

*Vitalii Lebediuk**

Political Dynamics in Ukraine After Russia's Full-Scale Invasion

Abstract

This study examines the intricate shifts in political competition during the period of martial law in Ukraine, with a focus on alterations in dynamics and their potential implications for the post-war political landscape. Employing data from reputable institutions, parliamentary voting records, and analyses of current events, this study aims to provide insights into the extent of changes in political competition and its influence on the upcoming party system configuration. The analysis reveals noteworthy patterns, such as the shift in legislative focus towards foreign policy and defence post-full-scale invasion, and the increased parliamentary support for the Ukrainian president's initiatives, largely due to personal influence rather than party affiliations. The study also examines the evolving voting dynamics in parliament, characterised by two distinct periods, shedding light on the challenges of securing crucial votes for significant bills. In light of these findings, this study emphasises the importance of a well-thought-out action plan to restore the electoral process in post-war Ukraine, taking into account the challenges posed by the current electoral system and regional variations in voter turnout. The study concludes by highlighting the need for intensive support for Ukraine's military efforts as the primary means of ensuring a quick return to the democratic electoral process.

Keywords: Political Parties, Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, President of Ukraine, Electoral Process, International Cooperation, Russian Invasion of Ukraine

* **Vitalii Lebediuk** – The National University of Ostroh Academy, e-mail: vitalii.lebediuk@oa.edu.ua, ORCID ID: 0000-0001-6308-6778.

Introduction

Any political party's primary objective is to attain and wield political power, even during moments of conflict such as war. The onset of the comprehensive Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022, resulted in a significant shift in the activities of Ukrainian political parties. Until Ukrainian troops liberated the whole of the Kyiv region between March 30th and April 2nd, 2022, political parties represented in Parliament barely engaged in any form of interparty competition. This was due to the uncertainty of the situation around the capital of Ukraine and the results of negotiations between the Ukrainian delegation and the Russian delegation, which first took place on the border with Belarus near the Prypiat River (February, March 28th, 3rd, and 7th, 2022) and then in Turkey (March 10th, 14–15th, 21st, 29–30th, 2022). Low-intensity political tension resumed due to a conflict over the all-Ukrainian “United News” information telethon.

The aim of this study is to analyse the changes in political competition during martial law in Ukraine. To attain this objective, the following research questions must be addressed: (1) To what degree has political competition been altered under martial law? (2) How will this affect the configuration of the party system in the upcoming elections? The author aimed to answer their research questions by examining the potential factors that influence the dynamics of political competition. These factors can possibly shape future political configurations in post-war Ukraine. The study will be based on the results of opinion polls conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, Internews, and the International Republican Institute, along with voting by members of parliament and an analysis of current events. Based on the data analysis, the author provided answers to their research question.

Resumption of Political Struggle

Following the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the exclusion of several opposition TV channels from digital broadcasting triggered a Pandora's box for the resumption of political conflict between the government and the opposition. The telethon format known as United News is an exceptional instance of a cooperative effort by state, public, and private Ukrainian media to combat Russian propaganda. The concept of the telethon was initiated by journalists of prominent TV channels (1+1, ICTV/STB, Inter, and Ukraine 24), who collaborated with the state-owned Rada TV channel and the National Public Broadcasting

Company of Ukraine. This media project meets and continues to fulfil the authorities' requirements for a unified source of information on military operations and conveys consistent messages to society. Nevertheless, the United News project's creation in formal circumstances enabled the Office of the President of Ukraine to restructure the Ukrainian media market in its favour (Korba, 2022). Thus, the primary television channels that were integrated into the United News format subsequently lost their political influence, which was intentionally maintained by oligarchs. For instance, oligarch Rinat Akhmetov declared in July 2022 that he was surrendering his media holdings to the state and transferring all terrestrial, satellite, and print media licenses in Ukraine to the state (Perun, 2022). Simultaneously, the legislation concerning oligarchs enacted on 23rd September 2021 (Law of Ukraine, 2021) necessitated the conveyance of Petro Poroshenko's shares in Pryamyi and Channel 5 TV channels to the Free Media holding, which is supervised by Mykola Kniazhytskyi, a representative of the European Solidarity faction. Nevertheless, there remains an unanswered question regarding the possible involvement of the three TV channels, namely Channel 5, Pryamyi, and Espresso, in a singular news marathon. Three entities were involved in this dispute; the Office of the President of Ukraine, the management of the United News telethon, and the Free Media held their respective interests. The Office of the President of Ukraine did not agree to allow media outlets in close proximity to Petro Poroshenko to participate in the telethon to preclude the discussion of sensitive issues. The television channels that had already taken part in the United News programme were uninterested in inviting their peers with low viewer numbers to join the project to prevent any new competitors arising for themselves.

Initially, TV channels affiliated with Petro Poroshenko showed little interest in collaborating, as they believed that the public would eventually seek alternative programming, thereby boosting their ratings (Kravets, 2022). However, following the decision of the National Security and Defence Council of Ukraine "On the Implementation of a Unified Information Policy under Martial Law" (Decree of the President of Ukraine, 2022) (18th March 2022), it became apparent that only two options remained: joining the telethon or establishing an alternative project. On April 4th, 2022, the broadcasting of the Channel 5, Pryamyi, and Espresso channels on the T2 digital network was switched off by representatives of the Concern for Radio Broadcasting, Radio Communications, and Television.

During the initial year of the war, a considerable percentage of respondents not only viewed the telethon, but also trusted the news

presented in this format, according to various surveys. In November 2022, Internews, an international organisation, conducted a study that revealed that 32% of respondents had watched the telethon (InMind, 2022). Although trust in national television is declining (in 2015, 61% of the people trusted it, and in 2022, only 48% did so), television remains one of the primary sources of information. A study by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology in January 2023 found that over 60% of respondents learned about daily news from the United News Telethon, and 84% of them trusted this news format (The National Democratic Institute, 2023). During the second year of the war, however, there were significant changes in the level of trust in Telethon. Despite the fact that there is a positive balance between trust and distrust in the Telethon, the proportion of those who trust it has fallen significantly to 48% (October 2023) (Hrushetskyi, 2023). The results of the public opinion poll indicate that, on the one hand, military operations have significantly affected the respondents' need to stay in the information flow for security reasons, and, on the other hand, the telethon has become not only a legitimate means of government communication with society during martial law but also an opportunity to reformat the established media space in Ukraine. At the same time, this format of communication with society about domestic and foreign policy events is losing its potential. Instead, the share of consumers of daily news through Telegram channels has increased significantly (60% of respondents received news from Telegram channels in 2022, while in 2023 the share of consumers of this news format increased to 72%) (InMind, 2023). This, in turn, creates potential risks for both the authorities due to the loss of audience and for the consumers of information themselves through numerous Telegram propaganda channels (Security Service of Ukraine, 2022).

Interaction Between Parliament and the President

Following the imposition of martial law in Ukraine, the interaction between parliament and president changed significantly. Before the full-scale invasion, the head of state introduced bills in various areas (from health care to tax policy), after which legislative initiatives became more focused on areas within the president's competence (national security, defense, and foreign policy). According to the constitution, the president can propose the appointment of the ministers of defense and foreign affairs, the head of the security service, and the attorney general, as well as make decisions on martial law and mobilisation. For example, after the full-scale invasion, 58.2% of the president's legislative initiatives were

related to foreign policy, security, and defense, whereas before the war, the share of such initiatives had been 40%. In terms of support for the president's legislative initiatives, the parliament tends to vote in favour of them. This is evidenced by the fact that the proportion of presidential bills supported by the Parliament is three times higher than that of bills initiated by the government (90.2% compared to 35.3%). Most of these laws and resolutions fall within the constitutional powers of the head of the state. This level of support for the president's legislative initiatives is related to his personal influence rather than the level of support for the ruling Servant of the People's Party.

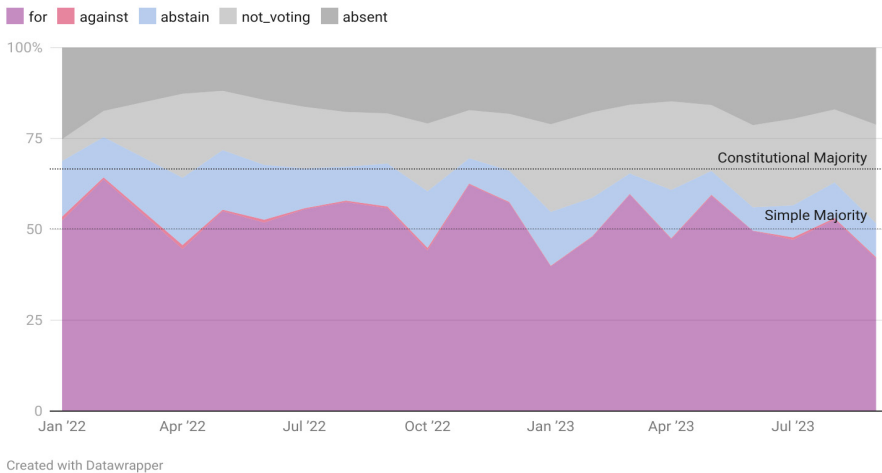


Figure 1. Voting Dynamics in the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine in January 2022–September 2023

Note: Aggregated voting results by month.

Source: The authors' own study based on the portal of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine.

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, parliament has held 73 meetings (as of September 26th, 2023). The first two months of 2022 in parliament were held in the mode of winter holidays and remote work. However, the dynamics of voting in parliament indicates two characteristic periods (Figure 1). During the first period (May–September 2022), there was a certain consensus in parliament to support decisions, but the proportion of abstentions also increased. During this period, the active phase of hostilities and the first counteroffensive of the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the Kharkiv and Kherson directions fell. During the second period (October 2022–September 2023), the share of those who did not vote

and who were absent was growing as regards deputies, which significantly complicates the search for the necessary votes when voting for important bills. When majority votes are insufficient, power rests with other factions or support groups. If, during the first period, the necessary votes were mostly added by pro-Ukrainian opposition parties (European Solidarity, Holos and Batkivshchyna), during the second period, the necessary votes were increasingly added by non-factional people's deputies, the deputy groups "Trust" and "For the Future", as well as deputies of the former opposition pro-Russian faction "Opposition Platform – For Life" (on the basis of which, after its ban, two deputy groups "Platform for Life and Peace" and "Restoration of Ukraine" were formed) (Kontraktovych, 2023). The ruling party "Servant of the People" justifies such cooperation because of the need to find votes for important bills, although such cooperation with deputies from the former pro-Russian party "Opposition Platform – For Life" added decisive votes in only 9% of cases.



Figure 2. Dynamics of the Composition of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine during January 2022–September 2023

Note: According to the Constitution of Ukraine, the Verkhovna Rada consists of 450 deputies, but since Russia's annexation of Crimea and the eastern territories of Ukraine in 2014, the number of deputies has decreased to 423 (early elections were not held in the temporarily occupied territories).

Source: The authors' own study based on the portal of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine.

In Figure 2, we can observe a rapid decrease in the total number of deputies in the Verkhovna Rada, which, in turn, answers the question of why a pro-government political party is looking for the necessary votes among non-factional deputies and other deputy groups. During 2019–2021, a total of 22 deputies left the “Servant of the People” political party. Some deputies went to work with government bodies, and the rest left the faction due to various public revelations. After a full-scale invasion on February 24th, 2022, another wave of mandate losses began. In accordance with the decree of the President of Ukraine on the enactment of the decision of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine of March 18th, 2022, “On the suspension of the activities of certain political parties in Ukraine” (Decree of the President of Ukraine, 2022), the following were suspended: “Opposition Platform – for Life”, “Left Opposition”, “Sharia Party”, “Progressive Socialist Party of Ukraine”, “State”, “Union of Left Forces”, “Opposition Bloc”, “Socialist Party of Ukraine”, “Ours”, “Socialists”, and “Bloc Volodymyr Saldo”. However, 11 deputies from the pro-Russian party “Opposition Platform – For Life” resigned at their own request. An additional six MPs were stripped of their mandates because of their losing their Ukrainian citizenship. Concurrently, the Ukrainian parliament enacted a procedure for the exchange of prisoners of war and hostages, which allows for the potential inclusion of Viktor Medvedchuk, who was divested of his Ukrainian citizenship, in exchange for Ukrainian prisoners of war. It is not possible to fill unoccupied positions with other MPs who were elected on their list or to conduct elections in their respective constituencies for two reasons. Martial law does not allow for elections, and the suspension of political parties due to their anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian stance on Ukrainian territory prevents their reinstatement on the party list and in the majority districts.

The issue of suspending and potentially banning political parties has sparked discussions and controversy. This is because of the legal framework that governs these actions, particularly during martial law, which raises challenging concerns regarding democracy, representation, the rule of law, and national security. The Ministry of Justice in Ukraine has the authority to launch administrative actions that may prohibit political parties if there are indications that they are undermining the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and democratic values of the state. Such a prohibition, however, can only happen if it is deemed legal and follows a relevant court proceeding. In fact, on September 15th, 2022, the Administrative Court of Cassation issued a final ruling that banned the pro-Russian political party “Opposition Platform – For Life” from operating in Ukraine. This approach endeavours to achieve a balance between the necessity for national security

and the protection of democratic institutions. A crucial consideration in this scenario is the accountability of MPs elected by suspended parties. Even though these parties have been suspended, their mandates persist and they can continue to exert their authority within factions without facing any recall procedures initiated by the public. Additionally, the responses of political parties to these suspensions exhibited a range of views. Some political parties have adapted to the changing political landscape by changing their names or by ceasing their factional activities. For instance, “Opposition Platform – For Life” has transformed into parliamentary groups such as “Platform for Life and Peace” and “Restoration of Ukraine.” Nestor Shufrych, a pro-Russian MP, serves as an illustrative example by declining to resign voluntarily from his position as the chairman of the Committee on Freedom of Speech in the Verkhovna Rada.

The organisation of parliamentary activities in Ukraine faced a dilemma. On one hand, there is a growing demand to cleanse the Verkhovna Rada of pro-Russian politicians and corrupt officials, while on the other hand there is the need to ensure the viability of the legislature under martial law. It is precisely because of the danger of losing the capacity of the parliament that the ruling party is delaying the deprivation of mandates of MPs from the banned “Opposition Platform – For Life”. Despite having collected the necessary signatures of MPs to include the issue of depriving former representatives of “Opposition Platform – For Life” on the agenda, the Speaker of the Parliament Ruslan Stefanchuk rejected this idea (Pryshchepa, 2022). That is, if the Verkhovna Rada adopted a bill to terminate the powers of MPs from the banned “Opposition Platform – For Life”, parliament would lose 33 MPs, and if the convictions come into force, another 16 MPs would lose their seats (Agency for Legislative Initiatives, 2023).

Under these circumstances, the composition of parliamentary groups in the legislature could undergo significant changes, as many groups barely meet the minimum number of MPs required. The Parliament’s decision-making ability is presently precarious, given that it has nearly 10% fewer MPs than its constitutional composition, which has a detrimental effect on the quorum of parliamentary committees. Thus, MPs from the former “Opposition Platform – For Life” faction serve as a convenient temporary tool for authorities. A similar issue at the local council level poses an even greater threat; the potential recall of representatives from banned or dissolved parties will impact almost 67% of the local councils, with the majority situated in Ukraine’s frontline regions. Moreover, 91 local councils with a population of more than 10 thousand (11.5% of the total) will no longer have the required competencies (Feshchenko, 2022). Removing a significant number of mandates simultaneously (3,698 local

authority members) may result in centrifugal tendencies and an increase in the number of collaborators, ultimately leading to the formation of quasi-councils at the local level.

The President's inner circle is exploring diverse choices for the future of the pro-presidential party. To be exact, the present Servant of the People's Party could undergo significant alterations, or alternatively, a new political party could be established. It is likely that the latter will be selected for several reasons. The intermittent resurgence of the discourse regarding upcoming elections has catalysed the surge of "dormant" political parties. Since the commencement of the full-scale invasion, 27 political parties have altered their leadership, and 15 political parties have updated their names. As all of these parties are relatively unknown, the reasons behind these substantial changes could be either a rebranding initiative or a so-called 'selling' of the party (which is easiest to formalise through a change of leader) (Maksymova, 2023). These actions may indicate an intention to prepare for upcoming elections, as the option to register a new political party is restricted during martial law. At the commencement of the full-scale war, the Ministry of Justice of Ukraine had registered 378 political parties (Taranenko, 2023). However, registering a new political party involves facing technical hurdles, such as a mandatory constituent assembly and gathering 10,000 signatures from 2/3 of Ukraine's regions. Consequently, political actors frequently turn to acquiring obscure, existing political parties, rebranding them, and including them in the political fray. It is noteworthy that there is high demand for such actions among political actors at the local level. The new electoral system in local elections has merely stimulated this practice by decreasing the threshold for territorial communities, where only political parties are authorised to nominate candidates (Lebediuk, 2022). Open sources have revealed that in 2021, a political party known as "Diya" was registered by an individual who previously led the "Party of Harmonious Development" party (Opendatabot, 2023). This party later became Mikheil Saakashvili's "Movement of New Forces" in 2017. The new pro-presidential political party may adopt a name aligned with the prevalent electronic application of public services in Ukraine, or alternatively, use the official platform of volunteer and public initiatives "SpivDiya" (Khmilevska, 2023).

Elections After (During) Martial Law

The matter of holding elections in Ukraine is a subject periodically discussed in public discourse. Nevertheless, there has been increasing debate on different public platforms since the statement made by Martinus

“Tiny” Kox, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, who stated that Ukraine should seek a means to conduct free and fair elections even under martial law (Stern et al., 2023). In an interview with *The Washington Post*, Volodymyr Zelenskyy stated that if martial law persists in Ukraine, parliamentary elections scheduled for October 2023 would be postponed. Although the President of Ukraine occasionally declares that elections will not take place during martial law, there is an ongoing debate among civil society and parliamentary committees regarding the difficulties of holding elections during martial law.

The legal discussion regarding the feasibility of conducting elections while martial law is in effect is rooted in the interpretation of the constitution and martial law regulations. Although both the law of martial law and the electoral code explicitly forbid holding elections during martial law, the Constitution does not contain an explicit prohibition. Article 83 of the Constitution of Ukraine states that if the term of office of Parliament expires during martial law, its powers are extended until the first meeting of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine is elected after the lifting of martial law. Consequently, the matter of holding elections can be addressed by implementing pertinent procedural and technical aspects into the Electoral Code and martial law. As it becomes more challenging for the parliamentary majority to secure crucial votes for significant bills, enacting the necessary modifications for parliamentary elections proves to be a more formidable task than for presidential elections. This stems from the fact that it could potentially be the final election for several political parties. Following the imposition of martial law, Ukrainian electoral preferences have not been publicly published. This suggests that the war has brought about considerable changes to the established electoral system, leading political actors to seek a new base of support. Consequently, it is probable that current parliamentary parties will either rebrand or simply cease to exist.

Security concerns are the primary challenge in holding elections during or immediately following the termination of martial law. Democratic procedures require impartial and transparent election campaigns. Under such conditions, voting carries more risk than incentives for voters. The public release of polling station addresses and the presence of large voter crowds and vote-counting activities necessitates supplementary security guarantees. Moreover, clear protocols for managing ballot boxes during air raids are required. Another obstacle is the recruitment of election commission members and the establishment of relevant infrastructure in de-occupied and frontline regions. Furthermore, international observers must adhere to relevant security protocols. The second most crucial

concern is guaranteeing the voting rights of military personnel in frontline areas. Omitting this group of voters from the election process who have the highest level of public support (Hrushetskyi, 2023) will not enhance the legitimacy of election outcomes.

Participation in elections by citizens abroad also requires additional effort. Firstly, the exact number of Ukrainian refugees is unknown, and their distribution among the EU countries is uneven. Furthermore, voting outside Ukraine can only occur on the premises of Ukrainian consulates and embassies within that nation, as specified by current legislation. For instance, Poland has over one million Ukrainian residents, with the country hosting a single Ukrainian embassy and four consulates. Clearly, organising voting for such a vast number of people presents a challenge. One viable solution could involve setting up temporary polling stations with the help of election commissions by European nations. Under these circumstances, further human and financial resources will be necessary, but their provision appears unlikely in light of the organisation of the European Parliament elections in June 2024. Likewise, there is an issue with Ukrainian state voter registration, which has not been updated since the outset of Russia's full-scale invasion.

Holding elections in Ukraine amidst the war presents numerous challenges for authorities in organising the campaign, with uncertain consequences. According to opinion polls, 81% of citizens believe that elections should be postponed until after the war (Hrushetskyi, 2023). Furthermore, an overwhelming majority of citizens (approximately 65%) hold pessimistic views on the concept of online voting and are wary of the potential risks of fraud (Hrushetskyi, 2023). To uphold democratic principles, it is necessary to revoke the prohibition of public gatherings, allow for government criticism, and grant different political entities access to online information spaces. This could potentially cause internal destabilisation and polarisation of society, as elections coincide with the time when all resources and public attention are focused on supporting the army and the struggle for its future. Conversely, polls reflecting public opinion indicate a gradual decrease in support for the government, which could prompt unpopular decisions aimed at maintaining a politically favourable situation. In October 2023, the level of trust in the Ukrainian President dropped to 76%, down from 91% in May 2022 (Hrushetskyi, 2023). Additionally, the percentage of respondents who believed it necessary to actively criticise authorities for making mistakes and incorrect actions increased from 26% in May 2022 to 70% in October 2023 (Hrushetskyi, 2023). These developments could make it difficult for current political actors to secure victory in elections after the war.

The public debate should now focus on an action plan to restore the electoral process in post-war Ukraine and consider the challenges that the electoral system will face. For example, according to the current electoral system, the number of seats in a district depends on voter turnout, which significantly affects the number of MPs in the eastern and southern regions of Ukraine. The mere fact that elections are held does not mean that they are legitimate. Therefore, more than 100 civil society organisations signed a joint statement calling on Ukrainian authorities not to hold elections during the war (OPORA, 2023). International organisations or Western partners pressuring the authorities to hold elections should consider that this could lead to internal destabilisation, as Ukrainian society does not support such an initiative, and the risks outweigh the potential benefits. The only guarantee of a quick resumption of the democratic electoral process lies in intensive support for Ukraine's battlefield needs.

Conclusions

This study delves into the intricate landscape of political competition in Ukraine in the shadow of martial law. The analysis unearthed notable shifts in parliamentary dynamics, revealing a nuanced pattern of support for legislative initiatives, particularly those spearheaded by the president in the wake of a full-scale invasion. The evolving collaboration dynamics within parliament, marked by varying degrees of support from different factions and groups, underscores the complex interplay of political forces during times of war.

As the spectrum of elections looms amid the ongoing war, the challenges facing Ukrainian authorities have become increasingly daunting. Public sentiment, as reflected in opinion polls, strongly advocates the postponement of elections, raising concerns about the legitimacy of the electoral process conducted under wartime conditions. The populace's skepticism towards online voting further complicates matters, necessitating a reevaluation of democratic principles, including the restoration of public gatherings, government criticism, and equitable access to online information spaces.

In navigating the delicate balance between international pressure and domestic sentiment, it is imperative for external actors to recognise that premature elections may exacerbate internal destabilisation. This study posits that intensive support for Ukraine's battlefield needs emerges as a linchpin for a swift return to a robust and democratic electoral process.

Since the beginning of the war, the electoral structure of Ukrainian society has dramatically changed. This is due to fundamental changes in

citizens' attitudes towards certain issues (language, church, and foreign policy orientation) and the growth of Ukrainian identity. Therefore, it is likely that significant success in the battlefield will contribute to the consolidation of Ukrainian society and the institutionalisation of political activity; otherwise, it may lead to even greater fragmentation and the emergence of new regional political projects.

Ukraine faces the challenge of preserving the rule of law and democratic values while addressing national security issues under martial law. Instead, pressuring Ukraine to hold elections contributed to the spread of anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western narratives. In any case, if elections are held, Russia will use this to spread the narrative of illegitimate results due to non-compliance with democratic procedures while accusing Western partners of double standards; if the elections are not held, Russia will also appeal to the fact that Western partners are supporting a usurpation of power. Thus, holding elections during an ongoing war could lead to further destabilisation in Europe. Supporting Ukraine in gaining a significant technological edge on the battlefield would not only aid in the swift restoration of regular democratic procedures, but would also ensure security across Europe.

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