Europe on Edge: Tackling Hybrid Warfare amid Elections, Foreign Influence and Unfinished Europeanization

Conference Report

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Europe on Edge: Debating European Challenges

On January 29, 2025 the Institute for Global Analytics (IGA), in partnership with Free Press for Eastern Europe (FPEE) and SCIENCE+, hosted the regional conference ***"Europe on Edge: Tackling Hybrid Warfare amid Elections, Foreign Influence, and Unfinished Europeanization"***, which took place in Sofia, Bulgaria. The event brought together acclaimed international and local researchers, government stakeholders, civil society organizations and represented the second annual edition of discussion forums organized by IGA and FPEE that shine a light on the most pressing challenges facing Europe.

While last year's edition focused on a sociological dissection of the growing anti-democratic and anti-Western turn in youth attitudes – which proved to be a driving factor behind the rise of the far right in European elections and pernicious trends on social media, the 2025 edition zoomed out to deliver in-depth debates about the most urgent geopolitical trends in Europe. The animating idea behind the conference was thus related to the unresolved challenge of unfinished Europeanization. Indeed, there are manifold problems besetting the EU that tend to receive the spotlight in media attention and expert deliberations – such as how to maintain global economic and strategic competitiveness and relevance in the face of the strategic standoff between the US and China. Yet, before the Union can craft a strategic stance abroad, its first paramount task is to look inward and solve the remaining challenges of European integration in the areas wherein its primary responsibilities lie – particularly in the candidate, accession as well as aspirant states in Moldova, the Western Balkans, and the South Caucasus.

The challenges that the lands defined by unfinished Europeanization now encounter are more complicated and multi-faceted than those that characterized previous waves of EU and NATO enlargement towards Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in the 1990s and 2000s. First, *hybrid warfare that manipulates the information environment during elections and beyond is a major intervening and "contaminating" factor* that did not exist previously to the same extent. Distorted information ecosystems can therefore skew voting patterns, foreign policy positioning and social movements away from democratic and Euro-Atlantic choices. [1]

1For example, a key hybrid warfare tactic deployed by Russia has consisted in the subversion of the established practice and academic understanding of protests as furthering democratization. Instead, by weaponizing and deliberately inciting anti-Western social movements, local pro-Kremlin proxies have attempted to undermine Euro-Atlantic integration and promote authoritarian trends: Filipova, R., 2024, "The Kremlin's agenda in Bulgaria. The role of pro-neutrality protests in disinformation campaign", Ch. 2 in Kovalčíková, N., (ed.), *Hacking Minds and Machines. Foreign Interference in the Digital Era*, EUISS.

Second, *Russia and China have become dramatically more assertive in CEE than before*, interfering in media, academia, electoral politics and infrastructure projects. Candidates for EU membership have to contend with large oppositional forces, unlike previous enlargement rounds, when Russia was in retreat and China had not yet staked its global ambitions. This trend was starkly exemplified by developments in Moldova, whereby the Kremlin's propaganda, extensive bribing of the population, energy warfare and political destabilization represented major obstacles to the conduct of a free and fair referendum in October 2024 on whether the goal of EU membership should be enshrined in the Moldovan constitution. And as regards Europe as a whole, just as it has started to vigorously pursue the goal of weaning itself off of dependency on Russia – an objective and realization spurred by the Kremlin's war on Ukraine, there is still hesitation as to whether the EU should chart a similarly firm course with respect to China. Tellingly, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez and Finnish President Alexander Stubb paid high-profile visits to China in 2024, both advocating for an acceleration of economic relations and people-to-people exchanges – even as the European Commission imposed tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles and was thus set to assume a tougher stance.

Third, during previous waves of accession EU membership always represented an attainable end goal – a matter of *how* domestic reforms would be carried out to qualify for accession but not *if* the latter would ever take place. Currently, fully-fledged membership is a distant prospect and the credibility of the accession process as an incentive for reforms, particularly in the Western Balkans, is diminishing.

To unpick all of these trends and developments, the conference featured a keynote speech on the main attitudinal patterns and threats in Central and Eastern Europe as well as separate panel discussions dedicated to (1) a comparative exploration of the intersection of elections and hybrid warfare in Romania, Moldova, Georgia as well as the European Parliament; (2) the geopolitical and domestic dynamics in the Western Balkans that relegate the region to a seemingly eternal candidate for EU membership; and (3) the likely convergence between Belarus and Georgia in their opposition to Europeanization. During specially dedicated sessions, the IGA and Science+ teams each presented their latest work on hybrid warfare, political corruption and audience engagement.

Keynote Speech

Trends, Threats and Perceptions in Central and Eastern Europe *by Dominika Hajdu, Policy Director of the Center for Democracy and Resilience at GLOBSEC*

In recent years, CEE has faced threats from three major sources, including Russia, anti-democratic and nationalist populists as well as ongoing problems with societal resilience and media literacy. Some countries in the region have been more vulnerable than others and an insight into these differences can be gleaned from respondents' response to the question of who is primarily responsible for the war in Ukraine. Significant majorities in Poland, Czechia, the Baltic states pinpoint that blame on Russia, whereas in Bulgaria and Slovakia less than half of the polled think that way – 44% and 41%, respectively.

These views are reflected in GLOBSEC studies of vulnerabilities in the region across public opinion, the political and informational landscape, public administration, the civic and academic space. Bulgaria, along with the Western Balkans countries, score higher in the vulnerability index across these domains than Czechia and Romania.



Speaker Highlight: Dominika Hajdu

"A change of mindset towards greater resilience to foreign influence requires consistent crisis preparation for emergencies, building trust among citizens as well as fostering digital literacy."





Panel 1: After the Super-Election Year in Europe: Taking Stock

- **Dr. Miruna Butnaru-Troncota,** Professor at National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (Romania)
- **Giorgi Goguadze,** Director at Georgian Center for Strategy and Development (Georgia)
- **Massimo Flore,** Disinformation Expert, Aurora Fellows
- **Moderated by Dr.Rumena Filipova,** IGA

The defining theme of 2024 was related to elections. Some were more consequential than others and the extent to which they became the subject of foreign interference also differed as did the level of covertness and types of methods deployed by foreign malign actors. The aim of this panel was to discuss the most critical cases of the Romanian, Georgian, Moldovan national elections as well as the European Parliament election and understand why they were particularly significant from the point of view of the intersection of hybrid warfare and foreign malign influence, while taking note of similarities and differences. Romania came as a particular surprise, given that it is a country which has gained an international reputation as a staunch and dedicated member of the EU and NATO. On the contrary, there was an expectation of heavy foreign interference in both Georgia and Moldova, but elections in the two countries displayed two different outcomes. The discussion yielded the following sets of key takeaways:

Legal and Ethical Challenges in Countering Hybrid Warfare

A key issue discussed was how democratic states should respond to the challenges posed by FIMI (Foreign Information Manipulation & Interference) while balancing the need for legal and ethical safeguards. The panel reflected on the dilemma of overreach vs. inaction:

- Overreach could involve infringing on civil liberties, stifling free speech, or undermining fundamental democratic principles in the name of security.
- Inaction or inadequate responses allow adversaries to exploit weaknesses in democratic processes, potentially undermining elections and public trust.
- A major point of debate was *how to define what is "legal"* or "*illegitimate"* in the *context of hybrid warfare*. The panel stressed the importance of clear, consistent legal frameworks to guide responses and avoid ambiguity.

Electoral Integrity and Political Legitimacy

The integrity of electoral processes was a central theme, particularly in light of suspicious voting patterns and allegations of electoral fraud in Georgia, as well as the annulment of the Romanian presidential election. This raised questions about the legitimacy of the political process:

- How does one balance free, fair elections with the need to protect democracy from external interference?
- The legal complexity surrounding electoral annulments (such as the Romanian case) gave rise to debates about *whether electoral institutions and the judiciary are equipped to handle such decisions in a way that maintains political legitimacy*. Romania's experience demonstrated two conundrums:
  - » Contradictions in legal rulings and absence of published evidence to justify decisions can deepen political divisions;
  - » The timing of legal rulings, especially when they affect electoral processes already underway and contain an adjustment of rules in an ad hoc manner, can exacerbate polarization. Accordingly, the Romanian Constitutional Court's decision to cancel the first presidential election gave rise to conflicting interpretations: one group in society saw it as protection against a political crisis, while others viewed it as an unjust denial of their voting rights.
  - » Election security was a major concern, particularly with regard to vulnerabilities in *voting infrastructure, foreign influence on digital platforms, and the use of social media algorithms* to manipulate voter sentiment.

Societal Resilience and the Role of Institutions

The panel emphasized that building societal resilience is crucial in countering hybrid warfare. This involves creating mechanisms that allow democracies to withstand external pressure without compromising democratic values. Key to this resilience is strengthening democratic institutions—such as the judiciary, electoral bodies, and media—while protecting fundamental rights. This imperative, however, has come up against at least three sets of challenges as exemplified by the Georgian case:

- *The transnational consequences of Russia's aggressive international actions* – for example, the influx of Russian refugees in Georgia, following the re-invasion of Ukraine, drastically altered Georgia's socio-economic landscape, especially in Tbilisi. Some of the fallout has included gentrification and rising housing prices, alongside pressure

on local resources, such as pensions. Moreover, the increasing Russian population has shifted the demographic and political landscape towards greater receptivity to the Kremlin's messaging and influence operations.

- *Growing tensions between state and society* – there is a deepening divide between Georgia's state institutions and its broader society. The Russian-backed socio-economic changes and the government's autocratic turn have alienated large segments of the population, making the political system less responsive to the public's preference for deeper engagement with the EU and NATO.
  - » Moreover, the Georgian Dream government has sown further division by focusing its political influence efforts on regions in the country outside of the capital and the big cities as well as by disenfranchising the Georgian diaspora (unlike in Moldova, where Moldovan communities living in the West contributed to the success of the outcome in favor of enshrining the goal of EU membership in the country's constitution).

- *The weaponization of fear of physical violence and coercion* – the threat of war and invasion of Georgia by Russia has been exploited by the Georgian Dream government as a justification for its political control, suppression of the opposition and pro-Russian orientation.
  - » On a more general level, hybrid warfare is not simply contained in the manipulation of facts and dissemination of lies but rather entails controlling attention and emotions, particularly fear.

Speaker Highlights:

Dr. Rumena Filipova



» *"The degree of informality and covertness of Russia's interference in European elections differed. In Romania, a local programmer with alleged ties to Moscow made payments to influencers to boost Calin Georgescu's popularity. In Moldova, extensive and open bribery of the population was disbursed by Russian banks and a local oligarch, while in Georgia, the government itself did the Kremlin's job through vote-buying and intimidation ahead of the election".*

Dr. Miruna Butnaru-Troncota



» *"There is a tension between taking legal action against FIMI (e.g., prosecuting disinformation) versus the risks of overreach, such as stifling democratic freedoms. The Romanian case highlighted the complexities of this balance and how inaction or poorly coordinated responses can have adverse consequences."*

» *"FIMI is invisible but entails obvious results".*



Massimo Flore

» *"Understanding how disinformation works—especially in terms of emotional manipulation—is key to developing better defenses against it. Media literacy and institutional resilience must be built to address the exploitation of attention deficits and fears in the information space."*





Panel 2:
Forever Standing on the EU's Doorstep? The Path Ahead for the Western Balkans

- **Miroslav Sazdovski,** Senior Analyst at Hybrid CoE (Helsinki)
- **Dr.Donika Emini,** Director at CiviKos platform (Kosovo)
- **Dr. Shalva Dzebisashvili,** Associate Professor at University of Georgia
- **Daniel Sunter**, Founder of Balkan Security Network
- **Dr. Adnan Huskic**, Professor at Sarajevo School of Science and Technology
- **Moderated by Dr.Rumena Filipova,** IGA

The process of unfinished and incomplete European integration represents a distinctive trend characterizing the Western Balkans, which are surrounded by EU members. This has left the region vulnerable to the incursions from Russia and China and has further contributed to a deep-seated societal disenchantment with Europe. At the same time, the Western Balkans' international predicament has it domestic roots, particularly related to unresolved problems related to the Yugoslav legacy especially in the area of history, nationhood and identity. The following main takeaways stood out from the panel discussion:

Geopolitical dynamics:

- The role of foreign powers, above all Russia and China, in the Western Balkans and South Caucasus was a dominant theme. Both countries use different tactics, but their shared goal is to undermine Western values and influence regional politics. *Russia often utilizes disinformation, political destabilization, and historical narratives* to take advantage of weaknesses in these countries, while *China is focused on economic investments and long-term influence through infrastructure and cultural ties.*
- *The EU's role in the region is both a unifying and dividing factor.* Although the EU is in many cases seen as the ultimate goal for these countries, the Union's lack of a clear and decisive plan for countries such as Georgia, Kosovo, and Bosnia is perceived as a failure to adequately address security concerns, democratic reforms, and foreign influence.

» Indeed, there is *paradox*, whereby the Western Balkans are on the one hand institutionally excluded from EU membership, yet, on the other, the region is inextricably linked to the Union, with over 80% of exports and more than 90% of aid coming from the EU. This makes the Western Balkans an essential part of the European security architecture, despite the fact that full integration remains unfinished.

» *The EU's reticence in the face of authoritarian actors* in states aspiring for membership can set a precedent undermining political accountability – for example, during the 2020 elections in Georgia, the EU's insistence on recognizing the Georgian Dream party's victory, despite allegations of fraud, gave the ruling party the impression that no consequences would be incurred for undemocratic actions.

» *The EU also needs to take a more proactive role in mediating Kosovo-Serbia relations* and addressing the internal divisions within Kosovo, which affect the broader European integration process in the Western Balkans.

State-Society Divide & Political Legitimacy:

• A recurring issue discussed was the *gap between state elites and societal aspirations*. The panelists highlighted the disconnect between governments and the populations in countries such as Kosovo, Serbia, Georgia, and Bosnia. In particular, the legitimacy of political systems is undermined by corruption, elite manipulation, and a lack of genuine democratic engagement, leading to protests and public discontent.

• *Civil society in the region is coming to play a role in shaping the political landscape*. From protests in Serbia to calls for democratic reforms in Bosnia, citizens are mobilizing against corruption and undemocratic governance. This growing demand for accountability suggests a shift towards more active engagement from non-state actors in pushing for reforms, potentially reshaping the region's path to European integration.

» *Yet, the low media literacy across the region* makes it an easy target for external actors to polarize societies and undermine democratic institutions.

Speaker Highlights:



Miroslav Sazdovski

» *"Russia seeks to undermine Euro-Atlantic integration and stoke conflict (e.g., Kosovo-Serbia tensions), using disinformation and historical narratives. Russia also promotes itself as the protector of traditional values and a counterbalance to the West."*

» *"The Western Balkans are no longer a political and economic periphery of Europe. Yet, the region remains an institutional outsider".*

Dr. Shalva Dzebisashvili



» *"Georgia has become a testing ground for Russia's hybrid tactics, and EU strategic inaction in the face of Russian aggression sends the wrong signal to the region."*

» *"On the EU - if you are not unitary, you cannot be strategic".*



Dr. Donika Emini

» *"There is an increased securitization of Serbia-Kosovo relations and national security concerns have often been used to justify authoritarian measures or undemocratic practices in both Kosovo and Serbia."*

» *"Local autocrats are also products of the West"*

Dr. Adnan Huskic



» *"Europe needs to play a more active role in Bosnia as the country is at a critical juncture before EU integration. Bosnia's EU candidacy is stalled due to internal political divisions and ethnic conflicts, but the response from Brussels has been too passive and a more decisive stance is needed to encourage reforms."*



Daniel Sunter

» *"Serbia continues its delicate balancing act—maintaining relations with the U.S., Russia, China, and EU states all at once, though the war in Ukraine has made this increasingly difficult."*

» *"Serbia's position on Ukraine—quietly supporting U.S. and EU efforts while allowing Russia to continue its influence operations in the region—reflects a multi-vector policy that, for now, aligns with the priorities of key international actors."*





Interactive Session: Audience Engagement in Polarized Times (SCIENCE+)

- **Mykola Okhotnik,** Audience Researcher
- **Dominika Stawarz,** Audience Researcher

The SCIENCE+ team presented the overarching tenets of their work focused on showcasing practical tools for effective communications and building audience resilience to hybrid warfare.

Personalized Digital Strategies for Disinformation Prevention:

- The session focused on how SCIENCE+ creates personalized guidance for organizations based on audience research by developing user personas through which they can ensure that organizations tailor their communication strategies to the preferences of different groups.
- Audience-specific strategies (e.g., focusing on format, substance, and messaging preferences) can be developed based on behavioral research and insights into which groups are most susceptible to certain narratives.
- Engaging younger generations through digital literacy and fostering critical thinking is essential to counteract the influence of disinformation. Creating tools and platforms that encourage questioning of online narratives can empower youth to recognize false information.

Audience Vulnerability to Disinformation:

- The session focused on understanding the most vulnerable audiences to disinformation, such as *young waverers, informed empathisers, and disempowered disengaged groups*. The challenge is to create more personalized and effective strategies to address their unique vulnerabilities and cognitive biases.
- The primary subjects targeted by disinformation campaigns have included *food security, health scares, climate change, anti-migrant sentiments, and narratives surrounding war*. There was a discussion about the specific narratives used in these areas and how to counter them by understanding their emotional and psychological impact on different audiences.

Speaker Highlights:





Dominika Stawarz and Mykola Okhotnik

» *"During our session, we uncovered how disinformation exploits public frustration and trust gaps, shaping narratives that spread widely in 2024 and beyond. More importantly, we explored how empathetic audience-centered journalism can not only counter falsehoods but also rebuild trust - turning passive news consumers into engaged, critical thinkers."*



Special Session: Real-life Consequences of Hybrid Warfare - A Case Study on Bulgaria and Europe

- **Dr. Rumena Filipova,** Chairperson, IGA
- **Dr. Stoyan Panov,** Senior Analyst, IGA
- **Barbara Bačová,** Analyst, IGA
- **Marketa Vasickova**, Analyst, IGA

The IGA team highlighted two strands of the Institute's work, including the impact of digital technologies on political corruption; the critical manifestations and methods of hybrid warfare, exercised by foreign malign states as well as comparative vulnerabilities in CEE to hybrid warfare.

Regulatory Frameworks & Anti-Corruption Efforts in Europe:

- The panel examined the *effectiveness of anti-corruption frameworks across Europe*. A major debate revolved around the gaps in enforcement, the scope of these laws, and whether they adequately address the rise of digital corruption tactics, especially in the context of hybrid warfare and foreign influence. Anti-corruption legislation often exists but suffers from implementation gaps, which undermines its effectiveness in addressing corruption at all levels.

Digital Technologies in Fighting Corruption:

- *Digital platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok are increasingly leveraged by civil society actors to expose corruption* and organize anti-corruption movements. The panel discussed how these tools are being used to fight corruption, promote transparency, and counter political manipulation, but also acknowledged challenges such as limited digital adoption in some regions and the weaponization of social media by malign foreign actors.

Hybrid Warfare & Foreign Malign Influence:

- A significant theme centred around how foreign powers, particularly Russia, utilize hybrid warfare tactics such as disinformation campaigns, media manipulation, and the weaponization of historical narratives. The impact of these tactics in Bulgaria, Czechia, and other CEE countries was explored in terms of polarizing political discourse and undermining public trust in democratic institutions.

» *Whereas Czechia has taken steps to curtail Russian influence*, such as banning disinformation channels and collaborating with fact-checking NGOs, *Bulgaria faces more challenges due to political instability and pro-Russian sentiment in its mainstream political parties*. It was also highlighted that Russian disinformation is viewed as a long-term cyber threat in Czechia, which has led to ongoing governmental efforts to combat fake news through NGO partnerships and media investigations.

Media Capture and Political Influence on Press Freedom:

• A major debate focused on how media capture – the concentration of media ownership by oligarchic business and political elites – *undermines press freedom and democratic processes*. The discussion included case studies from Bulgaria, France, and the Netherlands, highlighting the challenges faced by independent media in highly polarized environments and the role of regulatory frameworks in safeguarding journalistic independence. While countries such as France have strong institutional safeguards, others, like Bulgaria, suffer from misused regulations that target smaller outlets, whereby larger players are left unaccountable.

Speaker Highlights:



Dr. Rumena Filipova

» *"Russia's and China's hybrid warfare focused on the manipulation of public attitudes is advanced in three main ways: 1) through the weaponization of history and identity; 2) interference in social movements and 3) incursions into academia."*

Dr. Stoyan Panov

» *"In Bulgaria, there are significant challenges related to the narrow scope of anti-corruption initiatives and delayed digitalization efforts. Restricted media access and fearmongering from political elites often stymie efforts to tackle corruption through digital means."*





Barbara Bačová

» *"Civil society pushback, including journalist protests in Bulgaria and strikes in France, is attempting to combat media capture. Nevertheless, civil society often exerts a limited impact on legislative change as the case of Bulgaria has demonstrated."*



Marketa Vasickova

» *"Pro-Russian disinformation is deeply intertwined with political figures across the political spectrum in both Bulgaria and Czechia and is often used to undermine trust in democratic processes."*



Panel 3: An Emerging Authoritarian Axis in Eastern Europe? How Belarus and Georgia Resist Europeanization?

- **Armen Grigoryan,** President of Center for Policy Studies (Armenia)
- **Veronica Laputska,** Co-Founder of EAST Center (Warsaw)
- **Diana Petriashvili,** Director of Programs, Free Press for Eastern Europe
- **Moderated by Maryia Sadouskaya-Komlach**, Chairwoman, Free Press for Eastern Europe

A budding trend in Europe's eastern "neighborhood" is emerging, whereby countries that have traditionally been subjects of the EU's Europeanizing practices are actively subverting and undermining European values and institutions along an authoritarian axis controlled by Moscow. Georgia, in particular, looks to be following in Belarus' footsteps of resisting Europeanization and distancing itself from the EU's orbit. The wider security dynamics in the South Caucasus may further affect and be in turn impacted by Moscow's attempt to assert a sphere of influence in eastern Europe. A number of key takeaways stood out from the panel discussion:

Authoritarian Tactics and Hybrid Warfare:

- Regimes in Georgia and Belarus adapt and collaborate to maintain control, using tactics such as hybrid warfare and media manipulation.
- It is thus necessary to introduce educational and media literacy programs to combat oligarchic control.

Youth Engagement and Pro-EU Sentiments:

- Youth will play an ever greater role in shaping the future of Eastern Europe, as they harbor pro-European Union attitudes. The panel emphasized that *youth therefore represent a force for democratic change*, particularly in Georgia.
- *Education is key for countering authoritarianism and promoting European values*. Targeted educational policies can equip populations with critical media literacy skills in order to tackle hybrid warfare.

Europeanization and Trade Relations in the South Caucasus:

- There is potential for the further Europeanization of Armenia and trade growth between countries in the South Caucasus. *Armenia is and should be aligning itself with European standards and values*, focusing on political, economic, and social reforms.
- At the same time, there has been an increase in trade relations between Iraq and Kyrgyzstan, which serves to highlight that *Armenia is navigating regional dynamics and trade partnerships beyond the EU.*

Speaker Highlights:



Veronica Laputska

» *"Dictators, their compromised state institutions and aligned oligarchs manipulate media in the region. This highlights the control these regimes have over information and how it is used to suppress dissent."*



Diana Petriashvili

» *"It is of critical importance to mobilize youth and foster engagement with European ideals. Younger generations need to be more deeply involved in political and social movements."*



Maryia Sadouskaya-Komlach

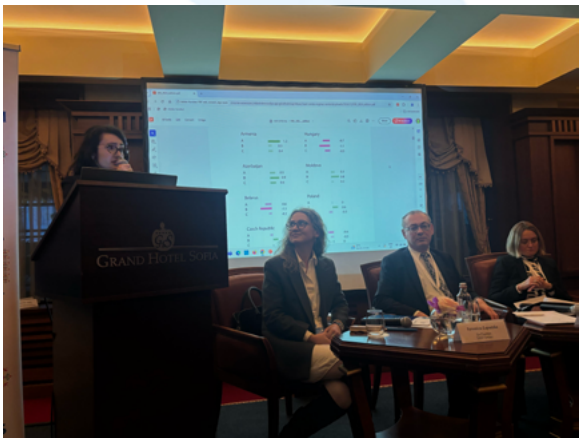
» *"The 2024 demonstrated to us that we cannot be complacent even when we think we know the outcome of the elections. The same politicians may come to power or stay in power but but behave totally unpredictably. It is therefore important to always think about what we, as a whole society, can do to improve our democracies and to make sure that we face challenges together".*



Armen Grigoryan

» *"The government of Armenia recently launched the process of the country's EU accession. Yet, IRI polling has shown that while the majority of citizens supports deeper cooperation with the EU, youth were the least supportive, with a tendency to abstain in a potential vote on EU membership. The reasons for this are still to be investigated and can include lack of awareness, general mistrust towards the political parties and apathy, lack of personal experiences with life in the USSR, the impact of (social) media on attitudes."*





Conference Conclusions: To the precipice and back?

Overall, the panel discussions and presentations yielded key overarching conclusions about the methods of hybrid warfare and corresponding means of counteraction as well as the state of European policy and domestic configurations, particularly in the lands characterized by "unfinished Europeanization".

- It is imperative to ***define the spectrum of legality and legitimacy*** of both what constitutes an act of hybrid warfare and how to counteract it. For instance, flagship initiatives such as the EU's Digital Services Act and the Online Safety Bill in Britain both outlaw illegal harmful content such as pornography, incitement to terrorism, hate speech. Yet, there is whole class of legal but harmful content that most disinformation consists of and which manipulates public minds without being categorized as illegal or even false.
  - » The presence of clear benchmarks and pre-stipulated response measures applied consistently can also aid in *avoiding the appearance of arbitrariness*. (The Romanian case demonstrated that the authorities' belated reaction to foreign interference, which spearheaded Georgescu's TikTok campaign, raised concerns about the soundness of post-hoc government and court responses that were not always justified with evidence clearly laid out to the public).

- The ***finer distinctions between state and society as well as intra-societal cleavages*** need to be taken into account, especially when international actors make decisions about which groups to engage or sanction within a given country. The example of Georgia points to a growing disconnect between the prevailing societal vision of the country's geopolitical direction and the official state policy. Similarly, majorities of citizens in the Western Balkans support the EU integration process even against the backdrop of political elites, which attempt to craft alternative geopolitical stances and invite foreign malign actors to hold sway over critical sectors of the economy, media and academia.
  - » Still, *certain societal segments remain more vulnerable to malign foreign influence and domestic populist forces*, including parts of the youth population and residents of regions remote from big cities.

- ***Established value orientations in Europe are in flux***. The principles enshrined in the foundation of the EU have become subject to increasing contestation. The historically most right-leaning constellation in the European Parliament that emerged in the aftermath of the elections in June 2024 shows that a significant number of MEPs do not share the original EU values and further express pro-Russian sentiments.
  - » A configuration – unprecedented in the Union accession process, has also emerged, whereby certain governments of EU member states heavily contest Brussels policies and make common cause with aspirants for EU membership that profess pro-Kremlin sympathies and institute authoritarian practices. Hence, a *double subversion of the Europeanization process* occurs mounted by both members of the Union and candidates for accession.

- Despite increasing deliberations about how the EU should become a global strategic player, EU member states' path-dependent inability to act in unison means that ***the Union still lacks the qualities of a geopolitical actor***. The acceleration of a trend, whereby the EU has been both blamed for failures in the domestic policies of member states and at the same time utilized as a legitimizing factor for autocratic governance (i.e., in cases where authoritarian politicians present themselves as guarantors of a pro-European path) has weakened the vision of the EU as a beacon of democracy and as a desirable organization to enter. Moreover, the fact that security and deterrence issues are excluded from the integration process diminishes the credibility of the EU as a strategic actor and confines its appeal to a common market.

- Questions of ***geographic location and cross-regional contiguity can both facilitate or impede European integration***. Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova's greater proximity to Russia brings them closer to the range of the Kremlin's military-coercive activities and perceived sphere of influence. In the absence of stronger EU engagement, the South Caucasus, for example, can be pulled in the direction of other regional formats – such as the 3+3 format encompassing Iran, Russia, Türkiye, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

- The pernicious impact of hybrid warfare on societies pushed by foreign malign actors can ***call into question fundamental facets of democracy*** – including the extent to which elections can be deemed free and fair, if they take place in a "polluted" information environment. At the same time, a conundrum has emerged as to how to channel the rise of anti-establishment social forces – fuelled by, at times, justified grievances, through responsible political elites. Democracy that delivers thus remains a work in progress.


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