COLLECTION OF ARTICLES

The EU amidst global shifts

Navigating the path to democracy in unstable times

ENoP
EUROPEAN NETWORK OF POLITICAL FOUNDATIONS

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Navigating the path to
democracy in unstable times

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FOREWORD

Dear readers,

The year 2024 marked an unprecedented moment for global democracy, with over 70 elections held around the world, including the European elections that ushered in a new European Parliament and a new European Commission.

In this publication, ENoP brings together a series of articles written by experts and practitioners affiliated with our member foundations, each offering a perspective on the post-election challenges that lie ahead. Each contribution explores a different facet of the new EU mandate in the current geopolitical context, ranging from foreign policy to democracy support, competitiveness, digital and technological advancements, as well as the future of the European Green Deal. The publication features contributions from six of our member foundations: Fondation Gabriel Péri, Hanns Seidel Stiftung, Green Forum Sweden, Projekt Polska, Kristdemokratiskt Internationellt Center, and the Konstantinos Karamanlis Institute for Democracy, offering a diversity of political perspectives reflective of ENoP's membership.

This publication explores some of the key themes expected to shape the European Union's agenda in the years ahead. From transatlantic relations and trade developments to global democracy support, technological transformation, digital regulation, and the evolving role of Central European countries within the EU, the contributions reflect on how global and regional shifts are influencing European policymaking. The articles also consider questions around the ecological transition, colonialism, election integrity and the EU's positioning in a changing geopolitical environment. Together, they provide a cross-cutting perspective on the opportunities and challenges facing Europe in the aftermath of the 2024 elections.

I hope that the reflections and ideas presented here offer not only insights but also inspiration for the new EU mandate.

Best regards,
Jules Maaten, ENoP President

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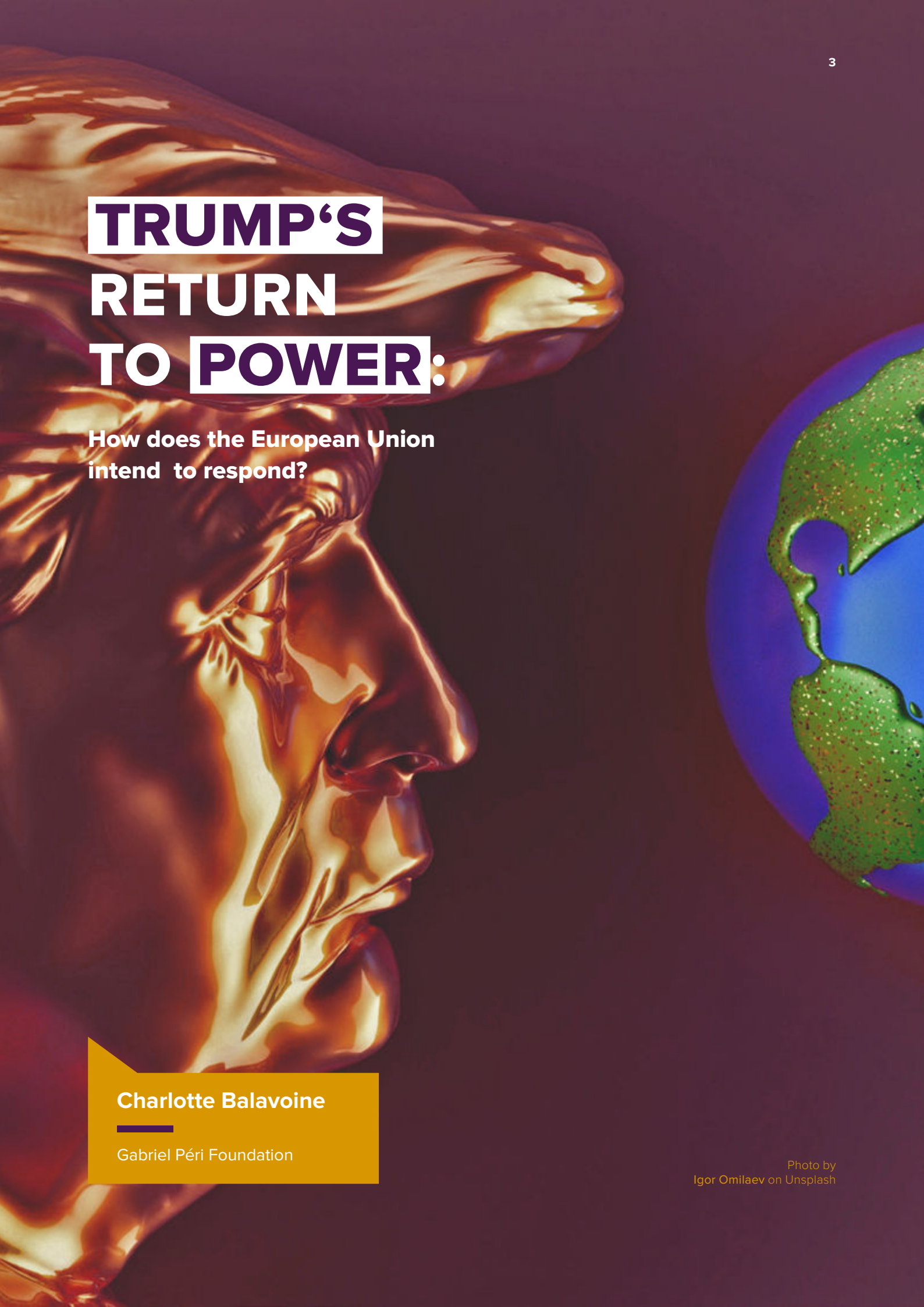

Charlotte Balavoine

Gabriel Péri Foundation

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THE AGGRESSIVENESS OF THE UNITED STATES IN A CONTEXT OF INTERTWINING ECONOMIES.

Since his return to power in January 2025, D. Trump and his government have triggered multiple instances of outrage and coercive measures on an international scale and in particular vis-à-vis countries or regional organisations previously considered as allies: Canada, Mexico, Ukraine and of course the European Union (EU). Apart from the words and the abandonment of the rhetoric of human rights – which the West has held dear for three decades – to legitimise its interference and interventions on a global scale, the United States wants to engage in a real economic war, including with its "partners".

While the strategy of the world's leading power is changing, the stakes remain the same: a desire for economic recovery in a context of scarcity of resources and rare earths and to maintain its hegemony at a time when the Western camp is increasingly being challenged by the countries of the South and where new powers such as China are on the offensive.

This is all the more alarming for the European Union, as its economy is totally linked to that of the United States. The intertwining of trade and industrial policies between the two entities has even strengthened since the renewal of the transatlantic partnership in

„The United States wants to engage in a real economic war – including with its ‚partners'."

2021. In addition, the joint statement from the second EU-US summit on 20 October 2023, which emphasises the further consolidation of this *"cooperation to address the pressing challenges and emerging opportunities of our time, in terms of strengthening our economic security, promoting reliable, sustainable, affordable and secure energy transitions, both within our economies and globally, strengthening multilateralism and international cooperation, and harnessing digital technologies"*[1].

With regard to economic cooperation, the objective is then *"a targeted agreement on critical minerals, aimed at expanding access to sustainable, safe and diversified supply chains of critical minerals and high-quality batteries"* with the aim of creating a large *"Western club of critical raw materials"* bringing together the United States, the EU and their allies by pooling risks in supply chains. This "solidarity" of an alliance without limits on exports was at that time seen as a counterweight to the "*risk of a Chinese monopoly*"[2].

Since then, this alliance has been profoundly challenged by the Trump administration's desire to impose drastic tariffs on its "allies", but also by aggressive operations to get its hands on rare earths and critical materials. As such, here are three illustrative examples:

- The imminent agreement to grant 50% of Ukraine's rare earths to the United States in exchange for the continuity of their military support, when about 5% of all the world's "*critical raw materials*" are in Ukraine[3], and the EU also has an interest in benefiting from these resources[4].

- The US administration's attempts to buy Greenland. In addition to the fact that this autonomous territory of Denmark would be a geopolitical asset, it has rare earth resources estimated at 36.1 million

1. The full joint statement is available on the European Commission's website: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/fr/statement_23_5198

2. This is all the more seen as a danger that Western countries have advocated for thirty years the disinvestment of the State, especially in the industrial and economic sphere, while China has developed a commercial and industrial approach of the State to the trade of "strategic" materials with a mastery of the production chain, planning and an upscaling allowing it to overtake Western countries. While internally the country has a lot of resources, externally, massive investments in Africa in particular have allowed it to hold 90% of the world's rare earth production, as well as 80% of tungsten production. Beijing is therefore selling increasingly processed products with higher added value. Ultimately, its strategy extends to finished products, allowing it to be at the forefront of the renewable energy and electric mobility markets.

3. "Rare earths and strategic minerals in Ukraine", United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe, 19 February 2025. https://unric.org/fr/terres-rares-et-mineraux-strategiques-en-ukraine/

4. Seb Starcevic, "EU offers its own "win-win" minerals deal to Ukraine", Politico, 25 February 2025. https://www.politico.eu/article/critical-minerals-rare-earths-deal-eu-not-donald-trump/

tonnes (Mt) by the National Geological Survey of Denmark and Greenland (GEUS), the island has a significant stock of these 17 metals coveted by the industry of tomorrow. In November 2023, the EU signed a strategic partnership on raw materials[5].

- The decree signed by Donald Trump on 24 April 2025 allowing the large-scale extraction of minerals in the deep ocean, including in international waters. This measure, contrary to international law, would allow the United States to recover resources such as copper, nickel, cobalt or manganese, used in particular in the production of batteries, wind turbines and photovoltaic panels.

This issue of rare earths as critical metals and materials is at the heart of the problem of economic and industrial recovery. They are essential for the manufacture of components present in many pieces of military and digital equipment. It should be recalled that, according to the International Energy Agency (IEA), the EU's demand for minerals would have to quadruple in order to meet the needs of industry and the digital transition, and increase sixfold to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. By then, European demand for cobalt is expected to increase by 331% and that for nickel by 103%. But it is lithium that should be the most coveted, with European consumption expected to increase from 23,000 tonnes in 2020, from 100,000 to 300,000 tonnes in 2030, depending on the speed of the ecological transition, and from 700,000 to 860,000 tonnes in 2050[6].

The US's shift to seeing the European Union as a competitor rather than an ally could therefore have dramatic consequences for the economy of the old continent[7]. In March 2025, *L'Humanité magazine* ran the headline "*Will Europe leave history behind?*"»[8].

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5. 'The EU and Greenland sign a strategic partnership on sustainable raw material value chains', press release, European Commission, 30 November 2023. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/fr/ip_23_6166

6. For more information on the link between critical raw materials and the ecological transition, read volume 30-2023/1 of Alternatives Sud on the *"green" transition and "critical" metals* published in May 2023 https://www.cetri.be/Transition-verte-et-metaux; Christophe Poinssot, "Les métaux stratégiques: le nouveau défi de la transition énergétique", proceedings of the symposium, *L'énergie: bien commun de l'humanité?* Gabriel Péri Foundation, March 2024. https://gabrielperi.fr/librairie/notes-actes/lenergie-bien-commun-de-lhumanite/

7. Charlotte Balavoine, "Les minerais rares: indépendance ou entrée en guerre froide?", La Pensée magazine no. 417, January–March 2024. https://shs.cairn.info/revue-la-pensee-2024-1-page-30?lang=fr

8. *L'Humanité magazine* no. 945 of 13 March 2025. https://kiosque.humanite.fr/detail/publication/detail-top-right/17/l-humanite-magazine-945?issue_id=207486&switch_toc=archive

THE ASTONISHMENT OF EUROPEAN GOVERNMENTS, BETWEEN ALIGNMENT AND CONTRADICTIONS

However, in the face of this unprecedented threat, both the European Commission and the governments of the Member States are unable to respond in a united manner. In the wake of an economic crisis that has been going on since 2008, with low growth rates, high unemployment[9] and poverty[10], the European project is increasingly being challenged by populations with a sense of downgrading. This is reflected politically by the rapid growth, or even a return to power, of ultra-conservative and far-right nationalist forces. These forces are characterised by not breaking with liberal logic on the national economic level[11], but defending national production against a "*transnational elite*" while designating population groups (migrants, women, LGBTQI+ people, etc.) as responsible for the global crisis.

In other words, the lack of a joint EU response to Trump's offensive is primarily political. Some European leaders subscribe to the return of ultra-conservative political leaders, not hesitating to show coercive measures to achieve their ends. Even further: they see Trump and his government as supporters of their own policies. This was particularly striking during the first debate in the European Parliament on Trump's return to power. Indeed, in January 2025, at the request of the Renew and Socialists and Democrats (S&D) groups, Parliament debated the *geopolitical and economic consequences of the new Trump administration on transatlantic relations*[12]. The far-right groups in the European Parliament unanimously welcomed the return of D. Trump to power, Jordan Bardella, president of the Patriots for Europe group, even saw it as an "*Alliance of the middle classes and the entrepreneurial elite*". In the "centre", the liberals are fairly measured on this political change, except for the head of the French delegation, Valérie Hayer, who, following E. Macron's speech, insists on the need to build a balance of power to face "*a trade war in which Europe and the United States would have no interest*". In concrete terms, the parties of the "*coalition*" – European People's Party (EPP), S&D and Renew – agree on three things:

9. Eurostat estimates that 12.978 million people in the EU, including 10.830 million in the eurozone, were unemployed in December 2024

10. Eurostat estimates that one in ten Europeans live below their country's poverty line. This proportion varies from one to three, from 5% in Finland and the Czech Republic to 16% in Bulgaria. Between 50 and 125 million people in the EU live in extreme poverty and do not have access to electricity.

11. It is not a question for these forces of strengthening public services, for example, but rather of defending a specific fringe of the economy: national companies while putting the resources of the State at their service so that these companies are more competitive on an international scale, while advocating a distinction in legal terms and rights between national and immigrant workers.

12. Full report of the debates, 21 June 2025. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-10-2025-01-21-ITM-008_FR.html

• Continuing to invest in the "defence of Ukraine", including by strengthening European defence in parallel or in complementarity with NATO

• Strengthening the internal market and thus working towards greater federalisation of the European Union

• Continuing to strengthen the transatlantic partnership while calling for multilateralism.

It should be noted that the S&D group, supported by some of the liberals (the French) and the Left group, also calls for the implementation of anti-coercion measures[13].

„In this trade war, Europeans arrive in disarray, because they do not have the same interests."

Among the groups that represent governmental forces (except the extreme right, which shares the political project supported by D. Trump), one might wonder why there is not unanimity to face the measures taken by the United States against Europe. These differences are also expressed at the level of the European Council meetings that have been held since. Until very recently, European leaders, with some exceptions, remained fairly silent in the face of the aggressiveness of the United States. The transatlantic partnership is never called into question. And for good reason: in addition to political divisions, there are divergent interests from a national economic point of view.

Not all countries across the EU have the same interests or the same economic and industrial situation. On 5 February 2025, the Gabriel Péri Foundation organised the first part of the Transatlantic Chronicles on the *Return of D. Trump: what will be the consequences for Europe and the world?*[14] During this seminar, journalist Natacha Polony insisted that *"in this trade war, Europeans are in disarray, because they do not have the same interests. The German model is failing and Germany wants to avoid the trade war at all costs, because its economy is extremely intertwined with that of the United States"*.

13. Regulation (EU) 2023/2675 on the protection of the Union and its Member States against economic coercion by third countries of 22 November 2023, initially adopted to counter the ambitions of Chinese investors in certain EU countries. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/fr/LSU/?uri=oj:L_202302675#:~:text=QUEL%20EST%20L'OBJET%20DE,membre%20de%20l'UE).

Theoretical measures that could be applied to the third country in response to economic coercion include the imposition of trade restrictions, for example in the form of increased customs duties, import or export licences, or restrictions in the field of services or public procurement.

14. https://gabrielperi.fr/initiatives/chroniques-transatlantiques/

Indeed, in 2024, the United States was the EU's largest partner for exports of goods (20.6%) and its second partner for imports of goods (13.7%), behind China (21.3%). But not all countries are equal: 20 of the 27 EU Member States had a trade surplus with the United States, in terms of trade in goods. At the top of the list is Germany, with a trade surplus of 92 billion euros, followed by Ireland (51 billion euros)[15] and Italy (39 billion euros). Conversely, the Netherlands is the EU country that imports the most from the United States: 25 billion euros in 2024 for goods alone. These two countries with different economic realities are totally dependent on the United States and have no interest in building a balance of power vis-à-vis Washington or in moving further towards a true "*strategic autonomy*"[16]. Conversely, a country like France, which has suffered the full brunt of deindustrialisation in recent years, is in the middle of European countries, with a trade surplus of 3 billion euros in 2024 vis-à-vis the United States. It has an objective interest in moving away from US tutelage. However, French diplomacy, which has become considerably weaker, is far from being widely convincing nowadays in Europe.

Indeed, the essential question to face this new phase of the trade war is that of the industrial revival and the capacities of the countries of the European Union to be "sovereign" or at least "autonomous" in sectors essential to the economy and development, in particular in terms of food, digital, energy, monetary or military. These are all sectors in which the United States intends to maintain its dominance.

15. Eurostat Data.

16. To compensate for the lack of efficiency at the international level and the difficulties of supply at the European level, a new rhetoric has been built around "strategic autonomy", a central axis of the European Commission's communication in recent years, supposed to reflect its geopolitical turn. This notion appeared for the first time in the Council's conclusions on the European defence industry in 2013, and gradually expanded to economic issues under the influence of the French Presidency of the EU in 2017. It has since been directly associated with the EU's external policies, and in particular with trade policy and industrial recovery.

17. To cite just one example, the Itar (International Traffic in Arms Regulations) is a US regulation that controls the manufacture, sale and distribution of defence and space-related objects and services, as defined in the USML (United States Munitions List).

AN INDUSTRIAL REVIVAL PUT FORWARD AS A PRIORITY BY THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION, BUT TO THE TEST OF CONTRADICTIONS.

The aggressiveness of the world's leading industrial power is not new. Indeed, the extraterritorial nature of US law has been[17] constraining companies for years and has led to aggressive buybacks against some large European companies[18]. In this context, the question of industrial recovery is central to avoiding the inevitable decline of Europe, on which the United States is betting to maintain its hegemony.

In September 2024, the Draghi report[19], named after the former president of the Central Bank, was released on the future of European competitiveness. Since then, this report has been the subject of much discussion at European level. It is being touted as the solution by a coalition ranging from the Social Democrats to the Liberals, including the majority of the Greens and part of the traditional right at the European level. It notes the industrial decline of the European Union due to the lack of massive investments in industry, research and innovation. In addition, the report points to "*structural problems related to the European energy market and low investment in infrastructure*" and finally "*dependencies mainly concerning critical materials and technological resources such as semiconductors*". The report highlights the need for massive investments, which the report estimates at 750–800 billion euros each year, to reindustrialise Europe and strengthen energy security in particular. It also advocates "*the completion of the capital markets union and the launch of a common debt*", in other words, a move towards greater federalism within the European Union, where "governance" would be further shifted from the national level to the Union level.

Since then, the Commission has taken several measures in industrial terms. Of particular note is the publication on 26 February 2025 of the Clean Industrial Deal, aimed at supporting the competitiveness of European industries while accelerating their decarbonisation. This plan, which is expected to mobilise €100 billion for clean technologies and energy-intensive indus-

The extraterritoriality of US laws obliges any non-US industrialist to comply with them, as long as they manage the supply and re-export of products subject to Itar or EAR (Export Administration Regulations). This results in dependence, pressure and even fines that can heavily penalise European companies.

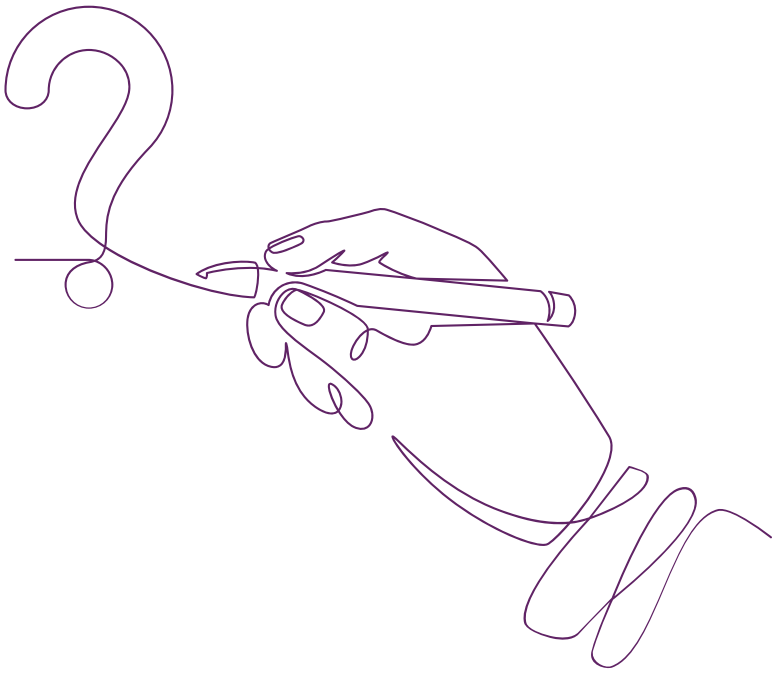
18. An emblematic example is the sale of Alstom's energy branch to General Electric following pressure, including the arrests of some of these leaders, such as Frédéric Pierucci, who recounts his experience of fourteen months spent in prison in the book *Le Piège américain. Les Dessous de l'affaire Alstom*. Éditions Lattès, 2019.

19. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/draghi-report_en

tries, also proposes structural reforms to "*reduce bureaucracy*" and ensure a sustainable supply of critical raw materials[20]. Specific measures concerning the automotive industry in particular were also set out on 5 March 2025[21], and others concerning the steel sector at the end of March 2025[22].

In addition to these measures, the European Union is relying on its industrial defence strategy presented in March 2024 and giving rise to the publication of a white paper on European defence, presented by the Commission on 19 March 2025[23]. The related "*RearmEurope*" programme entails spending of more than 800 billion euros in order to "*support the European defence industry by pooling demand*" and to "*deepen the defence market at EU level*".

In other words, in a context of an increasingly globalised trade war, the European Union is opting for a war economy, a strengthening of market mechanisms and ever-increasing federalisation at a time when the European integration project has never been more in question. If the novelty lies in the massive investments sought at the level of the Union, these will serve to strengthen an integration project anchored in the neoliberal doctrine of competition and a public power at the service of large private sectors of the economy. In this respect, the project differs little from what the Trump administration intends to do for the United States.



20. *The Clean Industrial Deal: A joint roadmap for competitiveness and decarbonisation*, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, 26 February 2025. https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/9db1c5c8-9e82-467b-ab6a-905feeb4b6b0_en?filename=Communication%20-%20Clean%20Industrial%20Deal_en.pdf&prefLang=fr

21. "Stimulating the European automotive sector", European Commission, 5 March 2025. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/business-and-industry/boosting-european-car-sector_fr

22. Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, A European Steel and Metals Action Plan, European Commission, 19 March 2025 https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/publications/european-steel-and-metals-action-plan_en?prefLang=fr

23. "Commission unveils White Paper on European Defence and 'ReArm Europe' plan/Preparing for 2030", press release, European Commission, 19 March 2025. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/fr/ip_25_793

WHAT ALTERNATIVE POLICY COULD EUROPE PURSUE?

However, the question could be asked differently: how could the revival of industrial production in Europe be beneficial to the people of Europe, to human development and to ecological transition? In this, the objective is no longer "the completion of the capital market", but rather how to regain control of production to put it at the service of the people.

This would mean, for example, aiming for sovereignty in food or energy so as to no longer be dependent on external powers.Massive subsidies from the European Union could be used to renationalise key sectors of the economy to meet human and ecological needs. Cooperation between European countries could be achieved to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 with the establishment of large public energy hubs to get out of fossil fuels, price volatility and energy poverty on a global scale.

In other words, neoliberal politics is not a dogma from which we cannot emancipate ourselves. Other countries are making contrary choices. After thirty years of privatisation, Britain, for example, decided in November 2024 to renationalise the rail sector, after renationalising part of its electricity network in 2022.

"Strategic autonomy requires breaking with the logic of alignment – or even submission – to the United States."

„The essential question is how the EU can regain control of production to serve people and the ecological transition."

In the same way, achieving true "strategic autonomy" for the European Union inevitably involves questioning the transatlantic partnership and alignment – or even submission – to the United States. In this respect, the remoteness of the decision-making centres, as well as the disinvestment of the States from their most sovereign powers (security and defence in particular), offer no guarantee of remedying the industrial crisis, the growing mistrust of the European institutions, or the growing tensions on a continental and global scale.

Asking the question of the purpose of public policies is tantamount to asking the question of who they serve: workers and populations, or large private groups and shareholders. In the same way, to ask the question of the purpose of production is to ask the question of the political priority that

we set ourselves: to respond to human and ecological transition needs or to conquer new markets. Bringing an alternative and social voice to the two pitfalls of nationalism and the federalist headlong rush is a central challenge for the forces of social transformation. It is also a necessity to conquer the "*peace and prosperity*" so often promised by EU leaders.

„Strategic autonomy requires breaking with the logic of alignment – or even submission – to the United States."

CHARLOTTE BALAVOINE

Board Member of the
Gabriel Péri Foundation

Charlotte Balavoine, board member of the Gabriel Péri Foundation, specializing in international relations and European affairs. Political advisor to the European Parliament from 2010 to 2024.

EU GLOBAL DEMOCRACY SUPPORT AMID GEOPOLITICAL POWER SHIFTS:

Where are we heading in the new legislation term?

Laura Lahner

Hanns Seidel Foundation

Photo by Alexgrec on Freepik

Supporting democracy has been a core priority for the European Union since its very beginning. Democracy is not only one of its founding values, but also a key pillar of the EU´s foreign policy. It is viewed as the only system that fully respects human rights and contributes to long-term peace and development. As part of its external action, the EU works to strengthen democratic governance worldwide. Its institutions play complementary roles: the European Commission delivers concrete initiatives and funding; the European Parliament supports electoral processes, dialogue, and human rights defenders; and the European External Action Service with its delegations across the world engages diplomatically to bolster democratic structures in partner countries.

However, this commitment to democracy is facing increasing challenges. The rise of authoritarian regimes, intensifying geopolitical competition and a worrying trend of democratic backsliding around the globe are undermining the EU's ability to maintain its influence on international democratic support. As the EU has entered a new legislative term, it faces a pivotal question: can it uphold its role as a defender of democracy while adapting to a more contested international environment? This paper examines how the EU's democracy support may evolve amidst these global shifts, exploring potential changes in its priorities to defending democratic values in a more complex and contested world.

WHAT ARE THE KEY CHALLENGES FOR THE EU IN ALIGNING GLOBAL DEMOCRACY SUPPORT?

Despite solid frameworks for international democracy support, the EU's long-standing commitment is under increasing pressure. The growing influence of global actors with less commitment to democratic principles poses a significant challenge to democratic governance worldwide. China has significantly expanded its global influence through large-scale investment initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Russia, at the same time, backs authoritarian regimes through military assistance and media campaigns in Africa, while engaging in disinformation efforts aimed at undermining democratic institutions. These actions contribute to a narrative that questions the viability and value of democracy itself, making the EU's political and financial support appear overly complex to partner countries, especially when other actors offer assistance with fewer conditions.

In addition, traditional allies such as the United States are reducing their commitment to democracy support. Plans are underway to significantly cut USAID spending, which stood at $35,4 billion in 2024 (McCabe, 2025; Bruce, 2025). This trend raises significant concern for the EU, particularly given its historically close transatlantic alignment on democracy promotion. At the same time, the EU cannot ignore that the shifting geopolitical landscape has compelled Brussels itself to concentrate on immediate priorities such as security, migration, and global competitiveness (Farinha, 2025). As a result, democracy support is likely to take a back seat in practical terms, even though it remains high on the rhetorical agenda and has been identified as one of the main priorities by the European Commission for the 2024–2029 legislative term. Finally, it must be acknowledged that even within the EU, democratic backsliding in some member states and increasing political fragmentation make it more difficult for the Union to present a unified position and uphold funding for support of democracy internationally.

„The EU is shifting from a value-based approach to one shaped by strategic interests."

In light of these dynamics, the EU appears to be moving from a predominantly value-based approach to one shaped by strategic interests. Priorities such as competitiveness, defence and migration policy are gaining momentum over normative goals. While the EU continues to affirm its commitment to global democracy support, it now

faces the critical challenge of aligning it with a more interest-driven external policy, ideally without compromising the core values it seeks to promote. This shift raises various questions: To what extent is democracy support actually prioritised within the EU's main foreign policy instruments such as NDICI-Global Europe and the Global Gateway initiative? And under the new legislative term, is there a growing risk that democracy support will be sidelined in favour of more immediate concerns like security and migration?

ADAPTING TO NEW REALITIES: THE EU'S CHANGING PRIORITIES

As the EU has embarked on its 2024–2029 legislative term, early signals suggest that democracy support is not at the top of the political agenda (Youngs et al., 2025). Already by the end of the previous term, the EU's commitment appeared to wane. Few new initiatives were introduced, and existing strategies, such as the Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, were merely extended rather than reinforced. Member state reluctance, particularly from Hungary, played a role in this stagnation (Youngs & Ventura, 2024).

Looking at the European Council's Strategic Agenda and the European Commission's political guidelines for 2024–2029, reveals a clear shift in priorities. Both documents highlight competitiveness and the defence as central objectives. While there is a priority titled "Protecting our democracy, upholding our values," it primarily focuses on strengthening democratic governance within the EU, with only limited references to supporting democracy beyond its borders. Similarly, the "Global Europe" section addresses external challenges, including geopolitical threats, enlargement, neighbourhood policy, and economic security, but again overlooks robust support for democracy outside the EU. Although Commission President von der Leyen has identified prosperity, se-

curity, and democracy as the three core priorities of the Union, the key question remains: How will the EU translate its democratic commitments into concrete and feasible strategies (European Commission, 2024; Drachenberg, 2024)?

Several Directorates-General of the European Commission are expected to encounter democracy as part of their mandates for the new legislative term. Kaja Kallas, the new High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, expressed her intention to strengthen support for democracy defenders during her confirmation hearing (Welt, 2024). However, her official mission letter does not specifically mention democracy support. Similarly, both Marta Kos, the new Commissioner for Enlargement, and Dubravka Šuica, responsible for the Directorate-General for the Mediterranean, will engage with democracy-related issues (von der Leyen, 2024). Yet, their mission letters also lack explicit references to promoting democracy internationally. Furthermore, the appointment of Andrius Kubilius as the first-ever European Commissioner for Defence underscores once more the prioritisation of security concerns for the legislative term from 2024 to 2029.

„Development aid without democratic safeguards risks strengthening undemocratic regimes.“

ALIGNING EU INVESTMENTS WITH DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

The shift towards prioritising geopolitical and security interests is also evident in the Directorate-General for International Partnerships' evolving approach, where economic security and strategic objectives shape development cooperation. The professional background of the new Commissioner, Jozef Sikela, with his experience in investment and banking, further mirrors this trend. It highlights a broader dynamic within EU external action, where initiatives like the Global Gateway aim to deliver sustainable infrastructure and advance the EU's strategic objectives (Center for Global Development, 2025). Sikela's mission letter, while emphasising the importance of measuring the impact of Global Gateway projects on "human rights and political freedoms," makes no concrete reference to democracy support. Despite the opportunities these development initiatives present for growth and cooperation, a critical remains open: Are these investment-driven strategies aligned with the strengthening of democratic governance in partner countries (von der Leyen, 2024)?

In this context, it is crucial to ensure that EU projects avoid undermining democratic processes. While initiatives like Global Gateway focus on sectors such as energy, transport, and digitaliza-

tion, they should also take into account the political dynamics in their partner countries. Large infrastructure projects can have unintended political consequences, such as strengthening undemocratic regimes by channelling resources to elites (Hackenesch et al., 2024). According to IDOS, the current flagship projects do not adequately address the political economy implications of such investments or integrate democracy support into Global Gateway initiatives. Moving forward, the EU should guarantee that its investments consider these dynamics and, at a minimum, avoid undermining democratic efforts in partner countries. This challenge becomes more pressing as the EU increases its reliance on public-private partnerships (PPPs) for foreign cooperation, which will be central to the legislative mandate from 2025-2029. From a development perspective, mobilising private investment alongside aid funds is crucial to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as these are unlikely to be met by Official Development Assistance alone. However, as the EU leverages financial tools to attract private capital and pursue strategic goals, it must ensure these partnerships adhere to democratic standards (Prieto, 2024).

This being said, it must be recognised that investments alone are not enough to safeguard democracy on the global stage. Given the current geopolitical context, the fight against also has a crucial role to play in fostering democratic values, particularly in regions where authoritarian narratives are gaining ground (Terren et al., 2025). This is the case in Africa, where disinformation campaigns are shaping public perceptions. In regions like the Sahel, the manipulation of information poses a critical challenge to democracy. As African governments turn to Russia for support, the EU's governance-linked partnerships risk losing influence. Wagner-related and Kremlin-supported media run disinformation campaigns that discredit democratic values by, for instance, spreading anti-Western narratives. These campaigns often use social media platforms and local influencers to disseminate content that undermines trust in EU institutions (Atanesian, 2023). Fighting disinformation must therefore be a central pillar of the EU's external action, it cannot be detangled from global democracy support (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2022). To protect the EU's credibility, it needs to strengthen strategic communication, support independent and local median and help build resilience against manipulation.

„It is crucial to ensure that EU projects avoid undermining democratic processes."

EU ENLARGEMENT - AN EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR DEMOCRACY?

Credibility is also a key factor in the EU's approach to expansion. It has long been regarded as a vital tool for advancing democracy in Europe's neighbourhood and stabilising its borders. However, its effectiveness in fostering democratic change has been increasingly questioned in recent times. After negotiations lasting over two decades in some cases, it is worth asking: Does Enlargement still serve as an effective tool for promoting democracy? For instance, when candidate countries like Serbia fail to meet essential democratic standards, such as holding free elections or ensuring media pluralism (European Parliament, 2024), the EU's credibility is put at stake. Despite condemning such democratic breaches, several member states have continued to strengthen their economic ties with Serbia. This unavoidably raises questions about the consistency and coherence of the EU's approach. Should the EU suspend funds or impose stricter conditions to signal its disapproval of undemocratic practices or is the geopolitical pressure too overwhelming to allow for such actions? This dilemma once again highlights the tension between upholding the EU's fundamental values and responding to the current geopolitical context. One possible direction could be to set clear deadlines and conditions for the allocation of funds, linking financial support to progress in democratic reforms. However, such an approach can also risk slowing down or even halting the process altogether, which could, in turn, hinder the promotion of democratic values.

EXISTING TOOLS FOR GLOBAL DEMOCRACY SUPPORT

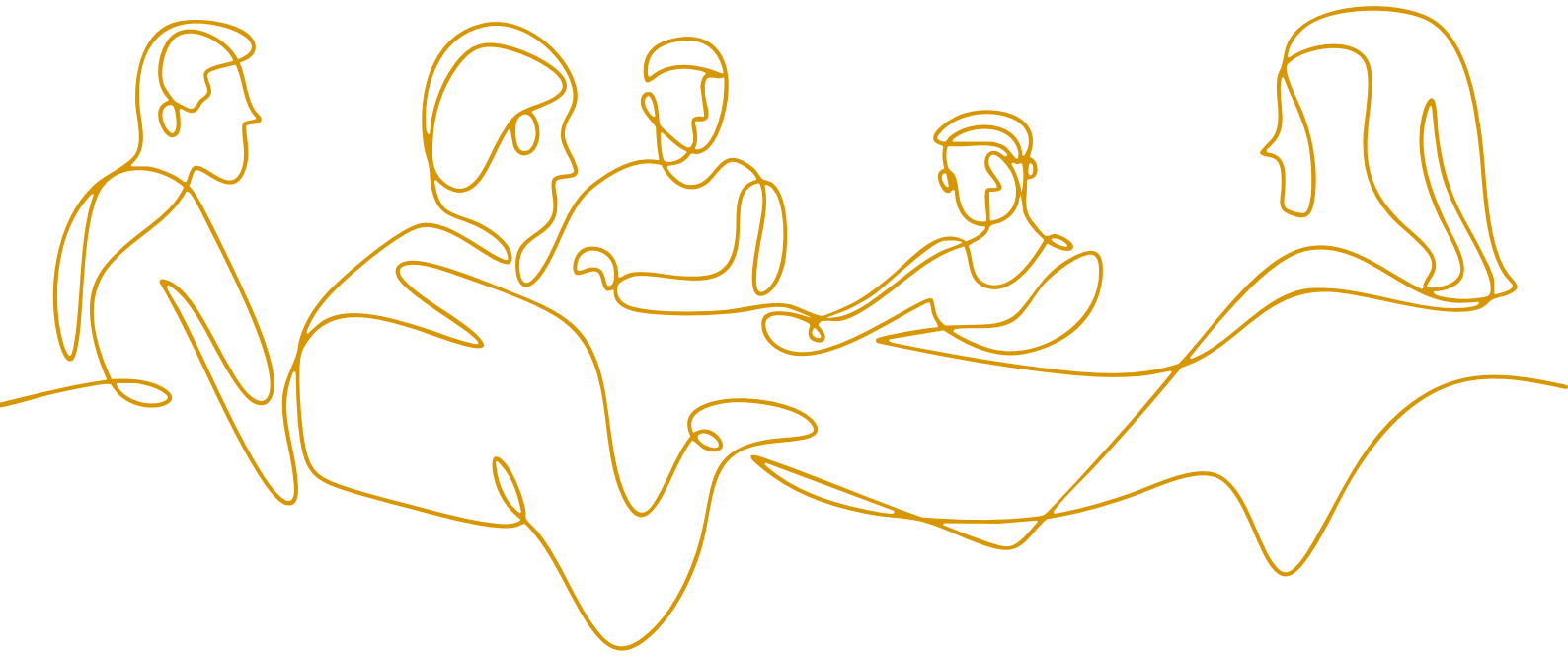
It is evident that fostering democracy is not an isolated policy goal but one that intersects with all areas of EU external action, from trade and development to environment and security. To integrate this vision into its policymaking, the EU has developed several valuable instruments. Chief among them is the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, initially adopted for 2020–2024 and now extended to 2027. The plan reaffirms the EU's commitment to democracy as a core value, assigning a central role to the European External Action Service (EEAS) and EU delegations in its implementation while encouraging close cooperation with local stakeholders. However, to maximise its impact during the extended period, the plan would benefit from the inclusion of clear timelines, measurable interim goals, and enhanced financial transparency. At present, it outlines political and financial support but lacks specific funding details, especially compared to more clearly defined allocations in areas such as security (Youngs & Ventura, 2024; EEAS, 2024).

Equally worth mentioning is the NDICI- Global Europe instrument (2021–2027), which allocates €79.5 billion for EU external cooperation, with €1.36 billion specifically dedicated to human rights and democracy under its thematic programs. Democracy promotion also features as a cross-cutting objective in some of the geographic programs, accounting for roughly €60 billion of the budget (Hauck et al., 2024; European Commission, 2024). Although this funding framework appears robust, the 2024 mid-term evaluation revealed key challenges for the legislative period from 2025–2029. The so-called 'cushion', a flexible reserve within NDICI for unforeseen events, was rapidly depleted, with approximately 80% used in the first three years of the current budget cycle. This illustrates that while earmarking funds for democracy is fundamental, flexible mechanisms are unavoidable in times of crisis (Hauck et al., 2024).

Moreover, the NDICI mid-term review has drawn criticism for increasing incoherence in EU external spending. With the Global Gateway initiative shaping the allocation of funds towards investment-driven partnerships, resources have shifted away from low-income and fragile countries towards middle-income countries. The Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) has raised concerns about this inconsistency, arguing that the EU is sidelining countries in crisis, such as those in the Sahel region. This approach ultimately not only undermines long-term objectives related to democracy and human rights, but also weakens the EU's credibility (Van Damme, 2025).

In addition to funding instruments, the EU has also focused on enhancing coordination and implementation efficiency through initiatives like Team Europe Democracy (TED). Bringing together the European Commission and an expanding group of Member States, TED reflects a shared commitment to advancing democratic governance through joint action and pooled resources. One of its key contributions is at the country level, where TED provides technical advice and facilitates joint planning by different EU actors. The strength of this mechanism lies in its ability to deliver impact efficiently, an increasingly crucial factor in times of tightening budgets and urgent global demands (European Union, 2025).

Election observation is another tool in the EU's democratic efforts. The European Parliament's Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group (DEG) organises election observation missions to foster democratic processes, particularly in priority regions like the Western Balkans and Eastern Neighbourhood (European Parliament, 2023). These missions monitor electoral integrity and encourage transparency. For example, the DEG's 2025 Call for Proposals in North Macedonia aimed to ensure inclusive and fair local elections (Civil Society Resource Centre, 2025). Simultaneously, the EU's Election Observation Missions (EOMs), coordinated by



the European External Action Service with certain contributions by the European Parliament, especially the DEG, contribute to assessing voter equality, media freedom, and civil society participation. These missions are considered effective, often receiving positive evaluations for their impartiality and impact (EEAS, 2025).

Overall, the EU's toolbox for external action and democracy support demonstrates that the creation of new tools may not be needed. Rather, the focus should be on maximising the potential of existing instruments, ensuring they are adequately resourced and effectively implemented. Complementing the EU's efforts, political foundations play a crucial role in advancing democratic governance worldwide. With their extensive networks and permanent on-the-ground presence, they are well positioned to foster close connections with local stakeholders and civil society actors. Their bottom-up approach allows them to identify context-specific needs, support capacity-building and nurture long-term relationships based on trust. This engagement offers reliable alternatives to the often top-down, state-centric models promoted by other global actors such as China and Russia.

„Supporting democracy is not only a value-based commitment — it lays the groundwork for sustainable development, security cooperation and long-term partnerships. “

TAKEAWAYS

The EU stands at a crossroads in its approach to global democracy support. Amid a challenging geopolitical landscape, it must reconcile its foundational values with an interest-driven external policy. The current legislative term offers both risks and opportunities. It presents a moment to rethink strategies to ensure that democracy support remains present in and ensures an impactful dimension of EU foreign policy. At the same time, promoting democratic governance is not only a value-based commitment, it also lays the groundwork for the effective implementation of broader foreign policy goals, from sustainable development to security cooperation and long-term partnerships.

Moving forward, several key actions should be considered to approach the EU's democracy support for the 2025-2029 legislative period.

1. Mainstream Democracy Across External Action: Democracy support should not be confined to isolated instruments but integrated across all areas of external engagement, including trade, migration, digitalization, and security cooperation. Strategic investments, especially those made under the Global Gateway, should be carefully aligned with democratic governance principles to prevent inadvertently supporting authoritarian practices.

2. Strengthen Strategic Communication and Local Engagement: To counter growing disinformation and external influence, the EU must invest in strategic communication and local ownership. The European External Action Service should play a more prominent role in this effort by focusing on targeted, context-specific messaging and fostering closer ties with local stakeholders.

3. Enhance Coherence: Existing frameworks such as NDICI and TED should be leveraged more effectively and efficiently. This requires clear and coherent objectives, effective communication of these goals, and a reduction in bureaucratic and administrative processes to enhance responsiveness.

„Democracy support should not be confined to isolated instruments but integrated across all areas of external engagement."

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WHAT HAS EUROPE EVER DONE TO/FOR US?

Europe's Gordian knot in drifting climate and geopolitics

Dr. Irina Tomak & Dr. Ludovic Garattini

Green Forum / Le CNAM Paris

Photo by Harrison Moore on Unsplash

Climate and ecological breakdown mitigation and adaptation measures are manifesting themselves as a radix of public policies under the umbrella term of "Green New Deals". Climate and environmental degradation implications on the global security have been widely recognized in their short-term and long-term preeminence, and the mainstream objective is to align economic development with respect to natural environments, planetary boundaries and sociable equitability.

The European Union's environmental policy has evolved as the perception of the problem has become undeniably clamorous. Careful examination of the environmental pledges articulated by the EU on the global scene is fraught with difficulties. It suffers from loss of attractiveness under decolonial and inequity accusations from competitors and industry vested interests (e.g., China, Russian Federation, OPEC, GEFC). What is more, the EU appears to lack credibility in its advocacy of democracy and equitable energy transition in the context of being itself crippled with internal anti-democratic movements and failing to deliver on environmental indicators while also acting as a major contributor to fossil fuel emissions respectively.

Drawing on diverse sources, the article aims to identify a number of bottlenecks and contradictions in the EU messaging to reinstate its credibility as a major geopolitical actor for democracy through the lenses of climate narratives and, in the wake of its recent elections, cast a new light on pathways yet to be explored for overcoming its main challenges.

EUROPEAN UNION IN THE AGE OF POLYCRISIS

The world as we know it appears to be in a grip of multiple transformations that are eroding our sense of security and stability (World Economic Forum, 2025). Recentresearch (Institute of Economics and Peace, 2023) entasked with comprehensive assessment of people's feeling of safety across 121 countries indicated a significant rise in generalised or ambiguous feelings of fear and lack of safety throughout the world. This implies that people have become more fearful and feel less safe without being able to identify the sources of potential threats.

Critical changes to Earth systems, deepening geopolitical and geoeconomic conflicts (Rustad, 2024), erosion of human rights and civic freedoms, energy poverty and a host of other calamities seem to be interconnected in vital ways (Albert, 2024; Lawrence et al., 2024). This avalanche of intersecting crises, enmeshed in multiple intercontinental systems in ways that degrade humanity's prospects, is understood as a global polycrisis (Helleiner, 2024; Krogmann, 2025).

It is becoming clear that individual solutions failing to recognise the nature of these interwoven challenges have exhausted themselves and are no longer sufficient to halt the amalgamation of socio-political and environmental woes that have befallen humanity. Contending with the polycrisis demands a radically different approach, new ways of thinking and acting in the age of Anthropocene - an uncharted, human-induced epoch, the human epoch (Hamilton, 2017). The global community has been called to embark upon a quest to craft a unique social contract that can engage various actors (e.g. civic society, private sector, public sector, decision and policy makers, indigenous communities) to foster sustainable societal transformation respectful of the global economy and Earth's life support systems on local, regional and global levels (Siirilä & Salonen, 2024).

„The European Green Deal seems to be a schizophrenic attempt at addressing the polycrisis of precarity in social, political and environmental dimensions."

The recent past has witnessed the emergence of multiple green deals with sustainable futuristic visions throwing down the gauntlet to environmental crisis and socio-economic precarity in the geopolitical cartography of the "Minority" (developed, northern) vs "Majority" (developing, southern) worlds (Almeida et al. 2023; Salifu & Salifu, 2024).

The European Green Deal (henceforth EGD) is a package of state-led policy initiatives launched by the European Commission in 2019 with a long-term twofold objective of nurturing equitable and prosperous society off a low-carbon economy through decarbonization, dematerialization and decoupling economic growth from resource use and environmental impacts (Palmisano et al., 2025; Buzogány et al., 2025). It seeks to spur the green transition of living well within planetary boundaries through protection and restoration of the state of the environment. The EGD has been espoused as a blueprint for green revolution "...to make Europe the world's first climate-neutral continent by 2050" (European Environment Agency, 2023) by reducing net domestic greenhouse gas emissions to at least 55% below 1990 levels by 2030 and subsequently attaining climate neutrality by 2050. Primarily, the EGD is entasked with forging a resilient and technologically advanced EU economy capable of boosting its global economic leadership and distinguishing it from competing actors on the geopolitical arena (Koundouri et al., 2024; Korosuo et al., 2024).

The trajectory towards long-term social and environmental wellbeing captured in the EGD appears to be marred by incessant exogenous and internal emergencies inclusive of Russia's war on Ukraine, heightened energy poverty, cost of living crisis alongside shifts in global power distribution (Azmanova & Nicolaïdis, 2023). Against the backdrop of precarity people do not appear amenable to any kind of change, radical change in particular. Chronic public anxiety often translates into support for autocratic options of governance that deliver a sword and a shield to counteract vulnerability people live in. The recent creeping ascent of the far-right into European political mainstream with alternatives promising instant stability attests to this (Kessel, 2024). Such context is already fraught with serious socio-political dilemmas weakening realisation of the EGD. However, the initiative itself is embroiled in deep controversy undermining its claims of just transition to a low carbon economy and propagating a solipsistic Eurocentric stance on it. As we discuss below, the EGD seems to be a schizophrenic attempt at addressing the polycrisis of precarity in social, political and environmental dimensions.

DECOUPLING MYTHOS VERSUS NATURE LOGOS

The core wishful thinking underlying the EGD is not even a wish but the claim of having already fairly "decoupled", stated in a 2018 kickstart communication from the Commission "A Clean Planet for All", where we are found to have "successfully decouple[d] greenhouse gas emissions from economic growth in Europe for the past decade." (EUR-Lex - 52018DC0773 - EN). However, thinking that decoupling GDP growth *as we know it* (i.e. without collectively questioning and reinventing its fundamental meaning) from energy/resource intensive and environmentally impactful economies disdains the degree of penetration and the scale of today's major emitting and vital industries (Smil Vaclav, 2022). At best, it stands as a voluntary denial of the most fundamental laws of physics and thermodynamics, consistently verified through decades of studies on climate change, trade and industrial supply chain production, which have applied all kinds of models and testing instruments finding similar results on the magic of decoupling. Granger causality tests, Leontief type (Eurostat's favourite), autoregressive distributed lag (ARDL), VECM, NEEBT show an unequivocal correlation between GDP growth and GHG emissions (Steinhauser & al, 2024; Y. Wu and J. Wan, 2024; Onofrei et al., 2022; Habert Helmut et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2019; Grub et. al., 2004). Reality does not agree with the claim that has come to exemplify a certain "plantation mindset" (Ferdinand, 2023): while the decoupling narrative is pronounced politically as a success, it conceals the displacement of the most polluting industries to third countries since the 1990s, too busy emitting to feed our carbon bubbles' needs. As of 2024, the entire emission volume of the EU did not marginally reduce by 8.3% compared to 2022 (EUR-Lex - 52024DC0498 - EN, from country based GHG inventories): instead it underwent a twofold increase of this same number when adjusted to more thorough metrics and measurements from bilateral trades, and this, with China only (Ünala et al., 2023; He & Hertwich, 2019; Ding et al., 2018). We are yet to see how the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) will address this knotty issue in the coming years.

„Claiming victories resulting from the exploitation of injustices and inequalities erodes the bloc's credibility."

The progress on the Green Deal's wide-ranging objectives is also rather stalled. The 2025 progress report issued by the Joint Research Centre (JRC) underscores incompatibility of the unquestioned belief of growth & wealth with practical constraints imposed by laws of nature and physics. In this report, barely 13 targets (out of 154) are "progressing at the necessary speed to meet the EGD ambitions" (JRC, 2025). Out of these 13, a crushing majority congratulates the progress on renewables and "electricity" (while 92.26% of our Gross available energy needs are still relying on fossil fuels, nuclear and foreign produced renewables), individual EVs charging outlets, and (as mentioned above) partial truths concerning GHG emission reductions. The rest is bound to be revised under the pressure of ever-evolving financial mechanisms historically shaped for speculative forms of economy, stretching its products beyond planetary boundaries. Solely 3 targets speak of a sacrifice to our denialist habits: recent increase in common forest (but not farm) bird populations, reduction of overall sales of antimicrobials for food-producing animals and reduction in the use and risk of pesticides. In light of such modest and marginal progresses, claiming victories and leadership resulting from the exploitation of injustices and inequalities does not only ridicule the EU position as "champions" of green transition, democracy and human rights: it erodes the bloc's credibility. The latter represents probably its last and only (though rapidly shrinking) valued currency among more powerful rising regions, an issue addressed hereafter.

CLIMATE COLONIALISM

While on paper the EGD represents a bold initiative for a large-scale equality-oriented environmental U-turn in policy for one of the world's largest economies, the european take on "greening" is imbricated in colonial or neo-colonial motivations rather incongruous with the claim of leaving nobody behind (Zografos & Robbins, 2020).

The EU's push to achieve the status of climate-neutral continent by 2050 alongside strengthening its ability to sustain social and environmental transition is particularly materials-intensive and, thus, relies heavily on secure and resilient access to metals and specific critical raw materials (CRMs). Europe's dependence on CRMs imports is extremely high, reaching nearly 100% for certain elements (Rietveld et al., 2022). This has deep-reaching implications for CRM-producing nations, many of which have imposed export restrictions to secure domestic supply. The European Commission has communicated firsting of its green intentions through securing resilient material supply in no uncertain terms:

„Freedom for some spells out unfreedom for others."

"The EU will continue to lead international efforts and wants to build alliances with the like-minded. It also recognises the need to maintain its security of supply and competitiveness even when others are unwilling to act" (EC, 2019, p.2). Essentially this communication implies that the bloc may resort to its political power and financial resources to strike sweetheart deals with willing exporting nations, cajole the more obstinate ones and use a whip on the unwilling. This exposes colonial vision, a future replete with exclusions and pretense of normativity. The EU's greening will inflict severe pressure on lands, livelihoods and sovereignty of Indigenous and marginalised communities that will be forced to shoulder environmental traumas associated with powering low-carbon economy and turn their lands in ''green sacrifice zones'' (Zografos & Robbins, 2020; Scott & Smith, 2017).

„The EU's greening will inflict severe pressure on lands, livelihoods and sovereignty of Indigenous and marginalised communities."

The implications of sacrificed ecologies and spaces cannot be dismissed. Someone will have to bear environmental, social, health and economic costs of extraction, processing, transportation, operation and end-of-life treatment of associated waste (Newell & Mulvaney, 2013). Such zones will become a terrible testament to climate colonialism inflicted in the name of just transition where justice will be reserved to the selected few (Juskus, 2023; Blanc, 2022). In actual terms, freedom for some spells out unfreedom for others.

The leaders of grassroots policy initiatives are particularly cognizant of the green deal pitfalls and unequivocally voice their opposition to climate colonialism served under the guise of sustainability: "The unequal distribution of power – and suffering – is literally in the molecules we eat and drink. The burden of transition lies at the feet of those most responsible for carbon emission-driven climate change, not those most imperiled by it. The energy consumption of the Global North – especially in the United States and Europe – has to be radically curtailed, not subsidised by more "green" energy" (Red Nation, 2021, p.12).

Taking seriously those concerns rather than merely paying lip service to decolonisation and equitability is paramount if the EGD is to avoid reproducing the very same logic that led to climate and environmental crisis in the first place. This outlines the contour of an EU pathology, the one where the patient claims the will and legitimacy to build a more inclusive, sustainable and just world/Europe, while exploiting injustices, loopholes, and inequalities to do so, turning a blind eye on human & non-human forms of domination, and ironically packaging it as an enviable model

of wealth and happiness. No matter the metrics, mechanisms, tools, incentive, financial schemes, our understanding is that Europe's obstinacy to never question, debate, and truly prioritise (instead of balkanising) collective participation at the fringe of its most fundamental and strategic mechanisms could be the very root of a political schizophrenia, deteriorating as punchbacks from nature and marginalised populations mount. As we will see in the following segment, these inconsistencies and incoherences offer a myriad of opportunities to undermine the EU's message, both internally and externally.

REDRESSING TRAUMAS: PHANTASY OF CLIMATE NEUTRALITY AND ENERGY EQUITABILITY

If left unaddressed, the hypocrisy of equitable transition à la West where profits hold sanctity over justice opens an opportunity boulevard to fossil fuel giants like the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), seeking to ensure oil market stability and secure areas of trade expansion. The organization research unit furthers its understanding of the many opportunities and challenges the future may bring to the oil industry in its landmark publication, World Oil Outlook (WOO) 2050 (OPEC, 2024). Showcased as a channel to incentivise dialogue, cooperation and transparency between OPEC and other industry stakeholders, an emphasis is put on equitable energy transition and justice: how it can be guaranteed to those currently living in "energy poverty" and to those whose livelihoods depend on a fossil fuel economy, in the spirit of leaving nobody behind. It is important to note that the outlook has been extended to 2050: the symbolic energy transition cut-off point enshrined in the Paris Climate Agreement and new green deals.

However, achievement of climate neutrality is not within OPEC's objectives. In doomsday scenarios with the Earth teetering on the brink of collapse, the organization is honest about what to expect from the future. It is providing answers to the dilemma of how realistic it is for the world to become carbon neutral when global energy demand is predicted to increase substantially - at least by 18% - through 2050 due to population growth and industrialisation of emerging economies (McKinsley & Company, 2024; DNV, 2024). While the EGD speaks of decoupling, slashing greenhouse gas emissions and enhancing carbon removals, OPEC's view is somewhat different, with no peak oil demand in the foreseeable future: "...the fantasy of phasing out oil and gas bears no relation to fact. Combined they make up well over 50% of the energy mix today and are expected to do the same in 2050. A realistic view of demand growth expectations necessitate adequate investments in oil and gas, today, tomorrow, and for many decades into the future" (OPEC, 2024, p.2).

A similar stance on imperative access to energy for all in a nationally-determined manner is offered by the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF). The Global Gas Outlook 2050 (GECF, 2023) expresses concerns over weak progress of the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda underscoring that critical areas ranging from "poverty alleviation" to "resilient access to affordable energy" are lagging behind. This turns the energy trilemma of energy security, affordability and sustainability into a top priority, in the context of rising energy demand. Investing in production of natural gas will guarantee a sustainable option for those without access to clean cooking and basic lighting, people in emerging economies playing energy catch up. They effectively speak of fossil fuels as the critical means to redress manifold traumas associated with colonialism the industrialised nations are privy to, the EU included.

Both OPEC and GECF bet on the contradictions stemming from simultaneous pursuit of energy and climate justice. They dispel the feasibility of powering the world exclusively by means of renewable energy sources, casting shadows over the claims of climate neutrality by 2050. Natural gas and oil alongside renewables and cleaner hydrocarbon technologies are claimed to provide the only realistic pattern of socio-economic development for marginalised and disadvantaged communities suffering from eroded quality of life.

A MORE HOPEFUL CONCLUSION?

We can see how green European narratives collide in a vortex swallowing any virtuous claim or intention coming from what's identified as a Western club. The self-proclaimed "champions" of the green transition, having created wealth off fossil fuels, are seen as lecturing the world on how to construct equitable and decarbonised economies. Unsurprisingly, our narratives of justice and righteousness are labelled as patronizing, irremediably damaging the EU's landmark climate incentive as it reflects its own internal difficulty to cope with injustices and outdated models of wealth and growth.

But is everything truly lost for the EGD? We do not think so. The EGD might still give rise to policies with a solid decolonial foundation built on non-Eurocentric knowledge and leadership. Europe is, after all, underusing a fantastic wealth seen nowhere else on the planet: abode to the most ignoble breeds of colonialism, wars and unwise pluri-millennial tendency to exploit all things and beings (Garattini, 2021, 2022), Europe is also in a unique experimentation with its own diversity, rich past and ongoing struggles, shapeshifting them into keys opening potentially groundbreaking decolonial and inclusive discourses. Exploring new forms of citizenship (Machin & Tan, 2024) within a concert of na-

tions where cultures, beliefs and cosmogonies stretching from the scientific to the indigenous, can provide the missing normative components to the EU grand narrative of sustainability within planetary limits. The EGD beholds tangible clout to connect each social justice struggle to climate change, from green jobs to free healthcare, but it is in need of a logical alternative to colonialism. Some alternatives amenable to exploration are underlying policy initiatives offered by frontline and vulnerable communities who have been contending with shock waves of environmental degradation and trauma for generations. A drastic qualitative and ethnographic shift toward social sciences and humanities as programmatic feedstocks; direct and continuous participation of citizens, CSOs and NGOs with facilitating access pipelines to influence strategic choices; and a repurposing of our technological development to align it with them both, are considered to be the cornerstones of this rebooted EGD and of enticing forms of politics, at home or abroad.

Our sentiment is that, considering how facts stubbornly disapprove of our claims, what we truly need is imagining radically different ways of interacting between human and other-than-human, cognizant of both facts and the world's pushbacks. We need new narratives that do not offer quick technological fixes favoured by accumulation-based societies. We need narratives that draw on values recentering our relationships with Earth and one another. Study of such narratives appears to be indispensable if we are to turn the tide of the ecological and socio-economical collapse that the global community is inexorably heading to.

„What we truly need is imagining radically different ways of interacting between human and other-than-human."

Recognition of this necessity led Green Forum to conduct a qualitative study aiming to elicit individual and collective climate narratives alongside eco-emotional responses of actors participating in the Conference of Parties in Baku (COP29) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Given the multinational fora of the conference attracting a range of actors such as country delegates, industry representatives, NGOs and activists, it offered ample opportunities for data collection. The study was designed as an attempt to capture various existing narratives pertaining among others to equitable energy transition, issues of collective and individual responsibility in the climate crisis, political messages disseminated by green parties and relevance of those messages to addressing climate and environmental trauma. We hope our work will help inform novel narratives and invite interested parties to overcome fear of imagining different ways of living, respectful of planetary and socio-economical boundaries for all.

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NEW CENTER OF GRAVITY.

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Photo by Karolina Grabowska on Pexel

Twenty years after the historic ‚Big Bang' enlargement of the European Union, Central Europe has transformed from a group of transition economies into a politically and economically vital region of the EU. This paper examines how countries such as Poland have evolved from being ‚younger cousins' in the Union to assertive players shaping the European agenda. With a focus on regional cooperation formats, strategic leadership, and defense policy, the article explores how Central Europe, and Poland in particular, has repositioned itself amid shifting geopolitical dynamics and rising external threats.

BIG BANG

On 1 May 2004, ten countries joined the European Union, marking the biggest expansion in its history in terms of both people and countries. This "Big Bang enlargement" integrated over 74 million citizens into the EU and shifted its external borders significantly eastwards. Eight of the new EU countries had previously been part of the Eastern bloc and had been dominated by the Soviet Union for over four decades. They then experienced a fast-track transition into democracy and a market economy in the early 1990s. Although EU membership united the political class and the majority of citizens[1], enlargement was not guaranteed.

In addition to the opportunities presented by enlargement, Western European elites also saw dangers. Not everyone was convinced that the political, social and economic reforms in eastern Europe had gone far enough. They were concerned about the potential costs of enlargement, as well as the cultural differences between the aspiring societies.

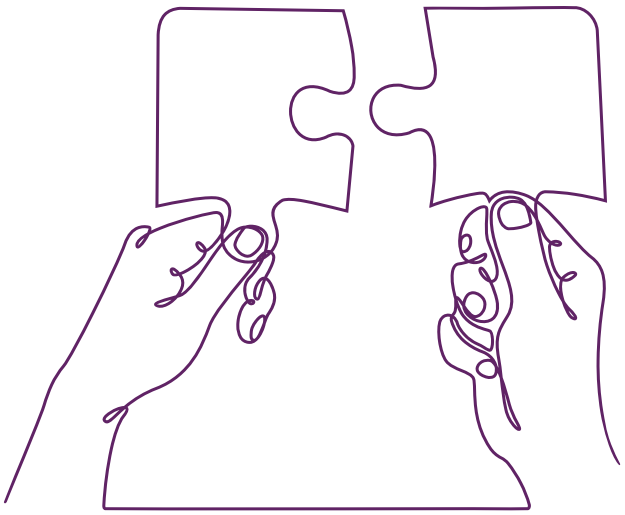
After gaining official membership, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Slovenia - referred to as Central Europe for the purpose of this article - became "new members" for a long time. Although they quickly learned the rules of the community and took advantage of the opportunities that integration offered , for years they viewed themselves as "younger cousins" and tried to prove that they fit into the whole. This role was also an offshoot of the actions of the so-called "old EU" countries, which saw themselves as sole leaders deciding the future of the community and looked to the East with superiority[2].

The twentieth anniversary of the "Big Bang enlargement" was an occasion for taking stock. The dominant voices were, and rightly so, enthusiastic about the achievements of the time. The eight countries of the region combined achieved PPP per capita GDP growth of 27% higher than in the counterfactual scenario, i.e., had they not joined the EU. One of the most significant consequences was Central Europe's insertion into EU supply chains, which brought in foreign investment inflows, led to a fivefold increase in the value of merchandise exports and increased their level

1. E.g. Szczerbiak, A., Taggart, P. (2005). *EU Enlargement and Referendums*. London & New York: Routledge. Marczewska-Rytko, M. Accession referenda in the fifth EU enlargement. *Annales UMCS, 22(1)*

2. In Poland, the symbol of this attitude was French President Jacques Chirac and his 2003 "shut up" order to Eastern European countries. *Read e.g.* DW.com (2003, February 19). 'Chirac Comments Send A Jolt Through EU'. Available at https://www.dw.com/en/chirac-comments-send-a-jolt-through-eu/a-782707. *Compare Krastev*, I., Holmes, S. (2018). Explaining Eastern Europe: Imitation and Its Discontents. *Journal of Democracy*, 29(3). Available at https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/explaining-eastern-europe-imitation-and-its-discontents-2/

of advancement. The region increased the complexity of exports, the technological sophistication of products increased. Digital transformation took place in Central Europe at a pace similar to the EU average. Economic success translated into social success. The risk of poverty fell below the EU average in five of the eight countries, the perception of corruption declined significantly everywhere except in two cases, and rural living standards improved significantly. Countries advanced in a widely used measure of quality of life - the Human Development Index (HDI)[3].



BECOMING A REGIONAL LEADER

But politically, even after 20 years, there was still talk of the "new member states". It seemed as if their perception by the "old Europe" had not changed at all. However, the goals and ambitions of Central European countries, particularly Poland, had changed. Poland, the fifth most populous member state and the sixth largest economy in the EU, was still not treated as a "big country" and decided to assert its role. Since the early 1990s, Poland has had the ambition of being a leader in the region representing it vis-à-vis institutions in Brussels[4], and started to act like a leader. This was particularly evident during the first term in office of Prime Minister Donald Tusk (2007-2014). For whom being "at the main decision-making table" was both a political goal and a mobilizing slogan for pro-European Poles (i.e. the majority[5]). During this period, Tusk organized the countries of the region around issues that were important to them, primarily the Eastern Partnership[6], but also climate policy[7]. In this context, the Visegrad Group become an important tool. In his speech

3. *E.g.* Kopiński, D., et al. (2024). Wielkie rozszerzenie. 20 lat członkostwa Europy Środkowej w UE. Warszawa: Polski Instytut Ekonomiczny. Komisja Europejska (n.d.). '20 lat razem – Co dobrego przyniosło rozszerzenie UE w 2004 r.' Available at https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-enlargement/20-years-together/20-years-together-facts-and-figures-about-benefits-enlargement-eu_pl

4. E.g. Ukielski, P. (2020). Europa Środkowa w polskiej myśli politycznej po 1989 roku. In *Polska wobec południowych sąsiadów w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w XX wieku.* Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego

5. CBOS (2024). 20 years of Poland's membership in the EU. *Polish Public Opinion*, 3. Available at https://www.cbos.pl/PL/publikacje/public_opinion/2024/03_2024.pdf

6. E.g. Szwarc, K. (2012). Partnerstwo Wschodnie a polska prezydencja w Radzie UE. *Krakowskie Studia Międzynarodowe, 2.*

7. E.g. Kirpsza, A., Stachowiak, G. (2012). *Podsumowanie polskiej prezydencji w Radzie UE.* Kraków: KON.

after a V4 summit in 2014, Tusk noted that the four CEE countries "no longer expect compliments" because they have become "partners of the largest European powers[8]". Tusk emphasized that the best indicator of its good condition is the comparison of the growth of the V4 countries' GDP with that of other EU countries.

The first Polish presidency of the Council of the EU, which fell in 2011, was supposed to be an opportunity to present Poland as a country with a vision for Europe and ability to implement it efficiently. The Polish presidency had much to boast about - many of its demands were implemented, but it did not breathe new energy into the functioning of the EU, which was Tusk's ambition. Tusk's political leadership, however, resulted in a reflection on political leadership in the EU in general[9]. This cannot be "the leadership of one, two or three even of the strongest countries, nor can it be the leadership of technocrats (...) This leadership must have a democratic mandate (...) It must be a leadership based on European institutions," he said[10].

It should be noted that the Law and Justice (PiS) government (2015-2023) - with an obvious Eurosceptic slant and featuring overtly anti-EU politicians[11]- also sought to build regional alliances to base its strength inside the EU on. "Unlike the far right, PiS is not typically Eurosceptic. It does not question the legitimacy of the European Union or Poland's membership in it. PiS's approach to European integration can be called Europhaticism, which boils down to a conviction that things will go wrong in further deepening integration," stressed Klub Jagielloński, a conservative Polish think tank .The PiS rhetoric for domestic use emphasized "getting up from the knees"[12] in relations with major European capitals and EU institutions. The right-wing denounced "second-class membership" and demanded a redefinition of the scope and extent of European integration and the EU model, which de facto amounted to a debate around the role and importance of the nation-state.

PiS also used the V4 to implement its European policy, whenever it could. The V4 was a useful instrument for the Szydło and Morawiecki governments, since the migration crisis in 2015. The group has evolved into a platform for criticizing the mainstream EU and its agenda. But V4 was not sufficient for PiS's ambitions. Not only because the group

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8. Money.pl (2014, June 24). Tusk: Grupa Wyszehradzka stała się partnerem największych potęg europejskich. Available at https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/unia-europejska/wiadomosci/artykul/tusk;grupa;wyszehradzka;stala;sie;partnerem;najwiekszych;potegeuropejskich,29,0,1569821.html

9. *Ibid.*

10. Prime Minister Donald Tusk's speech at the European Parliament, summing up the Polish presidency. Available at http://pl2011.eu/sites/default/files/users/shared/spotkania_i_wydarzenia/przemowienie_pe_14.12.2011.pdf

11. *E.g.* Fella, S. (2024). Poland: The Law and Justice Government and relations with the EU, 2015-2023. London: House of Commons Library

12. *E.g.* Kędzierski, M. (2021, October 12). „Wstawanie z kolan" i „odzyskiwanie suwerenności" czy wyprowadzanie Polski z UE? Odpowiedź jest zupełnie inna i znacznie poważniejsza. *KlubJagielloński.pl*. Available at https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2021/10/12/wstawanie-z-kolan-i-odzyskiwanie-suwerennosci-

was not cohesive in key areas and alliances, and some leaders could not always be counted on, but also because its reach was limited. PiS therefore returned to the historic idea of Intermarium[13]. It re-launched it under the banner of the Three Sea Initiative (3SI), sometimes called Trimarium. Along with the 12 initial participants - Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia - other countries have decided to join specific projects, notably Ukraine[14]. The dozen original 3SI countries cover 28% of the EU's territory and 22% of its population (114 million people). Surprisingly to many, 3SI has become a permanent fixture on the landscape of CEE, a constructive platform for cooperation in area of infrastructure and development[15]. A further mention can be made here of the security initiative launched by Polish President Andrzej Duda and Romanian President Klaus Iohannis, the Bucharest Nine. The organization, composed exclusively of NATO's eastern flank countries belonging to the EU, took on greater significance after Russia's invasion of Ukraine began[16]. Together, these formats provided PiS with broader avenues to project influence, shape regional dynamics, and pursue its vision for Poland's role in Europe.

WE TOLD YOU SO

The beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine marked a turning point in the perception of the role of Central European countries in the EU. Countries such as Poland, Estonia and Lithuania had been warning for years about Russia's aggressive policy toward the West and the possibility of escalation of existing conflicts and initiation of new ones by the Kremlin. The Poles pointed, among other things, to the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border, calling it an element of Russia's hybrid war[17]. Previously, talking about Russia's actions against the EU as a war was considered an

> ***„For years, they were patronizing us: 'Oh, you over-nervous, over-sensitive Central Europeans are prejudiced against Russia.'"***

czy-wyprowadzanie-polski-z-ue-odpowiedz-jest-zupelnie-inna-i-znacznie-powazniejsza/acje/public_opinion/2024/03_2024.pdf

13. Hodun, M. (2020). Poland's Regional Ambition. From Intermarium to V4 to Three Seas. In Mikecz, D. (ed.). The Future of the Liberal Visegrad Project. Brussels: European Liberal Forum

14. Now there are 13 members (Greece joined), non-EU parters and strategic partners, e.g. USA, Japan, Turkey.

15. *Ibid.*

16. PISM (2024, Aug. 12). Bucharest Nine Cooperation Strengthening NATO's Eastern Flank. Available at https://www.pism.pl/publications/bucharest-nine-cooperation-strengthening-natos-eastern-flank

17. PISM (2022, February 2). The Border Crisis as an Example of Hybrid Warfare. Available at https://www.pism.pl/publications/the-border-crisis-as-an-example-of-hybrid-warfare

„It is quite visible that the center of gravity has moved here to Poland and other countries in Central Europe.“

exaggeration and a manifestation of anti-Russian phobia, but after February 24, 2022, the West conceded the point to the states of the eastern flank[18]. „'We told you so!' How the West didn't listen to the countries that know Russia best", Politico asked in a title[19]. 'No One in Europe Is Telling Poland to 'Shut Up' Now', said the headline of The New York Times referring to the infamous words of Jacques Chirac[20]. "It is quite visible that the center of gravity has moved here to Poland and other countries in Central Europe," Polish prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki said. "The Western Europeans pooh-poohed and patronized us for these last 30 years," concurred Radosław Sikorski, a then former Polish foreign minister. "For years [they] were patronizing us about our attitude: 'Oh, you know, you over-nervous, over-sensitive Central Europeans are prejudiced against Russia,'" he added.

The voice of Warsaw resounded exceptionally loudly in this context. Even more so when Tusk returned to power, and in the nimbus of a hero of democracy. The victory of pro-European forces in Poland in the autumn of 2023 and the formation of a broad government coalition led by the new old prime minister was received in Europe with joy and hope. Poland had the attention of the entire democratic world and all the cards to play the role it had long wanted.

Warsaw and allies did not stop at repeating "and I told you so." Poland has become a hub for Western military aid flowing into Ukraine, a shelter for millions of Ukrainian and a driving force behind European sanctions against Russia[21]. Poland has also become NATO's leader in the defense spending category. Total outlays for this purpose

18. *E.g.* Hodun, M., Cappelletti, F. (2024). *Putin's Europe*. Brussels: European Liberal Forum. PAP (2023, October 15). Polska i inne kraje Europy Wschodniej miały rację ostrzegając przed Rosją. Avaialble at https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/ekspert-polska-i-inne-kraje-europy-wschodniej-mialy-racje-ostrzegajac-przed-rosja

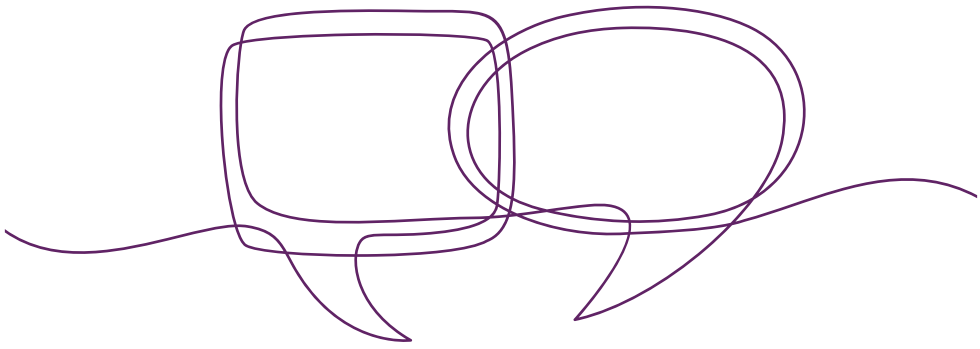
19. Stuart, L. (2022, Match 9). 'We told you so!' How the West didn't listen to the countries that know Russia Best. *Politico*. Available at https://www.politico.eu/article/western-europe-listen-to-the-baltic-countries-that-know-russia-best-ukraine-poland/

20. Higgins, A. (2023, February 1). 'No One in Europe Is Telling Poland to 'Shut Up' Now. *The New York Times*. Available at https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/21/world/europe/poland-russia-ukraine.html

21. Prezydent.pl (2025, February 23). Polska pomoc dla Ukrainy. Available at https://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wydarzenia/polska-pomoc-dla-ukrainy-plen,93620

between 2025 and 2035 will amount to as much as PLN 1.9 trillion. This is a significant increase compared to the PLN 825 billion spent between 2014 and 2024. Projections indicate that outlays will peak in 2025, reaching 4.7% of GDP[22] (second in 2024, according to the NATO report, will be Estonia with 3.43%, third - United States with 3.38%, and fourth will be Latvia with 3.15%[23]). In an effort to maintain good relations with the new administration in the U.S., Poland responded positively to President Donald Trump's call to raise NATO defense spending to 5% of GDP[24]. Through these actions, Poland strengthened its role on the global stage, earning recognition as a key contributor to collective defense and a trusted point of engagement for major international allies, including the United States.

In addition, Poland's role as a defense leader is reinforced by its presidency of the Council of the EU, which falls in the first half of 2025. Its slogan is very simple, "Security, Europe!", and all priorities concern security in seven dimensions[25]. „We need concerted and ambitious action on European defence, complementing the efforts of NATO. There is a need to boost defence readiness based on increased military spending, a stronger defence industry and addressing defence capability gaps. (...) We need strong support for the defence capabilities and defence industry, which will benefit entities of all sizes from all Member States. Support for key defence and dual-use infrastructure, such as East Shield and the Baltic Defence Line, is also important", reads the presidency's website.



22. Deloitte.com (2025, Match 3). Do 2035 roku wydatki na obronność Polski mogą wynieść nawet 1,9 bln złotych. Available at https://www.deloitte.com/pl/pl/about/press-room/do-2035-roku-wydatki-na-obronnosc-Polski.html

23. PAP (2024, August 28). Polska już teraz wydaje najwięcej na obronę pod względem PKB wśród krajów NATO. Available at https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/polska-juz-teraz-wydaje-najwiecej-na-obrone-pod-wzgledem-pkb-wsrod-krajow-nato

24. Górski, M. (2025, January 15). 5% of GDP on Defence? Poland Doesn't Say "No". *Defence24.com*. Available at https://defence24.com/defence-policy/5-of-gdp-on-defence-poland-doesnt-say-no

25. Priorities of the Polish Presidency in the Council of the EU 2025 available at https://polish-presidency.consilium.europa.eu/en/programme/priorities/

LITTLE REVOLUTION

Prime Minister Tusk has become one of Europe's leaders by creating a vision of a Union capable of defending itself and competing in a world of global interdependence. The Politico portal proclaimed him "The most powerful person in Europe" 2024. In times of crises and uncertainty, Tusk's message is one of action and struggle for Europe's position in the world, rather than inertia and subservience to world powers[26]. Tusk is seen as a key partner by liberal French President Emmanuel Macron, the last pillar of the West's ambitious European policy, but also by the right-wing Giorgia Meloni, who has been called Europe's most efficient politician. After the elections in Germany and the defeat of Olaf Scholz, there is a chance for renewed Polish-German relations and close cooperation with the new chancellor[27]. Tusk, as the leader of Central Europe, is necessary for the other major EU countries to build European-wide agreements on fundamental challenges. The Polish prime minister is not only positioning himself as a leader of the eastern part of the EU, but at the same time building an understanding with the northern part of the continent. Tusk was a special guest (for the first time) at the 2024 summit of the heads of government of the Nordic and Baltic countries, the so-called NB8 format in Sweden. There he proposed, among other things, the creation of joint missions in the Baltic Sea, or "navy policing"[28]. Commentators stress that the coalition Poland is building, made up of central and northern European countries, including the UK, is an emanation of Warsaw's ambitions in shaping European policy. French *Le Monde* called it a "little revolution in Polish diplomacy"[29].

„Tusk's message is one of action and struggle for Europe's position in the world, rather than inertia and subservience to world powers."

On the one hand, Poland's position was derived from interest in the region as a whole. On the other hand, Poland's activity in the EU and in-

26. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3MBxlbrN48

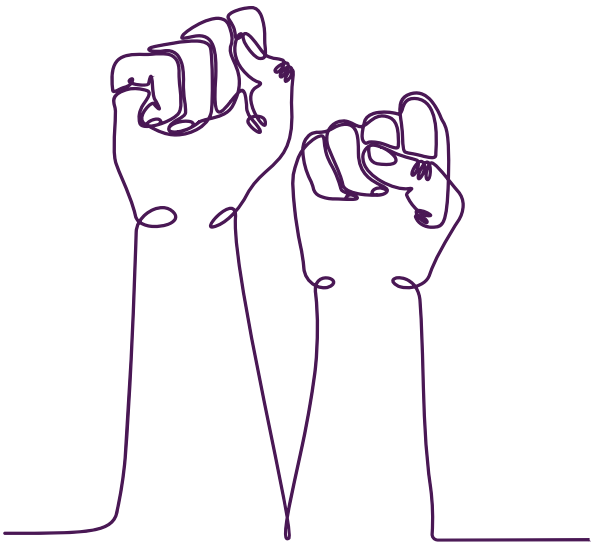
27. Onet.pl (2025, January 22). Donald Tusk w Parlamencie Europejskim. "Jeszcze Europa nie zginęła" [video of D. Tusk's speech]. *YouTube*. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3MBxlbrN48

28. PAP (2024, November 29). Początek nowej koalicji? "Polska zwraca się ku krajom nordyckim i bałtyckim przeciwko Rosji". Available at https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/poczatek-nowej-koalicji-polska-zwraca-sie-ku-krajom-nordyckim-i-baltyckim-przeciwko

29. *Ibid.*

ternational arena strengthened the region. This was evident after the 2024 EP elections, where mainstream democratic parties had some spectacular successes. In Poland, the centrist Civic Coalition led by Tusk broke a decade-long streak of electoral successes for PiS. The new institutional cycle showed the importance of the central European countries. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced that of the six executive vice-presidents, "[t]hree [are] from member states that joined before the fall of the Iron Curtain. And three from member states that joined after Europe was reunited. (...) [A]ll with one common goal – and that is to make Europe stronger[30]." Key appointees from the region include Estonia's Kaja Kallas, taking the foreign affairs and security portfolio, and Lithuania's Andrius Kubilius, who will assume the newly created position of defence commissioner. Romania's Roxana Minzatu has been appointed as one of vice presidents, Slovenia's Marta Kos took the enlargement portfolio, Slovakia's Maros Sefcovic remains a key figure in the Commission with his role in trade and economic security, and Poland's Piotr Serafin has been entrusted with overseeing the EU's budget[31]. The new Commission is a strong indicator of the shift in the intra-European balance of power towards the East. So important under current geopolitical and economic circumstances.

„The new Commission is a strong indicator of the shift in the intra-European balance of power towards the East."



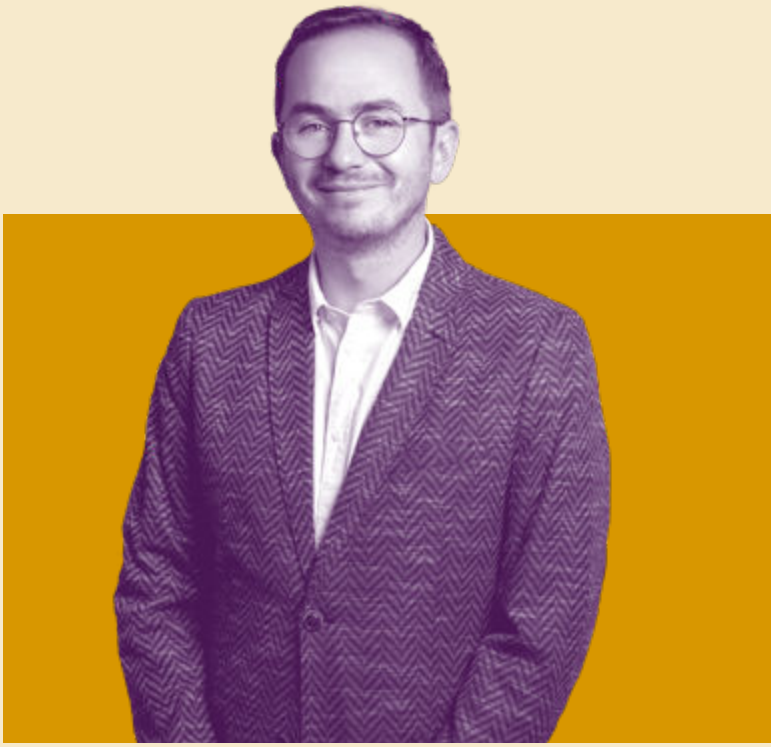
30. *E.g.* IntelliNews (2024, September 17). Eastern EU members secure key portfolios in new European Commission. Available at https://www.intellinews.com/eastern-eu-members-secure-key-portfolios-in-new-european-commission-343823/. Turp-Balazs, C. (2024, September, 20). Baltics lead the charge as emerging Europe bags several of the EU's top jobs. *Emerging Europe*. Avaiable at https://emerging-europe.com/analysis/baltics-lead-the-charge-as-emerging-europe-bags-several-of-the-eus-top-jobs/. McDonald, A. (2024, September 25). Eastern rising: new EU team puts focus on CEE. TVP World

31. Jozef Síkela of Czechia takes on international partnerships, Ekaterina Zaharieva of Bulgaria will handle startups, research and innovation, and Suica will manage the Mediterranean portfolio.

SUMMARY

In conclusion, Central Europe's transformation over the past two decades highlights the region's growing maturity and influence within the EU. Poland's assertive regional and European policies—ranging from economic integration and infrastructure development to defense leadership—have redefined its role on the continent. With initiatives such as the V4, 3SI, and Bucharest Nine, as well as the leadership of figures like Donald Tusk, Poland has helped shift the EU's center of gravity eastward. As Europe confronts new security, economic, and political challenges, Central Europe stands ready not only to participate, but to lead.

„Poland has helped shift the EU's center of gravity eastward."



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President of Projekt: Polska

Miłosz Hodun, PhD is a President of the Projekt: Polska Foundation and member of the Board of Directors of the European Liberal Forum. Author and editor of various publications on hate speech and populism including “Putin’s Europe”, “US/THEM. Hate Speech at the Service of Politics”; “Free Voices. LGBT+ Rights in Eastern Europe”; “Beyond Flat Earth. Conspiracy Theory vs. European Liberals”. He is a visiting adjunct professor at Reykjavik University Law School.

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ALGORITHMIC ELECTIONS.

Policies to Combat Microtargeting in Europe

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Christian Democratic International Center (KIC)

Image generated using artificial intelligence (Freepik, 2025)

One increasingly common method in election campaigning is microtargeting, which gained widespread attention following the Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2016. Notable recent examples include election campaigns in Germany, Romania, and, perhaps most prominently, the United States.[1]

The issue of how to address new developments in the democratic landscape is not solely one of democratic theory, but also of security. Election interference has become a recognised instrument of hybrid warfare. For the European Union, which is not only a union of states but a democratic project built on trust between peoples, protecting electoral integrity is a matter of strategic interest as well as democratic principle. In this respect, reflection on the adequacy of current regulation seems not only legitimate, but necessary.

This paper is a study of microtargeting from a policy perspective. The questions posed are the following:

1. To what extent is political microtargeting currently addressed by existing EU policy?
2. Should the EU take further steps to regulate political microtargeting?
3. If so, what form should such regulation take in order to balance democratic integrity with fundamental rights?

First, this paper outlines microtargeting as a phenomenon and describes the existing EU policy framework. It then considers whether further regulation can be justified conceptually, weighing the risks microtargeting possesses for democracy against the rights of EU citizens and the importance of open political communication. Finally, the main points are summarised in the conclusion.

The reader should bear in mind that this is not a legal analysis. While questions of legality may be mentioned, they will remain outside the scope of this paper.

1. Perkins, The Guardian, November 4, 2024; Botan, EDMO, December 9, 2024; NOYB, February 21, 2025.

BACKGROUND

Microtargeting

Microtargeting refers to the use of online data to tailor advertising messages to individuals, based on the identification of their personal interests. Personal data gathered through various means is processed, sorting individuals into specific profiles. Political messages are then crafted and directed at these microsegments in an effort to influence their opinions, choices, or voting behaviour.

Microtargeting first emerged in the commercial sector in the early 2000s. Political consultants soon adopted these methods, seeking to bring the same level of precision to voter outreach. The technique gained wider use in political campaigns, particularly in the United States. The practice gained global attention with the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the Brexit referendum, during which the data analytics firm Cambridge Analytica became infamous for harvesting personal data from millions of Facebook users without their consent.[2]

Research shows that organisers of political campaigns commonly analyse people's behaviour online to form psychological profiles. This form of targeting can exploit psychological reactions to elicit deeper engagement with the message.[3] In short, depending on the exact method, microtargeting allows tailored outreach where messages are designed to achieve specific and instrumental responses based on individual or group characteristics. Although the specific extent of the method's influence remains open to discussion[4], it is clear that political strategists have begun using the methods at scale. [5]

Current policy

The European Union has taken steps to regulate aspects of political microtargeting, though it has not banned the practice outright. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) [2016/679] sets the policy baseline with its restriction on the use of sensitive personal data unless individuals give explicit consent or there is a strong public reason.

The Regulation on the transparency and targeting of political advertising [2024/900] builds on this by banning the use of sensitive data in political advertisements unless GDPR exceptions apply. It

2. Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018.
3. Zarouali et al., 2020.
4. Tappin et al., 2023.
5. Even the EU Commission has been accused of the practice, see Euractiv, "EU Commission's Microtargeting Ads on Controversial Law Faces Fresh Complaint".

requires advertisers to disclose the targeting logic used: specifically, what data was processed, the main parameters behind the targeting or amplification technique, any use of third-party data or analytical tools, and the reasoning that led to a particular individual or audience segment being selected to receive the advertisement. This information must be shown alongside the advertisement and included in public records. Advertisers and platforms must also keep internal policies, log their targeting practices, and help users understand and exercise their rights.

The Digital Services Act (DSA) [2022/2065] adds further safeguards by requiring large platforms to ensure transparency for all advertisements, protect minors from profiling, and assess the risks of manipulation and disinformation. Meanwhile, the forthcoming Artificial Intelligence Act (AI Act) [2024/1689] treats certain algorithmic techniques that may influence democratic processes as high-risk, potentially subjecting political targeting systems to future scrutiny.

Microtargeting is still allowed using non-sensitive data, such as age, location or online interests, even if these can indirectly reflect political views. There are also no firm limits on how algorithms can optimise or test political messages, as long as the data used is lawful. Emotional and psychological profiling is not explicitly restricted (though data pertaining to such profiling mostly is), and inferences drawn from behaviour may fall outside the strict definition of sensitive data.

In short, the EU has made political microtargeting more transparent and accountable, particularly where personal data is involved. Yet the system still permits subtle and sophisticated targeting methods, so long as they comply with EU legislation. In essence, the regulations restrict how political content is delivered, but not what is said or to whom, nor the forms it may take. Content remains largely outside the scope of regulation.

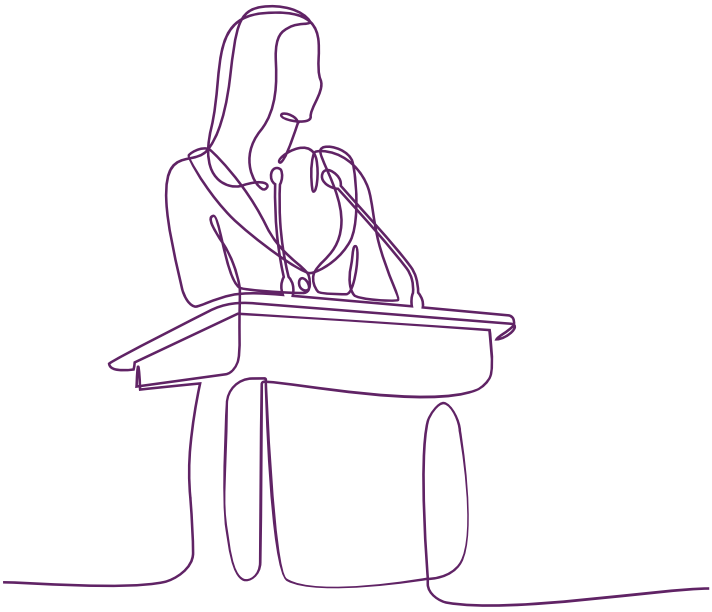
SHOULD MICROTARGETING BE TARGETED BY EU POLICY?

Before turning to this question, it must first be established why political microtargeting is a matter for the European Union at all. While national elections are held at the national level, the challenges posed by microtargeting are transnational in nature. In addition, the European elections are held in the whole union. Moreover, the platforms that enable it operate across borders, the data flows involved are not confined to any one state, and the risks, such as disinformation or foreign interference, often affect the Union as a whole. The EU has a shared responsibility to uphold fundamental rights, including data protection and freedom of expression, and to safeguard democratic

integrity across its member states.[6] A coordinated policy response is therefore justified.

Any discussion of political microtargeting at the EU level must also begin by recognising the limits of the Union's powers. The EU's ability to act in this field has hitherto rested primarily on its competences concerning the internal market (Article 114 TFEU) and the protection of personal data (Article 16 TFEU), as reflected in instruments such as the *Regulation on the transparency and targeting of political advertising* and GDPR. The Union's foundational values of democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights are established in Article 2 TEU, but mechanisms to enforce these values, such as the Article 7 procedure, are politically sensitive and have proved difficult to apply in practice. The EU Charter guarantees certain rights, but it binds Member States only when they are implementing Union law.

In addition, external influence by hostile foreign powers is increasingly present in European democracies. The EU depends fundamentally on the democratic health of its Member States: free elections, open political debate, and trust in public institutions are essential for the functioning of a tightly integrated Union. Yet its capacity to act when these conditions are endangered remains narrow. Initiatives such as the European Democracy Shield demonstrate the Commission's growing concern, but without stronger and more enforceable instruments, such efforts risk remaining largely symbolic.[7]



A Balance Between Rights and Democratic Integrity

Finally, any serious discussion of democratic integrity must include a discussion about the values that give democracy meaning. Democracy is both the means and an end of the political order, and must be treated as a matter of principles before it becomes a matter of procedure. It is only

6. See TEU Article 2 and the Charter of Fundamental Rights, Articles 8 and 11

7. See European Commission, European Democracy Shield initiative, as of writing in an early feedback stage

by returning to them that we can approach these questions. Namely, the questions of what democracy truly is, and what parts of it must be regulated in order to be safeguarded.

James Madison wrote to the Kentucky statesman W.T. Barry in 1822, emphasing that a "*A popular Government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a Prologue to a Farce or a Tragedy*". In the same vein, western democratic thought has never defined democracy mechanically, as a method for counting votes. It has always rested on shared conceptual foundations: the existence of a shared public space, access to reliable information, the capacity for reasoned debate, and a shared understanding of the world.[8] Without these conditions, elections may continue in form but not in substance. This can be seen clearly in authoritarian states like Russia and China, that have gutted the preconditions for elections, but are happy to keep up the appearances of holding them.

Democratic integrity is also deeply linked to protection of fundamental individual rights. Most important among these is the right to freedom of expression, without which no meaningful democratic life can exist. The ability to speak, to hear, to disagree, and to persuade is not simply another element of democracy; it is its very lifeblood. Any effort to safeguard democratic processes must begin from a full and unwavering commitment to these basic freedoms. Without them, the notion of democratic integrity loses all meaning. At the same time, democratic societies often face the difficult task of balancing freedom of expression against other essential interests, such as public order or the rights of others.[9]

"Without a shared public space, access to reliable information, and reasoned debate, elections may continue in form but not in substance."

Political microtargeting as a method of persuasion may, in the long and short term, and in combination with other measures, threaten the conditions necessary for fair and open democratic deliberation. Yet responding too forcefully could endanger the rights that democracy is meant to exercise, and which it is upheld by in turn.

8. As Arendt writes in the The Human Condition, 57, "*The reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself.*"

9. See Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which protects freedom of expression while allowing restrictions that are "necessary in a democratic society" for reasons such as national security, public safety, and the protection of others' rights.

The central questions follow naturally: are transparency and procedural safeguards enough, or is there a case for moving toward a more substantive regulatory approach? Should solutions be sought primarily through legislation, or are cultural, educational, and civic responses better suited to the task? And if regulation is needed, how can it be designed to strengthen democracy without undermining the freedoms on which it ultimately depends?

The Principles of Free Speech

Messages through microtargeting are certainly political, and political expression is as a general rule deserving of protection. However, as detailed above, microtargeting messages are not merely one person expressing a view to others in the public sphere, but also a carefully engineered message, shaped by personal data and delivered through algorithms to selected individuals. These messages are often invisible to the wider public, sometimes drawing on psychological phenomenon to affect the recipient with messaging that isn't easily subject to direct scrutiny. In this manner, microtargeting shifts political speech from the open contestation of a public debate to private influence under private circumstances.[10]

Should such communication fall under the same protections as traditional political speech? Classical defences of free expression have been made under the assumption that speech occurs publicly, where it can be heard, tested, and debated.

„Microtargeting shifts political speech from the open contestation of a public debate to private influence under private circumstances.“

Yet not all speech today fits the classical mould. Microtargeting treats speech instrumentally, as a tool to trigger certain responses in its recipients for a specific goal. The question is not whether microtargeting departs from the classical ideal, but *how far* it does so, and *whether* that difference undermines the democratic function of speech itself as to be worthy of regulating. Drawing that line is very difficult. But if freedom of expression is to remain a safeguard of democracy rather than a tool of its erosion, we must at least pose the

10. Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018

question of when speech ceases to inform and begins to manipulate, and whether regulation should be the outcome.

Freedom of speech has long been recognized as one of the essential pillars of a free and open society. Yet, as Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes famously noted in Schenck v. *United States* (1919), this freedom is not absolute. "*The most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a crowded theatre, and causing a panic*." He then continued to define another difficult question for when determining prohibited speech: when, and by whom, may speech rightly be limited?

But not even all falsehoods should be categorically prohibited, according to classical thought. In John Milton's *Areopagitica* (1644), a defence of unlicensed printing, Milton argues that truth has nothing to fear from falsehood. Rather than censor ideas, societies should trust in the ability of free and rational individuals to discern truth. "*Let her and Falsehood grapple, who ever knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?*"

Thomas Paine, in the introduction to *The Age of Reason* (1794), similarly insists on the sacred right of the individual conscience to engage with ideas freely. Paine's focus was on religious authority, but his underlying message was that reason and liberty go hand in hand. People must be free not only to speak but to receive ideas, even controversial or offensive ones.

John Stuart Mill, in *On Liberty* (1859), offers perhaps the most famous philosophical defence of freedom of expression. For Mill, the suppression of any opinion is a crime against both current and future generations. Even a false opinion may contain a "portion of truth" necessary for the full understanding of a matter. More provocatively, Mill argues that even if an opinion is entirely true, it still must be allowed to be challenged and debated—or else it will become "a dead dogma, not a living truth." In other words, freedom of speech is necessary not just for the sake of individuals who wish to speak, but for the intellectual and moral development of society as a whole.

„If freedom of expression is to remain a safeguard of democracy rather than a tool of its erosion, we must ask when speech ceases to inform and begins to manipulate."

All of these defences of the freedom of speech rely on an open and safe space (public sphere) for deliberation – a space which microtargeting actively subverts.

LOOKING AHEAD

Given the complex nature of microtargeting, any policy response must be approached with great caution. The existing EU framework has taken important steps to increase transparency and accountability. It restricts the most intrusive practices, especially those involving sensitive personal data, and ensures that political advertising is at least visible, explainable, and open to scrutiny. Yet these measures remain largely procedural. They regulate *how* content is delivered, but not *what* is said, *why* it is said in a particular way to a particular person.

„Freedom of speech is sacred — it must not be impeded unless vital democratic or societal structures are gravely at risk.“

Whether this is sufficient remains an open question. Procedural regulation has the virtue of neutrality, respecting freedom of expression and avoiding many dangers posed by control over speech. And here a crucial principle must be underlined: as a general rule, freedom of speech is sacred. It must not be impeded unless there is the utmost necessity, when vital democratic or societal structures, or fundamental rights, are genuinely and gravely at risk. Any attempt to restrict or regulate speech must be guided by deep respect for this freedom, as well as a clear understanding of the historical arguments that have long defended it.

The classical authors argued that speech must not be restricted simply because it is controversial, uncomfortable, or misguided. Speech cannot be banned on the grounds that it may mislead, provoke offence, or unsettle established opinion. Any regulation that undermines the free contest of ideas, or that presumes to protect citizens by limiting debate itself, would run counter to the democratic ideals that the European Union, as a project committed to freedom and human dignity, seeks to uphold.

At the same time, it can be argued that microtargeting presents not merely the risk of “wrong” ideas being spoken, but the risk that the very conditions for rational public debate and trust in our democratic institutions are eroded. Microtargeting’s strength lies not simply in the content of its messages, but in how it as a matter of strategy bypasses the shared public sphere and seeks to blatantly instrumentalise both speech and the electorate. If political communication becomes too instrumental, too individually tailored, and too manipulative, it may affect the

democratic process in ways that procedural transparency alone cannot fully address. Microtargeted messaging is not directly similar to shouting fire in a crowded theatre, but if someone wanted to exploit the audience and weaken their ability to recognise a real alarm when it comes, microtargeting would be an ideal start.

In light of the above, several possible regulatory approaches could be considered. The EU could perhaps move to prohibit content practice that is clearly designed to fragment democratic debate and sow societal division, such as the delivery of wholly contradictory and inflammatory messages to different segments of the electorate, based purely on personal profiling. Another would be, if deemed necessary after a thorough assessment, to outright prohibit the purchase or use of data from third-party data brokers for political advertising purposes. The addition of other compliance measures could be warranted, for instance that political campaigns and platforms of a certain size maintain an auditable log of targeting parameters, algorithms used, and audience characteristics for each political campaign, accessible by electoral authorities after the election.

„Microtargeted messaging is not directly similar to shouting fire in a crowded theatre—but if someone wanted to weaken our ability to recognize a real alarm, it would be an ideal start.“

Another aspect of microtargeted messaging targetable by policy is clear falsehood amplified or pertaining to interaction data. Policymakers could add specific rules pertaining to the prohibition and fine political advertisers from artificially inflating engagement metrics or simulating grassroots popularity through bots or undisclosed paid inter-

actions, or content that mimics citizen speech (e.g. fake testimonials, bots) without clear labelling as campaign content.

Another side of policy to investigate would be the rule of law monitoring and conditionality requirements. Deepening discussions on microtargeting as a risk factor in documents such as the Commission's annual Rule of Law Reports and assessments under the conditionality mechanism could be warranted.

„Microtargeting undermines the possibility of an open and trustworthy space for democratic deliberation“

Microtargeting undermines the possibility of an open and trustworthy space for democratic deliberation. That said, it must be stressed that these are preliminary considerations. This short paper cannot claim to settle such a complex and sensitive issue. Further and deeper reflection will be needed, both on the nature of modern political communication and on the careful balance between protecting democratic structures and preserving individual freedoms in our age. These questions touch the heart of what it means to live in a free and democratic society, and any regulatory response must proceed with humility.

Ultimately, more importantly than exact form, any future policy must rest on a broader democratic judgement: how to strengthen the conditions for free and fair debate without undermining the freedoms that are the lifeblood of democracy itself. In the face of new and powerful techniques of persuasion that test the foundations of democracy itself, one cannot ignore the questions posed by this new technology.

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THE FOURTH WAVE.

Europe's Future in the Age of Disruption

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Photo by Thida on Freepik

EUROPE AT THE CROSSROADS OF DISRUPTION

The Fourth Industrial Revolution is not simply a phase of technological advancement—it is a tectonic shift in the very principles that have underpinned global order since the mid-20th century. The rise of artificial intelligence, machine learning, automation, and the Internet of Things is redrawing the boundaries of economic power, statecraft, and social development. For Europe, a continent in the past eight decades has managed gradual change through consensus, the velocity and magnitude of this new wave present a unique dilemma: how to adapt to exponential disruption without eroding its foundational values of democracy, human rights, and rule of law.

But technology alone is not the only force disrupting Europe's trajectory. The political West itself is undergoing a redefinition—one that threatens to leave Europe either exposed or sidelined. The return of Donald Trump to the White House casts a long shadow over Europe's strategic calculations. Trump's first term signaled a profound departure from traditional transatlantic engagement: a retreat from multilateralism, a transactional approach to NATO, and a disregard for institutional diplomacy. During his second presidency Europe faces a multidimensional challenge of American disengagement and antagonism.

Trump's transactional view of international relations, his erratic handling of issues like tariffs, and his inconsistencies on major global matters—such as the Middle East and the war in Ukraine—create an especially confusing and unstable environment. The complete lack of predictability makes it exceedingly difficult to craft a coherent strategy. As a result, Europe is compelled not to respond directly to Trump—since his positions and demands are often unclear—but rather to chart its own independent course.

„The burden of strategic autonomy is no longer aspirational—it is existential."

Trump's worldview aligns poorly with the EU's cautious, rules-based approach to global affairs. His rhetoric, questions the value of longstanding alliances, his policies prioritize unilateralism, and his strategic instincts lean toward a zero-sum game—be it in trade, defense, or technological competition. In such a scenario, Europe cannot afford to continue assuming the permanence of transatlantic guarantees, particularly in areas such as cybersecurity, AI governance, and digital infrastructure. The message is clear: the burden of strategic autonomy is no longer aspirational—it is existential.

Still, Europe retains the power to shape – perhaps more than- its own future. Europe has the intellectual capital, the regulatory foresight, and the normative ambition to chart its own course through the Fourth Wave. What it lacks, too often, is political will and coherence. The task ahead is to move beyond reactive policymaking and articulate a confident European vision of technological sovereignty—one that balances innovation with ethics, competition with solidarity, and independence with partnership.

The convergence of technological and geopolitical disruption—especially in light of America's unpredictability—offers Europe an inflection point.

Fortunately, serious thinking about Europe's path forward has already begun. The recent reports by Mario Draghi and Enrico Letta offer ambitious yet sober blueprints for a Europe capable of thriving in this new environment. Both highlight the urgent need for deeper integration in key strategic sectors—technology, energy, and capital markets—and stress that Europe's future depends on its ability to act decisively, pool resources, and project power with realism rather than utopian idealism. The challenge now is to move beyond analysis and find the most realistic and effective policies that can turn Europe's potential into tangible global influence.

Under the themes of digital sovereignty, regulatory leadership, and digital geopolitics, EU can evolve from a soft power to a strategic power in the digital age. It is an urgent call not for fear, but for resolve—a moment to reclaim Europe's voice in shaping the global future.

TECHNOLOGICAL SOVEREIGNTY AND DIGITAL LEADERSHIP

Europe's ambition to achieve technological sovereignty is no longer a luxury of industrial policy—it is a strategic imperative. In an era where technological supremacy translates directly into economic power, political influence, and even national security, the European Union must ensure that it retains control over critical technologies, infrastructure, and standards. Dependence on foreign providers, whether American or Chinese, carries risks that Europe can no longer afford to ignore.

The COVID-19 pandemic brutally exposed the vulnerabilities of global supply chains, particularly in high-tech sectors. Meanwhile, the weaponization of technology, the tensions around semiconductor supply chains, and growing cybersecurity threats—has confirmed that technological ecosystems are now arenas of geopolitical contestation. Europe, which traditionally saw itself as a neutral regulator in a globalized economy, must now act as a strategic actor, ensuring that it can design, produce, and control the technologies it depends upon.

Unlike the United States, whose tech giants dominate globally, or China, which pursues explicit state-led innovation strategies, Europe finds itself in a delicate position: technologically advanced, but structurally dependent on non-European providers in key sectors such as cloud computing, semiconductors, and artificial intelligence. If left unaddressed, this dependency risks eroding Europe's economic autonomy and political sovereignty.

The European Union has responded with a series of bold initiatives aimed at reclaiming leadership in strategic technologies. One of the most notable efforts is the European Chips Act, launched in 2022, which recognizes the strategic vulnerability of semiconductor supply chains. The Act aims to double Europe's global market share in semiconductors from 10% to 20% by 2030, with an expected mobilization of €43 billion in public and private investments. It supports the development of cutting-edge fabrication facilities and research into next-generation chip technologies. The recent announcement of Intel's €30 billion investment in new semiconductor plants in Germany marks a tangible first success of this strategy. However, achieving true autonomy will require not only attracting foreign investment but also nurturing a complete European ecosystem, from research to manufacturing.

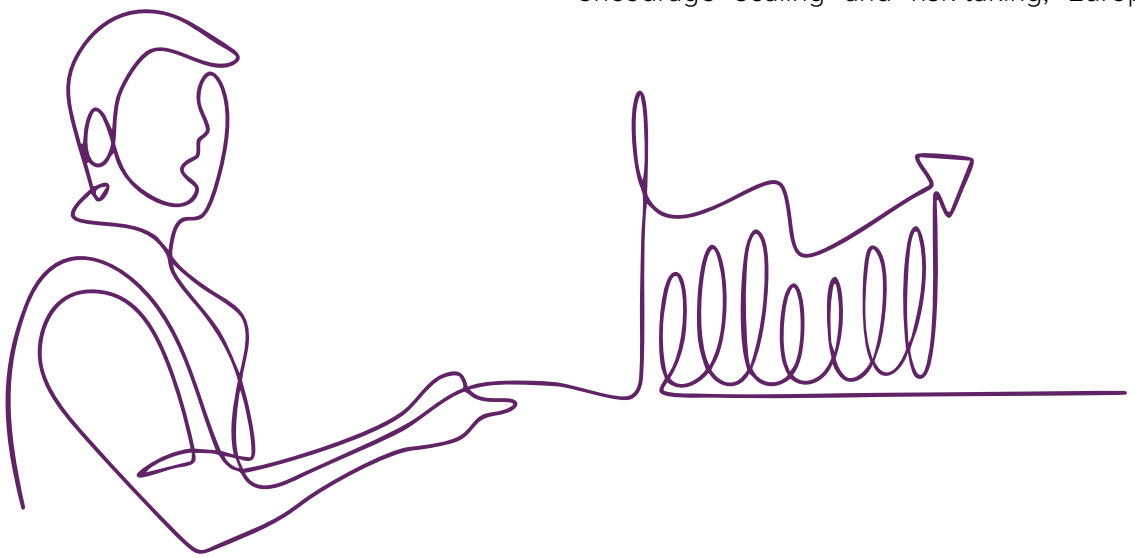
In cloud computing—a domain still dominated by American giants like Amazon Web Services, Microsoft Azure, and Google Cloud—the EU initiated the GAIA-X project. Conceived as a European alternative, GAIA-X seeks to create an open, secure, and interoperable cloud infrastructure underpinned by European values of data protection, transparency, and sovereignty. Though

progress has been slower than anticipated, with internal disagreements and technical challenges, GAIA-X nevertheless symbolizes Europe's broader determination to define its own digital future, rather than merely regulating foreign platforms.

At the same time, through Horizon Europe, the EU's flagship €95.5 billion research and innovation program, and the European Innovation Council (EIC), Brussels is making efforts to close the innovation gap with the U.S. and China. By providing grants and equity investments to deep-tech startups and scaling up European research collaborations, the EU hopes to transform its world-class scientific output into globally competitive technologies. Initiatives such as the EIC Accelerator are specifically designed to cultivate the next generation of European tech champions, creating a more dynamic and sovereign innovation ecosystem.

Yet despite these initiatives, Europe's path to technological sovereignty remains fraught with challenges. Fragmentation remains a persistent obstacle: Europe's market continues to be fractured along national lines, hampering the emergence of truly continental tech giants. Unlike the vast, unified U.S. domestic market, European startups often struggle with regulatory inconsistencies and linguistic-cultural barriers that inhibit scaling and international expansion within the Union itself.

Closely linked to this is the issue of risk aversion and capital scarcity. European venture capital markets remain significantly underdeveloped compared to their American counterparts, and the culture of risk-taking and failure tolerance—critical ingredients for entrepreneurial innovation—remains less deeply rooted in Europe's political economies, despite notable improvements. While the United States has long benefited from deep and liquid capital markets that encourage scaling and risk-taking, European



entrepreneurs often face fragmented funding landscapes, limited access to late-stage growth capital, and regulatory complexities that inhibit rapid expansion.

The scale of the gap is significant. For example in 2022, venture capital investment in Europe amounted to approximately the 1/3 compared to the United States. Furthermore, Europe still lags badly in late-stage funding, where American startups have access to significantly larger rounds that allow them to scale rapidly and dominate global markets. Without access to similar resources, many European startups either stagnate or seek acquisition or listing abroad, often migrating their innovation ecosystems outside the continent.

Recognizing these structural weaknesses, several initiatives have emerged to catalyze Europe's venture ecosystem. Scale-Up Europe, launched in 2021 under the patronage of French President Emmanuel Macron, has proposed concrete measures to improve access to financing, foster talent mobility, and strengthen the collaboration between startups, corporates, and policymakers. Its core ambition is to create conditions for at least ten European tech companies valued at more than €100 billion by 2030, allowing Europe to retain and scale its most promising innovators.

Similarly, platforms such as TechTour help bridge the investment gap by connecting tech entrepreneurs with investors across Europe, especially at the critical scale-up phase. National initiatives are also playing a vital role. For example, BPIFrance has emerged as a cornerstone of the French innovation financing ecosystem, providing a blend of public and private funding instruments to support startups and deep-tech ventures through every phase of their growth. Likewise, the Hellenic Development Bank of Investments (HDBI) in Greece is providing new co-investment platforms and equity financing tools that aim to invigorate local venture capital markets and support regional innovation ecosystems.

„Europe must invest massively and intelligently in strategic technologies."

While these efforts signal encouraging momentum, the broader challenge persists. Europe must move beyond fragmented national solutions and build a truly integrated venture capital market capable of supporting companies at every stage of their development—from seed funding to IPO. Without systemic reforms and deeper pools of patient capital, Europe risks seeing its best technologies and entrepreneurs slip into foreign ecosystems better equipped to support ambition at scale.

A further complication lies in the tension between industrial policy and competition policy. Efforts to build European champions frequently collide with the EU's historically strict competition rules, which are designed to prevent market concentration. Reconciling the legitimate need for strategic industrial policy with the preservation of a dynamic, open market economy remains a delicate balancing act. This must be handled with care, lest Europe drift into protectionism or state corporatism under the guise of strategic autonomy.

Finally, Europe must recognize the reality of global interdependence. Absolute technological autarky is neither feasible nor desirable, according to many stakeholders. Europe's prosperity depends on open global markets, international research collaborations, and access to global supply chains. Technological sovereignty must therefore be understood not as a call for isolation, but as the ability to make autonomous strategic choices—free from coercion by external powers—while remaining actively engaged in the global innovation ecosystem.

Despite these challenges, there are reasons for cautious optimism. Europe possesses unique strengths it can leverage: a deep pool of scientific talent, leadership in regulatory frameworks that increasingly set global standards—exemplified by the GDPR in data privacy—and a cultural emphasis on responsible innovation. These assets provide a strong foundation upon which Europe can build a distinctive model of technological leadership.

Furthermore, the political momentum behind the quest for technological sovereignty is now undeniable. What was once a concern confined to specialists has become a mainstream political priority, endorsed across the ideological spectrum. From French President Emmanuel Macron's calls for "strategic autonomy" to German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's insistence on creating a more resilient European industrial base, or the initiative for common European defense by the Greek PM Mitsotakis there is a growing recognition that Europe must take its destiny into its own hands.

„Europe must cultivate a model of technological leadership that is competitive, resilient, and value-driven."

The task ahead is to translate this political will into effective and coherent action. Europe must invest massively and intelligently in strategic technologies, ranging from quantum computing to biotechnology and artificial intelligence, ensuring that innovation ecosystems are nurtured across the continent. It must promote cross-border integration of digital markets and research ecosystems, overcoming the fragmentation that has historically limited the scaling potential of European enterprises. Incentives for risk-taking and entrepreneurship

must be expanded, including reforms to venture capital markets and stock listing rules, to make Europe a more attractive environment for ambitious startups and scale-ups. At the same time, Europe must forge strategic technology alliances with like-minded partners such as Japan, South Korea, and Canada, while managing its interdependence with major global players like China and the United States with both pragmatism and caution.

In short, Europe must cultivate a model of technological leadership that is competitive, resilient, and value-driven—a model that fully aligns its economic strength with its political aspirations. By doing so, it can not only preserve its sovereignty but also shape the standards and norms of the emerging digital age.

Europe's pursuit of technological sovereignty is not a retreat into protectionism, but a necessary adaptation to a world where technological power defines national destiny. Success will require ambition, realism, and strategic patience. It will demand a break from old habits of complacency and an embrace of entrepreneurial dynamism. If Europe rises to the challenge, it can not only safeguard its sovereignty but also become a global leader in setting the terms of technological progress—terms that reflect human dignity, freedom, and the rule of law.

Ultimately, technological sovereignty is not about domination; it is about freedom—the freedom to choose Europe's future in an increasingly uncertain world.

REGULATING DISRUPTION: THE EU'S BALANCING ACT

While technological innovation is reshaping the global order, it is regulation that often determines the pace, character, and legitimacy of that transformation. Nowhere is this more evident than in Europe, where the European Union has carved out a distinct global role as the premier regulator of the digital economy. Yet in the Age of Disruption, regulation is a double-edged sword: it can nurture innovation and protect citizens' rights, but if misapplied, it risks stifling growth, scaring away investment, and isolating Europe from the technological frontier it so urgently seeks to reach.

Europe's challenge, therefore, is to strike a careful balance—to regulate wisely and effectively without becoming the continent where innovation goes to die. As technological change accelerates and geopolitical competition sharpens, this balancing act will define whether Europe remains a global standard-setter or becomes a well-meaning bystander.

In recent years, the EU has demonstrated an extraordinary ability to project its regulatory power beyond its borders—a phenomenon political scientist Anu Bradford has termed the "Brussels Effect". Through instruments like the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Digital

Markets Act (DMA), Europe has set global benchmarks for data protection, competition policy, and digital platform governance.

The GDPR, for instance, has had a profound impact not only within Europe but globally, prompting companies from Silicon Valley to Shanghai to adjust their practices to comply with European standards. Similarly, the DMA and the Digital Services Act (DSA) aim to create fairer digital markets by imposing new obligations on "gatekeeper" platforms such as Google, Amazon, and Meta.

This regulatory leadership reflects one of Europe's great strengths: its commitment to ensuring that technological progress serves society rather than undermines it. In an age of rising distrust toward Big Tech and increasing concern over privacy, misinformation, and digital monopolies, Europe's approach resonates broadly, even beyond its own borders.

Yet success breeds its own dangers. There is a growing risk that Europe's regulatory zeal could tip into overreach, creating an environment that deters investment, slows innovation, and ultimately leaves Europe technologically dependent on others.

Critics argue that the GDPR, while admirable in intent, has imposed heavy compliance costs on businesses, disproportionately affecting small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and startups less able to absorb the bureaucratic burden. Meanwhile, the DMA's rigid definitions and one-size-fits-all obligations may hinder the flexibility needed for dynamic innovation ecosystems.

Moreover, the rapid evolution of technologies like artificial intelligence, blockchain, and quantum computing poses a regulatory paradox: rules crafted today may be obsolete tomorrow. Overly prescriptive regulation risks locking Europe into a regulatory framework that cannot keep pace with innovation cycles measured in months rather than years.

„In the digital age, innovation and regulation are not enemies—they are partners."

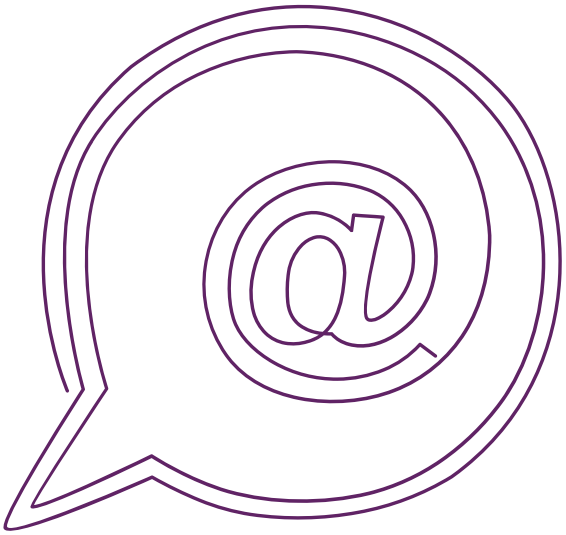
Nowhere is this tension clearer than in the EU's proposed Artificial Intelligence Act. While aiming to create the world's first comprehensive AI regulatory framework, critics warn that classifying many AI systems as "high-risk" could stifle experimentation and push innovation offshore. As the United States and China aggressively promote AI entrepreneurship, Europe must ensure that its approach to regulating AI encourages responsible innovation rather than creating a climate of fear and paralysis.

Europe's regulatory power is not inherently a problem; the issue lies in how that power is deployed. The success of the GDPR offers important lessons: a clear values-based foundation (privacy as a fundamental right), combined with mechanisms for adaptation (the European Data Protection Board's ongoing guidance), allowed the GDPR to remain relevant even as technologies evolved.

Going forward, Europe must pursue principles-based regulation rather than detailed command-and-control models. This means defining core outcomes—such as transparency, fairness, and accountability—while leaving room for innovation in how companies achieve them. It also means building more agile regulatory frameworks that can be updated as technologies and markets evolve.

Another key to maintaining the balance between innovation and protection lies in improving Europe's regulatory governance. Simply passing new laws is not enough. Effective enforcement, regulatory clarity, and rapid dispute resolution mechanisms are essential to ensure that regulation provides predictability rather than uncertainty.

Initiatives like the European Innovation Council's regulatory sandboxes—allowing startups to test innovations in a controlled environment without full regulatory burdens—represent promising steps in this direction. Expanding and institutionalizing such models across sectors could enable Europe to combine its regulatory leadership with a dynamic innovation culture.



Moreover, Europe should cultivate deeper public-private dialogue in shaping regulations, ensuring that innovators, entrepreneurs, and technologists have a seat at the table. Regulation crafted without understanding technological realities is regulation doomed to irrelevance or failure.

From a geopolitical perspective, smart regulation can be a tool of power. In a world increasingly wary of the American laissez-faire model and the Chinese authoritarian model of tech governance, Europe's regulatory approach offers a third way: a vision of a digital economy rooted in rights, transparency, and democracy.

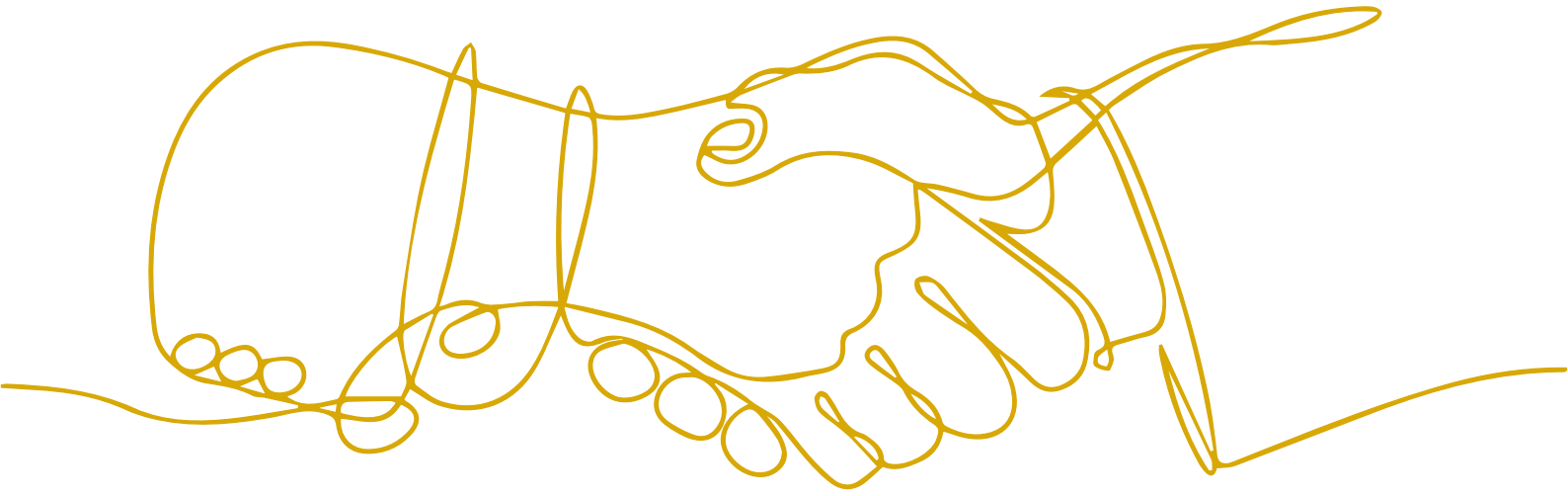
However, for Europe's "normative power" to be effective, it must remain competitive. If Europe becomes merely a consumer of foreign technologies while trying to impose its standards, it risks irrelevance. To shape global rules, Europe must not only regulate, but also innovate—producing

the platforms, infrastructures, and ecosystems that carry its values abroad.

Regulation is essential to prevent technological progress from becoming socially destructive. But it must be wielded with strategic vision, not a bureaucratic approach. Europe must recognize that in the digital age, innovation and regulation are not enemies—they are partners. When designed thoughtfully, regulation can set the rules of fair competition, protect human dignity and rights, and at the same time catalyze responsible innovation.

As Europe stands at the crossroads of disruption, it has a unique opportunity to redefine what technological leadership means—not just by producing more unicorns, but by building a digital economy that embodies the values of a free and democratic society.

Achieving this balance will not be easy, but if Europe succeeds, it will have achieved something truly remarkable: it will have proven that it is possible to master the Fourth Industrial Revolution not by abandoning principles, but by elevating them.



GEOPOLITICS OF THE DIGITAL AGE

In the twenty-first century, the competition for global power is increasingly fought not just across oceans and borders, but through networks, algorithms, and platforms. Technological disruption is no longer simply an economic or societal issue—it is now firmly a matter of geopolitics. For Europe, understanding and acting upon this new reality is vital if it wishes to maintain influence and sovereignty in an increasingly multipolar and competitive world.

The traditional instruments of power—military strength, economic might, diplomatic prestige—are being supplemented by new forms of technological power. Control over data flows, standards for emerging technologies, critical infrastructure such as undersea cables and 5G networks, and even leadership in areas like AI and quantum computing have become strategic assets. In this emerging environment, the geopolitical stakes for Europe could not be higher.

There are encouraging signs that Europe is beginning to grasp the full implications of this new environment. Strategic documents such as the EU's Strategic Compass for security and defense and initiatives like the European Cybersecurity Strategy demonstrate a growing awareness that technological sovereignty and digital resilience must be central pillars of European foreign and security policy.

The creation of the European Defense Fund and the ongoing discussions about a European Rapid Reaction Force suggest a slow but meaningful move toward greater strategic autonomy. In the digital realm, the establishment of the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) and the recently enforced Cyber Solidarity Act represent important steps toward building collective cyber defenses.

Yet Europe's geopolitical awakening remains incomplete. Defense spending is still fragmented and insufficient, cybersecurity capabilities vary widely among member states, and the EU's diplomatic clout in the digital domain lags behind its regulatory influence. Closing these gaps is essential if Europe is to shape, rather than merely react to, the emerging global digital order.

Europe finds itself increasingly squeezed between two technological superpowers with diverging and often conflicting visions for the future. On one side, the United States—especially under the leadership of Donald Trump—has come to view technological leadership primarily through the lens of strategic rivalry with China. Washington expects its allies, including Europe, to align more closely, especially in critical domains such as semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and cybersecurity.

On the other side, China promotes a fundamentally different model of digital development—one rooted in state-led innovation, extensive surveillance, censorship, and centralized control. Through initi-

atives such as the Digital Silk Road, Beijing is actively exporting its technologies and digital governance standards to emerging markets, offering a compelling—albeit authoritarian—alternative to Western norms. For Europe, navigating between these two poles requires a nuanced and sovereign strategy that neither defaults to alignment nor retreats into naïve equidistance.

Europe cannot ignore either reality. However, it must resist being drawn into a simplistic "us versus them" dynamic that would reduce its strategic choices. While transatlantic cooperation remains vital—particularly on cybersecurity, supply chain resilience, and digital standards—Europe must also preserve its ability to act independently when its interests and values require it.

This strategic autonomy does not mean a midway positioning between Washington and Beijing; rather, it means retaining the freedom to define European priorities without being subsumed into another power's strategic agenda. As French President Emmanuel Macron has rightly emphasized, autonomy is about choice—not about neutrality.

In this context, Europe must pursue a pragmatic and multidimensional strategy. Beyond the U.S. and China, there is a global appetite for an alternative model of digital governance—one rooted in openness, fairness, and human-centric innovation.

Europe should intensify cooperation with like-minded partners such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, India, and Canada to promote shared standards in areas like AI ethics, cybersecurity norms, and data protection. Initiatives like the EU-Japan Digital Partnership and growing collaboration through the G7's Technology Working Groups show promising avenues.

At the same time, Europe must be prepared to engage selectively with countries that do not share its political systems but align on specific interests—whether in digital infrastructure development, standard-setting, or cybersecurity. This reflects the broader shift Ursula von der Leyen outlined: the era of only working with like-minded partners is over.

Securing critical infrastructure must also become a top geopolitical priority for Europe. The Nord Stream sabotage highlighted the vulnerabilities of Europe's energy networks; the same vulnerabilities exist in its digital infrastructures, from undersea cables to cloud data centers.

Initiatives such as the EU's Joint Cyber Unit, aimed at pooling member states' cybersecurity capabilities, and the Global Gateway strategy, designed to offer a European alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative in digital infrastructure, are essential steps.

However, greater ambition is needed. Europe should invest heavily in securing its physical and

digital infrastructure, develop common defense mechanisms against cyber-attacks, and promote trusted technology supply chains that are resilient against external coercion.

In the emerging geopolitics of the digital age, Europe must be neither a passive consumer of technologies nor a passive subject of external strategies. It must become an active shaper of the digital world order. This requires a Europe that is strong, confident, and clear-eyed about the realities of power. It requires investments not just in technology, but in the capacity to defend, project, and sustain influence globally. It demands partnerships that are pragmatic, flexible, and interest-driven, without abandoning core European principles.

The road ahead will be complex. Europe will sometimes need to engage with uncomfortable partners, make hard strategic choices, and bear the burdens of leadership. But the alternative—irrelevance—is far worse.

The Fourth Wave of disruption demands a Europe that is ready to compete, defend, lead and even fight, in the digital arena. The time for strategic hesitation is over. The time for a new European digital statecraft has arrived.

EUROPE'S STRATEGIC MOMENT IN THE FOURTH WAVE

The Fourth Industrial Revolution is not a passing storm—it is a structural transformation, remaking the foundations of economic power, social organization, and international competition. Europe stands today at the intersection of technological disruption and geopolitical realignment. It faces daunting challenges: external pressures from strategic rivals, internal fragmentation, and the ever-accelerating pace of innovation. Yet the greatest risk for Europe is not external defeat—it is internal complacency.

„The greatest risk for Europe is not external defeat—it is internal complacency."

The path forward demands a Europe that acts with strategic will and clarity. Achieving technological sovereignty is no longer a theoretical goal; it is a necessity for safeguarding Europe's prosperity, values, and global voice. Yet sovereignty cannot mean isolationism. Europe must remain open to collaboration, innovation, and the global exchange of ideas—but always on terms that protect its interests and reinforce its freedom of action.

In regulation, Europe has demonstrated unique global leadership, setting standards that others increasingly follow. However, regulation must be wielded with intelligence and flexibility, lest it ossify innovation or render Europe a technological bystander. Principles must guide policy, but pragmatism must guide its application.

In geopolitics, Europe must abandon illusions of a benign global order. Technological competition is now central to strategic competition. Europe must build resilience, forge alliances of interest, and defend its infrastructures and values with the seriousness that the new era demands. Strategic autonomy must be more than rhetoric—it must be operationalized through concrete capabilities.

At the same time, Europe must strengthen its internal front through more empathetic and effective communication with its own citizens. In an era of rapid technological change, rising social anxiety, and growing institutional skepticism, the ability of the EU to explain—not just implement—its strategic choices is more vital than ever. Public support for European sovereignty, innovation, and autonomy will depend not only on outcomes, but on how those outcomes are communicated: with clarity, transparency, and above all, empathy. Citizens must feel seen, heard, and included in the European project—not as passive beneficiaries of technocratic decisions, but as active participants in shaping its direction. In this context, the EU would benefit from embracing the principle of "*intelle-mo*"—an approach to communication that fuses intelligence with emotionality. In the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, communication must be both science-based and data-driven, but it must also connect on a human level. Information alone is not enough; it must be delivered in a way that acknowledges people's fears, values, and aspirations. In this light, communication is not a soft accessory to policy—it is a core strategic tool. A Europe that speaks honestly to its people, that acknowledges their concerns and aspirations, will not only bolster democratic legitimacy but also build the societal resilience necessary for geopolitical influence. Simply put, the stronger the internal front, the more credible and coherent Europe's voice will be on the world stage.

„The Fourth Wave will reward those who adapt, innovate, and lead."

Europe is not condemned to decline. It possesses world-class scientific talent, sophisticated regulatory frameworks, a powerful internal market, and a model of innovation anchored in human dignity and freedom. What it requires now is the strategic maturity to weave these assets into a coherent and confident global strategy.

"The Fourth Wave will reward those who adapt, innovate, and lead."

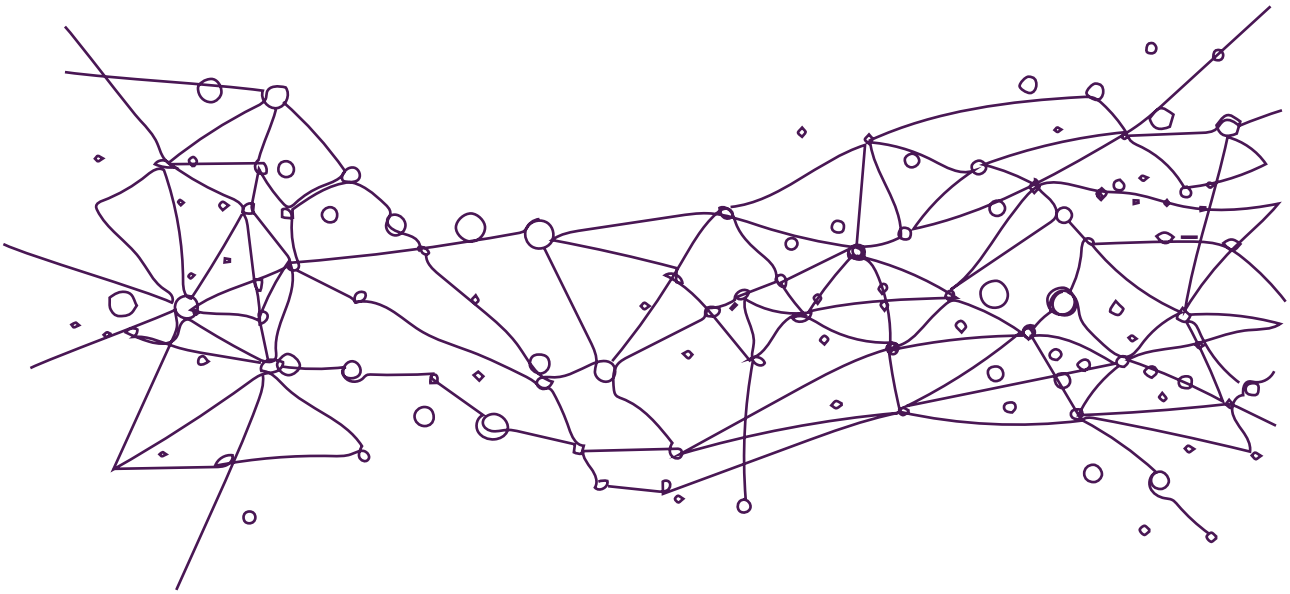
The Fourth Wave will reward those who adapt, innovate, and lead. Europe still has the opportunity to be among them—not by mimicking others, but by setting its own path. The moment to act is now. History will not wait for us to decide.

If Europe is to meet the challenges with strength and coherence, it must move decisively beyond fragmentation, which has proved a major weakness. The time for half-measures and parallel agendas is over; strategic unity is no longer a lofty aspiration but a practical necessity. Only through deeper institutional, political, economic and technological unification, EU can protect its interests.

As Europe confronts an era of systemic disruption and escalating geopolitical pressures, the notion of differentiated integration—often framed in the past as a threat to unity—now emerges as a pragmatic path forward. Treaty revision remains politically elusive, yet the urgency of common challenges requires faster, more decisive action. It may be time for a core group of Member States, united by a clear commitment to Europe's technological and strategic ambition, to move ahead with greater coherence and speed, while leaving space for others to follow when national circumstances allow.

Such a development would undoubtedly complicate the institutional landscape, but it would also bring clarity. A structured alliance of the willing could demonstrate effectiveness, reignite citizen confidence, and restore momentum to the European project—not by lowering the bar of ambition, but by raising it. This would not represent a fragmentation of Europe's achievements, but rather a forward leap toward its unrealized potential.

A more agile, outcome-driven Europe—defined by strategic purpose rather than institutional paralysis—could once again inspire its citizens and pro-



ject influence in a world that respects only results. In this context, a multi-speed Europe should no longer be seen as a concession to weakness, but as a bold and necessary instrument of European renewal. It may, in fact, be the only realistic way to transform a moment of crisis into a platform for continental leadership.

Because in the end, the future will belong not to those who stand still, but to those who dare to lead—and Europe must decide, with clarity and courage, whether it intends to be among them.

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