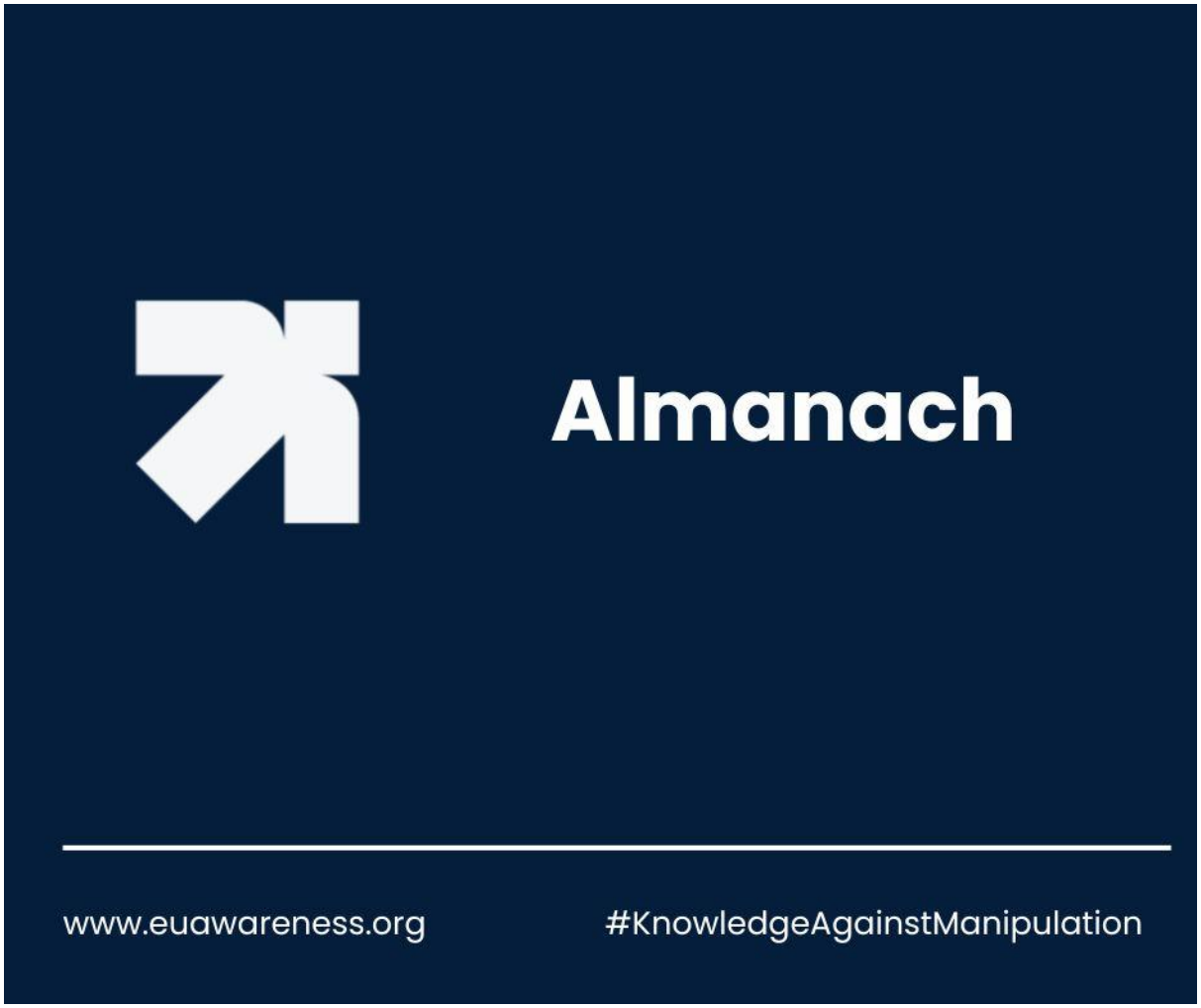


Almanach #14

Opinion paper by Samuele Rea

Shared Vulnerability, Shared Responsibility: Towards a European Sense of Belonging

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Shared Vulnerability, Shared Responsibility: Towards a European Sense of Belonging

Cyberattacks on commercial refrigeration systems raise questions about the everyday dependencies that connect European societies. This opinion paper considers how shared vulnerabilities might contribute to a sense of European belonging, while distinguishing confirmed incidents from uncertain attribution and possible psychological effects. It argues that belonging needs tangible foundations: reliable services, accountable institutions and visible cooperation. A European political community must also accommodate national and local identities, scrutiny and dissent. Fear alone cannot sustain such a project.

Walking into a supermarket, choosing the items on our shopping list, paying and going home. For those who can afford it, this is one of the most ordinary routines of daily life. Precisely because it is so ordinary, we rarely pause to consider the conditions that make it possible. We expect the refrigerators to work, the food to have been stored correctly and payment systems to be available. Behind these expectations lies a network of technology, labour and responsibilities that usually remains outside our field of vision.

When part of this network stops working, a seemingly technical disruption can make the conditions of everyday security visible.

On 2 November 2026, the Radenza Group told ANSA that attacks had altered refrigeration settings and spoiled food in at least four Coop supermarkets in Sicily, three in Catania and one in Palermo. That same day, the Associated Press reported that Carrefour had confirmed an attack affecting refrigeration at 15 Belgian stores and that Musgrave had taken chilled and frozen products off sale as a precaution after a cyber incident affected 13 SuperValu stores in Ireland.

Italy's National Cybersecurity Agency had already urged food distributors and cold-chain operators to secure their refrigeration systems on 13 October, following an attack on French supermarkets. These disruptions affect equipment and businesses, but they also touch the material conditions around which we organise our day.

The available reporting leaves open who carried out the attacks, whether the incidents were connected and what purpose they served. Automatically classifying every incident as hybrid warfare would anticipate a conclusion that requires evidence.

The European context nevertheless makes it relevant to consider hybrid threats. The Council of the European Union describes them as coordinated harmful activities that may combine cyberattacks, information manipulation and other means to undermine states and institutions. This framework

helps us formulate questions about incidents; attributing individual cases requires specific investigation.

To understand the public significance of a vulnerability, however, we also need to consider how it enters our experience.

Construal-level theory, developed by Yaacov Trope and Nira Liberman, offers a lens for thinking about what feels near and what feels far away. We tend to picture psychologically distant events in more abstract terms. When a threat concerns a place we frequent, it acquires details and consequences closer to our experience.

The possibility of disruption brings the reliability of the services I depend on into focus. I want to know who is responsible for protecting them and who intervenes when something goes wrong.

These concerns can coexist with trust in government. In a survey experiment by Matzkin, Shandler and Canetti, exposure to simulated news reports of cyberattacks on rail infrastructure had no direct effect on trust in government in the United States, the United Kingdom or Israel. Collective reactions need to be studied rather than inferred from an event's apparent severity.

This is where I would locate the European question.

When a vulnerability extends across several countries, we can address it through technical measures, institutional cooperation and shared responsibilities. The political challenge is to make that cooperation recognisable in everyday life. When a warning issued after an incident abroad helps protect the supermarket down the road, the local and European dimensions of the problem come into view together.

My argument is that this kind of cooperation could bridge the distance between what feels close to us and what we understand as European. Knowing which institutions intervene, how they cooperate and whom to hold accountable could give concrete substance to a form of belonging often expressed in abstract terms. In learning to take responsibility for what happens beyond our immediate surroundings, perhaps we could come to feel more European.

A shared threat can also be read as a reason to retreat behind national borders. Fear alone is therefore an insufficient foundation for a European project. That project must be assessed through the quality of its responses, the distribution of burdens and the opportunities to participate in decisions.

What, then, do we mean when we speak of a "European people"?

I mean a political community in which people with different languages, histories and affiliations recognise certain problems as common and accept shared responsibility for addressing them. A

sense of belonging that can coexist with national and local identities, without demanding that they be erased.

This is the supranational space that interests me: cohesive, yet differentiated. A space in which differences can be expressed and debated within a framework of mutual responsibility. Dissent must have a place within it: the willingness to criticise a European decision is part of participating in that community.

Journalism also has a role in this perspective. Reporting organised exclusively within national boundaries risks leaving the connections between cross-border problems in the background. Placing a European dimension alongside the local one would allow closer examination of shared dependencies and institutional responses.

The media's task is to verify, contextualise and hold those responsible to account. Journalists can show where cooperation works, where it fails and which interests come into conflict. The credibility of a European public sphere also depends on the ability to report its shortcomings.

Likewise, discussion of external threats must be accompanied by an examination of our internal vulnerabilities: organisational preparedness, clear communication, accessible information and the willingness to take responsibility. Distinguishing the perpetrator of an attack from the weaknesses that enable or aggravate its effects allows us to address both problems.

We live in a world that changes without asking our permission. Faced with that change, I would propose giving European resilience a recognisable meaning: more reliable services, understandable communication, verifiable cooperation and institutions that can be held accountable for their decisions.

A shared sense of belonging is also built through these experiences. Through the possibility of recognising that the everyday security of people living beyond our borders concerns us too.

The ordinary act of walking into a supermarket can become a starting point from which to observe a wider network of dependencies. Understanding that network gives us a concrete reason to discuss what we are willing to do together.



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