach to countries in the Global South?

Of Polish origin, born in Mexico and now based in Estonia for nearly a decade, Ivan Kłyszcz brings a distinctly transnational perspective on North-South relations. His current work includes the study of Ukraine's engagement with African countries after the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022. While not a proponent of neo-idealism, Kłyszcz is familiar with the concept and gives it a provocative twist.

Sofiia Shevchuk and Richard Wouters: In a 2023 article[1] on the Global South's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, you highlight the diverging perceptions held by the West and the "non-West". What explains these differences?

Ivan Kłyszcz: The motivation behind that article was to start a conversation on why many countries have chosen not to impose sanctions on Russia, even though they acknowledge that the invasion of Ukraine violates international norms and has created a humanitarian disaster. Some countries decided to keep relations with Russia as they were, others even saw an opportunity to improve them. There's an existing term in the literature that is being promoted for use in this context by certain academics from Latin America: "active non-alignment". This label was originally coined in the context of the US–China trade war, which greatly affected Latin America, but is now also being applied in relation to Russia's war on Ukraine. I think the term captures the sense of a proactive foreign policy that pursues national interests – or some understanding of national interests – without really committing to any of the major powers. We can, of course, find exceptions to this. However, when it comes to the war, I think this is the approach that has dominated in most countries in the world.

One important driver behind active non-alignment is the fact that power is not what it used to be. The disparity between the major powers and developing countries has diminished to some extent. The wealth gap

is still wide and, in some ways, becoming wider. But the power gap has narrowed. The world has changed since the Cold War era; Washington and Moscow are no longer able to behave as they used to. Smaller countries recognise that this development comes with advantages and disadvantages. The main advantage is that they are not compelled into alignment; they can push back against the US and Russia, as well as China and the EU. Many countries are now doing what they had aimed to do with the founding of the original Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War: they are pursuing their own foreign policies.

I'm thinking in particular of the middle powers in Africa, such as Algeria, Egypt, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and South Africa. These countries now have greater scope for autonomy, partly because the major powers have become less invested in Africa. Chinese investments have declined, while the EU is changing its approach altogether. These middle powers are therefore gaining relevance as brokers of regional affairs. The same can be seen in South America and Asia.

Active non-alignment became more evident after 2022 – just look at United Nations votes on Ukraine, as well as patterns of sanctions against and engagement with Russia. I believe this was an uncomfortable realisation for Moscow, which likely assumed some countries would be more supportive. Algeria, for example, which maintains deep historical, military, and economic ties with Russia, was expected to oppose measures condemning Moscow. Instead, it abstained in key votes in the UN General Assembly (UNGA), most notably on the March 2022 emergency session resolution calling for Russia to withdraw from Ukraine. This abstention – rather than a "no" vote – signalled hesitation and underscored the fact that Russian influence no longer automatically translates into diplomatic alignment with Moscow.

By contrast, Eritrea stood out as the only African country that voted against the UNGA resolution, joining a small group of states including Russia itself, Belarus, Syria, and North Korea. It also opposed the establishment of a UN Human Rights Council (HRC) commission to investigate war crimes in Ukraine; all other African HRC members voted in favour or abstained. Eritrea's alignment reflected its strategic affinity with Russia and other authoritarian regimes yet did not result in any formal partnership.

Is there a difference between democratic and autocratic states in the Global South when it comes to support for Ukraine?

The evidence is tilting in the direction of the more democratic the country, the higher the level of support for Ukraine in the UNGA. However, there is plenty of room for nuance. I try to push back against the narrative that this is autocracy versus democracy, in the global picture at least. There are many countries that have been supportive of Ukraine but are not democracies. Take Sudan: there has reportedly been contact between the military junta there and Ukraine, and there has

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been some coverage of their relations in the military sphere since 2022. Of course, this remains unconfirmed, but it would appear to be traditional foreign policy at play.

Western support for Ukraine, spearheaded by neo-idealist politicians such as EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas, is viewed as hypocritical by many in the Global South. They point to Europe's neglect of conflicts elsewhere. Can Ukraine's own experience with colonial oppression help bridge the gap between European neo-idealism and anti-colonial perspectives in the Global South?

I have pondered this question a lot – the colonial narrative and the extent to which it connects Ukraine and the Global South. It's a fascinating and complex area, and nothing definitive can be said about it yet. This is something scholars, historians, and others are still figuring out.

This uncertainty creates something of a dilemma for Ukraine in its efforts to develop strategic communications. Ukrainian officials certainly talk about the war as a colonial conflict: Russia trying to recolonise Ukraine. That argument carries some weight; you only need to look at what Russia is doing to those living in the occupied territories. But in Ukraine's public diplomacy towards countries that have experienced colonialism, there is more caution. Ukrainian diplomats are hesitant to draw direct parallels between their history and the colonial histories of countries in the Global South. In private, I think they're more willing to make that connection. Yet publicly, in diplomatic settings and at events, they are very careful.

When it comes to influencing the foreign policies of nations in the Global South, I think the colonial framing has reached its limits. The stance of active non-alignment is locked in. Ukrainian – and European – diplomacy stands a better chance if it appeals to these countries' interests. We need to learn what these interests are and figure out where they might overlap with ours. It's a good investment – not just financially – to build connections, make contacts, and bring decision-makers, businesspeople, students, and even artists into dialogue. That whole spectrum of engagement is valuable.

To give a concrete example, about a year ago, the Estonian Foreign Ministry held a meeting with those African ambassadors who cover Estonia from Berlin. Estonia does not have African embassies; they're usually in Helsinki, Stockholm, or Berlin. So, they organised a meeting in Berlin, where there's the highest concentration. The foreign minister was there, as well as a lot of ministerial staff. They were trying to spark something. There were already formal diplomatic relations, of course, but this was about making those relationships active and meaningful. The message was very simple: "How do we make this a winning relationship? What can we do for you? Where can we find shared interests?"

It was a very simple gesture, with a message of equal partnership. No "lecturing" African ambassadors about Russia or framing everything through a security lens. I think there was something very sincere about it. Maybe that's real idealism: the idea that we can transcend historical baggage and the broader geopolitical context by focusing on shared interests. That might sound naïve, but I found the initiative quite refreshing.

Why is it wrong to lecture about Russia?

I will respond to that with a brief anecdote. When I was in Addis Ababa, I asked people for their views on Ukraine. They were mostly very polite, very professional, and gave me excellent answers. But one person responded quite angrily saying, "Our country, Ethiopia, is constantly at war, and we are

constantly facing famine without the help of international donations. We have all these challenges – do not ask me about Ukraine."

So much for neo-idealism, with its focus on values.

The neo-idealism articulated by various leaders in Central, Eastern, and Northern Europe often gets framed as part of a grand strategy in foreign relations, including by Benjamin Tallis, who coined the term. I don't see it that way. I see neo-idealism as a response to the West's longstanding difficulty in translating its enormous economic and technological power into military success. Over the last 30 years, the West – whether we're talking NATO, the US, or the EU – has struggled to win wars, at least in a strategic sense. We may win initially, but we often lose in the long term. That creates anxiety: why can't we defend ourselves effectively despite all our power? I think neo-idealism partly stems from that anxiety.

One reason for this lack of success is the way the West prefers to fight wars: minimal casualties, heavy reliance on technology, short timelines. These kinds of wars are palatable to voters. But that's not how war has traditionally been fought. Historically, war involves sacrifice, taxes, and deep societal mobilisation. We don't see that now, and as a result, the military has almost disappeared from everyday public life in Europe.

For me, the key contribution of neo-idealism relates to how we think of defence and the role of the military in our societies. It's about restoring visibility and relevance to defence without making it a partisan issue. In that sense, it is quite centrist – sometimes even called "radical centrism". It says, let's debate things like migration or climate policy openly and democratically, but let's unite around defence. Whether you are right-wing or left-wing, reinvesting in the military and

In my view, neo-idealism is about making defence a legitimate, visible, and shared concern in liberal democratic societies.

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supporting Ukraine is reasonable policy. That's the essence of the new idealism, in my view. It's not so much about abstract values as about making defence a legitimate, visible, and shared concern in liberal democratic societies. I think that's incredibly important.

I'd even say that neo-idealism isn't actually that idealistic. It's a kind of hard-headed realism – especially here in Estonia, where the Russian threat is perceived as very real. For countries like Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Finland, and Norway, re-engaging with defence is not an academic issue; it's about survival.

Do you have specific recommendations for Green parties?

Firstly, do not be tempted to pit the Ukrainian and the Palestinian causes against each other; they should not be seen as somehow in competition. That is fundamental if we want to find common ground for dialogue. I know that might sound vague, but I think it's vital.

Secondly, we're not going to solve the issue of hypocrisy in politics. Governments will remain self-interested; that's just the reality of international relations. We'll need to appeal to those interests to a certain extent if we want to build long-term, meaningful connections. That takes us back to traditional diplomacy – a practice that has its flaws and often leads to dead ends, including moral ones. If I had to make a recommendation here, it would be that politicians, especially those involved in foreign policy, take the time to reflect on these issues. They should ponder the weight and complexity of foreign policy and the significance of the ethical dilemmas it contains.

Endnote

1 Ivan U. Kłyszcz, *It Is Not About "Neutrality": How the Global South Responds to Russia's Invasion*, 30 January 2023. https://www.boell.de/en/2023/01/30/it-not-about-neutrality-how-global-south-responds-russias-invasion

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Bridging Europe's North-South Divide on Security

Interview with **Mārtiņš Staķis** & **Carlos Corrochano** by **Richard Wouters**

The threat of Russian imperialism is more acutely felt in Northern and Eastern Europe than in Southern Europe. This leads to disagreements over defence – not least within the progressive camp. In this interview, Latvian Green Member of the European Parliament Mārtiņš Staķis and Spanish political theorist Carlos Corrochano discuss whether and how these differences can be resolved.

Richard Wouters: How has the debate on security and defence evolved in both of your countries since Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine in 2022?

Mārtiņš Staķis: In Latvia, the main political shift occurred in 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea. Once we joined the European Union and NATO in 2004, we thought that war with Russia was no longer possible. After all, we were protected by the most powerful alliances in the world. In 2014, we came to the realisation that *we are NATO*; *we need to do the protecting*. That same year, I enlisted as a volunteer in the Latvian National Guard.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine therefore came as less of a shock to us than it did to many others in Europe. Five years ago, as a parliamentary secretary to the Latvian defence minister, I would warn at international meetings that another Russian attack on a neighbouring country was just a matter of time. A common response was that we should tone it down, be less "Russophobic", seek peace with Russia instead of war mongering. In 2022, the sceptics admitted that we – Latvia and other frontline states – had been right all along. I don't want a repeat of that situation. That's one of my missions in the European Parliament – as a member of the Committee on Security and Defence, and within the Green family.

Latvian society was not fully prepared for war in 2014. To avoid spreading alarm, the government focused its communications on civil protection – dealing with floods, wildfires, or chemical disasters. We borrowed the "total defence" concept from Finland and told people that they must be capable of being self-sufficient for 72 hours in the event of a major crisis. By 2022, the notion of societal resilience had taken root. Citizens started demanding that politicians take it a step further and discuss what to do in the event of war. This is making it relatively easy to increase defence spending to 5 per cent of GDP, as agreed within NATO. Society is calling for it.

Carlos Corrochano: Spain is geographically distant from Russia, and defence is not perceived as a matter of survival. For most political parties, it's simply another issue to be instrumentalised, a convenient arena for partisan confrontation, rather than for serious, substantive debate.

Within the Spanish Left, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has caused a huge split in opinion. Some of us call it what it is: an act of imperialist aggression against the people of Ukraine. We may be against NATO's worldview, but we must be honest about the nature of this war. We've spoken with our contacts in Central and Eastern Europe, including the Baltics, to better understand their concerns and political perspectives. Yet many on the Left still believe there were legitimate justifications for the invasion. This, in part, reflects the movement's own history: some parties emerged in opposition to Spain's accession to NATO, and anti-NATO sentiment remains central to their political identity. That historical and even existential legacy often makes it harder to have nuanced debates.

In your booklet *Hacer Mundo*, you write that the Left is trapped in a "realist iron cage". What do you mean by that?

Carlos Corrochano: I used to teach Critical Theories of International Relations at Sciences Po in Paris. Each year, I would begin by introducing my students to the mainstream theories of international relations – the ones furthest from critical approaches – particularly realism. Realism essentially sees the world as a realm of anarchy and perpetual conflict, where cooperation is nearly impossible. It has a rather bleak view of human nature and world politics. Realists are fixated on power and security, leaving little room in their frameworks for ideas such as self-determination or global justice. They are rarely concerned with actual human lives. That's precisely what makes realism deeply problematic from a progressive standpoint.

I was therefore dismayed when leftists in Western and Southern Europe started explaining Russia's aggression by quoting and referencing the work of realist theorists – especially John Mearsheimer, who is friends with Viktor Orbán and a lot of other dubious people. Sometimes there's such a huge gap between how these leftists approach international politics and how they approach domestic politics. At home, you're allowed to be an idealist: you can discuss ideology, invoke principles, and take moral stances. But once you have crossed national borders, anarchy descends, and pessimism prevails. Your only choice is to be a realist and say that Ukraine doesn't stand a chance, that it needs to surrender, or even that it is partly to blame for the war. This approach is what I call the realist iron cage.

Mārtiņš Staķis: I recognise this from voting behaviour in the European Parliament. On the issues of defence and Ukraine, The Left group is most closely aligned with groups on the furthest right of the political spectrum.

Of course, we also have some disagreements within the Greens/EFA group on these issues. To provide some historical context: over the last 500 years, Russia has invaded Finland five times and Latvia six times. Meanwhile, Italy, Spain, and Portugal have never experienced Russian invasions. This partly explains the countries' differing viewpoints; these are difficult to bridge. If a fellow MEP has a negative view on defence

spending or military support for Ukraine, I can't turn that into a positive view. But maybe I can persuade someone with a neutral position to take a positive stance. Time is limited, so I pick my battles.

Have you succeeded in making the Green group more supportive of defence?

Mārtiņš Staķis: I think so. It's easy to measure. Just look at how the group voted in the past and how it votes now.

In one of our group meetings, I showed a huge map of the Baltic region and indicated where Russia had placed its armed forces along the border. I explained why the Suwałki Gap is the most vulnerable point on this map, because Russia wants to create a ground corridor to its exclave Kaliningrad in this narrow border area of Lithuania and Poland. I indicated how Russia would move its troops to take the Suwałki Gap and how NATO forces would respond. I think this presentation was a game changer; a lot of my fellow group members realised the scenario it portrayed was realistic. Afterwards, I was invited to meet personally with many of my Green colleagues and their staff. In my opinion, having new members from Latvia but also from Lithuania, since 2024, has certainly made a difference within the Green group.

What are your views on the new NATO defence spending targets: 3.5 per cent of GDP for the military and 1.5 per cent for broader resilience?

Mārtiņš Staķis: I'm not happy that the debate is focused on percentages; we should instead be talking about capabilities. If all people hear from the military is "give us more money", you won't convince them. Instead, the focus should be on the new capabilities that are going to be delivered. Better air defence, for instance, to protect our critical infrastructure and reduce the risk of power blackouts or interruptions in drinking water supply.

Also, we shouldn't talk about spending but rather about investing. Take the defence line that Finland, the Baltic states and Poland are building along their borders with Russia and Belarus. The fortifications will be constructed by local companies, which create jobs and pay taxes. Other industries will benefit from the demand for cables, electronic surveillance, and anti-drone systems. The innovations that will ready us to fight – not the last war but rather the next war – will have civilian spin-offs. Strengthening our defence will therefore also boost our economies.

Carlos Corrochano: GDP indicators distract us from having a real debate around defence. A target of 3.5 per cent seems arbitrary and disproportionate. It's much more important to discuss better European coordination of security and defence policies, sharing capabilities, and more democratic decision-making.

The emphasis on spending targets has reinforced the old "guns versus butter" dichotomy. This logic comes from a liberal economic framework that assumes a fixed pool of resources available to governments – if you spend on one thing, you can't spend on another. As an ecosocialist, I find it striking how many on the Left have internalised this framing. Even in Spain, where barely a decade ago we witnessed first-hand the devastation caused by such economic thinking. Yet history shows that investments in security can, in fact, serve as a catalyst for broader social progress. The real question is not *whether* you spend, but *how*: how you channel those investments, and how you connect them to social, economic, and climate justice.

Mārtiņš Staķis: "Guns or butter" is indeed a false choice. Look at Finland: it has been investing heavily in security and defence

for decades, yet it has one of the best social security systems in the world. In the Baltics, we're rapidly increasing our defence investments, but we haven't cut a single cent from our welfare arrangements.

Should governments increase taxation of the rich to finance extra defence spending and support for Ukraine?

Carlos Corrochano: Yes. Some progressives in Europe have already brought this to the table. It's a smart way to connect people to causes that seem distant from their daily lives. Linking national and international solidarity, security and economic justice is both intellectually and emotionally compelling. The Spanish government's approach – that we should finance defence investments through common European debt – is also useful. It resonates with the rest of Southern Europe, so it could help bridge the North-South divide on security.

If there were no defence spending target, wouldn't we need another yardstick to determine whether each NATO member is doing its part?

Mārtiņš Staķis: Yes and no. Let me use a metaphor. If you live in a village and a single house is on fire, you don't send firefighters all over the village; you concentrate them where the problem is. The same goes for Europe's defence. The problem is on the eastern border, so we should concentrate our armed forces there. The question of whether countries such as Spain achieve the 3.5 per cent target is therefore less pressing. Spain would make a bigger contribution to deterring Russia if it increased its defence investments by 0.5 per cent in order to send more troops and equipment to the Baltics. There are already Spanish forces in Latvia, and we are very grateful for that. But we would welcome more of them.

We can find common ground in the need to make our societies more resilient to large-scale disruptions, whether from war or wildfires.

(Mārtiņš Staķis)

That said, I do believe that we should go for the 3.5 per cent target. Not all countries need to achieve it at the same time, however. In Latvia and other frontline states, we need to reach this target within three years at the latest. Countries like Spain could move towards it more gradually.

We must bear in mind the price of war. In Ukraine, but also in Russia, the war is costing 40 to 50 per cent of GDP. Investing 3.5 per cent now – in order to avoid paying a much higher price in the future – is therefore the wisest choice.

Carlos Corrochano: I don't believe that sending more Spanish troops to the border with Russia would be supported at home, whether by public opinion or among the political class. Making such a proposal would be a mistake.

Mārtiņš Staķis: When Italy, Spain, and Greece were facing a migration crisis, we – the Baltics, Poland – made a huge mistake in saying that it wasn't our problem. A decade later, faced with the weaponisation of migrants by Russia and Belarus, we were the ones asking for solidarity. Our Southern European partners responded by asking, "Where were you when we needed your help?" My message to my Spanish counterparts would be: "Please don't repeat our mistake." As politicians, we must emphasise day in, day out that Europe is a solidarity-based project. If we cling to our national positions, it's a hands-down win for all of the dictators in the world.

Carlos, there is support in Spain for European strategic autonomy. Doesn't that imply stronger European defence?

Carlos Corrochano: I've tried that approach during my time in active politics, as have others on the Left. Current Minister of Social Rights Pablo Bustinduy became the head of the international office of left-wing alliance Podemos shortly after it was created in 2014. Under his influence, Podemos took a smarter stance on NATO. Instead of saying that we need to leave the alliance immediately, Podemos advocated a gradual shift from a NATO to an EU security umbrella, based on the Treaty on European Union's Article 42(7) on mutual defence. How to attain strategic autonomy through European defence coordination, that was exactly the debate that the Left needed.

When I became head of the international office of Sumar, a new left-wing alliance founded in 2022, I tried to continue along this path. But foreign policy soon became a battleground for political infighting between leftist groups. The debate on what European strategic autonomy actually entails, in terms of decision-making and capabilities, came to a standstill. It has become a token phrase, an excuse for not talking about concrete issues such as investment in defence.

But I'm not ready to abandon the concept of strategic autonomy. Europe can no longer rely on the US, even if the Democrats come back into power. In an increasingly complex, polycentric world, Europe must become a geopolitical actor in its own right. Progressive forces would do well to link strategic autonomy not only to military security but also to other forms of security: climate, social, and economic.

Mārtiņš, do you agree that Europe can no longer rely on the US?

Mārtiņš Staķis: We still need the US. I think it's a bit unfair to blame Trump for all the mistakes Europe has made. Already in 2004, George W. Bush said that it was time for Europe to take its security into its own hands. This should have been an incentive to work towards greater strategic autonomy, but nothing happened. In 2014, Barack Obama said something to the tune of, "Guys, if you

don't go for 2 per cent, there'll be problems in the future." In the Baltics, we heeded the call, but some NATO countries are still below the 2 per cent mark or have only just reached it. The problem is a lack of political leadership. Trump is very vocal on the need for Europe to spend more on defence, but we have already been aware of this for twenty years. Because we dragged our feet, we are now facing huge expenses.

Europe must strengthen its defence, but I'm not ready to give up on NATO. Developing our military capabilities will be cheaper – and deterring Russia more effective – if we keep the US on board. Fortunately, there is still massive support for NATO in the US Congress.

Do you have any other proposals for bridging the North-South divide on security?

Mārtiņš Staķis: It will be difficult to persuade people in Southern Europe that they are under military threat, but they have experienced the dangers of climate change first-hand. We can find common ground in the need to make our societies more resilient to large-scale disruptions, whether from war or wildfires. Civil defence was my brief when I was parliamentary secretary to the Latvian defence minister, so I know it takes a lot of effort to get people prepared. Civil society plays a key role in this. True preparedness begins with trust between people, with NGOs and community groups who know the names, numbers, and needs in their neighbourhoods. They can organise training and build resilience from the bottom up. I believe that North and South can agree on the need to support this type of human infrastructure.

Carlos Corrochano: We need more progressives to join the conversation on security. Hopefully we can then move beyond the "campism" that still has a hold on parts of the Left. According to this logic, we live in a bipolar world, we are obliged to choose a side, and therefore Leftists should always be against what the US does – even if it means justifying Russian aggression. This logic must be denounced and replaced by new and more nuanced frames of thinking on international relations.

In *Hacer Mundo*, you put forward the concept of "strategic universalism". What do you mean by this?

Carlos Corrochano: Strategic universalism could be a new guiding principle for an autonomous foreign policy. Universalism has a bad reputation in leftist and progressive circles, mainly because universalist rhetoric has often been misused, not least to underpin colonialist and imperialist actions. But I've learnt from feminist and postcolonial thinkers – especially Gayatri Spivak – that concepts have no immutable essence. Just like sex and gender, universalism is a malleable object that can serve various ends. We can construct new values that we want universally applied. In the field of global politics, our guiding principle should be that we always stand with the aggressed and against the aggressor, regardless of the camp they belong to. In the words of James Baldwin: "Every bombed village is my hometown." In the context of Spanish politics, this means standing with the people of Palestine, Ukraine, and Western Sahara. This may sound obvious, but it isn't – not even for the Left.

There may be some overlap between strategic universalism and the neo-idealism promoted by Benjamin Tallis. I support his endeavour to bring moral principles into geopolitical pragmatism. Idealism and pragmatism are always in tension – and rightly so.

Mārtiņš Staķis: If the choice is between realism and neo-idealism, then I am a neo-idealist.

As I said, I'm not only a politician; I'm also a volunteer with the Latvian National Guard. You don't spend days with the army instead of your family if you're not motivated by ideals. If you have no ideals, you have no place in the military – or in politics.

To what extent is the EU hurt by its double standards – support for Ukraine, lack of action on Gaza?

Carlos Corrochano: The paralysing divisions over Gaza are very damaging, both to the EU's internal relations and to its credibility on the world stage. European leaders would have had an easier time had they centred their discourse on international law, humanitarian law, and human rights from the outset and held all parties involved to these standards. It may then have been a smaller step to recognising the genocide committed by Israel and acting on that recognition. I'm not saying that we should approach Ukraine and Gaza in the same way, as they are clearly different conflicts, but we should always stand with the aggressed.

Mārtiņš Staķis: I fully agree with Carlos that these are different conflicts. After the attacks by Hamas on 7 October 2023, sympathy for Israel was high in Latvia. The turning point came when Israel started using famine as a weapon. That's not targeted punishment for terrorists; it's collective punishment in violation of international law. In such cases, we must clearly state that a red line has been crossed.

If someone crosses a red line and does terrible things, they should be brought to justice. I believe that day will come.

Mārtiņš Staķis is a Member of the European Parliament with the Greens/EFA group. He was elected in 2024 on behalf of the Progressives (Progresīvie), a governing coalition party in Latvia and a member of the European Green Party. Previously, he served as a member of the Latvian parliament, as a parliamentary secretary (vice minister) in the Latvian defence ministry, and as the mayor of Riga. Staķis is a volunteer in the Latvian National Guard, with the rank of private first class.

Carlos Corrochano Pérez is a Spanish political scientist and writer. From 2021 to 2025, he worked as a foreign policy advisor in the cabinet of Yolanda Díaz, the second deputy prime minister of Spain. He also served as the head of the international office of Sumar (Unite), the left-wing alliance founded by Díaz. He is now pursuing a PhD in political theory and international relations. Pérez is the editor of *Claves de política global [Key Points of Global Policy]* (Arpa, 2024) and the author of *Hacer mundo [Making the World]* (Lengua de Trapo, 2025).

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"Resisting Invaders Isn't Just a Matter for the Armed Forces"

Interview with **Ilmar Tamm** & **Airi Tooming** by **Imre Treufeld** & **Maiko Mathiesen**

In Estonia, more than 2 per cent of the population is active in voluntary military and civil defence organisations. Major General Ilmar Tamm, commander of the Estonian Defence League, and Airi Tooming, chair of the Women's Voluntary Defence Organisation, discuss how this form of citizen engagement is strengthening resilience against Russian aggression and other threats.

Imre Treufeld and Maiko Mathiesen: Could you tell us something about your organisations and how they contribute to Estonia's defence?

Ilmar Tamm: The purpose of the Estonian Defence League (Kaitseliit) is to enhance Estonia's readiness to defend its independence and constitutional order by means of voluntary citizen action. Our mission is enshrined in law, and we are overseen by the Ministry of Defence. We have weapons and take part in military exercises. We also have a role in civil crisis management, including tackling wildfires and providing assistance to the police.

The Defence League has around 18,000 members, of which over 1,500 are women. They are grouped into 15 regional branches, plus a separate cyber defence unit. We also have three affiliate organisations: the Women's Voluntary Defence Organisation (WVDO) and separate youth organisations for boys and girls. With these sub-structures included, we have over 30,000 members – roughly 2.2 per cent of the Estonian population.

Airi Tooming: The aim of the WVDO (Naiskodukaitse) is to develop crisis preparedness among both our 4,000 members and the wider population. We offer our members basic medical, civil safety, field catering, and military training and also provide training to non-members.

Our organisation offers an opportunity to women who don't want to be actively involved in combat to contribute to national defence, for instance in a supportive role to the ground forces. That's why the training we offer also covers evacuation and other forms of civil protection.

Providing support to the armed forces allows our members to familiarise themselves with national defence. Some of them – including women who initially didn't want to pick up a weapon – eventually decide to join the Defence League's combat units. Without the WVDO, they would likely have remained entirely unfamiliar with the military.

How much impact do your organisations have on society at large?

Ilmar Tamm: Our Tallinn section is the largest in terms of membership, but we have a greater impact in smaller places. There, voluntary organisations play an important role in community building. They foster social cohesion through joint activities that also involve non-members.

Airi Tooming: The number of people we reach with our trainings is many times greater than that of our membership. One of the training programmes we offer to non-members was developed by the Estonian Rescue Services Agency, which is responsible for national non-medical emergency services including the fire service. It includes general information on dealing with crisis situations, stockpiling, sheltering, and evacuation. At WVDO, we also teach additional topics such as lifesaving first aid, as well as skills that go beyond crisis preparedness including wildlife management, cyber hygiene, and recognising disinformation. We organise monthly evening lectures on various topics that are attended by hundreds of people.

In addition, we address mental health issues and psychosocial assistance in times of crisis. We train our members to share the basic skills they learn – on mental resilience in crisis situations and how to support others – within the wider community.

In 2024, we trained almost 30,000 people in crisis preparedness. Of these, around 18,000 participated in dedicated trainings, while the rest learned specific skills from us during larger public events.

Due to logistical and resource challenges, it's impossible for us to reach the whole of the Estonian population using this approach. We realised that we needed a self-learning tool that is accessible and easy to use. That's why we developed the *Be prepared!* (*Ole valmis!*) mobile app. The app provides instructions on a broad range of issues, from first aid for toddlers and protection against cyber threats to what to do in the event of armed conflict. It covers every scenario that our team at WVDO has been able to think of.

To date, the app has been downloaded by an estimated 140,000 people, of which 70,000 are active users. In May 2025, on the day the emergency alert system was tested, the app was opened on around 30,000 different devices.

Ilmar Tamm: Crisis preparedness, whether through apps or other means, cannot be forced upon people. This provokes resistance. However, we are looking into the possibility of having *Be prepared!* pre-installed on every smart device purchased in Estonia. Ukraine, which sends air raid alerts via a number of similar apps, could serve as an example here.

Of course, technology may be a challenge for the older generation. But young people could help their grandparents, which would improve both preparedness and social cohesion. They would feel that their knowledge and skills, which at first glance may seem insignificant compared to the life experience of their elders, are both valuable and valued.

Does participation in the Defence League and the WVDO affect people's values and their attitudes towards state institutions?

Airi Tooming: The Estonian Ministry of Defence conducted a survey that gauged, among other things, respondents' willingness to actively defend their country. Whereas average willingness is around 65 per cent, among members of the WVDO, it is over 90 per cent. A sense of patriotism is also significantly higher among our members, by dozens of percentage points.

Do people join our organisations because of their higher-than-average willingness to defend Estonia, or is this conviction fostered by participation in our activities? It's impossible to say. I think it works both ways.

What motivates your members to voluntarily spend weekends in the woods doing training exercises?

Airi Tooming: According to the study, it's mainly about self-fulfilment, contributing to national defence, having a sense of belonging, and developing individual skills. This all adds up to a holistic picture in which a person feels safe, they feel good about themselves, they develop their capabilities, and they become part of a team – while doing something useful from a defence perspective.

Ilmar Tamm: Neither the Defence League nor the WVDO engage in active recruitment campaigns, for instance via TV commercials. We rely on our members to do this. Those who are interested will find their way to our organisations. They generally feel driven to contribute to the collective good because their country is dear to them. As this sentiment can develop at any time in a person's life, we have no upper age limit for joining. A reservist in the regular army is released from duty at the age of 61, but it is possible to join the Defence League at any age.

People don't sign up for the Defence League because they like the prime minister or the governing party, and they don't quit when the party they support is no longer in power. They join because of other values, and that is very important. The Defence League is not the place to discuss politics.

That said, geopolitics does play a role. The survey that Airi mentioned was carried out in 2023 to analyse the jump in membership after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine the year before. This surge was not a sign of social panic but rather a very conscious decision by many people to express their willingness to defend the country. At present, we welcome between 600 and 800 new volunteers per year.

Airi Tooming: The catchphrase for those who joined in 2022 was, "I want to be a helper, not a needer." In times of crisis, people want to be of service to others rather than depend on their assistance.

Ilmar Tamm: One advantage of the Defence League over the military reserve force is that our volunteers can choose their own unit. This fosters self-initiative and experimentation. In some cases, the regular armed forces also benefit from that.

A good example is the development of drones. On the Ukrainian battlefield, drone technology is advancing at a rapid pace. This is a challenge for the army's formal structures. If they define a particular drone capability today, it may be obsolete in six months. The solution to this is continuous experimentation – and this is where the Defence League comes in. We have volunteer UAV fanatics doing innovative things in small groups. Some buy drone equipment, often with their own money or donations, while others travel to Ukraine to test it. On their return, they give feedback on the drones' operation, which is used to make improvements.

Last May, an experimental drone unit of the Defence League even took part in a major Estonian military exercise – Exercise Hedgehog – together with Ukrainian and other foreign troops. None of this would have been possible ten years ago. Back then, it was common for military equipment to be put into service with a delay of several years. Nowadays, our armed forces are much more responsive and flexible, thanks in large part to volunteers.

I want to stress that our contribution to society goes beyond military preparedness. For instance, during the weekend in early 2025 when all three Baltic states switched from the Russian power grid to the EU system, we assisted in guarding electricity infrastructure objects that were vulnerable to sabotage. The fact that we do not limit ourselves to military activities but have a wider role in protecting society resonates with our members.

Defence is a common asset for all of us, regardless of sex or gender. Why maintain the distinction between a largely male Defence League and an all-female WVDO?

Airi Tooming: Let me stress that men and women have an equal opportunity to join the Defence League, including the combat units. But we cannot ignore the fact that military service is still compulsory for men only; for women, it's voluntary. Therefore, far fewer women than men receive military training. The WVDO is a unique tool for involving women more effectively in national defence. If we didn't have this specific format for women, they would be even more distanced from the armed forces. It would be harder for them to make a contribution.

Our youth organisations introduce their members to the various military service pathways, with a special focus on options for girls. The skills that young people acquire within these organisations, from hiking to basic survival, have military relevance.

Moreover, the activities of the WVDO are contributing to the normalisation of women in defence. Its members know how to shoot a gun, follow military skills courses, and take part in military exercises. Many of them are mothers and therefore role models for their children. I would argue that these children grow up with a very different understanding of gender roles than previous generations. As society evolves, we will probably reach a point one day when it is considered natural for men and women to make a more equal contribution to defence.

Ilmar Tamm: I think our school system should start teaching young people about defence earlier on, from the age of 12 or 13. They need to develop an understanding of what national defence is and what its components are. To avoid encouraging militarism, children should be taught civics at an even earlier age: how to become a good citizen, and what it means to have a say in decision making.

The Defence League's youth organisations are also open to non-citizens. Does that help to protect young people belonging to the Russian-speaking minority from Moscow's propaganda?

Ilmar Tamm: We made that change in 2015 because we didn't want to exclude the young people who are in another information space. We wanted to involve them and introduce them to our activities. If you push them into the Russian information space now, in ten years' time, it will be basically impossible to integrate them into Estonian society.

In Narva, a town with a majority of Russian speakers, only a handful of young people were interested in national defence at first. Today, there are several hundred. They are motivated not so much by patriotism as by other passions, including the desire to have a community of friends to socialise with. We don't push them to communicate in Estonian. They generally speak Russian, but they have found a way to reconcile this with the values of our youth organisations.

How can civilians who are not part of the Defence League or the WVDO get involved in national defence, especially in the event of war?

Airi Tooming: We are aware that, if any kind of crisis escalates, we are likely to have people lining up at our door who want to help. We're currently working on a system to quickly direct them to places where they can be of assistance – not only to us, but also to our partner organisations.

Ilmar Tamm: Our members receive training in the basics of non-violent resistance. We are now adapting this course and the accompanying training materials for young people, so they can learn how to undermine an occupying force without putting themselves in danger. Ideally, this would be part of school curricula.

Wider society needs to understand that resistance isn't simply a matter for the armed forces, hiding out in the woods and carrying out attacks on the invaders. Society can resist in different ways; not everyone needs combat skills.

Major General **Ilmar Tamm** is the commander of the Estonian Defence League (Kaitseliit). Tamm joined the Estonian military in March 1992, shortly after the country regained its independence. He has since held a wide range of leadership and staff positions in Estonia and abroad, including within NATO. He played a key role in Estonia's accession to NATO and was one of the initiators of the alliance's Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn.

Airi Tooming is the chair of Estonia's Women's Voluntary Defence Organisation (Naiskodukaitse). Airi holds a master's degree in organisational behaviour and a bachelor's in semiotics and culturology. She joined the WVDO in 2000, subsequently rising through the ranks to become its head in 2006.

Imre Treufeld and **Maiko Mathiesen** are members of Degrowth Estonia (Tasaarengu Eesti).

Recom-mendations

Building Blocks for a Green Security Strategy

The transnational project *New Idealism for a Disrupted Europe* aimed to learn from the experiences and perspectives of politicians, thinkers, and practitioners in Central and Eastern Europe who take a strong stand on values such as democracy, human rights, self-determination, and the rule of law. The lessons imparted by these "neo-idealists" can be used to bolster Green geopolitical thinking.

In this section, we present these lessons in the form of building blocks for a Green strategy that addresses today's many security challenges, from geopolitics to ecology. In this era of polycrisis, Greens need an approach that is broad and values-based and avoids the pitfalls of short-termism, transactionalism, and tunnel vision. Above all, we need to be ready to defend what we hold dear.

The following recommendations were jointly developed by the project's four co-partners: Wetenschappelijk Bureau GroenLinks (NL), VONA (BE), the Association for International Affairs (AMO, CZ), and Degrowth Estonia (Tasaarengu Eesti, EE). While the recommendations are Europe-focused, they could also be taken up at national and local levels, providing inspiration for both election programmes and parliamentary initiatives.

Values-based security

1. Treat **values as interests**.[1] The values underlying global and European cooperation – including human dignity, democracy, human rights, freedom, equality, the rule of law, self-determination, peace, and sustainable development – are essential for state, human, and ecological security. Values underpin long-term strategy and breed trust between allies and partners. They can also galvanise civic engagement.

2. Translate values-as-interests into a **comprehensive concept of security**, spanning geopolitics, ecology, economy, society, and democracy. To effectively address the interconnected crises of war, ecological breakdown, inequality, and democratic erosion, silos must be broken down, whether between government departments, academic disciplines, or social movements.

3. At a time when autocracy is on the rise, prioritise the **defence of democracy**. The right to speak freely, assemble, mobilise, and participate in decision-making is fundamental to the protection of other rights and values.

In many areas, from peace and climate action to gender equality and health, democracies perform better on average than autocracies, not least because they provide scope for civic action.[2]

4. Drive forward Europe's capacity to act on its values. **Strategic agency** requires both hard and soft power. Europe must develop its capability to counter military attacks, hybrid warfare, and economic coercion. But it must also (re)gain the credibility it needs to play a leading role in tackling the climate crisis and other global challenges. For the EU, strategic agency implies institutional reform, aimed at swifter decision-making, greater democratic accountability, stronger judicial oversight, and a larger budget funded by own resources.

5. Be candid about **conflicting values**. Trade-offs inevitably involve compromise and often hurt parties' interests. Take measures to mitigate harm.

See the interview with Atte Harjanne in this report, in which the issue of landmines is discussed.

6. **Avoid double standards**. Apply values evenly and admit failures. The stark contrast between Europe's commitment to international law in Ukraine and its inaction on Israel's genocidal violence in Gaza[3] has undermined Europe's global standing.

7. Define **peace as justice**, not surrender to aggressors.[4] For peace to endure – in Ukraine, Gaza or elsewhere –, it must be built on international law, not least territorial integrity, the right to self-determination, and accountability for international crimes.

8. Talk honestly about the **price of security**. For decades, Europe has been overly reliant on cheap energy from Russia, cheap labour from China, and digital technology from the US. It outsourced part of its military security to the US and passed on the ecological costs of overconsumption to future generations. Breaking these bad habits will come at a cost. It will entail considerable investment in domestic renewable energy, critical industries, circular business models, and digital autonomy, alongside policies to reduce overconsumption. Europe will also have to spend more on external security – from defence and diplomacy to development cooperation and climate aid. One cannot be pitted against the other.

9. Ensure that investments in defence are not at the expense of the most vulnerable in our societies. Our **social protection** systems are part of what we seek to defend. By fostering civic resilience, they also contribute to our defence. It is primarily up to the wealthy to make a greater contribution to the security of the societies that have enabled them to prosper. Increase taxes on high wealth, capital growth, and corporate income, as well as on the luxury consumption that is a key driver of ecological breakdown. Curb tax competition.

See the interview with Justīne Pantelējeva and Tomas Tomilinas in this report: "Tax the rich."

Diplomacy

10. Strengthen **alliances with democratic states** and actors worldwide, in order to push back against autocratisation and imperialism. Allies bring more resources and greater legitimacy. Leverage the Coalition of the Willing, some 35 countries that have pledged support for Ukraine against Russian aggression, for broader cooperation between democratic allies.

11. Recognise the **agency of smaller states**. Do not treat the EU's neighbours as "buffer states". Instead of spheres of influence, promote spheres of integration.[5]

12. Revitalise the **EU enlargement** process without compromising on the criteria of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and alignment with EU foreign policies. Stop condoning autocratic tendencies in the Western Balkans. Empower civil society in candidate countries and draw lessons from their fight against corruption, foreign interference, and extractivism. Work steadfastly towards the accession of Ukraine and Moldova. Make clear that Norway, Iceland, and Greenland are welcome to join the EU.[6]

13. Strengthen ties with (more or less) **democratic countries in the Global and Plural South**. Highlight the common interest in salvaging and strengthening the rules-based order, inter alia by protecting international courts, making the UN Security Council more effective and representative, restoring a multilateral trade regime, and moving forward on climate and biodiversity agreements despite US obstruction. Pursue non-exclusive partnerships, including trade, aid, green industrialisation, and legal migration.

14. Build bridges between Western democratic and post-colonial world views. Embrace the **indivisibility of human rights**[7] – the principle that civil and political rights must go hand in hand with economic, social, and cultural rights –, thereby pushing back against narratives that paint human rights as a Western "civilising mission" and, in the case of autocratic China, aim to shift rights from humans to states.[8]

15. Utilise the diplomatic networks of European states and the EU to **strengthen Ukraine's voice** in the world and to counter Russian propaganda.

See the essay "Rethinking Solidarity: Lessons from Ukraine's Approach to the Majority World" in this report.

Defence

16. Step up **support for Ukraine**. Prioritise arms exports to Ukraine over other destinations. Broaden import bans against Russia, strengthen other sanctions, and tighten enforcement. Ukraine is Europe's first line of defence against Russian imperialism. Ukrainians are fighting for our values.

17. Work towards meeting NATO's **defence spending targets** – not to please Trump but to take responsibility for our own security. Accelerate the build-up of Europe's military capabilities by spending not just more, but more wisely. Create economies of scale and ensure interoperability by means of joint procurement. Tax any windfall profits in the defence industry.

18. Be prepared for the end of NATO or a NATO without the US. Pursue an **autonomous European pillar within NATO** that is interoperable with US forces but no longer dependent on them. To that end, European NATO must acquire (more of) its own strategic enablers, for instance in the areas of command and control, intelligence, and communications.

19. Build this European pillar **within the EU framework** as far as possible, making use of the treaty provisions allowing flexible integration and the participation of non-EU allies, such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO).[9] Combining military capabilities with the EU's other external instruments and regulatory power would foster a comprehensive approach to security and democratic accountability and ensure a voice for smaller states. In addition to purchasing and managing strategic enablers, the EU should invite (smaller) members to merge their militaries into an EU armed force and operationalise its mutual defence clause[10] as a backup to NATO's Article 5.

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20. Extend the French and British nuclear capability into a **nuclear deterrent** for European NATO. This would be far less damaging to the Non-Proliferation Treaty than further NATO members developing their own nuclear weapons.

21. Continue engaging in **arms control** forums, with respect to nuclear, conventional, and automated weapons. Arms control agreements are made between adversaries, not allies. History shows that such agreements can be reached even at times of heightened tension.[11]

22. Step up the **greening of defence**. Ensure transparency on military greenhouse gas emissions along the value chain. Bring military CO2 emissions under the EU emissions trading system (ETS) to ensure any rise is offset by reductions in other sectors. Such a move would also serve to foster electrification, the uptake of renewable fuels, and energy efficiency in the sector. Set ecodesign standards for military hardware and introduce green procurement.[12] A more efficient use of energy and (critical) materials will improve resilience ("greener and leaner").

23. Synergise military and environmental security by **restoring wetlands**[13] **and forests**,[•] in particular along NATO's eastern border. These ecosystems act as natural defences against invaders, support wildlife, and store carbon. To the same end, rewild roadside verges and riverbanks and green built-up areas.[14]

[•] See the interview with Justīne Pantelējeva and Tomas Tomilinas in this report.

24. Foster citizens' **readiness to participate in either military or civil defence**, by increasing social justice and deepening democracy. People will be more willing to risk their lives for their country if they feel they have a stake and a say in society. Make the military more attractive for enlisted soldiers, conscripts, and reservists, regardless of gender, by reshaping it to fit the needs and aspirations of younger generations.[15]

Trade and aid

25. **Diversify supply chains** away from China and the US. Assist developing countries that supply critical raw materials in capturing a larger part of the value chain through investments, technology transfer, and support for good governance.

26. Ensure the EU's **Global Gateway** investments in the Global South bring tangible improvements to the lives of ordinary citizens. This starts by consulting them. Prevent an overreliance on loans. Do better than China and the US.

27. Reverse the deregulation trend that sidelines sustainability and human rights in business. **Fair trade and investment** foster long-term security of supply.

28. Fund defence spending without taking money away from the **world's poorest people**. Put equal effort into achieving the international target for development assistance (0.7 per cent GNI) and NATO's defence spending targets.

29. Mainstream **feminist foreign policy,** especially in the areas of trade, security cooperation, and post-war reconstruction. The active redistribution of power, resources, and voice in favour of women and other disadvantaged groups is essential for democratic legitimacy and conducive to peace.[16]

Economy and ecology

30. Stick to the goals of the **European Green Deal** in order to bring the European economy back within planetary boundaries, boost green investment and innovation, reducing fossil fuel dependency – which shores up autocratic regimes –, and mitigate the costs of ecological disruption and adaptation. Set an EU roadmap to **phase out fossil fuels**.[17]

31. Boost the **circular economy** to keep materials in the loop and reduce import dependency. Complement policies aimed at resource efficiency with a programme for **sufficiency**, aimed at reducing resource-intensive (over)consumption.

32. Prepare for **post-growth**. There can be no infinite material growth on a finite planet. Transforming business, finance, and taxation to reduce their dependence on GDP growth increases resilience against ecological and geopolitical disruption.[18] Promote broader concepts of freedom[19] and human flourishing beyond consumerism.

33. Gear research and development policies towards sustainability and **strategic indispensability**. The latter implies pursuing EU leadership in a number of key technologies that others find difficult to do without. This would discourage systemic rivals from weaponising economic dependencies. Green tech can serve both purposes.

34. Reduce the EU's dependence on the US dollar and US-based payment systems by introducing a **digital euro**,[20] issuing Eurobonds, and making the euro the currency of the green transition.[21]

35. As the EU, (re)take the lead in negotiating and implementing **global agreements** that combat climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and pandemics. Deliver on climate finance commitments.

Democratic resilience

36. Strengthen **EU oversight of the rule of law**, fundamental rights and democracy within its member states. Advance the Article 7 procedure against Hungary to the sanctions phase. Be more resolute in deploying infringement actions and EU funding conditionality against member states that flout the EU's founding values.[22]

37. Step up the **fight against corruption** – in the EU, in candidate countries, and in dealings by European businesses and governments with the outside world. Kleptocracy and autocracy go hand in hand.[23]

38. Strengthen the **European Democracy Shield** to counter disinformation, election interference, and other forms of manipulation, both foreign and domestic.[24] Enforce EU digital rules instead of weakening them under US pressure. Prohibit the trade in personal data, profiling-based recommender systems, and addictive design, thereby reducing the oligopolistic power of US platforms that are being weaponised for autocratic regime change in Europe. Step up government support for non-profit, open-source, and federated social networks.

39. Build the EuroStack[25] for greater **digital autonomy**. This requires public and private investment, guided by democratic values, in all layers of a European digital ecosystem – including chip production, satellites, cloud services, platforms, open-source software, and safe, human rights-compliant AI –, backed up by regulation and public procurement. Invite Europe's democratic allies to join the effort.

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40. Support a free, independent, and pluralistic **media landscape**. Extend "due prominence" rules to guide users of social media, search engines, and generative AI towards trustworthy journalism.[26] Increase funding for investigative journalism.

Due prominence requires self-regulatory standards, such as those of the Journalism Trust Initiative, and independent oversight. See endnote.

41. Strengthen **civic and media education**. Help children enjoy books. **Reading** allows us to understand the perspectives of people who are unlike us and fosters in-depth reasoning, making us more resilient against populist simplifications and disinformation.[27]

42. Protect the **freedom of the arts and sciences** by law[28] and by constitution. Come to the rescue of international research projects contributing to the global public good, such as climate research, that are disrupted by the US government's attack on science.

43. Support a vibrant **civil society** and defend the right of NGOs to influence policy-making. Civic engagement underpins resilience within democracies.

44. **Protect parliamentary democracy** against executive overreach, even in times of crisis. Simultaneously, **deepen democracy**, including through citizens' assemblies,[29] future design,[30] participatory budgeting,[31] and support for commons,[32] whereby citizens jointly manage shared resources. Participation enhances trust in public institutions.[33]

45. Make good on democracy's unfulfilled promise of **socio-economic equality** to foster social trust, cohesion, and democracy. Pursue redistributive policies with a focus on meeting basic needs. Level the lobbying playing field: powerful private and commercial interests should no longer have privileged access to decision-makers.

See the essay "Realism Failed – It's Time for a New Idealism" in this report.

46. Tackle Western democracies' blind spot: **economic democracy**. Shift power within companies from shareholders to stakeholders, including workers and nature. This would also help shift companies' focus from quarterly results to long-term value creation.

International democracy support

47. Treat democracy as a vital part of **collective security**; it fosters peace. Protect and promote democratic institutions and practices worldwide, inter alia through electoral assistance, support for civic participation, and diplomacy. Anchoring democracy requires long-term, context-sensitive commitment. In the event of democratic backsliding, repurpose funds towards civil society and independent media. If democratic openings occur, scale up support.

See the essay "Europe, Stand Up for Democracy Worldwide" in this report.

48. Within **international organisations**, push back against attempts by authoritarian governments to sideline democracy and human rights, including by subverting their meaning[34] or introducing fake NGOs.[35]

49. Support **democratic Taiwan** against aggression by mainland China. Taiwan's pluralist democracy gives the lie to Beijing's claim that democracy is a Western invention and incompatible with Asian culture.[36] Make it clear to Beijing that the EU and allies would meet an attack on Taiwan with tough sanctions – to the point of inflicting pain on themselves.

Civil crisis preparedness

50. In fostering the readiness of society for large-scale disruption, be it from war or wildfires, go beyond individual preparedness. Stimulate and facilitate **community prepping**, for instance by encouraging people to get to know their neighbours, find a preparedness buddy,[37] share resources within homeowners and tenants' associations, or take part in community-based emergency response training.

See the essay "Defence as a Commons: The Estonian Example" in this report.

51. **Strengthen the civic fabric** for greater societal resilience. A sense of community cannot be created by decree; it must be nurtured by inviting people to meet and work together. It requires a social infrastructure, including attractive public spaces, neighbourhood centres, parent-involved schools, sports and cultural facilities, repair shops, and community food gardens. This is where people develop commitment, empathy, and trust – the qualities that save lives in a crisis.

52. Work towards a **more relaxed society** in which people have time to volunteer. Allow employees to work partly from home or to reduce their contractual hours. Provide decent parental and caregiver leave. In the event of labour market shortages, consider alternatives before extending the average working week: downsizing sectors of questionable social utility (such as commercial advertising), organising labour migration, or raising the retirement age.

53. Give **NGOs and community groups** a seat at the table in emergency planning. This will help ensure that no resources or needs are overlooked. To the same end, consider organising citizens' assemblies on crisis preparedness.

54. Integrate crisis preparedness into **education curricula** in an age-appropriate manner. Include the teaching of practical skills, from map reading to water purification.

55. Seize upon the all-hazards approach in the EU's Preparedness Union Strategy[38] to **narrow the divide in Europe** over threat perceptions. Since preparations for war and sabotage in Eastern Europe have significant overlap with those for floods, heatwaves, and wildfires in Southern Europe, exchanging good practice could foster mutual understanding of different security environments and concerns.

See the interview with Mārtiņš Staķis and Carlos Corrochano in this report.

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New Idealism for a Disrupted Europe

Putin's invasion of Ukraine and the crumbling of the world order are forcing Greens to do some long, hard thinking about security. This report does just that, with few taboos. Using the concept of "neo-idealism" as a starting point, it draws lessons from the experiences of the Central and Eastern European countries that were the first to raise the alarm about the revival of Russian imperialism. The essays and interviews it contains explore a values-driven approach to military and civil resilience. They highlight the importance of diplomacy and democracy promotion worldwide and of strengthening the social fabric at home for both geopolitical and ecological security. This approach is all the more relevant in the face of a US administration that scorns Europe and can no longer be trusted as an ally.

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