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EDİTÖR **ASSOC. PROF. DR. AHMET İŞLER**

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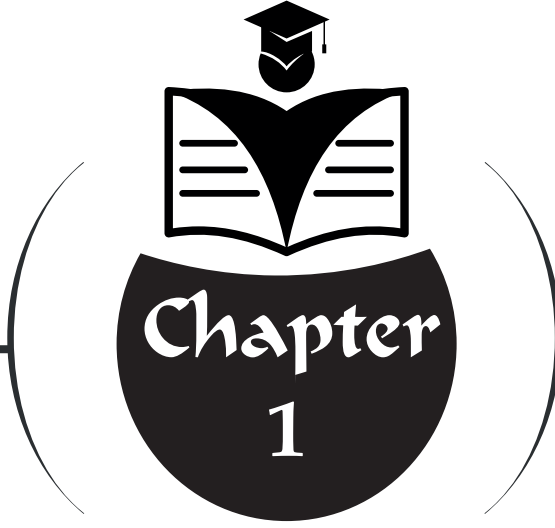
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THE MUNICH ANALOGY? RECONSIDERED

“

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Introduction

Attempts to explain the behavioral patterns of international actors solely through military power configurations or the personal motivations of political decision-makers contribute to a body of literature in which crucial variables necessary for meaningful synthesis remain insufficiently accounted for. The integration of economic variables into the analytical framework of international relations signifies not merely the incorporation of technical or quantitative data, but rather a deeper engagement with the structural essence of the system itself. Socioeconomic variables constitute the foundational pillars that sustain, constrain, and shape political behavior (Alker & Biersteker, 1984: 125).

In particular, state conduct is shaped by the penetration of domestic economies by external economic forces, the mutual sensitivity of national economies, and conflicts of interest structured around material competition. Financial markets and the activities of multinational corporations—domains that often exceed the comprehensive regulatory reach of the state—possess the capacity to influence both the financial capabilities of international actors and prevailing conceptions of state sovereignty. In a scenario where the economic dimension is excluded from analysis, studies of foreign policy, strategy, and war risk drifting away from empirical and structural reality. The mechanisms of the international system remain difficult to comprehend so long as issues such as the activities of international organizations and multinational corporations, the politics of international credit and conditionality, sovereign debt, and the political economy of war are either absent from theoretical formulations or neglected in historical analyses (Susan, 1970).

However, such explanations often overlook the structural economic factors and corporate interests that shaped the international environment of the interwar period. Building on revisionist scholarship that highlights the interaction between capitalism and foreign policy, this study re-examines the relationship between American business networks and Nazi Germany in the years leading up to the war. In particular, it investigates how the investments, commercial relations, and production networks of major American corporations—including Ford Motor Company, General Motors, Coca-Cola Company, IBM, and International Telephone and Telegraph—interacted with broader geopolitical developments and may have influenced the timing and nature of American foreign policy responses to Nazi expansionism. In doing so, the article aims to reconsider the explanatory scope of the so-called “Munich Analogy” by situating it within a wider framework of economic interests, corporate networks, and capitalist expansion.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in historical analysis and aims at analytical generalization rather than statistical inference. The research draws upon a combination of archival

materials, governmental reports, contemporary documents, and secondary historiography in order to reconstruct the economic and institutional linkages between American corporations and the Nazi German economy. Archival sources—including documents related to the Office of Alien Property Custodian and wartime institutional mechanisms such as the War Production Board—are examined alongside corporate histories, diplomatic records, and scholarly studies to analyze the structural relationship between the American state and the business community. By integrating economic history with international relations analysis, the article seeks to demonstrate how corporate investments, transnational capital networks, and wartime economic arrangements contributed to shaping the strategic environment in which U.S. foreign policy decisions were made during the interwar and early wartime years.

The Munich Analogy? An Economic-Political Perspective on U.S. Decision-Making in the Lead-Up to World War II

Paul Fussell's iconic formulation in *Wartime*—“*To get home you had to end the war. To end the war was the reason you fought it. The only reason.*” (1989: 141)—lays bare the circular and, in many respects, absurd logic of war as experienced by American soldiers during the Second World War. As similarly portrayed in *Saving Private Ryan*, the war was not only terrifying but also deeply devoid of tangible meaning for those on the front lines. The soldiers depicted in the film possess no concrete, personal grievance against the men on the other side of the barbed wire. They fight, rather, to earn the right to return home. This profound sense of purposelessness—captured as well in the critical historiography of Howard Zinn (1998)—can also be discerned in the broader socio-political atmosphere of the United States during the 1920s and 1930s. The war in question, of course, is the World War II. Rhetorical history studies such as those conducted by Studs Terkel have focused on the discourses of war veterans delivered during commemorative ceremonies at American war memorials in places such as Normandy landings and the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium. Within these narratives, it is notably difficult to encounter explicit references to motivations centered on combating fascism and militarism in Europe or on the idealistic ambition to establish democracy and justice. Indeed, public opinion data from September 1942 indicate that approximately 40 percent of the American public had no clear understanding of the reasons behind the United States' entry into the war. Only less than a quarter of the population had heard of the Atlantic Charter. “Strikingly, only 7 percent of respondents were able to name just one of the ‘Four Freedoms’—no more than one (Pauwels, 2017: 24–26). The “Four Freedoms,” which significantly shaped the spirit of the Atlantic Charter, constituted a universalist vision of liberty articulated by Franklin D. Roosevelt before the U.S. Congress in 1941. Presented in his annual State of the Union Address, this vision sought to construct the moral and ideological framework of the

impending war. The freedoms were officially recorded as freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear (Roosevelt, 1941). Yet this normative and ideological articulation failed to resonate fully even with 10 percent of the American public. On the eve of war, the prevailing disposition of American society was not one inclined toward engaging in a physical struggle on European soil in defense of these abstract freedoms against an “ism”—whether fascism or Nazism—about which most citizens possessed limited substantive knowledge (Pauwels, 2017: 24).

The dissatisfaction within the domestic public, while not preventing the United States from entering the Second World War, would nevertheless witness the emergence of an important analogy for the subsequent period: the Munich Analogy. It has frequently been observed that many of the military policy initiatives implemented by the United States in various regions after the Second World War—such as in Korea, Grenada and Nicaragua, and Iraq—were grounded in the logic of the “Munich Analogy.” In general, the belief that appeasement would lead to significant losses served as a pillar of legitimacy, as exemplified by Eisenhower’s invocation of Munich to justify U.S. support for the war in Indochina, or by the portrayal of Saddam Hussein as a “modern-day Hitler,” accompanied by explicit references to Munich (Conolly-Smith, 2009: 35). Analogies function as instruments for mobilizing public support by reducing complex and multi-variable foreign policy issues to a familiar and easily comprehensible narrative of a classical struggle between “us” and “them” (Bell, 2016). Indeed, the distinction between “us” and the “other” represents both a sharp boundary and an expression of a sense of security. With its universal roots, this dichotomy reflects the human tendency to draw distinctions in their minds through competitive instincts, ranging from tribal conflicts in primitive times to contemporary football matches (Eaton, Eswaran & Oxoby, 2011: 720). The “other,” in turn, also gives meaning to the “self,” creating a specific identity and thereby increasing mobilization (Hall, 1997: 41–42). In this context, the Munich Analogy can be understood as a historical lesson drawn from the failure of the policy of “appeasement” pursued by Britain and France against the revisionist policies of Nazi Germany on the road to the Second World War. The essence of this principle lies in the assumption that making concessions to a revisionist or aggressive state and/or dictator in order to avoid war will ultimately lead to far greater costs (Conolly-Smith, 2009: 34–35). But is Munich truly an analogy? Even if it is, can it legitimately be applied to all situations and geographical contexts? More fundamentally, what is the relationship between such an analogy and the inaction of the very actors who invoke it? When these questions are taken into account, it becomes necessary to scrutinize which elements of the historical narrative underpinning the analogy are highlighted and which are ignored. The complexity of historical events is often lost within the inherently “simplifying” nature of analogies,

rendering alternative interpretations largely invisible. While the essence of Munich is most often discussed in terms of the “appeasement” policy pursued by Britain and France, the role of other international actors that maintained economic and financial relations with Germany during the same period is frequently left outside the equation. This tendency reduces the analogy to a predominantly military perspective and leads to the neglect of economic, financial, and political relationships in the historical narrative. Consequently, “appeasement” should be reconsidered not only in terms of military and diplomatic concessions but also within the broader framework of economic and financial interactions.

International relations refers to a system in which a variety of international actors operate. These actors are not fixed; rather, they are dynamic and mobile. Political issues explained solely through the actions of states, international organizations, or individuals require deeper scrutiny. The United States, in this respect, represents a state whose political decision-making processes are highly multilayered, where numerous dynamic and influential actors play active roles. This becomes particularly evident when the Second World War period is examined in light of variables that extend beyond the role of a president whose importance is otherwise indisputable, such as Franklin D. Roosevelt. What *The Power Elite* (2000) describes as economic and military elites occupies the apex of modern social organization. These elites in the United States have historically acted within the framework of economic interests and the imperatives of capital. Industrial corporations such as Ford Motor Company, General Motors (GM), and International Telephone and Telegraph (ITT) have wielded considerable influence in Washington and have possessed significant capacity to shape American foreign policy in various ways. In this respect, Washington’s policy orientation has often been designed to secure access to raw material resources and markets for the products of such corporations—and, when necessary, for individual entrepreneurs as well—to remove domestic and international political constraints on commercial activity as far as objectively possible, and to minimize the risks associated with competition (Pauwels, 2017: 27–28). Consequently, the state does not appear merely as a rational mechanism making fully autonomous decisions; rather, it often functions as an instrument that also accommodates the interests of economic elites.

From the perspective of Washington, the design of foreign policy—particularly during periods of crisis—has frequently been shaped not only by independent political leaders but also by figures emerging from the corporate world. To suggest that the policy-making mechanisms of the United States during such periods were formed solely by career bureaucrats, academics, or experienced politicians would therefore be to overlook the influence of the American corporate sector (Feagin & Riddell, 1990: 73–74). A public opinion poll conducted only one month before the Attack on Pearl Harbor (November

1941) indicated that merely 20 percent of the American public supported U.S. entry into the war. Moreover, a poll from 1940 suggested that more than half of respondents believed that even a potential German victory would not pose a threat to the United States (Freidel, 1958: 212–213). Although the “Munich Analogy,” fundamentally rooted in the idea of delayed response, appears to have been shaped by several domestic factors—such as anti-war sentiment, political opposition, the social trauma generated by the Great Depression of 1929, and isolationism (Cole, 1957: 595–597)—American and international elites were largely reassured by the socially and economically conservative stance adopted by Adolf Hitler. Indeed, until the end of 1941—right up to the declaration of war—the Führer was not necessarily perceived negatively by many Americans of German and Italian descent. There were, of course, significant reasons for this situation. First, considering the support that successive American governments extended to regimes such as those of Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, Anastasio Somoza García in Nicaragua, and Augusto Pinochet in Chile, it is difficult to argue that Washington consistently opposed technocratic, military, political, or economically autocratic regimes in situations where American interests were not directly threatened. Over time, National Socialism likewise demonstrated—despite its so-called revolution—that it did not pose a fundamental threat to the wealthy and conservative segments of American society. A form of fascism represented by Hitler, while inherently conservative and reactionary in character, could even appear useful from this perspective. Indeed, the financial and political support provided by elements of the German establishment during Hitler’s rise to power cannot be overlooked. The Führer did not pursue political or economic initiatives that would undermine the social or economic priorities and privileges of German elites. Nor was there any policy orientation that threatened the principle of private property, one of the fundamental variables of capitalism. In fact, one symbolic detail that reassured American elites was strikingly iconic: the inscription above the main gate of the Buchenwald concentration camp read *Jedem das Seine* (“to each his own”). While many businesses in the United States were experiencing a severe financial crisis in the aftermath of the Great Depression of 1929, Adolf Hitler, following his rise to power in 1933, increased his influence among American elites by dissolving labor unions and overcoming the crisis through extensive highway construction, large-scale public works projects, and rapid rearmament (Pauwels, 2017: 33–36). During the interwar period, U.S. diplomacy primarily aimed to keep the world market open (Open Door) on behalf of American capital and investments. The Führer was not perceived as an obstacle to this strategy. Consequently, for many elites, the expansionism of fascism could continue in parallel with a policy of appeasement so long as it did not run counter to American economic interests (Levin, 1974: 601).

When one examines the tables at which these decisions were made, it is difficult to speak of any absence of leaders representing financial interest groups. Indeed, the upper echelons of institutions such as the War Production Board (WPB)—which directed U.S. industry toward war production and decided which factories would produce what and which raw materials would be allocated to whom—were staffed by executives from massive corporations such as General Motors, General Electric, and Sears. Established by Roosevelt with the aim of transforming the civilian economy into a war economy, the WPB already included 45 corporate executives at the time of its founding, in addition to approximately 700 other senior business managers. Within the same framework, Industry Advisory Committees composed of business leaders also played an important role by advising the government on the determination and distribution of production needs. In addition to the production–distribution mechanism, corporate executives also held significant roles in the administration of the armed forces. Robert P. Patterson, who served as Assistant Secretary of War between 1940 and 1945, was a partner in a large corporate law firm associated with Rockefeller interests and connected to the New York Trust Company. During the same period, John J. McCloy, who served in a parallel position, was a partner in a corporate law firm in New York and the brother-in-law of a member of the board of directors of J.P. Morgan & Co. Robert A. Lovett, who served as Assistant Secretary of War for Air between 1940 and 1945, was a partner in the banking firm Brown Brothers Harriman & Co. and also a director of Union Pacific Railroad and the New York Trust Company. Ralph A. Bard, who served as Assistant Secretary of the Navy in 1944–1945 (and later as Under Secretary), was an investor and chairman of the board of Eversharp Inc. Artemus L. Gates, who served as Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Air from 1941 to 1945, was president of the New York Trust Company and a director of the American Smelting and Refining Company as well as Pan American Airways (Feagin & Riddell, 1990: 61–62). Taken together, this picture points to an institutional and personal intertwining between the state and large capital circles within the U.S. decision-making mechanisms in the period leading up to the Second World War. The presence of business leaders with connections to banks, financial institutions, and major corporations among wartime decision-makers constitutes an important indication that U.S. policies during the Second World War were shaped not only by strategic security concerns but also in close relation to the interests of capitalist production and the business community.

“If you are going to try to go to war, or to prepare for war, in a capitalist country, you have got to let business make money out of the process or business won’t work” (Polenberg, 1972: 12).

-Henry L. Stimson

During the period leading up to the Second World War, Washington needed not only to be militarily and strategically prepared but also to transform its industry. According to Donald M. Nelson, this was not merely a transformation but a revolution. The conversion of existing factories was not seen as a comprehensive solution to meet the needs of the U.S. armed forces or allied forces. Establishing new factories, mitigating business risks, and increasing production in already existing facilities were essential. The War Production Board (WPB) was the key factor in creating these persuasion and production mechanisms. In this process, the government covered a significant portion of expansion costs from its own budget, guaranteed that military agreements signed with other countries would be profitable, and promised to suspend anti-trust regulations that hindered production. The plan prepared by Nelson in 1940, and frequently implemented especially during the early stages of the war, clearly emphasized the partnership between the U.S. government and the business sector. According to the plan, companies could amortize expansion costs within only five years, thereby maximizing profits by reducing taxable income. In cases of excessive profit, taxes paid could later be reclaimed if the companies reported losses after the war. The Munich Analogy is closely linked to risk management, profit margins, investments, and production capacities of American businesses. The “cost-plus-a-fixed-fee” system is another indication of this relationship. The production cost of military goods was highly volatile, and designs were continuously evolving. From a business perspective, these high-risk products were manufactured under the condition that the government covered production costs and guaranteed a fixed profit. With this system, frequently used by the Army and Navy, the U.S. government assumed the entirety of the risks. This regulation, which remained in effect for most of the war, can be interpreted numerically through comparative calculations conducted after taxes: corporate profits rose from \$6.4 billion in 1940 to \$10.8 billion in 1944. The WPB also reflected a consensus awareness that companies unable to adapt to wartime demands and production requirements would inevitably be eliminated from the market. Companies that could not compete with large corporations and failed to profit from industrial transformation exited the market, effectively undergoing a “natural selection process.” Especially with the suspension of anti-trust laws, factory transformation and large-scale expansion were reflected in the numbers. Within the three years of the war, as many new industrial facilities were established as had been built in the previous fifteen years. By 1942, production levels had already doubled compared to 1939 (Polenbery, 1972: 11–14). During this process, Donald M. Nelson, as an executive who came from the private sector, served as an essential pillar in coordinating defense industrial production. Through his role within the Supply Priorities and Allocation Board (SPAB)—the predecessor of the War Production Board (WPB)—Nelson became a key figure in integrating the demands, activities, and perspectives of the business community into the

U.S. administration during wartime preparations. Archival documents from 1941 indicate that defense programs accounted for approximately 18 percent of industrial production, with expectations that this figure would rise to 45–50 percent within a year. Nelson's own statements underline that modern warfare consumed strategic raw materials at an "unimaginable speed," clearly demonstrating the need to redirect the productive capacity of civilian industry toward defense requirements. This situation illustrates how the American government directly incorporated the business community into decision-making processes while managing the wartime economy. Restrictions imposed on the civilian sector and the fact that some companies were forced to halt their operations reflected the structural transformation that wartime mobilization imposed on the capitalist economy. While an important link existed between companies' investments, production capacities, and fields of activity in Nazi Germany and the strategic timing of the government, the dual relationship between the state and the capitalist business world appears to have played a decisive role in organizing the war economy during the U.S. entry into the Second World War (FRUS, 1941). Diplomatic documents in which Roosevelt introduced Nelson as his personal representative explicitly describe him as both a corporate executive and a state official, emphasizing the organic relationship between the state and the private sector. The process leading to war—and the war itself—was therefore conducted not only by professional soldiers but also by representatives of large capital. In this context, war production was organized in close coordination with capital. The U.S. entry into the war was not solely a military or political matter; it was also an economic-political issue involving an enormous mobilization of production. This mobilization represented a production boom encompassing broad industrial sectors such as automobiles, steel, shipbuilding, aviation, and machinery. Even while the war continued, the United States began designing the "restoration" of peacetime capitalist production together with the business community, thereby articulating the long-term economic strategy of American capitalism (FRUS, 1944a). Thus, this dual relationship was not limited to the pre-war and wartime periods but continued into the construction of the postwar order. In a letter dated August 18, 1944, Roosevelt assigned Nelson to a mission in China to conduct economic assessments and provide recommendations, thereby planning the role of American capital in the postwar Chinese economy. Consequently, the mission of the WPB was not confined merely to wartime logistics; it also encompassed the sustainability of trade with other states and the strategic positioning of American capital (FRUS, 1944b).

American business owners, who played such significant roles even in the management of the war and the construction of the postwar order, had already made considerable investments in Germany during the interwar period and had entered into arrangements with German companies to share resources

and expand joint production capacities. Among the companies that played important roles in production and commercial activities in Germany were the Coca-Cola bottling plant in Essen, the German subsidiary of Ford Motor Company, Ford-Werke GmbH, and the Opel factory of General Motors near Mainz. In addition, the German subsidiary of Standard Oil and its partnership with IG Farben concluded key agreements during the Hitler era that increased production capacity and profit margins (Pauwels, 2017: 36–37). The constant expansionary requirement of the capitalist mode of production played an important role in leading the American business world to perceive Germany and other international markets as a kind of “frontier” for American goods and investments. According to revisionist historians, the need to alleviate class conflicts within the domestic market after the Great Depression of 1929 was closely connected to the strategy of gaining access to foreign markets, known as the Open Door Thesis (Levin, 598–601). In this context, the growth of American companies’ investments and revenues in Germany during this period constitutes a concrete indication of this connection. For instance, while the German subsidiary of Coca-Cola Company sold 243,000 cases in 1934, this figure rose to 4.5 million cases by 1939. This rapid growth was also associated with Hitler’s prohibition of strikes and job changes among workers, as cola was increasingly perceived as an alternative to beer for German workers who were required to work more intensively and at a faster pace. During this period, employers assumed a role in business management that resembled that of mini-dictators, or *Geschäftsführer*. The needs of workers and the proper operation of technical equipment significantly increased the responsibilities of employers compared to the past. As unemployment in Germany nearly disappeared, enormous investment opportunities emerged for American companies. Max Keith, the head of Coca-Cola GmbH (and one of the creators of Fanta), together with his loyal workforce, became one of the key elements behind the company’s high sales volume (Pendergrast, 2013: 220–222). Similarly, the profits of Ford-Werke, the German subsidiary of Ford Motor Company, rose from 63,000 RM in 1935 to 1,287,000 RM in 1939. This increase can be explained not only by profitable government armament contracts and the *Lebensraum* policies but also by Hitler’s elimination of trade unions and workers’ parties, which reduced labor costs from 15 percent to 11 percent of business volume. Within six years, the total assets of Ford-Werke increased by 34.2 million RM. At the time, one U.S. dollar was equivalent to approximately 2.5 RM, and it should be remembered that the value of the dollar in the late 1930s was roughly seven times greater than its present value. Likewise, the Opel factory of General Motors increased its share of the German automobile market from 35 percent to 50 percent within the first two years of Nazi rule and became an extremely profitable enterprise thanks to Hitler’s rearmament program. Doing business with Hitler was legitimized not by the popularity of the Führer but by the high profits it generated. By 1939, the combined share

of General Motors and Ford in the German automobile market had reached 70 percent, and these companies stood ready to supply the equipment that the German army would require.

Moreover, the financial partner of General Motors, DuPont, made substantial investments in the German arms industry. Arms shipments were carried out to Germany through the Netherlands, and Hitler's revisionist policies and rearmament programs generated significant profits for American corporations. During this period, the Nazis also turned to the punched-card system of IBM in order to mechanize production, plan train movements, and provide computer technology for identifying enemy forces. IBM's German subsidiary, Dehomag, paid profit shares to IBM and doubled its value during the Hitler era, earning approximately 4 million RM in net profit by 1939. The financial pocket of Hitler's "instrumental toolkit" was also financed by another profitable name connected to American investments in Germany. The bank known as Union Banking Corporation of New York maintained close relations with Thyssen, one of the most prominent figures in the German steel industry who had provided substantial financial support for Hitler's rise to power. The manager of the bank was Prescott Bush, the grandfather of George W. Bush. Indeed, much of the income generated there would later become the capital that enabled George's son to enter the Texas oil industry (Pauwels, 2017: 36–41).

American archival documents indicate that the shares of the New York-registered Union Banking Corporation, among whose owners was Prescott Bush, were held for the Dutch bank Bank voor Handel en Scheepvaart, which was in turn controlled by the Thyssen family. These archival records provide an important basis for reconsidering the Munich Analogy. It should not be overlooked that Thyssen played a central role in steel and arms production in Germany before and during the Second World War. Archival documents show that the assets of the Union Banking Corporation, whose director was Prescott Bush, were seized. A report published in 1942 by the Office of Alien Property Custodian stated that the steel and mining properties in question had been under the ownership of the German government since 1939 and were being operated by the Nazis. The report constitutes one of the key references demonstrating that this ownership and management significantly assisted Nazi Germany's war effort (Crowley, 1942; Aris & Campbell, 2004).

The opportunities created for the American business world by Hitler's rule in Europe and the wartime economy must therefore be included as an important variable in the equation explaining the United States' entry into the Second World War. Prior to the Attack on Pearl Harbor and even afterward, these commercial activities were permitted by the American government. Even International Telephone and Telegraph, considered one of the formal instruments of the U.S. intelligence network, was able to maintain its relations with Axis countries until 1945. No measures were taken to prevent Ford

from protecting Nazi German interests in France, nor was there any explicit prohibition against keeping open the branches of Chase Bank and J.P. Morgan, which facilitated the trade and financing of American companies' investments in Germany and played important roles in transferring funds necessary for arms production there. A systematic commercial network existed in which the profits of multinational corporations were effectively guaranteed regardless of which side ultimately won the war. Indeed, some American companies even received assurances from the Nazi Ministry of Economics and the Reichsbank that their property would not be harmed after the Führer's victory. In fact, this reflected the principle of *Jedem das Seine*. Corporate executives acted in such a way that each side of the dice would produce a different form of profit. At the time of the iconic Pearl Harbor attack, American investments in Nazi Germany had reached approximately 475 million dollars. The investments of companies such as Standard Oil, International Telephone and Telegraph, and General Motors were protected, allowing their value to accumulate even during the war without significant losses (Higham, 1983: xvi–xviii). The American business community was satisfied with Hitler's Nazism insofar as it protected and supported the interests of large business and financial elites, while also creating important opportunities through its armament programs. Consequently, one of the key factors delaying the United States' entry into the war was the vast investment networks that American capitalist elites and their corporations had established with Nazi Germany, together with the “business as usual” ideology aimed at protecting these networks.

The networks, investments, and activities of American companies in Nazi Germany functioned as a braking mechanism that discouraged direct military intervention against Germany even when the war had already reached the boots of American soldiers. Existing profit mechanisms encouraged Washington to seek a negotiated peace rather than immediate intervention. Considering both public opposition to war and the role of corporate executives in the mechanisms designing the war economy, such as the War Production Board, the Roosevelt administration's conduct of the war in a way that allowed the business world to profit from it necessitates a critical reconsideration of the Munich Analogy. Furthermore, Hitler was perceived as the energetic and ruthless military vanguard of anti-communism in Europe and, being aware that he represented a dynamic and tangible hope for the capitalist economy, he was able to violate the Treaty of Versailles without facing any serious sanctions. Hitler calculated that British, French, and American leaders—who had already internalized this vanguard role—would tolerate his revisionist policies pursued in the name of *Lebensraum*. In this calculation, he proved correct (Higham, 1983: xvi–xviii; Pauwels, 2017: 55; Levin, 1974: 601). Among those who expected anti-Soviet gains from National Socialism were the social, economic, and political elites of both Europe and the United States, who would later experience the speed

of *blitzkrieg* in different regions. Therefore, the Munich Analogy should not be considered solely a matter of military strategy; it is also a complex field of inquiry that reveals the power of the business world within a framework of ideological-economic buffering and economic interests.

Conclusion

Attempts to explain wars and foreign policy decisions solely through personal motives or purely military security concerns weaken the analytical power of such explanations. Accordingly, explaining wars and foreign policy decisions in the field of international relations only through military power balances or the personal preferences of leaders is insufficient for understanding the complex nature of the international system. This study demonstrates that in order to understand the decision-making mechanisms of the United States in the period leading to the Second World War, economic variables—particularly the role of large capital groups—must be taken into account. The institutional and personal intertwining of the state and the private sector emerged as a decisive factor in the organization of the wartime economy and in the shaping of foreign policy choices. In this sense, war must be understood not only as a strategic and military necessity but also as a process closely connected to the expansionary dynamics of the capitalist production system.

In this context, the War Production Board clearly reveals the organic relationship between the state and the business world as a mechanism in which leading figures of the American corporate sector directly participated in the planning of wartime production. The financial incentives applied during the organization of war production, the assumption of risks by the state, and the suspension of anti-trust regulations all demonstrate the structural connection between American capitalism and the wartime economy. Likewise, the commercial and financial relations that American companies maintained with Nazi Germany before and during the early stages of the war make visible the influence of economic interests on foreign policy preferences. In this sense, revisionist interpretations expressed within the framework of the Open Door Thesis possess a certain explanatory power in linking American foreign policy to the objective of maintaining open access to global markets.

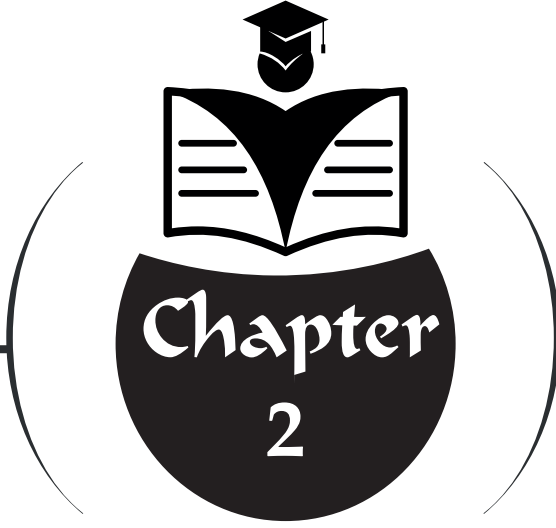
Even during the war itself, the intensive commercial and financial relations established by American corporations with European economies—particularly with Nazi Germany—remain striking. Major American companies such as Ford Motor Company, General Motors, Coca-Cola Company, IBM, and International Telephone and Telegraph expanded their presence in the global market by establishing production facilities, partnerships, investments, and distribution networks in Germany during Hitler's rule. In this process, Germany's relatively conservative stance toward private property, its rearmament programs, the effects of the totalitarian regime on labor relations,

and its role as an economic and ideological buffer against Soviet Russia became crucial elements in the timing of the United States. All of these findings demonstrate that U.S. foreign policy in the period leading to the Second World War cannot be explained solely through security concerns or ideological confrontations. The global investment networks, production capacities, and profit expectations of American business played a significant role both in the organization of the wartime economy and in Washington's strategic timing. Consequently, explanations such as the Munich Analogy remain incomplete when evaluated only through military and diplomatic dimensions; the analogy must also be reconsidered within the framework of economic interests, capital networks, and capitalist production relations. Such a perspective provides a more comprehensive analytical framework that places the interaction between economic structures and political decision-making processes at the center of debates on the origins of the Second World War.

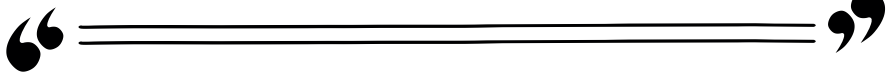
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**EU-US RELATIONS AND
EUROPEAN SECURITY: THE
DEBATE ON STRATEGIC
AUTONOMY**



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Introduction

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the European Union (EU), which had made significant progress in the process of economic and monetary integration, began to take steps to strengthen its institutional capacity in the fields of foreign policy, security, and defence. In this context, the EU developed new policy instruments aimed at increasing its decision-making capacity in military, security, and defence matters and positioning itself as a more effective actor in the international system. These developments have generated significant debates in the academic literature regarding the nature of the EU's role in the field of security and defence.

The policy of “strategic autonomy,” which aims to create a relatively more independent sphere of action for the EU from the United States (US), has brought renewed attention to the reassessment of relations with the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which has been one of the fundamental pillars of European security since the aftermath of World War II. In particular, the resurgence of debates on European security following the Russia–Ukraine War has led to the concept of strategic autonomy being discussed more intensively at both academic and political levels. In this context, some scholars interpret the EU's strategic autonomy policy as a balancing instrument against the hegemonic position of the United States, while others argue that this policy primarily serves as an institutional mechanism aimed at deepening the EU's political integration. By focusing on this academic debate, the present study aims to examine the issue of European security within the framework of the EU's strategic autonomy policy and the nature of EU–US relations.

Based on the document and data analysis method, one of the qualitative research methods, this study both addresses the EU's strategic autonomy policy in general terms and examines the nature of relations between the EU and the US within the context of strategic autonomy. Accordingly, the study provides information about the security and defence policies developed by the EU over the years within the context of the changing European security architecture following the Russia–Ukraine War, while also seeking to explain the position of the United States within European security, particularly in relation to NATO.

European Security and the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)

CSDP and Strategic Documents

The EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is the product of a long-term strategic vision. This policy emerged as a result of the approach articulated in the 1998 Saint-Malo Declaration, which emphasized that the EU should possess “the capacity for autonomous action backed up by credible military forces.” In line with this objective, during the Cologne European

Council in 1999, the “Atlanticists” and the “Europeanists” within the EU reached an agreement on the principles of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). With the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009—an important milestone in the process of European integration—the ESDP gained a clearer legal basis under the name Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), and mechanisms such as mutual solidarity and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) were incorporated into the treaty provisions.

Within this framework, the strategic documents announced by the EU over the years have concretized the views of member states regarding security and defence issues. The first step in this regard was the European Security Strategy announced in 2003. This first strategic document of the EU set out the objective of “a secure Europe in a better world” and identified terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, regional conflicts, and organized crime as the main threats. The EU’s subsequent strategy, the EU Global Strategy of 2016, reformulated the strategic vision of the CSDP around the concept of strategic autonomy and updated the EU’s threat perception to include hybrid threats, cybersecurity, energy security, and the growing role of non-state actors. At the same time, the three main objectives of the European Security Strategy—addressing threats, ensuring stability in the neighbourhood, and strengthening effective multilateralism—remained valid after 2016. The European Neighbourhood Policy, Eastern Partnership, and the EU’s Mediterranean policies were restructured within this framework. In 2017, PESCO became operational, demonstrating that although the CSDP maintains its intergovernmental character, the EU has entered a more institutionalized and permanent process of integration in the field of defence (Fiott, 2018). The EU’s third security strategy, the Strategic Compass adopted in 2022, updated threat assessments and introduced the goal of establishing a rapidly deployable capacity of 5,000 troops (European Union, 2016; Council of the European Union, 2022). This step indicated that the EU has begun to consider not only soft power but also the use of hard power. Indeed, the Russia–Ukraine War that began in 2022 clearly demonstrated that security—even in neighbouring regions—constitutes a strategic priority for the EU.

When the overall structure of these strategic documents is examined, it becomes evident that they possess a hybrid character. On the one hand, an interventionist and capacity-enhancing approach is adopted; on the other hand, the EU’s traditional identity as a “civilian power” is preserved. This dual structure can be seen as a reflection of differences in strategic culture within the EU.

It is expected and natural for an actor that has largely completed its economic integration to pursue institutional deepening in the fields of foreign policy and security (Duna, 2010). In other words, within the evolving structure of multilateralism, the EU has decided to assume greater initiative in

foreign policy, security, and defence matters. In this context, the CSDP can be considered one of the preconditions for the EU to become an influential actor in the international system (Smith, 2017).

The Development of the EU's Security Architecture

The CSDP has largely maintained its intergovernmental character within the EU. Member states continue to preserve their sovereignty in matters of foreign policy and defence. However, developments following the Russia–Ukraine War—such as Germany’s increase in defence spending, the NATO membership processes of Scandinavian countries, and the strengthening threat perception in Eastern Europe—have accelerated coordination in defence within the EU. This situation indicates the emergence of a stronger tendency toward integration within the intergovernmental framework.

Although the geostrategic focus of the CSDP generally includes neighbouring regions such as the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa, the 2022 war in Ukraine once again highlighted the central importance of Eastern Europe for EU security. Consequently, the security dimension of the EU’s enlargement and neighbourhood policies has been reinforced.

Similarly, the institutional structure of the CSDP has provided the EU with both a political decision-making mechanism and the capacity for military operational planning. In this sense, bodies such as the Political and Security Committee, the EU Military Committee, and the EU Military Staff coordinate civilian and military missions. More importantly, numerous civilian and military missions conducted since 2003 in the Balkans, Africa, and the Middle East have concretized the operational dimension of the CSDP. In the post-2022 period, the EU Military Assistance Mission Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine), established to support the Ukrainian Armed Forces, constitutes a notable example in this regard.

The CSDP does not aim to establish a defence alliance that would serve as an alternative to NATO, which has ensured Europe’s security since World War II. Rather, it seeks to play a complementary role in the transatlantic security architecture by enhancing Europe’s crisis-management capacity (NATO, 2022). Thus, although limited, the CSDP provides a framework that institutionalizes cooperation in the field of security and enables the EU to support its diplomatic efforts with military instruments. However, this structure does not constitute a “European army” based on collective territorial defence. Accordingly, Article 5 of NATO continues to form the foundation of collective defence. Instead, the CSDP can be defined as a mechanism that expands the EU’s foreign policy toolkit through capacity building, training missions, and stabilization operations (Howorth, 2018). In this respect, the CSDP may be regarded as a combination of coercive diplomacy and a comprehensive civil-military approach.

Although NATO remains the backbone of European defence, the defence-industrial dimension of the CSDP has become more visible over the past decade. For example, the European Defence Fund established under the 2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework aims to reduce fragmentation in the defence sector by encouraging joint research and development projects. This development indicates that the CSDP has acquired not only an operational but also an industrial dimension.

The CSDP seeks to establish a more balanced division of labour within the transatlantic security architecture. This became more evident first during Annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and later during the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Within this framework, although the central role of the United States in European security continues, the EU's provision of military support to Ukraine through the European Peace Facility and its initiatives to coordinate defence-industrial production demonstrate that Europe has begun to participate more actively in burden sharing.

The relationship between the CSDP and NATO is not a zero-sum game. Since the NATO Warsaw Summit, the EU–NATO Joint Declaration and subsequent joint declarations (2018, 2023) have deepened cooperation in areas such as hybrid threats, cybersecurity, military mobility, and capability development. Indeed, the parallels between the NATO Strategic Concept and the EU Strategic Compass demonstrate that the threat perceptions of the two institutions largely overlap (NATO, 2022).

Therefore, the institutional evolution of the CSDP plays a complementary role that strengthens the European pillar rather than creating an alternative structure to NATO. Although the CSDP represents an important step toward the institutionalization of a supranational defence policy in Europe, it is not a balancing instrument against the United States. On the contrary, it constitutes a natural extension of the EU's integration process within a changing international system and an institutional expression of a multilateral understanding of security. In this framework, NATO continues to play a crucial role as the organization that most effectively implements the concept of collective defence, particularly in the areas of crisis management and conflict prevention. The primary aim of the CSDP is therefore to provide additional capabilities to complement NATO's strengths (Duke, 2008). In other words, for EU member states, the common denominator of the CSDP is its function as an instrument for crisis management (Schroeder, 2009).

In conclusion, the institutional process of the CSDP, which began in 1999, has undergone a qualitative transformation over the past decade. Initially based mainly on crisis management and limited operational capacity, the structure has evolved into a broader security framework that includes elements such as strategic autonomy, coordination of the defence industry, rapidly deployable

forces, and deterrence in the EU's neighbourhood. This evolution has made the security dimension of the EU's efforts to strengthen its position in the international system more visible and has increased the EU's opportunities to participate more actively in joint projects with the United States (Jones, 2006).

The Concept of Strategic Autonomy and Its Historical Development

From a historical perspective, the European Union (EU) functioned primarily as a “security consumer” during the Cold War period. However, beginning in the 2000s, it gradually evolved into a “security provider” through its civilian and military operations in the Balkans, Africa, and the Middle East. Following Annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the EU's sanction policies, military assistance mechanisms—such as the European Peace Facility—and coordination in the defence industry have acquired a more functional character, indicating that the Union's security identity has become increasingly visible.

Similarly, the EU's expansion of both military and civilian capacities in the areas of peacebuilding, crisis management, and conflict prevention has contributed to making the Union a more visible actor in the international system (Howorth, 2018). The launch of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in 2017 and the establishment of the European Defence Fund in 2021 represent concrete instruments of this institutional deepening (Fiott, 2018). The Strategic Compass adopted in 2022 further clarified the EU's operational capability development goals by updating its threat perceptions.

Different Dimensions of Strategic Autonomy

The EU has pursued its strategy for greater autonomy from the United States (US) by taking its “real interests” into account (Antoniades, 2008). By seeking to establish an independent security structure, the EU primarily aims to appear as a credible international actor (Eriksen, 2006). Likewise, the EU's efforts to enhance cooperation in foreign policy can be interpreted as an example of the “architectural role” that the Union seeks to play in international relations (Bickerton, 2010). Nevertheless, the development of an autonomous security strategy by the EU encompasses several distinct dimensions.

The first of these dimensions is the fact that political influence in the international system is closely linked to military capability. Although the EU is not a military power in the traditional sense, it would be difficult for the Union to position itself as a global political actor without developing capacity in the field of security and defence (Howorth, 2018). Therefore, institutionalization in the defence sector essentially means strengthening the EU's foreign policy instruments.

The second dimension concerns the structural differences between the EU's understanding of security and that of the United States. While the US security approach is largely based on global power projection, the EU's security perspective focuses more on its neighbourhood, crisis management, and the strengthening of multilateral norms (Smith, 2017). This difference suggests that an autonomous European security structure could play a role in supporting multilateralism within the international system.

The third dimension is that increasing the EU's defence capacity also implies burden-sharing with the United States. Debates on defence spending, particularly during the presidency of Donald Trump, clearly revealed the US expectation that Europe should assume greater responsibility for its own security. In the post-2022 period, the crisis in Ukraine accelerated European decisions to increase defence spending and strengthen the defence industry.

The final dimension relates to the occasional tendency of the United States to take unilateral decisions in security matters. Past examples—such as the Iraq War—and the transatlantic tensions that followed reinforced the idea within the EU of developing a more autonomous decision-making capacity (Howorth, 2018). Nevertheless, as demonstrated in the post-2022 period, the EU's search for autonomy does not aim at a break from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but rather seeks a more balanced partnership within the transatlantic alliance.

Debates on Strategic Autonomy within the EU

Despite the strategic autonomy policy, differences in strategic culture among EU member states prevent the Union from becoming a fully-fledged security power. The strong commitment of Eastern European countries to the US security guarantee against the perceived threat from Russia, as well as differences between France's vision of strategic autonomy and Germany's more cautious security approach, limit the EU's transformation into a completely independent military power (Von Moss, Major & Mölling, 2013). These differences have not diminished over the past decade; rather, they have become more visible following the 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russia and especially after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine (Rynning, 2024; Mearsheimer, 2022).

To elaborate further, one of the EU's two principal powers, France, has long advocated that Europe should possess an independent defence capacity. In the post-2017 period, the discourse of "strategic autonomy" and "European sovereignty" articulated by President Emmanuel Macron represents the contemporary expression of this approach. According to France, Europe must develop institutional and operational capacity in defence if it is to become a global actor. While France seeks to enhance Europe's capabilities within what it perceives as a multipolar international system, it also avoids completely severing transatlantic ties.

The other major power within the EU, Germany, has experienced a significant transformation in its security policy, particularly following the announcement of the *Zeitenwende* in 2022. By deciding to increase defence spending and strengthen its military capacity, Germany has taken steps toward becoming a more active security actor. However, although Germany supports a stronger institutional defence structure within the EU, it also maintains that NATO should remain the cornerstone of European security (Von Moss, Major & Mölling, 2013).

Another influential EU member, Italy, has traditionally pursued a policy of balancing between NATO and the EU. Italy supports the EU's operational capacity particularly in relation to instability in Southern Europe and security challenges in the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, Italy does not question NATO's central role. Similarly, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe remain strongly committed to the US security guarantee due to the perceived threat from Russia. For these states, the discourse of strategic autonomy does not imply the weakening of NATO. These developments indicate that strategic differences within the EU persist.

More broadly, when examining perspectives on the international system, it becomes evident that significant differences exist among EU member states. While France and, to some extent, Germany advocate a multipolar international order, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe tend to prefer a security architecture led by the United States. For this reason, it is politically and strategically difficult for the EU to develop a classical balance-of-power policy against the United States. For small and medium-sized states, close cooperation with the United States is often perceived as a low-risk security strategy, particularly in the context of the Russian threat.

Consequently, differences in the military and security sphere within the EU structurally limit the Union's ability to develop a collective strategy aimed at balancing the United States. The pursuit of strategic autonomy is therefore shaped primarily within the framework of institutional deepening and capacity building in European integration. These differences make it difficult for the EU to act as a unified strategic actor and limit its capacity to balance US hegemonic power. In this context, interpreting the EU's strategic autonomy discourse as an attempt to balance the United States would be a reductionist approach. Indeed, the literature generally addresses the institutional development of the EU's defence policy within the framework of "capacity building" and "burden sharing" (Howorth, 2018). The following section further develops this debate on "hegemonic power balancing."

Strategic Autonomy and the Debate on US Hegemony

The policy of the "pivot to Asia" or "rebalancing toward the Asia-Pacific," initiated during the presidency of Barack Obama, as well as the transatlantic

tensions of the Donald Trump era—particularly criticisms directed at NATO and pressure regarding defence spending—heightened perceptions of strategic uncertainty in European capitals (Rynning, 2024). However, the 2022 war in Ukraine resulted in a renewed increase in the US military presence in Europe. While this development did not eliminate the prospect of developing an autonomous European security structure, it strengthened the view that such a process should evolve in harmony with NATO (Smith, 2017).

In other words, the transformation of the European security architecture and the emergence of a security crisis following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 led not to the weakening but rather to the reinforcement of transatlantic ties (Mearsheimer, 2022; NATO, 2022). At the same time, this situation made it necessary for the EU to assume greater responsibility in the field of defence (Howorth, 2018; Mearsheimer, 2022).

Within this new international context, the concept of strategic autonomy became an official policy of the EU with the publication of the EU Global Strategy in 2016. This was followed by the launch of PESCO in 2017 and the implementation of the European Defence Fund in 2021 (Fiott, 2018). The Strategic Compass adopted in 2022 established an institutional framework for the EU's determination to enhance its operational capacity in security and defence. Similarly, Germany's decision after 2022 to increase defence spending represented a significant turning point for strengthening defence capacity within the EU. These initiatives can therefore be interpreted as integration efforts aimed at enhancing the EU's institutional capacity in the field of defence (Fiott, 2018).

Some scholars have interpreted this emerging autonomous military-security policy of the EU within the framework of the "soft balancing" perspective, viewing it as an institutional attempt to counter US hegemony (Pape, 2005; Paul, 2005). However, developments over the past decade suggest that EU initiatives in defence have largely focused on capacity development and responsibility sharing in crisis management (Howorth, 2018). In other words, strategic autonomy indicates the EU's intention to achieve a more balanced burden sharing with the United States within NATO.

Ultimately, it can be argued that the EU's independent security policy has led to a transformation aimed at strengthening the "European pillar" of NATO (Smith, 2017). Therefore, the EU's efforts toward autonomy in the military and security domain should be understood not as a strategy to balance the United States but rather as part of the institutional deepening of European integration and the search for a more effective role in a changing international system. This approach also reflects the aim of contributing to the development of a rules-based international order, effective multilateralism, and a stronger international society.

Another reason why the EU's strategic autonomy policy does not seek to balance US hegemonic power is the continued institutional cooperation between the EU and the United States. Indeed, the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept defines cooperation between the EU and NATO as a “strategic partnership” (NATO, 2022).

EU-US Partnership and the Transatlantic Security Relationship

During the Cold War, it appeared almost inevitable—given the nature of the international system—that the United States (US) would intervene in potential crises in Europe by utilizing its military power. In the post-Cold War period, however, the institutionalization of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) transformed security and defence governance in Europe into a structure that remains coordinated with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) while also incorporating the decision-making capacity of the European Union (EU) (Howorth, 2018).

The EU-NATO Joint Declarations have elevated institutional cooperation between the two organizations to a new stage, increasing coordination in areas such as hybrid threats, cybersecurity, military mobility, and capability development. Within this framework, the defence capacity developed by the EU aims both to strengthen European security and to support the European pillar within NATO. The NATO Strategic Concept explicitly underlines this complementarity by defining the EU as a “unique and essential partner” (NATO, 2022).

The value-based affinity between the EU and the US is another decisive factor sustaining this partnership. Normative elements such as the rule of law, democracy, human rights, and the liberal economic order constitute the ideological foundation of the transatlantic bond. Particularly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the sanctions imposed on Russia and the military assistance provided to Ukraine demonstrate the strong coordination between the EU and the US (Mearsheimer, 2022).

While NATO continues to play a central role in collective defence and conflict prevention, the purpose of the CSDP is primarily to provide complementary capacity for NATO in areas such as crisis management, peacekeeping, and civilian-military operations (Howorth, 2018). In this sense, the defence mechanisms developed by the EU aim to enable the Union to act more rapidly and autonomously in addressing instability in Europe's surrounding regions.

Debates on defence spending and burden sharing within NATO during the presidency of Donald Trump (2016–2020) created significant tensions in transatlantic relations. However, even these tensions did not lead the EU to develop a systematic balancing strategy against the United States. On the

contrary, under the administration of Joe Biden, efforts have been made to reinforce the transatlantic partnership; particularly after the war in Ukraine, NATO's eastern flank has been strengthened and the US military presence in Europe has increased (NATO, 2022).

Beyond value-based affinity, intensive cooperation between the EU and the US continues across various policy areas. For instance, the two actors cooperate extensively on issues such as climate change, global terrorism, and energy security. Indeed, given the scale of the challenges they face in areas such as climate change and global terrorism, it would be extremely difficult for either the EU or the US to address these issues independently; therefore, transatlantic cooperation remains essential (Poettering, 2007).

Similarly, the EU–US Trade and Technology Council (TTC), established in 2021, aims to enhance policy coordination in strategic areas such as semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and supply chains. This development reflects the efforts of both actors to shape common global norms and standards within the international system. Cooperation between the EU and the US also continues in the fields of defence industry and technology. While the EU's initiatives within the framework of the European Defence Fund and Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) aim to strengthen European defence capacity, programs conducted with the United States within NATO support transatlantic military integration (Fiott, 2018). Consequently, increasing EU defence capacity may lead not to a reduction in cooperation with the United States but rather to a more balanced partnership.

Space policy has also emerged as another area of cooperation (Wang, 2009). The EU's Galileo and Copernicus programs enhance Europe's strategic and technological capabilities, while NATO's recognition of space as an operational domain in 2019 and the United States' growing investments in space activities have increased the need for cooperation in this area. Issues such as space security and the militarization of outer space require coordination rather than unilateral solutions.

Overall, while the EU continues its institutional deepening largely as an actor focused on internal integration, the United States seeks to maintain its global leadership role (Calleo, 2008). Historical experience nevertheless demonstrates that neither actor can sustain its achievements without transatlantic cooperation. As illustrated by the Seattle WTO Ministerial Conference, a lack of coordination between the EU and the US can produce negative consequences for global economic governance.

Looking ahead, in a context of “geopolitical transition” in which the global role of the United States is evolving, the EU will likely continue to strengthen its capacity in defence industry, technology, and crisis management. However, this process should be interpreted not as an attempt to balance US power

but rather as an effort to establish a more balanced and institutionalized transatlantic partnership (Smith, 2018). European leaders have repeatedly emphasized the importance of this partnership. Statements made by leaders in Germany and France following the Ukraine war reflect an approach that aims to strengthen NATO solidarity while simultaneously increasing Europe's defence capacity. Ultimately, the relationship between the EU and the United States is shaped less by competition than by mutual interdependence and institutional partnership. The EU's efforts to develop autonomous defence capacity therefore serve not to balance the United States but to create a more sustainable and balanced transatlantic relationship.

The EU's Strengthening Defence Capacity and the Future of European Security

In Europe during the 1970s, defence and security issues were largely considered taboo within a supranational framework, and defence was primarily viewed as an element of national sovereignty. Beginning in the 1980s, however, this perception gradually began to change. In particular, the Gulf War clearly revealed the limitations of a Europe that lacked integration in foreign and security policy. This realization paved the way for the 1990 Rome Intergovernmental Conference and ultimately for the institutionalization of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) through the Maastricht Treaty. The Maastricht process and the Petersberg Tasks granted the EU the authority to conduct military and humanitarian operations in crisis management. After 1999, both political and military institutionalization accelerated. The civilian crisis-management instruments adopted at the Feira European Council—including policing, rule-of-law missions, civilian administration, and civil protection—represented early examples of the EU's "comprehensive approach."

During this period, EU member states increasingly recognized the need to take more coordinated steps in the defence industry in order to reduce structural dependence on the United States. Defence-industry cooperation initiatives led by Germany and France gradually developed into a more institutionalized structure in the 2000s, and the European Defence Agency (EDA), established in 2004, became one of the central actors of this coordination. Projects such as the Airbus A400M Atlas and the Galileo satellite system contributed to the technological dimension of EU defence capacity and reinforced the idea of strategic autonomy. Over the past decade, new domains—including cybersecurity, space security, and resilience against hybrid threats—have also been incorporated into the defence agenda.

The EU's need to act more autonomously in the military and security domain has been shaped by historical experience. Technology-transfer restrictions and examples of strategic dependence during the Cold War strengthened the perception that Europe must develop its own capabilities

in the long term. In this context, the Ariane program and European-based defence and space-industry structures have become symbols of Europe's capacity for independent action.

With the publication of the EU Global Strategy in 2016, the concept of “strategic autonomy” gained official recognition, and the launch of PESCO in 2017 initiated a deeper process of cooperation in the defence sector (Fiott, 2018). The European Defence Fund implemented for the 2021–2027 period sought to reduce fragmentation in the defence industry by financing joint research and development projects. Consequently, defence cooperation acquired not only an operational but also an industrial and technological dimension.

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine created a profound rupture in the European security architecture. Germany's decision to increase defence spending and establish a special fund of €100 billion led to significant increases in defence budgets across Europe. The EU provided military support to Ukraine through the European Peace Facility and developed joint procurement mechanisms to increase ammunition production. These developments demonstrate that the EU is evolving toward a structure capable of more coordinated and rapid decision-making in the defence domain (Council of the European Union, 2022).

Despite these developments, the European defence industry remains fragmented, and a balance must still be established between national priorities and common European interests. In the post-2022 period, issues such as ammunition production, supply-chain resilience, and military mobility have moved to the top of the EU agenda. Cooperation with NATO plays a complementary role in this context. The alignment between the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept and the EU's Strategic Compass illustrates that the two structures operate in a mutually reinforcing relationship rather than a competitive one (NATO, 2022).

Overall, European defence integration, which began in the post–Cold War period, has experienced a qualitative leap over the past decade. A structure that initially focused on crisis management and limited operational capacity has evolved into a broader security architecture that includes defence-industry coordination, joint financing mechanisms, rapidly deployable force objectives, and deterrence in the EU's neighbourhood. This transformation can be interpreted as the manifestation of the security dimension of the EU's long-term strategic objective to complete the “political” pillar of European integration.

Conclusion

The international system that emerged after the Cold War was initially defined as a unipolar structure under US hegemony. However, the rise of China, the revisionist foreign policy of Russia, and the growing influence of regional

powers have demonstrated that this structure represents not a permanent unipolar order but rather a transitional phase evolving toward multipolarity. The United States' strategic shift toward the Asia-Pacific region in the 2010s and its policies aimed at balancing China have reopened debates regarding Europe's relative position within the transatlantic security architecture. This development does not signify the weakening of transatlantic ties but rather their redefinition. Accordingly, it can be argued that security relations between the EU and the United States have gradually evolved from the one-sided dependency model of the Cold War period toward a more balanced burden-sharing model.

From this perspective, it is difficult to argue that the EU's emerging autonomous military-security policy constitutes a classical "hard balancing" strategy against US hegemony. Instead, the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy is primarily based on functional objectives such as capacity building, effectiveness in crisis management, coordination of the defence industry, and the promotion of stability in the Union's neighbourhood. An examination of the 2016 EU Global Strategy and the 2022 Strategic Compass clearly emphasizes that NATO continues to represent the cornerstone of European security.

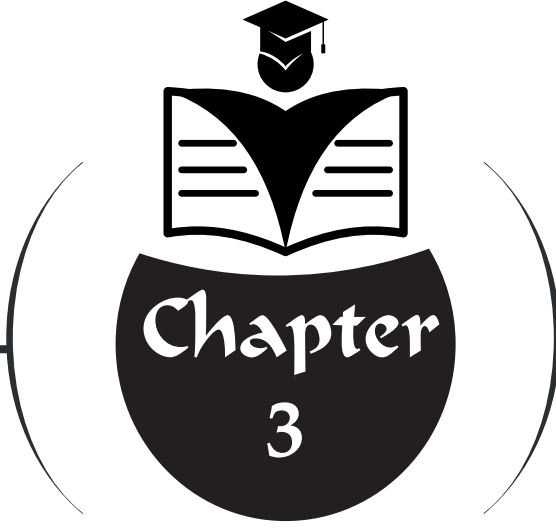
Ultimately, the EU's autonomous military-security policies should be understood not as a traditional balance-of-power strategy directed against the United States but as an extension of the Union's broader effort to strengthen its institutional cohesion and become a more influential actor within a changing international system. While responding to external threats, the EU has simultaneously seized an opportunity to deepen internal integration, using the field of security as an instrument to complete the political dimension of European integration.

Within this framework, several issues remain important areas for future research: the extent to which the EU's autonomous military-security policy—adopted to reinforce political unity—will prove successful in the long term; how strategic-culture differences among member states will be managed; the limits within which complementarity with NATO will continue; and the degree to which integration in the European defence industry will deepen.

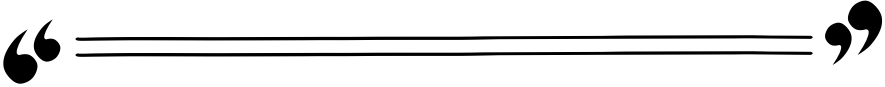
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DIGITAL DIASPORA AND TRANSNATIONAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION



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INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented advancements in globalization and information and communication technologies (ICTs) have triggered a fundamental paradigm shift in migration and diaspora studies. The conventional understanding of migration, historically framed by physical displacement, spatial rupture, and assimilation, has been restructured into the multifaceted concept of the “connected migrant” under the influence of digitalization. The proliferation of the internet and social media enables migrants to sustain ties with their homelands and construct a “digital diaspora”—also referred to as e-diaspora or web-diaspora. In this context, Ponzanesi (2020) underscores that digital diasporas transcend rigid identity politics, offering individuals the opportunity to develop multiple belongings within a postcolonial framework and establish affect-oriented cosmopolitan networks. Similarly, Oiarzabal and Reips (2012) highlight that ICTs facilitate the preservation of transnational networks for geographically dispersed communities, paving the way for the creation of cross-border virtual societies and the digital reproduction of identities. This process of digital transformation has not only simplified the transmission of cultural heritage and collective memory; it has also enabled diasporic consciousness to evolve into digital social capital, leading to the emergence of new civil society structures and transnational mobilization via virtual networks.

This transnational social space generated by digitalization has fundamentally altered the roles of diasporas in political communication. Diasporas, previously analyzed within the narrow scope of classical migration sociology, have now ascended to the status of primary political actors capable of influencing global politics, conducting civil activism, and lobbying international organizations. Ho and McConnell (2017) interpret this involvement through the concepts of “diaspora diplomacy” and “polylateralism,” noting that diasporas are no longer mere observers but are diplomatic actors who directly assume roles in representation, communication, and negotiation.

States have not remained indifferent to this bottom-up transformation and have sought to mobilize their own diasporas as instruments of soft power to achieve foreign policy objectives. For instance, the paradigm shift and institutional restructuring in Turkey’s approach to its diaspora (e.g., YTB) demonstrate how the state establishes organic ties with transnational communities through the lens of a “transnational nation-state” and long-distance nationalism. These traditional public diplomacy activities have become increasingly institutionalized through new media platforms, evolving into “digital public diplomacy”. Today, numerous states and official institutions, including Turkey (TİKA, Yunus Emre Institute, Presidency of Communications, etc.), actively utilize social networks such as Twitter (X) and popular digital content platforms like Netflix as strategic political communication tools. These platforms are employed to construct national images, establish cultural

diplomacy, and broadcast humanitarian stances in refugee crises—such as aid to Syrian refugees and refugee activism—to the international community. The asynchronous, de-massified, and interactive nature of social networks allows state institutions to engage directly with foreign publics while simultaneously maximizing the impact of civil diaspora activism.

Nevertheless, the pluralistic and empowering opportunities offered by digital diasporas and transnational political communication also bring significant security risks, social fragmentations, and authoritarian tendencies. While the internet holds potential for conflict prevention, it was noted early on by Brinkerhoff (2006) that it can also facilitate radicalization or cyber-terrorism when seized by ethnic entrepreneurs. Currently, this threat landscape has manifested as state-sponsored “digital transnational repression”. Using the case of Iran, Michaelsen (2017) illustrates how authoritarian regimes utilize digital surveillance tools as weapons to monitor, harass, silence, and spread disinformation against dissidents, journalists, and exiled human rights activists. Similarly, Adamson (2020) argues that both state and non-state actors employ long-distance or transnational repression tactics to maintain control over diasporas, creating a mechanism of “non-state authoritarianism” that constricts the civil space in diasporic fields. Furthermore, the algorithmic structures of digital storytelling can lead to “digital amnesia,” which erodes collective memory, as well as filter bubbles, micro-fascism, and polarising anti-democratic “digital racism” directed at migrants. In this context of securitization, host states also tend to perceive diaspora policies as national security threats, viewing groups organized via digital networks or those who carry homeland political issues to their new countries as risks to social cohesion. Georgiou (2013) highlights the limitations of minority representation on digital platforms, drawing attention to the exclusion and control mechanisms operating behind the facade of technological utopianism.

Given this multilayered structure, this synthesis article examines the major paradigm shift diasporas have undergone through digitalization, their roles as soft power, civil activism, and lobby actors in public diplomacy and transnational political communication. Simultaneously, it aims to provide a holistic analysis of the cyber-surveillance, non-state authoritarianism, and security crises emerging from these developments.

DIASPORA STRATEGIES AS PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION TOOLS

Propelled by the dynamics of globalization, national governments have fundamentally shifted their perception of diasporas; rather than regarding them merely as ordinary expatriate enclaves situated beyond national frontiers, states have increasingly conceptualized these groups as strategic foreign policy

assets equipped to generate substantial geopolitical leverage.¹ By stretching the orthodox boundaries that traditionally separate domestic and foreign realms, this structural evolution has engendered the paradigm of “diaspora diplomacy”—a framework that radically reconceptualizes the power trajectories and transnational relationships states orchestrate with their cross-border populations.² Furthermore, the most palpable institutional manifestation of this macro-strategic shift is evidenced by the worldwide proliferation of specialized “diaspora institutions,” a trend underpinned by the intensifying governmental focus on expatriate affairs.³ In light of this development, Gamlen et al. (2021) articulate the rationale behind state-diaspora engagements through three distinct motivational pillars: “tapping” into the lucrative economic and human resource potential of migrants, “embracing” the diaspora to extend national identity beyond territorial limits, and deploying state-sponsored “governing” policies within the broader continuum of global migration management.⁴

A quintessential manifestation of this state-centric evolution in institutional vision is evidenced by the proactive diaspora engagement policies orchestrated by Turkey, particularly throughout the post-2010 epoch. Propelled by the establishment of the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) in 2010, the Turkish state has strategically reoriented its trajectory toward cultivating a “transnational nation-state” anchored in the doctrine of “long-distance nationalism.” This paradigm fundamentally aims to insulate expatriate citizens from cultural assimilation while simultaneously empowering them as viable political actors within their host environments. The governmental apparatus has systematically mobilized transnational enclaves and their affiliated institutions to function as a formidable “soft power” capacity, actively championing the homeland’s geopolitical imperatives across the international arena.⁵ In alignment with this strategic vision, Akçay and Demircioğlu (2022) articulate that Turkey has instrumentalized both mass refugee influxes and its expanding diasporic leverage as potent diplomatic bargaining parameters—especially during intricate negotiations with dominant global actors such as the European Union. The authors maintain that this multifaceted and calculated maneuvering intrinsically underpins the foundational architecture of the nation’s “migration diplomacy” practices.

1 HO, E. L. E., & MCCONNELL, F. (2017), Conceptualizing ‘Diaspora Diplomacy’: Territory and Populations Betwixt the Domestic and Foreign, *Progress in Human Geography*, 43(2), 235-255.

2 HO, E. L. E., & MCCONNELL, F. (2017), Conceptualizing ‘Diaspora Diplomacy’: Territory and Populations Betwixt the Domestic and Foreign, *Progress in Human Geography*, 43(2), 235-255.

3 GAMLEN, A., CUMMINGS, M. E., & VAALER, P. M. (2021), *Explaining the Rise of Diaspora Institutions, The Microfoundations of Diaspora Politics*, 20-44, Routledge.

4 ELİTAŞ, T. (2023), The Role of Digital Platforms in Public Diplomacy and Netflix, ELİTAŞ, L. (Ed.), *Maintaining International Relations Through Digital Public Diplomacy Policies and Discourses*, IGI Global, 65-80.

5 ARKILIC, A. (2021), Explaining the Evolution of Turkey’s Diaspora Engagement Policy: A Holistic Approach, *Diaspora Studies*, 14(1), 1-21.

When evaluating Turkey's state-centric implementations through a comparative lens, the digital diaspora diplomacy tactics orchestrated by Greek (HALC), Armenian (ANCA), and Jewish (AJC) civil society organizations operating in the United States emerge as highly salient. By strategically harnessing the "in-betweenness" and bridge-building capacities inherently afforded by their diasporic identities, these non-governmental entities have underpinned comprehensive efforts to safeguard the "ontological and physical security" of their respective communities. Furthermore, they exhibit a formidable leverage in embedding the geopolitical imperatives of their homelands—ranging from the recognition of the Armenian Genocide to the facilitation of the Abraham Accords and peace initiatives, or the protection of Eastern Mediterranean security interests—directly into the foreign policy frameworks of the host state.⁶

Consequently, the organizational and political communication proficiencies of diasporas have attained a decisive magnitude regarding their capacity to shape the foreign policies of host nations to the advantage of their countries of origin.⁷ Ali Afyare (2023) highlights that the Greek, Armenian, and Jewish diasporas in the U.S., in particular, function as predominant pressure groups capable of directly navigating foreign policy trajectories via the intricate communication and financial networks they have cultivated around American political policymakers. Building upon this premise, Prasad and Savatic (2023) conceptualize these diasporic foreign policy interest groups as "political entrepreneurs," systematically underscoring how such actors manage to dominate the democratic arenas, conflict dynamics, and legislative decision-making mechanisms of the host country within the broader spectrum of political communication.

The mobilization of political communication and lobbying is no longer confined merely to the diaspora's capacity to influence host states; rather, it has acquired a profound new dimension as homeland political factions increasingly conceptualize expatriate communities as critical electoral reservoirs. Demonstrating this phenomenon, Østergaard-Nielsen and Ciornei (2019) reveal how political parties in nations such as Spain, France, Italy, and Romania have orchestrated "transnational mobilization strategies" directed at cross-border constituencies, thereby transmuted the diasporic sphere into a direct arena of partisan competition. The researchers provide robust empirical evidence indicating that homeland parties systematically engineer tailored ideological discourses to maximize the emigrant vote, underpinning these efforts with substantial investments in political communication and public relations through the establishment of extensive transnational branch networks.

6 SIMAIOFORIDOU, M. (2023), *Diaspora Digital Diplomacy: A Comparative Analysis of HALC, ANCA and AJC* (Yüksek Lisans Tezi), University of Macedonia.

7 AYFARE, A. (2023), *Diaspora Politics: The Influence of Diaspora Communities on Foreign Policy*, Tutorial: Diaspora Politics.

Concurrently, the digitalization of public diplomacy via new media, social networks, and platforms such as Twitter (X) has fundamentally dismantled the traditional asymmetric hierarchy historically entrenched between the homeland state and diaspora communities. In this context, Bjola, Manor, and Adiku (2021) assert that digital communication technologies have catalyzed an empowering effect for both state ministries of foreign affairs and diasporic cohorts simultaneously, consequently forging a multifaceted and polyilateral architecture of “digital diaspora diplomacy” within cyberspace. Whereas conventional diplomatic frameworks traditionally relegated diaspora groups to the status of passive targets or mere instruments of soft power, contemporary dynamics have facilitated their evolution into proactive agents capable of generating autonomous digital narratives, orchestrating collective mobilization, and strategizing transnational operations.

Furthermore, Gilboa (2022) underscores that amidst the digital transformation of public diplomacy, diasporic populations have unequivocally repudiated the orthodox “state-to-public” asymmetric communication paradigm. According to Gilboa (2022), digital platforms have propelled diasporas to the elevated stature of “boundary spanners” who actively participate in the transnational image construction of their homelands, navigate strategic narrative warfare during geopolitical crises, and fundamentally reconfigure established diplomatic conventions. Consequently, state apparatuses can no longer impose an absolute hierarchical rhetoric upon diasporas through digital narratives; instead, they are compelled to institutionalize a more horizontal, deliberative, and networked model of communication and governance.

COLLECTIVE ACTION AND DIGITAL ACTIVISM PRACTICES IN VIRTUAL PUBLIC SPHERES

The unprecedented advancements in globalization and internet technologies have radically reconfigured the “bottom-up” organizational practices of non-state actors and civil society, thereby cultivating a novel foundation for collective action within virtual public spheres. In light of this transformation, “stateless diasporas”—communities devoid of an independent, sovereign nation-state—strategically operationalize digital ecosystems as a “virtual homeland” to sustain their diasporic consciousness and orchestrate political mobilization. Substantiating this phenomenon, Adamson (2016) elucidates how transnational separatist and ethno-nationalist factions mobilize diasporic populations to amass global material and political backing, explicitly drawing upon the paradigms of the Tamil (LTTE) and Kurdish diasporas. Consequently, Adamson (2016) posits that cyberspace has metamorphosed into a contested political arena where identities circumventing state hegemony are propagated, and national apparatuses are virtually reconstituted (e.g., the conceptualization of a “Virtual Tamil Eelam” or “Virtual Kurdistan”). Furthermore, in a focused empirical inquiry into the Kurdish diaspora, Keles

(2016) asserts that the internet operates as a potent generator of “digital social capital,” which fundamentally stimulates the civic engagement and integration of marginalized sub-groups into the broader civil society. By transcending rigid physical boundaries, these interconnected networks engender vital elements of trust, reciprocity, and solidarity; consequently, they empower stateless cohorts to institutionalize a formidable mechanism of collective resistance and social mobility, wherein their political, cultural, and human capital are seamlessly synthesized.

Virtual public spheres function as a critical arena of resistance against the representational paradigms of mainstream media, which conventionally frame refugees as passive, destitute, and perpetual “victims.” Drawing upon the young Congolese diaspora in the United Kingdom—specifically the Geno-cost initiative and JJ Bola’s performative poetry—Godin and Doná (2016) systematically elucidate how refugee youth have architected social media platforms into an alternative “counter-public sphere.” Consequently, novel digital ecosystems have empowered refugees to unequivocally repudiate the stereotype of passivity. Instead, these platforms have facilitated their capacity to author “counter-hegemonic” narratives regarding the root causes of systemic violence and conflicts, thereby enabling them, as proactive political actors, to autonomously reclaim the ownership and belonging of their own “voices.” Corroborating these dynamics, Anderson and Daniel (2020) underscore that young refugees residing in Norway instrumentalize social media not merely for basic communication and information acquisition, but fundamentally as a strategic apparatus for self-representation and for contesting the marginalizing depictions perpetuated by mainstream outlets. In this trajectory, digitalization has underpinned a proactive contribution to their integration and identity formation by transmuted their lived traumas into a galvanized political consciousness.

Furthermore, bottom-up civil mobilization vividly manifests itself through networked models of transnational resistance cultivated against non-state authoritarianism and repressive regimes. Investigating this phenomenon, Putra (2024) meticulously analyzes the “#MilkTeaAlliance,” which emerged as a digital insurrection against autocratic governance across Southeast Asia, particularly in response to the military coup in Myanmar. Characterized by its non-hierarchical infrastructure, this movement has orchestrated instantaneous information dissemination, catalyzed “silent strikes,” and broadcasted human rights atrocities to the global public sphere; thereby cementing a robust transnational democratic solidarity among activists navigating disparate geographical boundaries. In a congruent analysis examining the digital political cultures of the Middle East (e.g., Egypt, Tunisia, and Lebanon) during and succeeding the Arab Spring, Mahloully (2023) highlights that progressive youth dissidents have strategically deployed decentralized, grassroots-driven informal communication practices to bypass stringent censorship apparatuses.

Ultimately, this “connective action” architecture inherent to civil resistance harbors a profound potential to engender a more organic and inventive political agenda compared to the rigid confines of conventional institutional politics.

The collective actions of migrants within virtual environments transcend momentary mobilizations during profound geopolitical crises; rather, they inherently embody a perpetual construction of meaning interwoven into everyday life practices. As distinctly underscored by scholars such as Oiarzabal and Reips (2012) alongside Zhao (2022) in the broader literature, information and communication technologies have substantially deepened the “translocal” practices of migrant populations. Propelled by digitalization, these individuals successfully acculturate to the cultural dynamics of their newly settled host societies while concurrently sustaining intense connectivity with their homeland networks. Consequently, they experience a dual state of being “from both here and there,” essentially cultivating a robust “transnational habitus.” This asynchronous yet perpetual communication paradigm—exemplified by the ubiquitous utilization of smartphones and applications like WhatsApp—has fundamentally detached the concept of belonging from mere geographical territoriality. Instead, it operates as an uninterrupted nexus that constantly rejuvenates political consciousness in daily routines and relentlessly reproduces the diasporic identity.

Virtual public spheres concurrently serve a pivotal function in empowering diasporic communities to safeguard their shared historical heritage and orchestrate the reconstruction of their collective memory. Substantiating this dynamic, Kianpour et al. (2025) posit that social media infrastructures facilitate the dissemination of migrants’ intimate memoirs and cultural narratives to expansive audiences, thereby engendering a robust “digital heritage.” By functioning as interactive repositories of memory, these digital platforms cultivate subterranean discursive arenas that actively contest hegemonic, state-sanctioned narratives, ultimately catalyzing the emergence of a novel historical consciousness.

Furthermore, empirical observations by Panchal and Mago (2024) elucidate how the Indian, Filipino, and Nigerian diasporas instrumentalize networking sites—predominantly Facebook and YouTube—as comprehensive digital archives. This strategic utilization underpins their capacity to transmit integral cultural paradigms, encompassing traditional choreography, musical expressions, ritualistic ceremonies, and gastronomy, seamlessly across transnational frontiers.

Consequently, rather than operating merely as static mechanisms for nostalgic preservation, these digital ecosystems facilitate the cultural hybridization of traditional practices by integrating them into novel environmental contexts; a process that profoundly fortifies the diasporic sense of belonging. Nevertheless, this digital terrain is not devoid of structural

vulnerabilities. The algorithmic architecture that systematically engenders filter bubbles, coupled with the inherently ephemeral nature of online content that risks precipitating “digital amnesia,” continue to represent formidable, contemporary impediments to the cohesive construction of collective identity among diasporic populations.

DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM AND TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Authoritarian regimes increasingly resort to “transnational repression” to suppress dissent and obstruct the political activities of activists and journalists residing abroad. Moss (2016) emphasizes how authoritarian states paralyze the political mobilization of the diaspora even beyond borders through methods such as diplomatic missions, agents, threats, and proxy punishment against relatives in the homeland. The evolution of ICTs has extended these repressive apparatuses into cyberspace, giving rise to “digital transnational repression”. Using the case of Iran, Michaelsen (2018) provides a comprehensive analysis of how state security agents utilize digital surveillance, spearphishing, spyware, and social media manipulation to monitor exiled activists. These strategies aim to sever the communication networks between activists and their homelands by sowing fear and mistrust within the diaspora. Similarly, Ogbazghi (2025) examines the systematic digital repression policies of the Eritrean regime (PFDJ) targeting dissidents abroad. According to Ogbazghi (2025) the Eritrean state uses informant networks and trolls to conduct organized smear campaigns, targeted harassment, and disinformation, forcing the diaspora into self-censorship and fragmenting transnational civil society.

While diaspora politics is often celebrated as a democratizing transnational space, the mechanisms of repression and surveillance are not exclusive to nation-states. Adamson (2019) utilizes the concept of “non-state authoritarianism” to explain how dominant actors within diasporas (such as armed groups or extremist nationalist/secessionist organizations) establish strict hierarchies and hegemony over their members. Such groups actively use authoritarian practices like blackmail, extortion, ideological loyalty impositions, and the creation of leadership cults to marginalize rival factions and alternative voices. Consequently, ordinary diaspora members may find themselves silenced within their own communities, subjected to the intimidation mechanisms of both homeland states and non-state diaspora elites.

To analyze the multilayered structure of authoritarianism in political communication and transnational space, it is essential to view it not merely as a “regime type” but as a continuously produced “set of practices”. Glasius (2018) defines authoritarian practices as actions by political power that use secrecy, disinformation, and the sabotage of accountability to “disable the voice” of dissidents. The spillover of homeland conflicts and authoritarian practices

across borders also profoundly affects the policies and security frameworks of host states. Baser and Feron (2018) state that host states perceive aggressive diaspora engagement policies by homeland states as direct threats to their national sovereignty and public order. In this context, host states tend toward “securitization,” framing the diaspora as a potential “fifth column” susceptible to radicalization; thus, diaspora members become trapped between the security-oriented policies of both sides, facing double repression.

The opportunities for transnational mobilization provided by digital networks have simultaneously evolved into an exclusionary and manipulative “dark side”. Kianpour et al. (2025) critically demonstrate how the structural algorithms of social media systematically amplify echo chambers, disinformation, and polarization, thereby undermining cultural diversity. The attention economy and profit-oriented mechanisms of social media giants produce “digital racism,” anti-migrant “micro-fascism,” and a “digital amnesia” that leads to the loss of collective memory. This dark nature is further intensified when migrants are converted into political tools in geopolitical interest conflicts between sovereign nations. Avraamidou and Maria (2023) analyze how refugees and migrants are framed as political “pawns” during crises, specifically examining anti-migrant debates on Twitter (X). In these hate networks amplified by algorithms, migrants are dehumanized, depicted as invaders or weapons of enemy states, and such narratives are used to digitally legitimize Europe’s restrictive, securitized, and exclusionary border policies.

CONCLUSION: FUTURE OF DIASPORA POLITICS AND TRANSFORMATION OF STATE SOVEREIGNTY

This research demonstrates that digitalization has transformed diaspora communities from passive migrant groups into some of the most dynamic and multidimensional actors in transnational political communication. The examined literature and current practices indicate that digital platforms have provided diasporas with a unique capacity to construct their own narratives, intervene remotely in homeland politics, and conduct global lobbying. However, this technological shift has simultaneously created new crisis areas that challenge the limits of nation-state sovereignty and carry authoritarian practices into the digital realm. A synthesis of the core debates reveals that the digital diaspora phenomenon is centered around three primary axes.

First, states have institutionalized the diaspora as a soft power instrument and a strategic foreign policy asset through “top-down” mechanisms. The paradigm shift seen in Turkey illustrates that the diaspora is no longer just an economic resource but a symbolic and political component of building a “transnational nation-state”. Second, “bottom-up” civil mobilization has transformed the digital sphere into a “virtual homeland” and counter-hegemonic platform, particularly for refugee and stateless communities. Social

media has allowed these groups to protect their identity and memory against exclusionary mainstream narratives and has opened doors for transnational democratic solidarity through networked, non-hierarchical organizations.

The third and perhaps most critical finding is the institutionalization of new-generation threats such as “transnational repression” and “non-state authoritarianism” through digitalization. The use of digital surveillance by authoritarian regimes to silence overseas dissidents shows that the digital space is not always an emancipatory promise but can also become a sophisticated laboratory for control. This situation places diaspora members in a “double bind” between homeland repression and host-state securitization.

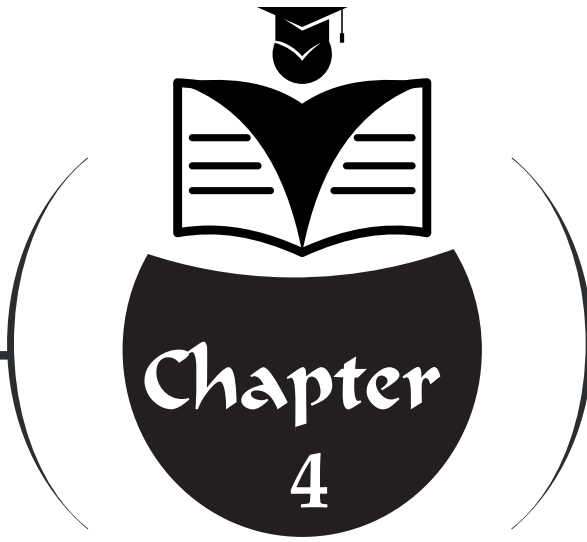
Ultimately, the future of diaspora politics will be shaped by the balance between the optimistic scenarios of technological determinism and the dystopian risks of algorithmic disinformation and digital racism. The primary condition for the digital sphere to become a democratic site of deliberation is for nation-states to abandon the instrumentalist approach that frames the diaspora as “pawns” or “security threats”. Future research must focus on the impact of AI-driven disinformation on diasporic collective memory and on how civil society can strengthen “digital resilience” against authoritarian digital practices, which is vital for the democratic future of transnational political communication.

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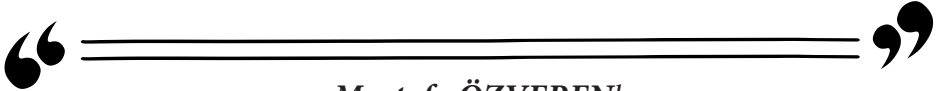
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DIGITAL CIVIL RESISTANCE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE FEBRUARY 20 MOVEMENT AND GEN Z 212 IN MOROCCO



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Introduction

Although Morocco has historically been regarded as one of the most stable monarchies in the Arab world, persistent issues such as structural inequalities, youth unemployment, corruption, and a lack of democratic representation have kept levels of social dissatisfaction consistently high. The literature indicates that the persistence of high levels of youth unemployment and opportunity inequality in Morocco contributes to widespread dissatisfaction and a sense of political exclusion, particularly among the young population. In particular, the mismatch between education and labor markets, low youth labor force participation, and the negative effects of unequal opportunities on young people are highlighted (Yassine & Bakass, 2023; Adnani, 2025). Research indicates that the NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) status of young people leads to negative consequences not only economically but also psychologically and socially. Among NEET youth, negative effects such as low well-being, increased social exclusion, poor health, and a sense of unwell-being are evident (Rahmani & Groot, 2023). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) report *Global Employment Trends for Youth 2024*, there are significant challenges in integrating young people into the labor market worldwide, with millions of young people either unemployed or in unsuitable jobs (ILO, 2024). This situation highlights the negative impact of structural issues, such as the mismatch between education and the job market and the lack of job opportunities, on young people. Studies conducted in the African context have identified the mismatch between education and the labor market as one of the primary causes of youth unemployment; it is noted that this mismatch reduces young people's employment prospects and complicates their job-seeking processes (Morsy & Mukasa, 2019). Today, this mismatch plays a significant role in the increasing conflicts between young and middle-aged populations and among nations in many parts of the world.

Corruption and the lack of democratic representation weaken young people's institutional trust, thereby increasing levels of social dissatisfaction (Kim, 2019; Biney & Amoateng, 2019; U4, 2024). Perceptions of corruption erode young people's trust in the political system and reduce rates of democratic participation. Global research indicates that young people view corruption as a threat to the functioning of democracy and that this perception is closely linked to political dissatisfaction (Kim, 2019). According to a report by the International Anti-Corruption Resource (U4), corruption has negative effects on young people, leading to disparities in education, employment opportunities, and political participation. Corruption increases young people's distrust of political institutions and can create dissatisfaction with civic participation. This report presents international evidence showing that corruption negatively affects young people's living conditions and their perspective on politics (U4, 2024). In the African context, it demonstrates that corruption, the lack of

democratic representation, and poor governance lead to dissatisfaction and political marginalization, particularly among the youth population (Akande & Bimbola, 2025). A qualitative study conducted in Ghana found that perceptions of corruption and distrust in political institutions underlie young people's lack of political participation; young people associated politicians and political processes with being "unfair" (Biney & Amoateng, 2019). In Nigeria, some studies have shown that factors such as corruption, poor governance, and a lack of political representation increase young people's dissatisfaction with and resistance toward the state. This contributes to social unrest and protest behavior (Akande & Bimbola, 2025). A public opinion survey covering the 2023–2024 period in Morocco reveals that a significant portion of the population views corruption as one of the country's major problems and that trust in political leaders remains relatively low (Arab Barometer, 2024).

In Morocco, corruption is not merely a political issue but has become a significant matter of public perception. A significant portion of the public believes that corruption exists within public institutions, and this situation has led to low levels of trust not only in political leaders but also in democratic institutions (Afrobarometer, 2022). This perception has emerged as a key factor driving the public's demands for democratic representation and institutional accountability into the streets. In this context, the country has been shaped by waves of protests that emerged at various times in the 21st century. The first and most impactful of these waves was the February 20 Movement (*Mouvement du 20 Février*), which emerged during the 2011 Arab Spring. The February 20 Movement was a broad-based coalition comprising young people, left-wing parties, Amazigh (Berber) rights advocates, independent journalists, and Islamist groups such as the Justice and Benevolence Movement, during a period when social media was first used for mass mobilization. The movement's core demands included a transition to a constitutional monarchy, the fight against corruption, social justice, the rule of law, and freedom of expression. As a result of this pressure, King Mohammed VI pledged constitutional reforms, and a new constitution was adopted via a referendum in July 2011. However, subsequent academic analyses have shown that these reforms were largely symbolic and did not translate into a genuine sharing of power (Burdah, 2017).

Although the February 20 Movement eventually lost its momentum, it bolstered the legitimacy of civil protest in Morocco and reinforced the belief among young people that "change is possible." This historical legacy was revived by the Gen Z 212 (GZ 212) movement that erupted in 2025. GZ 212 takes its name from the country code 212 and the Generation Z demographic (individuals born between 1997 and 2012). However, unlike previous movements, this new wave of protests has exhibited a more direct and pluralistic structure, organized horizontally on digital platforms and free from hierarchical leadership. Protesters took to the streets with multifaceted

demands, including high youth unemployment, the collapse of health and education infrastructure, injustice in political representation, and corruption.

This article aims to analyze the core demands of the Gen Z 212 movement to understand the evolution of youth-led civil resistance in Morocco and to identify the structural issues underlying these demands. The protest culture that took shape between 2011 and 2025 should be viewed not merely as a series of episodic reactions, but as an expression of long-suppressed socioeconomic tensions and democratic expectations.

A Theoretical Perspective on Protests and Social Movements

The sociology of protest offers an interdisciplinary approach that examines social movements within their political, economic, and cultural contexts. Classical social movement theories primarily explain protests through class-based conflicts of interest and issues of access to material resources. In particular, the resource mobilization approach evaluates social movements based on the organizational capacity of rational actors, their leadership structures, and their ability to mobilize material resources (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). In this perspective, protest is primarily treated as an instrumental and strategic form of collective action. In contrast, the New Social Movements Theory (NSMT) argues that contemporary protests possess characteristics that transcend this reductive framework. According to Touraine (1985) and Melucci (1996), new social movements are shaped around symbolic and cultural demands—such as identity, recognition, lifestyle, justice, and democratic participation—rather than economic demands. This approach conceptualizes protest not merely as a tool for defending material interests, but also as a process through which collective identities are constructed and social meanings are produced.

NTMT emphasizes that these movements exhibit pluralistic and flexible structures, distinct from hierarchical organizations. Tarrow (2011) and Tilly (2004) note that protest movements are not limited to institutional politics; they are directly linked to everyday life practices, the redefinition of the public sphere, and debates over political legitimacy. In this context, protests are evaluated not as revolutionary initiatives aimed at directly seizing power, but rather as forms of collective action intended to transform public discourse, gain visibility, and challenge political boundaries. However, the New Social Movements Theory has also been the subject of various criticisms. In particular, it is argued that the theory downplays the role of economic inequalities and class positions in protest dynamics, and thus fails to adequately explain the determinative role of material conditions. These criticisms point to the need to consider the relationship between the cultural and symbolic dimensions of contemporary protests and structural economic issues together. Consequently, current analyses necessitate complementing the emphasis on identity and culture offered by NTMT with a political economy perspective.

The literature on youth and political participation reveals that the relationship young people establish with political processes has transformed significantly in recent years. Numerous studies show that young people are moving away from traditional forms of political participation—such as voting, party membership, and union activities—and are instead turning to non-institutional forms such as protest, volunteer activism, and digital participation (Furlong, 2013). This transformation is linked not to young people's political apathy but to a lack of trust in representative institutions. Norris (2011) explains the weakening of young people's ties to the political system by the declining capacity of institutional politics to respond to demands. In this context, youth is viewed not merely as a biological life stage but as a structural position defined by insecurity, uncertainty, and limited future prospects. In particular, educated yet excluded from employment opportunities, young people experience a profound disconnect in their relationship with the political system. This situation reveals that youth-based protests are not a sign of depoliticization but rather a transformation in the forms of political participation.

Digitalization, meanwhile, has brought about a fundamental transformation in the organizational forms of social movements. According to Castells (2015), digital networks largely eliminate the spatial and temporal boundaries of collective action, enabling protests to spread rapidly and on a large scale. In this context, contemporary protests are shaped not by centralized leadership but through horizontal relationships and network-based mobilization. The concept of “connective action” developed by Bennett and Segerberg (2012) explains how individual motivations and personal narratives are transformed into collective action through digital platforms. In such movements, organizational membership, ideological commitment, and discipline take a backseat, while social media, hashtags, and visual discourse become the primary mobilization tools. Gerbaudo (2017) argues that this structure does not imply absolute leaderlessness; rather, it gives rise to a symbolic form of leadership that operates through symbols, discourses, and emotional appeals. However, Tufekci (2017) points out that despite the rapid mobilization capacity of protests in the digital age, they harbor vulnerabilities regarding long-term organizational continuity and the ability to produce political outcomes. While digitalization serves as a tool that strengthens protests, it also creates new limitations in terms of institutionalization and negotiation capacity.

The February 20 Movement (2011); Historical Context

The February 20 Movement emerged as the Moroccan manifestation of the wave of protests that swept across the Arab world in 2011. However, unlike the examples in Tunisia and Egypt, the movement was not the result of a sudden rupture; rather, it took shape as a culmination of socio-economic and political discontent that had been building in Morocco since the 1990s (Bogaert & Emperador, 2011). The protests mobilized around the youth

population's response to structural issues such as unemployment, corruption, social injustice, and a lack of political representation. The movement's actors consisted largely of young people, university students, unemployed graduates, and urban middle-class individuals. While political parties, unions, and traditional civil society organizations were part of the movement, they did not assume a decisive leadership role. The February 20 Movement consciously defined itself as leaderless and horizontally structured; in this regard, it diverged from classical forms of organized opposition (Cavatorta, 2016).

The movement's core demands included constitutional reform, the limitation of executive powers, the fight against corruption, social justice, the expansion of freedom of expression, and the strengthening of democratic representation. Protesters largely avoided directly demanding the abolition of the monarchy; instead, they emphasized the rhetoric of a "parliamentary monarchy" and "accountable governance" (Sater, 2011). The banners carried during the February 20 Movement clearly reflect the movement's rhetorical framework and political demands. Slogans such as "The people want the fall of despotism" and "The people want freedom and dignity" offer an indirect critique of authoritarian rule and structural injustices without using direct anti-regime or anti-monarchy language. The demand for a "constituent assembly for a democratic Morocco," meanwhile, represents a radical call for democratization that questions the legitimacy of the current constitutional order, yet is articulated in cautious terms. These rhetorical choices demonstrate that the February 20 Movement has both integrated itself into the regional protest repertoire of the Arab Spring and developed a language of opposition that respects Morocco's specific political boundaries.



Figure 1. Demands for democracy, freedom, and an end to corruption featured on banners carried during the February 20 Movement (2011).

As a result of the social pressure generated by the February 20 Movement, the Moroccan government held a referendum on a new constitution in July 2011. This constitutional reform process provided for a limited reduction in the powers of the monarchy and included the strengthening of certain powers of the parliament and the prime minister. The new constitution introduced significant symbolic provisions in areas such as the rule of law, fundamental rights and freedoms, and the recognition of Amazigh identity (Madani and Zerbouni, 2011). However, the literature largely agrees that the reforms were partial and controlled. The King retained his central powers, particularly in the areas of security, religion, and foreign policy; the constitutional changes did not fundamentally transform the regime's core power balances (Burdah, 2017). This situation has led to the reforms being interpreted as a "preemptive accommodation" strategy aimed at quelling protests (Cavatorta, 2016).

While the February 20 Movement triggered the constitutional reform process in the short term, it remained limited in its ability to produce long-term political transformation. Among the primary reasons for the movement's failure are organizational disarray, the absence of a clear political strategy, ideological heterogeneity, and the inadequacy of institutional negotiation channels (Desrues, 2013). Additionally, the monarchy's high social legitimacy and the state's capacity to steer reforms in a controlled manner were significant factors limiting the movement's impact. From the perspective of social memory, the February 20 Movement is remembered as a major turning point in Morocco's tradition of mass and peaceful protest. Although the movement failed to fundamentally transform the political system, it redefined street protest as a legitimate means of political participation for younger generations (Bogaert and Emperador, 2011). In this regard, the February 20 Movement has become a symbolic reference point for subsequent youth-led mobilizations.

In the literature, the February 20 Movement is frequently discussed within the framework of the "exception to the Arab Spring" narrative. While some authors view the Moroccan example as a positive case in terms of the regime's flexibility and capacity for reform (Sater, 2011), others interpret this process as the authoritarian regime's ability to reproduce itself (Cavatorta, 2016). This second approach argues that constitutional reforms served to temporarily quell the wave of protests rather than resolve structural issues. Burdah's (2017) study, based on field observations, demonstrates that protests did not cease entirely after February 20; rather, they continued in more limited, thematic, and covert forms. This finding is significant for understanding the evolving forms of youth-based opposition in Morocco, moving beyond the narrative of the movement's failure. This limited transformation reveals that youth-based opposition has not disappeared; rather, the social discontent temporarily suppressed by constitutional reforms persists in different forms. This situation suggests that if young people's political demands are not met through institutional channels, they will reemerge in new forms of protest and discourse under changing political, economic, and technological conditions.

The Emergence of the Gen Z 212 Movement (2025)

The Gen Z 212 movement can be viewed as a contemporary example of networked action in the digital age, characterized by a leaderless, horizontal organizational structure that prioritizes individual participation. The Gen Z 212 movement derives its name from the symbolic combination of “Gen Z”—a reference to a generational identity—and “212,” Morocco’s international dialing code. This naming reflects the movement’s dual sense of belonging, bridging the national context with a global youth identity. It is widely emphasized in the literature on new social movements that naming and symbols play a central role in constructing collective identity (Gerbaudo, 2017).

The movement’s language and symbolic repertoire draw heavily from the aesthetic and communicative practices of digital culture. Short slogans, hashtags, visual collages, and ironic discourse are the movement’s primary means of expression. It is frequently noted in the literature that such language in digital-age protests lowers the cost of participation and transforms individual experiences into a collective political narrative (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Tufekci, 2017). Gen Z 212’s discursive repertoire relies on the construction of collective identity through slogans containing short and universal messages (See Figure 2).



Figure 2. *Protest Discourse and Visual Representation of the Gen Z 212 Movement (2025)*

The participant profile consists primarily of young, educated but precarious individuals. University students, recent graduates, unemployed youth, and individuals in the NEET category form the social base of the movement. Youth studies have shown that young people’s relationship with the political system is shaped by experiences of structural exclusion, insecurity, and an uncertain future (OECD, 2024).

The protest posters used in the Gen Z 212 movement distinctly diverge from the traditional slogan-based language of opposition. The phrase “At least there will be a first-aid kit in their stadium” offers an ironic critique of how public resources are prioritized, without directly targeting political actors. This metaphor, built around an everyday object, makes visible the young people’s experiences of insecurity, neglect, and worthlessness. The reliance of the discourse on humor and irony demonstrates that Gen Z 212 constructs political criticism within an experience-based and emotional framework rather than through harsh ideological statements. In this regard, the movement’s discourse aligns with the creative and symbolic forms of resistance prominent in digital-age protests (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Gerbaudo, 2017) (See Figure 3).



Figure 3. A protester at a demonstration in Rabat on September 29, 2025, led by young people calling for reforms in the public health and education sectors (Abdel Majid Bziouat/AFP)

The organizational structure of the Gen Z 212 movement is based on the horizontal and symbolic logic of mobilization characteristic of the digital age, rather than on traditional hierarchical leadership. As Gerbaudo (2017) emphasizes, although such movements are often described as “leaderless,” they generate a form of symbolic leadership that operates through shared symbols, slogans, and emotional appeals. Discourses disseminated through social media help construct the movement’s collective identity while facilitating individual participation. However, as Tufekci (2017) notes, such protests—which grow rapidly through digital platforms—may remain fragile in terms of producing long-term political transformation due to a lack of institutionalization and strategic depth. This situation necessitates evaluating both the mobilization power and the structural limitations of Gen Z 212.

The Gen Z 212 movement distinctly diverges from traditional forms of political organization. The movement consciously avoids establishing organic ties with political parties, unions, or official civil society organizations; it does not establish a centralized leadership structure or official representation mechanism. While this leads the movement to define itself as “leaderless,” it is not possible to speak of absolute disorganization in practice. Leadership does not take the form of charismatic figures in the classical sense; rather, it manifests as a dispersed and temporary structure shaped through discourse production, symbols, and digital visibility. Certain social media accounts, content creators, and activist networks can indirectly influence the movement’s direction; however, these actors do not claim official leadership. While this structure enhances the movement’s flexibility and inclusivity, it can also be seen as a factor that limits its capacity to develop long-term strategies.

Strategically, Gen Z 212 prefers fluctuating, spontaneous, and thematic forms of action over large-scale and sustained mass mobilization. Digital campaigns, short-term street protests, actions at symbolic locations, and online calls for solidarity form the movement’s core repertoire. While these forms of action are effective in generating visibility, they may remain limited in terms of exerting sustained pressure on institutional politics. The media’s approach to the Gen Z 212 movement is largely fragmented. Traditional media outlets often frame the movement as a scattered and temporary youth reaction, while addressing the structural dimensions of its demands only to a limited extent. In contrast, digital media has become the movement’s primary public sphere; mobilization, discourse production, and the construction of counter-narratives have largely taken place through social networks (Castells, 2015). The state’s response, however, is shaped not by overt repression but by strategies of controlled tolerance, surveillance, and discursive delegitimization. The literature emphasizes that in authoritarian or hybrid regimes, such responses to protests aim not to suppress movements but to keep them within manageable limits (Burdah, 2017).

This organizational and discursive framework provides an important context for understanding why the Gen Z 212 movement rapidly gained mass support by the end of September 2025. The movement’s emergence gained momentum not only due to long-standing structural issues but also through the catalytic effect of specific crisis moments. In particular, the visibility of serious disruptions in public services played a decisive role in transforming the pent-up dissatisfaction among young people into collective protest. At the center of these protests were debates over the prioritization of public resource allocation. The perception that budgets allocated to large-scale infrastructure and prestige projects coexist alongside inadequacies in basic public services such as health and education has eroded the sense of justice and equality among broad segments of society, particularly among young people. This

situation demonstrates that the protests were shaped not only by economic demands but also on the basis of public responsibility and social rights. The state's response to the protests, however, has focused on containing them within the framework of public order and security rather than addressing the demands through political dialogue. Security-oriented interventions and increased control over public spaces necessitate evaluating the movement not merely as a temporary youth reaction but as an expression of a deeper challenge to the legitimacy of governance practices. In this regard, the Gen Z 212 protests mark a critical breaking point where suppressed social, economic, and political discontent has come to the surface in Morocco (Dursun, 2025)

The Gen Z 212 movement offers a contemporary example of how modern youth protests are being reshaped around the axes of generational identity, digitalization, and precariousness. The movement aligns with the paradigm of new social movements through its leaderless and horizontal organizational forms; however, it contains significant limitations in terms of strategic continuity and the capacity to generate institutional impact. With these characteristics, Gen Z 212 can be assessed as a protest practice that simultaneously reflects both the possibilities and vulnerabilities of today's youth-based opposition. As emphasized in the literature on new social movements, contemporary protest movements express their demands not through a comprehensive and ideological program, but rather through diverse experiential domains that directly impact daily life. Within this framework, the demands of the Gen Z 212 movement can be examined under distinct yet intertwined headings such as youth unemployment, education and health, political representation, and corruption. The relationship between the thematic distribution of these demands and their discursive frameworks is presented in Table 1 to provide an analytical overview.

Table 1. *Thematic Breakdown of the Demands of the Gen Z 212 Movement*

Domain of Demand	Problem Domain	Discursive Framework	Structural Reference
Youth unemployment	Precarious employment	Lack of prospects, devaluation of labor	Labor market, mismatch between education and employment
Education and health	Quality of service, unequal access	Social rights, dignity, public responsibility	Welfare state, distribution of public resources
Political representation	Lack of representation, crisis of participation	Being heard, participation	Democratic legitimacy
Corruption	Nepotism, lack of meritocracy	Justice, transparency	Governance, institutional trust

Table 1 demonstrates that the demands of the Gen Z 212 movement are not random or scattered; rather, they are clustered around specific thematic areas. The four demand areas listed in the table examine, in conjunction, the problem areas highlighted in the movement's discourse, the discursive frameworks through which these problems are expressed, and the structural references upon which they are based. This approach reveals that the demands of Gen Z 212 encompass not only individual grievances but also a critique of broader economic, social, and political structures. By making the relationship between demands and discourse visible, the table explains why the movement developed an experience-based and rights-focused protest repertoire rather than an ideological program. While each of the issues—youth unemployment, education and healthcare, political representation, and corruption—points to different areas, they converge around common discursive themes such as justice, dignity, and the future. This demonstrates that the demands of the Gen Z 212 movement form not a fragmented but an interrelated and holistic framework of political dissatisfaction.

Finally, Table 1 reveals that Gen Z 212's demands link concrete problems stemming from everyday life experiences to more abstract structural critiques. In this context, the table enables an analysis of the movement's demands not only through the question of "what is being demanded," but also by examining the structural issues and discursive strategies upon which these demands are based.

1. Demands Against Youth Unemployment

The demands of the Gen Z 212 movement are shaped as a reflection of the structural problems faced by the younger generation in Morocco. Rather than an ideological program, the movement focuses on socio-economic and political issues that directly affect daily life; these demands are circulated through digital platforms using symbolic and emotional rhetoric. In this regard, the demands of Gen Z 212 align with the pluralistic, flexible, and everyday experience-based protest practices highlighted in the literature on new social movements (Melucci, 1996; Gerbaudo, 2017).

One of the central demands of the GZ 212 movement targets youth unemployment and precarious employment conditions. The persistently high unemployment rates among young people, particularly university graduates, in Morocco foster a sense of systematic marginalization among the younger generation. This situation is experienced not only as an economic problem but also as a barrier to political and social participation (ILO, 2024).

In the movement's discourse, unemployment is framed not as individual failure or a temporary problem, but as a structural injustice. In social media posts and protest slogans, themes such as "the devaluation of labor," "unemployment among the educated," and "a lack of future" take center stage; the state's employment policies are criticized. This framework transforms young people's demands from individual expectations into a collective quest for rights.

2. Calls for Reform in the Education and Health Systems

The demands of GZ 212 also include criticisms of the education and health systems. In the field of education, despite quantitative expansion, issues of quality, the mismatch between education and employment, and regional inequalities are frequently raised in the movement's discourse. The failure of a university degree to provide the expected guarantees for entering the workforce stands out as one of the key factors deepening disappointment and uncertainty about the future among young people (OECD, 2024).

The healthcare system, meanwhile, is criticized in terms of access, service quality, and the fair distribution of public resources. In the movement's discourse, healthcare is defined as a fundamental public right that must not be left to market logic. Demands regarding education and healthcare are presented within a framework that reinforces the emphasis on the welfare state; shortcomings in these areas are viewed as part of young people's experience of insecurity.

3. Demands for Political Representation and Democratization

While the GZ 212 movement avoids adopting a directly regime-opposed discourse, it expresses strong dissatisfaction with political representation mechanisms. Young people emphasize that political parties, parliament, and local governments do not represent their demands; this situation deepens the disconnect in their relationship with the political system. In the youth literature, this trend is defined as a state of distancing from institutional politics while not completely severing ties with political engagement (Henn & Foard, 2014). The movement's demands for democratization are shaped primarily around the axes of participation, accountability, and transparency. In social media discourse, phrases such as "our voices being heard," "unrepresented democracy," and "participatory politics" take center stage. These demands reflect an understanding of democratization grounded in everyday political experiences rather than classical ideological debates about democracy.

4. The Fight Against Corruption and the Demand for Institutional Transparency

Corruption and institutional distrust occupy a central place in the discourse of GZ 212. The movement addresses corruption not as an individual moral issue but as a structural problem that undermines the state-society relationship. Young people emphasize that a lack of meritocracy, nepotism, and favoritism are decisive factors in employment and access to public services (U4, 2024). In this context, transparency is presented not merely as a technical principle of governance but as a prerequisite for social justice. In the movement's discourse, anti-corruption is directly linked to experiences of economic insecurity and political exclusion.



Figure 4. *The articulation of demands centered on justice, education, health, and dignity through a collective and future-oriented discourse in protest imagery associated with the Gen Z 212 movement (2025).*

The protest imagery used in the Gen Z 212 movement demonstrates that the demands are framed within a rights-based and universal discourse. Concepts such as “justice,” “our rights,” “education,” and “health” are linked to young people’s experiences of insecurity regarding the future, without resorting to ideological language. The phrase “Health and education: dignity for our future” reveals that the demand for democratization is not limited to political rights alone; it is integrated with the concepts of social rights and dignity. This discourse demonstrates that Gen Z 212 presents its demands within a highly legitimate, inclusive, and generational framework (Melucci, 1996; Gerbaudo, 2017).

Gen Z 212’s discourse is largely produced and circulated through digital platforms. Protest posters and social media content are structured using short, striking, and emotional expressions; visual narrative takes precedence over textual discourse. The use of hashtags is one of the primary tools enabling individual experiences to be woven into a collective narrative. This aligns with the logic of “connective action” as defined by Bennett and Segerberg (2012). The heavy use of irony, humor, and colloquial language in the discourse softens the protest’s harshness while preserving its critical content. As Tufekci (2017) emphasizes, such discourse in digital-age protests facilitates rapid dissemination; however, it can sometimes limit the depth of the message. Nevertheless, the discourse of GZ 212 demonstrates that young people have developed a collective awareness of structural issues.

The demands of the GZ 212 movement focus on interrelated areas such as youth unemployment, social rights, political representation, and corruption. The movement’s discourse fosters an experience-based and emotional solidarity rather than ideological consistency; this enables broad participation. In this regard, GZ 212 offers an important case study for understanding the demands and discursive repertoire of contemporary youth protests.

Comparative Analysis: February 20 Movement & GEN Z 212

1. Similarities: Triggers, Structural Issues

Both movements emerged not from sudden and temporary crises, but from the accumulation of long-standing structural issues. Although the February 20 Movement gained visibility within the context of the Arab Spring, issues such as youth unemployment, corruption, social injustice, and lack of political representation had been part of the protest dynamics in Morocco since the 1990s (Bogaert & Emperador, 2011). Similarly, the Gen Z 212 Movement took shape amid an environment of deepening insecurity driven by the pandemic and the global economic downturn, shaped by the uncertainties young people face in transitioning to employment and the weakening of their future expectations (OECD, 2024).

The common ground between both movements is the experience of structural exclusion among youth. Young people who, despite being educated, cannot access employment and feel they are not represented in political decision-making processes are using protest as an alternative space for political expression. This aligns with the trend of “non-institutional political participation” highlighted in the youth literature (Henn & Foard, 2014).

2. Differences: Organizational Structure, Tools, Leadership, Ideological Orientation

The most significant difference between the February 20 Movement and Gen Z 212 arises from their forms of organization and the tools they use. While the February 20 Movement was an early adopter of social media, it was primarily organized around street protests, physical spaces, and face-to-face mobilization. Although the movement claimed to be leaderless, the indirect influence of human rights organizations, leftist groups, and some Islamic movements was felt (Cavatorta, 2016). In contrast, the Gen Z 212 Movement emerged at a much more advanced stage of digitalization, organizing itself largely through online networks. Hashtag campaigns, visual content, and short-term calls became the main mobilization tools of the movement. This structure aligns more strongly with the “connective action” model defined by Bennett and Segerberg (2012).

There is also an important divergence in terms of leadership. While issues of spokespersonship and representation became more visible over time in the February 20 Movement, the Gen Z 212 Movement consciously rejects leadership, exhibiting a more dispersed and temporary structure. However, as Gerbaudo (2017) notes, this does not mean absolute leaderlessness; symbolic forms of leadership emerge through symbols and discourses.

In terms of ideological orientation, the February 20 Movement placed demands for constitutional reform and democratization more clearly within a political framework. In contrast, the Gen Z 212 Movement adopts an experience-based, everyday, and emotional discourse rather than ideological consistency. While this increases the movement's inclusivity, it can also be seen as a factor that limits its capacity to produce a long-term political program.

3. Effects on Political Outcomes

In terms of political outcomes, there is a clear difference between the February 20 Movement and Gen Z 212. The February 20 Movement triggered the process of constitutional reform and produced tangible results. Although these reforms were limited and controlled, the movement had a direct impact on the political system (Burdah, 2017). The Gen Z 212 Movement has not yet produced an institutional transformation of similar scale. Nevertheless, the movement has transformed forms of political participation and made youth demands more visible in the public sphere. As Tufekci (2017) notes, protests in the digital age may struggle to produce immediate political results. However, they can have a significant impact on political culture and consciousness in the long run. In this context, the February 20 Movement is a turning point for reformist politics in Morocco. The Gen Z 212 Movement represents the evolving forms and continuity of youth-based opposition. The relationship between the two movements is not a rupture but a formal transformation within historical continuity. Both the February 20 and Gen Z 212 movements are fueled by the same structural problems. However, they have developed different protest practices under different historical, technological, and generational conditions. This demonstrates that youth-based opposition in Morocco is a dynamic process that adapts to changing circumstances.

Conclusion

The Gen Z 212 movement makes a significant contribution to the formal transformation of civil resistance in Morocco. While the February 20 Movement made civil resistance visible through mass street protests and demands for constitutional reform, Gen Z 212 has transformed this legacy into a more dispersed, digital, and experience-based protest practice. This transformation demonstrates that protest is not confined solely to physical public spaces; digital platforms have also become arenas for political struggle (Castells, 2015; Tufekci, 2017). The movement's leaderless and horizontal structure makes civil resistance more inclusive, creating new channels of participation for youth groups excluded from traditional opposition forms. In this sense, GZ 212 not only sustains the tradition of civil resistance in Morocco but also plays a role in adapting it to generational and technological conditions.

The example of Gen Z 212 shows that the future of youth-based opposition in Morocco proceeds along a path that remains distant from institutional politics, but is not completely cut off from it. Young people, due to their distrust

of political parties and official mechanisms of representation, turn to alternative forms of participation; protest, digital activism, and thematic campaigns stand out in this context (Henn & Foard, 2014). However, the long-term political impact capacity of these kinds of movements can remain limited due to a lack of organizational continuity and strategic depth. As Bennett and Segerberg (2012) point out, while the logic of connective action enables rapid mobilization, it presents structural challenges in translating demands into institutional politics. This shows that the future of youth-based opposition depends on the extent to which it can balance digital flexibility with institutional impact. Nevertheless, the political impact capacity of the Gen Z 212 movement is shaped within the institutional boundaries of Morocco's monarchical governance structure. The monarchy's strong executive powers, its decisive position over the political field, and the security-oriented and adaptive strategies developed to manage protests limit the direct penetration of youth-based opposition into institutional politics. While this situation makes Gen Z 212's demands effective in terms of generating legitimacy and public visibility, it complicates their permanent reflection in political decision-making processes.

The Gen Z 212 movement once again makes visible the fact that democratization and the struggle for social justice in Morocco are incomplete processes. The movement's demands show that constitutional reforms have been insufficient in eliminating structural inequalities and political exclusion (Burdah, 2017). The persistence of issues such as youth unemployment, corruption, and institutional distrust demonstrates that democratization cannot be confined to legal regulations alone. In this context, GZ 212 offers a perspective that redefines democratization not only in terms of regime change or constitutional reform, but also along the axes of social justice, economic equality, and representation. This aligns with the increasingly emphasized approach of "substantive democracy" in the democratization literature (Norris, 2011). The findings of this study indicate that youth-based discontent in Morocco cannot be managed solely through security-based or temporary policies. Developing active employment policies to tackle youth unemployment, strengthening the alignment between education and employment, and implementing merit-based public policies should be among the primary priorities (ILO, 2024; OECD, 2024). Additionally, creating mechanisms to ensure the meaningful participation of youth in political decision-making processes can help supplement protest politics with institutional channels. In this context, the Gen Z 212 movement constitutes a manageable but undeniable area of social pressure for the regime rather than a direct existential threat. While the movement's rhetoric avoids openly targeting the monarchy, thus preventing an explicit rupture with the regime, the continued demands for social justice, employment, and governance act as a warning that challenges the current political order's capacity to generate legitimacy. In this regard, Gen Z 212 can be considered a protest practice that makes visible the limits of authoritarian stability in Morocco.

This research also has certain limitations. The relatively new and dynamic nature of the Gen Z 212 movement makes it difficult to fully assess its long-term effects. Furthermore, the study is mainly based on secondary sources and discourse analysis. It is important that future research supports these findings with fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and quantitative data analysis. This study offers a unique contribution to the literature by addressing youth-based protests in Morocco not merely as an aftershock of the Arab Spring, but as a political practice reshaped by digitalization, generational experiences, and structural insecurity. The comparative analysis of the February 20 Movement and Gen Z 212 reveals that youth opposition progresses not through ruptures but through transformations; forms of protest, discourses, and channels of participation gain continuity by adapting to the changing context.

In conclusion, the Gen Z 212 movement highlights the evolving forms, possibilities, and limitations of youth-based opposition in Morocco. The movement adapts the tradition of civil resistance to the conditions of the digital age; however, its capacity to produce lasting results in democratization and social justice remains dependent on the implementation of structural reforms. In this respect, GZ 212 demonstrates that youth in Morocco are not only a subject of protest, but are also among the key actors shaping the country's democratic future.

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