Editors' Note

Changing divisions in Europe and the Asia-Pacific: A new Cold War?

This special issue was proposed by the Australasian Association for Euro-Asian Studies (formerly the Australasian Association for Communist and Post-Communist Studies) as an output of its 2025 biannual conference for two main reasons. First, tensions across the broader Eastern European region have not been as high since the collapse of the Eastern Bloc in the late 1980s and early 1990s, making the theme of the issue particularly topical. Second, members of the Association have a strong track record of analysing post-communist dynamics and divisions in the region. This issue represents the third compilation on this theme. The first was a special issue in this journal, edited by Leslie Holmes and Milenko Petrovic (2010) published some fifteen years ago. That issue comprised papers discussing the legacies of the Cold-War and the emergence of some new (mainly socio-cultural and economic) divisions between Europe's West and East. At the time, the included papers viewed those divisions through a largely optimistic lens, anticipating that they would be overcome in the years to come. Ten years later Alexandr Akimov and Gennadi Kazakevich (2020) co-edited a volume on the 30-year anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall that was written in less optimistic tones. It provided a rather comprehensive account of growing political, cultural and socio-economic divisions between the Western European and EU Member States (including new EU members from the former communist bloc) on the one side and post-communist, non-EU European and Central Asian states on the other, with not much optimism for reconciling these divisions in any foreseeable future. Today, 35 years after the collapse of communist rule in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the end of the forty-year Cold War, political and socio-economic divisions in Europe and the world seem to be deeper than ever before. While some post-communist states, particularly those which were able to closely link their political and economic reform with the process of EU enlargement, have indeed transformed themselves into respectable liberal democracies with functioning market economies, others have merely replaced the communist dictatorship with other forms of authoritarianism. Although they no longer stem from differences over communist ideology, political divisions between the European West and East have not diminished but have only moved further to the east and even strengthened in recent years.

The Russia-Ukraine war has not only deepened these divisions but has also increased the political confrontation between Russia and Western European states, the United States, and NATO to an unprecedented level, closer to direct military confrontation and nuclear war than ever before. Further to the east, communist China's political relations with Western democracies has also significantly worsened in recent years, despite extensive trade relations and economic cooperation. Moreover, the West's confrontation with Russia over Ukraine and criticism of Chinese assertive foreign policy (particularly in South Asia and the Indo-Pacific) have strengthened cooperation between Russia and China. These two authoritarian super-powers have also been

expanding their alliance with countries from the Global South, especially through diplomatic engagement within the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation grouping. While mainly composed of countries ruled by authoritarian or even dictatorial regimes, these two groupings also include countries with a long-standing and respected democratic tradition, such as India, Brazil and South Africa. After taking office in January 2025, US president Trump has extensively tried to weaken this anti-Western alliance by convincing the fighting parties to stop the war in Ukraine (that would lead to reestablishing closer relations and particularly economic cooperation between the West and Russia) and avoid further political confrontation with China. However, these attempts have so far been unsuccessful, largely due to Trump's aggressive tariff policy, which has further strengthened China's support to Russian President Putin's ambitious war plans. The Shanghai Cooperation meeting of 1–2 September 2025 (when the leaders of the three most powerful non-Western states – China, Russia and India – were photographed happily holding hands – see e.g. BBC News, 2025) may serve to signal the emergence of a deeper and more durable "West-non West" division of the world.

In Europe itself, the homogeneity of the European Union, which seemed significantly strengthened after the completion of its 2004/07 mega enlargement and the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009, has been shaken by the multiple internal and external crises it faced over the past decade. Beginning with the global financial and Eurozone crises in the late 2000s/early 2010s, the migrant influx in 2015–16, Brexit between 2016 and 2020 and the Covid pandemic in 2020–22, these crises have deepened cleavages among EU Member States. Economically prosperous and advanced Northern and North-Western members have clashed with economically less prosperous, indebted and politically less stable Southern members of the Union. Likewise, democratically stable and socio-culturally progressive EU Member States have clashed with their democratically less stable and socio-culturally conservative counterparts. In the latter regard, discord between the Western members of the European Union and new-comers from the former communist East have increased exponentially since the early 2010s. While during the first half of the past decade Hungary and Poland – two countries that were early front runners in post-communist democratisation – were seen as black sheep in the Union due to their conservative social policies and increasing opposition to some basic values and norms of Western European (and the EU's) liberal democracies (see e.g. Kaczyński, 2019; Moder, 2019; Pap, 2017), in the late 2010s and early 2020s they were joined by most other CEE EU Member States in opposing the establishment of a common EU migration policy and further centralisation of some other EU common policies (Glied & Zamecki 2021; Soler& Cosic, 2025).

The homogeneity of the Union that was regained by unanimous and strong condemnation of the Russian military aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, has since been weakened by the unwillingness of some Member States – such as Hungary and Slovakia – to adopt certain suggested common policy responses. These states have frequently objected to adopting not only certain sanction packages against Russia, but also some forms of assistance which the vast majority of EU member states agreed to provide to Ukraine. This assistance has also included a dramatic change in the EU's approach to enlargement, when the Commission recommended and the European Council decided to accept Ukraine' and Moldova's applications for membership only three months after the Russian invasion, and despite the fact that these two countries were very late in post-communist reforms and effectively unable

to meet the EU accession conditions. This lowering of accession requirements was not only reluctantly agreed to by Hungary, but it also came as a disbelief to several candidates for EU membership from the Western Balkans, which had waited for decades to gain candidate status and/or open accession negotiations, and which have by now almost lost any hope of being accepted as Union members (see the contributions of Petrovic and Blanchet in this Special Issue).

This special issue of ANZJES features five papers which investigate some of the above-mentioned problems, divisions and confrontations that shake current political and social stability and security in Euro-Asia and the world. The issue begins with Ray Taras' paper titled "Steering away from or Exaggerating the Play of Multipolarity: Toward Global Order, or Disorder?", which discusses the waning dominance of the United States and the West generally on the international political stage and the emergence of a 'multipolar world'. It highlights increasing opposition to the 'so-called rules-based international order' (p. 12) defined and established by the USA and its Western allies among the countries of the Global South, and the countries aligned with Russia and China. The author pays particular attention to the growing independent roles of China and Russia in global affairs and these two's efforts to form broader non-US/Western alliances through the formation of the BRICS and China's Road and Belt initiative.

The second paper in this issue, written by Milenko Petrovic and titled "Is EU Enlargement Still the Main Policy Instrument for the Unification of Europe?", engages with the ongoing debate surrounding the European Union's expansion—or lack thereof. The paper provides a chronology of the EU's enlargement into Central and Eastern Europe and explains how, in the early rounds, the expansion was used to reward countries for progress in democratic reform, institution-building, and the rule of law. Petrovic argues that the enlargement process has been effectively frozen since Croatia's accession to the Union in 2013, as the EU has shifted its merit-based approach to enlargement to one increasingly shaped by the Union's foreign policy objectives and security-related concerns. The recent and rapid inclusion of Ukraine and three other new candidates in the enlargement process after the Russian invasion in 2022, was primarily done to address the security and geo-political interests of EU member states, rather than to genuinely prepare these candidates for ultimate EU membership.

The third paper is the paper by James Blanchett, titled "EU Partners or EU Members: EU Enlargement in Moldova, Ukraine and the Western Balkans," examines the European Union's decision to grant candidate status to four Eastern and Southeastern European countries shortly after the start of Russia's war in Ukraine. The paper focuses in particular on Ukraine and Moldova, comparing their progress towards democracy with that of the Western Balkan states, which received candidate status much earlier. Using democracy scores from Freedom House's "Nations in Transit" report, Blanchet finds that Ukraine's and Moldova's progress towards democracy has been more modest than that of the Western Balkans at the time of their candidacy announcements. The paper acknowledges the limitations of rationalist arguments in explaining changes in EU enlargement policy and suggests that a combination of rationalist and constructivist perspectives is necessary to fully account for the reasoning behind enlargement decisions. In particular, the transition of post-communist states to a liberal democratic order is viewed as a priority, and the EU's failure to facilitate such a

transition may be interpreted as a broader failure to effectively engage with prospective member states.

The paper by Nina Markovic, titled "Cultural Mobilisation in Serbia's Anti-Lithium Movement: Examining Protest Music, Environmental Democracy and Public Sentiments" skilfully analyses the role of popular music in the development of the Serbian protest movement, which began with anti-lithium mining demonstrations and evolved into broader anti-Vučić government protests. The paper draws on a qualitative discourse analysis of news reports, non-governmental organisation (NGO) statements, and activist interviews, focusing on two popular songs — "Fire in Darkness" (*Vatra u mraku*) and "March Out of My Yard" (*Marš iz moje avlije*) — that served as unifying forces sustaining the protests.

The final paper in this special issue – "Russian Migration in Finland Amid New Geopolitical Fault Lines", written by Larisa Kangaspuro – examines the implications of Russia's war in Ukraine for the lived experiences, identities, and integration trajectories of Russian migrants in Finland. The study employs three qualitative methods: interviews with migrants, media discourse analysis, and policy reviews. It finds that geopolitical tensions and the closure of the Finnish border with Russia have produced not only material restrictions but also profound emotional, symbolic, and political consequences. These include the framing of Russian speakers as potential risks to national cohesion; the marginalisation of critical voices on migration and border policies among legal scholars, researchers, and migrant communities; and the physical disruption of migrants' remaining ties with relatives and friends in Russia.

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