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THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE AND THE FUTURE OF UKRAINE

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Pat Cox was the President of the Jean Monnet Foundation for Europe from 1st January 2015 to 28th February 2026. An Irish national, he is 73 years old. After teaching economics, he then became journalist and anchor-man of the news bulletin on the Irish national television. He was first elected to the European Parliament in 1989, serving for three

terms until 2004. He was the President of the European Parliament from 2002 to 2004. He was the laureate of the International Charlemagne Prize of Aix-la-Chapelle in 2004. He subsequently presided over the European Movement International from 2005 to 2011. He was a member of the special European Parliament mission to Ukraine in 2012-2013, jointly with the former Polish President Aleksander Kwaśniewski. He is the Coordinator of the European Union project for the transport corridor from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean.

*Speech delivered by Dr Pat Cox on 29th June 2026 in
Lausanne during the dialogue organised by the Jean Monnet
Foundation for Europe on the future of Europe and Ukraine*

Liberal democracy which was on the rise post Salazar in Portugal and which accelerated after the collapse of the Berlin Wall is now in recession with a growing number of autocracies, dictatorships, and illiberal democracies. This year's Freedom House Report found that: "Global freedom declined for the 20th consecutive year in 2025" prompting some commentators to talk of a democratic depression. It notes that the United States was one of the countries rated "free" that experienced the biggest declines in freedom last year.

V-Dem¹ reports that democracy is back to 1978 levels for the average global citizen. At the end of 2025 the world had 92 autocracies and 87 democracies. For the first time it classified the USA as losing its long-term status as a liberal democracy.

There is a growing web of institutional structures between authoritarian regimes socialising their elites, standardising narratives, supporting state-aligned networks and exchanging practices and messaging strategies. Undermining civil society, categorising human rights concerns by third countries as interference and coordinating positions in international and global institutions all serve to underpin autocracy's rise. At the same time, as these are stepping up, rich democracies are stepping back, led by the abandonment of USAID in the United States and cuts to Official Development Assistance by many others as they concentrate on their own domestic challenges.

1 | Varieties of Democracy (V-DEM) is headquartered at the V-Dem Institute, the Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

To this can be added the Munich Security Conference 2020 analysis that the West in terms of inherited normative standards such as liberal democracy, open markets, and international cooperation was becoming less western, a phenomenon it classified as Westlessness.

European democracy is not immune from these trends.² They are an embedded part of our national electoral cycles variously registering democracy gains and losses. Poland's Civic Coalition led by Donald Tusk won control of parliament in 2023 but has continued to face legacy institutional ambushes on many fronts. Hungary's watershed election led by Peter Magyar this year marked not just a change of government but more fundamentally a change of regime after years of Kremlin-friendly centralisation of power under Viktor Orban.

Through their continuity, our values of pluralist democracy, checks and balances, classic freedoms and human rights exhibit resilience. Our electoral outcomes, however, exhibit diversity on the democratic spectrum. A key point is that, unlike autocracies, democratic choice about who governs remains a key electoral feature everywhere in Europe. Unlike Trump's USA, transitions of power from losers to winners have not been contested, though the Polish example reveals

2 | On 20th April 2026 the European Commission unveiled a twenty-four-meter high 'DEMOCRACY' banner on the Berlaymont, facing Rond Point Schuman in Brussels with a tag line reading: 'Protect what matters', a symbol both of commitment and of concern. Commitment to promote and protect democratic resilience and values and concern at external interference and disinformation and internal backsliding.

the constraints of lingering continuities. For the European Union how to cope with democratic backsliding is a particular challenge – a topic to which I shall return.

The American revolution 250 years ago inspired generations of people around the world to fight for freedom and equality. The United States was the anchor of the normative West, the arsenal of democracy, and the most influential voice in the institutions of the post war world order. The rise of the rest, in particular China, posed a challenge to this dominance but it is domestic US politics that has redefined and hastened the abandonment of America's former leadership role. As with Hungary but in the opposite direction Trump's election and Congressional majorities signalled not just a change of government but also a change of regime and a rupture with the past.

In terms of disinformation and foreign interference in our politics Europeans must look in future not only to the east but also to the west as MAGA ideologues and influencers flood the information space. Moreover, the US State Department is adding its weight by recruiting local influencers, academics and community leaders to mask US-funded narratives.³

Today new centres of power co-exist with the traditional sovereignty of democratic states. Mature capitalism is

3 | 30th March 2026, The Guardian; July 2026, US Department of State, "Developing Civilizational Bonds: Democratic Resilience and Rule of Law in Europe".

characterised by staggering concentrations of wealth and power especially the giant AI-enabled tech companies.⁴ In turn these companies have created a class of hyper wealthy individuals who embody individual sovereignty, influence and wealth surpasses that of many states.

US Tech-bros have bought a privileged space on the inside track of today's Trumpian power politics. The most egregious example is Elon Musk.⁵ At a reported \$290mn he was the largest donor of Republican candidates and political action committees during the 2024 electoral cycle. By mid-2026 his SpaceX IPO on Nasdaq on paper increased his pre-pandemic wealth of \$28bn forty-fold to more than \$1tn, with unprecedented self-serving governance rules and share trading access favouring Musk personally, hardly a coincidence.

By purchasing Twitter, now called X, Musk equipped himself with a global megaphone. He reduced content moderation, and wilfully amplifies a very right-wing toxic information environment, diminishing trust both in domestic institutions and social cohesion.

4 | The world's top nine companies – six American and three Asian - according to the McKinsey Global Institute in 2025 earned \$2.7 trillion, larger than the GDP of Italy. (Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Meta, Tesla/SpaceX cluster, Alibaba, Huawei, Samsung). They invested \$800 billion in R&D and capital investments in a single year, a seven times multiple of the EU's multi annual Horizon Research and Innovation Programme 2021-2027. NVIDIA's market capitalization is worth more than German GDP - the third largest economy in the world and Europe's largest economy and greater than the combined GDP of the 19 smallest EU economies by GDP.

5 | While heading the expenditure slashing DOGE, the Washington Post reported in February 2025 that Musk's companies over a two-decade long period had received \$38bn in government contracts, loans, subsidies and tax credits.

AI hopefully will find a cure for cancer and do other good things suggested by its promoters but the clear intensification of slopagenda – as many AI generated memes and deepfakes have been described – and the probable social consequences of labour displacement will leave struggling political systems increasingly vulnerable to social media anger-entrepreneurs, magnified by the richest man in history.

The EU Democracy Shield⁶ to be deployed in 2027 combined with the Digital Services Act should help. A European response to contain this tsunami of sludge is not only highly desirable but essential. A Trump era US regulatory backlash is highly probable. This arises from the symbiotic power relationship between the US tech sector's wealthiest people, the plutocratic richest billionaire cabinet in US history, and a US President more interested in deals than ideals who asserts that the EU was "formed in order to screw the United States".⁷

Turning East, Vladimir Putin's policy speech at Valdai last October sounded like a MAGA echo chamber. He blamed

6 | European Democracy Shield is an initiative aimed at protecting democracy in Europe from threats such as foreign information manipulation and disinformation. It focuses on enhancing information integrity, strengthening democratic institutions, and boosting citizen engagement, with actions set to be rolled out by 2027. It includes the establishment of a European Centre for Democratic Resilience, which will coordinate efforts across member states and enhance collective responses to threats against democracy.

7 | Trump supported the re-election of Viktor Orban expressing the hope that "he wins big". He sent his Vice President to Budapest personally to campaign for Orban. After the election Vance explained why he went. "We did it because he is one of the very few European leaders willing to stand up to the bureaucracy in Brussels. That has been bad for the US."

Europe for his own ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine. He accused the EU of militarisation and anti-Russian policies which he said threaten its security and domestic stability. He proclaimed his support for Europe's anti-establishment politicians who prioritise "national issues", citing far-right parties in France and Germany, and offered his support to Viktor Orban. Implicitly confirming Russian disinformation campaigns, Putin spoke of the importance of "influence on the political consciousness of a potential adversary's country." With approval, he cited the example of Trump's leadership which reoriented his country away from the "globalist agenda" and towards resolving domestic issues just as Europeans should be doing, he said. Mind your own business and let me get on with mine is one of the core narratives of the networked autocrat's play book including disdain for the obligations implicitly flowing from Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

To summarise: European democracy and values which we cherish and promote need to be defended on two fronts, from erosion within and from external manipulation. There is a symbiotic relationship between Europe's external opponents and its internal populists and nationalists. To our east and to our west there now exists a publicly acknowledged symmetrical danger to our information space from our greatest security threat, Russia, and our currently fickle and former greatest ally, the United States.

Looking to the east brings me to Ukraine. The past several months of a war now it is fifth year have been intriguing.

The Trump Putin meeting in Alaska in August 2025 ended without any ceasefire or clear direction. By January 2026 this process, led by two deal makers and not diplomats – Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner – reportedly produced a twenty-point plan. Witkoff met Putin in Moscow six times. He has never travelled to Kyiv and never met with Zelensky. In return for surrendering the unconquered part of Donbas Ukraine would be given unspecified security guarantees and promises of post war recovery assistance. The US would lift all sanctions against Russia.

What was in it for the USA? For Trump the ego feedback of a promise made, a promise fulfilled, even if it took more than twenty-four hours. Additionally, a reported \$12tn energy joint venture deal negotiated between Kiril Dimitriev, the head of Russia's sovereign wealth fund, and America's roving deal making duo, Witkoff and Kushner.

Neither Russia nor Ukraine found the proposed ceasefire plan acceptable but both played to keep Trump onside. The possibility of closing things out by the summertime, permitting the great peacemaker to claim another victory before the US midterm elections remained open, if remote.

On a second front Moscow deployed its Hungarian puppets in the persons of Viktor Orban and his foreign minister. The latter, after leaks, confirmed his regular contacts with Sergei Lavrov during pauses in EU Foreign Affairs Councils and promised to strike Russian oligarchs off the EU sanctions list. Orban obstructed the EU's €90bn loan for Ukraine. Having

initially opposed candidate status for Ukraine, Orban then blocked the opening of the first cluster of negotiations for two years, to the consternation of Kyiv and the frustration of Brussels. His corruption and perfidy saw him swept from power. The new administration in Budapest mended its fences with Brussels. The first cluster of negotiations finally opened on 15 June 2026. However, Hungary signalled its objection to fast tracking the opening of all remaining clusters in the coming weeks.

Count on the Kremlin seeking to cultivate alternative highly placed allies inside the EU.

Moving up the escalation ladder, in early February as winter temperatures plunged, Putin launched the largest ever strike against the Ukrainian energy grid. On 29 March, three days after Zelensky signed a defence cooperation agreement in Jeddah with Saudi Arabia, Russia launched almost one thousand drones and ballistic missiles against Ukraine in the largest twenty-four-hour aerial bombardment since the war began. Russia is now a war economy producing a prodigious volume and range of weapons. In May it launched 2,300 drone attacks, 1,560 guided aerial bombs and 108 missiles targeting civilian infrastructure, residential buildings and energy, spurring Volodymyr Zelensky yet again to appeal to allies for more air defence missiles.

In late February Trump's attention shifted to his own war of choice against Iran overlapping the war in Ukraine in many ways. Russia reportedly supplied drones, food and

medicine to the Iranian regime and assisted Iran by sharing targeting data for its neighbourhood strikes. The US rejected a Russian offer, made in Miami by Dimitriev to his US negotiating partners, to stop sharing this intelligence in return for Washington abandoning its intelligence partnership with Ukraine.

Taking political flak at home over rising energy prices Trump lifted sanctions on Russian oil exports. The surging price of oil due to the closure of the Straits of Hormuz saw Russian fuel export revenues rise in April despite Ukraine's relentless long-range missile and drone strikes attacking its energy production and storage facilities. With petrol prices falling this temporary uplift will not be sustained.

More ominously, angry with his European NATO allies for not joining his war in Iran, approved neither by Congress nor the UN, and prosecuted without any prior consultation with allies, Trump threatened to withdraw from PURL⁸, NATO's weapons procurement programme for Ukraine paid for by European states. In any event the US need to replenish depleted munitions and missile stockpiles is likely to slow down its supply chain to allies in any event.

Profiting from the incredible innovation, quality and scale of Ukraine's domestically produced drones and its growing mastery of drone warfare, Zelensky seized the moment and signed defence agreements with Gulf states stressed by

8 | NATO's Prioritised Ukraine Requirements List (PURL) initiative.

Iranian drones strikes. Zelensky now had cards, offering low cost highly effective capabilities that even the Pentagon could not match.

Ukraine's battlefield fortunes have been changing. Some territory has been liberated, some still threatened. Drones and unmanned ground vehicles have been inflicting shocking death and devastation on Russian forces, now being killed and injured at an unprecedented rate. Medium range missiles have been conditioning the forward battlefield by destroying land and sea-based logistics supply chains. Consecutive assaults on bridges, roads, and shipping have isolated Crimea with a state of emergency now declared there. Long range missiles continue to undermine Russia's energy sector, its arms production and munitions stockpiles. High profile targets hit in St Petersburg and Moscow reveal major air defence gaps too close for comfort for Putin. Zelensky threatens: "If Kyiv burns Moscow will burn."

How long the war will continue is a matter of conjecture. Most likely it will intensify in the coming months. Putin has so much at stake he is more likely to double down than to backdown. Ukraine's sovereignty and freedom is at stake. It cannot backdown. Trump's protracted Iran war end game may distract him or might induce him to return to the war in Ukraine in search of a win before the midterm Congressional elections in November. His G7 willingness to sign conclusions favourable to Ukraine, if it holds, may be a positive signal.

Antonio Costa's delicate back channel diplomatic contacts with Moscow correctly seeks to ensure that the EU, a key backer of Ukraine and its future destination, can address Europe's security and other interests. All going well a cease-fire might be possible later this year. To succeed a negotiable exit strategy for both sides needs to be carefully crafted. If not, the death and destruction will be prolonged.

Ukraine's future is as a full member of the EU family. It will bring unparalleled military experience and defence technology as a major gift to the EU's evolving security and defence posture. In defending itself it also is defending the EU's eastern flank. Ukrainians have sacrificed so much and paid such a high price their EU membership aspiration has transformed into a hard-earned entitlement.

To succeed both sides, Ukraine and the EU, must honestly confront any obstacles that could get in the way.

Even with a diminished de facto post war territory Ukraine still will be the largest state ever to join the EU. Its GDP per capita will be among the EU's lowest ever. Its agricultural share of GDP is on the high end of the EU average. Big, poor and more agricultural carries the risk of pushback from any member state fearing that its own EU cohesion and agricultural policy lunch could be eaten by someone else.

The row with Poland over national honours could be viewed as a storm in a teacup but its radioactive half-life will linger in political quarters that could be in power when Council

unanimity is required to open or close negotiating chapters or to ratify a future accession treaty. It would be better to deescalate this.

Fulfilling the requirements of the *Acquis Communautaire* must not become a box ticking exercise for either side. That only stores up future problems.

Speaking of which, Germany, France, Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg, learning lessons from the past, have proposed that a safeguard clause should be added to accession treaties imposing costs for democratic backsliding.

In the end EU leaders need to front up to their individual and collective responsibilities, bring their public opinion with them and deliver for the Europe by delivering for Ukraine, making us both safer and stronger together.

The Jean Monnet Foundation for Europe

The Foundation was established in 1978 by Jean Monnet, the designer and first President of the first European Community (the European Coal and Steel Community) and Europe's first honorary citizen, who entrusted his entire archive to it. As an independent, non-profit, non-partisan and politically neutral organisation, it is supported by the Canton of Vaud, the Swiss Confederation, the City of Lausanne and the Loterie Romande. It operates from the Ferme de Dorigny, situated in the heart of the University of Lausanne campus, its main partner. In 2025, it was awarded the Fondation BCV Prize.

Today, it holds and makes accessible numerous other private archive collections, including, in particular, the collections of Robert Marjolin and the European documents of Robert Schuman and Jacques Delors, as well as visual and audio material. It houses a unique collection of 6,500 posters on the theme of Europe, a specialist library and a European documentation centre. As part of its programmes featuring filmed interviews, it collects accounts from key figures and contemporary witnesses. In this way, it provides users – particularly researchers – with a comprehensive collection of documents on the origins and development of European integration, as well as on relations between Switzerland and Europe. Its archive portal has been available online since 2022 at <https://archives.jean-monnet.ch>. Each year, the Foundation awards two Henri Rieben Fellowships to support doctoral research and the communication of scientific knowledge.

Thanks to the influence of this legacy and the collaboration between Jean Monnet and Professor Henri Rieben, who chaired the Foundation until 2005, the Foundation has developed into a European hub and an indispensable forum for encounters, debates and reflection on the major challenges currently facing Europe. It regularly organises conferences, European dialogues and international symposia, and forges partnerships with renowned institutions. It periodically

awards its Gold Medal to leading politicians who have championed the common interests of Europeans; past recipients include José Manuel Barroso, Emilio Colombo, Mario Draghi, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, Jean-Claude Juncker, Helmut Kohl, Romano Prodi, Helmut Schmidt, Martin Schulz, Javier Solana, Herman Van Rompuy and the Ukrainian Parliament. It also welcomes numerous visitors and researchers, supporting them in their work, and contributes to the education of students.

Its work as a publisher rounds off the range of its activities, including the “Cahiers rouges” series, launched by Henri Rieben in 1957, which now comprises 221 volumes. In 2014, a new series of open-access publications, the “Collection débats et documents”, was launched. These publications aim to draw on the Foundation's documentary treasures, its public events and the expertise of its members and partners.

Every year, the General Assembly of the Foundation Board – which comprises over 600 members from a wide variety of fields – and its Scientific Advisory Committee hold their meetings. Roger de Weck, former editor-in-chief of the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, former Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Geneva Graduate Institute, and former Director-General of SRG-SSR, has been at the helm of the Foundation and its Executive Council since 1st March 2026. His predecessors are Pat Cox (2015–2026), former President of the European Parliament and of the International European Movement; José María Gil-Robles (2009–2014), former President of the European Parliament and of the International European Movement; Bronisław Geremek (2006–2008), Member of the European Parliament and former Minister for Foreign Affairs of Poland; and Henri Rieben (1978–2005), Professor at the University of Lausanne. Gilles Grin has been the Director of the Foundation since 2012; he holds a PhD in International Relations, lectures at the University of Lausanne and is Corresponding Academician for Switzerland of the Royal Academy of Economic and Financial Sciences of Spain.

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This text is the speech delivered by Dr Pat Cox on 29th June 2026 in Lausanne during the dialogue organised by the Jean Monnet Foundation for Europe on the future of Europe and Ukraine. He analyses the worldwide decline of liberal democracy, the weakening of American leadership and the threats facing the European information space. He examines the war in Ukraine and the challenges of its accession to the European Union. He argues for a determined defence of European democratic values on two fronts: against internal erosion and against external manipulation.

Dr Pat Cox was President of the Jean Monnet Foundation for Europe (2015-2026) and President of the European Parliament (2002-2004).



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