



European Security – Drones and Minds

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine revealed Europe's military vulnerability – a fragmented and rusted defense industry, reduced military mobility, a continent-wide insufficiency of investments. The months and years that followed have been effectively used by European countries to strengthen security of the continent, as well as to weaken Russia's economy; steps have been taken to embolden national defense industries, increase investments in security, and strengthen Europe's Eastern flank. To weaken its opponent, the EU reduced its dependency on Russian gas by 83%, adopted 12 packages of sanctions against Russia, allocated around EURO 35 billion to support Ukrainian economy and extended candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova. As the last months of the war in Ukraine showed, more measures are still needed to secure Europe. And as the war between Israel and Hamas revealed, in its quest for security Europe may have ignored one of its important dimensions – society.

Between the end of the Cold War and until February 2022, Europe has been complacent in approaching its own security: threats seemed to have disappeared – or so leaders chose to believe – and the trans-Atlantic unity, stronger than ever, appeared enough to protect Europe. The war in Ukraine ultimately forced the continent to take its own defense seriously, and act. **Strengthening NATO's Eastern flank, updating European defense plans and revamping national defense industries** have been the priorities and, consequently, achievements, be them fractional,

of the past two years. In August 2023 Russia withdrew from the Grain Deal, which allowed for safe shipment of Ukrainian grains through the Black Sea. It consequently attacked ships and ports in the Black Sea and the mouths of Danube, reminding Europeans of the vulnerability of **critical sea infrastructure**. Ports, submarine cables and off-shore explorations are in need of increased protection, adding this to the list of European security objectives. As long as Russia will continue to militarily dominate the northern part of the Black Sea, threatening to continue to attack commercial vessels and de facto controlling and limiting navigation in the sea, the maritime security in this area will remain fragile. Romania and Bulgaria have very limited naval capacities, while foreign ships may only station in the Black Sea under strict conditions imposed by the Montreux Convention¹, excluding the possibility of a permanent NATO presence in the sea. Russia's recent and continued attacks on Ukrainian ports on the **Danube** exposed the weak security of the mouths of the river, despite its obvious strategic importance. To further consolidate the security of its Eastern flank, Europe will have to enhance **maritime security in the Black Sea**, to complement air and land capabilities.

As Europe was getting used to and seemed prepared for the reality of a long conflict in its East, a renewed conflict erupted in its South. The attack of Israel by Hamas on October 7 generated new military threats to European security; its high possibility of contagion portends to the security of the entire Southern neighborhood, while its intensity may destabilize parts of Europe. Of equal importance, the conflict unleashed an enemy mostly ignored in the past decade, **home-grown terrorism**, and revealed the reach of extreme and radical organizations not only in the Middle East, but throughout the world. And it imprinted European security a forgotten dimension – the social one. Europe is now threatened not only by two military conflicts in its neighborhoods, one with a high possibility of contagion, but also by the **radical** elements in its societies. **Addressing terrorist threats and limiting the spread of radical views** have become new security priorities.

While hard-security remains the purpose and objective of NATO, counter-terrorism and prevention of (further) radicalization fall well within the responsibilities of the EU. The measures it adopted since 2005², aiming for increased cooperation among

¹ [1936-Convention-Regarding-the-Regime-of-the-Straits.pdf \(nus.edu.sg\)](#)

² [The EU's response to terrorism - Consilium \(europa.eu\)](#)

members, and leading to the creation of the position of EU counter-terrorism coordinator, ask to be revisited and improved. *These measures will have to account for societies that have changed, and that are now triggered by issues and manipulated by actors not necessarily different, but more sophisticated than two decades ago.*

The rise of extremism across trans-Atlantic space is not a new phenomenon, it has been increasingly reported after 9/11 and especially after the economic crisis of 2008, although its roots go deeper in history. The wide, general spread of social media now generously fuels the upsurge in extremism, exploiting deepening economic inequalities and increased political polarization. The last decade has seen increasingly more leaders embracing **populist and extremist messages** out of either vocation or political opportunism. Built on a social permeability to these messages, their distribution only increases polarization, in a vicious circle. Manifestations of extremism have evolved from xenophobic and racist discourses to violent actions, and creation of organizations that promote extremist approaches.³ The extremist scene has become more heterogenous, as the extremist ideologies expanded to new concerns. Far right as well as radical left-wing parties are making their way in national governments, as a sign that political polarization leaves less room for moderates. This new reality alters not only the political discourse, it complicates decisions at the EU level and affects its policies, including those related to security. And, in a vicious circle, further polarizes societies, only to create more space for extremist manifestations.

The war in Ukraine triggered a coalition of non-Western countries whose leaders not only place little value on democracy or human and collective rights, but defy those societies that embrace them. Their narratives, distributed through a formidable propaganda machinery, are reaching far in European societies, worn out as they are by multiple crises and genuine weaknesses of the European system. Without embracing an extremist ideology, more Europeans share **a certain skepticism towards effectiveness of democracy and indifference to its backlash**⁴.

The other conflict on Europe's borders, between Israel and Hamas, has put the spotlight on a certain radicalization of European societies, a concerning reach of

[3 ran_adhoc_cont_manif_vrwe_eu_overv_pcve_pract_2021_en.pdf\(europa.eu\)](#)

[4 Global Public Opinion in an Era of Democratic Anxiety | Pew Research Center](#)

Islamic extremism to various segments of societies. The existence of Islamic converts in the trans-Atlantic space surfaced with the beginning of war on terrorism as a response to the 9/11 attack, but they seemed to have been put at bay by the actions taken by national governments and at the EU level. The current manifestations, though, only stand proof of the limited success of these actions and the need for better designed policies to minimize the impact of **extremist Islam** within societies.

The multiple crises European societies have been subjects of in the past 15 years, some better managed than others, have fueled distrust not only in political leaders, but in the current political system itself, and made societies more permeable to anti-systemic manifestations. A vulnerability successfully exploited by external actors, mainly through social media. The EU enlargement to Ukraine, Moldova and Western Balkans will bring into the Union a cocktail of societies that strongly believe in democracy and still strive for it in their respective countries, but that are also well permeated by Russian and Chinese propaganda, and some even by elements of extreme Islamism. This potential vulnerability will have to be carefully addressed by the Union, which will have to expand and deepen its anti-extremist policies. A new European architecture will need not only minimize extremism, but also rebuild social trust in a system that provides safety and economic opportunities and preserve the social fabric from further deterioration, with a solid education system at the center. In a world where ideologies clash violently, further rise in extremism has to be considered a vulnerability to security.

Europe proved able to adapt to changes and respond to threats and will most likely continue to do so. Yet as long as its security architecture is being designed by events, rather than by vision, Europe will continue to quickly adapt, not necessarily strengthen; and as long as it is concerned only with drones, and not with minds, Europe may find itself prepared for war, but not for peace.