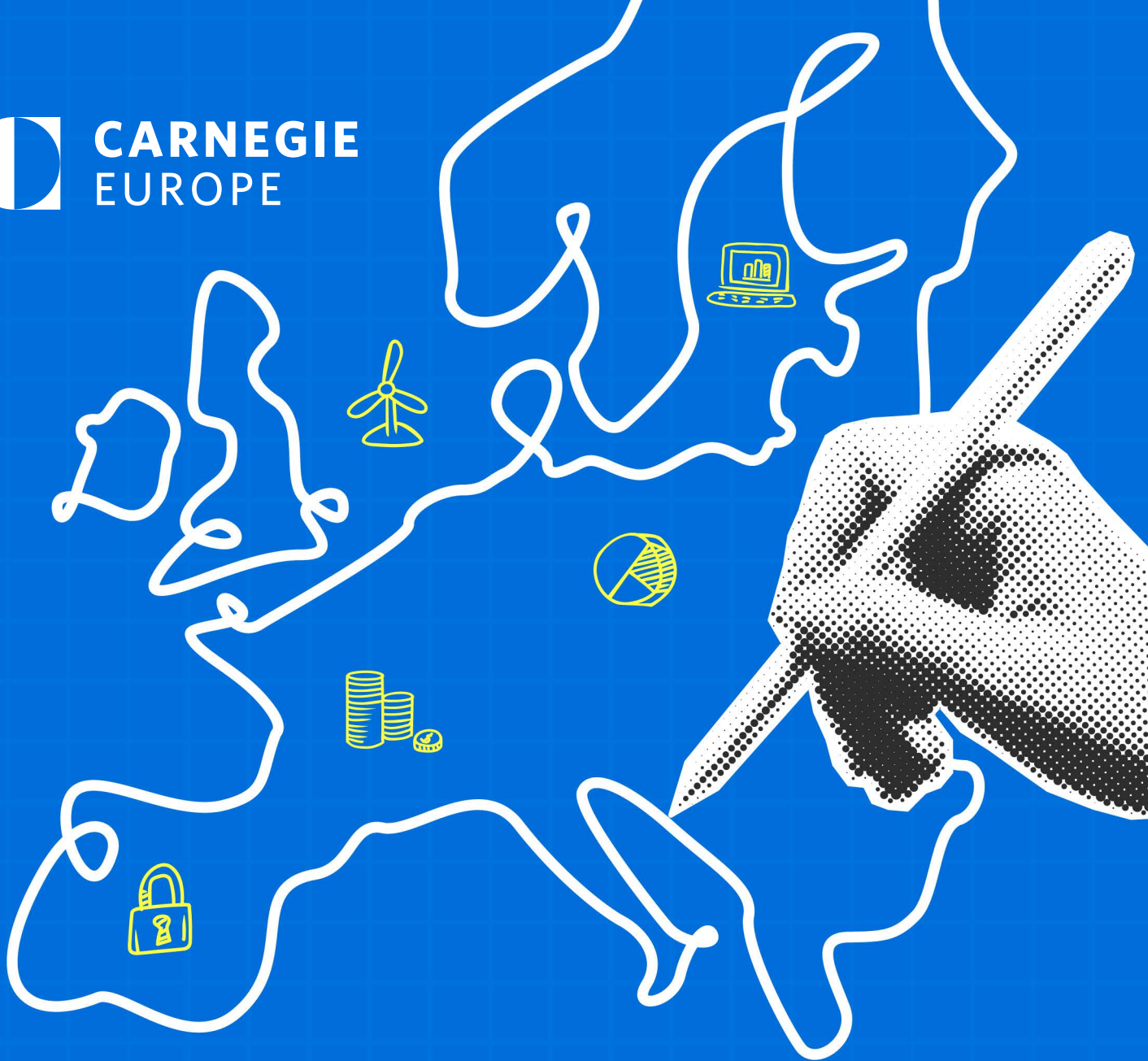




Europe from Scratch: Visions for a New European Order

Richard Youngs, editor

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Introduction: Rethinking the European Order

Richard Youngs

In recent months and years, many European leaders have suggested that the European project needs a fundamental redesign. Such calls have become ubiquitous over time. They were numerous during the eurozone crisis after 2009. They multiplied in the wake of Brexit and the migration surge in the late 2010s. They were heard again during the COVID-19 pandemic and became even more widespread after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

And many politicians, policymakers, and analysts have argued that the turmoil of the second administration of U.S. President Donald Trump now makes a reorganization of the European order even more pressing. Writing to European Council President António Costa in October 2025, European leaders argued that to preserve the EU, “we must change its course. Not just a little but substantially.”¹

Yet, despite these repeated injunctions, the EU has not radically changed in many years. The union's basic institutional settlement was codified in the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, which was itself a minor increment on institutional arrangements settled in the early 2000s. In the intervening years, the EU has retained largely the same structural features. Its well-known hybrid character remains, combining loose intergovernmental coordination with aspects of full supranationalism. Many leaders, policymakers, and writers have, over the years, insisted this combination is not sustainable, and yet it endures. In parallel, Europe-wide cooperation initiatives beyond the scope of the EU have intermittently shown promise but then atrophied; the European Political Community is the latest example.

The reasons for European governments and societies to break out of this immobilism appear compelling. Security challenges are acute thanks to Russian actions, the prospect of at least a partial U.S. withdrawal from Europe, and the rise of other adversarial powers. The prevailing model of integration has not helped the European economy stem an erosion of competitiveness and economic security. Effective action on many urgent policy files, from the green transition to political renewal, is hamstrung.

A March 2026 report by the EU's Joint Research Centre lamented that the union's current integration model risks failing to deal with the tensions between open market integration, the climate transition, and democracy, with divergences widening both between and within states.² Europe's anemic growth and competitiveness are weakening the foundations of the European project, and proposals for deep change are constantly blocked or watered down.

Today there is clearly a mismatch between institutional memberships and substantive cooperation needs. Despite former Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán's loss of power in April 2026, recent years have shown that European integration is structured in a way that is highly vulnerable to one or two illiberal governments playing spoiler. While some might argue that Orbán's exit makes EU reforms less urgent, an underlying structural risk of immobilism remains.

What is more, there are European states outside the EU that share concerns over defending Ukraine, shoring up the global order, and containing the illiberal turn in political values. And a whole swath of states sits in a liminal no-man's-land between the EU and Russia's recidivist hostility. Misalignments between substantive policy concerns and formal institutional memberships have become a more consequential structural feature of the European order.

Despite the apparent agreement among governments that systemic change is needed to the European order, their divergent views on what kind of change would be optimal militate against radical rethinking. Policymakers often insist that calls for ambitious new ideas have little value, as it is too difficult to implement change in practice, and that incremental policy change is the most that can be expected. And anyway, it may be that some governments do not really believe that the European project needs any notable redesign, notwithstanding their frequent assertions to the contrary.

In a 2025 paper, Carnegie Europe opened this debate about leaders' willingness to rethink Europe and possible new configurations of states and integrative commitments.³ This new compilation delves into the question in more detail and takes on board the way in which the context has shifted so dramatically and erratically in the last year.

A Thought Experiment

Against this background, we asked eleven experts how they would design an updated European order—that is, how they would imagine the optimal model for European cooperation and integration if current institutional arrangements had not locked in existing structures, processes, and memberships.

This thought experiment invites several key questions. Should the European order be divided between multiple institutions or centered on one main forum? Which states should be inside, which excluded, and on what grounds? Should the model be more uniform or more

flexible and differentiated? Should it be expert or citizen led? Should governments create new forums or seek to refit existing ones? Should new arrangements focus on a select number of priorities or try to cover all issues? And should a new order focus on the defensive protection of Europe or on wider external engagement?

We asked the experts to outline an ideal vision, rather than to immerse themselves in the detail of how likely or feasible such a vision might be. Fully aware of the many practical obstacles to change normally highlighted in such debates, we wanted in this volume to offer something different: an exercise in clear, clean thinking about how the European order might best be rethought, given the current European and global contexts.

Other collections offer policy ideas and general injunctions for the EU to get its act together on security, competitiveness, the green transition, technology, and many other issues; and they invariably ask about the future of the EU, not the future of the European order.⁴ This compilation instead explores the core principles and contours of the European project. When so much current debate is concentrated on the imperative of Europe's rearmament, we invited a deeper and wider rethink about where this securitized union might and should be heading. Policymakers often say they do not need think tanks to suggest they do what they are already doing, but to help them stand back and grasp big-picture challenges.

In inviting reflections on the European order, we understand this term in line with standard academic definitions. An order was defined in one major report as "the body of rules, norms, and institutions" that constitute a "structured pattern of relationships among states."⁵ Orders assume different features in accordance with their geographic scope, organizational logic, rules and institutions, hierarchy and leadership, and balance of coercion and consent. Going beyond the classical geopolitical definition, which focuses on the configuration of formal borders, a wider notion of order also includes the territorial organization of values and nonstate networks.⁶

Flowing from this definition, the compilation interrogates the European order in three senses: the institutional structures and processes that govern cooperation among states; the principles that guide such coordination; and the members that are included in the project or in different levels of cooperation. We did not ask the experts which individual policies they think might be most important in the future. And our rationale was not to replay debates about precise procedural change—majority voting and the like. Rather, we zoom out to the overarching, structural design of the European order in its widest sense.

Ideas have been around for a long time for either more centralized or looser integration; for different circles or degrees of involvement from European states; and for innovative institutional arrangements and forms of political legitimation. Aiming to update these debates, we asked our experts what kinds of arrangements, models, or templates they would design to fit the specific challenges of this moment. We invited ambition and innovation from our contributors but left open the option for them to argue that current arrangements might

in fact be best and talk of radical change a chimera. We deliberately assembled a team of experts from a range of places inside and outside the EU and pointedly included a handful of relatively young voices.

Three Themes

The purpose of this compilation is not to posit a Europe from scratch in the sense of completely disregarding the commitments and structures that currently exist, but to imagine a Europe that bestows these with new dynamics to generate a different kind of ethos to underpin European cooperation. In this vein, the contributions propose ideas clustered around three themes.

The first is more differentiated and variable integration, mainly in the EU framework but also with some consideration of bringing non-EU states into such arrangements. Frank Schimmelfennig argues that this requires more scope not only for flexible advances but also for disintegration. Janis Emmanouilidis suggests that going back to the drawing board should mean allowing some areas of cooperation to proceed outside the EU's institutional framework. In a similar vein, Elena Lazarou advocates a modular approach to external policies that allows for varying levels of engagement, with different configurations of states across different issues.

A second cluster of suggestions relates to redesigning the European order in a way that fosters deeper social interactions as a prerequisite for further institutional cooperation. Erik Jones proposes a European restart that builds up citizen links as a stronger base for policy coordination. Dan Baer offers concrete ideas to help construct a European public consciousness and a sense of shared citizenship. Teona Giuashvili suggests a new stress on trust building around notions of peace and security preparedness, including through a wider grouping of states than current EU members. Building on her Moldovan experience, Anastasia Pociumban insists that a European order begun today would place Eastern European countries as the central bulwark of societal resilience for the whole European project. Rosa Balfour calls for an EU based on fundamentally different kinds of intermeshed civic interactions with new global partners.

The third group of arguments focuses on making the European project less opaque and technocratic, with a relaunched EU framework that would be more open to democratic participation and accountability. Chris Bickerton writes on stronger democratic agency being the key to better European crisis management and legitimacy, rather than an add-on to existing arrangements, as at present. Kalypso Nicolaidis examines ways of combining locally rooted democratic participation with EU-level cooperation and accountability. And Hendrik Nahr draws on his organization's consultations with young people across Europe to stress that this generation seeks an EU reboot that ensures full citizen engagement above all else.

A final thought from this editor about how the different contributions relate to each other: An interesting challenge would be to reflect on how it might be possible to combine these three concerns of differentiated cooperation, societal interaction, and citizen engagement. One idea could be for governments to agree that, say, 2028 will be a moment of refoundation for the European project and, in preparation for this, to set up a year or more of intensive social interactions that far exceeds anything seen before and without preempting specific policy developments. This year of debate could give citizens a choice for the next phase of the European project through well-prepared participative assemblies and civil society engagement, leading up to a referendum.

This plebiscite could offer citizens a genuinely radical range of choices, including looser forms of European cooperation, a European order of multiple circles, new institutional arrangements, and participation in a full, state-like European political union. States and governments would benefit from a new mandate for European order as integration deepens into sensitive areas of security and the EU discusses possible union-wide taxes to fund its next budget. Citizens need options and deliberation of those options, and they need avenues of social interaction to make these choices in a collectively informed manner. Governments would need to commit to respond in a commensurate fashion and not treat such an exercise as a public-relations gimmick.

The compilation's overarching aim is to foster debate about the defining contours of the European security, political, and economic order. While many might predictably question the practical value of such big-picture reflection, it is surely necessary to pull the EU out of the minutiae of its labyrinthine decisionmaking processes. Laying out some ideal-type thinking for the future shape of the European order might help governments and regional institutions work backward to an understanding of where these day-to-day debates might and should ultimately be heading.

A Europe of the People

Erik Jones

Europe is not a design problem. Neither is governance, for that matter. These are people problems. Philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau recognized this when writing about the government and constitution of Poland in the late eighteenth century. He argued that you could have the best institutions and rules ever imagined, but it would not make much difference if the people who used them did not believe in them.⁷ U.S. President Donald Trump has proved Rousseau right. Even the best constitutional arrangements are only as strong as the desire of the people to make them work.

If the goal is to rebuild Europe from scratch, the best place to start would be with Europeans. This is not meant to sound trite. The argument has a long history. Starting with the people is what the liberal nationalists who followed Rousseau did. What they learned along the way is that creating a people is a dangerous and often violent process. Europe cannot afford to repeat their mistakes. Indeed, the Europe of today was designed to achieve that objective. The challenge in trying to build a better Europe is to avoid unleashing those destabilizing forces that the existing Europe was built to contain.

Fortunately, there is a rich theoretical tradition that can serve as a guide. This tradition is not prominent in the literature on European integration because it does not center on existing institutions. Instead, it focuses on relationships, problem solving, and systems dynamics. This theoretical tradition does not point to a blueprint for the perfect Europe. Rather, it underscores how to strengthen a sense of Europeanness. In that way, it promises to lay the foundations for more effective institutions not by changing their design but by strengthening the popular desire to make them work.

Start with Interaction

Europeans do not all speak the same language, read the same literature, or share the same metaphors or cultural references. But forcing them to do so is not the solution. Turning peasants into Frenchmen was a violent process; so was creating Italians. It is also unnecessary. The trick to creating Europeans is to bring people from different parts of Europe into interaction, make them aware of this engagement, and help them imagine themselves as part of a wider community.

Scholars of nationalism, from Karl Deutsch to Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson, have been underscoring the importance of this process for decades. So have nationalist politicians. That is why France's Charles de Gaulle and Germany's Konrad Adenauer included educational exchanges in the 1963 bilateral treaty of friendship between their two countries. The EU's Erasmus student-exchange program follows the same logic.

But there are many ways to make this interaction more obvious, inclusive, and intentional. Erasmus-like exchanges should be more widely available for students in secondary schools. These programs should also randomize the destinations. Having every secondary-school student experience another country may not be practical, but having enough exchanges so that people from all parts of Europe are exposed to the opportunity might be sufficient. In the same way, it would be useful to highlight how much Europe's internal market connects firms across national boundaries, how much savings in one part of Europe result in investment in another, and how much Europeans depend on one another in their daily lives.

This information is out there, but it needs to be more prominent. It might even be added to labeling, so that consumers could see on every product a map of Europe that shows which parts have contributed. European firms could have a map embedded in their corporate identity to show where in Europe they source, supply, invest, or borrow. Or, like chocolate, companies and products could list their percentage of European content or engagement.

Build on Small Successes

Raising European awareness and fostering European engagement are only the start of the process. To move beyond that level, it is important to show how this interaction contributes to the quality of life. That demonstration is complicated insofar as Europe is not the only point of reference for Europeans. Local, regional, and national identities are also important, as are interactions at each level of aggregation. More importantly, these different levels compete with one another, because people have limited time and resources, and whatever they invest in one relationship is not available for others.

Economists Karl Polanyi and Gunnar Myrdal wrote about this challenge in the 1940s and 1950s. They were skeptical that something like Europe could exist in a way that would not cause a popular reaction—or backlash—because it would not be embedded in people’s dense social connections.⁸

The solution is twofold: First, efforts to deepen interactions at the European level move slowly and build on small successes; and second, those efforts should allow for significant diversity in how people adapt to change at the local, regional, and national levels. The Europe of today builds on both insights. The EU’s elimination of cell phone roaming charges is a good illustration. It may sound like a small thing, but it has an oversize impact on popular attitudes. The same is true for the mutual recognition of voluntary industrial standards that was baked into the aim of completing the European internal market by 1992. These are small, technical changes that effectively transformed the way people think about Europe.

The results of these small changes are important because they are cumulative. This was a point stressed by Myrdal.⁹ Each success makes it possible for people to look for other opportunities to work together. The EU could tap into that creativity directly by reframing the conversation about regulation away from constraints and toward opportunities. This was the genius of the 1992 project. People did not fall in love with the internal market as such; they embraced the opportunity that this new approach to regulation represented.

Such framing is hard to guarantee, particularly when forces opposed to European action appeal to national, regional, or local identities. But an argument about the opportunities that Europe creates—backed by clear examples of success, no matter how small—is better than a framing that casts Europe as a source of constraint against which national, regional, and local identities need to be defended.

Tackle Wicked Problems

This promotion of Europeanness and celebration of small victories is not intended to create Europe for its own sake. Europe is necessary as a political project because only collective action at the European level can solve problems that Europe’s nation-states cannot address. This was true when the greatest problem in Europe was the possibility of violent conflict among Europeans; it is even more true today. Migration, climate change, and great power competition are all problems that individual European countries cannot tackle alone and even the EU will struggle to manage.

Europeans need to have the awareness and the confidence to support this kind of cooperation by agreeing to make common decisions and finding the material, financial, and human resources to put those decisions into action. By implication, Europeans need to have the self-discipline to act as Europeans and need to accept the kind of collective or top-down authority necessary to ensure that others do not break ranks.

This requirement of internal and external discipline is a tall order. The incentives for individuals and even countries to block unpopular actions, reject European authority, or try to get the most for themselves at the expense of the collective are great. But this is true at every level of society, from the smallest village to the largest country. What is more, state control—or, borrowing from sociologist Max Weber, the “monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force”—is never a comprehensive response.¹⁰ On the contrary, people everywhere find ways to work together whenever the need is great enough. They are not always successful, and societies do collapse. But people are surprisingly creative in finding ways to address even the most vexing problems.

Political scientist Elinor Ostrom and her colleagues identified this creativity in a wide variety of contexts associated with the management of common resource pools, like fish, forests, or water. In doing so, they documented the many ways that people come together as a community to make and implement decisions, including to accept and impose discipline on their own members.¹¹ The thread that runs through this work is the importance of having people take ownership of their own governance arrangements. No single design or blueprint for institutions could solve all problems, and many setups did not even work in addressing the same problems from one context to the next.

Ostrom used this observation about the importance of ownership to explain why many top-down policy interventions tended to fail, no matter how well intentioned. Like Rousseau, she recognized that design is not the problem.¹² The problem is more connected to awareness and motivation: People acknowledge the situation they are in, including the consequences of inaction; they must identify who they can work with; and they must agree on a framework for collective action.

Toward a Better Europe

Europeans need to recognize their Europeanness because they are all bound together by a complex set of interactions that center on the single market but extend to virtually all parts of daily life. Somehow, the EU must strengthen that awareness so that Europeans see that they are all in this together. Europeans also need to underscore that the web of interaction extends beyond formal EU membership to include a wider range of peoples and countries. This message is out there, but it must be tied more closely to people’s daily lives and the EU’s many small wins. Europeans need to imagine themselves as a community of opportunity that can enhance its members’ well-being and has a long track record of tangible, concrete successes.

Europeans also need to recognize the threats they face. These do not come from European institutions or from governance arrangements at any level. They come from human nature: the way people act when given incentives to abuse the environment, exploit one another, or engage in violent conflict. There is nothing unfamiliar about these threats. On the contrary, Europeans have faced them many times in the past and in many social contexts. What is different today is the scale of the problems and the complexity of organizing any possible solutions. The question is not whether the EU can solve these problems; it is whether Europeans can deal with them without the EU.

Finally, Europeans need to appreciate that the universe of people they can work with is shrinking and that the governance arrangements they have are the best available at the moment. That is always the situation. Governance is ultimately a people problem: Europeans—as a people—will be defined by their willingness to work together with whatever institutions they have available. The people of Europe must not only embrace self-discipline but also accept the need to impose discipline on those who choose not to cooperate—if necessary, by excluding them from shared institutions.

This mix of self-discipline and collective discipline is unfamiliar to students of European integration. The EU only rarely works that way. But it is familiar to scholars who work on the kind of governance arrangements that arise in more challenging situations. Those scholars have long drawn on the European experience in trying to explain the emergence of these more disciplined political organizations, often to understand how to avoid European excesses. Europeans have learned those lessons. Now they need to rediscover their own capacity for collective strength.¹³

How Might Europe Be Different?

Daniel Baer

Interrogating the question is likely to get one accused of having failed to graduate from schoolboy habits. Nonetheless, the task of reimagining Europe from scratch is so deliciously creative—at least for a policy analyst—that I find myself needing to define some lines to circumscribe the fantasy.

There are several ways to do so. One can say what the exercise is not about: It is not about reimagining Europe's geography in the sense that the continent might suddenly be an island, or erasing centuries of cultural and political history. Nor is it about imagining a Europe fully separate and apart from the rest of the world, insulated from developments elsewhere in politics, technology, and economy. Any such fundamental reimaginings would be so complete as to make the exercise of imagining a “Europe that could be” less valuable as a tool for thinking about the Europe that is.

In fact, starting with today's Europe might, paradoxically, be the best preparation for a thought exercise that presupposes starting from a clean slate. What is Europe, unavoidably and essentially? What are the things that cannot be imagined away and that therefore must fit comfortably in any useful reimagining? Europe is a collection of peoples, with distinct and overlapping histories and identities. It is multiconfessional and multiethnic, with a history and present characterized by waxing and waning internal and external migration. Its history includes conflict and commerce, domination and liberation. Whatever one thinks of its current borders, Europe has and always has had contested geographic boundaries.

Furthermore, for the present purposes, Europe has institutions of governance that are either recognizable or explicable to those living in the twenty-first century in other places. It might be desirable to redesign the EU in form and function, and there might be fewer or more states with different prerogatives and roles, but this exercise is not some kind of utopian departure from institutionalized governance. The goal here is not to use the task of reimagining Europe as a way to smuggle in some more radical vision for the transformation of human society writ large.

That is in part because Europe is already radical enough. The most essential element that must be the morally animating purpose of any reimagining is Europe's aspiration to build a politics that enables and protects peaceful and free pluralism across an entire continent. And the most important feature to enhance in Europe is its ability to be a geopolitical actor while maintaining a moral advantage rooted in political liberalism. This example is Europe's biggest potential contribution to the world—as a beacon of political liberalism in practice that can operate as a geopolitical force. Especially as the United States cedes its post–World War II role, it would be good for the world if anarchy were what Europe makes of it.

Four Pragmatic Ideas

And so, one might avoid the temptation to explore the things about European institutional arrangements that could be designed differently: the lack of overlapping monetary and fiscal policymaking, the lack of modern capital markets, the gridlock-prone mechanisms for European decisionmaking, the need for more clarity in the relationship between the EU and NATO, the ambiguity about whether political Europe is more valuable as an onramp to enable the transition to modern democracy or as a tool for locking it in once it has been achieved, and so on. These fixes are important and could be transformational—and other scholars writing in this compilation will surely have wiser and deeper observations about the institutional reimaginings that could be fruitful leitmotifs for them.

Instead, one might ask what could create a European society that would be liberal, pluralist, and yet more cohesive, with a stronger foundation for a shared identity, a shared commitment to a political project, and democratic support for Europe as a unified geopolitical actor. My core contention here is that the main problem with Europe is, in essence, that there is not more of it. And my hypothesis is that a more robust Europe on any dimension would at least be aided by, if not require, a more unified political society and culture to underwrite it.

The question of how to reimagine European political culture is still a policy question, since policy choices influence and shape culture. Indeed, it is, in some ways, fundamental to the sustainability of other features of a political society, like the structures of authority and democratic decisionmaking.

So here are four pragmatic ideas for reimagining Europe that aim at fostering a shared political identity and a deeper embrace of a pluralist, liberal, common political project. I use the EU here, accepting the notion that if the union did not exist it would have to be invented, but the EU should be understood as a placeholder for some idealized or reimagined version of it, rather than the current incarnation.

First, what if the EU had a European public-service requirement for all Europeans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-six—in addition to any national service—to spend six months or a year carrying out service to fellow Europeans? As in extant national-service systems, there could be options for the kind of service, including, potentially, in a new European military or humanitarian force.

The most important design element would be that all Europeans would participate in service in a country other than their own. The experience of working side by side with other Europeans early in life, and becoming acquainted with local culture in a country not of one's birth, would be a primary goal. This European service scheme could be open on a voluntary basis to those in EU candidate countries and could include work on behalf of the EU in those states as a way of laying the groundwork for integration into European political society.¹⁴

Second, what if the EU had a public system of European universities, technical schools, and research institutes funded by the EU budget and open to all Europeans? To support this vision, while primary and secondary education might remain national competencies, there should be a voluntary alignment of curriculums, including language skills, to equip students to participate in a shared higher-education experience.

In addition to common investment and participation in shared learning and research environments, a secondary goal of this policy would be specialized training and research institutes for the benefit of all Europeans. Instead of each large country needing to have, for example, its own biomedical research infrastructure or AI safety institute, a shared set of institutions would give confidence that access to top universities and basic research was available to all. This would allow Europe to more effectively capture the benefits of its scale in a competitive world.

Third, what if the EU had its own public media entities? Journalistic enterprises, among other things, define a political community. A set of EU public media enterprises could help build European resilience against internal and external challenges to the quality and integrity of the information space while giving Europeans a sense that some news is relevant to them as Europeans.

EU public media could be modeled on the most successful public media enterprises in European and other democracies. Such media could, like the U.S. National Public Radio, make use of affiliates in EU member states to generate a significant amount of reporting—and share it with other Europeans. A public media entity that is transparently governed and competes based on quality in an environment of increasing foreign influence operations and so-called AI slop might be the best investment Europe could make in the fight against misinformation and disinformation and the threats they pose to societal resilience.

Finally, what if the EU had a common language? Yes, only an American could think that this was a good idea. Language is so essential to national identity, and wars have been fought—are being fought!—in Europe in which language is an ostensible *casus belli*. But the centrality of language to identity is what makes this proposal both the most difficult to imagine accepting and, potentially, the most consequential. Language is the fundamental operating software of a society, and while Europe's commercial and political elites have de facto access to a common software—English—hundreds of millions of Europeans, who would benefit from participating in a shared political society, do not.

Practically speaking, the EU would need to acknowledge that the most sensible common language would be English—a historical legacy of U.S. primacy in the late twentieth century and the wave of globalization that coincided with it—and then agree on an education plan whereby public schools across the EU would be bi- or multilingual, so that all Europeans had access to English and a national tongue.

A Practical European Identity

The core of many of these ideas is to focus on the development of young Europeans who will be prepared to participate in a shared future and see themselves as part of a common enterprise. It has, for several decades, been a chic thing for European elites to declare their Europeaness, but for Europe to work, a European identity has to be deeper than a marker of cosmopolitanism. It has to be a practical identity that makes a tangible difference in Europeans' lives, one that they adopt not out of virtue signaling but because of its obvious virtues.

There are many other policy ideas that could add to Europeans' sense of the tangible benefits of being European. Sometimes it is the relatively small things that count, as seen in the popular embrace of the EU's elimination of cell phone roaming charges. Some of the big ideas under discussion—such as a more unified approach to defense industrial investment and spending—could contribute to (or detract from) European workers' investment in a European political society. Ultimately, of course, the progress of European political culture will require not only supportive policy developments but also the engine of leadership.

Europe began as a peace and prosperity project aimed at preventing the continent from tearing itself apart from within, as it did twice in the first half of the twentieth century. Now, Europe must also be a peace and prosperity project aimed at preventing itself from being chewed up from without. In the twenty-first century, this project depends on Europe rising to meet pressures from the outside: the so-called return of great power competition, with Europe only occasionally discussed as a great power. In the face of the geopolitical and economic transformations of recent decades, Europe needs leaders—there may be one who rises above the rest, but the progress toward a more unified political culture will necessarily be a team sport—who can rebut the siren calls of populist nationalism with the urgency and superiority of European unity as a strategic approach.

When I close my eyes and imagine Europe anew, I end up imagining something that is—against the grand and diverse backdrop of human history—really quite similar to the Europe that exists. And that is not because I lack imagination but because I have confidence in the moral intentions that inspired Europe's founders. Of course, there is a need for Europe to evolve within and adapt to changes in the world without. But a reimagining is useful not because Europe needs wholesale transformation but because creative exercises like this one can embolden Europeans' aspirations for the changes they might seek in the framework they are so lucky to have.

Designing Differentiated Integration Afresh

Frank Schimmelfennig

The EU's political development combines a strong norm of legal uniformity with a persistent practice of differentiated integration. In principle, EU member states are expected to participate in common institutions and policies in the same legal framework. In reality, however, European integration has repeatedly advanced through exemptions, opt-outs, and partial participation.

Because differentiated integration has often enabled the EU to move forward despite political and institutional constraints, the union should not attempt to enforce uniformity more strictly. Instead, it should adapt its rules and procedures to manage differentiation more transparently and fairly. If the EU were designed today, it would likely recognize differentiated integration as a normal feature of European governance and regulate it accordingly.

This contribution proposes three reforms: a treaty-based framework for differentiated integration, safeguards against the discrimination of new EU members, and procedures for differentiated disintegration. Together, these reforms would align the EU's legal framework with the realities of its political development.

Uniformity in Principle, Differentiation in Practice

The original institutional framework of the EU's precursor, the European Communities, left little room for differentiated integration. Member states were expected to participate in all supranational institutions and policies; nonmembers were excluded; and new members were required to adopt the entire body of European law after transitional periods. European integration was based on a strong norm of uniformity.

Many decades and numerous treaty reforms later, the EU is still reluctant to embrace differentiated integration. The EU has never recognized differentiation as a constitutional principle alongside subsidiarity, proportionality, and the supremacy of EU law over national

legislation. The EU treaties contain only limited provisions for variable approaches. The 1999 Amsterdam Treaty introduced a procedure for enhanced cooperation, but its conditions are restrictive and it has been used only sparingly. In the area of defense, the 2009 Lisbon Treaty created Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), another highly specialized mechanism.

Political declarations have occasionally acknowledged the reality of differentiation. In the 2016 settlement for the UK, intended to give the country a special status in the EU, the European Council recognized that “different paths of integration” were possible.¹⁵ Yet, the UK’s subsequent withdrawal from the EU halted any attempt to codify this principle more explicitly in the union’s treaties.

Despite the persistence of the uniformity norm, the EU has developed in highly differentiated ways. Many major steps of integration beyond the internal market initially excluded one or more member states. The Schengen Area of passport-free travel, the eurozone, cooperation on justice and home affairs, and the Common Foreign and Security Policy all developed through differentiated integration. Some members negotiated opt-outs, while others joined later.

Differentiation has also characterized EU enlargement. New member states have often been excluded temporarily from major policy areas, such as the euro or Schengen, until they meet the conditions for participation. At the same time, the EU has extended selective integration beyond its own membership. Nonmember countries take part in key elements of integration through arrangements such as the European Economic Area (EEA), customs unions, and participation in Schengen. The EU’s development therefore reveals a persistent tension between anti-differentiation norms and pro-differentiation practices.

Reforming, not Banning, Differentiated Integration

This tension invites two possible conclusions. One could argue that the EU’s treaty designers should have prevented differentiated integration more effectively to preserve the principle of uniformity. Alternatively, one might conclude that flexibility should have been recognized and regulated more explicitly from the beginning.

The first argument is clearly wrong. The flexible use of differentiation has served the EU and the cause of European integration well. As member states’ preferences over the depth and scope of integration and their capacities to implement demanding EU policies have become more heterogeneous, and as treaty change still requires consensus, flexibility has become essential for advancing integration. Three successful examples stand out.

First, without opt-outs and exclusions from new areas of integration, the EU would most likely have been confined to the internal market. It is questionable whether the union would have been able to introduce the euro or establish its Area of Freedom, Security, and Justice.

Second, differentiated integration has enabled EU enlargement. Without being able to exclude or exempt new members initially from several rights and benefits of membership, old member states' concerns about enlargement would have been more difficult to assuage. Without such flexibility, many of the current members would most likely have joined later—or not at all.

Third, without developing a system of external differentiation, the EU would have foregone the mutual benefits of deep cooperation with countries that are either unwilling or unfit to join. Arrangements such as the EEA, Deep and Comprehensive Free-Trade Areas, and Association Agreements expand the EU market and EU policies without expanding the union's membership.

Differentiated integration has also functioned as a pragmatic solution to specific political constraints. During the eurozone crisis that started in 2009, the EU established new instruments, such as the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), among subsets of members. More recently, the union has relied on enhanced cooperation to mobilize financial support for Ukraine.

In principle, the strong norm of uniformity has served the EU well, too. It has forced the member states to seek consensus whenever possible and resort to differentiated integration only as a last option. The norm has also prevented permanent inequality from being institutionalized among the member states. In particular, it has limited the risk that enlargement could create a system of second-class membership. As a result, most differentiated arrangements in the EU have taken the form of multispeed integration rather than permanent fragmentation. A large majority of such arrangements have ended after a reasonable period of time. Durable opt-outs typically apply only to a small number of members. These constraints have helped prevent the EU from devolving into a plurilateral Europe à la carte.

Nevertheless, the current approach has clear weaknesses. Differentiated integration often emerges through ad hoc political compromises rather than transparent institutional procedures. This has several disadvantages. Above all, it tends to favor individual powerful member states. The countries most likely to wield their national vetoes—the least integrationist members in the case of treaty reform and the most skeptical old members in the case of enlargement—can either block deeper integration or shape differentiation to their advantage.

Ad hoc flexibility has also contributed to institutional fragmentation. Integration has often proceeded through parallel treaties or special arrangements outside the EU's legal framework. The original Schengen Agreement, the treaty creating the ESM, and the EU's Fiscal Compact are examples of such legal and institutional fragmentation.

And the EU's institutional architecture for differentiation is asymmetrical. It provides multiple pathways for flexible additional integration but limited mechanisms for its reverse: differentiated disintegration. The EU lacks formal procedures that would allow member

states to withdraw from areas of integration, short of leaving the EU entirely. Conversely, the union's architecture has few options to relegate noncompliant members to lower levels of integration.

Three Reforms

The shortcomings of the EU's current arrangements suggest a need for an improved institutional framework. That framework should be embedded in the EU's treaties, include equitable rules for the particular case of enlargement, and set out clear procedures for members that wish to pull out differentiated integration.

A Treaty Framework

If the EU were redesigned today, it should include a treaty-based framework for treaty-changing differentiated integration, analogous to the enhanced cooperation procedure for secondary legislation. Such a framework would establish clear rules for initiating deeper integration among subsets of member states. These rules could specify a minimum number of participating countries, require transparency and consultation with all members, and guarantee openness to countries wishing to join later. Importantly, the framework should also provide legal safeguards. Member states that believe their rights have been violated should be able to challenge differentiated arrangements before the EU's Court of Justice.

At the same time, the framework should prevent individual countries from blocking integration among willing states. Without such a mechanism, integrationist governments may resort to intergovernmental agreements outside the EU treaties—as happened in 2012 when British opposition to the EU's Fiscal Compact forced participating countries to adopt the Treaty on Stability, Coordination, and Governance outside the EU framework.¹⁶

Additionally, this mechanism would help stop an integrationist group from concluding intergovernmental agreements to circumvent supranational authority or harm other members. A treaty-based procedure would help keep differentiated integration within the EU's legal and institutional architecture and avoid a proliferation of parallel treaties and institutions.

Fair Rules for Enlargement

Differentiation plays an important role in EU enlargement. Accession treaties already allow for transitional arrangements that delay new members' participation in certain policy areas. Even current ideas of reverse enlargement and staged or phased accession, which go beyond established practice, could be codified in accession treaties.¹⁷ The main risk, however, is indefinite and unjustified discrimination against new member states, which could produce a de facto second-class membership.

To prevent this outcome, the EU should establish clear procedures for ending transitional exclusions. These procedures should include well-defined conditions for new members' participation in specific EU policies, regular assessments by the European Commission, and decisions by majority rather than unanimity in the EU Council. Such a system would reduce the risk of arbitrary decisions and prevent individual member states from blocking the full integration of new members for political reasons. Similar procedures should apply to existing members that have opted out of specific policy areas.

Procedures for Differentiated Disintegration

Finally, the EU needs credible procedures for differentiated disintegration within the union. The EU treaties provide a route for a member to leave the EU entirely, but they offer no comparable process for countries seeking to withdraw from areas of differentiated integration. As a matter of principle, policies that allow voluntary participation should also permit voluntary withdrawal.

A structured withdrawal procedure could allow member states to exit certain forms of integration without leaving the EU altogether. To protect the integrity of EU policies, such a procedure would need to include safeguards. For example, it might apply only to policy areas in which integration is differentiated. Thus, if a domain is uniformly integrated or has ceased to be differentiated because all member states have joined, differentiated disintegration would not be permitted. In addition, while the withdrawal would not be subject to other states' vetoes, it could be challenged in court.

As the flip side of policy withdrawal, the EU should develop procedures for suspending or excluding members that fail to comply with the rules of variable arrangements. Such a mechanism already exists in PESCO and could be generalized to other areas of integration. If some members do not comply with the basic rules of a differentiated policy, other members could start a procedure that involves assessments by supranational actors: the commission, the European Central Bank, or others, depending on the area.

Conclusion

The EU has long combined a formal commitment to uniform integration with a practical reliance on differentiated arrangements. In many cases, differentiation has enabled integration to move forward despite political divisions and institutional constraints. Yet, the EU continues to manage differentiation largely through ad hoc political bargaining rather than a coherent institutional framework.

In hindsight, if the EU were designed today, differentiation would likely be recognized explicitly as a constitutional principle of European integration. Rather than rely on informal arrangements, the union would establish clear procedures that enable differentiated integration while safeguarding fairness, preventing discrimination, and keeping flexible arrangements within the EU's legal framework. The challenge for the EU is therefore not to eliminate differentiation but to govern it better.

Europe's Differentiation Imperative

Janis A. Emmanouilidis

If pro-European liberal democratic forces were asked to design the continent's order from scratch, they would not replicate the EU as it currently stands. Instead, they would aim to construct a far more capable, democratically modernized, and strategically coherent polity—one that could effectively defend Europe's vital interests and fundamental values in an era defined by geopolitical rivalry, geoeconomic confrontation, and democratic backsliding. While a full-fledged federal Europe should function as a normative compass, this is politically unrealistic in the foreseeable future.¹⁸ Differentiated integration must therefore become an imperative and a structural feature of renewal for the future of European integration.

In an age of permanent crisis, unity should not mean uniformity.¹⁹ No doubt, unified ambition and collective action supported by all member states would be preferable to variable integration. But if the twenty-seven EU members cannot move in the same direction at the same time, and if Europe is to safeguard its collective future, it must enable those that are willing and able to do so to deepen their level of integration. This differentiated cooperation should follow existing pathways in the EU's treaties when possible, go beyond them when necessary, and, if all else fails, take new constitutional forms.

Differentiation in the Age of Permacrisis

Since the 2008 global financial crisis, Europeans have lived in what analysts have described as a “permacrisis”: not a sequence of isolated disruptions but a structural condition of continuous instability and uncertainty.²⁰ This will continue in the future. In response, what is required is “permanchange”—a permanent capacity to adapt institutions and governance structures to multiplying challenges.²¹ Standing still or muddling through is not an option if Europeans want to defend their interests and their open, pluralist democracies. The stakes are existential.

Yet, despite remarkable crisis-management efforts over the past decades, a structural discrepancy remains between Europeans' rhetorical ambition and their political delivery. Too often, Europeans are trapped in what economist Fabian Zuleeg has called a “progress illusion”: an

attempt to manage increasing disruptions through linear, incremental reforms that inevitably fall short.²² Preventing collapse replaces the need for transformative change.

Thus, the reactions to the eurozone crisis that began in 2009 stabilized the common currency but did not create a genuine economic and fiscal union. The response to the 2015 European migration crisis reduced migrant inflows but left structural governance questions unresolved. Ambitious visions to enhance Europe's competitiveness have not yet been matched by decisive implementation. And the response to Russia's war against Ukraine since 2022 has been unprecedented but always constrained by lowest-common-denominator logic.

This pattern points to a deeper structural issue: The EU's operating system struggles to generate timely and far-reaching collective decisions in an increasingly heterogeneous polity of twenty-seven—and, at some point in the future, perhaps thirty or more—member states.

In this context, differentiation is a sign not of weakness but of realism and ambition. It is neither new nor anomalous. The Schengen passport-free travel area and the euro show that European integration has long advanced at variable speeds. What needs to change is the scale and centrality of differentiation.

If uniform deepening proves politically unattainable, and if what this author has called “gradual incrementalism” is insufficient, those willing to advance should not be held back by governments unwilling to move forward.²³ In some cases, political ingenuity allows the EU to circumvent the obstruction of one or a small number of members through alternative arrangements supported by an overwhelming majority. For example, in 2023–2025, when Hungary blocked various initiatives for EU financial and military support for Ukraine, the plans were politically endorsed by the other twenty-six member states.

But when such avenues are exhausted, accepting higher levels of differentiation becomes unavoidable if Europe is to prevent paralysis and preserve its capacity to act. It is highly likely that such situations will arise more often in the future, particularly if EU-critical political forces gain influence in more member states.

So, the question is not whether there will be a differentiated Europe but what it will—or, rather, should—look like. The central challenge lies in designing differentiation in a way that enhances the continent's ability to act and strengthens political cohesion among pro-European liberal forces willing to progress. Three interlinked strategic pathways can be envisaged to move Europe toward substantially higher levels of differentiation.

Systematic Use of Existing Instruments

The first pathway involves the full exploitation of the differentiation instruments embedded in the EU treaties. For too long, the bloc has treated these tools as exceptional or politically sensitive. In an era of permachange, they should become normal and legitimate instruments of governance in key policy areas.

Enhanced cooperation allows a group of member states to deepen integration within the EU framework while relying on its existing institutions, based on clearly defined processes and rules. This setup preserves legal coherence and democratic anchoring. If the unanimity requirement or a lack of political will continues to obstruct progress in areas such as capital-markets integration, joint investments in strategic industries, or the development of new fiscal tools, governments that are prepared to move forward should use treaty-based differentiation instruments to achieve progress.

The same logic applies in the field of defense. Given the gravity of the current geopolitical environment and fundamental uncertainties about the continent's future security architecture, collective European actions still struggle to live up to Europe's needs. But this should not justify stagnation among the most willing actors. A small group of states should be able to coordinate procurement, strengthen industrial capacity, invest jointly, and enhance interoperability among themselves while remaining firmly rooted in the union's overall framework.

EU enlargement may equally require differentiated approaches. If the need for unanimity obstructs the formal accession process of candidate countries, including Ukraine, while a good number of EU members and institutions are ready to make enlargement a reality, the EU may need to explore alternative pathways. In such circumstances, willing member states might have to advance sectoral cooperation efforts, even in the face of opposition from other EU governments.

Going a step farther, enhanced cooperation could serve as a vehicle to improve EU governance itself, provided that participating states are prepared to move beyond decisionmaking by unanimity. This consideration is particularly relevant because enhanced cooperation is tied to the underlying decisionmaking rules of the respective policy area: When the treaties require unanimity, unanimity also applies in enhanced cooperation.

However, despite its untapped potential, treaty-based differentiation has structural limits. The instruments enshrined in the EU treaties include manifold political, institutional, and legal safeguards to make sure that their use does not undermine the functioning of the union and the roles of its institutions. The use of enhanced cooperation depends on a minimum level of political tolerance, as its activation requires formal authorization by the EU Council.

This procedural design presupposes that a sufficiently broad coalition of member states is willing to push such initiatives to proceed within the EU framework. However, governments fundamentally opposed to deeper integration may seek to constrain or politically undermine the use of enhanced cooperation. What is more, the treaties offer only limited scope for the structured involvement of non-EU partners in ambitious coalitions. In a geopolitical environment in which strategic cooperation increasingly transcends the union's borders, this rigidity may prove a significant constraint.

An Open Supragovernmental Avant-Garde

When the EU's treaty instruments prove insufficient to allow the willing and able to progress within the EU framework, a second pathway becomes relevant: the establishment of an Open Supragovernmental Avant-Garde (OSAG).²⁴ This approach acknowledges that European integration may, at times, need to proceed beyond the confines of the EU treaties while remaining normatively, politically, and institutionally anchored in the existing union. Under constrained political conditions, OSAG can function as a laboratory for innovation, enabling participating states and EU institutions to experiment with new, more flexible arrangements in strategic domains central to Europe's autonomy, including security and defense.

OSAG would neither undermine nor replace the EU; it would complement and reinforce it. The avant-garde's primary objective would be to safeguard the union's capacity to act by allowing willing and able states to deepen cooperation outside the EU's treaty framework without being held hostage by veto players within the union. For such an arrangement to be politically legitimate and sustainable, it would have to be grounded in a clearly defined set of principles.²⁵

First, OSAG would need to be open and inclusive. All EU members would need to be allowed to participate, provided they accept the avant-garde's objectives and obligations. OSAG would not be a closed club but an open framework governed by clearly articulated commitments.

Second, even while operating outside the EU treaties, OSAG should remain firmly within the union's legal, institutional, and normative principles. Full compatibility with EU law and the preservation of the European single market would be indispensable. Any perception of fragmenting EU law or creating parallel legal orders would risk undermining the cohesion that OSAG would seek to protect and advance.

Third, OSAG should aim to involve—and, when possible, strengthen the role of—the EU institutions. It should refrain from establishing permanent parallel institutional structures outside the union. Institutional transparency and robust democratic scrutiny would be essential. This would require the structured involvement of national parliaments and meaningful engagement with the European Parliament to avoid the impression of technocratic or exclusivist differentiation.

Fourth, OSAG must not be conceived as a permanent alternative to the EU. It would need to be explicitly oriented toward eventual integration into the union's treaty framework once the political conditions allow. In this sense, it should function as an accelerator of integration rather than a substitute for it—a mechanism designed to preserve unity through structured flexibility rather than dilute the achievements and advantages of European integration.

Fifth, OSAG could offer a framework for structured cooperation with non-EU partners, including future members and like-minded European and non-European countries, whose geopolitical and geoeconomic alignment would be essential. In doing so, the avant-garde would acknowledge that Europe's strategic environment no longer neatly coincides with the union's legal borders. OSAG would enable the formation of coalitions of the willing while ensuring that participating EU members remain firmly anchored in the broader European construction.

The risks associated with the creation of such an avant-garde should not be underestimated. Intergovernmental cooperation outside the EU treaties could generate institutional complexity and foster fragmentation. It would thus require careful design to avoid alienation or the impression of exclusion. Yet, paralysis carries risks of its own. If differentiation is confined to the lowest common denominator, the union's strategic capacity may erode in precisely those domains where decisiveness and coherence are most urgently required.

In the current European and international geopolitical environment, defense is the most pressing field in which to apply the OSAG logic. The proposal of European Commissioner for Defense and Space Andrius Kubilius for a European Security Council on the basis of an intergovernmental treaty points in this direction.²⁶ Involving both EU and non-EU countries, the council could take on the responsibility to fill capability gaps and include crisis management in case of military aggression against any of its members while conserving as much as possible of NATO's operational system.

A New Supranational Entity

If the use of existing EU instruments or the creation of an avant-garde were to prove insufficient to overcome the EU's structural paralysis, pro-European liberal democratic forces might ultimately be compelled to think and act more decisively outside and in parallel to the existing union.

The most far-reaching—and, undoubtedly, most controversial—option would be the creation of a new supranational entity among a core group of willing states. This would constitute not simply intensified cooperation but a genuine constitutional refoundation: a smaller coalition deciding to endow common institutions with substantial executive and legislative powers; accept binding, majority-based decisionmaking in strategic policy areas; and equip the new structure with a meaningful joint fiscal capacity. In essence, it would amount to the formation of a federal core in Europe.

Such a step might become thinkable if blockages in the existing union framework turned persistent and systemic. If key EU members were governed by forces that were not merely reluctant to deepen integration but actively sought to revert to what this author has called a "Europe of Fatherlands," and if ambitious forms of differentiation were repeatedly obstructed or vetoed, episodic paralysis could become structural.²⁷ In such a scenario, governments

committed to safeguarding a capable and values-based Europe could face a stark choice: accept gradual regression or undertake constitutional innovation among themselves. Thinking outside the box may then be no longer provocative but necessary.

The advantages of a new federal core would lie in its clarity, cohesion, and capacity to act. A smaller, more cohesive group could respond more swiftly and forcefully to geopolitical pressures, project strategic coherence externally, and, potentially, generate a gravitational pull for others willing to assume comparable commitments later on.

But the risks of creating a new federal union would be substantial. Institutional duplication, legal complexity, and heightened political tensions between participating and nonparticipating states could weaken overall cohesion and generate new dividing lines across the continent. For these reasons, the creation of a new supranational entity should be conceived not as a political objective but as a contingency safeguard—the outer boundary of differentiated integration. It represents the most far-reaching response to systemic paralysis, and the very fact that it must be contemplated underscores the gravity of the challenges Europe may confront in the years ahead.

The Political Imperative of Differentiation

In an ideal world, differentiated European integration would not be required. A collective and comprehensive federal deepening involving all EU member states would be preferable. Yet, the Europe of today is characterized by structural heterogeneity, growing political contestation, sustained external pressures, and a lack of shared will to intensify cooperation and integration.

Since a collective major federal leap is politically unattainable in the foreseeable future, the above pathways to higher levels of differentiation can serve as a bridge between present constraints and future ambition. Europe's ability to act decisively—even if not all countries move simultaneously—may ultimately determine whether the continent remains a consequential global actor or gradually drifts into strategic irrelevance. The central strategic question is therefore not whether more differentiation will occur, but what form it should take and under what conditions it becomes necessary.

If pro-European liberal democratic forces wish to defend Europe's core interests and fundamental values, they must be prepared to advance with those willing to assume greater responsibilities. Unity should not mean paralysis serving as a pretext for inertia or lowest-common-denominator solutions. In an age of permacrisis, the capacity to act—even in variable formats—becomes a precondition for legitimacy, delivery, and the purposeful survival of European integration.

Building a Pan-European Community of Trust

Teona Giuashvili

Europe is confronting a daunting mix of internal and external pressures, prompting a growing recognition that Europeans must act collectively to shape their future—or risk having it shaped by others. Russia’s war against Ukraine, the resurgence of nationalism and populism, the erosion of multilateral institutions, and strains in transatlantic relations have all intensified calls for greater European sovereignty and strategic independence.

At the heart of this ambition lies the need to build a renewed European order that can ensure security and prosperity while remaining anchored in the guiding principles of European integration: peace, democracy, and the rule of law. This task would be formidable under any circumstances, but it has become especially urgent in an era marked by geopolitical uncertainty, systemic disruption, and political fragmentation.

Designing and consolidating a renewed European order, despite persistent structural impediments, will require both institutional reform and ambitious policy innovation. Achieving this objective presupposes sustained political will to uphold rulesbased integration and navigate difficult tradeoffs. It also demands a coherent, longterm strategic vision that can anticipate emergent threats while harnessing new opportunities.

Central to this endeavor—and too often underacknowledged—is the role of trust and confidence. If Europeans are to shape a shared future, mutual trust must underpin their collective action and provide the basis for constructing not just a community of interests but a community of destiny on a continental scale.

The Centrality of Trust

Mutual trust has often been in short supply in Europe.²⁸ Deficits of trust have repeatedly constrained the depth and effectiveness of cooperation, hindering the emergence of genuinely collective approaches at critical junctures, such as the 2008 global financial crisis, the 2015

European migration crisis, and the destabilization of Eastern Europe after Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. Divergent threat perceptions, particularly regarding the danger posed by Russia, have reflected wider confidence gaps that have limited European states' ability to act in concert.

For many EU members, confidence in European structures—and in one another—has historically been limited. Europe has largely delegated its security to the United States, a position sustained by the longstanding U.S. presence on the continent and the credibility of NATO's guarantees. At the panEuropean level, strategic hesitation in the EU's engagement with its neighbors, combined with a lack of clarity about its commitment to enlargement, has equally undermined trust between EU members and countries aspiring to join the union.

Neglecting trust and confidence building is no longer sustainable. First, cultivating deeper intraEuropean trust has become indispensable for shaping a shared strategic outlook, particularly in countering the enduring threat posed by Russian revisionism. Beyond the risks of military aggression, Russia's hybrid campaigns have targeted the integrity of democratic institutions and the cohesion of European integration. What is more, as confidence in the reliability of the U.S. commitment to Europe's defense continues to erode, stronger trust among Europeans will be essential for charting a common strategic future.²⁹ The transatlantic partnership—long regarded as an anchor of Europe's security architecture—is being unsettled by U.S. President Donald Trump's erratic unilateralism and assertive nationalism.

Promoting trust and confidence should therefore become the foremost priority for community building on a panEuropean scale. It must inform all major strands of work within a multilayered European governance architecture, which should include both a more integrated EU and a robust continentwide platform. Enhancing confidence and mutual trust requires a renewed commitment to shared values, solidarity in the face of conflict and multiple risks, the provision of European public goods, and the tangible experience of Europe in citizens' daily lives, alongside Europeans' active engagement in deliberations about Europe's future.

While EU enlargement can play a significant role in this effort, the process of trust building cannot be confined to the EU alone; it must encompass a broader continental community of likeminded states. An approach that excludes nonEU European countries, or those not currently on an accession track, would fragment security and prosperity across the continent, undermine trust among Europeans, and risk sowing the seeds of further instability.

Four Communities of European Cooperation

Europe requires a more extensive, inclusive, and operational pancontinental platform than those currently in place if it is to foster genuine mutual trust. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), weakened by Russia's systematic abuse of the body's consensual decisionmaking, has been largely paralyzed by the wider confrontation that Moscow has imposed on Europe since its 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Council of Europe, which since 1949 has served as the continent's principal guardian of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, is likewise ill positioned to assume additional functions, given the already extensive scope of its mandate.

In this context, the European Political Community (EPC), launched in 2022 as a demonstration of pan-European cohesion in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, offers the most promising platform for this purpose.³⁰ Despite having lost some of its initial momentum, the EPC retains significant potential to deliver added value.

To become more operational, a renewed EPC should rest on two core commitments from participating states: the renunciation of coercion as a means of resolving disputes, and adherence to democratic norms and the rule of law. Participation would be open to all European countries, provided they endorse these principles.

On this basis, cooperation could be organized around four main functional communities dedicated to the four Ps of peace, preparedness, public goods, and people. These entities would be supported by ministerial and workinglevel meetings among the participating states' representatives. When possible, the communities would harness existing initiatives and programs while creating more inclusive governance spaces. The EU could provide a secretariat to ensure continuity, coordination, and the institutional capacity needed to sustain this work.

Peace

The first dimension would be a European Peace Community. Building on their commitment to reject any form of coercion among themselves, participating states would engage when necessary in crisis diplomacy, political missions, and mediation efforts to defuse disputes in Europe—such as those between Kosovo and Serbia or between Cyprus and Turkey—or in its vicinity.

The peace community could mandate participating states to undertake such tasks and, when appropriate, request the EU or coalitions of the willing to conduct crisismanagement operations to prevent or stabilize conflicts that threaten Europe's security, while leaving planning and operational decisions to those responsible for carrying out potential missions. The community could also incorporate a mutual-assistance clause, including the possibility of military support in the event of armed aggression against a community member, should confidence in collective defense through NATO diminish further.

Preparedness

The second dimension of cooperation would address the wide range of challenges and potential disruptions facing European countries: a European Preparedness Community. This platform would include a solidarity clause that enables all members to mobilize in support of one another in the event of a natural or manmade disaster. A European Civil Protection Corps could also be created to offer citizens a tangible expression of solidarity, further operationalizing the existing EU Civil Protection Mechanism and providing the capacity to deliver mutual assistance during major emergencies, including health crises.

Alongside these mechanisms, the preparedness community would foster intensive networking and coordination among national services responsible for countering hybrid threats, with a particular emphasis on cybersecurity and disinformation. Strengthening resilience against hybrid threats is especially urgent given Russia's efforts to undermine Europe's social fabric. National capacity building would form an integral part of these efforts, helping guide and reinforce the work of existing bodies and agencies, such as the EU Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA). The preparedness community would also build on the ongoing implementation of the European Democracy Shield, including the European Centre for Democratic Resilience, and on the EU Strategy for Civil Society.³¹

Public Goods

The third principal dimension of panEuropean cooperation would be a European Public Goods Community, focused on extending digital, energy, and transportation connectivity across Europe and into neighboring regions. Expanding infrastructure delivers direct and tangible benefits to citizens—particularly, though not exclusively, on the continent's periphery—while enabling economic growth and enhancing energy security and affordability.

The public goods community would provide a forum for regular discussions of the connectivity strategies of key members and of the EU. This would help participating states to identify shared priorities, coordinate funding opportunities, and work closely with European financial institutions, such as the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Members would also commit to common rule of law, governance, and environmental standards in the awarding of infrastructure projects, thereby strengthening the European approach to connectivity relative to competing models.

People

The fourth dimension of cooperation would be a European People's Community, designed to deepen citizens' direct experience of Europe and engage them in structured deliberations on the community's priorities. The community would oversee programs that complement and significantly expand existing initiatives to support the mobility of students and young workers. In particular, the EU's Erasmus+ student exchange program should be scaled up, as

it is one of the union's most effective levers of community building. Alongside other initiatives to sustain transnational networks, temporary mobility and training schemes should be created for young workers in sectors less exposed to cross-border opportunities.

As more people from diverse backgrounds experience Europe firsthand, a major effort should be devoted to establishing a network of permanent, modular, transnational citizens' assemblies.³² These would be coordinated through a lighttouch system but initiated from the bottom up, with collaboration among local authorities and civil society actors across borders. Their deliberations would focus on major issues on the panEuropean agenda, including digital and energy transitions, the strengthening of democratic governance, the future of welfare, and the management of migration.

A Revised Path to EU Membership

These four communities would operate in parallel to the process of EU enlargement. The EU remains the core of the European order, and its expansion will, over time, narrow the gap between the envisaged pancontinental platforms and the union itself, even if the two will not necessarily fully converge. EU enlargement is essential for fostering stability, prosperity, and democracy across Europe. The establishment of the four communities would create favorable conditions for this process while remaining distinct from it.

However, for the journey toward EU accession to become a genuine multiplier of trust and confidence on all sides, the enlargement approach requires revision. Enhancing political ownership of this demanding, meritbased process would entail not only stronger financial incentives to sustain progress along the accession path but also the introduction of a staged membership model.

This model could take different configurations, but one option is a threestage approach.³³ In the first stage, once candidate countries have sufficiently strengthened their democratic governance and the rule of law, fully aligned their foreign and security policies with those of the EU, and made substantial progress on technical negotiating chapters, a status of associated member could be introduced before negotiations are formally concluded. While not conferring representation in the EU institutions, this status would signal an irrevocable trajectory toward membership—barring any regression on the reform track—and would entail a significant increase in EU funding.

The second stage would consist of a transitional status of new member, which would grant all the prerogatives of membership except for veto rights and would potentially be subject to certain policyspecific phasingin clauses.

After a defined number of years, and contingent on their full compliance with EU norms and rules, new members would automatically reach the third and final stage of full membership.

The status of associated member, in particular, would send a strong political signal to aspiring members. It would foster a sense of ownership and belonging among candidate countries, all of which would also participate in cooperation through the four panEuropean communities. At a time of geopolitical disruption and political fragmentation, this dense fabric of cooperation on a continental scale, combined with a revised EU enlargement process, would help lay the foundations for a trustbased and more resilient European political and security order.

LEGO Europe: A Modular Structure for EU Foreign Policy

Elena Lazarou

Almost seventy years after the creation of the European Economic Community, the model of uniform European integration is being challenged by a more flexible and varied architecture. Scholarship and practice increasingly point to the links between flexibility and agility, and between speed and capacity, in the EU's responses to complex policy challenges.³⁴ This is no longer a theoretical debate; the euro is often cited as the primary example of differentiated integration.

Yet, consensus remains central to the EU's external legitimacy. A consensual approach anchors the union's decisions in shared political commitments and ensures that its collective action reflects a common strategic direction. In an increasingly polarized international system, where an external perception of unity is critical to the EU's identity and legitimacy in acting, this is paramount. When it comes to the EU's structure and policymaking model, the million-euro question is then how to reconcile the need for consensus with the flexibility to maintain legitimacy while improving the speed and ambition of decisionmaking. How can the EU leverage consensus as a resource and not a constraint, and how can EU member states achieve collective policy buy-in while differentiating their participation in specific areas?

This contribution uses the example of foreign policy to advance the concept of LEGO Europe—one made up of modular blocks of different forms—as a way of rethinking EU policy, not by overhauling the union's treaties but by reconfiguring its architecture. The premise is straightforward: Coherence does not require uniformity, and flexibility need not undermine unity. A modular approach would allow the union to retain its foundational principles—most notably, consensus-based decisionmaking when it comes to foreign policy—while enhancing its ability to act in a timely, structured, and strategically consistent manner.

EU foreign policy is operating in a moment of structural transition. The return of large-scale war in Europe, shifting patterns of global power, and the growing entanglement of economics and security have collectively altered the context in which the EU acts externally. These developments have not made the EU ineffective; rather, they have exposed the limits of an institutional architecture designed for a different geopolitical era.

A Modular Architecture

The EU's response to Russia's war against Ukraine and the union's sustained engagement with Iran illustrate a dual reality. On the one hand, the EU has significant capacity to mobilize its resources, coordinate its positions, and project its normative influence. On the other, the translation of political consensus into action is uneven and often mediated by procedural complexity and institutional layering.

While consensus is critical to legitimacy, the operational environment in which EU foreign policy unfolds has become more fluid and time sensitive. The key challenge, therefore, lies less in how decisions are reached and more in how they are implemented.

LEGO Europe would introduce a distinction between these two dimensions. The EU would continue to define its strategic direction collectively, while implementation would be organized through modular structures that allowed for differentiated participation. In this sense, modularity would function as an enabling layer: It would translate consensus into action without requiring uniform engagement at every stage.

The EU's approach to Ukraine offers a clear illustration. The union has consistently maintained political agreement—albeit, at times, through prolonged internal negotiations—on supporting the country's sovereignty and resilience. Yet, the instruments through which the EU delivers this support, including military assistance, energy cooperation, and reconstruction planning, have often developed through parallel or overlapping frameworks.

A modular architecture would consolidate these efforts into structured policy clusters. A defense-support module, for instance, could coordinate training, equipment provision, and long-term capability development among participating states. An energy-resilience module could integrate EU and non-EU actors in stabilizing energy supplies and accelerating the transition toward a greener energy matrix and reduced dependencies. In the area of infrastructure, a reconstruction module could align public and private financing with governance benchmarks. Each would operate within a shared strategic framework, but with the flexibility to advance at different speeds and with different levels of participation.

External Engagement in a Layered System

The EU's foreign policy increasingly involves a spectrum of actors that extends beyond its formal membership. Partners, candidates, neighbors, and global stakeholders are integral to the union's external effectiveness. Yet, existing institutional formats often struggle to accommodate this diversity in a structured way.

LEGO Europe would address this shortcoming by embedding external participation directly into its architecture. Policy modules would not be confined to EU member states; they would be open, conditional, and functionally defined. This would transform the EU from a bounded institutional actor into a platform for coordinated external engagement.

In the case of Ukraine, such an approach would allow for the country's progressive integration without requiring its immediate accession. Kyiv's participation in modules for energy, security, and digital infrastructure could shore up Ukraine's alignment with the EU while reinforcing its resilience. Modularity would also enable the inclusion of non-EU partners, such as the United Kingdom or Norway, in specific domains of cooperation. This type of engagement would be based on existing alignments of interests and values and would create space for efficiencies of scale while allowing processes such as EU enlargement to progress on the basis of the union's treaties.

Engagement with Iran presents a different but equally relevant dynamic. The EU has long combined diplomatic coordination with restrictive measures in an attempt to balance dialogue and deterrence. Within a modular framework, this duality could be better structured. A diplomacy module would sustain high-level negotiations and multilateral coordination with other like-minded actors, while parallel modules could enable targeted economic measures or humanitarian engagement, aligned with broader policy objectives.

Such an arrangement would allow for continuity in engagement even when political conditions fluctuate. It would preserve channels of influence without requiring full policy convergence across all actors and instruments.

Integrating Economic Statecraft

The evolution of EU foreign policy is closely tied to the increasing centrality of economic tools. Sanctions, financial assistance, trade policy, and regulatory frameworks now function as core instruments of external action, and a doctrine of economic security has become an essential part of EU foreign policy. The effectiveness of all these instruments, however, depends on coordination, sequencing, and strategic alignment.

The EU's approaches to both Ukraine and Iran highlight this dynamic. The union has deployed economic measures at scale—whether in supporting Ukraine's macrofinancial stability or in imposing restrictions on Iran's economy.³⁵ Yet, these instruments often operate within fragmented governance structures, limiting their cumulative impact.

A modular architecture would allow for greater integration of economic statecraft into EU foreign policy. Financial, regulatory, and investment tools could be organized within dedicated modules, linking resources to clearly defined objectives. In the Ukrainian context, this could mean aligning reconstruction funding, private investment, and institutional reform within a single operational framework. In relation to Iran, it could involve calibrating economic engagement in tandem with diplomatic developments, ensuring that incentives and constraints remain strategically coherent.

This approach would not centralize control; rather, it would coordinate action. It would ensure that the EU's economic instruments reinforce, rather than merely accompany, its foreign policy objectives.

Structured Flexibility

A persistent challenge in EU foreign policy is not disagreement as such, but friction: delays, overlaps, and procedural complexity that slow down implementation. LEGO Europe would address this obstacle not by eliminating diversity but by organizing it.

Modules would operate with predefined parameters: participation criteria, governance structures, and resource commitments. This would reduce the need for repeated negotiation at each stage of policy delivery. It would also increase predictability, both internally and for external partners.

In practice, this means that once the EU makes a political decision—whether on supporting Ukraine or engaging with Iran—the corresponding modules could be activated with minimal delay. Participation would be voluntary, but the framework would already be in place. The result would be a shift from reactive coordination to anticipatory organization.

At the same time, the modular system would be inherently adaptive. Modules could evolve in response to changing conditions, expand to include additional actors, or be reconfigured as strategic priorities shift. This iterative capacity would be particularly valuable in a geopolitical environment characterized by uncertainty and rapid change.

Geopolitical Presence Through Coherence

The EU's role in the international system is often described in terms of presence: economic weight, diplomatic reach, and normative influence. Increasingly, however, presence must be matched by coherence. The ability to act consistently across instruments, actors, and time frames is what gives foreign policy its strategic effect.

LEGO Europe would contribute to this coherence by aligning consensus, flexibility, and structure. Consensus provides direction; flexibility enables participation; and structure ensures continuity. Together, they create the conditions for more effective external action.

The experiences of Ukraine and Iran illustrate the relevance of this alignment. In Ukraine, coherence strengthens the EU's capacity to sustain long-term support and shape the postwar order. In Iran, it enhances the union's ability to balance engagement and constraint while maintaining a credible diplomatic role.

Conclusion

The question facing the EU is not whether it can act but how it can act more effectively in a transformed geopolitical landscape. The answer lies less in revisiting foundational principles than in rethinking how they are put into operation.

LEGO Europe offers an architectural perspective on this challenge. By introducing modularity into the practice of foreign policy, it allows the EU to retain its commitment to consensus while enhancing its capacity for timely, coordinated, and strategically coherent action. As the current international environment makes all policy fields geopolitical, the reflections that underpin the idea of modularity can be broadened beyond what is traditionally perceived as foreign policy.

In a world of overlapping crises and shifting alignments, such an approach does not seek to simplify the EU's complexity. It seeks to organize it. And in doing so, it enables the union to translate its collective weight into a more consistent and visible geopolitical presence.

Citizen Power Europe

Kalypso Nicolaidis

What would Europe look like if it were designed from scratch today by actors who fully understood twenty-first-century interdependence and planetary constraints? This thought experiment is an invitation to put aside inherited institutional compromises and instead ask a more radical question: How should collective action be organized across a continent in which problems are transnational, identities are plural, and political legitimacy is fragile?

The premise of Citizen Power Europe is that in an age of geopolitical rivalry and a new cold war between authoritarians and democrats, Europe's internal democratic design cannot be disentangled from its external role. So the question needs to be extended outward: What kind of Europe would best shape its presence in the world?

Let's travel there together.

It is the late 2020s. Citizen power now constitutes the foundation of Europe's global power. Europe's external influence flows from citizen power as the response not only to Europeans' democratic aspirations but also to an emergent global movement for democratic renewal: a third democratic transformation, after the ancient cities of two thousand years ago and the parliamentary revolutions of two hundred years ago. To be sure, this thought experiment has not yielded a single blueprint or even design principles, but it has generated a set of aspirational catchphrases that are in constant need of reinterpretation and discussion.

A Laboratory for Planetary Politics

Europe 2.0 is not an end in itself, but a laboratory for planetary politics. The enmity between two alternative ways of organizing political life on the planet has come to structure a new cold war. Europeans fear that the regimes organized around authoritarian strongmen and omniscient surveillance seem more entrenched than ever, thanks to unholy state-corporate alliances. These regimes continue to attract more and more young people who are

disillusioned by the tribulations of their democracies. Those democracies continue to struggle to offer the magic package of stability and justice together; they remain too short-termist, too polarized, too messy.

With Europe 2.0, the only remedy is more democracy, not less. Since the return to the fold of key players from Hungary to Nepal to Bangladesh, Europeans have set their ambition higher and bolder.

To be sure, Europeans do not claim to be standard setters for the world. Truly awake to the spirit of postcolonialism, they are now committed to treating Europe as a learner rather than a model exporter. This means shifting their gaze toward the many other sites where democratic forms attuned to an interdependent world are being actively tested.³⁶ Europeans see their new project as an open-ended experiment in how citizen power can travel across borders and scales. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and technological transformation demand governance that stretches beyond the nation-state while remaining democratically grounded.

The new Europe's distinctive contribution is to channel the EU's institutional resources through the practices of translocalism, participation, and what can be called *demoicracy*—a union of peoples who govern together but not as one. This entails extending participation to include future generations and nonhuman concerns. It means building alliances that link Europe to other regions in a spirit of interconnected experimentation. And it requires embedding long-term thinking into a legal and institutional design so that democratic practices are no longer trapped in short-term cycles.

As with any experiment, its protagonists know that they are bound to learn more from its mistakes than from its successes. Sustaining life on a shared planet starts with a shift in perspective that cannot happen overnight: from viewing citizens as occasional participants in a predefined system to recognizing them as continuous co-creators of planetary futures. And that starts with a commitment everywhere to civic education.

Sustainable Integration

This new Europe began not with grand treaties and new competencies but with everyday mindsets and practices. Actors everywhere started to prioritize connection over hierarchy, participation over delegation, responsiveness over authority. Europe 2.0 has not resolved all the tensions and cleavages that surfaced during the polycrisis of the 2010s. But it is transforming the way they are navigated, setting aside the EU's promise of ever-closer union in favor of a commitment to a new vision: sustainable integration.

This shift marks not merely a change in rhetoric but a transformation in the *raison d'être* of the European project. Where ever-closer union implies a linear, almost teleological deepening of harmonization and centralization, sustainable integration asks instead: What kind of integration is worth maintaining over time? It recognizes the need for balance, resilience, and reversibility in a polity of multiple peoples.

Under the imperative of sustainability, integration is no longer measured by the transfer of competencies to a center but by Europeans' capacity to govern their interdependence without domination, to flexibly adjust the distribution of authority as conditions evolve, and to sustain political cooperation among decisionmakers without eroding social cohesion. It foregrounds not only economic and institutional efficiency but also the quality of democratic life, the durability of consent, and the ecological limits within which integration unfolds.

In this sense, sustainable integration becomes the guiding principle for a Europe that seeks not to converge into sameness but to ensure that integration remains politically and socially viable across generations.

As competencies expand and the EU's budget grows, democratic authority must operate like communicating vessels: The higher power rises at the European level, the more it must be balanced by a corresponding flow of legitimacy and control from below. If authority accumulates without this reciprocal movement, the system risks becoming top heavy and detached from those it affects. Sustainable integration therefore depends on a constant circulation between levels, whereby power and democratic anchoring adjust in tandem to maintain equilibrium and ensure that power remains rooted in the agency of the people.

A Coalition of Democratic Custodians

Europe's new purpose anchors its external power and its claim to relevance in a world where most people, most of the time, aspire to live free. In Europe, this aspiration is called democracy, even if it can take many forms. Europeans are not the custodians of a global rules-based order that preserves the remnants of the U.S.-led system but a laboratory for a new kind of post-hegemonic governance. Europe is part of a coalition of democratic custodians of a renewed order grounded in the will of the people.

Europe's power does not derive primarily from its military weight or market size but from the credibility of its internal democratic practices and the ways in which they provide signals for international cooperation. This is a union that visibly organizes itself around citizen power, binds institutions to listen, sustains participation across borders, and, over time, projects authority by example rather than by imposition.

This is not merely soft power in the conventional sense of attraction through values but something more demanding: power through demonstrated legitimacy.

As Europe 2.0 shows that it can channel conflict through inclusive and responsive processes, it gains the capacity to shape global norms not by prescribing them but by making them workable in practice. Rather than exporting ready-made institutional templates or conditions, Europe acts as a co-creative partner, extending its participatory ethos beyond its borders. Europe's transnational citizens' assemblies, translocal civic networks, and deliberative forums are progressively opened to non-European participants on issues from climate governance to digital regulation.

In doing so, Europeans help constitute spaces of democratic interaction beyond Europe itself, grounded in mutual recognition rather than hierarchy. Europe's external action thus mirrors its internal organization: pluralist, dialogue based, and oriented toward shared problem solving rather than unilateral projection.

Anchoring external power in citizen power provides Europe with a distinctive form of resilience. Whereas other powers may rely on centralized authority or coercive leverage, Europe's strength sustains consent under strain and adapts governance through iterative public engagement. In Europe 2.0, even issues of war and peace, such as defense investment, have been radically democratized.

In this sense, citizen power is not only a democratic ideal but also Europe's most credible and enduring geopolitical resource.

Transnationalism Through Translocalism

Translocalism describes a mode of political organization in which localities are connected horizontally through sustained practices of exchange, learning, and joint action. It is through these dense, cross-border linkages among cities, regions, and communities that transnationalism emerges.

If Europe were designed anew today, it would still rest on states, but these would be enlisted in a project committed to the entanglement between sovereignty and democratic contracts. In the refounded EU, democratic sovereign equality is the name of the game—as it should always have been.

This Europe does not rest on states as the only building blocks, nor is Brussels its only hub. It begins with places where people live and act: cities, regions, and communities that form nodes in a dense web of translocal connections.

In Europe 2.0, Europeans have abandoned the illusion of a single sovereign center. Instead, they are institutionalizing polycentric sovereignty, in which authority is distributed across multiple sites and levels, each with distinct but overlapping competencies. This is not simply a technical matter of subsidiarity. It is a normative commitment to nondomination across

political communities of all sorts. No single actor, whether a powerful member state or a central institution, should be able to impose its will without a justification to others. Think polycentric solidarity.

Transnational democracy thus emerges from the power of the local. Decentering the EU does not imply a retreat of collective capacity but its reconfiguration through the sites where public goods are produced and experienced. Local energy communities offer a concrete illustration: By organizing the generation, sharing, and governance of energy at the municipal or neighborhood level, these communities turn what was once a distant, technocratic domain into a locus of democratic practice. In doing so, they embed European objectives such as decarbonization, resilience, and solidarity within translocal infrastructures of participation. Citizens are not merely beneficiaries but co-producers of public goods. The EU's role, in this light, shifts from central provider to enabler and guarantor of a framework in which such initiatives can proliferate.

Similarly, amplifying trends from before Europe 2.0, local social movements have invented new modes of informal direct democracy, which combine with deliberative focal points and feed into electoral dynamics.³⁷ Youth movements have inspired the EU's refoundation through their decentralized participation, which has shown how widened channels for political agency can challenge entrenched power dynamics.

In practice, this means that mechanisms for horizontal accountability between states have been radically strengthened alongside vertical accountability to citizens. The delegation of authority remains reversible, allowing competencies to be reconfigured as conditions evolve.

Crucially, Europe 2.0 reflects the belief that the soul of Europe lies on its periphery. The injunction of nondomination at the heart of the European project was always meant to carry an asymmetrical implication: Those most vulnerable to domination, especially small and peripheral states or regions and their peoples, should enjoy a disproportionate voice and level of protection in the system.

The bigger picture is this: In Citizen Power Europe, Europeans have adopted a form of differentiated integration that is politically and normatively disciplined by citizen power and the management of democratic interdependence.³⁸

A Permanent Citizens' Assembly

Europeans have come to the realization that renewing democracy in Europe today requires paying attention not only to institutional form but also to how democracy is scaled up. Europeans now nurture chains of participation that link different forms of democratic engagement into effective processes across national cultures.

For these participatory chains to endure, they require institutional anchoring. This is the role of Europe 2.0's permanent citizens' assembly: to serve as the keystone institution that stabilizes and connects citizen participation across time and space. Drawing inspiration from the EU's 2021–2022 Conference on the Future of Europe and the ensuing European Citizens' Panels, this assembly responds to a fundamental insight: Expanding participation is not sufficient if it dilutes impact or invites capture. This is why one-third of the assembly's members, who are randomly selected residents from across Europe, are replaced every year.

In the spirit of translocalism, this body is Brussels-born but not Brussels-bound. It travels across borders, moving across cities and regions while linking local deliberative moments into a shared European process. Europe comes to town!

By providing a continuous forum for collective judgment, the assembly informs agendas, scrutinizes policies, and weaves together dispersed participatory practices into a coherent whole. The body's itinerant nature roots European democracy in lived contexts, while its translocal structure ensures that these contexts are connected rather than isolated. Crucially, the assembly's permanence not only empowers citizens to speak. It also binds institutions to listen and respond, creating a feedback loop between participation and power, transforming citizen engagement from consultation into joint governance.

In a democratic polity, this body does not rival representative institutions but complements them, ensuring that citizen power is institutionally sustained and territorially embedded at the heart of European governance. Citizen power rests on a dual-legitimacy system in which electoral and participatory channels reinforce one another.³⁹ The new assembly is the hub of the democratic panopticon Europeans are trying to build by dispersing their gaze across society and transforming observation into interpretation and interpretation into action.⁴⁰

Reclaiming Control

Under what this author has called the “Radicality of Sunlight,” Europeans are reconstituting the conditions under which power operates.⁴¹ The paradox of democratic innovation is that the more effective participatory mechanisms become, the more attractive they are to actors who seek to capture them. And this democratic capture is part of perhaps the biggest pathology Europe 2.0 is trying to confront: state capture, whether under private or public banners. For Europeans, citizen power operates not only as a voice in decisionmaking but also as a means of reclaiming control over the material and spiritual conditions of everyday life.

Ultimately, sunlight emanates from all of us. In this shared light, power no longer hides but answers, and democracy ceases to be an event and becomes a lived, continuous practice. For it is only when we learn to keep the light on together that we begin, at last, to govern ourselves in common.

Democratic Reckonings

Chris Bickerton

Officially in post until October 2027, Christine Lagarde, the president of the European Central Bank, is likely to step down earlier, handing the task of replacing her to the EU's current crop of national leaders.⁴² The governor of the Bank of France, François Villeroy de Galhau, announced in February 2026 that he would also vacate his post early.⁴³ Both decisions were made so that the posts could be filled well before the 2027 French presidential election, when a far-right candidate may win power. Europe's political mainstream is doing as much as possible to prevent extremists from breaking into the liberal fortress.

Meanwhile, in January 2026, EU member states were on the receiving end of direct threats by the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump over Greenland. A few months later, the United States and Israel launched a war against Iran's theocratic regime. EU members could do little more than watch and acquiesce. In the wake of these events, calls for greater European unity in defense and security came from all quarters. External circumstances have recast the structural conditions for collective European action, and leaders are expected to respond.

At present, changes in the EU's institutions and policies make little reference to democracy, which is often considered an enemy of decisionmaking in a crisis. As the EU has been assailed by one crisis after another, emergency politics has replaced concerns about the European demos, and what Irish political scientist Brigid Laffan has called "escaping the politics trap" has become a condition for successful problem solving at the EU level.⁴⁴ But however tempting it may be for political elites and officials, it is self-defeating to avoid democratic contestation in the EU's members in times of crisis. Circumventing the EU's national electorates obliges the union to act within its existing institutional parameters. The EU therefore acts incrementally even when circumstances call for radical action. Efforts to insulate the union from the polarization in its member states have failed: Euroskepticism has evolved into a political project that is changing the EU from the inside.⁴⁵

Calls for radical change lack substance as they come from experts and scholars tightly bound, professionally and intellectually, to the status quo. Disconnected from processes of democratic will formation, calls for reform are necessarily technocratic in nature. In the form of reports by eminent figures such as former Italian prime ministers Mario Draghi and Enrico Letta, they are akin to the magician pulling the metaphorical rabbit out of his hat.⁴⁶ The problem the EU faces today is not only what to do but who can do it. Democracy is an answer to this problem of agency, not an obstacle to it. But it is also an open-ended answer; specific outcomes cannot be guaranteed.

No Scope for Radical Reform

For all the talk since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine of a transformative moment, most of what has happened at the EU level has been within the union's existing institutional arrangements and to limited effect. The EU's new financing facility for defense purposes, Security Action for Europe (SAFE), is a time-bound instrument, temporary rather than permanent. A German idea to use frozen Russian assets to finance the Ukrainian war effort was derailed by an unwillingness to collectivize the risks of Russian reprisals.

Big budgetary commitments by EU members have fallen short. Germany revised its budgetary rules in March 2025 to finance military and infrastructural investments to the tune of hundreds of billions of euros. A year later, independent assessments found that the funds had been used to finance everyday federal government expenditure, and Berlin is considering penalizing those ministries that have been too slow in spending the allocated money.⁴⁷ A much-heralded Franco-German joint aircraft program with a projected budget of €100 billion (\$116 billion) has come to little. At the time of writing, the program will be either scrapped or replaced by a two-jet solution that can accommodate divergent French and German interests.⁴⁸ With little appetite to consult national electorates on elite-brokered changes to the EU's treaties, the realm of possible action and institutional innovation has been tightly circumscribed.

The EU's efforts after 2005 to uncouple integration from national electorates were formalized in the *passerelle* clauses of the 2009 Lisbon Treaty—a mechanism that allows for a change to EU decisionmaking rules without a formal treaty amendment—but this did not stop national political trends from shaping the EU.

Euroskepticism has evolved in recent years. It once manifested itself as a hostile anti-EU force of the kind incarnated by the UK Independence Party, previously led by Nigel Farage. A lack of partisan political competition in the EU's structures meant that debates about regional integration could only take the form of being for or against integration as a whole.⁴⁹ The telos of Euroskepticism was an exit from the EU. This is no longer true today, with the obvious exception of the UK, which left the bloc in 2020. Far-right political forces in Europe—the Freedom Party of Austria, the Brothers of Italy, Smer in Slovakia, and Fidesz

in Hungary—have become what author Simon Kuper called “Eurosceptic remainers.”⁵⁰ As French far-right leader Jordan Bardella put it in a May 2026 interview, “regarding Europe, I am in favor of changing everything but without breaking anything.”⁵¹

Critics of the EU are reshaping the bloc. EU membership has become more transactional and instrumental. SAFE was conceived as a form of sector-specific support and a boon to the Italian and German defense sectors. Embattled national leaders deploy anti-EU rhetoric as a campaigning device. While some deplore the civilizational rhetoric coming from Washington about the purported implosion of the West, some of this language has crept into the EU.⁵²

What used to be a debate about democratizing the EU is now punitive and censorious. The focus is on how to punish—and possibly even expel—the EU’s more illiberal members. By seeking to minimize national debates about the EU’s stated goal of “ever closer union,” national governments and EU institutions have ceded critical thinking about the EU to the margins, notably the nationalist right.⁵³ French President Emmanuel Macron’s great promise of saving the EU from the twin evils of the extreme left and the extreme right has instead bequeathed to the EU the distinct possibility of a far-right president in the bloc’s leading member state.

Europe’s Agency Problem

Calls for a more radical refoundation of the EU fall flat because they are made within the technocratic space that is the Brussels bubble. Such a bubble is incapable of major change because it is bound so tightly to the status quo. The most radical suggestions tend to go no farther than calling for the quick integration of Ukraine as a new member or for much faster progress in the form of Europe à la carte.

This is not just a problem of the limited imagination of the EU’s professional cadres. There is also a fundamental difficulty with a regional bloc that has integrated in ways that make profound change difficult to conceive. The eurozone’s existence as a currency union seems impermeable to reform unless it is in the direction of more economic integration. This is what German sociologist Claus Offe described as “Europe entrapped”—unable to move forward but also unable to move backward.⁵⁴ Writing in 2015 at the height of the eurozone turmoil, Offe argued that the crisis facing the EU was principally one of agency. Even if there was agreement on what should be done, “the actors have not yet arrived on a stage full of challenges.”

Faced with the current raft of difficulties, which are greater and more urgent than those in 2015, the EU has the same problem of agency. The two most obvious sets of agents are the leaders of the national governments and those of the EU institutions. But these agents are unable to act precisely because of the indeterminate quality of their democratic mandates.

The EU institutions are bound by the union's treaties and by their subservience in crucial areas—like security and defense—to member state governments that are unwilling to open the Pandora's box of national politics when thinking about how to meet today's challenges.

Europe's capacity to respond to the current transformative moment depends largely on its ability to address this crisis of political agency. And odd as it may seem, this can be resolved only by returning to national electorates and bringing the issue of the EU's future to the heart of national electoral politics. Outside powers will gape at an effort in regional democratic will formation at a time of global instability, but this is precisely what distinguishes Europe from other parts of the world. The two policy areas of security and AI illustrate how this approach might work.

Security

Recent events have raised doubts about the viability of Europe's existing security arrangements, but few real alternatives have been considered. The European Political Community, launched in October 2022, is the most prominent example of rethinking European security outside the box of NATO and the EU. Yet, it has failed to gain much traction.

In reimagining their security arrangements, Europeans could draw on Spain's 1986 referendum on NATO membership. The campaign was close and involved a national debate about nuclear arms, Spain's role in NATO and Europe, and the wider global security situation. At an anti-NATO demonstration that brought 750,000 Spaniards onto the streets, British historian E.P. Thompson addressed the crowds, telling them that leaving NATO would be an act of "internationalism, not of isolation."⁵⁵

In the spirit of the Spanish debate, European citizens could be asked whether they want to remain members of NATO, join a new European security organization, or not have any form of regional security at all. This choice would give any new organization an impetus rooted in a pan-European vote, or it might confirm Europeans' desire to stick with NATO, putting an end to inconclusive talk about European strategic autonomy. Individual national debates would generate ideas about the purpose of a new European collective security organization and provide a real opportunity to discuss Europe's role in the world.

Europe could end up bitterly divided if majorities in some member states wanted to remain in NATO and majorities in others wished to go it alone in security terms or create a new European security organization. However, the prospect of a divided Europe would be one of the main points of debate in the national campaigns. If it occurred, a schism would be a conscious choice of member state publics. Parties, governments, and think tanks would need to pronounce themselves on the question of European security and the degree of dependence Europe should have on the United States.

Artificial Intelligence

One of the world's hottest topics, AI is another example where the foundation of any EU action should be democratic debate within the union's member states. Quick out of the stalls, the EU's 2024 AI Act attempted to push the emerging industry toward more "trust-worthy" AI products.⁵⁶ The legislative process was not only at odds with the speed of the technology—the act was ill suited to the large language models that burst onto the scene in late 2022—but it also failed to do justice to the extent and depth of concerns across EU members.

The goal of legislators in the European Parliament and the member states was to act as quickly as possible. This urgency was driven by the EU's wish to shape global regulatory norms, akin to similar initiatives in environmental standards and corporate governance. However, in this instance, the EU's great strength—and what distinguishes the bloc from the two AI powerhouses of the United States and China—is not the speed with which it can introduce regulation but the depth and quality of its national debates about the meaning and purpose of AI.

This new technology is entirely bound up with China's project of national development, leading to an unquestioning rollout of AI at all levels of society. In the United States, the logic of prospective initial public offerings and profitability is paramount. In Europe, many are asking deeper questions about AI's ethical and social implications. Far from suggesting that Europeans are falling behind in the AI race, the quality of these debates puts Europe well ahead of other parts of the world.

Embracing National Publics

The EU is currently operating in an age of transformation. How it responds should not be uncoupled from processes of democratic will formation at the national level. Subjecting EU reforms to democratic tests means accepting the indeterminacy and unpredictability inherent in mass politics. National votes on European security could either realize or end the desire for European strategic autonomy. Similar consultations on other aspects of the EU's architecture might lead to the abolition of any one of its key institutions. Having long considered its national publics a hostile force, Europe should begin its reordering by embracing the vitality of its national public spheres.

Imagining a European Democratic Digital Union

Hendrik Nahr

Europe needs spaces “where technology enables us to come together in the ways that we need,” according to former European commissioner for competition Margrethe Vestager.⁵⁷ The two axes she highlighted—coming together, in the sense of meeting, discussing, and making decisions collectively, or democracy; and technology as it is shaped in the twenty-first century, or digitization—will guide the present thought experiment. These are not arbitrary themes; they are deeply connected to the most pressing questions Europe faces today and offer a meaningful entry point for imagining a future European order.

Democratic Europe Reimagined

The EU’s democratic deficit has been widely discussed in academic and political debates. The problems associated with it are widely known at both an institutional and a conceptual level: Decisions made in Brussels are often perceived as distant from citizens. Participatory tools are limited and not used or implemented to their full potential. Institutions appear fragmented and complex, making it difficult for citizens to understand how decisions are made. Accountability chains are long and often unclear, with the result that responsibility is hard to trace.

The EU was originally designed primarily as a system to regulate markets. Over time, however, its competencies and responsibilities have expanded significantly. Even since the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, the scope of European action has grown considerably, often driven by the EU institutions. Yet, the union’s governance structures have not evolved at the same pace. This mismatch between responsibilities and democratic structures is at the core of many current challenges.

In imagining a democratic EU from scratch, the focus is not on abstract chains of legitimacy or purely institutional debates. Instead, the question is what concrete elements would define a democratic Europe designed today. Four such elements stand out.

First, continuous participation must become central. Citizens' involvement in governance should not be limited to periodic elections. A reimagined Europe would create a continuous public space, a deliberative sphere that allows for participation beyond voting. This would not replace representative democracy but complement it to make democratic engagement an ongoing process. Digital tools could play an important role here by supporting the key principles of openness and accessibility.

Second, Europe's regions would play a much stronger role. European governance today is organized largely around nation-states, reflecting a historical logic rooted in the nineteenth century. While this structure has been pragmatic, it is not necessarily attuned to people's priorities today. Regions already play a crucial role in implementing EU decisions, yet their influence in shaping them is limited. A Europe designed today would take subsidiarity more seriously and empower regions as meaningful political actors. This would also transform today's intra-European border regions, which would no longer be peripheral spaces but central nodes in a more integrated system. Besides, such a move could empower the use of regional languages and give them more visibility across Europe.

Third, institutionally, Europe would benefit from a clearer and more transparent chamber system. The current institutional setup is complex and often difficult to communicate. A reimagined system could include distinct chambers that correspond to different dimensions of governance. One chamber could represent Europe's states, a second its regions, a third its citizens through elections, while a fourth could institutionalize participatory elements. Such a system would not only enrich decisionmaking processes but also reflect the multilevel nature of European governance. Competencies could be distributed depending on the policy area, ensuring that those who are most affected are meaningfully involved.

Fourth, accountability would be a defining feature of this democratic Europe. Decisions must be traceable, and responsibility must be clearly assigned. It should always be possible to understand who is in charge, how that authority was obtained, and how it can be changed. This does not necessarily require focusing on individuals but rather on institutions and processes. Competence and responsibility must go hand in hand. A democratic Europe would therefore be one in which citizens can clearly see how decisions affecting them are made and how they can influence them.

It could be argued that the EU has already taken important steps to strengthen democracy on the continent: the European Citizens' Initiative, the Conference on the Future of Europe, the Committee of the Regions, the Citizens' Engagement Platform, and European Citizens' Panels, to name just a few initiatives. Yet, these steps have been limited; in a reimagined Europe, democratic participation would be the core of the European project.

This need is identified clearly in the many youth consultations on the future redesign of Europe that this author and others have undertaken through Make.org, a European civic tech organization. In EurHope, a youth-engagement project that gathered 1.5 million voices ahead of the 2024 European Parliament elections, we asked participants what Europe needs

to be fit for the future. The respondents' number one priority was more democratic EU institutions. Among the most widely endorsed ideas were "increasing citizen participation and their understanding of the EU" and "reinforcing transparency and ethical conduct of public officials."⁵⁸

In addition, young people stressed the need for a stronger role for Europe's regions to bring decisions and participation down to a more local level. For example, participants in Make.org's cross-border consultation among over 14,000 young people in the Czech Republic and Germany highlighted "promoting more joint cultural projects and cultural exchanges between the two countries," underlining potential for greater cooperation in border regions. Respondents in the consultation also called for "promoting youth and public interest in politics," showing a clear desire among young people to be better represented.⁵⁹

Another consultation, which brought together over 51,000 participants to mark sixty years of the 1963 Élysée Treaty between France and West Germany, also pointed to a need for stronger European democracy. One of the top ideas was to expand participation mechanisms: "Citizens should be more involved in decisionmaking processes, especially on future-related issues such as climate protection, inclusion, and social justice." Another key demand was to "reform the decisionmaking procedures within the European decisionmaking system."⁶⁰

Finally, such a democratic Europe must reflect the fact that democratic ideas and practices are not exclusively European. While the continent's history offers important milestones, such as Ancient Greek democracy or the formulation of ideas during the Enlightenment, it is equally important to learn from democratic traditions and governance models beyond Europe. A future-oriented European democracy should be open, reflective, and inclusive in this regard.

Digital Europe from Scratch

Digital transformations are occurring at unprecedented speed. By the time societies begin to adapt to one technological shift, the next one is already underway. Compared with the Industrial Revolution, which unfolded over decades, today's digital changes happen within years or even months: It took forty years to go from the invention of the Watt steam engine to the first locomotive; by comparison, forty years ago from today, the internet had not even been invented.

If Europe aims to remain relevant in the future both as a political continent and as a values-based community, it must be at the forefront of digital developments. At present, this is only partly the case. Most of the biggest tech companies originate outside Europe. Technologies are often not designed with European values at their core. This creates dependencies that can translate into geopolitical vulnerabilities.

The often-cited phrase that “America innovates, China replicates, and Europe regulates” may have its flaws—but it captures an element of truth about Europe’s reactive stance. While Europe has strong regulatory capacities, it has not been equally successful in fostering large-scale ecosystems of digital innovation.

A Europe designed afresh would approach digitization differently. It would aim to be proactive rather than reactive. This means creating the conditions for innovation to emerge within Europe, rather than primarily responding to developments elsewhere.

One of Europe’s greatest strengths is its diversity. Instead of seeing this as a barrier, Europeans should understand diversity as an asset. Different cultures, languages, and perspectives, if properly connected, can foster creativity and innovation. Policies, funding structures, and institutional frameworks should therefore be designed to leverage this diversity and enable new technologies, collaboration, and exchanges of ideas across borders.

Such an approach would allow European actors to become relevant players in global markets. Importantly, this would concern not only Europe’s economic competitiveness but also its ability to shape technological developments according to European values.

Regulation and innovation should not be seen as opposites. On the contrary, well-designed regulation can create the conditions for sustainable and responsible innovation. History has shown that unregulated technological development can lead to negative consequences. A European approach would integrate values into technology design from the outset, ensuring that innovation serves broader societal goals.

Reducing dependencies on external technologies would be another key objective. This does not imply isolation or protectionism. Rather, it means ensuring that Europe has the capacity to act independently when necessary. A balanced approach would combine openness with strategic autonomy.

Again, it would not be fair to say that the EU, as it currently stands, is turning a blind eye to these matters. A range of initiatives—on digital regulation, AI governance, and innovation support—is already moving in these directions and could eventually lead to meaningful progress. However, a redesigned Europe would embed these elements much earlier in time and take a more proactive stance from the outset.

These calls are again clearly reflected in the results of Make.org’s engagement projects. In the Forum Against Fakes, in which more than 600,000 online participants in Germany discussed information integrity alongside a citizen panel on the same topic, many of the proposals put forward pointed to solutions that are feasible only in a values-based digital environment.⁶¹

Similarly, in another discussion of the same issues, more than 7,800 young citizens in France, Romania, and Moldova arrived at comparable conclusions. There was a broad consensus on “establishing ethical norms and international governance for the development of AI” and “increased regulation of social media sites.”⁶²

The EurHope consultation also highlighted the importance of innovation. Participants emphasized priorities such as “encouraging ‘Made in Europe’” and “supporting research, innovation and technology in Europe.”⁶³

Finally, the results of the Czech-German consultation echoed these findings. “Improving technology and digital infrastructure” emerged as a central demand, underlining the importance of innovation and digital capacity in strengthening Europe’s future.⁶⁴

At the same time, Europe must remain aware of historical patterns of inequality and exploitation. Europe’s industrial development was, to a significant extent, linked to colonialism and the use of natural resources and labor under unequal conditions. While this cannot be undone, it should inform current decisions. The digital transformation should not reproduce similar patterns, for example through the unsustainable extraction of resources or the externalization of environmental and social costs on other continents or at home. Europe must consider issues such as data infrastructure, energy consumption, and the global impact of AI in this context.

A European Democratic Digital Union

A nexus between democracy and digitization would be crucial to a reimagined Europe. Digital tools make possible new forms of participation and accountability. They allow citizens to engage in political processes on an unprecedented scale and can enhance transparency. Europe already has a strong civic tech ecosystem that shows how technology can support democratic practices.

At the same time, digital spaces have become the primary arenas for public discourse. Where physical marketplaces once served as centers of public life, today’s discussions increasingly take place online. However, these spaces do not always strengthen democracy. They can also amplify polarization and antidemocratic tendencies. A European approach to digital infrastructure could help create healthier and more constructive spaces for public debate.

There is also an important external dimension. Democracies are most credible when their internal values are reflected in their foreign affairs. Reducing technological dependencies would allow Europe to pursue a more consistent and values-based foreign policy. Meanwhile, European leadership in digital innovation could show that technologies grounded in democratic values are viable and competitive globally.

Finally, digital tools offer the potential to create a more solid European public sphere. Such a sphere does not fully exist today; it is highly fragmented. Language barriers and national media landscapes continue to limit cross-border communication. However, digital technologies, including translation tools and cross-border platforms, with their capacity to share content across frontiers, provide opportunities to overcome these barriers while preserving cultural diversity.

A European Democratic Digital Union, designed today, would be better equipped to navigate the complexities of the contemporary world. Such a union would strengthen democratic governance by enabling meaningful participation and clear accountability. It would foster digital innovation that reflects European values and reduces dependencies. Most importantly, it would connect these two dimensions, recognizing that democracy and digitization must evolve together. In this way, Europe would not only respond to global developments but also actively shape them, to eventually create Vestager's digital spaces that would allow Europeans to come together.

On Global Partnerships and Civic Identity

Rosa Balfour

The EU's founding myth is about overcoming centuries-long conflict and achieving peace through economic integration: a big idea coupled with the ingenuity of technocratically engineered economic interdependence and the stubbornness of the founding fathers. But the dominance of this narrative has overshadowed Europe's global opportunities. Understanding the union as immersed in the world, rather than oriented primarily toward its own internal peace project and economic consolidation, allows for a rethink of both the EU's trajectory and its role as an international actor.

A Europe from scratch could draw on the continent's historical heritage of being globally connected through people, goods, and ideas and set itself on a new footing in search of global partnerships. To do so, the EU needs to work on two interlocking issues. First, it needs a Copernican change in how it thinks of the world and its role therein. Second, the EU needs a new global engagement that rests on civic values and international law, rather than on a stronger European identity.

Europe in the World: Imperial Legacies

Historically, European countries have been subjects as well as objects of empire. Perhaps this provided an alibi for EU institutions governing trade and aid to avoid confronting the imperial past of their principals when engaging with third countries. By overlooking the simultaneous history of integration and decolonization, Europeans may have been guilty of what author Hans Kundnani has called “imperial amnesia.”⁶⁵

Oblivious to this heritage, the EU developed a narrative about its global role that was steeped in universalism, drawn from principles enshrined in the UN Charter, and uniquely and boldly constitutionalized in the EU treaties. The union is thus formally dedicated to promoting universal human rights and peace—and is globally recognized as such, even if its performance has been notably inconsistent and contradictory. In the 1990s and 2000s, an expanding and integrating EU imagined itself as a champion of norms and multilateralism.

But these lofty ambitions hit the wall of reality. Material interests often prevailed over universal norms, and a recognition of postcolonial assumptions prompted humility about the lectern from which Europeans were preaching to the rest of the world. The result was a retreat from such goals and a swing toward relativism. Universal principles became European values; now diplomats are in listening mode with the rest of the world and are expected to stop lecturing.

Even if some former European empires have embarked on partial reckonings with their past, in the eyes of the former colonies and the so-called Global South more broadly, repeated calls to rethink EU-Africa relations as “a partnership of equals” ring hollow.⁶⁶ While past wrongs cannot necessarily be righted—and, arguably, it is not primarily the EU’s role to do so—the notion of equal partnerships is misleading. First, it does not address the asymmetries that existed at the heart of a liberal international order that was shaped by the overarching power of the United States. Europe enjoyed a privileged position in the multilateral order and could support it—more vigorously than the United States—without questioning the continuing validity of a postwar settlement tilted in favor of the West. Second, this approach does not seem to include engaging in discussions of reforming the international system.⁶⁷

More importantly, this view fails to address specific EU policy blunders that have tainted perceptions of Europe across the world, regardless of historical legacies. If imperial amnesia was an alibi when the union set up its relations with the Global South, today’s recognition of empire provides an alibi for missteps in EU policies.

A Catalogue of Double Standards in EU Policies

The EU’s new diplomatic listening mode does not add up to a policy. It is unclear who the union should be listening to—governments (and, if so, which ones) or civil society.⁶⁸ What is more, it does not unpack the critique of EU double standards.

The problem of double standards affects a range of issues. The gap between the EU’s behavior at home and abroad is a cause of reputational damage to the union. The world has watched as democratic standards have declined in the EU—significantly in a few countries. This decline has been particularly evident at the EU’s external border, where harsh policies to curb arrivals of migrants and asylum seekers have often clashed with the values of respect for human rights and humanitarian law.

The EU has also pursued conflicting goals in the world. Stability, security, economic interests, and migration control have always challenged the long-term objectives of political reform and respect for human rights. These double standards are no longer an embarrassment, as the EU has started to conclude security and defense agreements with military dictatorships.⁶⁹

From the perspective of its global partners, the EU is selective in its efforts to protect universal principles and its support for other countries when these principles are called into question by an actor's aggressive behavior. The most glaring case is the discrepancy between Europe's expectation of global alignment to support Ukraine against Russia's full-scale invasion and the world's expectation that Israel's military operations in Gaza and Lebanon would be internationally condemned. But there are plenty of other instances in which global partners involved in regional disputes or victims of encroachments would appreciate stronger support from Brussels. Half-hearted and cacophonous condemnations of breaches of international law in Venezuela, Greenland, and Iran only support this perception of the EU's selective engagement.

Beyond conflicting objectives of security versus human rights, Europe is approaching a new frontier of double standards in the scramble for resources to address the climate transition. Here, the EU's rhetoric on global public goods, from health to biodiversity, sometimes clashes with policies that prevent the production of vaccines in the Global South or access to critical raw materials.⁷⁰ European diplomats claim that the partnerships offered by the EU's Global Gateway infrastructure investment initiative are less predatory than the overtures of China, Russia, or the United States toward the Global South, as they bestow ownership and advantages with few conditions; but the EU's offer is not always as compelling as others.

Working with Partners on Global Public Goods

Long gone are the days of an international system in which those universal values the EU constitutionalized were the acceptable norm, albeit with deviations. Today, a competing, multipolar world of mighty civilizations is the aspiration of many: Russia and China endorsed the notion of multipolarity based on civilizations in 1997;⁷¹ the United States, too, has now embraced civilizational discourses.⁷² In the EU's sprint to sign as many trade agreements as possible to counterbalance its dependence on the United States, the ambition to include normative goals in these partnerships has been reduced to a minimum.

Yet, this is precisely where the EU can reinvent its global role. The union can become far more actively engaged in working toward what political scientist Amitav Acharya has called the "world minus one," in which countries and organizations band together to make multilateralism survive without the United States.⁷³ Rather than support multilateralism for the sake of it, what is left of the international community should identify a few global public goods on which it can bring together commitment, resources, and political energy.

These public goods should reflect key interests, from energy transitions and climate change mitigation to human-centered technology, from the rights of navigation and maritime security to biodiversity. This approach would provide a way for the EU to return to an agenda that includes universalism, by identifying selected areas in which EU interests and the public good harmonize with one another and promoting them both bi- and multilaterally.

The types and shapes of engagement can vary, from middle powers coming together, as Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney suggested at the 2026 World Economic Forum, to working through existing institutions.⁷⁴ Former Czech president Václav Havel's 1978 essay "The Power of the Powerless," cited by Carney, recognized the contribution of Charter 77, an informal civil initiative that brought together a diverse coalition of actors, to ending communism in Czechoslovakia. Building big-tent global coalitions that transcend existing formations is the only pragmatic way to overcome the hindrances caused when a few nations block multilateral systems, be it in the EU or in the World Trade Organization.

Indeed, the pioneers of a reinvented Europe need not include the EU as a bloc. As coalitions of the willing increasingly become the *modus operandi* for European countries to address major international crises, from the war in Ukraine to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, so can similar formats work for global issues when Europeans want to shape the international environment rather than continue to be shaped by it. After all, the multilateral system was built not on altruism but on a convergence around a few norms that served the interests of many. If that convergence cannot be found universally, willing actors can pursue other networks and partnerships rooted in shared interests.

Interests, Civic Values, and Universalism

The EU's rhetorical and practical retreat from universal values in the name of embracing the brave new world has been accompanied by a narrative about anchoring the union's global posture in a stronger European identity or strategic autonomy—a reflection of the crisis of the organization's deepest relationship, that with the United States. European solidarity has become one of the EU's biggest political challenges since the economic crisis that started in 2008. Strengthening integration has come up against the wall of growing nationalism, which the leaders of the EU institutions oppose with a rallying cry for some kind of European identity. The president of the European Commission now ends every speech with a multilingual "Long live Europe!"⁷⁵ Other European political leaders are attracted by the idea of a European civilization, despite the notion being favored terrain of far-right thinking.⁷⁶

The temptation to build some kind of Europe-wide patriotism has always existed. Ideas about a European demos or a European army have long been present in pro-EU discourse—including in the form of a rhetorical question about who would die for Europe. But processes of national identity formation have historically been meshed with distancing others—real or imagined enemies—and building borders, also both real and imagined. In the context of the EU, the idea of identity rests on the fallacy that European integration was underpinned by some sense of common belonging.

In the face of an increasingly hostile world, in which great powers' goals include dividing the EU, Europe's shift to defensive rhetoric is to be expected. But it should not close the door to the like-minded rest of the world. European integration has depended crucially on

global openness; an inward shift without the self-sufficiency and executive agency enjoyed by the United States and China is bound to fail. Rather, the EU should double down on its strengths as an open partner committed to public goods that are shared with others. The key to the EU's success was the delivery of European public goods: peace, democracy, and prosperity. That old motto can still be relevant today, on a global scale and with a different set of friends.

Conclusion

There is dissonance in Europe over the question of whether to accept the dissolution of the liberal international order and embrace geopolitics, on the one hand, or work toward saving multilateralism, on the other. The EU's two presidents voiced divergent opinions on these issues at the same conference in March 2026, with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen arguing that the EU can no longer be the "custodian for the old-world order" and European Council President António Costa underlining the EU's role in "defend[ing] the rules-based international order."⁷⁷ Yet, the choice is not binary; the dilemma need not be framed as one between nostalgia for the past and preparedness for the future. The point is what kind of future Europeans are willing to work toward if they want to avoid having to adapt to a world shaped by others.

The EU should abandon the current commission's label of "geopolitical Europe" and its ambition to become a big power in the mold of past European powers.⁷⁸ Nor is the union a middle power, although a few of its members are. The EU's power is asymmetrical compared with that of classical powers: mighty in trade and regulation but dependent on others in security. The union's strengths lie in being a civic, value-driven political project. By engaging the world asymmetrically through regulation, norms, and selective leverage, the EU can exert power and influence intelligently and with impact.

The notion of an EU rooted in a civic identity and committed to changing global hierarchies of power is a utopian idea, especially in present circumstances. But refraining from utopia has not provided an exit from Europe's crisis, so why not?

Rethinking EU Resilience: Bringing Europe's Edge to the Center

Anastasia Pociumban

If the European order were redesigned from scratch, many of the countries currently on Europe's periphery would be core pillars of its resilience. In a new Europe, states like Ukraine and Moldova that were once considered parts of a gray zone between Russia and the EU would be central to the whole structure of regional order and would play an important role in the EU's architecture.

The countries in Eastern Europe, long treated as peripheral, now carry far greater weight in shaping the EU's future and agency. Ukraine, in particular, has revived the EU enlargement process while defending the bloc from direct Russian aggression. Moldova's most recent parliamentary elections have produced remarkable results: not only the victory of the pro-European Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) but also the defeat of corrupt, pro-Russia, kleptocratic actors. The pace of reforms in both countries—although uneven and despite hiccups—and the degree to which these nations are actively shaping the EU's positions mark a genuine shift in engagement between the EU and its neighbors.

A new European order requires the EU to be simultaneously more flexible and pragmatic in its external relations and more rigorous in its internal ones to consolidate societal cohesion. The EU is still Europe's necessary framework because the alternatives lack both vision and legal, financial, and normative weight. If it is to remain a relevant actor in its neighborhood, the union must reform specific mechanisms and become more strategic and visionary in its approach.

Europe as Societal and Democratic Resilience

The EU must do more than move ahead swiftly with enlargement. Beyond this, bringing in countries like Ukraine and Moldova as a central pillar of the new European order would help change the EU's architecture. Together with these states, the EU would foreground the principle of societal resilience as crucial to a reimagined Europe. This would give the

new EU a greater ability to withstand and recover from ongoing crises as well as agency and a stronger sense of a shared purpose. Russia's war in Ukraine has created a new reality in which Ukrainian statehood and governance are under sustained attack, yet Ukraine's society has shown extraordinary resilience and continues to resist after more than four years of full-scale war. This resilience developed as a matter of survival, since there was no alternative and the war is an imminent, existential threat.

Ukraine's response has required the country's institutional adaptation and a new degree of flexibility, innovation, and responsiveness to rapidly changing conditions. This shift not only has high costs but also marks a new era in the way countries adapt to ongoing war while trying to preserve democracy. Moldova presents a comparable example of institutional flexibility and adaptability, enabled in part by the fact that the country's institutions were not fully consolidated, making it easier to be responsive in a time of crisis and with a leadership that wanted change. Both countries still have reforms to pursue and domestic challenges to address, but they have shown commitment, a sense of urgency, and a push from civil society.

In Western Europe, by contrast, change is poorly absorbed, and populations accustomed to stability are more exposed to disruption. This vulnerability is being exploited by external authoritarian actors and populist parties, for example with narratives about Europe being dragged into the war or facing high costs because of European support for Ukraine, as well as a wide range of campaigns aimed at discrediting the EU and its backing for the country.⁷⁹ What a reimagined Europe needs is not institutional tweaking so much as a wholesale switch to focus on societal resilience and a shared strategy for how to deal with increasing foreign and security policy challenges.

Building societal resilience, then, would be a foundational principle of the new European order. Risk perceptions vary significantly across countries, and constructing a whole-of-society approach is a genuine challenge. But drawing on lessons from Eastern Europe requires, at a minimum, a different mode of governmental communication that is more forthcoming about threats and trade-offs and, possibly, a broader rethinking of what state institutions are for and how they can shape public opinion.

Changed Principles

To usher in this new Europe of societal resilience, the EU needs to preserve its credibility and follow through on its commitment to admit Ukraine and Moldova as members. For these countries, EU membership is understood both as a security guarantee and as a lever for reform. Balancing geopolitical urgency and a merit-based approach remains necessary, but leaving these states in the waiting room indefinitely will weaken their security and Europe's wider societal resilience.

However, this is not simply a matter of moving ahead with accession. A reimagined Europe would also embrace four other principles that would make societal resilience work.

Reversible Accession

First, the EU should contemplate making accession reversible for new countries. But the union should also apply this principle to current members that block collective decisions—such as Hungary under the previous government and, potentially, Slovakia—or that undermine EU unity on priorities where coherence is essential. The expectation that candidate countries align with the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) must, symmetrically, apply to existing members.⁸⁰ The same holds for adherence to EU norms and values. A reimaged EU would treat accession as a spectrum of integration, tiered according to clearly defined benchmarks and timelines.

In the case of Ukraine, even as the war is ongoing, the country can share battlefield knowledge with the rest of Europe and be fully aligned with the CFSP while consolidating key domestic reforms. Different ideas for variable or gradual integration are currently circulating, such as associated membership, as suggested by German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, membership lite, and reversible membership. These proposals are feeding and moving the debate, but so far with no concrete outcomes.

With a tiered model, in a spirit of gradual integration, clear benchmarks would determine what institutional access Ukraine gains and when. This would show political will and reward progress rather than require every condition to be fulfilled before integration deepens. Under this principle, integration could happen progressively but with concrete benefits, and it should be reversible for candidates and members alike.

Coalitions of the Willing

The new architecture should also use coalitions of the willing to drive forward integration in areas where there is broad agreement on priorities but where levels of interest vary across the member states. There are various models for how this could work.⁸¹ In a new, enlarged EU, more opt-ins and opt-outs could provide both a greater degree of agency for the union and easier coordination under the EU umbrella.

This is where examples from the EU’s neighborhood are useful. Ukraine and Moldova have been cooperating strongly with EU member Romania on connectivity and cybersecurity in a regional format supported by the EU. This logic opens up space for differentiated leadership within the new architecture. Ukraine could lead and anchor a security coalition, including through efforts to withstand hybrid attacks. Countries such as Estonia, as well as Moldova and Ukraine, are at the frontier of digitization and could lead initiatives not only in that domain but also in tech development.

The new EU would do well to recognize and support these emerging coalitions of the willing by drawing them under its institutional umbrella. The agencies responsible for these initiatives could be based in the countries that lead them. When coalitions fall outside the EU, the union could, when appropriate, acknowledge them, support them politically, or even work with them, particularly on questions of security on Europe’s Eastern flank.

Strategic Communication

A reimagined Europe needs to be based on a different approach to strategic communication that reaches out to citizens directly with positive narratives. Building societal and democratic resilience requires social trust, yet many of the measures on which this resilience is based, such as societal flexibility or the ability to adapt and bounce back, include high short-term costs that could erode trust. For instance, further EU enlargement and the EU's approach to accession are not seen by Europeans as key topics and are not widely supported by the EU population: In the European Commission's September 2025 Eurobarometer survey, only 56 percent of EU citizens said they were in favor of more EU enlargement.⁸²

Currently, EU communication is often channeled through national governments, which blame Brussels for the high costs of EU projects. Or, in the case of enlargement, discussions focus on cohesion funding or the agricultural budget. This situation creates a structural problem of how to pursue unpopular geopolitical decisions while maintaining citizens' confidence.

While there is no silver bullet to address this challenge, communicating reforms and decisions openly, even if they are difficult, leaves less room for speculation. A whole-of-society approach would require the EU to communicate directly with citizens on key priorities and work closely with national governments on communication and messaging to shape the agenda. This means being more active on social media, where Russian and other malign actors run coordinated campaigns, and leading with a positive agenda that makes a concrete, creative case for what European integration can deliver to citizens.

Civil Society Participation

Finally, societal resilience for a restructured Europe cannot be achieved without a new principle of full civil society participation. Civic involvement is essential, and again, Ukraine and Moldova can help ensure that an active civil society and independent media become more central and prevent democratic backsliding. In Ukraine, the country's first wartime demonstration took place in June 2025 after the government sought to strip certain powers from anticorruption bodies—and civil society pushed back. In Moldova, investigative journalists infiltrated Russia-backed social media networks designed to manipulate the country's elections.⁸³

Civil society is the first institution targeted by populist parties, which are routinely accused of supporting foreign agendas. As the funding for civil society and democratic initiatives decreases, they still remain central for preserving a values-based order. Indeed, civil society is indispensable for democratic resilience, which has been defined by one study as a "system's capacity to prevent, cope with, or recover from pressures that threaten democratic quality and continuity without losing its democratic character."⁸⁴ In the new European order, that capacity must be deliberately protected and supported by resources and funding.

Toward a Broader Europe

Amid the challenges to the current European order and an overall sense of insecurity and instability, now is the right time to imagine what kind of order Europe wants to build.

This would be a wider EU that would shift its center of gravity toward Eastern European countries and benefit from its Eastern partners to rethink its whole approach to resilience in defense of its norms and values. In this wider Europe, some key initiatives would be led by coalitions of the willing under the EU umbrella.

Last but not least, a reimagined European order needs to give a more defining role to civil society and independent media as vital actors that protect the European project from democratic backsliding. In a Europe rebuilt from scratch, societal resilience would be strengthened and the countries on the continent's periphery would no longer be waiting passively to join the European architecture but would be fundamental in shaping it.

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