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# The geopoliticisation of domestic issues in the Baltic Sea Region and Central and Eastern Europe

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## ABSTRACT

This special issue examines the geopoliticisation of domestic political issues in the Baltic Sea region and Central and Eastern Europe in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine. It conceptualises geopoliticisation as a process through which domestic conflicts, preferences, and political debates are reframed in terms of geopolitical alignments and rivalries, particularly along a value-based divide between the West/EU and Russia. Bringing together contributions that analyse party strategies, public opinion, elite-driven dynamics, and electoral behaviour, the issue explores how geopolitical orientations are constructed, mobilised, and contested within national contexts.

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## Introduction

The Russian attack on Ukraine has sharply increased tensions between the EU and Russia and triggered a series of developments that have reshaped Europe's geopolitical landscape. These include Finland and Sweden joining NATO, and Denmark ending its opt-out from the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The war has also altered how the EU understands its role in international relations. Previously described as a "possible geopolitical actor" (Youngs 2022) or a "liberal empire" (Pänke 2019), the EU has more recently been characterised in terms of a "geopolitical birth" or "geopolitical awakening" (Adriaansen, Vanhoo, and Sarkissian 2025; Andriane-Moylan, Raube, and Wolfs 2026; Anghel 2025; Blockmans 2022; Garton Ash 2023; Nitoiu and Sus 2019; Raik et al. 2024; Wood 2024). At the same time, these developments have underscored the continued strategic importance of the United States for European security. However, recent trends also point to a growing US focus on its own global priorities, leaving Europe to shoulder a greater share of its security responsibilities. This, in itself, represents a further geopolitical shift.

The notion of geopolitics has been frequently used – and perhaps abused – when describing or discussing different aspects of EU–Russia relations, especially in the post-Soviet space. It seems to include anything related to influence, conflict, and realpolitik

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(Cadier 2019, 77–78). According to a strict definition, geopolitics should have a distinct geographical (or territorial) component. The main idea is that geography shapes international politics and that geographical factors are relevant for international relations. The term geopolitics includes, among other things, great power relations, global institutions, interstate relations and border disputes. Also, territorially defined identities and migration issues are part of geopolitical analyses (Murphy et al. 2004; Sharp 2009; Storey 2009).

Since Russia's aggression against Ukraine beginning in 2014, it is nonetheless reasonable to speak of a broader trend of "geopoliticisation" in EU–Russia relations. The concept was introduced by Cadier (2019) in his analysis of the EU's Eastern Partnership (EaP), which was initially conceived as a largely non-geopolitical instrument, not driven by territorial competition. After 2014, however, the EaP increasingly came to be understood in geopolitical terms, reflecting a perceived contest between the EU and Russia over their shared neighbourhood (cf. Kazharskil and Makarychev 2015; Nitoiu 2016; Kasparov 2016; Youngs 2017, 6–7; Khodorkovsky 2022). For the EU, this has involved both "winning over" eastern partner countries and "rolling back" Russian influence in the region. In Cadier's formulation, geopoliticisation refers to the discursive construction of an issue or policy as a geopolitical matter (Cadier 2019, 73), drawing directly on the concept of securitisation (Waever 1995).

More broadly, scholars argue that over the past decade the EU itself has become increasingly geopoliticised, shifting from a predominantly norm-driven actor toward a more interest-based geopolitical stance (Adriaensen, Vanhoon, and Sarkissian 2025; Andrione-Moylan, Raube, and Wolfs 2026; Anghel 2025). This shift is reflected in analyses of, for example, the geopoliticisation of EU trade and investment policy (Meunier and Kalypso 2019) and the geopoliticisation of how European sovereignty is articulated in political discourse (Roch and Olear 2024).

While this trend marks an important discursive transformation, it remains unclear how such processes unfold across different political arenas and levels of analysis. In particular, there is limited research on how domestic political issues are reframed in geopolitical terms, which actors drive these processes, and what broader political consequences they produce. Luciani (2023), for instance, shows how LGBTQ+ rights in Georgia have increasingly been framed geopolitically: activists align with the EU and "European values", whereas far-right (and homophobic) groups adopt an anti-Western, anti-EU discourse. Luciani describes this dynamic precisely as "geopoliticisation", whereby the LGBTQ+ issue is embedded in a strategic discursive framework linking it either to the EU or to Russia's perceived sphere of influence.

This example points to a broader process in which domestic political conflicts are increasingly interpreted through the lens of geopolitical identity and competition. Yet despite growing scholarly interest, geopoliticisation remains underdeveloped as an analytical framework, particularly regarding how it connects different levels of analysis; from public opinion and party competition to elite strategies and policy-making.

The concept of "geopoliticisation" can thus be used to capture a wider tendency: the emergence of a value-based divide between the West/EU/Europe and the East/Russia, observable across multiple contexts and as opposing poles in various discursive struggles (cf. Cadier 2019; Luciani 2023). In this special issue, such a divide appears in different settings, including among general populations, political elites, and media discourses.

Although the cultural gap between “East” and “West” has been widely studied – particularly in relation to post-communist attitudes towards democracy and European integration (see, for example, Applebaum 2020; Berglund et al. 2013; Krastev and Holmes 2020; Norris 2025) – there is comparatively less research on public opinion and geopolitical orientations in Central and Eastern Europe. This includes attitudes towards the EU versus Russia, or more broadly towards a liberal-democratic Western civilisation versus an authoritarian, anti-liberal Russian model (cf. Rachman 2022). The dissolution of the Soviet Union initially brought these questions to the fore. In the post–Cold War period, cultural and religious identities were expected to become primary sources of global conflict (Huntington 1996), while globalisation further embedded geopolitical orientations within national identities (Dijink 1997; Dodds 2007). At the same time, such orientations are not merely expressions of identity; they are also deeply embedded in domestic political debates and conflicts.

However, it was Russia’s war against Ukraine, beginning with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and escalating into a full-scale invasion in 2022, that made questions of geo-cultural belonging and geopolitical orientation newly salient in European societies (cf. Ekman 2024). This raises broader questions about how such orientations are mobilised, contested, and translated into domestic political dynamics across different contexts.

### Aim and research questions

Against this background, the aim of this special issue is to provide a systematic and empirically grounded understanding of how domestic political issues in the Baltic Sea region and Central and Eastern Europe are increasingly “geopoliticised” in the context of Russia’s war against Ukraine and its broader repercussions.

While previous research has primarily examined geopolitics in terms of interstate relations and foreign policy, this special issue shifts the focus towards the domestic arena, exploring how geopolitical alignments, identities, and conflicts are constructed, interpreted, and contested within national political contexts.

The contributions examine geopoliticisation across multiple arenas, including party politics, public opinion, elite strategies and electoral behaviour, thereby capturing how geopolitical frames become embedded in domestic political processes. In doing so, the special issue brings together perspectives that are often treated separately in the literature, ranging from studies of political behaviour and public opinion to analyses of party competition and regime dynamics.

To guide this endeavour, the special issue addresses three interrelated research questions:

- (1) How are domestic political issues, preferences, and conflicts reframed and interpreted in geopolitical terms across different national contexts?
- (2) Which actors, including political elites, parties, and citizens, contribute to processes of geopoliticisation, and through which mechanisms do such processes unfold?
- (3) What are the political implications of geopoliticisation for democratic attitudes, political competition, and broader regime trajectories?

By addressing these questions, the special issue seeks to contribute to ongoing debates on geopolitics and domestic politics in Europe, highlighting how international

alignments increasingly shape political conflict, attitudes, and strategies within states. In this way, it addresses the gap between studies of geopolitical contestation and research on domestic political dynamics, particularly in regions where questions of geopolitical orientation have become increasingly salient in domestic politics.

## Geopolitical orientations and public opinion

In line with the argument advanced above, we understand “geopoliticisation” as a process through which domestic political issues, preferences, and conflicts are framed and interpreted in terms of geopolitical positions and rivalries. This implies that geopolitical orientations are not only matters of foreign policy, but also become embedded in domestic political debates, attitudes, and forms of political contestation.

Geopolitical orientations (sometimes geopolitical identities or cultures) may be analysed at different levels, using different methods and different data sources. For example, in his analysis of Hungary’s national self-image – the combination of the notion of a Western (Christian) bulwark against the non-Christian/Muslim world and Eurasianism (Turanism) – Balogh (2022) uses a wide range of data (statements of public officials, economic indicators, as well as opinion polls) to depict geographical narratives or the geopolitical culture of Hungary (cf. Bassin 2022). Sometimes the context decides what “geopolitical orientations” entail. Anisimova (2023) has analysed foreign policy orientations among Ukrainians (in 2002–2023), using attitudes towards NATO membership as the main dependent variable. In the context of a hostile neighbour, this in itself could function as a reasonable proxy for the geopolitical culture of Ukraine. Moreover, geopolitical narratives can of course be detected in media discourses (Kluver, Cooley, and Hinck 2018; Rönngren 2025).

This diversity of approaches highlights both the analytical breadth of the concept and the lack of a common framework for studying how geopolitical orientations relate to domestic political dynamics. In particular, research has often focused on specific arenas, such as public opinion or elite discourse.

When analysing geopolitical orientations among citizens by utilising public opinion surveys, different strategies have been suggested. O’Loughlin and Toal (2022) point out three challenges in this context. To begin with, it remains far from certain that asking people about their attitudes towards certain (and perhaps specific and topical) foreign policy issues would necessarily reflect the underlying geopolitical culture of a given country (cf. O’Loughlin, Toal, and Kolossov 2005). One should rather ask respondents about their perceptions about their own country’s friends and enemies in the world or what countries function as model for their own state. Geopolitical orientations could for example be measured by asking people to locate their country on a spectrum between two competing poles of power, like Russia and the West (O’Loughlin and Toal 2022, 46). The second challenge is related to the first; asking ordinary people about geopolitics (however you formulate the questions) is difficult, since it is often considered an elite activity, not really of their concern or interest. A third challenge is that people in general are not only uninterested in geopolitics; as a rule, they also tend to be poorly informed about geopolitical issues.

Despite such challenges, survey-based studies have provided important insights into how geopolitical orientations are distributed within societies, capturing a basic distinction

between pro-Western, pro-Russian, and intermediate positions. At the same time, such approaches tend to treat geopolitical orientations as relatively stable preferences, paying less attention to how they may be activated, reframed, or politicised in specific contexts.

Looking at what has been written on geopolitical orientations and public opinion, different measurements and analytical strategies have been used. For example, existing research has examined geopolitical orientations through survey questions capturing attitudes towards foreign policy alignment, perceptions of allies and adversaries, and broader evaluations of international actors and institutions (eg. Breuning and Ishiyama 2021; O’Loughlin, Toal, and Kolossov 2004, 2006, 2016).

Despite such different analytical strategies, the suggestion by O’Loughlin and Toal (2022) to ask respondents to locate their country on a spectrum between two competing poles of power seems to be a quite prominent strategy. Comparing post-communist public opinion on geopolitical orientations, Dostál and Markusse (2001) used *Eurobarometer* data and questions about the future of the own country; if it is tied to the EU or Russia. Analysing public geopolitical preferences in Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, Torres-Adan (2021) constructed a four-fold classification where the central distinction was the one between supporters of the Eurasian Economic Union (“Easternizers”) and supporters of the European Union (“Westernizers”), plus two intermediate positions (“Balancers” and “Isolationists”). Moreover, Onuch and Sasse (2022) analysed anti-regime protests in Belarus in a similar way, drawing on online surveys. Here, different geopolitical orientations were understood as foreign policy preferences: support for joining the EU, support for joining the Russian Federation, and agreement to the statement that the biggest threat to Belarus is Russia (cf. Leukavets 2023). Finally, drawing on a representative opinion poll from late 2019 and early 2020, O’Loughlin and Toal (2022) measured geopolitical orientations among Belarusians by focusing on attitudes towards future foreign policy alternatives: preference for a neutral position between Russia and the West; support for joining the European Union; preference for staying in the Eurasian Economic Union; support for staying close to both the EU and the EAEU; and locating Belarus on a scale from 0 (the West) to 10 (Russia).

In sum, these studies illustrate both the diversity of measurement strategies and the tendency to conceptualise geopolitical orientations primarily as individual-level preferences. At the same time, they provide more limited insight into how such orientations are activated, framed, and contested within broader domestic political processes.

## Geopolitical differences in Europe

Recently, Russia’s war on Ukraine has created a need for analyses of geopolitical orientations not only in countries bordering on (or located close to) Russia, but also within the EU. The *Eurobarometer* started to include questions about the war in Ukraine in the spring of 2022, and other public opinion surveys on geopolitical orientations have occasionally been conducted in individual countries (cf. Ekman, Duvold, and Berglund 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d; GLOBSEC Trends 2022, 2023, 2025).

Right after the full-scale attack on Ukraine, public opinion polls in the West confirmed the negative view of Russia manifested in official policies of denunciation and economic sanctions. Among US citizens, only 9 per cent had a favourable opinion of Russia after

2022, which was the lowest score measured by Gallup since 1989 (Jones 2023). Among NATO allied countries, the corresponding figure was 14 per cent. In Europe, opinions towards Russia and the war in Ukraine was more divided, as highlighted in a report by the European Council on Foreign Relations (Krastev and Leonard 2023). According to the ECFR report, two-thirds of Europeans in 10 countries considered Russia as an “adversary” or a rival to their own country (polls from January 2023). This was most notable in Denmark (82 per cent), Estonia and Poland (79 per cent) and Great Britain (77 per cent). The lowest “adversary” stance was found in Romania (44 per cent), whereas in Italy, Portugal, France, Spain, and Germany, the figures hovered around 54–69 per cent (Camut and Sheftalovich 2023; Krastev and Leonard 2023).

Previous polls by the ECFR (in 2022) documented a similar joint condemnation of the war and Russia, but greater variation in perceptions of how the war would end. Citizens in some countries thought, at the time, that it would be best to end the war as soon as possible (“peace at any cost”); others felt that the war could not end unless a clear defeat of Russia was achieved (a “justice” orientation). In 2022, the peace camp was larger than the justice camp, particularly in Italy, Germany, Romania and France. Poland was the most obvious supporter of the opposite opinion, and wanted to see Russia punished for its aggression, even if that meant a drawn-out war. The 2023 ECFR report demonstrated a general tendency to close ranks to support the idea that Russia must be pushed back, and Ukraine regain all its territory. In 2023, this was manifested among most respondents in Estonia, Poland, Denmark, and Great Britain. In Germany and France, the number of citizens belonging to the “peace camp” dropped significantly. Only in Italy and Romania you could find a majority in favour of the “peace at any costs” option.

What Krastev and Leonard (2023) could demonstrate, was thus that a standard and taken-for-granted attitudinal East–West difference was not really present in post-2022 Europe. Rather, three different blocks appeared to have emerged. Firstly, there was a north-eastern group of countries (Estonia, Poland, Denmark and Great Britain) where most people strongly support Kyiv’s objectives in the war. Secondly, there was an ambiguous group of West European countries (France, Germany, Spain and Portugal), with divided opinions on how the war should end. Thirdly, there were Italy and Romania, in Southern and South-Eastern Europe, with a preference for the war to end as soon as possible.

More recently, opinion polls have revealed a north–south divide in Central and Eastern Europe (GLOBSEC Trends 2025). The Baltic states and Poland stood out the strongest supporters of Ukraine, including public support for EU military and weapons assistance. Across the region, most people supported Ukraine’s right to self-defence, but enthusiasm for supplying arms was concentrated in the above-mentioned countries. Elsewhere, farmer protests and political rhetoric had weakened public support. Empathy-based narratives resonated the most, and there was broad acceptance of Ukraine’s right to defend itself, including retaliatory actions. However, many respondents hesitated to express clear views, suggesting some form of information gap. Importantly, these patterns point to considerable cross-national variation, suggesting that geopolitical orientations are shaped by a combination of historical legacies and contemporary domestic dynamics.

The more hesitant group of countries, including Romania, Slovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria, was more open to Ukrainian territorial concessions in exchange for peace. These countries also tended to perceive Russia as less of a threat. In particular, Bulgarian

respondents were comparatively less likely than others in this group to view Russia as a security risk (GLOBSEC Trends 2022, 2025; Muzikárová 2023; cf. European Parliament 2023).

These regional differences point to the importance of country-specific factors. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe all have longer historical relations to Russia, in different varieties. Some have distinctly negative experiences, and perceive Russia as an oppressor, like the Baltic states (based on post-World War II experiences). To others, more distant historical ties rather entail Russia as the liberator from Ottoman rule, making for example Bulgarians more pro-Russian than other East Europeans. Serbia too shares a historical background of widespread pro-Russian sentiments, which was partly reinforced by the Kosovo conflict and the NATO intervention in 1999. Hungary admittedly has weaker historical and cultural ties with Russia; but the strong political and economic relationship between Orbán's government and the Kremlin (even after 2022) makes the country stand out as a deviant case in the current Central European context (cf. Krastev and Leonard 2024).

Overall, these findings underline that geopolitical orientations are shaped and sometimes transformed within domestic political contexts. This observation connects directly to the focus of this special issue, which examines how such orientations become embedded in domestic political conflicts and processes across different arenas.

## Contributions of the special issue

When making the current special issue, we tried to bring together scholars with different regional expertise, to provide novel reflections on geopolitical orientations in the Baltic Sea region and Eastern Europe, as well as on the "geopoliticisation" of various domestic issues of the countries in the region, following the war. The different contributions thus demonstrate how domestic political issues are interpreted and contested in relation to broader geopolitical positions and rivalries in the Baltic Sea region and Eastern Europe.

While the contributions focus on different empirical domains, they can be read as addressing three interrelated dimensions of geopoliticisation: party strategies, public attitudes, and elite-driven political dynamics, as well as their implications for electoral behaviour.

## Geopoliticisation and party strategies

Peteris F. Timofejevs' contribution highlights how the Sweden Democrats (SD), a typical example of a European Radical Right Party (RRP) have dealt with the new conditions for foreign policy. In the EU, RRP are often described as being Eurosceptic and sovereigntist, opposing globalisation and European integration (since both are perceived as detrimental to national sovereignty). Also, existing literature suggests that security and defence policies of RRP in general tend to be anti-American and anti-NATO; but this is perhaps no longer the case? Timofejevs demonstrates how the traditional position of SD, supporting Sweden's neutrality and non-alignment policy, transformed into outright support for NATO membership (and for helping Ukraine) in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the spring of 2022. This was based on strategic calculations in anticipation of the 2022 Swedish parliamentary elections. In short, backing the West (Europe and NATO)

seemed like the more convincing and sensible choice, than being perceived by voters as siding with Russia (Timofejevs 2026).

By examining how Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine triggered a major realignment in the security and defence policies of two previously non-NATO-aligned Nordic countries, Finland and Sweden, the article thus deepens our understanding of shifting strategic orientations in the region. Although research on the security and defence policies of radical right parties has expanded in recent years, relatively little attention has so far been devoted to explaining why some RRP alter their policy positions and geopolitical alignments. In this sense, the article illustrates how geopolitical positions may be reshaped through domestic party competition and strategic adaptation.

### ***Geopoliticisation and public attitudes***

Drawing on public opinion surveys conducted in seven semi-presidential democracies (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Slovakia), Maarika Kujanen and Thomas Sedelius discuss public support for liberal democracy in contrast to preferences for authoritarian alternatives, as another example of a "geopoliticised" issue. Here, public attitudes toward regime types become framed not merely as domestic political preferences, but as components of a broader geopolitical struggle between East and West, thereby transforming them into a "geopoliticised" issue.

In semi-presidential countries, executive power is divided between a directly elected president and a government responsible to parliament. More often than not, the president possesses weaker constitutional powers than the prime minister, but is generally more popular than other national political institutions (cf. Kujanen 2024). In their contribution, Kujanen and Sedelius address this issue by examining public opinion on presidential powers and the factors explaining such attitudes under semi-presidentialism. Their findings reveal that while public support for a strong president with broad executive powers is associated with general support for the office, it is also associated with non-democratic attitudes, particularly support for "strongman rule" and support for authoritarian government over democracy (Kujanen and Sedelius 2025). This highlights the potential for illiberal shifts toward strongman rule in semi-presidential democracies where the president holds capacity for significant power.

This raises a key question: how stable are citizens' commitments to liberal-democratic norms when political power and partisan incentives shift? In the contribution by Ben Stanley, this question is addressed from a different angle. The emergence of cases of "democratic illiberalism" in several contemporary democracies has stimulated interest in the stability and sincerity of the liberal-democratic attitudes professed by voters in both the affected countries and beyond. Yet little is known about the dynamics of support for liberal democracy when liberal-democratic and illiberal forces alternate in power, for the simple reason that we have observed few cases of this happening. Stanley thus tries to ascertain whether revealed preferences for liberal democracy remain consistently held across such a change of power. More specifically, he addresses "democratic hypocrisy": the tendency for citizens to express support for democratic norms in the abstract while tolerating violations of those norms when doing so serves their partisan interests; which has been identified as a potential threat to liberal democracy in conditions of affective polarisation. Yet existing research has relied on declared

preferences, leaving open the question of whether such hypocrisy manifests itself in the kinds of multidimensional choices that characterise real political decision-making.

Using a conjoint experiment embedded in a three-wave panel survey spanning Poland's transition from illiberal PiS incumbency to a pro-democratic KO-led coalition government, Stanley examines whether citizens' revealed preferences for liberal democracy change when power changes hands. Results show that Polish citizens consistently punish candidates who espouse illiberal views, and that this tendency is not significantly altered by the change of government, even among citizens who are highly affectively polarised. Contrary to expectations, citizens polarised in favour of the former incumbent party did not become more protective of liberal-democratic norms after losing power. These findings suggest that revealed preferences for liberal democracy are more stable than theories of democratic hypocrisy would predict, but also that democratic restoration cannot rely on a natural correction in public attitudes following a change of government (Stanley 2026). While this contribution shifts the focus from geopolitical framing to the micro-level consistency of democratic attitudes, it nonetheless raises a complementary issue: how political elites may strategically engage and shape such attitudes in contested political environments.

### **Geopoliticisation and elite-driven dynamics**

This topic is further explored in Per Ekman's contribution, focusing on Georgia under the Georgian Dream (GD) government. In flawed democracies or hybrid regimes, geopolitical struggles can be used by political elites to remain in power. Ekman highlights two such strategies, *declarative Europeanisation* and *affective geopolitics*, thereby contributing to the growing literature on autocratisation processes as well as to contemporary debates about the functioning of hybrid regimes, where a geopolitical perspective seldom tends to be included in the analysis.

Ekman argues that the resurgence of geopolitics in world affairs can reinforce autocratisation. In hybrid regimes such as Georgia, political elites operate as gatekeepers who craft storylines linking international developments to domestic politics in ways that serve their hold on power. Declarative Europeanisation is used to claim legitimacy and obscure gradual democratic backsliding, while affective geopolitics mobilises emotions to consolidate support among key constituencies. Geopolitical narratives also function to delegitimise opposition actors as "foreign" or "anti-national", and to justify repressive legislation. In Georgia, GD relied primarily on declarative Europeanisation during its first decade in office, but after 2022 increasingly combined rhetorical commitment to EU membership with affective geopolitics and repression; highlighting the constant balancing act between legitimacy and coercion in autocratisation processes (Ekman 2026). The article effectively demonstrates how geopolitical narratives may be strategically employed to shape domestic political competition and justify both legitimation and repression.

An even more clear example of a geopolitical tug-of-war is found in the Belarusian case, where struggle over whether the country should align with the East (Russia) or the West (Europe) overlaps with the divide between support for the incumbent authorities and backing for the political opposition. In her contribution, Victoria Leukavets analyses the evolution of geopolitical orientations among Belarusian elites in the aftermath of

the 2020 presidential elections and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. She argues that these events constituted critical junctures that transformed longstanding debates over Belarus's foreign policy direction into a sharply polarising political divide. Although competing visions of alignment with Russia or Europe have existed since the independence of Belarus, they did not crystallise into a defining line of political differentiation until the consolidation of a broad opposition movement in 2020 and the regime's intensified dependence on Moscow after 2022. Drawing on a historical institutionalist framework and a systematic analysis of elite discourse, the article demonstrates how alignment with Russia became synonymous with regime loyalty, while the democratic forces consolidated around an explicit pro-European trajectory, formalised in 2023 (Leukavets 2026). In this case, geopolitical orientations become directly linked to regime support and opposition, illustrating how such positions may structure political conflict at the elite level.

### *Geopoliticisation and electoral behaviour*

Finally, in their contribution, Sergiu Gherghina and Paul Tap examine the 2024 EU membership referendum in the Republic of Moldova, a country situated at a highly sensitive geopolitical crossroads. In recent years, Moldova has gained increasing prominence in international politics amid escalating tensions between Russia and Western institutions. The country has firmly embraced a pro-European path, prioritising democratic reforms, anti-corruption efforts, and closer cooperation with the European Union; particularly after being granted EU candidate status in 2022. At the same time, Moldova continues to navigate a complex and often strained relationship with Russia, marked by energy dependence and ongoing political influence. A central security challenge remains the separatist region of Transnistria, where Russian troops are still stationed. Although the conflict is currently frozen, it continues to affect regional stability and Moldova's strategic calculations. Overall, Moldova has come to symbolise a frontline state in the broader contest between European democratic integration and Russia's geopolitical influence.

The 2024 referendum in Moldova thus took place in a climate of geopolitical instability, security concerns and potential external interference. There were strong allegations regarding the involvement of Russian money in the 2024 referendum campaign, and the pro-Russian politicians and political parties in Moldova engaged in systematic disinformation on social media and on their websites against the EU and the pro-European government in Moldova, in the build-up to the referendum. Still, the pro-EU side won. Using survey data, Gherghina and Tap identify the reasons behind the pro-EU vote in the referendum, demonstrating how positive evaluations of the country's democratic performance at the individual level spilled over into greater support for EU accession. This was strengthened by political interest, the respondents' information acquired through traditional media and better education. At the same time, the pro-EU vote was not a function of economic deprivation or a cry for help in relation to stopping corruption in the country (Gherghina and Tap 2025). The article highlights how individual-level attitudes may translate into geopolitical preferences in concrete political decisions.

Taken together, the contributions to this special issue demonstrate that geopoliticisation is not merely a shift in foreign policy discourse, but a broader transformation of domestic political life across the Baltic Sea region and Central and Eastern Europe. By tracing

how geopolitical frames permeate party strategies, public attitudes, elite behaviour, and electoral choices, the articles show that questions of international alignment increasingly structure internal political conflict and competition. This underscores the need to move beyond conventional distinctions between “domestic” and “international” politics and instead analyse how they are co-constituted in contexts marked by heightened geopolitical tension. In doing so, the special issue not only advances the conceptualisation of geopoliticisation as an analytical framework, but also provides new empirical insights into how geopolitical divisions are produced, contested, and institutionalised within European societies in the shadow of Russia’s war against Ukraine.

\*

**In Memoriam – Professor Sten Berglund.** It is with deep sadness that we announce that Professor Dr Sten Berglund has passed away. He died peacefully at his home in Örebro, Sweden on 25th of August 2024. He was 77 years old. Professor Berglund was a member of the European Consortium for Political Research Executive between 1991–1994, co-editor of *Scandinavian Political Studies* 1993–1996, and Chairman of the Nordic Political Science Association 2002–2005. He published extensively on democracy and the political development in the Baltic states and Central and Eastern Europe. Among his best-known works are *The Handbook of Political Change in Eastern Europe* (3rd edition, 2013), *The Scandinavian Party System(s)* (with Ulf Lindström, 1978), and *The New Democracies in Eastern Europe* (with Jan Åke Dellenbrant, 2nd edition, 1994). More recently, he published *Political Culture in the Baltic States* (with Duvold, Berglund, and Ekman 2020).

Sten left us in the midst of a busy working life; and he was supposed to have been one of the guest editors of this special issue. He will be sadly missed.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

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