Private Actors

in International Affairs

- Who's got the power?

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear reader,

This semester we have the honor of presenting an issue worked on by no less than two editors – Miriam Lundberg, who served as editor of *UTPOST* and chair of the board last year, and William Lundberg, this years editor-in-chief of *UTPOST*. Working with five writers, we've been able to put together an issue we hope you will thoroughly enjoy.

The theme for this semester's issue is private actors in international affairs. The question we ask is: *who's got the power*? While states still hold formal authority, tech companies, billionaires, and political donors increasingly shape global politics through lobbying, control over digital infrastructure, and the ability to mobilise – or withhold – resources. As decisions may become guided by private interests, democracy is weakened, and the consequences are rarely born(e) equally. At the same time, private citizens, CSOs, and activists play a vital role by observing, exposing, and stepping in where official institutions fall short.

The contributions explore a world where power isn't conventionally exercised through parliaments or international organisations. Rather, it is embedded in algorithms, patronage politics, and private decision-making that operates beyond traditional democratic oversight. This issue invites for reflection on how such power is exercised today, what power you the may hold, and what it might mean for the future of international affairs.

Lastly, we would like to dedicate a huge thanks to our amazing writers, without them this magazine wouldn't be possible. Hopefully you will find the articles as interesting as we do.

Happy reading,

Miriam Lundberg
William Lundberg
EDITORS

UTPOST

N°01

THIS ISSUE

UTPOST

Photo: Jei Lee

WHEN PRIVATE POWER BECOMES PUBLIC POLICY

– Elon Musk and the End of USAID

Batoul Nehmé

In March 2021, a notable shift occurred in global wealth rankings: Elon Musk, CEO of Tesla and SpaceX, surpassed Amazon founder Jeff Bezos to become the world's richest individual.

Evidently, one might assume that reaching the top of global wealth rankings would be the long-lasting defining feature Musk's public image. However, in recent years, his influence has extended well beyond the business world – into the heart of political discourse, media dynamics, and debates surrounding free speech and platform regulation. In fact, ever since the latter's symbolic involvement in Donald Trump's 2024 presidential campaign, serving as the then-candidate's financial backer and public advocate, calling Musk a structural part of the new american political order would be an understatement.

Musk's entrance into U.S. politics wasn't merely symbolic — it quickly became consequential. Nowhere was this more evident than in his role in the dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development, USAID. As head of the newly created Department of Government Efficiency, DOGE, Musk spearheaded one of the most aggressive overhauls of U.S. foreign aid policy in modern history. What began as a cost-cutting mandate rapidly escalated into a full-blown shutdown of USAID's global operations, igniting legal, ethical, and humanitarian controversies.

One of Musk's earliest actions against USAID came after citing alleged corruption and bloated contracts. Musk labeled the agency "a criminal organization" and advocated for its dismantlement (France24, 2025). Shortly after taking office, President Trump signed an executive order freezing most foreign aid expenditures. Within weeks, Musk orchestrated a mass furlough of over 10 000 USAID employees. On February 6, 2025, nearly the entire workforce was placed on administrative leave, with only 294 of over 10 000 employees remaining active. Essential global health programs, emergency food aid, and educational initiatives were abruptly suspended.

The dismantling of USAID triggered a wave of legal challenges and political backlash. In March 2025, a federal judge ruled that Musk likely overstepped constitutional limits, asserting that his role in issuing termination directives and altering federal agency structures violated the separation of powers. The court issued an injunction halting further layoffs at USAID. Labour unions, nonprofit organizations, and congressional Democrats launched coordinated campaigns to challenge DOGE's authority. International partners and recipient governments expressed alarm over the sudden cessation of aid, citing serious disruptions in humanitarian operations.

Musk publicly derided USAID as "a cartel of consultants masquerading as a development agency" (X, 2025), arguing that its work had minimal measurable impact and was riddled with inefficiencies. His team proposed transferring remaining functions to the State Department under Secretary Marco Rubio's supervision.

The immediate effects of the foreign aid freeze were severe. Internal USAID reports leaked in April 2025 detailed that over 500,000 children had their access to medical treatments jeopardized. More than 30 clinical trials for infectious diseases such as HIV, malaria, and tuberculosis were paused.

Vaccine distribution in over a dozen countries ground to a halt. Humanitarian organizations scrambled to fill the gaps, but funding shortfalls and logistical breakdowns led to worsening conditions in several conflict- and disaster-affected regions. Global public health experts warned that the aid freeze risked reversing decades of progress.

Musk's approach to USAID reflects a governing philosophy shaped by Silicon Valley ideals — favoring disruption, speed, and measurable efficiency over institutional memory, process, and diplomacy. Supporters view his actions as a necessary correction to unchecked spending. Critics argue it signals a dangerous precedent: unelected private-sector figures directing public policy without democratic safeguards.

The episode also illustrates a redefinition of American soft power. Where once aid was a strategic tool for influence and alliance-building, the current administration sees it as a liability. The message to the world is clear: U.S. global engagement is now subordinate to domestic cost-benefit calculations.

As of May 2025, the future of USAID remains in limbo. Court rulings have slowed DOGE's campaign, but the agency operates in a skeletal form, with many of its flagship programs dormant. Lawsuits are ongoing, and Congress is debating legislation to reassert its authority over foreign aid disbursements.

Musk's intervention in USAID offers a case study in what happens when business logic collides with humanitarian policy. Whether it marks the beginning of a lasting transformation in American governance or a brief, chaotic experiment remains to be seen. What is certain is that it has sparked a national reckoning over who gets to shape U.S. foreign policy — and on what terms.

Making a real

Ingvar Rönnbäck togeather with community health promoters in Homa Bay County in 2024

Ingvar Rönnbäck

Ingvar Rönnbäck is the founder of the company Another Development Perspective and the non-profit international think tank Another Development Foundation – two organizations promoting development alternatives through local and international projects, education, communication, outreach and analysis. The following text provides an insight into how it all came to be and what it is like to work for another development on a global stage.

Arlanda Airport April 26th, 2025. Back in Sweden after facilitating a discussion with Minister's and Directors representing five county governments located at the Kenya Lake Victoria Basin Area as well as representatives from five universities, the Treasury of Kenya and the Swedish Embassy in Kenya.

I am thoughtful since the impressions were many. I am also happy since the outcome of the meeting became as good as it could be. The parties are now committed to work for resilient health systems taking climate change and man-made environmental into account, besides of already existing social determinants of health.
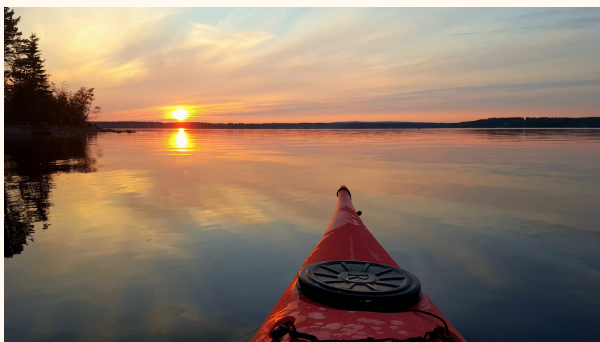
County governments have a critical role for managing these challenges. Research institutions also have a role in analysing and producing reliable scientific products, and development partners can also support based on their mandate and resources. In our case we have established relations with the World Health Organisation's headquarter in Geneva, WHO Africa Office in Brazzaville, WHO Kenya Office in Nairobi, UN Habitat and United Nation Capital Development Fund (UNCDF).

difference

I am also in need of time for recovery due to challenges in my own private life and due to me coming back from Lusaka, Zambia, on April 12th from another meeting with representatives for local governments from five different countries and UN-organizations who are engaged in the adaptation to and mitigation of climate change.

Soon the summer will be here and then I will use my kayak going out in the archipelago of Norrbotten. Nature is healing.

So, how did I find myself working in African countries, in other parts of the world and within so many international projects? Looking back at my upbringing, that was far from obvious.

Ingvar spending his free time in the Luleå archipelago, relaxing and resetting

Where did it all begin?
Once upon a time, I was a teenager reacting emotionally and intellectually towards violence – understanding on a deep level that people, groups, organizations, states and non-state actors could cause immense suffering to other people, to animals and to the environment.

I also understood that human organizations and decision-makers could cause the extinction of life on earth if the destructive capacities in the military organizations were unleashed on a global scale.

Actually, it was somehow a period of crisis in my own life. I was so hit by this understanding that it for a short time almost brought me down due to the shock and the feeling of losing hope.

However, instead of giving up or moving into a situation of permanent despair, I decided that I needed to do something. I understood that my life was forever changed and that I now needed to find a way of acting and working that suited my personality and capacities at that time. I quickly decided that I needed to increase my understanding rapidly and also become engaged in social movements, in advocacy work and in education.

Today, more than forty years later, I still try to be active in informing myself, analysing what is going on in the world and the causes behind it. I am also still active in working with advocacy and education within social movements.
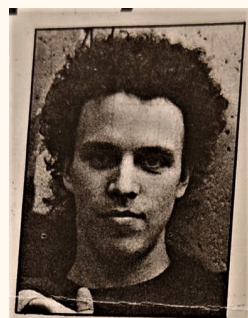
Books, articles, reports, magazines etc are everywhere in my home and in the offices that I have worked. The work with education, information, communication towards mostly youth and young adults from the basis of engagement in civil society has expanded to education at a number of institutions for higher education, at various programs

Ingvar speaking about human rights on a girls' school in Machakos County, Kenya

organized by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and in broad variations of other contexts in Sweden and in other countries.All the readings and research over the years have also resulted in publications of books, reports, articles and texts that have been discussed, displayed, appreciated and criticized.

Becoming a development practitioner
However, working with analysis and education have not been enough for me – independent of how important it has been. I am also an activist and a development practitioner. Since the time I was a youth, I have been engaged in social movements for social change. Later I also became a development practitioner, mostly in the role of project manager but also in the role as

facilitator and senior advisor working together with technical experts and civil servants.

Yes, I was involved in development projects and international partnerships

A cut out of Ingvar in his twenties talking about his engagement – proof of his long-standing commitment

during my work in Swedish civil society organizations and during my work as a researcher and a teacher at Umeå University in the 1980's and 1990's. However, development work with partners in the "global south" exploded during the 2000's and has been an important part of my life ever since. I am grateful for a short time at Sida the first part of the 2000's since I learned a lot during these years working as a programme officer for conflict resolution and humanitarian assistance.

After my period at Sida, I decided to start a company 2008 named ADEP – Another Development Perspective – influenced by thinkers and practitioners who are working for development alternatives and local sustainable development from the basis of rights-based approaches. It is an attempt from my side to be constructive in development projects, but also critical towards those who support neoliberalism, fascism, racism, sexism and militarism - ideologies that have caused so much suffering for so many when they are practiced.

It has been a challenge working as freelancer, but also most rewarding due to many reasons. Later I also co-founded an international independent non-profit think tank with a similar name: Another Development Foundation. This think tank has been active since 2016 and have many partners in Sweden and other countries who are engaged in projects and activities for peace, freedom from violence, human rights, gender equality and sustainable development. One example of relationship that has been established just recently is that we have become a member of World BEYOND War – a global movement to end all wars due to the devastating effects of war, armed conflicts, political violence, militarism and militarization. I take this relationship very seriously and we will be active in joint activities and campaigns.

I am forever grateful for people who are ready to engage in "another development". I have witnessed what people, movements and organizations can do in a number of complex environments; informal settlements, refugee camps, villages, communities, zones of conflicts etc. The stories are everywhere, and they provide the world with inspiration and hope.

My coming work in May and June 2025
In May and June, me and my partners in the County of Västerbotten and the City of Umeå will host two teams from Homa Bay County, Kenya and one team from Cape Agulhas, South Africa who are working for youth health and youth inclusion.

I have worked with the Department of Health in Homa Bay County for a number of years. They are producing incredible results within their health system. They have not given up and we shall not do it either. The team from Cape Agulhas is new to me and I will try to support the parties involved in this partnership to the best of my abilities. May and June will also be a time for writing project reports - also a task when you are a development practitioner. Not always as interesting as other tasks but a task that needs to be taken seriously.

Then and now
It all comes together. My feelings in relation to violence are the same. Why not work for alternatives to violence (direct, structural, cultural, symbolic)? Why not join hands with the many who engage themselves in the fight for human rights, human dignity, peace, freedom from violence, gender equality and climate justice?
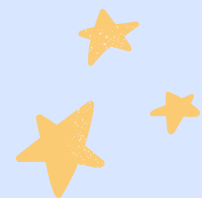
Why not do it through non-violence?

I end with a quote by Martin Luther King Jr – a human who besides becoming an icon for resistance and inspiration also fought with stress factors and for his mental wellbeing.
"*I never intend to adjust myself to the madness of militarism*".
That is something that resonates very well with me.

Last year, Sweden celebrated 30 years as a member of the European Union. To highlight this, UAIA together with Umeå University, invited Sweden's minister for EU affairs, Jessica Rosencrantz (M) and *UTOPST* got the chance to interview her on the situation the EU is facing, with internal and external threats, and on the topic of what role the EU and it's member states play in global politics.

Photo: Deniz Anttila

THE EU AS PART OF GLOBAL POLITICS

Miriam Lundberg

To begin with, keeping in mind that this issue of UTPOST focuses on private actors' role in global politics, one might ask why an interview focusing on EU politics is of interest. Although politics mainly revolve around governments, or as the EU, a union consisting of government states, official and private actors must cooperate, and both are affected by each other's actions. To understand how the relation works, and what can be expected of the two different actors, one must see the bigger picture and both perspectives.

The EU was founded in the aftermath of the second world war 1952. The Union was at first an intergovernmental cooperation and trade agreement between five European countries to prevent future conflicts. The cooperation, *the European Coal and Steel Union*, later grew to include more countries and expand its purpose to what we know it as today – a union consisting of 27 countries, all with the official goal of promoting peace, development and free trade.

But, however good the goal may sound, the EU is facing several challenges. There is climate change, the unstable relation with the US, and two wars which have a direct influence on discussions throughout all parts of the EU, inevitably affecting the relations between it's member states.

When asking the minister about her thoughts on the challenges the EU is facing – where both internal and external powers are trying to disturb the consensus within

the union – her answer is short. "The EU needs to stay strong and work as a contrast and counterbalance to Russia and other threats we are facing, no matter what".

And while the external conflicts grow bigger and closer, so do the internal. One example where the member states face recurring discord is the view on the conflict in Ukraine. While the majority of the EU member states are in favour of a strong support to Ukraine, not all of them agree. "When the EU adopts texts on Ukraine or new support packages, Hungary stands on the sidelines. Hungary is also actively blocking Ukraine from taking the next steps in its path to joining the EU, despite having made the necessary reforms".

The minister is keen to stress that "the EU is a union based on shared values, and to be a part of the union you have to respect these values", and that when we face these kinds of issues, we should handle in with "a firm approach". The question regarding support for Ukraine is only one example, Hungary continues to ban pride parades and free media – a clear breach of what values within the EU should be.

And when countries do not meet the standard for values held by the union, they should be met with consequences. In the case with Hungary, the minister, along side other menas of pressure, supports freezing the economic aid to the state. "Countries are allowed to have different opinions, but everyone must respect our values, and we must be firm in keeping our values intact". She continues, "when a country disrupts the will to cooperate and fail to live up to the rule of law, we have to ask the question: *is this* (the EU, eds. note) *the right place for that country?*"

Thus, it can be said that the EU holds a certain amount of power, both internal trying to affect the action of the member states, and external power, for example making decisions on sending financial and military aid to a war-torn country, like Ukraine, deciding on it's future.

The question then remains – what can a private actor, or even a single individual, do to affect a big actor like the EU. As a student of social science, where on the one hand, many peers seem to have the EU as a career goal, I can't help but feel, on the other hand, that the EU is something unattainable – behind wall of bureaucracy, and some kind of esoteric barrier only a chosen few gets to pass and be part of the small group of people making the decisions affecting us all. And I believe I'm not the only one having these feelings.

My last question when meeting the Swedish Minister for EU Affairs was about this – what tips she has for our readers, youths, and others who would like to get closer to the EU, which

Photo: Lukas S

otherwise feel so far away. She gave me four tips. Keep updated, vote, get involved in organisations, "not necessarily in political parties, there are lots of ways to influence politics", and last but not least, "don't hesitate, get in touch and take chances".

Throughout our interview the minister is eager to highlight that, "we are the EU". That is also how I would like to end this article. The EU is an obvious actor in global politics with direct, official power. But the EU would be nothing without us – its citizens, and the people who vote for who should represent us in making decisions. We are the EU and should not take that for granted.

Further, the EU and government states cannot function alone on the arena that is global politics. As the other articles in this issue describe, private actors play a central role in both disrupting and repairing the world that we live in, proving that everyone can make a difference, including *you*.

"When someone tells me he is politically neutral," Francesca smiled, "I always ask which politics he specifically has in mind."
— Andrzej Sapkowski, *Baptism of Fire*

EUROPE'S HARD FALL FOR
THE U.S. TECH TRAP

Elton Högklint

Europe is addicted to U.S. tech, and unless we want to remain perpetually subservient to our American dealers, we need to go to rehab, and fast. Like all addictive substances, U.S. tech is accessible, convenient, and (initially) cheap, leaving us hooked before we know it. As a result, a massive portion of our personal communications, information intake, and fundamental digital infrastructure that powers our governments has come to be controlled by a handful of Silicon Valley technocrats. Technocrats who have, without exception, bent the knee to the most Anti-European administration in U.S. history, which is actively working behind the scenes to break apart the European Union. If Europe wants to get out from under the thumb of a global power that does not have our best interests at heart, we need to start developing our own European tech alternatives.

Complacently, one might respond by claiming that we can just use the EU's massive regulatory power to shape American tech to our values. After all, Europe is the global leader in tech regulation, and the Digital Markets Act (DMA) and Digital Services Act (DSA) have already enabled us to hold American tech accountable to the tune of hundreds of millions of euros. Is it really necessary to conduct the lengthy and expensive process of developing our own alternatives?

While the DMA and DSA are certainly good tools in the EU's digital autonomy toolkit, they fail to address the inherent issues of incentive alignment and critical dependencies. As long as it is financially profitable to destroy the mental health and attention spans of the youth, to enable hostile states like Russia and China to spread disinformation, and to allow

to harvest our intimate personal data, these things will keep happening. **There is no fine the EU can impose that will fundamentally change the engagement- and advertisement-based revenue models which beget these harmful practices.** And that's even assuming that the EU will maintain its ability to impose these fines. Mounting American pressure against these regulatory tools are already showing cracks; for example in the plethora of deregulatory elements in the EU's recently proposed Digital Omnibus package. Furthermore, given that we are critically dependent on American tech and that the fines are only a few percentage points of annual EU revenue, providers could just raise prices for European customers in order to cover the costs of these fines. Since Europe lacks viable competitors to switch to, especially for infrastructurally embedded systems like Microsoft, we have limited options for recourse should they choose to do so.

However, even if the negative externalities of these tech services were addressed, it still doesn't solve the fundamental issue of the U.S. having the power to effectively "switch off" Europe. Countless European governments, companies, civil society organisations, and private individuals use Microsoft operating systems to make their devices function. **Should Microsoft cease connectivity in Europe, whether independently or at the behest of the U.S. government, Europe would be utterly digitally paralysed.*** This prospect should not be dismissed as a remote possibility, as we have already seen the digital services of officials in the ICC be targeted. Furthermore, the staggering amount of personal, usage, and communications data that U.S. firms, and to a large extent the U.S. government, has on European users of American digital services also highlights further vulnerabilities relating to espionage and extortion of public officials and other important persons.

No other global power, whether we speak of the U.S., Russia, or China, allow themselves to have these deep-rooted tech vulnerabilities. The U.S. government uses Windows for their administrative needs and American media services for their informational ones. Russia and China both use their own Linux-based operating systems for their administrative needs, and their own media services like WeChat and MAX for their informational ones. **Only Europe, in its blue- and yellow- eyed naivete, accepts that the administration and information services that we rely upon are not owned and controlled by us.** To be clear, I am not advocating for Europe to take a page from the Chinese or Russian playbook with regard to government censorship and restricting access to information; I am merely advocating for Europe to develop its own services with European values and interests embedded at their core.

So what would European tech alternatives look like? For social media platforms, dominant monetisation systems rely on engagement and advertising, such that the user becomes the product. Subscription-based models, conversely, can help ensure that your social media experience remains ad-free, doesn't harvest your personal data, and doesn't rely on trolls and foreign actors to drive engagement. Depending on the political will behind these initiatives, the platform could also be partially or entirely publicly funded to minimise cost for European users. Since the platform's monetisation is also no longer reliant on maximising content volume to keep you on the platform, this opens the door for advanced content filters that could curate your feeds from AI-generated content, for example. Furthermore, a robust identity verification system can give users certainty that the accounts they interact with are operated by real people, and not AI agents, bots, or impersenators. These ingredients would make for a uniquely authentic social media experience, especially as the rest of the internet becomes increasingly inundated with bots, agitators, and AI-generated content.

The Kidnapping of Europa by Valentin Serov (1910)

On the administrative side, Europe should direct its focus towards open-source software. An open-source approach would enable Europe to quickly catch up as we can immediately start building upon existing projects rather than developing our own proprietary software from scratch. Open-source documentation and standards also facilitate inter-state cooperation, which takes advantage of the EU's greatest strength, and is necessary in order for Europe to be able to scale its software to meet the needs of the continent. Additionally, open-source projects inherently embed European values through their transparency, enabling European states and citizens alike to independently verify data flows and privacy measures, and maintain their sovereignty through having direct control and ownership of the source code.

If we want to be confident in the ability for Europe to be autonomous and sovereign in the future we need to realise that the problem we have is not just a bad American president, but a bad American dependency. Even if we lived in a world where the current U.S. administration wasn't economically strong-arming us, wasn't taking directions from the Kremlin, and wasn't threatening to annex European territory, it would still be inexcusable to allow so many critical functions of European society to be in the hands of a foreign state. While the best time to have begun developing our own European tech alternatives was years ago, the second best time is now, so let's break our addiction to U.S. tech before our dealer starts restricting supply and raising prices.

Restoring the Democratic Public Sphere:

Why Europe Must Regulate for Openness, Trust, Freedom of Speech and Stop Outsourcing Democracy

Mattias Axell

ordförande Open Knowledge Sweden
https//:okfn.se

For the past twenty years, the places where citizens meet, debate, organise and form public opinion have quietly been moved from public squares, newspapers, forums and broadcast media into privately owned closed digital platforms.

These platforms have democratized the ability for open public discourse on the Internet. However, this historic outsourcing of the democratic conversation happened almost without public debate or meaningful democratic oversight. National parliaments, the European Parliament and governments, elected by you, largely stood by while the infrastructure of public discourse was handed over to a small number of actors, often purely commercial, whose core business model depends on keeping users scrolling as long as possible.

THE RESULT IS NO LONGER IN DOUBT: EXTREME POLARISATION, COLLAPSING TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS, COORDINATED DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS AND A MEASURABLE DECLINE IN THE QUALITY OF PUBLIC DEBATE IN ALMOST EVERY EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY.

The problems are structural, not the result of any single company's malice or fault. When the main revenue source is attention sold to advertisers, the incentives inevitably push toward content that triggers strong emotions. When moderation for three billion people is centralised in a few hands, local context is lost and systemic. When the only way to reach one's own citizens is through closed, proprietary systems, democratic actors become tenants in someone else's house – always at risk of sudden rule changes, shadow-banning or outright deplatforming. The European Commission recently had their account disabled at X after trying to control the foreign company with fines.

Photo: Clarisse Croset

Open Knowledge Sweden

Europe's response so far has largely been to try to control the symptoms inside the closed platforms: fact-checking programmes, content-removal orders, transparency reports and – most controversially – proposals such as ChatControl (the proposal for scanning of private messaging for illegal material). These approaches treat citizens as objects of surveillance rather than subjects of democracy and violate the European Convention on Human Rights. Your elected representatives pour enormous political and technical energy into monitoring and surveilling every word of what people say inside walled gardens, while doing very little to create viable, democratically governed alternatives outside those walls.

This is backwards. Instead of your politicians spending political capital on mass surveillance of your legal right to private communication, the same European politicians should use its regulatory power to make the open, federated internet the easiest and most attractive choice for all politicians, public sector, civil society organizations, private business and citizens.

Photo: Christian Lue

I suggest five concrete, actionable directions that would genuinely strengthen democracy and development:

1. Ban addictive design patterns and non-consensual behavioural data trading or force open source algorithms

The Digital Services Act should be amended to prohibit infinite scroll, autoplay, personalised "For You" feeds optimised solely for engagement metrics, and the sale or commercial reuse of behavioural data without explicit, granular, revocable consent. Platforms would still be allowed to make money, but they would have to compete on quality, privacy and usefulness rather than on their ability to hijack attention. An alternative would be to force platforms to open source the algorithms with clear information to the user.

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2. Mandate real interoperability and data portability for dominant platforms

Gatekeepers (platforms with more than 1 million monthly EU users) should be required to implement open protocols such as ActivityPub within a fixed timeline (e.g. three years). Concretely: you as a user must be able to move your entire social graph, posts, media and follower relationships from Instagram to a Pixelfed instance, or from YouTube to a PeerTube instance, with one click – exactly as you can already move our phone number between operators. This single measure would break the network-effect monopoly overnight and make the open Internet, e.g. the Fediverse, immediately viable for mainstream use.

3. Require public money → public code → open infrastructure

Whenever public bodies (schools, universities, municipalities, government agencies) pay for, or provide, social-media-like services, the software must be free and open source, and the instance must federate by default. Germany's Sovereign Tech Fund and the European Commission's own Next Generation Internet initiative already finance many Fediverse projects – this principle should simply become systematic procurement policy across the Union.
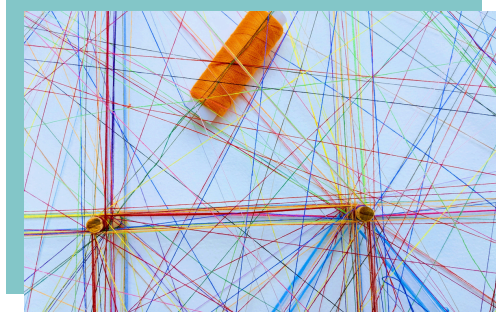

Photo: Omar Flores

4. Create strong incentives for chronological and non-algorithmic feeds

Platforms that offer only chronological time-lines, user-curated lists, or fully transparent and auditable ranking algorithms should receive regulatory "fast-lane" treatment: lighter reporting requirements, eligibility for public-service advertising budgets, and the right to use an official "democracy-compatible" label. Conversely, completely opaque, engagement-maximising black-box algorithms could be restricted or banned for political and news content.

5. Fund and protect civic Fediverse infrastructure at European scale

The EU should create a permanent, well-funded programme (similar to the Horizon Europe missions) dedicated to resilient, decentralised social infrastructure. This could include:

- Grants for cities and regions to collaborate and run their own Mastodon, PeerTube, Mobilizon and Pixelfed instances - eventually buying from market actors or self-hosting within an ordinary budget.
- Legal and technical support against SLAPP suits and DDoS attacks aimed at independent servers.
- Development of official, easy-to-deploy "Fediverse-in-a-box" packages tailored for schools, small associations and local media.
- A European "public option" instance (or a network of instances) run under public-service principles open to all EU residents as a safe default home if they do not want to choose a smaller community.

None of these measures require banning existing commercial platforms or forcing anyone to leave them. They simply level the playing field so that democratic societies are no longer forced to hold their conversations inside systems whose primary purpose is to sell attention and personal data and under the control of a single actor, susceptible to failure, bankruptcy or change or direction.

The technology does not have to be addictive, centralised and opaque to be successful – it only became that way because regulation was absent at the critical moment when the infrastructure was built. Europe now has the legal tools, technical knowledge and the democratic legitimacy to reverse that mistake.

If your elected politicians spend the next five years fighting over how to scan private messages inside European, American, Chinese or other platforms, Europe will have lost another decade. If instead your politicians use that time to make open, federated, non-addictive infrastructure the easiest, best and most trusted choice, we can bring the democratic conversation back under democratic control – without surveillance, without censorship panics, and without outsourcing our public sphere to whoever pays most for your attention.

The suppliers, tools and infrastructure already exist in Europe. Mastodon, Pixelfed, PeerTube and the rest of the Fediverse are not toys for enthusiasts – they are working proof that another model is possible. All that is missing is your politicians' decisions to stop managing the symptoms inside closed platforms and start building the future: an open Internet that serves democracy instead of exploiting it.

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"GOD, LUCK, VIKTOR ORBÁN"*
AND THE FREE MARKET:
THE RISE OF THE VISEGRÁD OLIGARCHS

Erika Vodvárková

Amidst some of the greatest security threats ever faced by the European Union, democracy festers on its eastern flank. Once prospective poster children of a successful post-communist transition, much of the Visegrád Four (V4) is now regressing towards the one-party dominance, politically controlled media, civic illiberalism and Russian meddling they once derided as a relic of a regime past — this time, however, brought to them not through the rule of a party elite, but by the free market.

The V4, a regional alliance between the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia, originally intended to support the state's NATO and EU accession, has since grown into a diplomatic asset for its members, as well as one of the key mechanisms for EU enlargement policy. Their strategic and geographic importance has surged during the Ukraine war, influencing the future of enlargement, aid/weapons logistics, security decisions and the appearance of democratic unity against the Russian threat. Simultaneously, the group has become notorious as a flashpoint for democratic tensions within the EU.

Since 2010, Hungary's Viktor Orbán led the illiberal shift with a series of policies intended to curb independent media, human rights,

*Hungary's richest person Lőrinc Mészáros attributing his succes to three factors: "God, luck and Viktor Orbán".

and political opposition as well as the rule of law, through policies of executive aggrandisement.

Poland's reforms under the nationalist conservative Law and Justice (PiS) worked to undermine the independence of the judiciary as well as the human rights of women and minorities.

In Slovakia, the previously contested democracy was dealt another blow after the 2023 reelection of Robert Fico, who has since moved to undermine public broadcasters, anti-corruption institutions as well as EU law.

Once a regional democratic stronghold, in 2025 the Czech Republic fell under a far-right government led by the oligarch Andrej Babiš (a co-creator of the far-right populist EU group Patriots for Europe), who has since managed to dismantle hybrid threats department on the ministry of foreign affairs, and threatened to crack down on civil society organizations as well as Czech support for Ukraine.

For all the troubles made for EU security, stability, and democratic integrity, it remains strikingly underdiscussed, how much of this process is carried out at the behest of only a small cadre of private actors, whose unchecked power now threatens to spill over national borders more than ever.

Poland

Czechia

Slovkia

Hungary

25

Czechoslovakia's President Vaclav Havel (left), Hungary's Prime Minister József Antall (center), and Poland's President Lech Wałęsa (right) signing The Visegrád Decleration (Visegrád, 15 February 1991).

The politics in both countries of the former Czechoslovakia is highly shaped by the concentration of private control over key industries and media. Second only to Russia on the crony-capitalism rankings, the Czech Republic has recently reelected Andrej Babiš, an agricultural billionaire accused of multiple corruption scandals, as prime minister. However, his populist campaign eventually made space in the far-right government, for the interests of at least one more man — Pavel Tykač, a coal baron with doubts about the propriety of Russian sanctions, and even greater ones about climate science, whose generosity has secured the electoral victory of the far-right Motorists for Themselves party, in charge of the ministries for foreign affairs and for the environment. Pro-Russian sympathies are not unique to Tykač among his billionaire peers, who regularly leverage their media influence to shape public discourse in their image. Perhaps then, the new Czech government can, along with Babiš and Tykač, also serve the interests of Vladimir Putin. A similar story unravelled in Slovakia, only with

an additional antagonist of mafia networks which permeate its business and political structures — the investigation subject of the journalist Ján Kuciak and likely reason for his murder. In the country's early days of independence, various political backroom deals advanced organized crime groups' influence, enabling its later entrenchment in frameworks of fraud and corruption. State power is thus regularly wielded for the sake of not only private but also criminal interests.

In Hungary, the ruling elite does not attempt to hide its private sector associations. On the contrary, an endorsement for an oligarchic structure was made explicit in the National System Cooperation, introduced by Fidesz in 2010. In a process of nationalisation and re-privatization, Orbán has put his dedicated political loyalists in charge of key industries. Since this new economic elite owes their success solely to public procurement contracts and Orbán's goodwill, they can be relied on to act in service of the government's agenda and it's command. In addition to personal

enrichment at the cost of the majority population, they are also rewarded for their loyalty with favourable foreign policy, such as the US sanction relief negotiated on their behalf as well as lucrative deals with Russia, conditioned by warm political relations between Budapest and Moscow.

Within the V4, Poland stands out as the only country where democratic backsliding is driven more by forces such as religious conservatism than oligarchy, which barely existed in Poland until recently. Still, the Polish exception helps explain the rule for the rise of oligarchs elsewhere in the region. Even at its most successful scenarios, the shock doctrine implemented in post-communist countries caused an economic decline akin to the American Great Depression and monopolised the market, right in the vulnerable moment of a burgeoning new democracy. However, in contrast to the process in countries of the former Eastern Block, Poland's privatization was uniquely inclusive of the country's social sectors, thanks to the Solidarność movement whose influence has extended beyond leadership in the 1989 revolution, into transition negotiations and assured an influential position for workers and trade unions over private industry. This, coupled with state intervention, more gradual privatization process and a rapid introduction of economic competition, significantly slowed down the plague of oligarchisation and set Poland on a path towards a more resilient and equitable economic growth.

The "winner takes all" privatization imposed in Eastern Europe by Western financial institutions has obstructed the development of a democratic system and welcomed in an oligarchy class who is at best ambivalent to it, and at worst beholden to its destruction. Public interest was defeated by that of profit. As a result, to take over a country in Central Europe today, one does not need to employ brute Soviet-style power, bother with a stressful coup d'état or invest into an expensive propaganda machine. All one needs to do is place some calls, move a bit of money, reconnect with old friends, and maybe make a couple of new ones. Putin knows this. The question is, whether the European Union does.

Czechia's Prime Minister Andrej Babiš (left), Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (center), and Slovakia's Prime Minister Robert Fico (right).

Further Reading

For readers who wish to explore some of this issues themes further, we have gathered a selection of readings and media, all approved by your editor. Some engage directly with the role of private actors in international affairs, while others offer broader perspectives on power, politics, and the world we live in.

Books:

The Age of Surveillance Capitalism
Shoshana Zuboff

The Impossible Will Take a Little While
Paul Rogart Loeb

The Price of Peace: Money, Democracy, and the Life of John Maynard Keynes
Zachary D. Carter

The Wretched of the Earth
Frantz Fanon

Movies/Documentaries:

Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964)
Stanley Kubrick

Paris Is Burning (1990)
Jennie Livingston

Please Vote for Me (2007)
Weijun Chen

WORD FROM OUR PRESIDENT

Dear members and readers,

The year 2025 has been marked by significant changes in global politics. With several ongoing wars and major shifts in global leadership and policy, we are living in uncertain times. We have seen examples from the United States where billionaires have been granted access to government agencies, leading to cuts and suspensions of U.S. aid to poorer countries. At the same time, tech giants have gained increasing power over algorithms and social media platforms, influencing public discourse and shaping narratives. These developments, combined with a growing lack of trust in institutions and public actors, highlight the international challenges of polarization.

With this in mind, I am very pleased that our Editors have chosen this theme and are addressing these complex issues in an educational and accessible way. Educating others and making difficult topics understandable for the general public, especially younger audiences, is at the core of what our Association stands for. I am proud to be part of a board that genuinely cares about spreading insightful and meaningful knowledge to our members.

I warmly encourage everyone to take part in our activities and get involved. Whether by attending an event, listening to a lecture, engaging with our podcast, or writing for *UTPOST*, your participation truly matters to us. Being active in UAIA is a great way to gain insight into, and actively engage with global issues. I hope to see many of you during the upcoming semester!

Kind Regards,

Mila Lamminsaari
PRESIDENT OF UAIA 25/26

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