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## Testimony: NATO Political Cohesion

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As the [NATO Parliamentary Assembly observed](#) on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Alliance’s founding in 2019, NATO’s might derives not only from “the military, economic, and technological strength of its members, but also from the commitment to the shared principles and values that underpin the transatlantic community”. Enshrined in the preamble of the founding [North Atlantic Treaty](#), these principles and values include “democracy, individual liberty, and rule of law” as well as a commitment to contribute to “the development of peaceful and friendly international relations”.

Today these principles are unequally upheld across NATO. Examples include attempts by the Turkish, Hungarian, Greek, Polish, and Slovenian governments to constrain [freedom of the media](#) or, as with Turkey, Hungary and Poland, to marginalize the opposition. A related phenomenon is some members’ willingness to pursue national decisions even when they run counter to NATO’s collective interests. This is the case with Turkey’s acquisition of the Russia S-400 system, which can compromise NATO’s integrated air defense. As a number of allies embrace heightened nationalism, they are increasing internal friction by bringing bilateral disputes into NATO business, a practice that was once taboo.

While some argue that these are isolated instances, and NATO has experienced democratic backsliding among members in the past, the situation is more urgent this time. In short, the deficit in NATO internal values has become an external security threat.

This democratic deficit creates societal vulnerabilities and polarization that adversaries can exploit, as seen in Russia’s attempt to prey on the grievances of racial and ethnic minorities in NATO member countries in order to weaken national-level governance. It also undermines NATO’s reputation as a credible actor in capacity building and rule of law missions. Over time, frustration with members’ democratic backsliding erodes trust and undermines political cohesion. And when political cohesion falters, it affects NATO’s collective ability to act.



With NATO in the midst of an adaptation process and a new U.S. administration committed to defending democratic values and revitalizing NATO, the time is right for tackling this issue. To this end, we recommend a graduated approach that consists of three phases:

- First, Allies should recommit to abide by the principles of the North Atlantic Treaty. This could take the form of a standalone ‘pledge’ or be incorporated into the Summit Communiqué. At a minimum, language should be embedded in an updated Strategic Concept that NATO is likely to launch at the June Summit.
- Second, NATO should monitor or review individual allies’ compliance with these principles. Benchmarks on democratic resilience, informed by the EU’s new Rule of Law Mechanism, could be added to NATO’s existing resilience metrics and evaluated in an annual report. This would provide a basis for periodic discussion similar to how NATO reviews members’ progress on burden sharing. Rather than set up a new Center of Excellence for Democratic Resilience, this mandate could be assigned to NATO’s International Secretariat under the authority of either the ASG for Political Affairs or the Deputy Secretary General. Joint NATO-EU Resilience Response Teams could provide advice or assistance to members who want help addressing their societal vulnerabilities.
- Third, NATO must raise the political costs for allies who break the rules. This would require creative use of both incentives and disincentives. The former might include favorable considerations for leadership positions or Ministerial locations, whereas the latter might entail suspension from participation in specific committees, military meetings, or exercises. In the most serious cases, pressure can also be brought to bear through bilateral and EU channels.

While confronting NATO’s internal challenges is not an easy task, it is an essential one. Left unaddressed, political cohesion will falter and inhibit the Alliance’s ability to act in defense of its collective interests. As NATO Secretary General [Stoltenberg reminded](#) allies in his launch of the NATO 2030 process in February, NATO’s values “are not abstract notions. They are at the very core of who we are.”