

POLICY REPORT | JANUARY-MARCH 2025

VISEGRAD / INSIGHT

**EUROPE RAMPS UP DEFENCE
POSTURE WHILE US
ADMINISTRATION CALLS OUT
MILITANT DEMOCRACY**



**EU FORESIGHT
FROM VISEGRAD FOUR**

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Problem

With little cohesion on its driving policies, the EUDS risks becoming a vulnerability rather than a strong addition to ongoing defence posture efforts – amid US accusations against militant democracy.

Key facts

- * EUDS preparations begin to combat info manipulation and interference in democracies.
- * Latvia talks conscription, Poland pledges 500k soldiers.
- * Poland and Baltics set 4-5% GDP spending on defence as the new EU standard.
- * REARM Europe expected to generate €800bn spending; €150bn in common EU borrowing, €500bn declared by the new German coalition.
- * Romanian far-right candidate banned from running again.
- * PM Fico survived a vote of no confidence, but his majority is weak, and protests continue.
- * Mentzen and Nawrocki poll in joint second after Trzaskowski.
- * PM Orbán spending big and cracking down on civil society to ward off Magyar, but at the cost of Hungary's economy.
- * ANO Party still set to return.

Foresight

Unless CEE leaders like Tusk, Merz, Kubilius and Kallas establish a common ground for democratic security initiatives, the EUDS will lack focus and legitimacy against FIMI and DIMI actors – ahead of key elections in Romania (04/05) and Poland (18/05).

Europe Ramps Up Defence Posture While US Administration Calls Out Militant Democracy

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- **The new US administration has forced the EU to make [much-needed investments in its hard security](#).**
- **However, Donald Trump's team has undermined the EU's ability to defend its democratic security, [empowering far-right narratives](#) and [DIMI actors like Viktor Orbán and Robert Fico](#). Take JD Vance's speech in Munich or the decision to cut most USAID funding.**
- **This augments pressure on the rule of law ahead of key elections in Poland and Romania, which are already the targets of pro-Russian FIMI campaigns.**
- **Poland and the Baltics lead on defence posture, spending big but also encouraging [social willingness to fight](#). [Donald Tusk and Edgars Rinkēvičs](#) are [mainstreaming military training and conscription](#).**
- **CEE initiatives have translated into EU policy, like the White Paper on Defence and Readiness 2030, the Preparedness Union Strategy, and the East Shield.**
- **Yet the EU Democracy Shield (EUDS) lacks cohesion, with disagreement between Warsaw, Berlin and Paris on policy direction – even as [public consultation begins](#).**
- **[Trump's geoeconomic instruments have also fallen on deaf ears](#). The US prioritises national security, coercing friend or foe to change their international strategy, while the EU does not fully acknowledge the China challenge.**
- **This overview draws on insights from our [weekly outlooks](#), which continuously monitor democratic security trends in CEE, as well as contributions from Visegrad Insight fellows across the region.**



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About

Project

Visegrad Insight is the main Central European analysis and media platform. It generates future policy directions for Europe and transatlantic partners. Established in 2012 by the Res Publica Foundation.

Foresight on European Values and Democratic Security (FEVDS). This project engages CEE civil society leaders in a foresight-driven debate on the future EU policy developments to protect European values and freedoms.

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INTRODUCTION

How CEE politics shapes the policies of the EU

'The threat that I worry most about vis-a-vis Europe is not Russia, not China, it's not any other external actor. **What I worry about is the threat from within, the retreat of Europe from some of its most fundamental values.**' US Vice President JD Vance lambasted European leaders at the Munich Security Conference for not working with hard-right parties and suppressing free speech. **He was criticising the notion of [militant democracies](#)**, where democratic states are forced to defend themselves against authoritarian, populist forces. In turn, **it was Vance's speech that inspired illiberal actors from CEE – and their very real threats to EU values and democracy.**

'JD Vance was hailed by the Polish right and far right because he said exactly what they constantly repeat: that Europe is corrupt, that people are being arrested for their beliefs. Nothing like that happens. In Europe, you can say anything you want – but freedom of speech also means responsibility. The point is that Vance's speech shows the unreliability of the new US administration. We can't count on the US as much as we used to,' says Bartosz Wieliński, a Visegrad Insight Fellow from Poland and deputy editor-in-chief at Gazeta Wyborcza.

By echoing such narratives, **[the Donald Trump administration](#) has helped to normalise far-right movements** – as explored in [this report](#) by the Institute of International Relations in Prague (IIR). **It has also amplified pressures on electoral integrity ahead of key elections**, including Romanian presidential elections (4 May), Polish presidential elections (18 May), and parliamentary elections in Moldova (July) and Czechia (October).

'The annulment of presidential elections in Romania after reports of foreign interference, voter irregularities, and non-transparent funding was a success for foreign actors. By success, I mean the semi-accomplished goal to erode confidence in democratic processes, destabilise society, stoke social tensions, and signal to other NATO and EU states that their elections can be hacked too,' says Alina Bârgăoanu, a Visegrad Insight Fellow from Romania and member of the European Digital Media Observatory advisory board.

It is in this context that [Călin Georgescu decried his arrest as a 'blow to the heart of democracy'](#) – even though his rise was to a large extent a product of Russia's 'information and media capture', as explained in [this report](#) by the Centre for the Study of Democracy (CSD), and [designed to undermine Romania](#) as a

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future NATO stronghold. Similarly, **Law and Justice (PiS) Party officials have accused the EU of plotting to interfere in Poland's presidential election**, warning that there will be a repeat of the Romanian annulment. Outgoing President Andrzej Duda had invited the POTUS to Poland ahead of May elections, though a Vance visit is now reportedly more likely. Another clear example is the arrest of French far-right leader Marine Le Pen, who said that her barring from office 'totally violated' the rule of law. **Leaders like Viktor Orbán, Geert Wilders and even Trump himself came to Le Pen's aid**, with the latter calling out: 'The Witch Hunt against Marine Le Pen ... another example of European Leftists using Lawfare to silence Free Speech'.

[The US administration's decision to cut 90% of USAID](#)

contracts further inspired an illiberal crackdown on civil society. After a meeting with Elon Musk, Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico declared the end of an era when USAID is used in Slovakia 'for political purposes'. **This crackdown has been sharpest in Hungary, where [Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has called for NGOs with foreign funding to be 'swept away'](#) by Easter.** Fidesz has even announced plans to expel citizens with double citizenship who undermine 'national sovereignty'.

'The government invested an unimaginable amount of energy and money into building relations with President Trump...his team is not going to criticise Orbán if he further undermines independent media and civil society. To the contrary: there is an illiberal knowledge transfer between Washington and Budapest, including topics like LMBTQI+ and migration, that glue the radical populist right together on the global scale,' says Edit Zgut-Przybylska, a Visegrad Insight Fellow from Hungary and a visiting fellow at the CEU Democracy Institute.

In recent weeks, **proposals by the illiberal Mathias Corvinus Collegium (MCC) and Ordo Iuris groups were presented behind closed doors to The Heritage Foundation**, a conservative think tank close to the Trump administration. The groups from Hungary and Poland, respectively, suggested radical reforms that would significantly weaken the EU.

'USAID/NED played an important role in...the strengthening of democratic institutions. They were the best manifestation of the soft power of the US. The suspension stops the financing of many important projects and complicates the formation of a global agenda according to the values of the free world,' says Ivan US, a Future of Ukraine Fellow at Visegrad Insight and senior consultant at Ukraine's National Institute for Strategic Studies.

In these ways, the Trump administration has fuelled both FIMI (Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference) and DIMI (Democracy Information Manipulation and Interference) actors and their threats to the rule of law. **The context highlights the importance of the EU Democracy Shield (EUDS)**, which has begun meetings and will soon open public consultation, alongside a separate consultation on Civil Society Strategy.

A Polish official has told Visegrad Insight, however, that it is hard to find an agreement between Warsaw, Paris and Berlin on the priority objectives of the EUDS. The initiative will be organised around several pillars, including foreign interference, disinformation, information manipulation; the fairness and integrity of elections; the strengthening of democratic frameworks; and societal resilience. Yet one capital wants to prioritise penalties for big tech platforms, the other focus on rogue domestic actors and funding that is illegal in online campaigning, and the third hone in on Russian FIMI in particular.

Aside from democratic security, **Trump's team has instigated [major developments in the EU's hard security](#), as more leaders adopt a CEE attitude on how to defend EU values.**

Not only have **the EU and Ukraine been sidelined in US-Russia negotiations to reach a ceasefire in Ukraine**, but Trump has frequently repeated Russian narratives – [branding Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy a 'dictator'](#) and claiming Ukraine 'should have never started [the war]'. His team had hoped to reach a ceasefire by Easter, after initial signs of agreement on maritime security in the Black Sea, but Russia is dragging its feet.

The US has also applied far less public pressure on Moscow than on Kyiv in its efforts to bring both sides to the negotiating table thus far, pausing military aid and intelligence sharing with Ukraine. Its main offer of security is an [economic deal on mineral resources](#), which reports suggest would, in its current form, give the US first right of refusal over [all major future infrastructure and mineral investments](#) in Ukraine, potentially undermining [new avenues for EU-Ukraine trade](#), as well as Kyiv's bid for EU membership.

'JD Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference was the materialisation of Trump's statements, which are based on dissatisfaction with the way relations between the US and Europe are going. The speech breaks the established idea that in the event of an attack on Europe, the US would defend it. However, such actions are the best motivation for Europe to increase its defence spending,' says Ivan US.

In turn, the EU unveiled its White Paper on the Future of European Defence, put together by top diplomat Kaja Kallas and Defence Commissioner Andrius Kubilius – [two Baltic leaders](#). **This details the €800 billion REARM Europe plan, including a €150 billion loan programme**; loosening of debt and deficit rules for defence spending; as well as plans to channel cohesion funds for defence. [Incoming German Chancellor Friedrich Merz](#) also looks set to kickstart a real *zeitenwende* after announcing **€500 billion defence plans**. This bodes well for Poland, given Merz has close ties with Donald Tusk and announced he would visit Warsaw in his first trip as Chancellor.

Additionally, **European Commission (EC) President Ursula von der Leyen launched ProtectEU** – a new internal security strategy designed to stop acts of sabotage by giving law enforcement more access to data – **and the Preparedness Union Strategy**, saying that 'New realities require a new level of preparedness in Europe'. This builds on CEE thinking that people, not just arms, must be prepared for conflict. Prime Minister Donald Tusk unveiled plans to increase the Polish army to 500,000, while Latvian President Edgars Rinkēvičs has strongly supported widespread reintroduction of conscription.

Prime Minister Tusk also celebrated the designation of the East Shield project as one of the EU's top priorities, designed to shore up Poland's border with Russia and Belarus. This comes halfway through [Poland's EU Council \(EUCO\) Presidency](#) and follows a visit by Von der Leyen and her commissioners to [Gdansk – a symbolic background](#) given its links to democratic hero Lech Wałęsa, as well as memories of Europe's failure in Westerplatte. Read this EUCO General Secretariat [report](#) on the need for strong leadership in 'the world's conflict landscape' and '[great power competition](#)'.

State of Central Europe

INFORMATION SOVEREIGNTY

Plurality of Sources

EUDS consultation comes amid continued attempts to destabilise democratic institutions via disinformation and hybrid warfare. Both Russia and China have put in place 'massive digital arsenals' to conduct FIMI operations, with social media in particular a hotbed for bot networks and coordinated inauthentic behaviour – as per the latest [EEAS report](#). In turn, **there is an 'unprecedented decline in public**

trust' as citizens around the world experience an increasingly hostile environment online – as per [this report](#) by the Forum on Information and Democracy. How to develop societies resilient to such influence is of key importance in Central Europe, with some best practices explored in this European [policy paper](#).

It is in this context that **the EP hosted a plenary debate on how the EC plans to enforce the Digital Services Act**, with a particular focus on Elon Musk's political meddling – including his live chat with Germany's extreme-right leader, Alice Weidel. Those in favour of coming down on Musk pointed to reports that he has tweaked the X algorithm to promote his own posts, which now push increasingly extremist views. Henna Virkkunen, European Commissioner for Technological Sovereignty, Security and Democracy, has said the EC will work together with national authorities to prepare for elections: **'In Poland, as in Romania and Germany, the far right is at the forefront of using VLOP mechanisms to promote its content and people.'**

'There will be a presidential election in Poland and we fear that Elon Musk could try to do the same stuff he did in the UK, Germany and Romania. I can't say how successful he was in those countries – in Germany, the AfD didn't gain support after being hailed by Musk – but he could normalise support. Frankly, we don't know what could happen, and I don't think we are prepared, for example, to cut some social platforms if they try to break the law,' say Bartosz Wielński.

Deputy Prime Minister Krzysztof Gawkowski has said Poland is bolstering online security and social media platforms ahead of the presidential election – in anticipation of both increased cyberattacks and FIMI campaigns. A commission investigating Russian influence on Polish internal security concluded that efforts to counter disinformation have been inadequate, as Russia spends up to \$2 billion annually on activities designed to destabilise Poland. Since the start of 2025, Poland has been observing attempts by the GRU and FSB to offer Polish citizens €3-4,000 to spread disinformation – like hostility towards Ukrainians. Last week, the IT systems of the Civic Platform were also hit by a 'planned and well-organised' attack.

Warsaw is on particularly high alert after allegations of FIMI in Romania's presidential election last year prompted its unprecedented annulment. This time around, a new coalition government in Romania has tightened campaign rules for big social media, including TikTok. Platforms will have to take down content which is not clearly marked as election content within five hours or risk fines. **Romania's social media regulator, ANCOM, has pushed back against Musk's claims it censors**

free speech by highlighting the extent of Russian interference. The far-right AUR Party and independent candidate Călin Georgescu benefited from the content of over 27,000 fake accounts during the 2024 presidential election campaign, a TikTok report has revealed.

'Romanian society has been subject to a massive digital literacy campaign. It is a cautionary tale regarding hybrid warfare, raising awareness that short term measures for long term influence campaigns are not enough, that weak signals should not be ignored, that reactive actions should be replaced with proactive measures. In short, once the social, political, psychological, and informational conditions conducive to information hybrid warfare are met, reactive measures are limited,' says Alina Bârgăoanu.

General Michal Koudelka, Czechia's counterintelligence chief, has also warned against cyberattacks and foreign interference in their Autumn parliamentary elections. For context, the Czech National Cyber and Information Security Agency (NÚKIB) has recorded more than 200 DDoS attacks by Russian-speaking hacktivist groups since the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine – often in response to Czech officials' declarations of support for Kyiv.

Czechia also illustrates the importance of protecting legacy media. It took months for the government to pass legislation aimed at raising concession fees for Czech Television (ČT) and Czech Radio (ČRo), despite the fact that these fees are key to keeping the public media afloat. This delay was caused by [continued obstructions from the ANO Party of populist billionaire Andrej Babiš](#) and the far-right SPD Party. Babiš argued for merging ČT and ČRo, immediately raising suspicions of his renewed efforts to [exercise control over the broadcaster should he and his ANO Party return to power](#). Meanwhile, **three Polish bidders have advanced to the second round of bidding for TVN, Poland's most influential private TV channel.** This came after the government placed TVN under state protection, blocking its purchase by Orbán's inner circle and Orlen ex-CEO Daniel Obajtek and by the Czech PPF Group.

The Trump administration has reversed an order terminating funding for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) after the pro-democracy news organisation took legal action challenging the closure – although no money allocated by Congress has yet been received by the radio station. [Elon Musk and US Presidential envoy Richard Genell had called for an end to RFE/RL](#), as well as the US international broadcaster Voice of America (VOA), for being run by 'left-wing radicals' – despite

the fact *RFE/RL* was virtually the only source of free information in the Soviet sphere during the Cold War era. Aside from peddling right-wing narratives, such actions have also brought down America's public image around the world.

'The US decision to suspend USAID and NED funding really hurts Taiwanese research on Chinese malign influence, especially disinformation and media manipulation. It is also influencing the phenomenon of so-called America Skepticism in the Taiwanese information space... China is trying to undermine public opinion and diminish its trust in democratic processes and institutions... Then, in times when the US makes decisions that make people question its dominance in the international system, public trust in a US response to Chinese attack on Taiwan falls', says Marcin Jerzewski 葉皓勤, a Visegrad Insight Fellow from Poland, Head of the Taiwan Office of the European Values Center for Security Policy

POLITICS

Between European Unity and Disunity

Slovakia saw several major demonstrations in recent months, each attended by over 100,000 people across the country.

These peaceful 'We Are Europe' protests – the largest since 2018, when journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée were murdered – reflected public anger against Slovakia's increasingly [pro-Russian turn under Fico's leadership](#). Several officials, including Fico himself, have raised the possibility of a future outside the EU and NATO. Indeed, demonstrations began after Fico's shock visit to Moscow late last year.

These protests posed a serious challenge to Fico's position, especially when coupled with the loss of several rebel coalition MPs. Eventually, the Prime Minister stymied political infighting through a government reshuffle and survived a no-confidence vote, but his majority remains weak, and the prospect of snap elections is not off the cards. According to the first government poll in 16 years, **the opposition Progressive Slovakia (PS) leads support on 24.6%**, followed by Smer (22.7%) and Hlas (13.7%). KDH (8.7%) and Republika (5.2%) also attracted enough support to enter parliament.

Fico has criticised the annulment of elections in Romania and even compared himself to far-right candidate Georgescu, who has now been barred from running. Fico claims the previous government also wanted to imprison him without reason, while Ivan Korčok of PS said the pair share only 'the same goal: advancing Russia's agenda and weakening the EU'.

Far-right parties have endorsed George Simion of the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) as their candidate ahead of an election rerun on 4 May. He is the current favourite to win the first round on 30.4% support, but Nicușor Dan, the independent mayor of Bucharest, is most likely to win any potential runoff on 18 May.

'The banning of Georgescu fell flat in public opinion, partly because many of his alleged followers were trolls or bots, not real people. This leaves the extreme right now very divided between very competitive and individualistic ears. Internationally, however, this was less understood as a move of self protection or of democratic security and more as an alteration of the democracy in Romania, ending up on the MAGA agenda of the White House circles,' says Radu Albu-Comănescu, a Visegrad Insight Fellow from Romania and Lecturer at the 'Babeș-Bolyai' University of Cluj-Napoca.

The fact Dan is projected to win also reflects continued anti-establishment sentiment. President Klaus Iohannis has resigned, but Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu – now embroiled in a fraud scandal – remains as head of a new government. Crin Antonescu, a pro-European candidate backed by several mainstream parties, is also a former acting President.

'Romanian decision makers should pay more attention to the fact that Georgescu's campaign weaponised the widespread dissatisfaction among a significant segment of Romanian society. The political establishment should address the topic of foreign election interference and integrity of elections, but I think that the major answer should address the root causes of this popular discontent,' says Alina Bârgăoanu.

The Law and Justice (PiS) Party has also looked to weaponise events in Romania ahead of the Polish elections on 18 May, launching an 'Election Protection Movement' to 'monitor the electoral process and ensure its fairness and transparency'. [The PiS-dominated constitutional tribunal even launched a probe into Tusk](#) and his team over an alleged coup plot. This was quickly dismissed by the ruling coalition, which has worked to restore the rule of law. **Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski expressed more concern about whether PiS-loyal judges could emulate Romania's decision to annul elections.**

Tusk also criticised PiS-backed candidate Karol Nawrocki for serving Russian interests, after he condemned Tusk for supporting Zelenskyy following his White House clash with Trump. Nawrocki also said separately that Ukraine does not belong in the EU or NATO. Tusk thus framed the election as a

choice between 'An independent Poland in a strong Europe or Russia'. [This report](#) by the Batory Foundation analyses all the narratives discussed during the Polish campaign – from paid ads on social media to the organic activity of candidates.

Recent weeks have seen far-right candidate Sławomir Mentzen rise through the polls – and in some instances overtake Nawrocki. Civic Coalition (KO)-backed Rafał Trzaskowski leads on around 35% support, while Nawrocki and Mentzen regularly poll in the low 20s. This is likely to panic PiS, which could lose its hegemony over the right. Mentzen's Confederation Party has doubled its voter share over the past year, from 8-11% to 17-21%. Mentzen has also met with Duda – a potential sign the President is looking to shift his support.

Péter Magyar has solidified his stature and that of his Tisza Party. 50% of Hungarians would like to see Magyar in an important political role, compared to 42% for Orbán, while the TISZA Party regularly polls at around 44%, compared to 39% for Fidesz. Tisza also gained 250,000 Fidesz voters from December to March. **Voters are as yet unsure about the personnel behind the Tisza Party, however.** Magyar announced two new members: Romulusz Ruszin-Szendi, the former-Major-General of the Hungarian Defence Forces, and Krisztian Kulcsar, the former president of the Hungarian Olympic Committee – both figures with past Fidesz ties.

Fidesz is still the most supported among the elderly, while voters under 40 choose Tisza over Fidesz by a large margin. Yet, **both Fidesz and Tisza are struggling to get the female vote.** Hence, Fidesz announced a tax exemption for mothers of two or three children, while Magyar says he wants to reinstate the right for mothers to choose a doctor when giving birth.

Ahead of elections in Czechia later this year, the opposition ANO Party of populist leader and billionaire Andrej Babiš continues to lead on around 33% support. The ruling Spolu coalition wins around 17%, followed by the liberal Mayors and Independents at 11%. Support for the liberal Pirates continues to decline, falling to only 4%. The right-wing Motorists, far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), and far-left Enough! movement would all secure seats, however. **The Chamber of Deputies voted to lift the immunity of SPD leader Tomio Okamura,** allowing police to press charges related to his party's controversial election posters, but Okamura has used this to call out 'an attack' on free speech and boost support.

Elsewhere in CEE: President Aleksandar Vučić offered new parliamentary elections on 8 June if a government is not

formed in the coming weeks, following the resignation of Prime Minister Miloš Vučević and months of anti-government demonstrations; [a new government came together in Bulgaria](#), comprised of the centre-right GERB Party, [the pro-Russian Bulgarian Socialist Party](#), the populist 'There Is Such a People' Party and the Turk-ethnic Democracy, Rights and Freedoms Party; the liberal Neos Party, conservative People's Party and Social Democrats formed a coalition in [Austria, blocking the far-right Freedom Party](#); democratic opposition leader Sviatlana **Tsikhanouskaya** said Belarusians 'will be ready to topple' the Alyaksandr Lukashenka regime at the first opportunity after [another sham election](#); and pro-Russian Alexandr Stoianoglo announced he will lead a coalition against the pro-Western ruling majority in **Moldova's** parliamentary election on 26 October.

SECURITY

Collective Defence or Unilateral Action

'The Polish government is reluctant to comment on Trump's transactionalism because it is obvious we need the Americans, and we would like to be sure that if Trump is talking about withdrawing troops from Europe, he's not mentioning those 10,000 troops stationed in Poland. We are ready to cooperate ... and then we adapt to it, so looking for a way to make NATO stronger by strengthening European defence', says Bartosz Wieliński.

The actions of the Trump administration and its calls for Europe to step up and do more to protect itself have been answered with several initiatives. **The most significant is the aforementioned REARM Europe plan and its €150 billion loan programme. Discussions will now focus on eligibility requirements for the loans, but it is clear that only companies from non-EU countries who have signed a defence pact with the bloc will be able to participate in the scheme – meaning that at least 65% of spending will go on EU products.**

There is also [a renewed push for the integration of the EU capital markets](#), which could free up the €11.6 trillion that were sitting idle in European savings accounts and cash reserves in 2023. Now, 'The idea is giving European savers a solution to invest in Europe...On defence, in particular, I think that money will follow naturally,' Financial Services Commissioner Maria Luís Albuquerque explained. Not only could this make a European defence-industrial complex sustainable, but it would most benefit those countries who spend big on their military industry – like Poland. **Governments from Northern Europe are in talks with Poland and the UK to**

create a new common fund to finance defence, including Sweden, the Netherlands, Finland and Denmark.

All of this collective action has been put forward with a focus on Europe's eastern flank. Ukraine received circa €3.5 billion under the Ukraine Facility, putting the total sent to Kyiv since the facility's entry into force a year ago at close to €20 billion. This comes amid a plethora of bilateral defence deals – like a 100-year partnership agreement with the UK – and **meetings in both London and Paris for the 'coalition of the willing', laying the groundwork for a potential peacekeeping force in Ukraine**. The EU also passed its 16th package of sanctions against Moscow, including restrictions on aluminium exports.

NATO Secretary General [Mark Rutte launched the 'Baltic Sentry'](#), amid rising concerns over suspicious, Russian and Chinese-orchestrated infrastructure attacks in the Baltic Sea. This will be a public-private initiative worth 'hundreds of millions' of euros, including patrol ships and aircraft – contributed by Poland, Germany, the Baltics, Finland, Denmark and Sweden – as well as new naval drones and national surveillance systems. **So far, there has been little response to Trump's threats to take over Greenland** – an example of the US administration's surprisingly aggressive approach to securing important trade routes and resources.

The EU has also accepted Tusk's warning that Poland 'will not implement' the Pact on Migration and Asylum if it is required to receive migrants as part of the 'solidarity framework'. Poland's parliament has approved a bill to suspend asylum rights for migrants crossing certain sections of the country's border as part of its crackdown on illegal crossings from Belarus. It has also commenced a major deportation operation targeting foreign nationals involved in criminal activities, marking the largest such action since 1989. The number of attempted **border crossings from Belarus to Poland fell by over 50% in the second half of 2024** as a result – **but human rights organisations, including the UNHCR, have warned Poland that it risks violating European law**.

This comes as nations from CEE continue to lead defence initiatives and spending. Polish and Lithuanian leaders have spoken positively about French President Emmanuel Macron's suggestion that Paris could extend its nuclear umbrella. They have also backed plans to withdraw from the Ottawa convention and possibly also the Dublin Convention – landmark treaties prohibiting the use of anti-personnel landmines and cluster munitions. **The Polish government announced plans to redirect €7 billion from its share of EU post-Covid economic**

recovery funds toward defence – an EU first – while Czechia (3%), Latvia (4%), Estonia (5%) and Lithuania (5-6%) have all pledged to up defence spending by 2026.

'4.7% of GDP is the highest spending level in NATO. Poland is also building its fortification along borders with Belarus and Russia. The most pressing thing now is the army. It has a rigid structure, which doesn't allow reform, so it will take time to modernise. This starts with new voluntary military training. We don't know the details, but I suppose that will include every male and female who would like to be trained in military basics. That will be huge,' says **Bartosz Wieliński**.

Countries in CEE are starting to work towards better military recruitment. Tusk's voluntary military training is part of plans to increase the size of the Polish army, including reservists, from 200,000 to 500,000. The Polish Ministry of Defence (MoD) also announced plans to increase professional troop numbers in 2025 by around 23,000, and the Czech MoD did the same, aiming for 30,000 professionals and 10,000 active reservists by 2030. **Latvian President Edgars Rinkēvičs went so far as to say that all European countries should 'absolutely' introduce conscription.** Latvia aims to expand its armed forces to 50,000-61,000 personnel, including active troops, National Guard members, and reservists.

According to the latest [Eurobarometer](#), **as many as 35% of respondents ranked peace and security as the top benefit of EU membership.** 36% listed defence as the prime area the EU should focus on to bolster its global position. This was a uniting theme across western, northern and eastern Europe, and also fuelled record appreciation levels, with 74% of Europeans saying their country had benefited from EU membership.

Opinion polls say only one in three Europeans is willing to fight for their country, however, with youth showing the greatest reluctance. This is why Poland has taken the lead and introduced voluntary military training. [Wojciech Przybylski and Goran Buldioski](#) detail why pro-democratic parties must prioritise hard power, while [Magda Jakubowska](#) outlines how the EU can foster societal readiness for EU armies.

It is in this context that Von der Leyen launched the Preparedness Union Strategy, building on a Sauli Niinistö report calling for a 'profound change of mindset' and the 'strengthening of Europe's civilian and military readiness to address growing security challenges'. In contrast to REARM Europe, which under Article 122 will not be discussed in the EP, the preparedness strategy highlights a need for public

engagement, developing 'a comprehensive risk and threat assessment at EU level' through consultation and foresight.

This is not to say that important divergences in defence posture have gone away. As expected, Orbán and Fico continue to criticise the EU for its military support of Ukraine and rearmament. More pressingly, however, the REARM Europe plan faces resistance from southern countries, worried that cheap loans for defence spending would add to their already heavy debt burdens. Both Italy and Poland take issue with the idea of using cohesion funds to pay for rearmament, given these have long supported infrastructure and healthcare. Warsaw also disagrees with Paris, arguing in favour of joint purchases made outside the EU, like South Korea or the US.

The 'coalition of the willing' also hasn't yet agreed on a peacekeeping mission to Ukraine. Germany has been delayed by coalition negotiations, while Poland has ruled out any involvement because it already dedicates troops to borders with Russia and Belarus – meaning [only France and the UK have pledged troops on the ground](#). **Much of the EU also wants Russian assets to remain frozen until Moscow 'ends the war against Ukraine' and pays for damage** – a position closer to countries like France, Germany, or Belgium, rather than the immediate use Poland or the Baltic states want to see.

Citing [this report](#) by the International Institute for Security Studies, Tusk wrote: 'There is a lack of courage and imagination in Europe. 500 million Europeans are asking 300 million Americans to defend themselves against 140 million Russians. **If there is anything we lack today, it is not economic, military or population superiority, but the belief that we are a global power.** Europe must understand its strength'. Find more in our report on ['Shielding European Democracy'](#).

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Enlarged EU or the Ivory-Tower

Deputy PM for European Integration Olha Stefanishyna had confirmed plans for Ukraine to open its first cluster of EU accession talks in April and complete all talks by the end of 2025. Tusk had announced a 'breakthrough' in Polish-Ukrainian talks regarding the exhumations of 100,000 Polish citizens killed by Ukrainian nationalists in a World War II massacre – a topic that could have easily divided the countries and derailed accession prospects.

Trump's decision to put most of USAID on administrative leave, however, has dealt a huge blow to [democracy](#)

[promotion in the EU's eastern neighbourhood](#). It means the EU might have to fill a \$40 billion hole left in the development budget – just as it's trying to push more toward defence.

'USAID has been a key driver of Ukraine's recovery. Since the start of the full-scale war, the agency has provided \$2.6 billion in humanitarian aid, \$5 billion in development assistance, and over \$30 billion in direct budgetary support. The suspension of USAID funding has significantly impacted humanitarian and development initiatives,' says Valeriia Novak, a Future of Ukraine Fellow at Visegrad Insight and Programme Manager for the USAID RANG Programme.

Hungary also continues to block Ukraine's membership for political reasons. Budapest often takes symbolic steps, like blocking statements or delaying proceedings, but it cannot block major packages and spending. It can pose major obstacles to Ukrainian accession, as it did by obstructing the opening of one of the clusters referred to by Stefanishya. This is despite multiple meetings between Zelenskyy and Orbán.

'Orbán has just announced a non-binding referendum to demonstrate that Hungarians are against the idea of Ukraine joining the EU. We have reliable polls showing that the majority of the Hungarian society does not want that. Orbán did the same trick with many other topics, like migration: he launches a biased campaign, fuels hate, and then tells the EU the Hungarian people do not want migrants in the country. It will be the same with Ukraine', says Edit Zgut-Przybylska.

In turn, six northern European countries have said the EU must urgently set out a clear roadmap for Ukraine to become a full member of the bloc, including Sweden, Finland, Denmark and the Baltics. One alternative to the standard process could be gradual integration, where candidate countries assimilate into policy areas, like transport and labour mobility, in exchange for reforms – according to [this report](#) by Clingendael.

Discussions are taking place about new ways to manage Orbán. It may be easier in the long run just to circumvent Hungary with coalitions of the willing, as opposed to taking formal steps. However, **Friedrich Merz's incoming coalition reportedly wants to press the EU to look at withholding funds and suspending voting rights from Budapest.** Already, Germany, Estonia and several MEPs have called for Hungary's EU voting rights to be curtailed after it banned Pride marches. Innovative suggestions also include using national subsidies to incentivise corporations to relocate from Hungary, and using clauses in the EU treaty to shift to a qualified majority system.

Interestingly, Orbán was very supportive of a fiscal plan for more spending on defence. **Getting some of Europe's new budget for military hardware would go a long way at a time when Fidesz is trailing in polls** and the Hungarian economy is struggling. The same goes for Slovakia, which refuses to provide official military aid to Ukraine, but whose arms and ammo exports reached €1.15 billion last year.

'It might seem that the Orbán government has been against European and NATO defence spending, but in reality it follows a somewhat ambitious defence plan – they just don't advertise it for political gains. Hungary aims to allocate €4.2 billion to defence in 2025. Nearly 48% of that will go on equipment procurement and R&D, making it NATO's second-highest procurement spender after Poland,' writes Luca Soltész, a Visegrad Insight Junior Fellow from Hungary.

Elsewhere, EUCO gave its final green light to the Reform and Growth Facility for Moldova. This is expected to provide €385 million in grants and €1.5 billion in loans from 2025 to 2027, providing the largest EU financial support package since Moldova's independence, on highly concessional terms.

'There will soon be parliamentary elections in Moldova, but Moldovan NGOs and free independent media were funded by the USAID, so they have no means to operate. The EU is reluctant to give any money, afraid of meddling in these internal affairs, but we need to find a way out of this situation. We've seen what happened in Romania, and how close it was for Maia Sandu in the presidential elections. Moldova is an important candidate country, struggling with Russian hybrid warfare,' says Bartosz Wielński.

Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos has warned that the EU accession process for Serbia is 'reversible', in response to ongoing [anti-government protests following the Novi Sad tragedy](#) – and cooperation between the Serbian government and Russian FSB. In contrast, **she singled out Montenegro for its significant progress in the past year, and stressed that Albania's path to EU membership is also 'secure and real'.** Montenegro was the best-ranked Western Balkan country on Transparency International's [Corruption Perception Index](#) (CPI), ranking 65th globally on 46/100 (= 2023 score), followed by Kosovo (73rd, 44/100, +3 from 2023), Albania (80th, 42/100, +5), North Macedonia (88th, 40/100, -2), Serbia (105th, 35/100, -1), and Bosnia and Herzegovina (114th, 33/100, -2).

ENERGY & TECH

Between Dependence and Interdependence

The Baltic states [disconnected their electricity systems from Russia's power grid](#) on 8 February, marking the conclusion of a historic plan to better integrate the countries with the EU and boost security. A ceremony was held in Vilnius, attended by Von der Leyen and [the Presidents of Poland](#), Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia. 'We are now removing Russia's ability to use the electricity system as a tool of geopolitical blackmail,' Lithuanian Energy Minister Žygmantas Vačiūnas declared.

In turn, Energy Commissioner Dan Jørgensen and Defence Commissioner Andrius Kubilius met with the Baltic Energy Ministers to discuss the next steps in ensuring energy security in the region. This includes **stationing of military personnel at key infrastructure, but also preparation for disinformation campaigns** which 'may attempt to exploit this period to create uncertainty', Estonia's Cybersecurity Centre chief warned.

The transit of Russian natural gas through Ukraine to Europe stopped on 1 January, marking the end of an era spanning several decades – and another means by which Russia gained a hold over dependent nations. In turn, **countries on the EU's eastern flank have sought to diversify energy supplies**. For example, Poland chose Westinghouse Electric to build its first nuclear plant on the Baltic coast and has signed an agreement with Canada for enhanced nuclear cooperation. It also secured €1.8 billion in financing for its distribution grid, positioning itself as a leader in energy competitiveness.

It has been reported, however, that **European officials are debating whether Russian gas sales to the EU should be restarted as part of a settlement to end the war against Ukraine**. Advocates argue it would bring down energy prices, bring Moscow to the negotiating table, and give both sides a reason to maintain a ceasefire – but the idea has sparked fierce backlash among Ukraine's closest allies. Lithuanian Foreign Minister Kęstutis Budrys stressed that 'Europe learned the hard way that Russian gas is...a geopolitical weapon...Even considering a return to Russian gas imports now would be a historic mistake.' [This report](#) by Ember outlines how **some EU member states are making 'perilously shortsighted decisions'** – Italy, Czechia and France led a spike of Russian gas imports in 2024 – and why there is still a desperate need for a flagship pathway for phasing out Russian gas.

Matthias Warnig, an ex-spy and close friend of Vladimir Putin, has also been engineering a restart of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline with the backing of US investors, having previously run Nord Stream 2's parent company for Gazprom. Top US administration figures are aware of this plan, but reportedly see it as a way to rebuild relations with Moscow.

Moldova had to tackle the consequences of dependency on Russian gas when its separatist pro-Moscow Transnistria region was cut off from Russian supplies – forcing it to impose rolling power blackouts. Talks had taken place ahead of the shutdown of gas transit via Ukraine, but Gazprom agreed to consider alternative routes only if Moldova agreed to pay a debt worth \$709 million – a figure far greater than the one Chişinău recognises. 'By jeopardising the future of the protectorate it has backed for three decades in an effort to destabilise Moldova...**Russia is revealing the inevitable outcome for all its allies – betrayal and isolation,**' Prime Minister Dorin Recean said.

At first, Transnistrian leaders accepted gas shipments from the European market and a €20 million EU aid package. Eventually, however, the region brokered a new deal with the Swiss-based but Hungarian-backed MET Gas and Energy Marketing, underpinned by 'Russian credit'. Senior Moldovan officials said **Russia had blocked EU-proposed solutions over fears of losing its hold over Transnistria.**

Aside from continuing to bet on cheap Russian energy, Hungary has further expanded tech cooperation with China. For example, Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó announced the construction of a new Chinese factory, for the motor generating company Xinzhi, in Hatvan. It turned out, however, that the government forgot to tell local officials about the decision, apparently to avoid further backlash from local residents. **The EU has also started a probe into whether China provided unfair subsidies for a BYD car plant in Hungary.**

European tech leaders penned a joint letter calling on the EU to become less reliant on overseas tech, including the creation of a sovereign infrastructure fund to galvanise investment in tech across the bloc. The 100 or so signatories included Aerospace giant Airbus, cloud storage firm Cribbit and lobby groups such as the European AI Forum and the European Startup Network. **The EU also unveiled its Clean Industrial Deal,** which pushes for a 'Buy European' policy and the diversification of energy supplies through clean tech.

Tusk promised a 'breakthrough year' at the unveiling of his government's economic plan, predicting over €155 billion in investments and progress in deregulation, AI and nuclear energy. He also confirmed a €43 billion investment in railways and plans to triple cargo being transported through Baltic coast ports by 2030. **Google later signed a MoU with the Polish government on speeding up AI adoption**, as part of a long-term cyber-security strategy. CEO Sundar Pichai said AI could increase Poland's GDP by 8%, or €50 billion, by 2035.

In this context, **Digital Affairs Minister Krzysztof Gawkowski called the [US decision to limit Poland's access to US-made AI chips 'incomprehensible'](#)**, as Warsaw found itself in the [second tier of a three-tiered system](#) introduced by the Biden administration to block Chinese and Russian access. Other CEE countries like Czechia and Latvia, whose chip and tech sectors are expanding rapidly per [this report](#), reacted similarly.

ECONOMY

Prosperity for All or the Few

Rating agency Moody's affirmed Poland's long-term rating at the A2 level with a stable outlook, explaining that Poland's 'high susceptibility to geopolitical event risks' is mitigated by its 'significantly increased self-defence capabilities'. This includes not just greater investment in defence, but Poland's fast-growing arms exports, which propelled its overall exports of high-tech goods to a record value of €37.25 billion. Across the continent, defence stocks have dominated gains, but Polish goods are set to be Europe's best performers.

Ratings agency Fitch similarly affirmed an 'A-' with a stable outlook, warning of fiscal deficits and governance challenges – debt increased from 49.7% of GDP in 2023 to 54.3% in 2024 after greater defence spending – but citing a 'large, diversified and resilient economy'. **Growth is set to reach 3.1% of GDP in 2025, making Poland one of Europe's fastest-growing economies**, and it is also the most business-friendly country in its region, according to the annual [Bureaucracy Index](#) of the Institute of Economic and Social Studies. Ukraine had the highest bureaucratic burden for starting an industrial SME, requiring 64 hours, compared to Poland's 19 hours.

Slovaks are beginning to feel the effects of fiscal consolidation implemented by Fico's government, with about 80% of the population concerned about rising prices. Inflation surged above 4% in January and is expected to remain at this level for most of the year, meaning Slovakia now has the third-highest inflation in the eurozone. Nevertheless, Fico was

happy to stay in a [€5,740/night luxury suite](#) in Hanoi during his post-Moscow trip disappearance for 14 days – and even release a video condemning Ukraine for the money it cost Slovakia by halting transit of Russian gas.

Similarly, Orbán's 'fantastic financial year' has got off to a bad start, with Economy Minister Márton Nagy hinting at new price freezes in response to: inflation hitting 5% in January; manufacturing productivity increasing by only 8%, compared to 58% for Slovaks; and an automotive sector production decline of 21%. While Hungary is officially out of recession, GDP growth for 2024 was only 0.5% and hopes for 2025 are looking slim, according to [this ING report](#). **This is in part a result of the government's pre-2026 election spending.** Measures like a new lifetime tax-break plan for women with children, estimated to cost \$2.4 billion/year, complicate efforts to reduce the budget deficit and shore up the forint.

Hungary's economy has also felt the costs of an antagonistic stance with the EU. On 1 January, the country irretrievably lost €1 billion of the €6.3 billion in EU funds frozen over rule-of-law concerns. Piotr Serafin, Commissioner for Budget, Anti-fraud and Administration, told Visegrad Insight that: 'Hungary has had over two years to address key issues related to public procurement, prosecutorial effectiveness and the fight against corruption. Regrettably, the authorities in Budapest have not done enough.' **A bid by Hungary's MVM for major Romanian energy supplier, Eon Energie România, was also blocked after its inflated offer triggered fears of Russian influence.**

In turn, **corruption has compounded these problems. The Hungarian Central Bank's foundation is on the brink of insolvency** because of years of mismanagement under György Matolcsy, Orbán's formerly close confidant and economy minister. **The Biden administration went as far as to sanction key Orbán ally Antal Rogán over allegations he is central to 'a system of corruption'** – although foreign minister Péter Szijjártó has been working hard to reverse that decision.

CEE is bracing for Trump's tariffs to kick in on 9 April, including 25% duties on all imported cars. These could deplete the European car industry, and especially smaller, export-oriented economies like Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary. Czech growth is set to pick up in 2025 (2.1% of GDP) and 2026 (2.5%), per the latest OECD Economic Survey, but it is warned that geopolitical tensions and supply chain disruption could erase such predictions. In relative terms, **no EU country is as dependent on car sales to the US as Slovakia.** The country's automotive sector accounts for 10% of GDP and employs at

least 300,000 in a country of 5.5 million. Tariffs could lead to a loss of 0.5% of Slovak GDP this year and 1.5% in 2026, erasing much of the predicted 2% growth, Erste has projected.

[In a bid to avoid a tariff war, Trade Commissioner Maroš Šefčovič has flown to Washington several times](#), offering to buy more American gas and guns, lower the EU's 10% import tax on vehicles and team up against China. Polish Finance Minister Andrzej Domański has called for **increased economic cooperation with the US in energy, trade and defence**. Poland has just signed a \$2 billion military contract with the US, after which Tusk appealed to Trump to remember that 'cooperation is better than confrontation'.

Šefčovič has also travelled to meet officials in Beijing.

According to the EC, this was to raise concerns about China's non-market policies and barriers affecting EU exports and investment. Yet, the trip also came just one month before the EU-China summit. In her speech at Davos, Ursula von der Leyen labelled the 50th anniversary of EU-PRC relations 'an opportunity to engage and deepen...trade and investment ties' in an era of 'harsh geostrategic competition'.

This shows the EU has not yet embraced [the extent of the China challenge](#) and its economic imperialism, however – the core incentive and target of Trump's tariffs. [The answer to a trade war is also not simply balancing trade and paying for guns](#). Signalgate has shown that the Trump administration does not want to use American resources to protect EU trade: 'I just hate bailing Europe out again', Vance said. Economic security, including countermeasures against the weaponisation of energy, industrial production or technological progress, is [more about collective security strategy](#) than simply building the wealth of allied nations. The US sees Ukraine, Greenland, Gaza, the Suez Canal and all else through this prism of economic security – as outlined in [this ECFR report](#) – and CEE nations must adapt, learning to back their business with force.

RULE OF LAW

State Capture or Independence

Over ⅔ of countries scored below 50/100 in Transparency International's latest [Corruption Perceptions Index](#) (CPI), with a global average of just 43. **Hungary was again the lowest scoring in the EU on 41/100 (-1) and ranked 82nd globally. Transparency International singled out Slovakia as a country to watch, however**, because it dropped by 5 points to score 49/100 and rank 59th globally. Czechia also dropped by a point to score 56/100 and rank 46th globally – reflecting the failure

of the ruling Czech government's anti-corruption initiative. The Economist Intelligence Unit's latest [Democracy Index](#) also put Hungary as the worst-performing country in the region.

'Ever since Trump's return to office, Orbán has doubled down on his already increasingly oppressive measures 'to protect national sovereignty': labelling judges, journalists and NGOs as 'bugs' to be eliminated, as well as banning Budapest Pride and changing the constitution to give the government the power to revoke the citizenship of dual-nation citizens,' says Iván László Nagy, a Visegrad Insight Fellow from Hungary.

In order to fully capitalise on Trump's decision to dismantle USAID, and so make sure these 'stink bugs' are swept away 'line by line', **Orbán has enlisted the Hungarian National Information Center (NIC). The intelligence agency is tasked with compiling a list of all Hungarian NGOs and media outlets to have received foreign funding over the past decade.**

'Since the organisations affected are constantly under scrutiny, there has not been a public call for help, so we don't really know how many organisations are affected and how their work will continue. NGOs expect harsher treatment from the government, however, even checks from authorities, like what happened in Serbia,' says Luca Soltész.

All of these moves 'restrict fundamental rights and exert...a chilling effect on civil society, activists and the independent media' – the full scale of which is detailed in [this joint report](#) by Amnesty International, Hungarian Civil Liberties Union, Hungarian Helsinki Committee, K-Monitor, Mertek Media Monitor, Ökotárs, Political Capital and Transparency International. The extent of civil society abuse, and potential ways forward, are also outlined in [this report](#) by FRA.

The use of the NIC in this way further undermines Hungary's international standing, given **countries will be less likely to share information with an intelligence agency facilitating state capture.** 14 EU Member States, Norway and the EP had already intervened in [the EC's lawsuit against Hungary's anti-NGO law](#), marking the largest legal mobilisation against shrinking democratic space in EU history. Most recently, Hungary also signalled it would leave the International Criminal Court (ICC) after hosting Israeli leader Benjamin Netanyahu.

Hungary is also [building its illiberal network through asylum.](#)

A Budapest court upheld the decision to grant refugee status to PiS MP Marcin Romanowski – despite the fact he is only in Hungary to escape criminal corruption charges under a

European Arrest Warrant. The Hungarian government also secretly prepared to help [Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik](#) escape Bosnia and Herzegovina in anticipation of his prison sentencing. Orbán's special forces actually arrived in Republika Srpska under the cover of a 'joint exercise', potentially risking regional conflict. Serbian President Vučić has proposed the formation of a military alliance between Serbia and Hungary in response – an idea that has already drawn interest from Dodik.

Nearly 10,000 people demonstrated in Bratislava after a new, Russian-style law on NGOs was confirmed by the government. This would require NGOs to publish data on their donors and submit detailed reports to authorities about their meetings and activities. The government may even dissolve NGOs for repeated violations. The Smer-led cabinet repeatedly denies opposition claims that this is a 'Russian law', but SNS chairman Andrej Danko admitted that government politicians discussed a draft version with Russia during a visit to Moscow.

In turn, Slovakia is classed among the countries whose governments are systematically dismantling democracy and the rule of law, according to [this report](#) by the Liberties network of civic organisations. **On the one hand, [the Smer-led cabinet is repeatedly pressuring the police to prosecute members of the former government.](#)** Smer MP Tibor Gašpar claims voters want to see legal consequences for the previous administration's management of the COVID-19 pandemic and military aid to Ukraine. **On the other hand, there has been a sharp decline in corruption and organised crime prosecutions** – following the dissolution of Slovakia's Special Prosecutor's Office and the National Crime Agency last year. Only one in five indictments were filed at the Specialised Criminal Court in the first two months of 2025, compared to 10/month previously.

The starkest example of Fico manipulating state powers came when **the prime minister [dodged a vote of no-confidence by citing the need to present a confidential report](#)** behind public eyes. The document, dubiously compiled by Slovakia's Intelligence Services (SIS), [purported to show opposition plans to overthrow the government with foreign help](#) – claims that were completely unsubstantiated. Opposition leader Michal Šimečka **has criticised Fico for demanding that ministries compile a list of all grants and subsidies awarded to organisations** – all while Smer happily funds two NGOs behind pro-Russian media outlets, Hlavný denník and Hlavné správy.

In contrast, the ruling coalition in Poland has accelerated its 'iron broom' approach against PiS officials. Party leader Jarosław Kaczyński and former defence minister Mariusz

Błaszczak have been stripped of their immunity (for defamation and info leaks, respectively); former justice minister Zbigniew Ziobro was detained by police (misconduct); former prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki was charged with abuse of power (postal elections); and MP Dariusz Matecki has been sent to pre-trial detention (evidence tampering).

Michał Kuczmierowski, former head of the Government Strategic Reserves Agency (RARS), will remain in London custody (corruption), and Warsaw is working to extradite Samer A., former head of the Swiss subsidiary of Polish fuel giant Orlen, who has been detained in the UAE (unfavourable contracts). **Overall, the National Prosecutor's Office has identified [112 cases of serious concern](#) in its investigation of legal cases conducted under PiS** between 2016 and 2023.

Finance minister Andrzej Domański has also withheld the payment of almost €4 million in delayed subsidies to the PiS Party. The National Electoral Commission originally found PiS guilty of misuse of public funds in the 2023 elections. It then reversed its ruling after a PiS appeal to a PiS-loyal chamber of the Supreme Court – which is not recognised by the ruling coalition or the ECJ. **The feud highlights unresolved rule of law issues in Poland and also sparks concern about a potential judicial stand-off in the upcoming Polish elections.**

SOCIETY

Polarisation or Cohesion

More than a hundred psychiatrists and psychologists signed an open letter to Fico expressing grave concerns over the country's political direction – repeating the events of 1998, when psychiatrists urged PM Vladimír Mečiar to resign. Their letter warned of a deteriorating political culture, polarisation and democratic backsliding, with Fico's language, such as attacks on opposition figures' families, 'fostering a negative emotional atmosphere and dividing society.'

In response, the General Prosecutor's Office is attempting to ban psychologists and psychiatrists from publicly commenting on political developments. **Fico has looked to shift focus away from his populist, pro-Russian policies** by: first, escalating his baseless accusations against anti-government protest organisers, claiming they are the Georgian National Legion, controlled by Ukrainian foreign intelligence, and plotting to overthrow him; second, announcing he wants to amend the constitution to enshrine two genders and ban gay adoption.

Orbán has also used increasingly incendiary language. The labeling of NGOs, journalists and the like as 'stink bugs' that have survived too long echoes political narratives seen in the Rwandan genocide, Nazi propaganda, as well as the language used by hardline communists in the 50s.

The Hungarian parliament has also voted to ban Pride, declaring that police will use face recognition software to identify attendees and fine them up to €500. The official reason for the Pride ban is the protection of children, but many fear that this is just the first step to deem any protests unsafe, curtailing the freedom of assembly. Orbán has already announced plans to draft new legislation aimed at protecting citizens who do not participate in protests.

Similarly, Hungary is set to amend its constitution for the 15th time, **restricting LGBTQ+ rights by defining gender strictly as male or female.** Both developments provide useful distractions for Fidesz from Hungary's floundering economy.