

Resilient Democracy: How Russia's Hybrid War Is Forcing Europe's Frontline States to Reinvent Democratic Self-Defence

Calling political opponents “the three-headed spy party of war” or “the three-headed mafia” is not the language normally associated with most successful democratic transitions. But these unusually combative statements [were made](#) in the aftermath of his electoral victory by Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and were directed at the leaders of the three principal pro-Russian opposition parties.

Pashinyan's remark encapsulates the dilemma confronting Armenia: having concluded that Russia seeks to reverse his country's westward drift, the PM increasingly treats the pro-Russian opposition as a national security threat rather than a potential democratic alternative. Whether this represents necessary democratic self-defence or an illiberal turn is one of the defining questions facing almost all frontline democracies today.

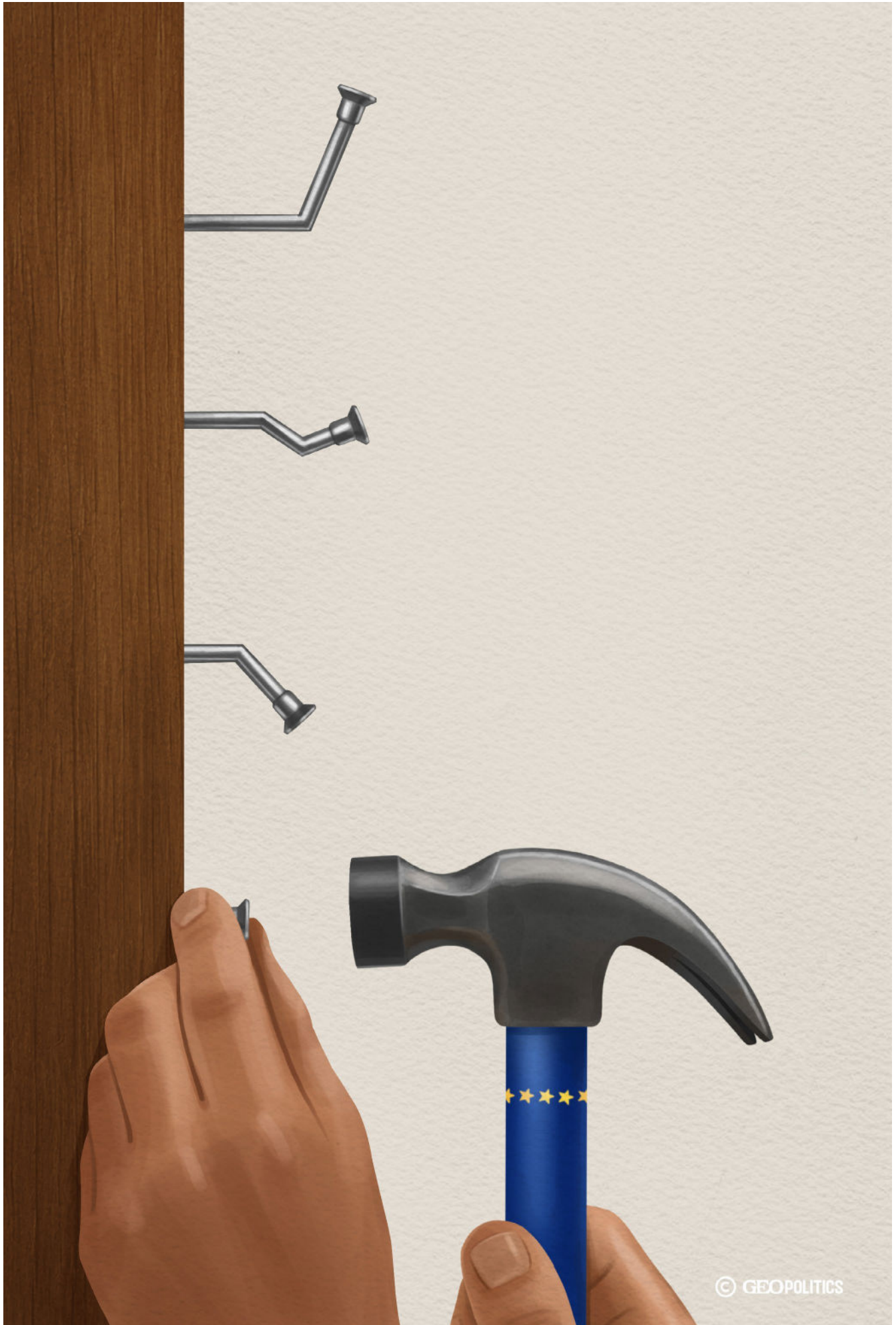
Democracy and New Security Dilemma

Moldova's democratic and pro-European government also went through similar dilemmas: it [suspended](#) the licenses of several TV stations and blocked dozens of websites spreading Russian disinformation or serving sanctioned individuals, [outlawed](#) some political parties (e.g., fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor's party), expanded surveillance and counter-intelligence powers, and followed the policy of strict enforcement of already strong legislation against vote-buying and foreign funding. Moldova's international partners all agree on extensive Russian hybrid activities and consider the Russian interference threat to be genuine. At the same time, organizations focused on democracy and media freedom have expressed concern that some restrictions, particularly media closures and website/platform blocking without robust judicial review, could undermine freedom of expression and create precedents that might be misused in the future.



THORNIKE GORDADZE
Contributor

Thornike Gordadze, a Franco-Georgian academic and former State Minister for European and Euro-Atlantic Integration in Georgia (2010-12), served as the Chief Negotiator for Georgia on the Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU. From 2014 to 2020, he led the Research and Studies Department at the Institute for Higher National Defense Studies in Paris. A Senior Fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) from 2021 to 2022, he currently teaches at Sciences Po in Paris and is an Eastern Neighbourhood and Black Sea program fellow at the Jacques Delors Institute. Gordadze, also a Senior Researcher at the research institute Gnomon Wise, holds a PhD in Political Science from Sciences Po Paris (2005).



In Ukraine, even more far-reaching measures have been adopted. These include [banning](#) several political parties, [consolidating](#) television news into a single nationwide broadcast under the United News platform, expanding surveillance powers to investigate espionage, sabotage, and collaboration, and [restricting](#) certain religious organizations deemed to pose national security risks. Most of these measures have been enabled by martial law, under which international law permits states, during a full-scale armed conflict, to temporarily derogate from certain rights and freedoms.

At the same time, one of the more encouraging features of Ukraine's wartime experience has been the resilience of its democratic institutions and political culture. Despite the concentration of executive power that inevitably accompanies martial law, the government has not been insulated from public scrutiny. On several occasions, decisions taken by the presidential administration that were perceived as overreaching encountered swift and forceful resistance from civil society, independent media, anti-corruption activists and the broader public. The backlash against legislation seen as undermining the independence of Ukraine's anti-corruption institutions, as well as the criticism surrounding the dismissal of a widely respected defense minister, demonstrated that organized civic pressure continues to shape political outcomes even in wartime. In both cases, the authorities were compelled to reconsider or modify their approach.

Ukraine's democracy has survived the strains of war and has continued to function as a system in which executive authority remains subject to meaningful societal constraints. That is no small achievement for a country fighting a war of survival.

These episodes showcase that Ukraine's democracy has survived the strains of war and has continued to

function as a system in which executive authority remains subject to meaningful societal constraints. That is no small achievement for a country fighting a war of survival. If anything, the repeated capacity of Ukrainian society to mobilize in defense of institutional checks and balances suggests that democratic norms have become more deeply embedded since 2014. Measured against the experience of other democracies confronting acute security threats, Ukraine has demonstrated a striking degree of institutional resilience. This does not diminish the serious challenges that remain, but it does provide reason to believe that, once the conditions of war recede, Ukrainian democracy is likely to emerge more mature, more accountable, and ultimately more consolidated.

Coming back to the Armenian case, where the [election result](#) (Pashinyan slightly under 50% of votes) has strengthened Yerevan's confidence in pursuing countries strategic reorientation, it also raised a series of significant domestic challenges: controversies surrounding the government's vision of a "Real Armenia", tensions with the Armenian Apostolic Church, and growing skepticism among segments of both the younger generation and the diaspora have all emerged as sources of political vulnerability.

Increasingly, Pashinyan appears to have concluded that only far-reaching and decisive measures can overcome these perils and secure a comprehensive reform of the state and its institutions in order to anchor it firmly within the Western sphere. To prevent the emergence of a destabilizing domestic front, the Armenian authorities now appear to be stepping up their campaign against Russian influence within the country. In the government's view, that influence is embodied primarily by political parties and media organizations maintaining close ties with Moscow.

The Armenian PM's statements have recently begun to take tangible form. None of the three leading figures of the pro-Russian opposition has reportedly [been allowed](#) to leave the country, and

one of them, billionaire Gagik Tsarukyan, leader of Prosperous Armenia, was already [arrested](#) on fraud and money-laundering charges in a spectacular police operation that put his flashy, luxurious lifestyle on public display.

As in Moldova, the government is also determined to enforce electoral legislation prohibiting vote-buying and other forms of electoral manipulation. Activists and representatives affiliated with the three opposition parties [were detained](#) before and during polling day. The Anti-Corruption Committee, which is conducting the investigation, is expected to determine whether these actions were isolated initiatives undertaken by individual activists or part of a coordinated and centralized effort to interfere with the electoral process. Mr. Pashinyan has already warned that any political party found guilty of electoral fraud could face prohibition.

Such prospects have inevitably raised concerns among observers who view Armenian democracy as still fragile and only partially consolidated. Critics caution against an overly heavy-handed approach towards political opponents, even when those opponents are widely perceived as aligned with Russian interests.

The Failure of Gradualism

What makes the evolution in Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine particularly noteworthy is the contrast with these countries' earlier approach to reform. Pashinyan, who came to power in 2018 on the back of the Velvet Revolution, and previous pro-European Moldovan governments were initially distinguished by their caution and gradualism. In neighboring Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili had pursued rapid and sweeping transformations several years earlier. Pashinyan repeatedly stressed that he sought to learn not only from the successes of the Georgian experience but also from its shortcomings. His objective was to avoid disrupting Armenian society and its post-Soviet elites too abruptly, thereby minimizing resistance to change.

Pashinyan repeatedly stressed that he sought to learn not only from the successes of the Georgian experience but also from its shortcomings.

Over the past two to three years, however, a discernible shift has taken place in both Armenia and Moldova. The countries' leaderships appear to have accelerated the pace of reform and embraced a more radical course than the one they once advocated. Indeed, Pashinyan now seems, in some respects, more radical than Mr. Saakashvili. The Georgian leader launched ambitious reforms at the outset of his tenure, then gradually slowed their pace as his political capital diminished. The Armenian prime minister appears to be following the opposite trajectory.

The apparent lesson he has drawn is that gradualism ultimately undermines reform.

The apparent lesson he has drawn is that gradualism ultimately undermines reform. Slow-moving change, in this view, creates space for entrenched interests to regroup, strengthens counter-revolutionary forces and jeopardizes the broader transformation of the state. Radical reform, therefore, becomes not merely an option but a necessity.

Pashinyan, Sandu, and Zelenskyy are also likely counting on stronger Western backing than Saakashvili ever enjoyed to sustain this strategy. They will hope to find understanding, and perhaps tacit backing among European capitals should more forceful measures become necessary in their campaign to dismantle Russian influence and secure their countries' westward alignment. For the time being, all three have this unwavering support.

If the West, and Europe in particular, is engaged in a hybrid war against Russian revisionism, which seeks to undermine, and ultimately dismantle, our

political model by exploiting the very instruments of democracy, including elections and freedom of expression, then what should be the appropriate response of democracies?

Romania's 2024 presidential election appears to have been a watershed, jolting European governments into recognizing the scale of foreign interference and information warfare targeting their democracies.

There are signs that Europe is beginning to respond. Romania's 2024 [presidential election](#) appears to have been a watershed, jolting European governments into recognizing the scale of foreign interference and information warfare targeting their democracies. Since then, the debate has shifted, with policymakers increasingly treating these threats as matters of national security rather than merely electoral integrity. Yet two fundamental questions remain. Will these measures prove sufficient to counter increasingly sophisticated forms of external subversion allied with local corrupt and predatory oligarchs? And, in seeking to defend democracy, could the governments de facto erode the very liberal principles they are trying to protect, setting their societies on a path toward democratic backsliding and authoritarianism?

The Forgotten Story of How the West Defended Itself During the Cold War

Given the scale of the challenge, should democracies not go further? The gravity of the threat may warrant a re-examination of the lessons of the early Cold War years, when Western states developed robust mechanisms to protect their political systems against a systemic adversary.

The crucial difference with the period of 1945–50, however, is the absence of the actor that once led

that effort. The United States no longer regards (let's hope, temporarily) the defense of liberal democracy as the central organizing principle of its foreign policy. At times, Washington appears to move in precisely the opposite direction, prioritizing other strategic or transactional considerations.

If a geopolitical Europe and a genuine European defense capability are finally to come of age, the responsibility can no longer be outsourced. Europe itself must assume it.

In these circumstances, if a geopolitical Europe and a genuine European defense capability are finally to come of age, the responsibility can no longer be outsourced. Europe itself must assume it. Safeguarding the continent's democratic institutions, protecting the integrity of its information space and defending its political sovereignty must become core strategic priorities for the European project in the years ahead.

During the Cold War, the United States and its allies used a very wide spectrum of methods, some democratic, some covert, and some even controversial, to prevent communist parties from gaining power in Western Europe. The fear was not only a Soviet military invasion. It was that communist parties could come to power through elections, especially in countries where they were strong after World War II, such as Italy, France, or Greece.

After 1945, communist parties enjoyed enormous prestige because many communists had played major roles in resistance movements against Nazi occupation. This was particularly true since Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union and the 1939 Nazi-Communist pact to fight together against liberal democracy was disrupted. In several countries, communist parties became mass political forces: in Italy, the Communist Party was the largest in Western Europe. In France, communists were a major political force and participated in government

immediately after the war, and in Greece, communist-led forces nearly won a civil war (1946–49).

American policymakers increasingly viewed these developments through the lens of containment: preventing further expansion of Soviet influence. Everyone remembers the economic stabilization role played by the [Marshall Plan](#), one of the most important, and arguably most legitimate, tools of this containment. The logic of pouring billions of dollars into destroyed Europe was to prevent economic collapse, which breeds political extremism. At the same time, prosperity would have reduced support for revolutionary movements. It was believed that stable democracies would be less likely to align with Moscow. This approach worked. Western European economies genuinely recovered rapidly, helping undermine the appeal of revolutionary politics.

The “Gray Zone” of Democratic Defense

However, it would be naive to assume that economic assistance alone was sufficient. History offers numerous examples where substantial financial aid failed to consolidate democracy, allowing anti-Western political forces to prevail. Iran between 1958 and 1979, Egypt since Anwar El-Sadat, Venezuela, Afghanistan, and even Russia, which received approximately USD 40 billion in Western financial assistance during the 1990s, illustrate the limits of economic support as a tool of political transformation.

One could argue that many of these cases involve countries outside Europe with limited democratic traditions. Yet even in Western Europe, the consolidation of democratic institutions proved far from straightforward.

Take the case of Italy and its 1948 elections. The U.S. government feared victory by the coalition that included the powerful Italian Communist Party. American actions reportedly included

large-scale financial support to anti-communist parties, propaganda campaigns, and encouraging Italian-Americans to write letters to relatives in Italy. Leonardo Sciascia, in his novel *La Zia d'America* and his even more famous *Todo Modo*, describes how the Christian Democrats won the highly disputed 1948 elections, with U.S./CIA [involvement](#), and how 25 years later the system created to prevent Italy falling under communists produced or at least reinforced other political pathologies, such as corruption, clientelism and morally decaying political elites.

Many historians regard political events in postwar Italy as one of the first major CIA political operations. The anti-communist coalition won decisively; this was a success, but critics argue it represented foreign interference in a sovereign democratic election.

The Western governments, particularly Washington, also supported non-communist trade unions to prevent communist domination of workers' movements. The latter, supported by Moscow, were influential in labor movements across Europe. The U.S. therefore funded and encouraged rival labor organizations. Declassified archives showed that in France, for example, anti-communist unions received support from across the Atlantic. The CIA involved American trade unions to limit the influence of the powerful CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail), heavily influenced by the communists. A new splinter workers' trade union, FO (Force Ouvrière), was created; its support for democratic socialism, European integration, and participation in Western institutions (versus CGT's revolutionary rhetoric) broke the quasi-monopoly of the CGT on workers' organizations. In the same manner, a Catholic workers' trade union – CFTC (Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens) was created.

In the immediate aftermath of WW2, the communist and pro-Soviet attitudes were even more dominant among European intellectuals, philosophers,

writers, artists, academics, cinema and theatre personalities in France, Italy, Germany, the UK, etc. CIA secretly financed numerous organizations involved in journalism, publishing, academic exchanges, student groups, and cultural programs. One famous example was the Congress for Cultural Freedom, founded in West Berlin in 1950, whose objective was to win the “battle of ideas” against the Soviet Union. Personalities such as Arthur Koestler, Raymond Aron, Hannah Arendt, or Isaiah Berlin were involved, even if most of them ignored CIA connections until it was publicly exposed in the late 1960’s. It sponsored magazines, conferences, and intellectual exchanges throughout Europe.

The case of Greece was much more violent. During the Greek Civil War, communist-led insurgents fought the Greek government. The U.S. intervened heavily with military and economic aid, advisors, and intelligence support. This became a foundational example of the Truman Doctrine. The communist insurgency was defeated. However, Greece’s political development afterward remained troubled, and anti-communism often justified restrictions on civil liberties.

In West Germany, the U.S., Britain, and France promoted democratic institutions, economic recovery, integration into Western alliances, and anti-communist political forces. The Communist Party remained marginal in West Germany, largely through institutional and economic means rather than the kinds of election interventions seen in Italy.

The Western intelligence services, in connection with NATO, went further in creating “Stay-behind” networks across several European countries (Italy, France, Benelux, West Germany) intended to resist a possible Soviet invasion and organize underground resistance if Western Europe were to be occupied. These organizations could have been involved in some cover-up actions and political manipulation, as several researchers and investigations alleged, particularly in Italy (Operation Gladio). The extent of those connections still remains debated among

historians, but some claims are well documented, as Giulio Andreotti himself (several times the President of the Council, aka Prime Minister of Italy) [revealed](#) in the Italian Parliament in 1990. Others remain controversial or insufficiently proven.

The story becomes even less flattering to the West when the U.S., in the name of resistance to Soviet expansionism, supported governments, security services, or political actors whose democratic credentials were questionable if they were seen as bulwarks against communism. This happened in Greece under the Colonels (1967-74). Even if the U.S. did not organize the coup, many critics argue Washington tolerated or accommodated the regime because it was strongly anti-communist and strategically important within NATO.

Western intelligence services cooperated extensively against communist organizations. This included surveillance, infiltration, and counterintelligence operations. Communist parties in countries such as France and Italy were closely monitored for Soviet influence and funding. Some operations were legal; others occupied gray areas of legality and democratic accountability.

Most historians today would say that the West’s anti-communist strategy in Europe contained both democratic and undemocratic elements.

Most historians today would say that the West’s anti-communist strategy in Europe contained both democratic and undemocratic elements. On one hand, economic reconstruction, support for democratic institutions, free elections, and political competition helped create stable democratic states. On the other hand, covert election interference, secret funding operations, propaganda campaigns, support for some authoritarian actors, and intelligence activities with limited oversight often conflicted with the democratic values the West claimed to defend.

This tension, defending democracy while sometimes using undemocratic methods, became one of the defining contradictions of the Cold War in Western Europe.

Hybrid War Changes the Rules

For nearly three decades after the end of the Cold War, Europe lived under a comfortable illusion: that every consolidated democracy could afford to become ever more open politically. More pluralism, greater freedom of expression, freer movement of capital, deeper digital connectivity, greater transparency – each new layer of openness seemed to strengthen democracy almost automatically. That era is over.

Vladimir Putin's Russia, alongside other authoritarian powers, has fundamentally altered the nature of geopolitical competition. Rather than exporting a universal ideology comparable to Soviet communism, it exports something arguably more effective: a method. Its strategy is to exploit the vulnerabilities of open societies. Elections become targets of influence operations, media become vehicles for information warfare, social media platforms become psychological weapons, political parties become channels for foreign influence, and civil liberties themselves become the infrastructure through which democratic systems are destabilized.

In other words, democracy is attacked not despite its principles, but through them.

This transformation challenges one of the deepest assumptions of post-Cold War liberal thought: that democratic institutions are naturally capable of protecting themselves. They are not.

This transformation challenges one of the deepest assumptions of post-Cold War liberal thought: that democratic institutions are naturally capable of protecting themselves. They are not.

Karl Popper anticipated part of the problem in his famous “paradox of tolerance”: unlimited tolerance ultimately allows the intolerant to destroy a tolerant society. The twenty-first century, however, requires us to reformulate that paradox. Today's threat does not primarily come from actors openly declaring their intention to abolish democracy. It comes from foreign states that use democratic institutions to produce profoundly anti-democratic outcomes.

Democracy therefore faces an unprecedented challenge: its own institutional architecture has become a theatre of geopolitical conflict. The frontline democracies of Eastern Europe – Ukraine, Moldova and Armenia, but also states in the Western Balkans and even those inside the EU (Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary) already live in this reality.

Georgia demonstrates why this debate is anything but theoretical. When Bidzina Ivanishvili and his Georgian Dream party won the 2012 parliamentary elections, the peaceful transfer of power was widely celebrated as evidence of Georgia's democratic maturity. Mikheil Saakashvili's earlier efforts to prevent what he regarded as the takeover of the state by a Russian-backed oligarch, at times stretching the boundaries of the rule of law, were widely criticized as inconsistent with democratic principles both by the Georgian civil society and Georgia's Western friends.

Thirteen years later, that interpretation appears ridiculous. Today Georgia is an authoritarian state in the process of consolidation, with dozens of political prisoners, suffocating media, decimated civil society, and aggressive anti-Europeanism as the regime's official ideology.

The country's democratic decline did not begin with a revolution. It began with an election. Democracy was not overthrown; it was repurposed for state capture and alignment with Moscow's geopolitical agenda.

Under certain circumstances, losing one election may eventually mean losing the possibility of genuinely competitive elections altogether. This explains why governments in Kyiv, Erevan and Chişinău have adopted measures that some local and European observers regard with discomfort.

That distinction is crucial. It means that, under certain circumstances, losing one election may eventually mean losing the possibility of genuinely competitive elections altogether. This explains why governments in Kyiv, Erevan and Chişinău have adopted measures that some local and European observers regard with discomfort.

None of the measures described at the beginning of this paper is politically or legally trivial. Each carries a genuine risk of abuse. Yet condemning them in the abstract, through the lens of an idealized liberalism detached from geopolitical reality, risks misunderstanding the nature of the threat itself. In the past, immediately after the end of the WW2, Western European democracies confronted a strategic dilemma remarkably similar in structure, a revealing precedent that Europe has largely forgotten.

The response extended far beyond the Marshall Plan. It included covert financial support for political parties, intelligence operations, information campaigns and discreet interventions intended to prevent democratic systems from being captured by a totalitarian rival. Many of those operations remain controversial today; some undoubtedly violated democratic principles.

Yet they remind us of an uncomfortable historical truth: liberal democracies themselves have, at moments of existential danger, concluded that their survival required extraordinary instruments. The real question, therefore, is not whether democracies

have the right to defend themselves. Every constitutional democracy already accepts that principle. The more difficult question is this: how can a democracy defend itself without beginning to abandon the very values it seeks to preserve?

The real question, therefore, is not whether democracies have the right to defend themselves. Every constitutional democracy already accepts that principle. The more difficult question is this: how can a democracy defend itself without beginning to abandon the very values it seeks to preserve?

From Militant to Resilient Democracy

This is where a constitutional concept developed in post-war Germany deserves renewed attention: wehrhafte Demokratie, the idea of a democracy capable of defending itself. The founders of the Federal Republic drew an essential lesson from the collapse of the Weimar Republic. A democracy cannot remain entirely neutral toward those determined to destroy it.

A democracy cannot remain entirely neutral toward those determined to destroy it.

It must possess legal instruments enabling it to ban openly anti-constitutional organizations and protect the constitutional order against actors seeking to exploit democratic freedoms in order to eliminate them.

That insight remains profoundly relevant, yet today it is no longer sufficient. The contemporary threat does not come only from domestic anti-democratic movements, but also comes from foreign states capable of using perfectly legal organizations as instruments of hybrid warfare.

Militant democracy must therefore evolve, and it must become resilient democracy. A democracy willing to adopt exceptional defensive measures while simultaneously subjecting those measures to exceptional safeguards.

That is where the true constitutional red line lies: not in whether restrictions exist, but in whether those restrictions themselves remain subject to democratic control. Any limitation of democratic freedoms should satisfy several essential conditions: a) it must be based on demonstrable evidence of foreign interference; b) it must be authorized through independent judicial procedures; c) it must remain strictly proportionate; d) it must be temporary; e) it must remain reviewable by both national courts and European judicial institutions. In other words, a democracy may occasionally restrict certain rights. It may never suspend the mechanisms through which those restrictions themselves are scrutinized. This is likely to become one of the defining constitutional debates of the coming decade.

Yet Armenia, Ukraine, and Moldova will not be able to navigate this transition alone. They will require sustained support, primarily from Europe. This is also why European Union enlargement should be understood as something far more significant than a neighborhood policy. Accession should serve as a form of constitutional discipline, and not just a reward.

Europe therefore does more than protect these democracies; it also helps prevent them from becoming what they are fighting against. Closing the door to EU membership would have the opposite effect.

The Copenhagen criteria, the European Commission's oversight, the jurisprudence of the Court of Justice of the European Union, and the broader

European legal order create institutional guardrails that substantially reduce the risk of emergency powers evolving into permanent authoritarianism. Europe therefore does more than protect these democracies; it also helps prevent them from becoming what they are fighting against. Closing the door to EU membership would have the opposite effect. Without a credible European horizon, governments under constant security pressure would have fewer incentives to preserve liberal constraints. At the same time, societies could conclude that the sacrifices made in the name of Europe lead nowhere, allowing disillusionment to become one of Moscow's most effective strategic assets.

Europe therefore faces a historic choice. It can continue to apply identical democratic standards as though Stockholm, Lisbon, Chişinău, and Kyiv operated in identical strategic environments. Alternatively, it can acknowledge that a new category of states has emerged on Europe's eastern frontier: democracies engaged in permanent hybrid conflict and requiring a distinct doctrine of democratic self-defense.

A responsible approach means establishing clear red lines, supporting independent institutions, and promoting civic education. It also calls for substantial economic and financial engagement aimed at strengthening these countries' political and institutional stability while enhancing the resilience of their economies against potential Russian coercion. Diversifying energy supplies and developing alternative trade routes should form integral parts of this strategy.

The success of this transformation will also require a sustained effort to preserve national cohesion. The governments of frontline democracies must seek to reduce internal divisions and maintain an inclusive political framework. Even those who oppose their country's pro-Western orientation cannot be permanently excluded from public debate.

The Cold War compelled Europe to create the institutions of liberal democracy as we know them today. Russia's hybrid challenge may compel it to shape its next evolution: not merely liberal democracy, but

resilient democracy. That may ultimately become the most important constitutional contribution that Europe's frontline democracies make to the future of the European project ■