MARCH 2023

CURRENT HISTORY

A Journal of Contemporary World Affairs

EUROPE

Testing Times

War and the Energy Dilemma
Marco Siddi

Finland and Sweden Turn to NATO
Tuomas Forsberg

From Austerity to the Pandemic
Sofia A. Perez

Dark Legacies

Serbia's EU Ambivalence
Tamara P. Trošt

Italian Fascism Resurfaces
Maddalena Gretel Cammelli

Plus:

A Czech Exception to the Illiberal Trend?
Radek Buben and Karel Kouba

Looking Back at the Euromissiles Crisis
Holger Nehring

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Coming in April
South Asia

It has been a time of upheaval in South Asia. Sri Lanka's president fled the country amid an economic meltdown. Pakistan was afflicted by epochal floods. The Taliban resumed their harsh rule in Afghanistan, while the Myanmar military seized power again in a coup that provoked an armed uprising. India has enjoyed relative stability, yet Hindu nationalism continues to clash with the country's heritage of diversity. The April issue of *Current History* will cover these developments and more across the region. Topics scheduled to appear include:

- **Generation Z Goes to War after Myanmar's Coup**
  Shona Loong, University of Zurich
- **What Made the Pakistan Floods Worse**
  Shandana Mohmand, Miguel Loureiro, and Lewis Sida, Institute of Development Studies
- **India's Economic Nationalism**
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- **The Politics of Water in India**
  Debjani Bhattacharyya, University of Zurich

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CURRENT HISTORY

March 2023 Vol. 122, No. 842

CONTENTS

83 **Europe's Energy Dilemma: War and the Green Transition** . . . . *Marco Siddi*
To curtail dependence on Russia, the European Union has taken steps to reduce fossil fuel use. But the scramble to diversify energy sources could delay a planned shift to renewables.

89 **Finland and Sweden's Road to NATO** . . . . *Tuomas Forsberg*
Two nominally nonaligned nations have been drifting closer to the Atlantic military alliance for years. Russia's invasion of Ukraine forced the logical next step: full membership.

95 **The Pandemic and the Long Shadow of Austerity in Southern Europe** . . . . *Sofia A. Perez*
Countries that made the deepest cuts to their health care systems after the sovereign debt crisis suffered the highest rates of mortality from COVID-19.

101 **Ambivalent Europeanization in the Western Balkans** . . . . *Tamara P. Trošt*
As Serbia and its neighbors keep waiting for admission to the EU, elites have turned the process to their advantage, while some of the rewards of membership have lost their luster.

108 **How Czech Democracy Defies the Illiberal Trend** . . . . . *Radek Buben and Karel Kouba*
Secular, pluralist traditions—and politicians more pragmatic than ruthless—have helped one Central European state avoid the democratic decay that has befallen others in the region.

PERSPECTIVE

115 **Unspoken Legacies of Fascism in Italy** . . . . *Maddalena Gretel Cammelli*
The far-right strain in Italian politics has repeatedly recast itself in new forms. In the centenary of Mussolini's March on Rome, one of his political descendants took power.

BOOKS

118 **Reconstructing the Nuclear Peace** . . . . *Holger Nehring*
A dispute in the 1980s over nuclear missiles in Europe brought NATO to the brink of collapse. The debates of that time sound familiar today.

CURRENT HISTORY

March 2023

"During the crisis with Russia . . . the EU and its members have been implementing measures that may slow down or even reverse the energy transition in the next few years."

Europe's Energy Dilemma: War and the Green Transition

MARCO SIDDI

The European Union has been facing a protracted energy crisis since the second half of 2021. The crisis was caused by a combination of factors, including tight global energy supplies during the economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, lower domestic energy production, and reduced natural gas supplies from Russia—until recently the EU's main oil, gas, and coal supplier. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 made the crisis more acute. In order to limit Russia's income from energy exports, which were seen as financing its war in Ukraine, the EU and Western allies imposed a ban on Russian coal, a partial embargo on Russian oil, and sweeping financial sanctions. Moscow responded by stopping gas supplies to some EU member states and reducing them to others. This caused a spike in gas and electricity prices, which in turn worsened inflation of prices for basic consumer goods. Annual inflation in the Eurozone rose at the unprecedented rate of over 10 percent in October and November 2022.

The EU has responded to the crisis with partly contradictory policies, which are subsumed under the REPOWEREU Plan, unveiled by the European Commission on May 18, 2022. On the one hand, Brussels presented plans for energy savings and an acceleration of the energy transition, which would decrease the demand for fossil fuels, now mostly met by external suppliers. On the other hand, the EU has intensified the quest for new fossil fuel suppliers and has allocated funds for additional import infrastructure, such as liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals. Member states have also subsidized their citizens' energy bills to reduce societal costs; in doing so, however, they have contributed to the soaring revenues of fossil fuel exporters, including Russia.

Although the various components of the REPOWEREU Plan share the objective of reducing reliance on Russia, they are inconsistent when it comes to the main goals of EU energy and climate policy: swiftly reducing greenhouse gas emissions, mainstreaming the energy transition, and achieving climate neutrality by 2050. The EU's green agenda was elevated to a top priority in 2019 and surprisingly retained that status despite the pandemic, as witnessed by the substantial allocation of EU funding to the energy transition in post-pandemic national recovery plans. During the crisis with Russia, however, the EU and its members have been implementing measures that may slow down or even reverse the energy transition in the next few years. Coal-fired power plants have been reopened, pipeline gas imports are being replaced by more polluting LNG imports, and additional "permits to pollute" will be sold in the Emissions Trading System (ETS), the EU's carbon market.

Despite the EU's attempts to stay focused on existing climate goals, geopolitical confrontations and the foreign policy agenda seem to have gained the upper hand, and EU energy policy is now being adjusted to the necessities of realpolitik. It is an open question whether this adjustment is temporary and climate policy will regain top priority once geopolitical tensions subside.

The EU has had a climate and energy transition agenda since the 2000s. This agenda has been structured around three main targets: reducing greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 levels, increasing the share of renewable energy in final

MARCO SIDDI *is a senior research fellow at the Finnish Institute of International Affairs.*

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energy consumption, and improving energy efficiency. For the year 2020, the EU-level goal for each of those adjustments was 20 percent. Meanwhile, the EU adopted new targets for 2030, which were revised upward several times during the past decade as Brussels increased its ambition. The latest revision of the three headline targets was announced in 2021 as part of the Fit for 55 Package, which raised the greenhouse gas reduction target to "at least 55 percent." At the same time, the targets for renewable energy and energy efficiency improvement were raised to 40 percent and 36 percent, respectively (in terms of final energy consumption).

Most importantly, EU climate and energy policies are no longer seen as separate domains in EU policymaking. The energy transition requires the mainstreaming of the green agenda in numerous policy areas, ranging from trade to industrial policy and agriculture. Such mainstreaming is a key objective of the European Green Deal, a roadmap of policies and strategies for the energy transition in the EU. Achieving climate neutrality (zero net greenhouse gas emissions) by 2050 is the overarching goal of the Green Deal. But the war in Ukraine has made short-term progress on the EU's climate agenda more difficult as European countries invest in new fossil fuel projects and increase coal consumption in order to meet immediate energy needs.

The Green Deal put climate change at the center of the European political agenda.

THE MAKING OF A GREEN DEAL

The European Commission presented the Green Deal plan in December 2019, following a period of increasing civil society and grassroots political pressure for a focus on climate change. The popularity of movements such as Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion and the strong performance of Green parties in the 2019 European Parliament elections played important roles in prompting action.

Among its most important measures, the Green Deal includes a Sustainable Europe Investment Plan, a new EU industrial strategy, a circular-economy action plan, the new EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, and a "farm to fork" sustainable agriculture strategy. It also provides for the introduction of a carbon border tax to prevent carbon leakage—the transfer of heavily polluting industrial production outside the EU, where it would not be subject to the same level of environmental restrictions.

In order to implement the Green Deal, the European Commission pledged to mobilize at least 1 trillion euros in sustainable investments (including private-sector deals) by 2030. To meet the higher costs of the energy transition for regions that are more reliant on coal, the Green Deal included a Just Transition Mechanism and Fund. It also proposed turning the European Investment Bank into "Europe's climate bank," offering preferential financing for green projects. Despite uncertainty about how much of the necessary funding was available, the Green Deal succeeded in putting the energy transition and the fight against climate change at the center of the European political agenda.

The March 2020 onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe could have derailed the Green Deal shortly after it was launched. Although some eastern members (notably Poland) sought to postpone the green agenda, the EU managed to stay the course. In a statement published on May 27, 2020, the European Commission clarified that the Green Deal and the climate targets took priority in the EU's post-pandemic planning. The Commission announced its intention to borrow 750 billion euros on financial markets to launch the Next Generation EU initiative (NextGenEU), a plan for a post-COVID recovery focused on the green and digital transitions. This was the first time that the EU—rather than its member states individually—had issued debt on such a large scale. These funds supplemented the Multiannual Financial Framework, a revamped EU budget of approximately 1.1 trillion euros for the years 2021–27. The Commission declared that 30 percent of both funding schemes was to be spent on climate investments.

Meanwhile, negotiations began among EU institutions—the European Council, the Commission, and the Parliament—concerning the two cornerstones of the Green Deal: the European Climate Law and the 2030 Climate Target Plan. By April 2021, following difficult discussions, a deal was reached on the climate law, which codified the objective of achieving climate neutrality within the EU by 2050, as well as the goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55 percent by 2030.

In the months that followed, European institutions began work on the Fit for 55 package, which

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included measures to implement the 2030 climate and energy agenda. It encompassed proposals to adjust the ETS in order to progressively reduce emission permits, boost renewable energy production and energy efficiency, raise emission standards for cars, limit maritime and aviation emissions, address land use and forestry, and introduce a Social Climate Fund to support the most affected businesses and citizens.

SUPPLY SQUEEZE

Just as EU climate and energy policy appeared to have successfully weathered the storm of the COVID-19 pandemic, an energy supply crisis began in the autumn of 2021. The global economic recovery from the depths of the pandemic brought growing energy demand and the subsequent supply squeeze. The climate crisis compounded these factors as scarce precipitation hindered European hydropower production; wind power production was also lower than expected in the latter part of 2021. Aging nuclear reactors in France and dwindling gas production in the Netherlands, which had been one of Europe's major gas providers until the early 2010s, contributed to a reduction in domestic EU power generation. In this context, faults in the design of the EU gas market and a change in strategy at Gazprom, Russia's largest gas company and the main gas supplier to the EU, made the situation go from bad to worse.

For over a decade, the EU's gas and electricity markets had been "liberalized" through a series of reforms that aimed to break monopolies, shrink the role of states, and increase competition. This also involved reducing reliance on long-term supply agreements with external gas producers and replacing them with purchases on the spot market. Given the apparently solid long-term prospects of continued "energy abundance," it was assumed the EU would become a large buyers' market.

Throughout the 2010s, this logic worked relatively well. Facing the threat of growing competition from LNG suppliers with higher marginal costs, Gazprom increased supplies to the EU and invested in new infrastructure projects, such as the Nord Stream 2 and TurkStream pipelines. Gazprom was the only pipeline gas supplier with the capacity to significantly ramp up production and exports to the EU. Despite Russia's annexation of Crimea and a first wave of EU sanctions in 2014, for the most part it seemed that the energy trade would continue to be kept out of the confrontation between the EU and Russia.

The picture changed drastically in the fall of 2021 amid the global supply squeeze. Gazprom continued to honor its long-term contracts with European companies, but scaled down its sales on the spot market, halting them completely in mid-October. Initially, EU politicians and analysts thought Gazprom was reducing supplies to reap profits from higher prices and to pressure the EU into allowing the opening of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which had been delayed for legal and political reasons. However, in November and December, while building up its military presence along the border with Ukraine, Russia put forward two treaty proposals demanding the removal of NATO forces from eastern alliance members and an end to NATO enlargement. In this context, the reduction in gas flows to the EU had clearer strategic implications.

CONFRONTATION WITH RUSSIA

Russia's attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and the events that followed transformed the European energy crisis into a broader, structural economic crisis. As German Chancellor Olaf Scholz put it, the war marked an epochal turning point (*Zeitenwende*)—a major statement coming from the leader of a country that had been Russia's main energy and trade partner in the EU. The surge in gas prices spilled over into the electricity market. The war extended the rise in prices to oil and its derivatives, as well as to several critical minerals of which Russia is a major exporter. Together with tensions between the United States and China, the war also aggravated price increases for raw materials and disruptions of supply chains, factors that had been at work already in previous months due to the pandemic.

Unlike during previous escalations, the EU–Russia energy trade was not spared from the logic of confrontation, and instead became a factor fueling it. Between April and June, the EU imposed an embargo on Russian coal and a partial embargo on oil and some petroleum products. The coal embargo took effect in August 2022. Crude oil sanctions were to be applied gradually from June through the end of 2022. Temporary exceptions applied to pipeline imports of crude oil by EU members dependent on Russian supplies, with no viable alternatives. Since most Russian oil deliveries to the EU were seaborne, the EU expected 90 percent of these supplies to be affected by the embargo, which would have a heavy impact on Russia's revenues.

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Russia was indeed forced to redirect its oil exports to other markets, particularly China and India, and to sell at discounted prices. But the energy crisis and the war had driven such an increase in prices that Russia was still able to reap large profits from oil sales throughout the summer and fall of 2022. In this period, China and India increased their imports of Russian oil and largely made up for Moscow's loss of revenue in Western markets.

In September 2022, the Group of 7 countries (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Britain, and the United States) announced their intention to impose a price cap on Russian oil. Since they had already stopped oil imports from Russia, or were about to do so, the G-7 hoped to leverage their influence over global companies providing insurance for oil shipments to induce them not to cover cargos of Russian oil sold over the price cap. The effectiveness of the cap was uncertain, since it largely rested on compliance by insurance companies and other countries. Defying the G-7's oil strategy, the OPEC+—an intergovernmental organization comprising Russia and the largest oil producers in the global South—announced a symbolic cut in oil production shortly after the G-7 cap was announced.

The EU has responded to the crisis with contradictory policies.

In early December 2022, the EU and G-7 countries introduced the oil price cap. Buyers of Russian crude oil could only access Western services such as insurance and brokerage if they attested that they had paid less than $60 a barrel. Though Russia threatened to refuse to sell any oil to countries that complied with the cap, early reports suggested that Moscow was continuing to trade with Indian buyers that had done so. This is explained by the fact that Russia can still make a profit if it sells its oil below $60 a barrel (and was already doing so before the cap was introduced).

As the EU attempted to reduce Russia's energy revenues, it saw its own energy crisis worsen when Russia first reduced and then halted supplies of gas, the only form of energy trading that remained exempt from EU sanctions. After sweeping Western financial sanctions were imposed in February and March 2022, Russia demanded that European energy companies make payments for gas purchases to a ruble-denominated bank account at Gazprombank, saying it would no longer accept payments denominated in euros or dollars. EU member states that did not comply with the system—starting with Poland and Bulgaria in April and Finland in May—had their supply cut off. Some other members that opened ruble-denominated accounts (Germany, Italy, France) avoided a cut-off, but experienced reductions or fluctuations in supplies in the following months.

During the summer of 2022, Russia sharply decreased its gas supplies to the EU. Moscow blamed EU sanctions for technical issues that prevented the correct functioning of the Nord Stream pipeline, one of the primary remaining conduits for gas trade between the blocs. Following the G-7's announcement of the oil price cap in September, Russia declared that gas supplies to the EU via Nord Stream would be halted indefinitely. This left the EU in a critical position, on the eve of winter. The EU had already laid out plans to address the crisis, but more time was required to implement them.

Throughout the autumn of 2022, EU officials discussed setting a cap to limit gas price spikes. An agreement was difficult to attain; member states such as Germany and the Netherlands feared that the cap could lead to shortages and threaten their energy security. But on December 19, the European Commission agreed to cap gas prices at 180 euros per megawatt-hour if market prices were higher than that for three consecutive days (in trading on the Dutch Title Transfer Facility), starting February 15, 2023. The mechanism will have a minimal impact on current market conditions (gas prices were around 70 euros below the cap at the time when it was set), but it can protect consumers from extreme price spikes.

Between March and May of 2022, the EU drafted the REPOWEREU Plan, a strategy to phase out imports of Russian gas by diversifying suppliers, boosting renewable energy production and energy efficiency, and taking other measures such as increasing both domestic production and imports of green hydrogen. When it was published in May, the plan was accompanied by a raft of other documents, notably an External Energy Strategy, a Solar Strategy, a Save Energy Communication, a Solar Rooftop Initiative, and a Biomethane Action Plan.

The REPOWEREU Plan attempted to build on the Fit for 55 agenda announced in 2021 and make some of its objectives more ambitious. For instance, it proposed to increase the 2030 renewable energy target from 40 to 45 percent of total energy

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consumption. It set targets for rapidly installing new solar photovoltaic capacity (from almost 160 gigawatts in 2021 to 320 gigawatts by 2025 and nearly 600 gigawatts by 2030) and introduced a European Solar Rooftop Initiative with a binding commitment for new buildings. It also proposed to double the current deployment rate for heat pumps and recommended simplifying permitting and planning procedures for renewable energy installations. Together with greater reliance on green hydrogen, the plan called for boosting biomethane production to 35 billion cubic meters (bcm) by 2030. This large-scale deployment of renewable energy infrastructure and storage systems will require reliable access to the necessary critical minerals and rare earth elements, for which the EU relies on imports and is particularly dependent on China-controlled supply chains.

The plan also put an emphasis on renovating buildings. The spike in prices and shortages of construction materials made renovations a difficult and costly task. To compensate for this at least partly, the Commission recommended that member states lower the value-added tax on new efficient heating systems and building insulation, among other steps.

In addition to mid- and long-term infrastructural changes, REPOWEREU and the Save Energy Communication highlighted the importance of behavioral changes in the short term. Accordingly, European politicians called on citizens to limit the use of air conditioning in the summer and of heating in the winter. According to the REPOWEREU agenda's assumptions, these energy-saving measures would allow for reducing imports of Russian gas by 10 bcm per year.

Since the REPOWEREU agenda was announced, however, large increases in electricity prices and heating bills have posed enormous challenges for European citizens and companies. In order to offset at least part of these costs, European governments introduced extensive subsidies. Setting the pace, in October 2022 Germany announced a 200 billion euro energy relief plan. But other member states lacked comparable financial resources to shield their citizens and economies from energy price spikes.

DOWNSIDES OF DIVERSIFICATION

The REPOWEREU Plan envisions that a large share of Russian gas imports will be replaced by diversifying suppliers. This is the most controversial part of the plan in terms of climate policy.

Most notably, the plan calls for the EU to increase LNG imports by 50 bcm and supplies of non-Russian pipeline gas by at least 10 bcm per year. This means that new gas infrastructure will have to be built, including LNG import terminals, floating storage regasification units, and interconnectors. Germany alone is planning to operate five new LNG terminals in the near future, one of which was completed in November 2022.

Despite a clear intention to downplay the cost of these efforts, which would otherwise cast doubt on the EU's green credentials, the plan itself estimates that 10 billion euros will be required for new fossil fuel infrastructure. Controversially, as part of its Green Deal agenda, the EU has been calling for an end to new fossil fuel projects in other areas of the world.

Moreover, the large increase in LNG imports would come from a group of distant countries, such as the United States and Qatar, which would add to the environmental impact of transporting the gas, notably the higher methane emissions associated with LNG. Also, the EU will have to compete with other large and small buyers on global markets for its LNG imports. That may end up diverting flows away from poorer countries, forcing them to rely more on coal.

The weaponization of the EU–Russia energy trade has led to a highly dysfunctional outcome for the European energy market. After half a century of growing trade and interdependence, Russia is no longer seen as a reliable supplier by its EU customers. As Russia reduces or halts gas supplies and the EU implements its diversification policy, the thick network of pipelines connecting them is left largely unused and could turn into a gigantic stranded asset.

Alternative gas imports via pipelines from countries like Algeria and Azerbaijan, should they become available, would entail both geopolitical risks and dependence on other nondemocratic states. Increased EU demand for fossil fuels from these countries will prompt them to increase production and make related investments in exploration and infrastructure, thereby delaying their own energy transitions.

Investments in new fossil fuel infrastructure divert funding and policy focus from renewables and energy efficiency. The risk of spending public money on large projects that will become stranded assets after a few years, or worse, lock the EU into new fossil fuel dependencies, is considerable. This risk was made more acute by the Commission's 2022 decision to include investments in gas infrastructure

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in the EU's green taxonomy. Now such investments can be labeled and marketed as green, and more easily obtain political and economic support.

Another critique of the REPOWEREU agenda concerns the planned aggressive increase in biomethane production. (Biomethane is renewable natural gas that can be produced from biomass, including agricultural waste, or from byproduct gas collected from landfills and wastewater treatment.) According to some critics, this could create competition for agricultural harvests and pose a risk to food security. Some stakeholders also argue that the plan places an excessive focus on hydrogen, and that without careful regulation it could divert scarce supplies of renewable electricity to the production of green hydrogen.

Overall, the Commission estimated that additional investment of 210 billion euros will be necessary before 2027 to implement the REPOWEREU Plan. This will have to be financed mostly with existing funds, especially the Recovery and Resilience Facility originally created to mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic. According to the plan, 20 billion euros will be raised by auctioning additional ETS emission allowances, which would enable higher greenhouse gas emissions. But costs could be partially offset by the reduced requirement for fossil fuel imports envisioned by the plan. According to Commission estimates, this would save over 90 billion euros by 2030.

CLIMATE ON THE BACK BURNER?

While the EU was attempting to cut its dependence on Russian energy supplies, the climate crisis constrained domestic energy production in several parts of Europe. Following a winter with scant precipitation and earlier snowmelt in the spring, many European rivers partially or fully dried up in the summer of 2022. The drought was particularly severe in the Iberian peninsula, France, northern Italy, and Germany.

Not only hydropower generation was affected; the drought and high water temperatures threatened the normal operation of nuclear power plants as well, and even hindered the transportation of coal on European waterways, notably the Rhine. By late summer, nearly half of France's nuclear reactors were offline for maintenance. France began buying electricity from neighboring Germany, which in turn increased its coal-based power generation due to the shortage of gas and the progressive shutdown of domestic nuclear power plants. Germany's phaseout of nuclear power has been under way since 2011, in response to Japan's Fukushima nuclear accident that year; its completion was expected by the end of 2022. In October 2022, however, the German government decided to extend the lifespan of the three remaining nuclear power plants until April 2023.

The increase in coal consumption was a climate policy setback, given the higher emissions associated with burning coal, compared with gas or even oil. In essence, the EU's focus on geopolitical and economic crisis management in 2022 led to the de facto deprioritization of the climate agenda. As of late 2022, it remained to be seen whether this was just a short-term outcome or a long-term trend.

What is worse, geopolitical tensions could undermine the multilateral efforts under way to fight climate change. The 2022 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP27), held in November in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, was an important test. Even before the start of the war in Ukraine and rising tensions between the United States and China over Taiwan, several major countries (most notably India and China) had refused to clearly commit to the phaseout of coal. Little was achieved at COP27 in this regard. The "Sharm el-Sheikh implementation plan" excluded any mention of winding down the use of fossil fuels, and provided little indication that countries were serious about scaling up efforts to cut emissions. For the EU, a longtime leader in climate negotiations, it will be even more difficult to advance that cause internationally while it increases its own reliance on coal, even if only temporarily.

The EU has tried to be flexible and adapt to the changed circumstances imposed by the war in Ukraine and the energy crisis. Brussels has attempted to turn the situation into an opportunity to accelerate the energy transition, but it will take years before most of the REPOWEREU Plan goals are met and the energy crisis ends. Until then, the EU will have to cope with a situation where very expensive energy becomes the new normal, and savings and efficiency measures are no longer an option but an absolute necessity.

So far, a fair degree of intra-EU solidarity has prevailed, as member states have united to face a common rival—Russia. But this unity remains frail. The winter of 2022–23 will bring economic challenges that have not been experienced for at least half a century. Societal costs will be high, especially for poorer citizens. European governments and institutions will have to make difficult choices, including substantial budget adjustments. They may face mounting opposition in parliaments and in the streets. ■

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“Changing the fundamentals of foreign policy often requires an external shock.”

Finland and Sweden’s Road to NATO

TUOMAS FORSBERG

When Finland and Sweden decided to apply for membership in NATO in May 2022, it was a big shift in both countries’ foreign and security policies, but a logical consequence of steps taken in the post–Cold War era. Both Sweden and Finland maintained neutrality during the Cold War, but then joined NATO’s Partnership for Peace in 1994 and the European Union in 1995. By becoming EU member states, they abandoned their earlier policies of neutrality, participating fully in European defense cooperation. Yet they remained militarily nonaligned, at least nominally, by not joining NATO.

They did form a close partnership with NATO, however: they shared the same threat perceptions, politically backed the goals of the alliance, participated substantially in its crisis management operations, and made their militaries interoperable according to NATO standards. Security elites—government officials and experts in both countries—were largely in favor of NATO membership. Many analysts regarded it only as a matter of time until the two countries would become full members. But it was uncertain how much time it would take or what would be the key reason for the final decision.

It turned out to be Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 that triggered Finland and Sweden to apply for NATO membership. In hindsight, this does not seem so surprising—but very few people had expected such a swift change. The most common prediction was that Sweden and Finland would become full members of NATO as a result of some kind of fusion between the alliance and the defense dimension of the EU. The expectation was that it would be a technical, bureaucratic decision that removed the anomaly of their military nonalignment, rather than a political decision in a crisis.

TUOMAS FORSBERG *is director of the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies at the University of Helsinki and a professor of international relations at Tampere University.*

States’ foreign policies are normally based on continuity despite domestic power transfers. Changing the fundamentals of foreign policy often requires an external shock. Yet there is never any straightforward causal relationship between external events and decision-making.

PUBLIC OPINION AS DRIVING FORCE

The most conspicuous element in the process leading to Finland and Sweden’s applications for NATO membership was that the policy change was initiated by a dramatic shift in public opinion in Finland. During the week when the full-scale war in Ukraine started, a majority of Finns suddenly came to support NATO membership.

Finnish public opinion had been rather stable on the NATO question from the 1990s, when the first polls on the issue were conducted, until January 2022: the share of supporters normally varied between 20 and 30 percent, and the share of opponents between 50 and 70 percent. Overall, external events rather than the domestic debate affected the popularity of NATO in Finland. Public support for membership reached its low points during or right after the NATO or US-led military operations in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. When Russia used military force, support rose, as with the war in Georgia in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Nonetheless, the changes were moderate, and opinion always returned closer to the average after these external events.

In January 2022, only 28 percent of Finns supported membership in NATO. The share of those opposed had decreased somewhat compared with earlier polls, and that of the undecided had increased, but otherwise there were no signs of a major upheaval. This changed during the week in late February when Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine. A poll commissioned by national broadcasting company YLE showed that public support for joining NATO had risen to of 53 percent. Backing for NATO membership continued to

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grow during the spring, rising to 62 percent in March. When the decision to apply for membership was officially announced in May, the level of public support had already risen to 76 percent, while opposition had sunk to less than 15 percent.

The shift in public opinion was not as drastic in Sweden as it was in Finland. A plurality of Swedes had supported the idea of joining NATO in many opinion polls carried out in the 2010s, but there was never a clear majority for it. Support for membership had only slightly increased by April 2022, when 45 percent of Swedes were in favor of joining NATO, while 33 percent opposed it. However, when asked if they would support membership if Finland also joined, more than 60 percent were for doing so; only 20 percent were against it. When the Swedish government made the decision to apply for membership at the same time as Finland did in May, more than 50 percent of Swedes backed the move.

This shows that the change in public opinion in Finland paved the way for acceptance of the NATO membership bid in Sweden. By contrast, in Finland, few respondents thought Sweden's willingness to join NATO was a precondition for Finnish membership.

The change in public opinion in Finland paved the way for acceptance in Sweden.

Several factors explain the drastic shift in public opinion on the NATO membership issue in Finland. First, the resistance of the Finns to membership had been wide but not deep. Less than a third of the population consistently supported joining, but only a third opposed closer cooperation with NATO. More Finns thought that NATO had made a positive contribution to Finland's security than were in favor of Finnish membership in the alliance.

Underlying anti-American sentiment in Finland, which manifested itself particularly during the Iraq War, had not entirely disappeared, but negative perceptions of the United States were more palpable under the Bush and Trump presidencies. It should be noted, however, that military cooperation between Finland, Sweden, and NATO, as well as with the United States bilaterally, grew steadily under those two administrations. But having the current US president, Joe Biden, seen as being committed to NATO and multilateralism certainly made it much easier for many Finns as well as Swedes to change their opinion about NATO membership. The fact that NATO's secretary-general, Jens Stoltenberg, was a highly respected Norwegian social democrat also made the decision to join NATO smoother.

SOVEREIGNTY AT STAKE

But why did Finnish public opinion change in 2022, not in 2014 when Russia started to use force in Ukraine and annexed Crimea? Only a few Finnish public figures changed their positions on NATO membership because of the Ukrainian crisis of 2014. It was seen as a post-Soviet conflict that was not likely to spread to the Baltic Sea region. Russia was recognized as a strategic challenge, but there was no general feeling of an increased security deficit.

Russia's military interventions in the area of the former Soviet Union were not viewed as undermining the fundamentals of Finland's security policy. Finland, after all, had not neglected territorial defense after the end of the Cold War, but rather had retained military conscription and a large, trained reserve force. It had also bolstered its military preparedness with large-scale procurements, including the purchase of a fleet of 64 modern fighter jets from the United States in 1992, and their replacements in 2021.

Some pundits warned that NATO membership could lead to lessened motivation for taking care of national defense. Moreover, the prevailing logic was that joining NATO would likely be perceived by Russia as a provocation, and the greater levels of deterrence and protection conferred by membership would be devalued by the increased Russian threat. The question of NATO membership therefore seemed to have more to do with identity: the strategic facts were interpreted so as to fit with existing beliefs sustaining the continuity of military nonalignment.

Russia's war in 2022 was more shocking than its actions in 2014 not just because it was the third time in little more than a decade that Moscow had resorted to military force against its smaller neighbors. In the run-up to the invasion, Russia had demanded that NATO abandon its open-door policy not only with regard to Ukraine, but also for Finland and Sweden. Finns and Swedes could no longer pretend that this crisis was restricted to the post-Soviet area. It concerned the European security order as a whole, and both countries' sovereign right to decide for themselves whether

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to join NATO. For many people, applying for NATO membership was therefore a demonstrative statement against Russian President Vladimir Putin's attempt to define new spheres of influence in Europe.

A cognitive shift often requires an emotional push. The full-scale war that Russia launched caused moral outrage. Russia's wars in 2008 and 2014 had brought about only a slight change in public opinion because both were easier to explain away as tragic events of a kind to be expected in international relations. Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2022 was different because it was unprovoked and on a larger scale. In Finland, the analogy of the 1939 Winter War against the Soviet Union was immanent and became much more strongly felt than in 2008 or 2014. People followed news of the war intensively, with emotional involvement.

In a comparative survey, Finland and Sweden were the European countries where the largest share of citizens believed that Russia, rather than Ukraine or NATO, was culpable for the war. They likewise had the highest proportions of citizens in Europe who supported imposing economic sanctions on Russia or supplying military equipment to Ukraine.

MOVING IN TANDEM

It is not self-evident that a change in public opinion should lead to a major policy change. The realist dictum that foreign policy officials can and should pursue the national interest irrespective of public opinion—since the masses do not have the necessary information to make correct inferences and are too emotional—had a long tradition in Finland. Given the shared land border extending more than 1,300 kilometers, the national interest had long been seen in terms of avoiding a major conflict by retaining good working relations with the Kremlin.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, public opinion started to matter much more in Finland, as evidenced by the decision to join the EU on the basis of a referendum. Leaders cited negative public opinion as one of the main reasons that Finland should not join NATO. When polls in the spring of 2022 showed that a majority now supported Finland's membership in NATO, politicians could no longer cite public opinion as a hindrance. But some questioned whether applying for membership in NATO in a time of crisis was wise. In his first interview after public opinion had turned positive on NATO membership, President Sauli Niinistö underlined that there was a difference between the thinking of those who are responsible for national security and those who are not. He said he understood the deep concern of the people, but argued for remaining cool-headed.

In February 2022, Niinistö did not seem to believe that any quick decisions with regard to Finland's NATO membership were in sight. Probably the biggest reason in Finland and Sweden for not joining NATO had been the fear that doing so would destabilize the security situation in Northern Europe. Although it was accepted that Finnish and Swedish membership would bring clarity to their position in any major military crisis in the region, the problem was the geostrategic change in itself. Russia's potential countermeasures had to be reckoned with, particularly during the period when the intent to join the alliance had been announced but the countries were not yet full members.

During the first weeks of the Ukraine war, there was also concern—including in Washington—that Finland and Sweden's NATO membership bids might escalate the conflict between Russia and the West, and possibly hamper the chances for an early cease-fire in Ukraine. But this reasoning was abandoned when it became clear that the war was not going to be over soon.

Because of the war, the idea that Finnish membership in NATO would contradict the old tradition of having good neighborly relations lost its appeal. Friendly relations with the Kremlin could no longer be retained when Russia was waging full-scale aggressive war against its neighbor—and had labeled Finland as an unfriendly nation due to its participation in Western sanctions. It was also difficult to see how it would be possible to return to good relations even after the war in Ukraine was over without a regime change in Moscow. Neither did there seem to be any reasonable mediating role on offer for Finland on the basis of its status as a nonaligned country, as had been the case in the Kosovo War in 1999. Moreover, the fear of countermeasures had diminished since Russia's actual capability to target Finland with hybrid, let alone military, operations was reduced due to its large deployments and losses in the war in Ukraine.

Although Finland's stated policy of preserving the option of applying for membership in NATO should the security situation change was partly a domestic political compromise, it was also considered a strategic signal to Russia. The message was simple: "We prefer stability and good

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neighborly relations with you, but if you do not respect the principle that it is our sovereign choice to join NATO, or if you start seriously destabilizing the European security order, then we will seek membership in NATO." Since Russia crossed both lines in the winter of 2021–22, the policy of using the NATO option as a strategic deterrent had failed. At the press conference announcing the government's decision to apply for membership, Niinistö addressed this comment to Russia: "You caused this—look in the mirror."

The shift in public opinion not only put pressure on the Finnish leadership but also gave it a broad mandate to pursue NATO membership. At the beginning of March, Niinistö launched a process that consisted of a series of political and diplomatic discussions with Washington and other key NATO actors to prepare for the formal decision to apply for membership. At this stage, it was important for Finland that Sweden move in parallel.

Already in February, both countries had intensified their cooperation with NATO by increasing the exchange of intelligence information and coordination of political and military activities. Now bilateral cooperation with the United States and Britain, as well as with the largest EU member states, was further strengthened in military exercises, armaments, and security of supply lines, as well as in the form of political declarations.

The need for consensus in a crisis was deeply ingrained in collective memory.

These measures could have been taken even if there had not been any firm intention to join the alliance. But they served to alleviate the concerns about vulnerability to Russian retaliation during the gray period between an application to join NATO and full membership, or in case the application process had to be halted.

Despite public opinion being clearly in favor of NATO membership in Finland, some time had to be reserved for domestic decision-making. For the sake of political legitimacy, there had to be a democratic process in which political parties held internal debates on the matter before the parliament gave its consent. The government prepared a report on the changes in Finland's security environment, which was delivered to the parliament in April. This report did not recommend that Finland should apply for NATO membership, but it formed the basis for a concise subsequent report that did so.

Without going into the details of how and why even those politicians who had been known to be skeptical about the blessings of NATO membership came to support it, the whole episode of Finland's membership application demonstrated a clear behavioral tendency to show unity in questions of national security. The idea of unity and the need for consensus in a crisis was deeply ingrained in Finnish collective memory during both World War II and the Cold War. Although the post–Cold War era seemed to render these historical lessons obsolete, they had clearly not vanished from collective memory when sovereignty and national security were seen as being at stake.

The NATO membership question was not seen as an issue that divided the government and the opposition or the leaders and the people. The opposition, which had already supported Finland's membership in NATO earlier, did not mock the government or the former skeptics for their sluggish reversal. Though the process was driven by public opinion, trust in leaders remained at a high level. Without this unity, it is impossible to explain the May 2022 parliamentary vote of 188–8 in favor of the NATO membership application.

In Sweden, the reasons for military nonalignment were more clearly tied to tradition and identity than in Finland. Swedish policy had rested on nonalignment for more than 200 years and was seen as the basis for a long period of peace. There was no urgency to change that status when the full-scale war in Ukraine started.

Social Democratic Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson still argued in March that Sweden's bid for NATO membership would destabilize the situation in the Baltic Sea area. But later that month she said the possibility of joining NATO was not out of the question. Meeting in mid-April with Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin, a fellow social democrat, Andersson indicated that Sweden might apply for membership if Finland also did so. The Swedish government thereafter prepared its report for the parliament on the worsened security situation.

The internal debate within the Social Democratic Party was the key to Sweden's decision-making process. Despite the fact that the party's old guard traditionally had strongly favored the policy of military nonalignment, the country's

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close connection to Finland had also been more important for the Social Democrats than for the other parties. The conservative party Moderaterna had already supported Sweden's membership in NATO before Russia invaded Ukraine; the populist Sweden Democrats, whose earlier position had been ambivalent, also decided to back the membership bid. Only two relatively small parties, the Greens and the Left Party, remained opposed.

SEEKING STABILITY

The formal decisions to apply for membership in NATO were made in Finland and Sweden simultaneously in May 2022. The stated motivation for the move was that it would strengthen the countries' security and overall stability in a changed strategic environment. Russia's invasion of Ukraine had increased the risk of a future military confrontation in Northern Europe in which both Finland and Sweden could be embroiled. Though neither state believed that it suffered from a substantial security deficit, membership in NATO was expected to bring added stability, particularly as a deterrent.

Finland might have been well prepared for the type of attack that Russia had launched in Ukraine, but NATO membership would raise its readiness for military operations even higher. Sweden had faced a provocative Russian violation of the airspace near Gotland Island in the Baltic Sea on Easter in 2016, and subsequently had bolstered its readiness, reintroducing military conscription. But more robust deterrence was needed, since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was based on a grave strategic miscalculation. Russia's loose nuclear talk also might have increased the feeling of insecurity, but the need for NATO's nuclear umbrella had long been a controversial question in both countries and remained marginal to the discussion.

Both governments' reports on the issue emphasized that NATO membership for Sweden and Finland would contribute to the overall stability of Northern Europe. It would strengthen the alliance and create strategic depth for the defense of the Baltic states as well as for Norway. Moreover, the decision to apply for membership was a symbolic act, demonstrating the unity of the West to the Kremlin.

Although it could be argued that Finland and Sweden's earlier policies were based on wishful thinking about the potential strategic benefits of nonalignment both vis-à-vis Russia and in world politics in general, the option of joining NATO was never just empty words. Both countries had been systematically engaging in close partnership with NATO, developing military interoperability and participating in NATO's crisis management operations and exercises. Finland and Sweden had deployed troops with NATO missions in the Balkans and Afghanistan, and Sweden also took part in NATO's operation in Libya. The possibility of receiving or giving military assistance in a conflict was not excluded, though taking part in Article 5 exercises for mutual defense was avoided on the basis of military nonalignment.

Since both Finland and Sweden were established Western democracies and EU member states, meeting the political criteria for entering NATO was never in doubt. When they sent their application documents to Brussels in May, negotiations on the accession treaty proceeded on a fast track, leading to the formal invitation at NATO's Madrid summit in June 2022.

But neither Finland nor Sweden fully expected the problems that would be caused by Turkey in the accession process. On the eve of the Madrid summit, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said he did not believe Finland, and especially Sweden, were doing enough to fight terrorism. He specifically accused them of harboring members of Kurdish political movements that Turkey regarded as terrorists and demanded their extradition. Both countries had also restricted their arms exports to Turkey in response to its use of military force against the Kurds in Syria.

Only after painfully complex negotiations did Turkey agree to lift its veto on Sweden and Finland's accession treaty with NATO in a trilateral memorandum of understanding. The memorandum contained a number of creatively worded clauses, as well as ambiguous promises by Sweden and Finland to take Turkish security concerns seriously. But it also included a mechanism for Turkey to monitor the implementation of the agreement.

By contrast, Russia's reaction turned out to be milder than feared. Pro-NATO advocates had always argued that Russia would protest loudly but eventually accept Swedish and Finnish membership without any significant military countermeasures, as it had done in response to the previous rounds of NATO enlargement. After all, NATO membership for the Baltic states must have been much harder for Moscow to swallow. Georgia and Ukraine were different cases, since Russia had both higher motivation and more effective means to prevent them from joining NATO.

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In Russia's strategic calculus, Finland and Sweden were already part of the West, though the extension of NATO enlargement even to these countries was a political blow for the Kremlin. At first, Russian policy on the matter appeared to shift to warning about severe consequences should NATO place military infrastructure closer to its borders, rather than regarding membership in itself as a major problem. In late September, explosions damaged the Nord Stream natural gas pipelines near Swedish territorial waters, raising public speculation as to whether Russia was behind it—and whether it was intended as a lesson for Sweden. Russia denied involvement in the incident. In December, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced that new bases and groupings would be created in northwest Russia in response to NATO's enlargement to Finland and Sweden, but it remains to be seen where these plans will be executed.

NO PRECONDITIONS?

The domestic discussions about Sweden and Finland's future role in NATO only started on the very eve of the decisions to apply for membership. The two countries had already proved their willingness to contribute to NATO's crisis management operations, but now they would be expected to also take part in common defense, particularly in the Baltic Sea area. The starting point in much of these discussions has been that there is no desire to place new NATO bases, let alone nuclear weapons, in Sweden or Finland. There is a widespread view that they will follow the Norwegian model in limiting NATO's presence during peacetime, but Helsinki and Stockholm do not want to set any preconditions for membership.

The governments of Sweden and Finland believe that their membership will intensify the already existing Nordic defense cooperation and create a strong Nordic dimension in NATO. Such regional cooperation would not constitute a separate bloc, but would take place within the overall NATO framework and involve other members, particularly the Baltics, Germany, Britain, and the United States. Membership for Finland and Sweden might also have some implications for NATO's command structure, which is currently being reformed.

As of this writing, Finland and Sweden are not yet full members of NATO. They are still waiting for the ratification of the accession treaty by Turkey and Hungary, hoping that this will be done at least before NATO's next summit, scheduled to be held in Vilnius, Lithuania, in the summer of 2023. Finnish and Swedish political leaders have remained fully committed to membership—even more so in Sweden after September 2022 elections resulted in a change of government, bringing in a conservative-led coalition. Public support has also remained high.

The strongest political criticism related to NATO membership in Sweden and Finland since the launching of their membership bids has come from those who allege that joining the alliance implies abolishing dearly held principles of human rights and humanitarian concerns in foreign policy. These critics argue that the two countries are already succumbing to pressure from the Turkish authoritarian government to bend to its demands on the Kurdish issue in order to secure its approval for their membership in NATO.

Finland and Sweden do not want to treat the dispute with Turkey as a bilateral matter. They see it instead as a question of NATO's credibility as a military alliance and a community of values. Although both countries justified their membership bids primarily with strategic motivations in response to Russia's aggressive behavior against its neighbors, it is unlikely that Sweden and Finland would have turned to NATO had they not regarded Russia's war in Ukraine as a conflict of values between democracy and authoritarianism. ■

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"Due to the fiscal austerity measures imposed during and after the sovereign debt crisis, Southern Europe had to face the COVID-19 pandemic with under-resourced health care systems, at a time of heightened political tensions."

The Pandemic and the Long Shadow of Austerity in Southern Europe

SOFIA A. PEREZ

In early 2020, as the SARS-COV-2 virus spread around the world, Europe quickly became the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given their generally well-functioning health care systems, relatively generous welfare states, and supranational governance structures, the countries of the European Union might have been expected to fare better than others. Seen from the United States, with its very high rate of fatalities, the EU on the whole indeed appeared to manage the public health crisis with more success. Yet the effects of the pandemic—in terms of both health outcomes and social costs—were highly uneven across the EU.

Southern Europe has paid an especially heavy price in fatalities. In the cases of Italy and Spain, this may be partly attributable to the very early spread of the virus. But Greece and Portugal, where the pandemic reached its height months later, have also suffered more fatalities than other European countries.

These outcomes of the pandemic in Southern Europe must be viewed in the context of a decade of fiscal austerity that was applied in the wake of the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis. That crisis peaked between 2010 and 2012, but the fiscal retrenchment lasted until 2015. Austerity measures were demanded by European authorities, in some cases formally, as conditions for financial assistance programs overseen by the "troika" of the International Monetary Fund, the European Commission, and the European Central Bank (ECB). In other cases, as with Italy and Spain, austerity was imposed more informally, through pressure exerted by the ECB.

SOFIA A. PEREZ *is an associate professor of political science at Boston University.*

Today it is widely accepted that the timing of austerity measures at the height of a financial crisis severely aggravated the economic downturns that these countries experienced through 2016. The four southern European states subsequently faced the pandemic at a time when they had not yet fully recovered from the economic crisis that began in 2008. Their health care infrastructure had undergone a significant withdrawal of resources in the years that preceded the pandemic.

This background to the pandemic in Southern Europe raises two questions. The first is whether the austerity measures imposed during the debt crisis contributed to the outcomes of the pandemic. The second is whether the abysmal results of the debt crisis had any positive effects in shaping how governments and European authorities responded to the economic crisis induced by the pandemic.

HIGH HEALTH COSTS

In considering these questions, it is useful to start with some figures on what those pandemic results look like. When it comes to health outcomes, three types of measures are often used to gauge the cost of COVID-19 in terms of human lives: 1) the case fatality rate, which is the ratio of deaths attributed to a disease to the overall number of confirmed cases; 2) the number of deaths from COVID-19 per 100,000 population; and 3) the percentage of overall excess mortality observed during the pandemic compared with previous years. These measures are easily accessible on the Our World in Data website.

It is important to note that the validity of the first two measures depends heavily on the extent of testing and the accuracy of "cause of death" reporting by local authorities. Epidemiologists

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therefore also look at excess mortality, a parameter that weighs projections of weekly death rates (using data from the five years prior to the pandemic) against actual death rates. The number of deaths observed during the pandemic that fall beyond a confidence interval of the predicted values are then counted as excess deaths. Although estimates of excess deaths are less likely to be influenced by reporting gaps (at least in richer countries), they may also capture deaths due to other consequences of the pandemic, such as reduced hospital capacity and medical services.

A glance at these measures suggests that the pandemic's cost in human lives was substantially higher in Southern Europe than in other parts of the EU. Looking first at the case fatality rate, Spain had the highest rate among the 19 countries belonging to the Eurozone, at 0.9 percent. In the larger EU, only Czechia and the United Kingdom (which formally left the EU in January 2020) had higher rates. Italy's case fatality rate was 0.7 percent, Greece's 0.6 percent, and Portugal's 0.5 percent. For comparison, in both Germany and France the rate stood at 0.4 percent in the period through November 2022.

Health care sectors were not spared by austerity.

Turning to deaths confirmed to be due to COVID per 100,000 inhabitants, Czechia had the highest figure in the EU, at 391. Greece and Italy were close behind, at 329 and 308, respectively. Spain's rate was also high, at 248, just below France at 254. By contrast, Germany stood at 190 and the Netherlands at 131.

Excess mortality (from the start of the pandemic to December 4, 2022) offers the most dramatic contrast. Italy led the group with an excess of 441 deaths per 100,000 population over the period, followed by Greece (381), Portugal (340), and Spain (324). During the same period, excess deaths registered at 203 per 100,000 in France, 228 in Germany, and 252 in the Netherlands.

EXPOSED ECONOMIES

It can be concluded from this data that the states of Southern Europe suffered some of the EU's highest mortality from the pandemic. But what about the economic fallout?

Here it should be noted first that the economic contraction suffered by Greece in the decade leading up to the pandemic was several times that of any of the other three countries. Greece's real gross domestic product per capita in 2019, on the eve of the pandemic, remained more than 20 percent below its level in 2008.

Italy's real GDP per capita had also declined over the decade, by 4 percent. Real GDP per capita had risen in Spain and Portugal, but only by a mere 4 percent from 2008 to 2019. Furthermore, except for Spain, the populations of the Southern European countries had shrunk by several percentage points over this period, so the per capita figures do not indicate the entire extent of the economic contraction.

Employment figures suggest a more complex picture of the economic consequences of the pandemic. Unemployment was still exceedingly high on the eve of the pandemic in Southern Europe, standing at 17 percent in Greece, 14 percent in Spain, 9 percent in Italy, and almost 7 percent in Portugal at the end of 2019. In that year, the total number of persons active in the Greek labor force (employed and unemployed) was down by 10 percent from where it had stood in 2008. The employment rate had fallen from 61 percent in 2008 to just about 54 percent of the labor force at the end of 2019. According to the harmonized Labor Force Surveys data provided by Eurostat, 66 percent of workers in part-time employment in Greece reported being in that situation involuntarily because they were unable to find full-time work.

In both Spain and Italy, the total number of people in the active labor force had recovered from the lows of the previous decade and was slightly higher in 2019 than in 2008. Employment rates had also recovered, but both countries achieved this through liberalization of employment conditions and a major expansion of part-time work.

As in Greece, the proportions of those employed part time who reported being in that position involuntarily were exceptionally high in 2019 across the region (66 percent in Italy, 54 percent in Spain, and 44 percent in Portugal). These rates of underemployment were much higher than in other European countries, including France, the Netherlands, and Germany. From a social and economic standpoint, the starting point of the pandemic in Southern Europe looked very much like the end of a lost decade.

Given this poor record, it is striking that governments were able to contain the labor market

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impact of the pandemic. By the end of the second quarter of 2022, employment figures for Portugal and Greece had surpassed those recorded in late 2019, though in Greece the number of employed persons still remained well below what it had been in 2008. In Italy and Spain, the number of those employed in mid-2022 surpassed the employment figures of 2008 for the first time since the financial crisis. Unemployment in Spain had fallen below its 2019 level, though it remained quite high at 12.5 percent.

The pandemic's impact on employment in Southern Europe was thus far more limited than that of the sovereign debt crisis and subsequent austerity. Indeed, the fact that the recovery in total employment was achieved in relatively short order suggests that the pandemic may even have had a positive effect on employment, on balance (at least judging by the numbers in mid-2022). The likely reason for this lies in the fiscal stimulus that was applied during the pandemic in the form of government discretionary spending and guarantees to support businesses, as well as the ECB's actions to avert a liquidity crisis in the period of 2020 to 2022.

By contrast, data on poverty and social exclusion following the pandemic offer a much less rosy picture. The percentage of children (those under 18) living at risk of poverty was already high in 2019, at 19 percent in Portugal, 25 percent in Italy, 21 percent in Greece, and 27 percent in Spain. By the end of 2021, these figures had gone up by two and a half percentage points in Greece and Spain, two points in Portugal, and one and a half points in Italy.

The percentages of those working but still under the poverty threshold continued to be particularly high—in the double digits—in all four countries. The number of people living in households with very low work intensity—those in which the working-age members of the household put in less than 20 percent of their total work-time potential—also remained at a high level in all four countries at the end of 2021. All of this suggests that the measures taken to support employment did not save those whose livelihoods had fallen into deeper levels of precarity over the previous decade.

AUSTERE BACKDROP

To understand this combination of outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic in Southern Europe, we first need to examine how the response to the European sovereign debt crisis shaped health care preparedness in these countries. Almost exactly a decade before Europe faced the pandemic, the countries belonging to the Eurozone faced a major crisis in international sovereign debt markets.

In the spring of 2010, falling confidence in Greek government finances sent the risk premium on the country's sovereign debt through the roof. European governments decided to impose draconian terms on Greece in return for financial assistance that would help it avoid defaulting on its debt. The terms were tougher than most international bond investors had anticipated, and the ECB's failure to immediately intervene in the sovereign debt market spread panic about the finances of other Eurozone governments.

Ireland, suffering a severe banking crisis, was the first to follow Greece in the fall of 2010, agreeing to an austerity program in return for a sovereign debt bailout from the EU. Next in line was Portugal in 2011.

The Portuguese case was particularly telling, since the government had already undertaken radical austerity measures in response to the bond market turmoil. As the risk premium on Portuguese public debt rose to unsustainable levels in April 2011, Socialist Prime Minister José Sócrates lost a parliamentary vote of confidence. Before new elections could be held, he was forced to sign a memorandum of understanding with the troika, committing the incoming government to even more radical measures.

Vítor Constâncio, the former Portuguese central banker serving at the time as vice president of the ECB, would later describe the process whereby the conditions attached to the Greek, Irish, and Portuguese bailout programs led investors to foresee more severe recessions than previously expected, accelerating the contagion in bond markets. Following the Portuguese agreement with the troika, that contagion spilled over to Spanish and Italian debt. Unlike in the first three countries, however, the Italian and Spanish economies (and hence their sovereign debt) were considered too large to be credibly underwritten through a bailout program.

Instead, as the ECB began to intervene in secondary bond markets to contain the rise in the risk premiums on Italian and Spanish sovereign debt, the central bank placed heavy pressure on the governments of Italy and Spain to impose their own fiscal consolidation measures as a condition for its

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coming to their rescue. Spain's Socialist government, which was already organizing a restructuring of its banking sector, soon complied, imposing severe spending cuts in 2010 and 2011. Those measures no doubt contributed to the Socialists' electoral defeat at the end of 2011. The Italian government put up greater resistance, but the standoff with European authorities ultimately catalyzed the fall of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Mario Monti, the technocrat appointed to head the next government, went on to impose sweeping austerity measures.

The extent and composition of austerity in the four Southern European countries differed, but none of their health care sectors was spared. In Greece, where health care was financed by government spending and compulsory insurance schemes in approximately equal parts, the government's share of spending on the sector declined from 2.57 percent of GDP in 2009 to 2.18 percent in 2018. The contribution of compulsory insurance schemes also fell over the period, from 3.85 percent of GDP to 2.63 percent. The fact that GDP remained at less than 80 percent of its 2008 level in 2019 means that the Greek health care system was hit even harder than those numbers suggest.

Unemployment was still exceedingly high on the eve of the pandemic.

In Portugal, government spending on health care fell by almost a full percentage point of GDP over the same period, from 6.49 percent in 2008 to 5.54 percent in 2018. The government budget finances most health care costs in Portugal.

In Spain, health care is financed almost entirely by the state, but it is administered by regional governments. Spain's decline in health care spending was somewhat more modest than in the other countries, going from 6.46 percent of GDP in 2009 to 5.95 percent in 2018. But the organization of health care, which had already been devolved to the regions, became far more politicized in the period leading up to the pandemic. Faced with spending cuts, some regional governments used the years of austerity to contract out more medical services to private foundations and management firms, which invested much less of their resources in excess bed and intensive-care capacity than the large public hospitals to which they routinely sent patients with longer-term care needs.

The overall shortfall this created became dramatically evident during the pandemic, when many of these smaller, privately managed hospitals were scenes of overflowing waiting rooms and corridors lined with severely ill patients suffering from COVID-19. With a central government controlled by the left and some of the hardest hit regions (in particular Madrid and Catalonia) governed by either the conservative Popular Party or separatist parties, the stage was set for an ongoing shifting of blame for the high fatality rates.

Something similar occurred in Italy, which appeared to impose the most modest overall health care spending cuts in the region—a decline of about a quarter of a percentage point of GDP from 2008 to 2019. But regional governments—which, as in Spain, administer public health care budgets and investments—redirected a substantial share of their budgets to private hospital providers in the years of austerity. This led to the closing of a large number of public hospitals.

As in Spain, this trend became a point of political contention during the pandemic, since privately managed hospitals were equipped with far fewer intensive-care beds than public hospitals had. An April 2020 assessment of global hospital capacity by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development found that Germany had over 48 intensive-care beds per 100,000 inhabitants in 2020, whereas Italy had 11, Spain just under 10, Greece fewer than 6, and Portugal just over 4.

Such differences in the health care resources available in each country were not the only way in which the years of fiscal austerity affected the ability of governments to respond to the pandemic. Austerity measures resulted in political changes, particularly the rapid rise of new populist parties such as the Five Star Movement in Italy and Podemos in Spain. In both Italy and Spain, the ascent of new parties increased partisan fragmentation, leading to hung parliaments and repeated elections.

Austerity in Spain also aggravated the territorial dispute over the region of Catalonia. Catalan nationalist parties that imposed major spending cuts between 2010 and 2012 sought to shift blame for austerity to the central government and demanded economic concessions.

Both regional conflicts and the populist surge made it difficult for central governments to

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manage the pandemic, especially since regional governments oversaw the operation of the national health care systems. In Spain, some regions feared that pandemic measures would infringe on their powers; their cooperation with Madrid had to be continually negotiated. In Italy, tensions within the ruling coalition ultimately led to the fall of the government headed by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte while the pandemic was still raging. That resulted in the appointment of a technocratic government led by former ECB President Mario Draghi, who was widely credited with bringing the pandemic under control.

But Draghi's position, backed by a grand coalition of parties that covered the full political spectrum, would only last for as long as it took to return to the new normal in Italy. The outcome of the September 2022 elections, yielding a far-right coalition government headed by Georgia Meloni, soon confirmed that the Italian party system continues on the path of fragmentation it entered at the time of the Eurozone debt crisis.

FINANCIAL FIREPOWER

Due to the fiscal austerity measures imposed during and after the sovereign debt crisis, Southern Europe had to face the COVID-19 pandemic with under-resourced health care systems, at a time of heightened political tensions. Two players, the ECB and the European Commission, played critical roles at the start of the pandemic in 2020 to push Europe toward a much different response. It would take almost four months to overcome the resistance of several Eurozone governments. Yet coordinated pressure from the Commission and Italy, France, Spain, and even Germany eventually yielded a far more supportive fiscal policy response.

The first key difference from the response to the sovereign debt crisis was the ECB's quick reaction to the pandemic. During the sovereign debt crisis, it took two years before the central bank sent a clear signal that it would come to the support of governments that faced spiking costs in bond markets. It took another three years before the ECB initiated its own version of the quantitative easing pursued by the US Federal Reserve, buying up sovereign debt and other bonds to reduce borrowing costs. By contrast, in March of 2020, the ECB stepped in quickly after a sudden sharp rise in Italy's bond spreads (the extra yield compared with the interest rate for German government bonds) due to the pandemic. It announced a large-scale emergency bond purchase program, which quickly resolved the liquidity crisis developing in the Italian financial sector.

This program would ultimately almost double the asset holdings of the ECB, most of which had been accrued over the three-year period from 2015 to 2018. According to estimates by the research center Bruegel, the program had a very large effect in limiting the debt financing costs that EU countries would have faced in its absence. It consequently also helped limit the overall increase in public debt that EU member states, including those in Southern Europe, ran up with their emergency spending during the height of the pandemic.

Apart from the central bank's actions, EU member states made a breakthrough in their response to the economic shock of the pandemic. A July 2020 European Council meeting reached an agreement for the Commission to issue commonly guaranteed debt worth 750 billion euros. This would finance loans and grants to EU governments to fund their efforts to support the recovery of their economies from the COVID-19 crisis.

These so-called NextGenerationEU funds broke new ground. Proposals to issue jointly guaranteed debt to help the countries hardest hit by the sovereign debt crisis had been floated on numerous previous occasions, but they were consistently rejected by Eurozone governments. The decisive step in reaching the agreement on the NextGenerationEU plan was the endorsement by Germany, which had previously been one of the staunchest opponents of collective EU borrowing. The funds also expanded the capacity of the EU to pursue broader goals, since they can be drawn on by governments not just to fund the pandemic recovery but also to finance projects that advance the green and digital transitions.

The ECB's actions and the EU recovery funds allowed governments to run far larger budget deficits in the first two years of the pandemic than they had over the previous decade, since they reassured bond investors that European economies would recover—precisely the opposite of the effect of the austerity programs. Italy and Greece both ran deficits of nearly 10 percent of GDP in 2020; Spain's deficit was just over 10 percent. Portugal, which saw a different progression of the pandemic, held its deficit to just under 6 percent of GDP. Governments were also able to run these large deficits because the European Commission suspended its debt and deficit rules.

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In 2021, deficits remained around 7 percent in Italy, Spain, and Greece, whereas Portugal reined in its deficit to just under 3 percent of GDP. These big deficits proved crucial in allowing governments to finance the job retention schemes that were so critical to the recovery from the pandemic.

In Italy, the government was able to rely on existing schemes, in particular its traditional furlough pay fund, the *Cassa integrazione in deroga*. Yet it also extended emergency income payments to workers in all sectors (ultimately covering around 45 percent of the entire workforce). In Spain, the pandemic prompted a new Temporary Employment Regulation Scheme that allowed workers to remain formally employed without pay (not losing any of the other benefits of continuous employment) while receiving unemployment benefits, for as long as a company could show a fall in business due to the pandemic. Around 20 percent of the workforce was covered by such schemes.

LESSONS AND SCARS

Europe's economic response to the health care crisis turned out to be far better than the measures imposed on Southern Europe during and after the Eurozone sovereign debt crisis. The choice to impose a hard line on austerity in the earlier crisis resulted in what can reasonably be called a lost decade for each of the four countries described here.

Fiscal constraints and labor market reforms that were principally aimed at driving down wages proved dismal in restoring growth and reducing unemployment across Southern Europe. Health care systems were increasingly under-resourced—Italy, Spain, Greece, and Portugal saw higher levels of mortality from COVID-19 than their European neighbors. These health care systems previously might have appeared fit and lean, based on life expectancy and other health data. But the pandemic revealed how lacking the health care infrastructure of Southern Europe had become.

In the economic sphere, however, European institutions this time around helped support government efforts to spend on job retention schemes during the pandemic. This can be appreciated in the much faster job market recovery that Southern Europe experienced in the past three years. Here, at least, we can say that European institutions may have learned a lesson from the poor record created by their earlier insistence on sustaining fiscal austerity in the Eurozone's South.

Yet the focus on limiting the damage done to employment during the pandemic has not erased the consequences of the austerity experiment. For those who had fallen into poverty and social exclusion during the fiscal hard times of the previous decade, job retention schemes could not do much. Even where governments of the left have sought to ameliorate conditions for those out of work, as in Spain, poverty levels rose during the pandemic. It is this segment of the population that is also most heavily impacted by the cost-of-living crisis that has followed the pandemic as a result of the war in Ukraine and the rise in world energy prices. The societies of Southern Europe still bear the scars of Europe's austerity experiment even as they have come to live with the losses of COVID-19 and face the turmoil of the current crisis. ■

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"[T]he formal adoption and implementation of EU rules, institutions, and practices have been accompanied by informal processes that frequently work directly against the Europeanization process itself."

Ambivalent Europeanization in the Western Balkans

TAMARA P. TROŠT

Increasing discussions of "enlargement fatigue" have raised doubts about the willingness of existing member states to continue expanding the European Union. This has been mirrored by growing "accession fatigue," or on-the-ground skepticism in prospective member states over a European future for the Western Balkans. At the same time, the EU itself has changed since 2004, experiencing populism and democratic backsliding within its own borders. It has also faced a rapidly changing geopolitical situation both internally and externally. Given this context, it is time to take stock of the effects of the Europeanization process on the countries of the Western Balkans, and Serbia in particular.

After Croatia's successful EU accession in 2013, the region's other countries trail far behind in their bids for membership. Serbia and Montenegro are the closest to the goal, having opened accession negotiations on specific issue areas. North Macedonia and Albania are official candidates; Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are still waiting to be granted candidate status.

In the nearly two decades these countries have spent "waiting for Europe," massive changes have occurred both within the EU itself (the sovereign debt crisis, Brexit, the Ukraine war) and in the candidate countries' reactions to and attitudes toward the EU accession process. The EU's demands on candidate countries have increased, the process is taking longer, and the outcomes are becoming less credible. The EU's newest strategy for enlargement, issued in November 2022, explicitly states that it is currently considering alternatives to enlargement. Unlike twenty years ago, the desirability of joining the EU and the premise that European integration is really the only option for the region have now been brought into question.

During the past two decades, several parallel processes have been taking place. On the side of the EU, candidate countries have been expected to "download" certain requirements, via both direct and indirect mechanisms. The direct ones include the Copenhagen Criteria, which specify the political, economic, and legislative requirements for member states, such as institutions that preserve democratic governance and human rights, and a functioning market economy capable of withstanding competitive pressures within the EU; and the *acquis communautaire*, the body of EU law and regulation containing 35 chapters that outline the principles, norms, and commitments candidate states are expected to fulfill prior to membership. The indirect mechanisms include recommendations from other bodies, such as the Council of Europe, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the World Bank.

This means that expected changes in different spheres—the rule of law, institutions, citizenship rights, LGBT rights, minority rights, environmental protection, postwar reconciliation, memory politics—could be stipulated either as a part of formal accession criteria or, more frequently, as informal suggestions to "do things the European way." This transformation was in any case expected to happen through conditionality (via incentives for compliance and sanctions for noncompliance) and socialization (the "soft" side of changing norms and values).

Although it has been clear where the EU stands on these issues, the criteria were, and still often

TAMARA P. TROŠT *is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Ljubljana.*

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are, implicit, unclear, and changing, lacking clear benchmarks and enforcement mechanisms. Because the EU is built on the assumption of a fundamental commitment to democracy, it lacks the mechanisms to ensure and enforce such a commitment. The consequences of this omission are clear in the weakening of democracy in existing member states like Poland and Hungary, and in the EU's inability to deal with democratic backsliding in the Western Balkans.

On the side of the candidate countries, the formal adoption and implementation of EU rules, institutions, and practices have been accompanied by informal processes that frequently work directly against the Europeanization process itself. First is "fake compliance," or strategic co-optation of EU criteria by regional elites. These elites have tactically advanced only those policies that serve their narrow interests in preserving power, while slowly but surely pushing their countries into semi-authoritarianism, marked by democratic deterioration and state capture by insiders.

Second, countries in the region have witnessed a series of unexpected consequences of Europeanization. There have been backlashes, for instance against LGBT rights, which some perceive as forced upon their societies by the EU. The Europeanization process has also given rise to "EU washing" in the field of memory politics, whereby member countries relativize their own specific historical crimes by subsuming them into the broader European memory framework of Holocaust remembrance, or imposing their narratives about the past on still-aspiring candidate countries.

Over 20 years of experience with "playing the EU game" has taught regional elites how to navigate EU rules, taking the minimum number of steps needed to demonstrate a superficial commitment to EU values. At the same time, as Brussels has turned a blind eye to such maneuvers, its perceived complicity has alienated some of those who were previously the most fervent EU supporters. Perceptions of the benefits of a future within the EU are getting dimmer by the day. The EU's main bargaining chip is precisely the desirability and feasibility of reaching that end goal.

THE WESTERN BALKANS DIFFERENCE?

Many analysts have examined how and why the Europeanization process is so different for the Western Balkan countries than it was for countries that joined the EU in previous waves. In the 2019 volume *The Europeanization of the Western Balkans*, the editors Jelena Džankić, Soeren Keil, and Marko Kmezić highlight weak and contested statehood and the legacy of the former Yugoslav state's dissolution in all of the countries in this region. They show that institutional weakness and failures in reforming the rule of law are the key elements explaining why Europeanization is trumped by narrow ethnonational considerations and concerns about the balance of power.

The main aim of the Europeanization process in the Balkans, given the region's recent history, is to foster peace and stability. This implies a focus on regional cooperation and neighborly relations. That approach is different from the EU's Eastern enlargement in the 2000s, which was more focused on developing markets and the capability to implement EU laws.

Many of the Western Balkan states are contested: their sovereignty is occasionally challenged both internally and externally. Elites need to balance EU requirements that are frequently at odds with ethnonationalist ideas of sovereignty that allowed them to assume power.

EU expectations can be instrumentalized by elites.

It is not just the relationship between state-building and national identities that is different from previous rounds of EU enlargement. The Western Balkans are undergoing a longer transformative period with more uncertain results and accession timelines. Numerous analyses have shown that Europeanization's greatest power lies in the credible prospect of membership, which is currently receding. As the tangibility of EU incentives decreases, the rewards for compliance are perceived as less valuable, undermining the transformative potential of the accession process.

PLAYING THE GAME IN SERBIA

After Zoran Đinđić became Serbian prime minister following the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević in 2000, he declared that commitment to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and to the EU was the only possible way forward for Serbia. President Vojislav Koštunica, meanwhile, remained committed to alternatives that would allow for Kosovo to remain within Serbia's borders. During his tenure as president and later as prime minister, he also opposed

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both cooperating with the ICTY and signing the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU in 2007. Although that recalcitrance ultimately cost him his political career, this period witnessed the strengthening of the anti-EU opposition, culminating in the victory of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) in 2008.

The current president, Aleksandar Vučić, who has led SNS since 2012 and served as prime minister from 2014 to 2017, gradually transformed himself from a fervent nationalist into a pro-European politician. Yet his declaratory pro-EU stance has been accompanied by the development of a semi-authoritarian regime, which has gone practically unopposed since 2014.

Initially, the percentage of Serbs supporting the ideology and party program of SNS was small. But in a vicious cycle, Vučić's ability to market party membership benefits—such as securing and maintaining coveted public sector jobs and places in childcare, as well as all positions of power in both the public and private sectors—in turn confirms the perceived advantages of belonging to the party. After 15 years, this has led to a huge public administration dominated by SNS members and a private sector dependent on the state. The bloated public sector and a political system lacking a proper division of powers have proved to be fertile ground for systemic corruption. The lack of rule of law and politically driven privatizations, subsidies, and public procurements put all economic activity at the mercy of government, incentivizing corruption.

During this decade and a half, Serbia slowly progressed through several steps of the EU accession process. Supportive statements and praise from EU officials undoubtedly played a major role in allowing Vučić to slowly but surely take over the state, giving him more credibility and strengthening his grip on power. Vučić learned how to play the EU game flawlessly, outwardly demonstrating baby steps toward compliance with European norms while slowly eroding democracy internally. As far as the EU was concerned, Serbia was a democratic country with multiparty elections, active civil society and nongovernmental organizations, and a commitment to economic reforms and market liberalization.

Yet over this period the situation has deteriorated to such an extent that all independent accounts point to a bleak picture of a semi-authoritarian country with weak institutions, elements of state capture, human rights violations, and an absence of media freedom. Corruption is rampant in the economy, and the health and education sectors are struggling. All this has prompted many skilled workers to leave the country—Serbia continues to have one of the leading rates of brain drain in Europe.

These developments have divided Serbians into two camps of disaffection with the Europeanization process. On the one hand are those who were already skeptical of the EU and saw Brussels as forcing LGBT rights and migrants onto their country, together with other requirements fundamentally at odds with Serbian values. They joined a backlash against EU conditionality and the bloc's pretenses of superiority and modernity as a teacher of morality to peripheral nations like Serbia. On the other hand are those who are firmly committed to democratic principles and initially supported the EU, but resent its complicity in allowing Vučić to consolidate power and turning a blind eye to antidemocratic activities.

The result, combined with the longer accession process and less credible promises of actual EU benefits, is the reemergence of credible alternatives, 22 years after Đinđić declared that there was no future for Serbia but a European one. One of those credible alternatives is Russia, referred to by the writer Ana Russell-Omaljev as "the first friendly Other in the anti-European debates."

At the most recent EU–Western Balkans summit, held in Tirana, Albania, in December 2022, the EU expressed anxiety about Russia's role in the region, as well as organized crime, smuggling, and illegal immigration. It remains to be seen whether the EU can restore its credibility by calling out Vučić's transgressions and applying pressure or other mechanisms to force compliance with democratic norms and institutions. But the EU also has to convince the remaining pro-Western forces that a European future is desirable and actually likely.

TURNING A BLIND EYE

As the EU tries to balance geopolitics in the region, it has frequently expressed support for questionable elites, both in Serbia and in Kosovo, in response to what were in reality tepid declaratory pro-EU stances. EU Enlargement Commissioner Stefan Fuele attended Tomislav Nikolić's inauguration as Serbian president in 2012, and European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso welcomed Nikolić to Brussels shortly after that, despite Nikolić's ideological commitments. He advocated for a Serbo-Russian superstate that could "stand up against the hegemony of the

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United States and the EU," denied the genocide in Srebrenica, and made statements claiming that Vukovar, in Croatia, was a Serbian city. His inauguration was boycotted by the leaders of Serbia's neighbors.

Later, EU officials were similarly optimistic in welcoming Vučić as Nikolić's successor, commending his vows to lead Serbia into a European future, despite his previous political loyalties as the minister of information in Milošević's administration and his formerly far-right and hard-Euroskeptic platform. But as Vučić slowly consolidated power, numerous reports were published by the EU itself on the deteriorating situation concerning freedom of the press and expression and civil society organizations, with rising hate speech, harassment of judges and prosecutors of war crimes, and intimidation of journalists.

Similar developments occurred in Kosovo. The EU demonstrated a lack of actual commitment to democratic values by signing a Stabilization and Association Agreement in 2015, despite Kosovo being defined as a "semi-consolidated authoritarian regime" by the US-based monitoring group Freedom House and receiving its lowest democracy score in Europe. In the words of analyst Branislav Radeljić, the Brussels leadership has sent a clear message that "semi-authoritarian practices would be acceptable for as long as the direct interests of the EU or its individual member states are not threatened."

Europeanization's greatest power lies in the credible prospect of membership.

A 2018 European Commission report on enlargement prospects in the region was particularly scalding, citing "clear elements of state capture, including links with organized crime and corruption at all levels of government and administration" in the candidate countries. The report stated that "none of the Western Balkans can currently be considered a functioning market economy nor to have the capacity to cope with the competitive pressure and market forces in the Union."

The 2022 European Commission report on Serbia cited little to no progress on upholding fundamental rights and freedom of expression. It noted that "the state retains a strong footprint in the economy and the private sector is underdeveloped and hampered by weaknesses in the rule of law, in particular corruption and judicial inefficiency, and in the enforcement of fair competition."

Nonetheless, the EU's responses to any individual developments or reports of electoral corruption have typically been tepid. Its halfhearted reactions to breaches of human rights and democratic norms, the undermining of political pluralism, the weakening of institutions, undemocratic electoral procedures, and lack of freedom of the press have drawn mockery. The satirical Twitter account "Is EU Concerned?" encapsulates this tendency in its profile description: "Very, deeply, strongly, seriously, gravely, extremely, unprecedentedly." Ultimately, this has resulted in a vicious cycle where the EU voices its concern, the region's leaders pretend to take steps on reforms in particular areas, and the EU again reacts with concern or reports limited progress, but no systematic efforts to address fundamental problems are made.

RIGHTS AND RESENTMENTS

Minority rights and LGBT rights are a revealing sphere in which to consider the EU's effectiveness and track record in changing on-the-ground realities in the Western Balkans. Respect for and protection of minorities are specified in Chapter 23 of the accession criteria, whereas LGBT rights were included in the 2013 Enlargement Strategy as a key priority in assessing progress on fundamental rights. Yet even though these goals are outlined in several key EU documents, their actual implementation is not strictly defined or regulated by specific criteria, providing openings for fake compliance as well as for deeper polarization.

Before Croatia's 2013 accession, EU pressure resulted in the Constitutional Law on National Minorities in 2002, and much work and money was put into developing National Minority Councils. As analyst Simonida Kacarska has shown, however, these bodies did little more than practice a kind of "decorum," serving as a mere "ornament" without clear functions—a fact that was admitted by the European Commission.

Similarly, Macedonian policy documents cited an EU requirement to adopt a law that would specify protections for minority languages, including Albanian. But what exactly was expected by the EU, and how it was to be implemented, remained unclear. The European Commission did not specify the language law as an element of

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conditionality, but did report on the progress of its implementation after 2008, providing mixed signals as to whether the law was a requirement of the EU accession process.

A lack of clarity regarding the implementation of this law was evident both within the Commission itself—Kacarska points to discordance between progress reports and negotiating documents—and among the local actors expected to work on implementation. Yet the law itself was used by politicians on both the Macedonian and Albanian sides to garner political support. As with the Croatian minority law, this shows how EU expectations, which change over time and frequently lack both internal and external consensus, can be instrumentalized by elites who strategically use arguments over EU conditionality for their own political purposes.

Regarding LGBT rights, Serbia has come a long way since the brutal attacks on the Belgrade Pride Parade in 2001, and the utter chaos following the 2010 parade, which took place under massive police protection but drew coordinated attacks by football hooligans and extremist groups, resulting in numerous injuries and destruction in downtown Belgrade. Undoubtedly, the 2010 parade would not have taken place without EU pressure, and continued pressure from Brussels ensures that the parade—and LGBT rights more broadly—remains on the Serbian political agenda every year.

As early as 2010, the idea that the EU expected Serbia to respect LGBT rights, and consequently to ensure the peaceful holding of a Pride parade, had already become mainstream in the media. This discourse encouraged the perception among ordinary people that protecting LGBT rights was a key part of conditionality, something that had to be done if the country wanted to join the EU. The perception of the EU as a promoter of LGBT rights, and the definition of "Europeanness" and modernity as LGBT-friendly, had already drawn backlashes after accession in several new member states, like Poland, Latvia, and Hungary. It also resulted in a spike in Euroskepticism in potential member states.

In his 2023 book *Coming In*, on the effects of the EU accession process on sexual politics in Serbia, political scientist Koen Slootmaeckers demonstrates how the framing of LGBT rights as an EU demand allowed the state to co-opt the annual Pride parade. As the EU focused on the event and congratulated the Serbian state for ensuring it would take place, it sent a message that the parade could be used for political purposes. At the same time, the protests and riots surrounding the parade every year allow the state to step in as a "protector" of human rights, even though it does little to improve the lived realities of the LGBT community.

Thus, although such formal compliance with EU expectations can seem to be a positive development on the surface, it fails to have a deeper influence on domestic politics. Slootmaeckers calls this "tactical Europeanization," a phenomenon evident in many pro forma changes implemented by the Serbian leadership in order to perform and demonstrate a commitment to European values, though these changes do not bring deeper on-the-ground effects. There is a need for more concerted action on improving LGBT rights, beyond using the Pride parade as a litmus test of Europeanization.

Memory wars

What Slootmaeckers dubbed "tactical Europeanization" in the sphere of LGBT rights has been labeled by researcher Ana Milošević as "EU washing" in the domain of memory politics in the region. Dealing with the past remains both a formal and an informal condition for EU membership, coded alternatively as "reconciliation," "good neighborly relations," or "cooperation with the ICTY." But divergent interpretations of history, including World War II and the Yugoslav wars, continue to trigger confrontations between neighboring countries and hinder their EU prospects.

Regional "memory wars" now have a European dimension. They have become a tool for either supporting or opposing EU accession. They are used by elites not only to endorse so-called EU values, but also to further their own nation- and state-building agendas.

For instance, Croatia's adoption of the EU memory framework has allowed it to subsume its own transgressions as a Nazi ally during World War II into the broader European framework of Holocaust remembrance. As historian Alexandra Zaremba shows in her analysis of memory politics in post-accession Croatia, new state-sponsored World War II memorials have divorced victims and perpetrators from their ethnic identities, ignoring concentration camps' location-specific contexts in favor of an emphasis on the larger Holocaust narrative, which obscures negative associations or responsibility for crimes committed by the Croatian regime. This alignment has provoked domestic pushback, most visible in the

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boycott of the state-promoted commemoration in Jasenovac, the site of one of the most horrific concentration camps in the region, by human rights activists, victims' associations, and representatives of the Serbian, Roma, and Jewish minorities in Croatia.

In addition, the EU memory framework has allowed Croatia to buttress the "two totalitarianisms" narrative, which indirectly equalizes crimes committed by Nazi-fascist and communist regimes in Europe. This victim-centered pillar of the EU memory framework, resulting from the EU's previous Eastern enlargements, renders the type of the oppressor regime irrelevant: Holocaust massacres and other mass atrocity crimes of the past, such as those committed by the Yugoslav state, are seen as comparable. This allows for the relativization of responsibility and leads to more polarization on the ground regarding these contentious issues.

In other cases, larger neighboring states used the EU accession process as leverage to force the Macedonian government to make political concessions in the interpretation of its own national history and memory in order to advance on the EU path. In September 2020, Bulgaria blocked Macedonian progress in EU negotiations by using its veto as a member state, demanding that North Macedonia formally recognize the historical Bulgarian roots of the Macedonian language. The two countries came to an agreement in June 2022 that would require North Macedonia to amend its constitution.

In 2018, Greece finally dropped its longstanding veto on Macedonian EU membership on the condition that its neighbor change its name to North Macedonia. The agreement also called for a joint commission to review points of contention in history curricula in both countries.

The instrumentalization of the EU accession process in such regional disputes shows how elites co-opt those aspects of the Europeanization process that fit their needs, whereas national historical narratives remain fundamentally unchallenged. It is frequently pointed out that the failure to adequately deal with the fallout from the 1990s conflicts in the Balkans is one of the biggest threats to regional stability. The lack of genuine progress and change is nowhere clearer than in the field of memory politics.

EXPECTATIONS GAP

Despite these bleak trends, some positive lessons have also been learned over the past twenty years. One of the main ones is that the most valuable bargaining chip held by the EU consists of the concrete benefits it has to offer to candidate countries, such as visa liberalization.

On this front, several promising developments have taken place recently. The most recent discussions between the EU and Western Balkan states in November and December 2022 focused on phasing out mobile roaming charges beginning in 2023, expanding the Erasmus+ and European Universities Initiative education programs, and, for Kosovo, provisionally expanding Schengen visa-free access. These are all strong incentives.

Additionally, in an attempt to counter Russia's influence in the region, the European Commission lifted a moratorium on opening membership negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in June 2022. At the Tirana summit in December, the EU also offered more funds for infrastructure and rural development, opportunities to participate in its food security programs and common purchasing platform for natural gas, and technical support for resisting cyberattacks, which have plagued Albania and Montenegro. The official declaration underlined the EU's commitment to accelerating accession talks.

EU requirements are at odds with ethnonationalist ideas of sovereignty.

As with all aspects of the EU process, however, the carrots also come with sticks for the leaders of the region. The EU formally expressed its expectation that Serbia, the Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro—all perceived as footholds for Russia—would distance themselves from Moscow. Regional governments were also required to "decide which side they were on" (in the words of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen) by committing to a declaration attributing "sole responsibility" to Russia for the current energy and economic crisis, as well as aligning with the EU's sanctions on Russia. So far, Serbia and Bosnia have refused to make such commitments.

Other expectations outlined at the Tirana summit included requiring local governments to recommit to upholding core European values and principles, and to make EU support as "the region's closest partner, main investor and trading partner and principal donor" more visible, so that ordinary

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people would be more aware of the "concrete benefits of the partnership with the EU." Governments are also expected to work on resolving regional disputes and strengthen good neighborly relations. The EU specifically called on Serbia to recognize Kosovo's status as an independent state, and Kosovo to grant autonomy to its Serbian minority.

Vučić at first refused to participate in the summit, and afterward stated that he disagreed with its conclusions. In Kosovo, the summit was accompanied by street demonstrations in which the opposition leader Sali Berisha was attacked. This was more evidence of the lack of consistency between declaratory statements and actual realities, a fault common to both the EU and regional elites. The extent of actual progress, either by the EU in concrete support for democracy consolidation, or by the regional elites in genuinely embracing EU reforms, will depend on bridging the gap between idealism and pragmatism. ■

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"Czech democratic resilience stands out in Central Europe."

How Czech Democracy Defies the Illiberal Trend

RADEK BUBEN AND KAREL KOUBA

During Andrej Babiš's term as Czech prime minister from 2017 to 2021, many observers of the Central European political landscape concluded that the country was under threat of democratic backsliding, teetering on the edge of joining a regional illiberal trend. The challenges to Czech democracy were largely seen as products of the transformation of the party system over the previous decade. These changes gave rise to political actors who breached some of the taboos that had underpinned the post-1989 democratic consensus: the pro-Western direction of Czech foreign policy, parliamentarism, the importance of countervailing institutional and legal constraints on power holders. Rising authoritarianism in Hungary and serious democratic backsliding in Poland raised concerns that Czechia was following a similar path.

For many observers, the basic setup of the Czech political game between 2017 and 2021 indeed made for a grim democratic outlook, with Miloš Zeman as president and Babiš as prime minister of a minority government. The lower chamber of parliament had a majority composed of Babiš's rhetorically anti-establishment ANO party, Communists, and far-right legislators.

Yet Czech democracy has defied the Central European trend of democratic decay, proving sufficiently resilient. Unlike Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán or Poland's Law and Justice party (PIS), Babiš never moved aggressively to put public media outlets under party control. Public broadcaster Czech Television retained its autonomy. By contrast, PIS pushed to "repolonize" Poland's national media after its election victory in 2015, gradually converting public channels into government propaganda organs.

Unlike Orbán, who used gerrymandering and other tools of electoral manipulation to secure his party's victories, Babiš never rewrote the electoral rules, allowing a moderately strong system of proportional representation to remain in place. Unlike the judicial systems in both Hungary and Poland, whose constitutional and lower courts were brought under the control of political forces, Czech courts remained independent. While Hungary (and to some extent Poland) followed an authoritarian path, there was little or no evidence of political elites similarly eviscerating the infrastructure of Czech democracy.

In our view, these starkly divergent outcomes can be partly attributed to differences those set the Czech political tradition apart from those of Poland and Hungary. Furthermore, the potential dangers of Czech backsliding have been both exaggerated and politicized. This is especially so in depictions of Babiš and his political record. Not only his political adversaries but also some journalists and academic analysts have overemphasized his alleged illiberalism rather than focusing on his specific policies, while overlooking similar tendencies in the opposing camp.

MODERATING TRADITION

Czech democratic resilience stands out in Central Europe. The contrast with Hungary's (and to a lesser extent Poland's) democratic decay over the past decade is in large part driven by historical and structural causes. Czechia has exhibited a more liberal and secular political tradition than its neighbors, as did the former Czechoslovakia. These pluralist and moderate characteristics were at times elevated into a Czech democratic myth, which served both to strengthen the existing political reality and to prevent undemocratic

RADEK BUBEN *is an assistant professor of contemporary history at Charles University in Prague.* KAREL KOUBA *is an associate professor of political science at Charles University.*

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developments. Myths are some of the strongest weapons in contemporary culture wars, posing a challenge to the liberal democratic order. But the long-standing myth of a Czech democratic tradition strengthened its actual manifestations and made the country's political mythology less prone to capture by an illiberal and anti-democratic narrative, as occurred in Poland and Hungary.

Among these long-term factors is the weak political role played by religion. Whereas more than 90 percent of Poles declare themselves to be Catholic, and over 50 percent of Hungarians profess membership in a Christian denomination, 72 percent of Czechs do not identify with any religion. A defense of Catholic tradition has been a hallmark of Poland's PIS government—with anti-abortion laws and a school curriculum in keeping with it. But in the Czech context, in 2012 it was the so-called liberal camp that defended restitution to churches of property that had been seized by the Communists (most of it from the Catholic Church), while the historical left, Babiš, and the radical right aligned against restitution. Babiš never launched anything like Orbán's plan for "building an old-school Christian democracy."

The dangers of Czech backsliding have been exaggerated and politicized.

Interwar Czechoslovakia, despite its many shortcomings and problems, had been the only democratic country in the region; conservative authoritarians governed the rest. Czechoslovakia maintained a stable, competitive party system and the rule of law, guided by the state-sponsored idea of belonging to the democratic West. Its fascist movement was weak and politically insignificant.

This was in part a consequence of the fact that after World War I, the newborn country was assigned much more territory than expected. Hungary was deprived of 72 percent of its former historical territory in 1921. The territory of Slovakia and Carpathian Ruthenia (today part of Ukraine) was added to the Czechoslovak state as a result of the breakup of the Habsburg Empire. Hungary's territorial loss due to the Treaty of Trianon remains a historical trauma to this day, considered "unjust" by 94 percent of Hungarians and "the biggest national tragedy" by 85 percent. Poland, for its part, has always been a country with changing borders and a self-perception of being under threat from both Germany and Russia. Consider the contrast with Czech public opinion: even the disintegration of Czechoslovakia in 1992 has generally been considered a success and the correct course, not a cause for national trauma or a source of grievances against a "treacherous" postcommunist elite.

The undeniable achievements of Czechoslovak democracy between 1918 and 1938 strengthened the pre-existing liberal political tradition in a heavily industrialized society with a strong democratic labor movement (in contrast with its agrarian neighbors). The sense of being deprived of something "because of the West" is limited only to the trauma of the Munich Agreement of 1938, in which the Western powers acquiesced to Nazi Germany's annexation of the Sudetenland. But even this alleged treachery by Britain and France only strengthened the Czechs' self-perception as regional upholders of democracy.

The ease with which the Communists seized power in 1948 undeniably undermines many aspects of the myth of a Czech democratic tradition. Still, to achieve their electoral victory in 1946, the Communists had tactically presented themselves as followers of that tradition, publicly rejecting Soviet methods. The ensuing hard repression—the worst in Communist Europe—can be partly explained by the need to destroy a once vibrant and dense civil society and deeply rooted political pluralism.

Thus, from a *longue durée* perspective, and compared with Poland and Hungary, there are weaker Czech historical foundations for democratic backsliding. The country has little on which to build an ideological movement around a national-religious conservative narrative challenging liberal democratic values. There is no such domestic historical tradition, sense of historical difference with the West, or concern about contested national borders or the threat posed by "mixed race" populations, such as Orbán has warned against. It is a stretch to equate the pragmatic, chameleonic, and uneducated Babiš with the well-prepared, conviction-driven, and ideologically motivated leaders of Hungary and Poland.

Another striking difference lies in the broader use of anticommunism as a tool of political mobilization in the culture wars. Whereas Babiš, a former Communist Party member and active collaborator of the communist secret service, is a frequent target of the Czech anticommunist right, PIS and Orbán's Fidesz, parties formed by

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former dissidents, use the same potent mobilization tool against their liberal and left-wing opponents. Nonetheless, parts of the Czech mainstream media and the current government compare Babiš to those parties to mobilize opposition to the former prime minister.

The politics of memory and recent history also make the Czech case stand out with respect to the instrumentalization of conspiracy theories. In Poland, the discourse of PIS has been driven by conspiracy theories of an alleged secret pact between communists and part of the opposition during the transition to democracy in 1989. The party has used these claims to depict most non-PIS postcommunist politicians as anti-Polish traitors. The tragic death of President Lech Kaczyński in a 2010 plane crash in Russia forms another part of the PIS narrative of anti-Polish intrigues. In the Hungarian case, conspiracy theories center on the investor and philanthropist George Soros, alleging that he plotted to flood the country with migrants and dissolve the nation.

Despite many similar conspiracy theories circulating widely on Czech social media, none have reached the level of semi-official paranoia that has gripped Poland and Hungary. None have been embraced by Babiš, who remains a vocal critic of corruption and "political cartels," employing standard anti-establishment rhetoric.

CHANGING PARTIES

Favorable *longue durée* conditions notwithstanding, Czech democracy has come under pressure as a result of the transformation of its party system and institutional structure over the past decade. These developments brought the basic contours of its relatively institutionalized party system to an end.

Since the 1990s, that system had been based on multipartyism with two strong poles, the right-wing Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD). They were accompanied chiefly by two historical groupings: the Christian Democrats and the Communist Party. The latter consisted of nostalgic defenders of the Communist regime, inspired more by nationalist, conservative, and neo–Pan-Slavist ideas than by a revolutionary spirit.

The radical right was largely toothless. Party competition revolved around socioeconomic cleavages. The only issues resembling culture wars were controversies over the communist past and foreign policy, especially NATO and European Union membership. There was a relative consensus on the pro-Western orientation of the country. Yet both dominant parties contained Euroskeptic and nationalist factions. In the case of the ODS, these were embodied by its founder Václav Klaus, who served as prime minister from 1992 to 1997. The Social Democratic leader, Miloš Zeman (prime minister from 1998 to 2002), played the cards of national sovereignty more subtly and in a more opportunistic manner.

The party system has undergone a profound transformation since the late 2000s. The ODS led governing coalitions in the 1990s and between 2006 and 2013. The party was severely damaged by a series of internal disputes and scandals, as well as its handling of the dire economic consequences of the 2008 global financial crisis. A new, minor right-wing party, TOP 09, captured liberal and younger sections of the electorate, joining the ODS in a coalition government. By 2013, their austerity policies and socially insensitive discourse had alienated important sectors of Czech society, as did a series of corruption scandals. Fully 89 percent of Czechs were dissatisfied with the government.

For its part, the ČSSD signaled its willingness to include the Communists in some governmental arrangements. This accommodation was cause for alarm among many politicians and activists since it undermined the broad post-1989 consensus that treated the Communists as a pariah party, unfit for an executive role.

Responding to widespread dissatisfaction with the political class, the parliament approved a constitutional reform in 2012, introducing direct popular presidential elections. Until then, presidents had been elected indirectly by both chambers of parliament and were expected to perform a largely ceremonial yet symbolically important role.

WORRYING SIGNS

The ensuing, highly polarized presidential campaign resulted in Zeman becoming the first directly elected president in 2013. An economist purged from the Communist Party after 1968, Zeman gained some fame in the last year of communist rule when he published a daring critique of the regime. Declaring himself a liberal and environmentalist in the early 1990s, he praised both Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Yet as Social Democratic leader, he launched a frontal attack on the right-wing policies of the ODS.

By the time he ran for president, Zeman was long alienated from his former party, but he

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divided the Social Democrats by using his residual influence within their ranks. He flaunted his frequent use of vulgarities as well as his self-confessed drinking habit to win over voters. As president, he became a central figure in the Czech culture wars that he helped unleash, lashing out at "fanatical" environmentalists, "hysterical" feminists, and the "Prague café," a symbol of the "elite" disconnected from the "people."

Zeman began his presidency with a constitutionally dubious action, completing the country's shift from a parliamentary to a semi-presidential regime by strengthening the presidency in relation to the legislature and the cabinet. After the collapse of the ODS-led government in 2013, Zeman ignored the will of the parliamentary majority (to continue the existing right-wing government under a different prime minister) and appointed a caretaker government composed of his loyalists. That cabinet failed to receive a vote of confidence, but it governed "in resignation" for the next six months until elections produced another government. Zeman's approach departed from previous constitutional practice, whereby presidents acted as mediators who helped forge a majority-supported government. His actions gave rise to fears that further aggrandizement of presidential powers could jeopardize the country's democratic order.

Interwar Czechoslovakia was the only democratic country in the region.

Presidential overreach was also evident in foreign policy. Zeman attempted to reorient Czech foreign policy toward China and Russia, and closer to the Visegrad Group of Central European states. He also used his institutional resources (such as the power to appoint ambassadors) to overshadow the government's official policy line. He made a string of statements widely seen as playing to Russian interests: he relativized the Russian use of the nerve agent Novichok in assassination attempts by acknowledging that it was also Czech-produced, joked on camera with Vladimir Putin that journalists should be liquidated, and called the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea a fait accompli. Zeman's cordial embrace of China, and his emphasis on Visegrad cooperation alongside an increasingly authoritarian Hungarian government, posed additional challenges to the traditional pro-Western orientation of Czech foreign policy.

Another worrying sign for Czech democracy was the emergence and electoral rise of radical populist-right parties. There had been no sizable fascist movement in interwar Czechoslovakia, and previous attempts to build a hard-right party in the postcommunist era had been fleeting and unsuccessful. But the shakedown of the traditional party system following the 2013 corruption scandals produced an opening for a political entrepreneur, Tomio Okamura.

Echoing the rhetoric of European far-right leaders, Okamura's parties—first Dawn of Direct Democracy, and then, after 2017, the Freedom and Direct Democracy Party (SPD)—embraced a combination of nativism, authoritarianism, and opposition to the EU. The prevailing popular depiction of the 2015 influx of migrants into Europe as a security, cultural, and economic threat (even though very few migrants settled in or even crossed through Czechia) further energized the radical right.

The SPD received 10.4 percent of the vote in 2017. A slight drop to 9.6 percent in 2021 was attributable to a vote split favoring other radical-right parties. But Babiš's minority government relied on the SPD (which was formally in the opposition) for parliamentary support to pass legislation on an ad hoc basis. This arrangement eroded the informal cordon sanitaire meant to ensure that the far right was kept away from state power.

The main reason that democracy was perceived by some to be under threat was neither Zeman nor Okamura, but Babiš. This Slovak-born political entrepreneur formed his own party, ANO, in 2011, became a junior partner in a Social Democrat–led coalition government in 2014, and served as prime minister from 2017 to 2021. He is also a billionaire who made his fortune in the agricultural and chemical sectors, becoming the third-wealthiest Czech by 2021. Upon his entry into politics, Babiš's company, Agrofert, purchased some of the most influential media outlets in the country, including three widely circulated daily newspapers, giving him a tool for attacking potential political opponents and deflecting attention from his scandals.

Babiš's business empire has also been the beneficiary of EU funds: it is the largest recipient of EU agricultural subsidies in the country. Suspicions about his possible conflicts of interest were not unfounded. Babiš faced a criminal prosecution for

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fraud related to the illegal use of EU subsidies for a leisure and entertainment center called the Stork's Nest, 50 kilometers south of Prague. Some of his companies' past financial operations (including an alleged massive tax evasion scheme) came under scrutiny during his tenure as finance minister from 2013 to 2017, when his ministry was responsible for overseeing the legality of such transactions. Allegations of abuses by the ministry's Financial Analytical Unit in investigating and sanctioning companies for tax offenses raised further suspicion of conflicts of interest.

This series of scandals precipitated a government crisis in May 2017, resulting in Babiš's forced dismissal from the cabinet of Social Democratic Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka. By reinforcing his image as a wronged challenger to the established parties, this drama buoyed Babiš in the October 2017 elections. His party received 29.6 percent of the vote, up from 18.7 percent in 2013, whereas the Social Democrats' vote share dropped to 7.5 percent, from 20.5 percent in 2013.

EXAGGERATED THREATS

Babiš was appointed as prime minister by Zeman following the 2017 election, raising alarms that their future cooperation would damage the country's democratic credentials. But this tandem proved to be much less disruptive than critics had warned.

The ambitious foreign policy reorientation toward China and Russia envisaged by Zeman was a fiasco. As for relations with China, despite Czech membership in Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative and promises of major cooperation and investments made during Xi Jinping's 2016 visit to Prague, little Chinese investment has materialized. Chinese companies accounted for 0.1 percent of total foreign investment in Czechia in 2020, less than came from Taiwan.

The reorientation toward Russia, meanwhile, was derailed by two developments. First, after the April 2021 revelation that two operatives of the GRU, the Russian military intelligence agency, were responsible for the explosion of an arms depot in the Czech village of Vrbětice in 2014, the Czech government expelled the majority of Russian diplomats from their oversized embassy in Prague in May 2021. Any hopes of normalizing relations were cast aside after the Russian invasion of Ukraine began on February 24, 2022.

Caught off guard, Zeman proceeded to make perhaps the biggest reversal on Russia of any Western leader. Not only had he downplayed the threat of a Russian attack on Ukraine, he went so far as to call it "another sham of the US intelligence agencies." But on the day of the invasion, Zeman denounced the Russian aggression as a "crime against peace" and said it was necessary to isolate the "lunatics" responsible. The abrupt switch from one extreme to another diminished Zeman's credibility and weakened his position in setting foreign policy. His health problems and speculation surrounding them further diminished his standing.

Babiš's actions likewise did little to undermine democracy. Declaring a strict distinction between an allegedly authoritarian Babiš and the democracy-upholding center-right parties does more to obscure than to illuminate the nature of Czech politics. This cleavage has been artificially exaggerated, and the depiction of Babiš as an unprecedented threat to democracy comparable to that posed by the Polish or Hungarian governing parties has been instrumentalized by his detractors.

Babiš has not hesitated to take the conservative-authoritarian side in the culture wars when it suits him. He brandished the immigration issue, emulating Orbán and even campaigning with him ahead of the 2021 election. Yet Babiš's party contains several liberal elements within its ranks, whereas his opponents (chiefly the ODS and Christian Democrats) are parties whose conservative factions on some key issues are much closer to the European radical right.

While Babiš praised French President Emmanuel Macron, frequently boasting about their good relations, and his party forms part of the centrist Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, the ODS joined the Euroskeptic faction of the European Conservatives and Reformists in the European Parliament, along with Poland's PIS, Italian post-fascists, Greek pro-Russian nationalists, and COVID-19 vaccination deniers. ODS chairman Petr Fiala, who has been prime minister since November 2021, warned against the "neo-Marxist social engineering" and "political correctness" of the left. In an article on US President Donald Trump's election defeat, he claimed that Barack Obama's administration had demonstrated the "capability to destroy society and weaken . . . Western civilization."

Fiala's current minister of defense has participated in public protests by a xenophobic group called We Don't Want Islam in the Czech Republic. In July 2020, a former ODS foreign minister and current member of the European Parliament,

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Alexandr Vondra, vulgarly denounced the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, better known as the Istanbul Convention, a treaty adopted by the Council of Europe that came into force in 2014. These positions form a core part of the ideological repertoire of some of Babiš's opponents. In contrast, Babiš's shifts between praising Macron and inviting Orbán to campaign with him are pragmatic improvisations.

Babiš failed to secure another term in office following his Pyrrhic victory in the October 2021 parliamentary election. Despite winning a plurality of votes and seats, his party and his potential coalition partners fell short of a majority. Two opposition alliances combined for a comfortable majority of 108 seats in the 200-seat lower house, the Chamber of Deputies. The coordination among these parties was unprecedented in Czech politics—some of them were historical rivals. Their move to join forces was a response to anti-Babiš (and to some extent anti-Zeman) calls for broad interparty cooperation.

Babiš's various scandals, as well as his actions (such as appointing a close ally of Zeman as justice minister) that were perceived as threatening to close democratic spaces, had fueled a growing social protest movement called A Million Moments for Democracy. In 2019, the movement held the largest demonstration in Czech history, with a quarter of a million people in attendance.

Conspiracy theories have not reached the status of semi-official paranoia.

By early 2021, the two opposition alliances had formed, each presenting itself as a single list in the elections. The center-right alliance led by Fiala, SPOLU (Together), comprised the right-wing ODS, the Christian Democrats, and the center-right TOP 09. A centrist alliance included both the Czech Pirate Party—one of the most electorally successful offshoots of a global family of Pirate parties that merge a mélange of left-libertarian ideas with center-right positions—and a centrist Mayors and Independents Party, bringing together successful local politicians. Anti-Babiš (and anti-Zeman) sentiment, driven by rhetoric about saving democracy from its (alleged) enemies, provided the necessary glue for this ideologically incoherent and oversized pair of alliances in the run-up to the October 2021 election.

Successful coordination among the opposition parties was not the only reason for Babiš's loss. His party cannibalized the electorate of both of his previous political partners. Neither the Communist Party nor the Social Democrats reached the threshold of 5 percent of the vote to qualify for seats in the lower chamber. Much of this was due to the progressively leftist and redistributive economic policies adopted by Babiš's ANO movement—and the credit claimed for these policies by a party that gradually rebranded itself, shifting from its original platform of advocating austerity policies and protecting the business interests of its founding entrepreneurial elite. Aided by the ineffectual leadership of both left-wing parties, Babiš (and his celebrated marketing team) seized their electoral niche. By the time of the 2021 elections, the ANO electorate disproportionately comprised low-income, rural, and elderly voters, many of whom were former supporters of the left.

Despite early post-election expectations that Zeman would appoint Babiš as prime minister (following the convention that the leader of the largest party is given the first chance to form a government), Zeman this time respected the will of the parliamentary majority and appointed Fiala instead. Babiš accepted his defeat and moved into parliamentary opposition.

Czech Exceptionalism?

Czech democracy has undergone two transformations over the past decade. The first involves changes that have also affected many other liberal democracies: the opening of a new political divide epitomized by culture wars, and the corresponding transformation of the party system with the emergence of new types of political actors and the repositioning of old ones. The public became much more suspicious of politics as usual and grew more attentive to nontraditional narratives. Compared with the rest of Central Europe, however, conspiracy theories and fake news so far have not helped create an ideologically motivated and electorally successful challenger to Czech liberal democracy, such as those that have taken power in Poland and especially Hungary.

The second transformation was specific to Czech politics. As the first directly elected president, Zeman initiated a rapid transition toward a semi-presidential regime and challenged established practices of Czech democracy, while using the culture war repertoire to stay in power. Yet Zeman was effectively blocked from pursuing his

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largely rhetorical antiliberal mobilization by other political actors, not to mention by his ailing health. In stark contrast with Orbán, Zeman completely abandoned his pro-Putin rhetoric following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Similarly, neither Babiš nor his party launched an ideologically driven attack on the liberal aspects of democracy. Rather than being firmly committed to illiberal populism, Babiš remained a pragmatic political entrepreneur whose chaotic government—exemplified by its erratic response to the COVID-19 pandemic—resembled anything but authoritarianism. In fact, it is his political adversaries who defend political ideas that are close to those of the region's pioneers of democratic backsliding.

The cleavage dividing liberal democrats on the one hand and national conservatives and populists on the other does not match the Babiš versus anti-Babiš divide. Its outlines are much more blurred in Czechia than in Hungary and Poland. The struggle for liberal democracy has been a useful mobilizational tool for the anti-Babiš camp, helping it win the 2021 elections, yet Babiš has not posed a real threat to the democratic regime. It was rather the quality and transparency of governance that was at stake.

Still, despite the favorable structural and historical conditions for Czech democratic resilience, we cannot rule out that a return to power by Babiš—who lost the January 2023 presidential election by a wide margin to Petr Pavel, a retired general—might bring greater polarization around his divisive personality. In tandem with social frustrations unleashed by the economic crisis and soaring inflation, this could produce profound political transformations. Leaders as diverse as Viktor Orbán, Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, and even Miloš Zeman have demonstrated that leaders who return to government after sitting on the sidelines often become power-hungry, abandon their democratic credentials, and assume illiberal stances. But Andrej Babiš would hardly be the only one to blame for such an outcome. ■

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Unspoken Legacies of Fascism in Italy

MADDALENA GRETEL CAMMELLI

What are we referring to when we use the "f-word"—fascism—in current political debates? This question is even more compelling after Giorgia Meloni and her Brothers of Italy party won the September 2022 Italian elections, considering that this party has never concealed its attachment to the country's fascist legacy and neo-fascist parties. In October, Italy also observed the centenary of the March on Rome, the day the Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini was born in October 1922. This important historical commemoration was marked with publications, debates, and public events.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that current popular discussion on the topic of fascism derives solely from Meloni's victory or the anniversary of the March on Rome. These two elements are not isolated. The fascist legacy never really disappeared from Italian political life, and its current high profile points to the importance of interrogating its multifaceted practices and contemporary meanings.

In historical scholarship, it is common to spell Fascism with a capital "F" to indicate the Italian regime of Mussolini between the two world wars. There is still no consensus among scholars as to whether this definition can be extended to include other authoritarian regimes. Historian Roger Griffin has attempted to develop a definition capable of providing a shared understanding of what should be labeled "fascism," delineating its "palingenetic" quality—its basis in myths of national rebirth.

Another eminent historian, Roger Paxton, rejects any static, singular definition of a "fascist minimum." Paxton insists on the importance of viewing Fascism, in its historical form, as a process that takes shape and form across time, space, and the people engaged with it more or less spontaneously. As with any other social phenomenon, he suggests, we cannot understand Fascism without looking at its concrete forms, actions, and actors: who does what, when, how, and why. This approach is indeed crucial, especially when looking at the contemporary manifestations of such a legacy.

From 1946 until 1994, one of the political parties active in Italy was the Italian Social Movement (MSI), a party explicitly attached to the country's fascist legacy. For that reason it was excluded from the governmental alliances of the leading party Christian Democracy, even if it could be instrumentalized for anticommunist purposes. Together with multiple other groups, the MSI formed what was referred to as the neo-fascism of the second half of the twentieth century.

The groups formally or informally connected with the MSI party were leading actors in the political violence of the 1960s and 1970s. This violence culminated in the 1980 bombing at Bologna's central train station, which killed 80 people and injured 200. The connections between neo-fascist activists, the Italian secret services, and some upper echelons of state power comprise a historical truth that is still undergoing the process of being recognized as a legal truth, via ongoing trials—in particular for the Bologna train station bombing.

In January 1995, at a party conference in Fiuggi, the MSI formally dissolved and was replaced by the National Alliance (AN), a party with a nationalist and conservative spirit, at least symbolically erasing the explicit continuity with the fascist legacy. The inclusion of AN in Silvio Berlusconi's coalition government was a major event in European politics. "For the first time since 1945 a neo-fascist party enters a government coalition," political scientist Piero Ignazi wrote in his 1994 book *Postfascisti?* AN was deemed "post-fascist" in that it accepted democracy; however, Ignazi argued that "post-fascism" was an empty word without a critical examination of fascism and its ideals.

In 2009, together with Berlusconi's Forza Italia, the AN established a new party, People of Freedom

MADDALENA GRETEL CAMMELLI *is a research fellow in anthropology at the University of Bologna.*

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(PDL), a further step in trying to distance itself from the neofascist past. In 2013, a group of former AN members, including Giorgia Meloni, decided to split from the PDL and establish a new party, reclaiming the symbols of the MSI and thus an explicit reference to the neo-fascist past. This party is the Brothers of Italy we find in government today.

Another important turning point took place on the eve of the millennium, when a group called CasaPound (in tribute to the American poet Ezra Pound, who made pro-Fascist radio broadcasts from Italy during World War II) claimed a new definition for its members: "third-millennium fascists." This movement revived the use of the "f-word," appropriating it for a new identity appealing to young people and composed of specific practices—especially rock concerts. It also engaged in violence, which represented a continuum with the fascist legacy through symbolic and physical actions against political opponents, migrants, and journalists.

The fascist legacy has maintained a key role in Italian political life over time, in one way or another; it has never really disappeared. The contexts in which that legacy has been reasserted and the actors claiming to uphold it may have changed, but it has proved capable of updating and renewing itself to the present moment. The formation of Meloni's government provides an emphatic example of the presence and potency of this legacy. But Meloni did not appear out of nowhere. In this context, questioning the real meaning of this f-word is a central task. We need to better understand what we are talking about when we talk about fascism in contemporary times.

Anthropologist Peter Hervik has said that practitioners in his field should be able to speak with people, not categories. This suggests the importance of ethnography as a tool of research and knowledge production that is capable of stepping back from pre-established truths in order to understand phenomena such as the current widespread circulation of references to fascism. This word carries more layers of meaning than are evident when it is used simply to accuse somebody of being a fascist or to assume that the Fascist past was defined by a singular personality.

Historian Emilio Gentile has pointed out the perils of what he calls "a-historiography," referring to the practice of comparing different historical epochs to identify similarities and continuity with the Fascist past. Such scholarship, he warns, risks rendering Fascism banal, an empty word. The past never repeats itself in the same way, and it is necessary to avoid simplifying the complexity and violence perpetrated in history, as well as to avoid banalizing current manifestations of this legacy. One reason for the continuity of the fascist legacy in the institutions and political life of the Italian republic is the fact that Italian society as a whole has never effectively analyzed and concretely taken responsibility for that past.

The past never repeats itself in the same way.

WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY?

In light of these premises, the question is not whether the Meloni government represents a fascist resurgence, as if this were some kind of unprecedented novelty. The more important task at this point is interrogating the practical manifestations of such references and legacies, and the instrumental use of this category by politicians. We also need to question the existence of real differences in political practices across the party spectrum, and ask how we can challenge the continuity of racist and authoritarian politics in governments over time.

It is perhaps worth recalling that recent agreements with North African dictatorships to prevent migrants from coming to Italy were signed by Interior Minister Marco Minniti of the center-left Democratic Party (PD), who held office from 2016 to 2018. The Jobs Act, a law abolishing many fundamental rights for workers and increasing employment precarity, was developed by Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, who headed a PD government from 2014 to 2016. And we should not forget the recent management of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which the technocratic government headed by Prime Minister Mario Draghi, supported by the PD, acted as a notably authoritarian regime in suppressing basic rights written into Italy's constitution, such as the fundamental right to work. Hardly anyone condemned this betrayal of the country's so-called anti-fascist constitution.

The similarities between the political practices of the PD and the Brothers of Italy are more numerous than a superficial glance at their ideological profiles might suggest. The PD's electoral campaign in 2022 was built around the supposed dichotomy

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between fascism and antifascism; the party presented itself as a force for good taking a stand against evil, the supposed evil being Meloni's party. But where does the need for this kind of categorization come from? When used to erect an ideological barrier, such categories risk obscuring rather than effectively giving a sense of what is happening.

The fascist legacy is always treated as somebody else's responsibility. Commemorations of the March on Rome held up the face of Mussolini as the unique identifier of the regime. Italy missed out on yet another opportunity to face its own responsibility. Just as it was not Mussolini alone who built the Fascist regime in the past, so today it is not Meloni alone who is causing fascism to resurface. We need a much deeper process to analyze the political and social responsibilities for this continuity, a process capable of shedding light on the ways in which attitudes and practices attached to that legacy appear across the political spectrum of the Italian Republic.

In 2006, filmmaker Nanni Moretti produced and directed *Il Caimano*, in which the protagonist wants to make a movie about Berlusconi and his governments. In one scene, Moretti himself appears as a character driving through the tangle of Rome's traffic. He notes that Berlusconi, through his television empire, had already won the most important battle: that of changing Italian society. It is true that the legacy of the Berlusconi governments definitely did not end with his last period in office. His personality, his television channels and programs, and his trials have changed public life and helped to shape a new generation. The values he personified circulate widely as a shared element in Italian society, no matter the specific role he plays as an individual.

And if we think about fascism as a phenomenon of twentieth-century history, or about neo-fascism as the continuity of this phenomenon in different forms since the end of World War II, or about post-fascism as well as today's third-millennium fascists, it is evident that this legacy never really disappeared. Similar to Berlusconi's enduring presence, the fascist legacy has exerted a pervasive influence in this society, even when it is not named as such. ■

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Reconstructing the Nuclear Peace

HOLGER NEHRING

From the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Americans and West Europeans took to the streets to protest against the deployment of a new generation of medium-range missiles. The North Atlantic Assembly, a committee of parliamentarians from across NATO, saw this as a sign of a "gradual but accelerating disintegration of the public support on which NATO depends" and a "crisis of confidence, values, and perceptions."

Euromissiles: The Nuclear Weapons That Nearly Destroyed NATO
Susan Colbourn
(Cornell University Press, 2022)

Susan Colbourn has written a truly international history of what has become known as "the Euromissile crisis" to explain why NATO did not collapse under the weight of these events. Moving seamlessly between the national capitals of Washington, Ottawa, Bonn, London, Rome, Brussels, and The Hague (though paying scant attention to Paris), she engages with protest movements as well as high politics.

One of Colbourn's main findings is that this was not just one crisis, but that many different crises overlapped. Among the problems that had to be tackled were the United States' commitment to extended deterrence through NATO; the role of West Germany within the alliance; the transformation of the international system beyond bipolarity; increasing public scrutiny of foreign and defense policy; and the balance of national and collective interests within the Western alliance.

Paraphrasing a famous quip commonly attributed to Hastings Ismay, the first secretary general, about the purpose of NATO—to keep the Americans in, the Soviets out, and the Germans down—Colbourn demonstrates how these problems were entangled to such an extent that they appeared to undermine the structure on which NATO rested. The key questions were "whether the Americans would remain in Europe, whether the Soviets would keep out, whether the (West) Germans would remain down, and whether their publics and parliaments would continue to accept that their security was best protected with weapons that could destroy humankind."

In the way it highlights this complexity, Colbourn's book can be read as a valuable sequel to Marc Trachtenberg's 1999 landmark *A Constructed Peace*, and comes close to it in scope and ambition. Trachtenberg highlighted how finding a stable status quo for the German question was closely linked to finding a solution to West Germany's status in the international system with regard to nuclear weapons from the end of World War II into the early 1960s.

Colbourn's mapping of the genealogy of those multiple crises around the Euromissiles begins where Trachtenberg's ends. With the emergence of a strategic stalemate in the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, many Western policymakers started to look beyond the "strictures of the bipolar order," so that the "the Cold War's central place in international politics" was much diminished by the mid-to-late 1960s.

This rearrangement created new challenges, however. As the United States began to pursue détente with the Soviet Union, aiming for parity in strategic nuclear weapons, European NATO members feared the end of extended deterrence—Washington's commitment to deter and potentially respond to nuclear and non-nuclear aggression, with regard to not only its own territory, but also the territory of its allies. West Germans felt especially vulnerable as the Soviets began to station a new generation of medium-range missiles in Warsaw Pact countries.

Quick fixes—such as proposals for stationing more US cruise missiles in Europe—did not work. It was in this context that German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt went public with his frustrations in a landmark speech at the International

HOLGER NEHRING *is a professor of contemporary European history at the University of Stirling.*

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Institute for Strategic Studies in London on October 28, 1977. For Schmidt, NATO's crisis was fundamentally about the "credibility of the US nuclear guarantee."

His solution to this crisis of credibility—to combine the threat of new medium-range deployments with an offer of negotiations—prefigured what would become NATO's double-track decision. It would propose to negotiate with Moscow on nuclear weapons, while threatening to station new medium-range nuclear missiles in Europe should no consensus be found. But the path toward that decision was not straightforward.

The adoption of this policy by NATO in December 1979 led to a wave of protests across the United States and Western Europe. Although these demonstrations have often been portrayed as mere instruments—or at least unwitting assets—of Soviet propaganda, Colbourn emphasizes how peace movements were far from homogeneous. The dual-track decision was simply the "lowest common denominator" and a "lighting rod" for a variety of groups.

One key point of disagreement between governments and movements was that critics saw the proposed deployments as the "centerpiece of [US] warfighting doctrine" that had been discussed since the mid-1970s, whereas governments stressed nuclear deterrence. Debates in West Germany, on the front line of the European Cold War, were especially controversial and acrimonious, contributing to the collapse of Schmidt's social democratic–liberal coalition government in 1982.

What seemed like good solutions for some countries created problems for others.

One of the peace movements' main opponents was the new US president, Ronald Reagan, who took office in 1981. But Colbourn shows that Reagan's policies were never as fixed and stable as his champions or detractors have assumed. Initially, the Reagan administration was not sure what to do about arms control. Schmidt and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher jointly lobbied Reagan to continue a policy of modernization of long-range nuclear weapons alongside the pursuit of arms control negotiations. Secretary of State Alexander Haig stressed the importance of negotiations with Moscow, even if only for the purposes of alliance management, but others in the Reagan administration warned against allowing German interests to define NATO policy.

Buoyed by favorable public opinion, Reagan began to style himself as a peacemaker. Meanwhile, debates about the deployment of medium-range missiles continued—and the Soviets were keen to capitalize on this political controversy in negotiations. While the British, Italian, and West German parliaments gave their approval for deployment in the autumn of 1983, Belgium and the Netherlands continued to drag their feet.

At the same time, "alternative models of security" were being debated. Some NATO governments started their own peace initiatives. Greek Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou pushed for a "policy of peace," while Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau diagnosed an "ominous rhythm of crisis" that he wanted to resolve through a dual-track strategy of his own, namely by encouraging selected European allies to pressure Reagan to pursue a policy of détente, and by urging European NATO members to work toward changing alliance strategy.

As the deployment decisions were implemented, the United States began to push even harder for negotiations with the Soviets. Ultimately, Colbourn argues, the success of the negotiations depended on Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's change of heart after his failed Reykjavik summit with Reagan in 1986.

In 1987, the signing of the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, envisaging the complete withdrawal of all such weapons from Europe, recreated some unity in the alliance. But it also led to new problems. Resolving the issue of intermediate-range nuclear weapons brought the modernization of shorter-range nuclear missiles into sharper focus. The West Germans, in particular, pushed for a delay in modernizing the nuclear arsenal. Then, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the unification of Germany, and the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, NATO abandoned core elements of its Cold War strategy, especially with regard to actual war fighting.

ALLIES WITH AGENCY

Colbourn's book is an exemplary study of contemporary history as the "pre-history of current problem constellations," as German historian Hans Günter Hockerts put it. The debates she outlines sound eerily familiar in the present context of debates about NATO's stance on Russia's

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war against Ukraine, not least because they rely on the same vocabulary. "Finlandization" and "neutralism" were concerns, as was the question of what West Germany was really up to: was it a reliable ally?

But the value of Colbourn's study lies not only in her illuminating analysis of the complexity of past discussions; she also makes an important conceptual intervention. She highlights how military and political aspects of (nuclear) strategy cannot be as clearly separated as some purists would like. In doing so, she alerts us to the "sheer complexity of NATO's political landscape." Though the United States might have been the dominant power within the alliance, it had to work to create legitimacy for that power among its allies—and these allies had agency, too. During the 1980s, Italy and the Netherlands were able to wield this power especially astutely, but West Germany also often turned its position of vulnerability into one of strength.

The complexity of NATO's political landscape was amplified by the importance of domestic politics and the question of domestic political legitimacy. What seemed like good solutions for some countries—Papandreou's and Trudeau's peace initiatives in the mid-1980s, for example—created problems for others.

It might seem unremarkable that a historian would conclude her book with reflections on the importance of time. Yet this is a key point that others have failed to spot: NATO's multiple crises in this period were compounded by the substantial lag between making decisions and implementing them. This time lag was an outcome of the complexity of decision-making among and within the NATO member states, and it often created new problems when existing ones had just been resolved.

Reconstructing the European peace that had been created by the early 1960s was therefore far from straightforward. There was no sudden end to the Cold War, either. Colbourn argues that the "Cold War eroded gradually in fits and starts, punctuated by dramatic moments of sudden and sweeping change." Paradoxically, this also created the conditions for NATO's survival beyond the Cold War—there was no dramatic moment at which it was clear to all policymakers and publics that the alliance should be abandoned.

It is perhaps this absence of clear historical lessons from the 1980s that has led so many commentators toward simplistic solutions in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine. Many seem tempted to smash the seismographs during the earthquake. Reading Colbourn's book offers a useful analytical antidote. ■

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