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Europe's Choice: Getting Out Of – Or Getting Lost In – The Labyrinth of the Interregnum

Ferenc Miszlivetz, Elira Luli, and Henrietta Dóka



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Author

Ferenc Miszlivetz is the Director of the Institute of Advanced Studies Kőszeg. His research interests include democracy, civil society, Central-European and European Studies, globalization and sustainability.

Elira Luli is a Lecturer and Researcher at “Luarasi” University. She obtained her Ph.D. in International Relations and Political Science in 2017 from the European University of Tirana. In 2022, she was honoured as a George C. Marshall Centre Alumni Scholar after her participation in an alumni group scholar program. Currently, she is a fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Kőszeg (IASK) conducting a research under a general topic: Western Balkans and the EU: Possibilities and hindrances to further EU enlargement.

Henrietta Dóka has been a staff member of the Institute of Advanced Studies Kőszeg since 2016, where she began her career as a librarian. She obtained her Master’s degree in the same year in Library and Information Science at the Savaria University Centre of the University of West Hungary.

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Abstract

This discussion paper explores the concept of the European political community, framing it as a foundational premise for advancing deeper integration and cohesion across Europe. It argues that under conditions of cultural and normative diversity and fragmented political agency, the EU can evolve into a concrete and viable unified community only by coupling shared values and societal understanding with coordinated capacities in areas such as security, digital governance, and economic resilience. Rather than treating integration as a purely institutional or technical project, the paper conceptualizes the European political community, beyond the EU members, as an active framework through which collective autonomy, democratic legitimacy, and strategic agency can be constructed and sustained.

Although the EU has integrated many of its parts, it has never fully realized Europe's potential as a unified entity or risen to the grandeur of Europe as a whole. Yet there is reason for cautious optimism: the EU has repeatedly shown an ability to reinvent itself in moments of crisis. This raises important questions: How has it managed such reinvention, and what enduring gains have resulted? Short-term fixes have too often failed to cultivate a coherent long-term vision. The EU faces a major geopolitical disruption and risks falling behind due to the structural dependencies it has developed with major global powers. The EU has long relied on China for technology, trade, and critical supply chains; on the United States for defense, security, financial systems, cloud computing, and AI infrastructure; and on Russia for energy, particularly natural gas. While many of these dependencies are purely material, one has also been value-based: the EU's reliance on a shared commitment to liberal democratic norms with the United States. An alignment that is increasingly fraying as U.S. foreign policy priorities shift. Additional dependencies include global semiconductor supply, rare earth minerals, digital platforms dominated by U.S. tech giants, and key financial instruments that tie Europe to the dollar system.

In this context, the EU must return to a self-reflective vision of itself, the "open European project," and take its own strategic autonomy seriously. Strategic autonomy should not mean inward-looking self-obsession, but rather the ability to act independently and reduce critical reliance on external actors, particularly China, Russia, and the US. Current U.S. policy documents confirm that these shifts are no longer hypothetical; they reflect the realignment of global interests. Everything currently unfolding in the world may help redirect Europe's course for the better. It is in this spirit that this paper seeks to initiate a scholarly discussion on the significance of the European Political Community, drawing specifically on perspectives from authors based in Central and Southeast Europe.

On their own, EU member states cannot navigate these mounting geopolitical pressures. Only through a coordinated European strategy, strengthening defense, securing critical technologies, diversifying energy and supply chains, and reaffirming shared values through cultural sensitivity and understanding, can the EU preserve its sovereignty, resilience, and capacity to act as a meaningful global actor.

Keywords

political community, strategic autonomy, cultural values, digital sovereignty, enlargement policy, European Union

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Analytical Point of Departure...

1. Europe After Predictability: Managing a Volatile Transatlantic Order After Trump II Presidency

Europe stands at a historical crossroads. The post-Cold War promise of integration has collided with geopolitical rupture, democratic erosion, and strategic dependency, now shaken by the US foreign and defense policy on retreat.

Trump's second mandate has positioned US-EU relations in uncharted territory, turning a pillar of post-war order into a theater of volatility defined by realpolitik rather than partnership.¹ The relationship between the EU and the US has never been solely idealistic or purely based on power politics. Instead, it is a blend of shared values and strategic interests. However, during critical junctures such as the Cold War, the Iraq War, and shifting responses to Russia and China, realpolitik often took precedence, even as rhetoric about shared values persisted. With the rise of a Trump-style transactional approach to foreign policy, this tension is becoming more obvious. The transatlantic relationship now shows more inconsistencies and disruptions. It reflects a stronger focus on power politics, where cooperation still exists but is increasingly shaped by national interests, leverage, and negotiated agreements, rather than an assumed alignment of strategies. Was the EU prepared or anticipating these changes? Maybe the EU did anticipate some shifts, given the strategic autonomy discourse, NATO burden-sharing debates, and the digital sovereignty agenda, but many EU strategies still rely on assumptions about the long-term reliability of the US in security and global governance. The speed and intensity of recent geopolitical and transactional shifts (trade, defense burden-sharing, strategic competition) have outpaced adaptation in several areas, as EU internal divisions also slow reaction and strategic responses. The EU has repeatedly found itself confronted with *faits accomplis* during Donald Trump's second term, including unexpected and disruptive initiatives such as renewed U.S. interest in Greenland, the 2025 Turnberry trade agreement, the Iran war, the proposed "Board of Peace" for Gaza, and U.S.-Russia negotiations over Ukraine that largely bypass European input. Taken together, these episodes suggest that the EU's core challenge is not only strategic but also psychological and political: it has not fully internalized that the transatlantic relationship is undergoing a structural transformation.

Rather than preparing for either an idealized best-case scenario or a worst-case rupture, the EU needs to plan for the most realistic trajectory, one defined by conditional cooperation, intermittent confrontation, and declining predictability in U.S. leadership. In this context, it's best to keep expectations vis-à-vis the United States low and focus on what Europe can do for itself.² Focus on what it can control: strengthening its own capabilities, reducing strategic dependencies, and building credible autonomy in defense and foreign policy. Benner argues that investing in domestic strength would require Europe to adopt a more realistic strategy for managing its dependence on the United States in areas such as AI and the implementation of the Draghi report, while also seriously addressing reliance on China for critical raw materials and the broader impact of Chinese trade competition on key industries.³

2. The Rise of China: Systemic Rivalry and the End of Strategic Certainty

The rise of China marks one of the most significant changes in Europe's external landscape. It fundamentally alters views on global order, economic ties, and the unity of the so-called "West." This situation not only challenges Europe's external standing but also casts doubt on the West's shared interests and values in these unpredictable times. In reality, China's growth reveals differing priorities across the Atlantic. The United States is becoming more focused on strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific, while Europe is still trying to balance economic interdependence, regulatory goals, and geopolitical caution.

Systemically, China is both an economic partner and a strategic competitor, though the latter is becoming more prominent.

¹ Houda Barroug, "Trump 2.0, NATO, and EU Autonomy: Reconfiguration of Transatlantic Relations," Commentary & Analysis, May 18, 2026. <https://www.grc.net/single-commentary/383>

² Kristi Raik, "Taking the Pulse: Is it Worth it for Europeans to Placate Trump?" in Strategic Europe, Carnegie Europe, May 7, 2026, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2026/05/taking-the-pulse-is-it-worth-it-for-europeans-to-placate-trump>

³ Thorsten, Benner, "Taking the Pulse: Is it Worth it for Europeans to Placate Trump?" in Strategic Europe, Carnegie Europe, May 7, 2026, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/europe/strategic-europe/2026/05/taking-the-pulse-is-it-worth-it-for-europeans-to-placate-trump>

Systemic rivalry is reflected not only through market and technology competition; it also poses a challenge to liberal-democratic governance. This challenge is particularly evident in China's support for development models that emphasize stability, sovereignty, and state control over political diversity and open markets. Toro Hardy argues that China seeks to replace the post-war liberal international order with a system more aligned with its own authoritarian model. While the West and its allies have traditionally defended that order, this position is weakening as internal divisions resurface and as U.S. politics under Donald Trump show increasing ambivalence toward liberal international norms, thereby strengthening China's strategic confidence.⁴

This rivalry is most evident in technological governance and industrial policy. In AI, China's government-led innovation system is moving forward quickly. This progress comes from a coordinated industrial strategy, broad access to data, and use in areas like surveillance, logistics, and defense. This situation not only increases the technological divide but also highlights differences in governance. Global standards on AI ethics and regulation could split along geopolitical lines. As major powers recognize that early rule-setting can determine global market and governance outcomes, China is developing its own model of AI governance in parallel with its strategic rivalry with the United States over leadership in the sector.⁵ Europe's goal of becoming a "regulatory superpower" is hampered by limited technological capacity and ongoing reliance on both U.S. and Chinese digital infrastructure.

Additionally, China's move toward AI regulation reflects a broader phase of global competition that extends beyond technological capability to encompass the power to shape future regulatory standards. As major powers recognize that early rule-setting can determine global market and governance outcomes, China is developing its own model of AI governance in parallel with its strategic rivalry with the United States over leadership in the sector.

Recently, China has advanced a regulatory strategy amid intensifying U.S.–China competition in AI across models, semiconductors, computing infrastructure, and regulatory frameworks. While the United States tightens export controls on advanced technologies, Beijing is simultaneously fostering domestic AI development while maintaining strong state oversight over data, content, and intelligent systems.⁶

China is expanding its global influence with the Belt and Road Initiative. It is financing infrastructure like ports, railways, digital networks, and energy projects across the Global South, including Europe's neighborhood. The EU has increasingly begun to filter and regulate Chinese investments in a pragmatic, defensive way, even as Chinese FDI in Europe reached a seven-year high in 2025, driven by a surge in M&A activity and greenfield investments, especially in the automotive (EV), energy, and tech sectors.⁷ This involvement affects governance decisions, creates debt dependencies, and influences political alignment in the countries receiving aid. It serves as a means of strategic influence rather than just a business opportunity. In Europe's neighborhood, especially in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, China is raising its profile through investment, media outreach, and political partnerships. While EU and U.S. influence still outweighs it, this growing presence adds competitive pressure in regions that have followed EU norms or are in the process of implementing them. It also challenges the EU's credibility on issues of enlargement and conditionality.

3. Europe at the Breaking Point: An Interregnum Toward What Future?

Building on the systemic pressures generated by strained Euroatlantic relations, China's rise, and the broader fragmentation of the global order, the European Union now finds itself in an interregnum defined not only by external rivalry but also by an unresolved internal question of political coherence and strategic purpose.

The European Union now faces a binary choice: either to exit the interregnum by consciously renewing its political, social, and economic foundations to secure strategic autonomy and drive the digital revolution, or to drift further into fragmentation, masked by institutional activity. Following the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union, European integration expanded

4 Alfredo Toro Hardy, "China and the West: A Civilizational Contest," *Global Policy*, September 1, 2025. <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/01/09/2025/china-and-west-civilizational-contest>

5 "China moves toward comprehensive AI regulation law to expand sector control." *Jawlah*. Accessed May 21, 2026. <https://jawlah.co/en/56462>

6 "China moves toward comprehensive AI regulation law to expand sector control." *Jawlah*. Accessed May 21, 2026. <https://jawlah.co/en/56462>

7 Xiaofei, Xu, "Chinese Investment in Europe Surges to Seven-Year High Despite Rising Trade Tensions," *South China Morning Post*, May 20, 2026, <https://www.scmp.com/economy/china-economy/article/3354235/chinese-investment-europe-surges-7-year-high-despite-rising-trade-tensions>

geographically but failed to consolidate politically and culturally. Krastev and Holmes (2019), in their book "The Light That Failed: A Reckoning,"⁸ demonstrate how imitation of Western liberal norms never fully translated into cultural or political consolidation, not only within the EU but also among aspiring states. These authors absolutely recognize and advocate for the universalist nature of liberal democracy, calling it "the most effective human rights organization in the world." Nevertheless, the paradox lies in the instruments used to promote a liberal model through a top-down dictate that ultimately fails to engage the social elements, thereby undermining the very understanding, bonds, and expectations it aims to create. While the Single Market and eastern enlargement strengthened Europe economically, identity formation, democratic deepening, and strategic autonomy remained incomplete. It was somehow unable to fully align power, participation, identity, and responsibility within a single, commonly understood political project. That has happened because citizens have experienced the EU more as a regulatory authority than as their political community. Drawing on Ralf Dahrendorf's long-standing warning, this argument holds that abstract and technocratic projects such as the single market are incapable of generating genuine public attachment. A critical examination of the sources of failure may therefore open the way for new approaches, a clearer sense of purpose, and a renewed design for the European project. Although such renewal cannot be guaranteed, the failure to attempt change would foreclose progress altogether, as European integration cannot persist or advance along its existing trajectory.⁹

Since the war in Ukraine began, the concept of political community has gained considerable attention, and the EU has begun to materialize it beyond its traditionally legalistic and market-based foundations through several core dimensions: shared threat perception, collective responsibility, inclusive dialogue, and solidaristic action.

The concept of political community plays a crucial role in understanding normative pluralism. A political community, however, is inconceivable without political sentiments and a strong sense of belonging. Culture, in this regard, can serve as a tissue that connects the sense of belonging in the EU, not by replacing national identities, but by making a shared political and social space emotionally and symbolically meaningful. While the term "political community" has evolved over time, "European political community" remains underdefined and poorly materialized in the mainstream of political science literature. The term "political community" denotes the unit of any meaningful political activity and all discursive contexts in which the notion is used, within which authority, legitimacy, and collective purpose are negotiated. In the European context, marked by deep normative and cultural diversity and asymmetrical integration, political communities do not emerge automatically through institutions alone. This renders it imperative to complement hard-power initiatives such as strategic autonomy or debates on a European Army with soft-power aspirations that foster cultural cohesion, societal ownership, and democratic legitimacy.

The EU today faces a world that is changing dramatically. "Indeed, the forces that were supposed to bring the world together, trade, energy, technology, and information, are now pulling it apart."¹⁰ We are not merely witnessing geopolitical competition, but a profound erosion of international law and global norms. The EU faces a major geopolitical disruption and risks falling behind due to the structural dependencies it has developed with major global powers. It has long relied on China for technology, trade, and critical supply chains; on the United States for defense, security, financial systems, cloud computing, and AI infrastructure; and on Russia for energy, particularly natural gas. The EU has relied on the alignment of liberal democratic norms with the United States, an alignment that is increasingly fraying as U.S. foreign policy priorities shift. The transatlantic community, long linked by the shared security of Europe and the United States, is increasingly under strain. Additional dependencies include global semiconductor supply, rare earth minerals, digital platforms dominated by U.S. tech giants, and key financial instruments that tie Europe to the dollar system.

In this context, the EU must return to a self-reflective vision of itself, the 'open European project', and take its own strategic autonomy seriously. Strategic autonomy should not mean inward-looking self-obsession, but rather the ability to act independently and reduce critical reliance on external actors, particularly the U.S., China, and Russia. The Current U.S. policy document confirms that these shifts are no longer hypothetical; they reflect the US realignment of global interests. On their own, EU member states cannot navigate these mounting geopolitical pressures. Additionally, "the Strategy denounces what it

8 Ivan, Krastev, and Holmes Stephen. *The Light That Failed: Why the West Is Losing the Fight for Democracy*. New York: Pegasus Books, 2019.

9 Ferenc Mislivetz, "1989–2019: Thirty Years After: Re-Enchanting Europe?" *Journal of Global Policy and Governance* 9, no. 1 (April 22, 2020): 19–35, <https://doi.org/10.14666/2194-7759-9-1-002>

10 Stubb, Alexander. "The West's Last Chance: How to Build a New Global Order Before It's Too Late." *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2026 (published December 2, 2025). <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/wests-last-chance#>

interprets as a wider identity and democratic crisis in Europe.”¹¹ In this regard, the EU is challenged not only from within, but also from both the East and the West. It “faces intense pressure on its security posture, particularly regarding the future of Ukraine, along with challenges linked to energy dependence, industrial competitiveness, and the unresolved need for genuine strategic autonomy”,¹² as well as growing tensions in transatlantic digital governance. This latter point is essential because the digital dimension constitutes a critical aspect of EU-US relations, not because it signals conflict, but because it exposes a fundamental divergence in how political authority, markets, and rights are governed in the digital age. By adopting the Digital Markets Act, the AI Act, and the Data Act, the EU affirms collective authority, protects shared norms, and reinforces internal cohesion. These are precisely the signals needed for the EU to function as a true European political community. Regulatory and strategic measures give substance to European unity, ensuring that culture-based belonging moves beyond symbolism to real influence and agency. Only by coordinating defense, securing critical technologies, diversifying energy and supply chains, and reaffirming shared values can Europe transform these institutional and normative commitments into tangible sovereignty, resilience, and the capacity to act as a credible and independent global actor. In this regard, “deeper political and cultural integration is the most effective way to defend its values on the global stage. Europe must complete the project envisioned after the Second World War: a political union capable of acting, safeguarding its citizens, and guaranteeing democratic resilience.”¹³ A strong political union requires a strong political community grounded in shared narratives, symbols, memories, and practices. Culture has the potential to translate the EU from an abstract legal order into a socially and emotionally experienced space of governance. Without such grounding, efforts toward collective defense and digital power risk remaining technocratic projects rather than genuine expressions of a shared political will.

This discussion paper approaches culture as a mediating force that reconciles normative pluralism with political unity in the European Union. Rather than promoting homogeneity, cultural practices enable a political community grounded in mutual recognition, allowing diversity to coexist within a shared normative framework through engagement and participation. This function is particularly significant for a polity such as the EU, whose legitimacy, prospects for future enlargement, and ambitions for strategic autonomy in the fields of security, defense, and technology depend on the sustained acceptance of difference within a common horizon of values. This paper represents an initial effort to stimulate debate and further elaboration from the perspective of authors from Central and Southeastern Europe, contributing to ongoing reflections on the theoretical foundations and practical formation of a European political community, understood not only as an evolving political project but also as a shared normative and identitarian destination.

4. Beyond the “Political Community” Conceptual Evolution

4.1 Limits and Preconditions in the EU

The idea of a political community has undergone considerable change in its perception in political theory. The idea of “*koinonia politik*”¹⁴ in Aristotle includes not only individuals coming together in an association, but also their shared welfare (i.e., the ability to live a good life) and a shared moral goal with their members. The political community also reflects human experiences and moral values, and these experiences and values are part of the process by which individuals create it. With the rise of the modern nation-state, the meaning of political community shifted from focusing on the ethical unity of the members to focusing on the legitimacy of the political community, with the ideas that evolved the concept of the social contract¹⁵. Political communities were defined within the nation-state framework, and Weber’s definition of political community included the use of legitimate violence and belief in the state’s authority to better define it.¹⁶ Later, this concept became closely tied to the nation-state in the 19th and 20th centuries, with scholarship such as Anderson’s finding that political communities are created through a social construction

11 Young European Federalists – JEF Europe. “With the Publication of the New U.S. National Security Strategy, a Federal Europe Is a Matter of Necessity.” JEF Europe, December 17, 2025. <https://jef.eu/news/with-the-publication-of-the-new-u-s-national-security-strategy-a-federal-europe-is-a-matter-of-necessity/>

12 *ibid*

13 *ibid*

14 Aristotle. *Politics*. Translated by C. D. C. Reeve. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998. Originally written ca. 4th century BCE. <https://ia902300.us.archive.org/28/items/aristotle-entire-collected-writings/Aristotle/Politics%20-%20trans.%20Reeve%5D/Aristotle%20-%20Politics%20%28Hackett%2C%201998%29.pdf>

15 Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1997. *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*. Edited and translated by Victor Gourevitch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://assets.cambridge.org/97811071/50812/frontmatter/9781107150812_frontmatter.pdf

16 Weber, Max. 1978. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

process rather than through primordial ties.¹⁷ This understanding of political community was prominent during the rise of mass democracy.

In the late 1900s, the theoretical concept of politics underwent a dramatic transformation as increasing diversity in societal norms challenged traditional views of society as culturally/morally uniform. Rawls¹⁸ proposed that a political community can exist with respect to a number of ethical values held in common (a belief system shared by many people), while Habermas¹⁹ maintained that the basis for creating a political community is a common way of running a democratic government and administering the law. Each of these approaches changed the way political communities are viewed, from being primarily defined by culture/morals to being normatively pluralistic, through the use of procedures/ways of thinking or acting together, and adaptation to changing societal environments.

As a result of these developments, examining how political authority operates within a given nation-state or post-nation-state realities becomes essential to understanding the various ways in which political communities are created. Within the context of European integration, there has been an ongoing debate among scholars about whether the European Union can create a political community without a common demos (the majority of citizens who share a common cultural identity). According to Habermas, the EU presents itself as an important contribution to the constitutionalization of a world society²⁰ and could provide a model of post-national political community through law-based consensus and deliberative process. However, as a result of the crisis, lack of collective vision, the continuous debates between federalists and unionists, various leaderships attached to state sovereignty, either to keep traditionalism or for political justifications, and lack of agreement on economic and normative values, there's no consensus about how or what the future of the EU will be or what kind of political community it may evolve into. For Habermas, state sovereignty refers to the state's freedom of action (Willkür) in the international sphere—its ability to act, decide, and protect itself and its citizens. By contrast, popular sovereignty refers to citizens' autonomy as co-authors of the laws they live under, exercised through democratic procedures.²¹ This awareness of this distinction is not yet achieved at the EU level. These are conceptually and functionally distinct: the state acts, but the people legislate. Regarding the lack of EU societal solidarity, Berting proceeded in his book about "the formulation of collective representation" in the EU, a presentation that has to take into consideration "the coming society as a corporate multi-cultural (multi ethnic, multi-religious) one." Additionally, "the rise of a politically responsible European citizen"²² is not yet there. This is imperative for a stronger sense of belonging, a thicker European identity, a growing cultural understanding, and political engagement, thereby making the EU political community a living cosmos of participation and consultation that can advance democracy and the EU's global stance.

Balibar portrays the European political community as inherently unfinished and contested (We, the People of Europe?).²³ The possibility of an exclusive "Fortress Europe" based on a European version of apartheid does not negate the positive role that European integration has played in promoting social cohesion, tolerance, and democracy; yet it is highly indicative of the internal contradictions of the European citizenship project.

5. Reimagining Europe's Soul

Despite the great efforts and countless conferences through Jacques Delors's initiative, Europe couldn't find its soul in the very construct of integration. Its model as a 'peace process' and a 'soft power' and the identification with it did not help in solving the epistemological crisis: the EU could not and still cannot define itself, its role, and responsibility in geopolitical and cohesive terms. The search for a new "meaning" for Europe was a moral and spiritual challenge. Today, the "heart and a soul" appeal still stands.²⁴

17 Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso. https://nationalismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Imagined-Communities-Reflections-on-the-Origin-and-Spread-of-Nationalism-by-Benedict-Anderson-z-lib.org_.pdf

18 Rawls, John. 1993. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

19 Habermas, Jürgen. *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*. Translated by Max Pensky. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001.

20 Erik O. Eriksen, "Habermas on the Legitimacy of the EU," ARENA Centre for European Studies (blog), University of Oslo, accessed January 8, 2026, <https://www.sv.uio.no/arena/english/people/aca/erikoer/blog/habermas-crisis-europe.html>

21 *ibid*

22 Jan Berting, *Europe: A Heritage, a Challenge, a Promise* (Delft: Eburon Uitgeverij B.V., 2006), ISBN 9059721209/9789059721203.

23 Ioannis Grigoriadis, "Étienne Balibar, We, the People of Europe: Reflections on Transnational Citizenship (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004)," *Journal of International Affairs* 57 (2004): 190–192.

24 Laurens Hogebrink, ed., *Europe's Heart and Soul: Jacques Delors' Appeal to the Churches* (Globethics.net & Conference of European Churches, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.58863/20.500.12424/166535>

As Hogebrink notes, a "sense of belonging" and dialogue with each other²⁵ have long been regarded as essential to the EU's political development, but acquired renewed urgency following Russia's war against Ukraine and the subsequent political community initiative. As discussed in the literature review, the notion of political community presupposes a demos' that recognizes itself as collectively bound by shared governance and perceives political authority as legitimate. At the same time, this concept has been repeatedly reconceptualized and adapted to reflect the historical evolution of modern states, confederations, and federations. The EU has constructed sophisticated governance structures and legal orders, yet it has not produced a corresponding European demos. Political participation remains primarily national or regional; elections, public debate, and accountability mechanisms are filtered through the logics of member states. As a result, citizens experience the EU more as a regulatory authority and a giant market than as their political community.

Additionally, a political community is presumed to integrate insiders and outsiders (aspiring members) through credible membership pathways. The EU's prolonged enlargement process has produced a category of "permanent candidates," fostering a sense of exclusion, second-level belonging, and disillusionment. In some parts of Europe, including central and Southeast Europe, these feelings have been reinforced by "populists" who "try to step up disillusionment and shift the blame to the EU, reinforcing Euroscepticism."²⁶ These actors often tap into existing grievances and amplify perceptions of marginalization, attributing domestic shortcomings to the EU and thereby reinforcing Eurosceptic attitudes, even though many of the tensions in EU-member and EU-candidate relationships also stem from domestic political dynamics. On the other hand, as Ilazi and Loshaj note, Brussels often treats enlargement as a binary choice between accession and waiting, but the real problem lies in the gap between the two: the lack of meaningful operational integration of the Western Balkans.²⁷

Such relations and circumstances undermine the EU's claim to represent a unified political space grounded in shared rights, obligations, and shared "social imaginaries."²⁸ about the future. The tension between the EU's declared commitment to shared values as a civilian power and its sudden assumption of great-power responsibilities has been intensified by recent global and regional shocks, including the ongoing war in Ukraine and the political fallout of repeated migration crises. Now, European democracies are facing a pincer attack: externally taking fire from the US administration and Silicon Valley companies, internally from the European far right, with an overlay of crippling dependency on the US for security.²⁹

The EU finds itself amid divided societies, "marked by internal polarization and democratic backsliding,"³⁰ weakening democracies inside and in their peripheries, and strong rhetoric without decisive decision-making, a lack of a clear geopolitical strategy, and a lack of autonomy on the global stage. All these elements are unsustainable characteristics for a global player in light of international competition and a self-made multipolar order.

The European Union has to find its way out of the labyrinth of global and regional turmoils, or it will lose the chance to realize its cherished values, especially at the societal level in shaping a new world order.

6. The Enlargement Paradox: Stability Without Democracy

6.1 The EU Enlargement Paradox-- Serbia as a Critical Case

Over the past decade, the European Union's enlargement policy has drifted away from its original transformative logic, considering the reform effects in the 1990s–2000s, especially in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). What was once conceived as a process aimed at embedding democratic governance, rule of law, and societal pluralism has been gradually reoriented toward

25 Laurens Hogebrink, ed., *Europe's Heart and Soul: Jacques Delors' Appeal to the Churches* (Globethics.net & Conference of European Churches, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.58863/20.500.12424/166535>

26 Zsuzsanna Végh, "From Partners to Disruptors: Central Europe's Populists Try to Break the EU While Living Off It." *Balkan Insight*, February 1, 2026. <https://balkaninsight.com/2026/02/01/from-partners-to-disruptors-central-europes-populists-try-to-break-the-eu-while-living-off-it/>

27 Ramadan, Ilazi, and Jeta Loshaj. 2026. "EU's Enlargement to the Western Balkans No Longer Just About Membership: The Case for Operational Integration." *European Western Balkans*, January 13. <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2026/01/13/eus-enlargement-to-the-western-balkans-no-longer-just-about-membership-the-case-for-operational-integration/>

28 Charles, Taylor. (2004). *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

29 Armida van Rij, "Europe Faces a Pincer Attack from White House Ideologues Backed by Silicon Valley and Its Far-Right Proxies," *The Guardian*, January 8, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2026/jan/08/europe-white-house-ideologues-silicon-valley-far-right-proxies-trump-vance>

30 Javier, Rendón and Klara Novák. 2026. "From Partners to Disruptors: Central Europe's Populists Try to Break the EU While Living Off It." *Balkan Insight*, February 1. <https://balkaninsight.com/2026/02/01/from-partners-to-disruptors-central-europes-populists-try-to-break-the-eu-while-living-off-it/>

managing geopolitical uncertainty. "The traditional model where progress is rewarded with incremental negotiation chapters has often produced reform fatigue and political stagnation."³¹ Under conditions of regional instability, great-power competition, and internal EU fatigue, enlargement has become an "unintentional" tool contributing to "stabilitocracy formation"³² rather than fostering long-term democratic consolidation. "The EU's overly technical approach to enlargement fails to foster deep political and societal transformation."³³ This dynamic has generated a potential tension: in prioritizing stability and gradual compliance with accession criteria, the EU may at times appear to accommodate democratic backsliding in candidate states, raising concerns about the long-term sustainability of democratic standards. At the same time, critics argue that the EU enlargement policy has not always fully incorporated lessons from major political events and social mobilizations that have historically reaffirmed the European peace project and the broader idea of Europe.

The aspirations and struggles of post-communist societies have often been overlooked by local, national, and European institutions, despite their central role in shaping European democracy and solidarity. The uprisings in East Berlin (1953), Hungary (1956), and Prague (1968), as well as movements like Charta '77 and Polish Solidarność (Poland's Solidarity Movement (1980-1989)), were grounded in European values, the rule of law, human rights, and social solidarity—and reflected a commitment to Europe as an idea. Yet these efforts are largely absent from the narrative of European identity, an example of what has been called "institutionalized European amnesia."³⁴ This marginalization continues today, as seen in the EU's muted response to protests in Serbia, suggesting that the continent still struggles to fully recognize and support the democratic aspirations of all its societies. Serbia illustrates this paradox with particular clarity. Formally positioned as a frontrunner 3 years ago, in the accession process, the country has simultaneously experienced a steady consolidation of authoritarian governance. Political power has been centralized through institutional capture, the erosion of judicial independence, and the domination of public discourse by government-aligned media. Elections continue to take place, but they function increasingly as instruments of legitimation rather than mechanisms of accountability. Among the most significant problems during elections are vote-buying, the use of parallel voter lists to track voters, intimidation of voters and observers, the abuse of public resources, and an overall uneven playing field favoring the SNS-led government.³⁵ Democratic procedures are maintained in form, while their substantive content is hollowed out, a pattern that allows Serbia to remain formally aligned with the EU accession framework while diverging from its democratic standards in practice.

Yet the Serbian case cannot be reduced to authoritarian entrenchment alone. In parallel with institutional degradation, society has demonstrated an extraordinary capacity for civic mobilization. Large-scale protests, initially triggered by infrastructure failures and later expanded to include environmental, anti-corruption, and social justice demands, have brought together students, farmers, workers, and urban professionals across regional and social divides. It has grown into one of the largest and most coordinated civic movements in the country's history, larger even than the 2000 Bulldozer Revolution that overthrew Slobodan Milošević. Today's movement challenges not only the government but the entire system.³⁶ These mobilizations reveal a profound societal commitment to democratic norms and public accountability, directly contradicting narratives that portray Serbia as politically apathetic or structurally resistant to democratic change.

The EU's response to these developments has been notably restrained. Despite credible evidence of state violence, repression, and democratic backsliding, European reactions have been mainly confined to diplomatic expressions of concern. This passivity reflects more than procedural caution; it signals a deeper recalibration of priorities. Serbia's geopolitical positioning in the Western Balkans, its role in regional security dynamics, and its growing importance in Europe's resource strategy, particularly

31 Spyraou, Vera. "EU Enlargement: A Strategic Priority in Need of Democratic Reform." LSE European Politics and Policy (EUROPP) Blog, March 4, 2026 <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2026/03/04/eu-enlargement-strategic-priority-democratic-reform/#:~:text=Ultimately%2C%20what%20the%20EU%20needs,fueling%20scepticism%20and%20institutional%20paralysis>.

32 Wouter Zweers and Giulia Cretti, "The EU as a Promoter of 'Stabilitocracy' in the Western Balkans?" Clingendael Institute, February 2022, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/eu-promoter-stabilitocracy-western-balkans>

33 ibid

34 Ferenc Miszlivetz, "1989-2019: Thirty Years After: Re-Enchanting Europe?" *Journal of Global Policy and Governance* 9, no. 1 (April 22, 2020): 19-35, <https://doi.org/10.14666/2194-7759-9-1-002>

35 Freedom House. *Nations in Transit 2024: Serbia*. Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2024. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/nations-transit/2024>

36 Breza Race Maksimovic and Srdja Popovic, "How Serbian Students Created the Largest Protest Movement in Decades," *Journal of Democracy* (online), August 2025, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/how-serbian-students-created-the-largest-protest-movement-in-decades/>

regarding lithium extraction for the green transition, have increasingly shaped its relationship with the EU. The Union's explicit support for Serbia's lithium-mining projects, despite widespread public opposition and significant environmental risks, exemplifies how economic and strategic considerations have come to override democratic conditionality. Weizman and Ahmatović note that many Serbs see the EU's backing of Rio Tinto as prioritizing profit over public input and environmental protection, and Serbia's zigzag foreign policy between major powers has created tensions both domestically and externally.³⁷

This approach carries high normative and strategic costs. By prioritizing regime stability over democratic accountability, the EU weakens its credibility as a normative power and erodes the transformative appeal of enlargement. Authoritarian practices are tacitly normalized, while civic actors—the very constituencies that embody European values—are marginalized. The result is a form of "disarmed democracy," in which citizens retain formal rights but lack effective institutional channels through which political participation can translate into meaningful change. In this context, the promise of EU membership loses its mobilizing force, and Europeanization comes to be associated not with democratic empowerment but with prolonged stagnation. At the same time, the convergence of student movements, environmental activism, and anti-corruption protests in Serbia points toward an alternative trajectory. These civic alliances have generated a new political energy that transcends traditional ideological, ethnic, and regional divides. Through inclusive mobilization and innovative forms of grassroots diplomacy, including transnational protest actions and direct appeals to European institutions, these actors articulate a vision of European integration grounded in democratic integrity, ecological responsibility, and social justice, giving societal meaning to the very EU foundational values.

A sustainable resolution of the enlargement paradox requires a fundamental redefinition of stability. Stability cannot be equated with the predictability of governing elites or the containment of dissent; it must be understood as democratic resilience rooted in accountable institutions and empowered societies. This demands a recalibration of EU enlargement policy, one that restores the credibility of conditionality, aligns resource and economic strategies with environmental and social standards, and engages directly with civic actors rather than exclusively with incumbent regimes. Without such a shift, enlargement risks becoming a hollow process that preserves the appearance of European integration while hollowing out its democratic substance.

7. The European Political Community: From Symbolism to Realization

7.1 A New Platform for Pan-European Cooperation

The European Political Community (EPC) is a novel platform designed to foster "strategic intimacy"³⁸ and bridge EU and non-EU countries through dialogue, coordination, and informal cooperation on issues of strategic importance. Proposed by French President Emmanuel Macron and supported by former European Council President Charles Michel, the EPC convenes EU member states and aspiring partners to discuss security, energy, economic competitiveness, youth empowerment, and governance. Since its launch in October 2022 in the Czech Republic, the EPC has held summits in Moldova, Spain, the UK, Hungary, Albania, and, most recently, in Denmark in October 2025, with participation from 20 non-EU countries alongside the 27 EU members. The next, 8th Summit of the EPC will be held in Armenia.

At its core, the EPC offers a horizontal forum for dialogue, avoiding the procedural rigidity of formal EU institutions. Its flexibility allows leaders to engage directly, explore shared challenges, and build political trust without being constrained by treaty obligations. It remains a pertinent format for fostering political dialogue, cooperation, and strategic convergence among

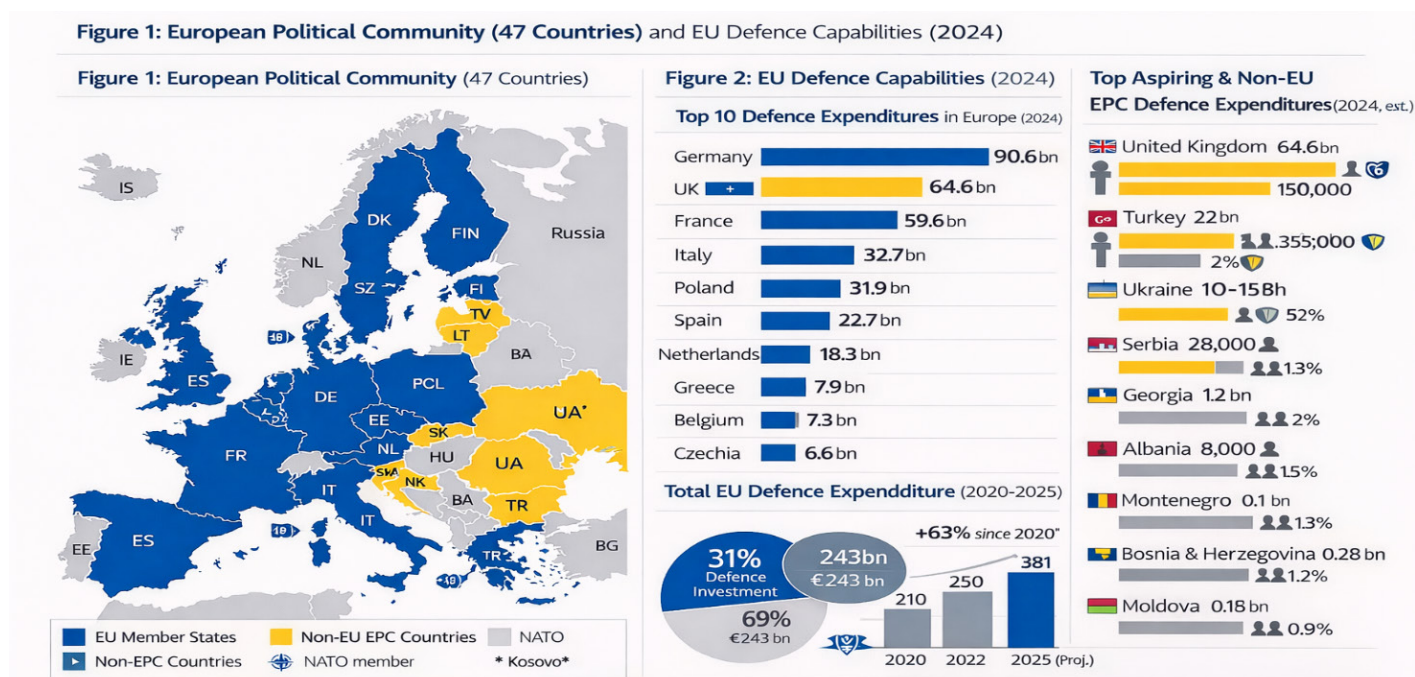
³⁷ Jakob Weizman and Šejla Ahmatović, "Is Serbia Turning into an EU Mining Colony?," *Politico*, April 18, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/serbia-lithium-reserve-eu-mining-colony-electric-vehicles/>

³⁸ Dario D'Urso, Lada Vetrini, and Sabina De Silva, *The European Political Community: Informality as a Key to Success* (policy brief, Foundation for European Progressive Studies, February 29, 2024), <https://www.epc.eu/publication/without-reform-the-european-political-community-risks-becoming-irrelevant/>

countries across the entire European continent.³⁹ For non-EU countries, it provides visibility into and access to European decision-making that was previously limited to accession talks. For the EU, it projects influence, fosters consensus on geopolitical and economic issues, and reinforces European cohesion and identity.

If the EU political community materializes in more concrete terms, it would be able to leverage collective security through a combination of security, law enforcement, crisis response, and other benefits for both its citizens and those of the will-be members of this political structure. This would not only increase the EU's geopolitical influence but also deepen the legitimacy of the European project by transforming this fragmented community into an operational capacity.

These strengths are reflected in the capabilities of both EU members and aspiring EPC countries, as well as in the geographic and defense distribution of the political community.



This figure illustrates the EPC countries, EU defense spending, and the defense capacities of non-EU participants.⁴⁰

Bechev notes that EU defense spending jumped 63 % from 2020 to 2025, with Germany spending €86.5 billion (2.4 % of GDP). France and the UK may struggle to hit NATO's 3.5 % target, but as nuclear powers with advanced militaries, they remain strong. With Ukraine's combat experience and Poland's 4.7% of GDP in defense spending, Europe is well-positioned to defend itself against Russia.⁴¹ It shows an ability to project power globally in the medium- and long-term.

Despite its strengths jointly, the EPC risks becoming symbolic if it does not set clear objectives, establish structured follow-

³⁹ Eric Maurice and Tabea Schaumann, "Without Reform, the European Political Community Risks Becoming Irrelevant," European Policy Centre, May 15, 2025, <https://www.epc.eu/publication/without-reform-the-european-political-community-risks-becoming-irrelevant/>

⁴⁰ Data derived from the European Council, European Political Community background note; European Defence Agency, Defence Data 2024; NATO, Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries; SIPRI Military Expenditure Database. Defence expenditure figures are rounded estimates based on the latest publicly available data (2023-2024) and are intended for comparative and illustrative purposes.

⁴¹ Dimitar Bechev, "Europe: a Great Power in the Making," Engelsberg Ideas, February 13, 2026, <https://engelsbergideas.com/essays/europe-a-great-power-in-the-making/>

up, and build strong links to formal EU policy. Ceremonial gestures, such as AI-generated videos of leaders as children at the Tirana summit or the symbolic signing of a unifying star, enhance visibility and emphasize shared European values but do not automatically produce policy outcomes and operational benefits. Without mechanisms to translate dialogue into concrete initiatives, the EPC could be perceived as a series of meetings lacking tangible impact, especially for EU-aspiring countries seeking meaningful integration.

Juraj Majcin emphasizes that symbolism continues to carry political weight, particularly as recent drone security incidents expose Europe's strategic vulnerability. These developments underscore that defense largely remains outside the EU's core competences, with the Commission's role confined to defense-industrial coordination and financing, while the effective division of labor between NATO, the EU, and member states remains the central test.⁴²

Structured follow-up is particularly important in the Western Balkans, where delayed EU accession has eroded the credibility of membership promises. Summits in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia offer opportunities for domestic stakeholders to demonstrate reform and build confidence in European integration. Yet dialogue alone is insufficient unless connected to EU instruments such as funding, technical assistance, trade agreements, or governance support. Ensuring measurable outcomes in areas such as energy transition, innovation, youth mobility, and democratic accountability is essential to maintain relevance. The EPC also serves as a strategic platform for addressing broader European challenges. Security and defense, particularly in light of Russia's aggression in Ukraine, have emerged as central themes, with discussions including coordination, collective resilience, and the role of like-minded partners such as Türkiye. Energy security, renewable transitions, economic competitiveness, trade, and artificial intelligence highlight the EPC's potential to turn these discussions into actionable strategic priorities that strengthen Europe's autonomy and global influence.

Beyond policy, the EPC can strengthen civic and cultural cohesion. Summits emphasize youth engagement, education, and mobility, contributing to the EU's human capital and social cohesion. Cross-border cultural and educational initiatives reinforce a shared European identity and mitigate the distance often felt by non-EU countries. In this way, the EPC supports legitimacy for European integration and provides partner societies with a stake in shaping Europe's future. As emerged from the meetings in the Czech Republic, Moldova, and Spain, the EPC is gradually emerging as a G7/G20 kind of format, a 'European diplomatic Davos' mainly focused on 'political speed-dating' rather than procedures, policy, and declarations. However, the EPC must address a structural challenge: without a clear purpose and integration into EU policymaking, it risks repeating the pattern of past informal platforms, rich in symbolism but limited in impact. Strengthening coordination teams, linking discussions to EU policy instruments, and providing pathways for non-EU countries to contribute to European policy design are crucial. Only by transforming symbolic dialogue into outcome-oriented engagement can the EPC evolve into a direction-setting mechanism that supports EU strategic autonomy and meaningful pan-European integration.

8. Reframing European Unity: Culture as Strategic Infrastructure

The European Political Community's potential to move from symbolism to direction highlights a broader imperative: Europe's cohesion and resilience cannot rely solely on dialogue and institutional design, or on the concentration of hard power. The effectiveness of any pan-European initiative ultimately depends on the societal foundations that underpin it, shared values, civic ownership, and a sense of collective destiny. Cultural cohesion emerges as a form of strategic infrastructure, essential for sustaining unity, enabling democratic resilience, promoting openness, and reinforcing Europe's capacity to act collectively in a turbulent geopolitical environment and in the face of many emerging risks. Without a strong cultural basis, formal structures risk functioning as isolated mechanisms, disconnected from the citizens they are meant to serve. In this regard, we are prone to see the concept and the embrace of the culture as a unifying element for EPC as "a dynamic one, open towards the future, always a culture in the making that will never be finished and that never can be based on a complete consensus of the Europeans."⁴³

Culture, understood strategically, is not simply symbolic; it constitutes a living framework for political and social integration. Just as physical infrastructure supports economic activity and legal frameworks enable governance, culture binds communities, shapes social norms, and provides the foundation for shared action. Through cultural networks, educational and cultural

⁴² Juraj Majcin, "European Leaders Meet at Copenhagen: What Does It Reveal about Europe's Security?" Anadolu Agency, October 3, 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/opinion/opinion-european-leaders-meet-at-copenhagen-what-does-it-reveal-about-europes-security/3706430>

⁴³ Jan Berting, *Europe: A Heritage, a Challenge, a Promise* (Delft: Eburon Uitgeverij B.V., 2006), ISBN 9059721209/9789059721203

The Cultural Compass is not a completely new initiative. It expands on earlier frameworks such as the 'Creative Europe (2014)' and the 'New European Agenda for Culture (2018).' The Culture Compass looks more like a roadmap, more strategic and ambitious, demonstrating that culture can be intentionally mobilized to reinforce democracy, facilitate regional cooperation, strengthen cross-border regional belonging, and cultivate an inclusive, participatory, and forward-looking European identity. It was adopted by the European Commission only in November 2025, so it is still in its very early stages of implementation.

The security dimension of cultural cohesion is equally critical. A Europe in which citizens feel a sense of ownership over shared values and political institutions is inherently more resilient to internal and external pressures. Social trust, civic literacy, and engagement reduce vulnerability to disinformation, political radicalization, and divisive foreign influence. Cultural initiatives, ranging from youth mobility and educational programs to cross-border arts and civic campaigns, play a central role in building this resilience, embedding democratic norms, and fostering a sense of shared responsibility across generations.

Moreover, culture serves as a platform for innovation, participation, mutual respect, and building bridges, which might foster societal renewal. By promoting scientific collaboration, creative industries, and civic engagement, cultural infrastructure strengthens human capital and empowers citizens to contribute actively to Europe's political, social, and economic life. This participatory dimension is crucial for linking high-level forums such as the EPC to broader society, ensuring that European integration is both inclusive and rooted in lived experience. Culture is not an ancillary aspect of European integration; it is a strategic infrastructure that sustains cohesion, democracy, and security. By treating culture as an operational, forward-looking tool that involves civil society, local communities, and cultural actors more directly, Europe can reinforce soft power, nurture societal ownership and a sense of belonging, and anchor institutions in the shared values and aspirations of its diverse populations. Only through integrating culture into effective policies and initiatives can the European project achieve both unity and resilience, enabling Europe to navigate complex challenges while remaining inclusive, innovative, and future-oriented.

European cultural and creative sectors need a true CULTURE AGORA – a pan-European forum that brings citizens into the conversation. With this compass, it is believed that the proposed EU-led structured dialogue with stakeholders will be genuine and meaningful, constituting a co-creation exercise. And it won't be merely a box-ticking exercise, but democracy in practice.⁴⁸

9. The Evolution of the European Army Debate

9.1 Security, Defense, and the Cultural Preconditions of a European Army

Building on the argument that cultural cohesion constitutes strategic infrastructure, the discussion of European defense underscores a critical interdependence between soft and hard power. Just as shared culture, civic participation, and societal ownership create legitimacy for European integration, they also form the foundation for collective security. A European Army, or more broadly, coordinated European defense, cannot be effective without a clear purpose strongly supported by social and political cohesion; military capacity gains meaning and legitimacy only when citizens recognize that it safeguards their shared values and collective destiny, and when they see it as a guarantee for their common future.



Source: Niklas Helwig, ed., *Strategic Autonomy and the Transformation of the EU: New Agendas for Security, Diplomacy, Trade and Technology* (Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2021).

⁴⁸ European Cultural Foundation, "Culture Compass: How Culture Can Lead the Way," accessed December 30, 2025, <https://culturalfoundation.eu/stories/culture-compass-how-culture-can-lead-the-way/>

Niklas Helwig's edited volume⁴⁹ highlights that the EU's pursuit of strategic autonomy encompasses multiple dimensions: protection, provision, and projection. While autonomy through protection and provision focuses on reducing dependencies and reinforcing the EU's internal economic and political capacities, autonomy through projection is particularly relevant to the study of the European political community and identity. This dimension emphasizes the EU's ability to shape the external political and security environment in ways that reflect the EU's "res publica," interests, values, and vision of global order.

The European Army debate reflects long-standing tensions between sovereignty and integration. From the post-World War II vision of Jean Monnet and Dwight D. Eisenhower's support for a European Defense Community to the contemporary proposals of Emmanuel Macron, the idea has consistently navigated between national prerogatives and supranational ambitions. Throughout the Cold War, NATO's primacy and fears of relinquishing state control limited integration, while leaders such as Kohl and Mitterrand promoted incremental cooperation through entities like the Western European Union. Today, renewed pressures, Russian aggression, hybrid warfare, terrorism, and shifting U.S. engagement have revitalized these debates, prompting initiatives such as PESCO and the European Defense Fund that emphasize interoperability, joint projects, and harmonized procurement within NATO frameworks.

Macron's vision of strategic autonomy and a European Army capable of independent action highlights a new dimension: Europe as an actor capable of combining hard and soft power to defend its interests. Cleary's assessment complements this vision by highlighting the practical implications of such ambitions. He points to the Franco-British nuclear agreement as an illustration of the need for deeper European coordination in response to major security threats, arguing that addressing Russia's military expansion requires harmonized defense standards and joint production. Without a coherent common defense policy, Cleary warns, increased national spending risks inefficiency and undermines the credibility of a European defense strategy.⁵⁰ Coordination and capability development alone are insufficient; legitimacy and societal support are equally critical. In this sense, shared culture, civic engagement, and a shared European identity operate as preconditions for militarization. Populations that feel included and represented in the political project are more likely to support collective defense, volunteer for joint missions, and sustain long-term military commitments. Conversely, exclusion, distrust, or perceived democratic deficits risk undermining both operational capacity and political credibility.

The militarization of Europe is not just a technical endeavor but a political and societal project. Initiatives like PESCO and the EDF demonstrate the potential for functionalist, incremental integration, yet the realization of a credible European Army depends on reconciling divergent national approaches. Some leaders prioritize sovereignty, selectively engaging in joint initiatives, while others pursue ambitious integration, requiring consensus-based solutions and gradual alignment. According to Damien Mariette, strengthening Europe's defense capabilities can help build an integrated industrial ecosystem capable of responding swiftly to crises and providing sovereign solutions. Mariette emphasizes that this dual approach seeks to generate sustainable financial returns while simultaneously enhancing the continent's security and resilience. He further highlights that the success of this strategy relies on three critical levers: political commitment, private-sector investment, and citizen support, underlining that coordinated action across government, industry, and society is essential for a credible and effective European defense framework.⁵¹ Civil society, regional actors, and cultural networks must be employed to translate military coordination into legitimate, democratically anchored institutions.

Moreover, contemporary security challenges, hybrid threats, energy vulnerabilities, cyber warfare, and asymmetric conflict underscore that military preparedness alone cannot guarantee resilience. Soft power investments, such as civic education, youth mobility, and pan-European dialogue, reinforce societal cohesion, mitigate internal divisions, and provide a politically legitimate basis for defense. In this way, hard and soft power are mutually reinforcing: military capability is amplified and legitimized by a shared political culture, while societal resilience supports the credibility of collective action in defense of European values.

49 Niklas, Helwig, ed. *Strategic Autonomy and the Transformation of the EU: New Agendas for Security, Diplomacy, Trade and Technology*. Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2021. https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2021/04/April2021-67-FIIA-Final_Report-STRATEGIC-AUTONOMY-AND-TRANSFORMATION-OF-THE-EU.pdf

50 Sean, Cleary. (2025). *Navigating between Stasis and Chaos: Crafting a Course through Disruptive Storms*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/395183147_Navigating_between_Stasis_and_Chaos_Crafting_a_Course_through_Disruptive_Storms/citation/download

51 Damien Mariette, "European Strategic Autonomy: Urgency, Challenges and Opportunities," CPR (Centre for Policy and Research), accessed December 30, 2025, <https://cpram.com/fra/en/individual/publications/megatrends/european-strategic-autonomy-urgency-challenges-and-opportunities>

10. From Strategic Autonomy to Digital Sovereignty: Counterbalancing the Emerging Pax Silica

The debate on European strategic autonomy and the prospect of a European Army highlights a broader insight: sovereignty in the contemporary EU context can no longer be understood exclusively in military or territorial terms. While defense capabilities and security cooperation are indispensable, they are insufficient on their own to sustain a legitimate and cohesive political community. As argued above, any credible European defense project must rest on shared norms, democratic legitimacy, and societal trust. These same foundations now extend decisively into the digital domain, where power, security, and identity are increasingly negotiated.

In this sense, the EU's growing assertiveness in digital regulation represents a continuation, rather than a departure, of its strategic autonomy agenda. Just as military autonomy seeks to reduce dependency and enhance collective capacity in security matters, digital sovereignty aims to protect the political community from structural dependencies embedded in global technological ecosystems. As the US administration increasingly combines sovereignty-based rhetoric with support for far-right actors hostile to democratic norms, while simultaneously advancing tech deregulation, Europe finds itself with limited instruments to confront this multidimensional challenge.⁵² Efforts to undermine the EU are intended to weaken its resolve to regulate the activities of US technology giants.

The rise of what has been described as a Pax Silica, a global order shaped by a small number of predominantly US-based technology corporations, poses not only economic challenges but also profound political ones. Control over data, platforms, and algorithms increasingly translates into influence over public discourse, social behaviour, and democratic processes. This has contributed to a widening transatlantic divergence between the EU's regulatory model and the United States' traditionally deregulatory, market-driven approach. While the US has prioritized speed of innovation and corporate autonomy, the EU has advanced a rule-based framework grounded in fundamental rights and public accountability. Notwithstanding, critics argue that Europe's strong regulatory approach, while normatively laudable, risks reinforcing industrial weaknesses and discouraging the investment and talent necessary to build a competitive AI ecosystem.⁵³ This divergence has taken on quasi-geopolitical dimensions, giving rise to what some describe as a new "digital Cold War". But instead of being about nuclear weapons or political ideology, this new Cold War will be about online speech and who gets to set the rules for the next generation of the internet,⁵⁴ power, and societal organization in the digital age. While restrictive AI rules may slow Europe's innovation and push talent abroad, loosening them could undermine the EU's credibility as a defender of digital rights. The path forward requires a bold strategy that balances human-centric, ethical AI with competitive innovation.⁵⁵

Additionally, "with artificial intelligence set to become critical across a growing number of sectors, EU governments are coming under increasing pressure to assert more control over the technologies that will underpin everything from industry to public services."⁵⁶

The Digital Markets Act (DMA) occupies a central role in this landscape. By imposing *ex ante* obligations on dominant digital "gatekeepers,"⁵⁷ the DMA seeks to rebalance asymmetrical power relations between platforms, users, and public authorities. More than a competition instrument, it reframes digital markets as political spaces subject to democratic

⁵² Armida van Rij, "Europe Faces a Pincer Attack from White House Ideologues Backed by Silicon Valley and Its Far-Right Proxies," *The Guardian*, January 8, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2026/jan/08/europe-white-house-ideologues-silicon-valley-far-right-proxies-trump-vance>

⁵³ Raluca Csernatoni, "The EU's AI Power Play: Between Deregulation and Innovation," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 20, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/05/the-eus-ai-power-play-between-deregulation-and-innovation?lang=en>

⁵⁴ *ibid*

⁵⁵ Raluca Csernatoni, "The EU's AI Power Play: Between Deregulation and Innovation," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 20, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/05/the-eus-ai-power-play-between-deregulation-and-innovation?lang=en>

⁵⁶ Radio France Internationale (RFI), "Macron, Merz Push for Europe's Digital Sovereignty as AI Race Accelerates," November 18, 2025, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20251118-macron-merz-push-for-europe-s-digital-sovereignty-as-ai-race-accelerates>

⁵⁷ Daniel Liberto, "Digital Markets Act (DMA): How the EU Law Will Work," *Investopedia*, July 31, 2024, <https://www.investopedia.com/digital-markets-act-7097402>

constraints. In doing so, the EU extends the logic of political community into the digital sphere, asserting that collective interests and social fairness must prevail over unchecked private dominance. U.S. political actors and industry representatives have criticized the DMA as being harmful to American companies and potentially a form of economic pressure on U.S. interests, and even suggested retaliatory measures, such as tariffs, if European digital regulation is perceived as discriminatory.⁵⁸

This regulatory philosophy is further consolidated through the AI Act, which draws firm red lines around high-risk AI systems. Rather than treating artificial intelligence as a purely technical or economic asset, the EU embeds it within a normative framework that prioritizes human dignity, fundamental rights, and societal trust. These regulatory boundaries function as acts of political self-definition, signaling what forms of technological power are compatible with a democratic European polity. This clash between two fundamental philosophies creates tension, as the U.S. resists allowing European regulators to dictate global tech standards.⁵⁹

The Data Act complements this framework by addressing structural dependencies related to data extraction and control. By limiting the automatic transfer of European data into non-EU-controlled systems and strengthening data access and portability, the EU seeks to retain strategic oversight over a critical resource of the digital age. This is not an inward-looking move, but one aimed at ensuring that data governance aligns with European public interests rather than external commercial imperatives.⁶⁰ In conjunction with other efforts undertaken by the European Union, these initiatives show how the European Political Community is developing outside of the traditional areas of defense and Security. Both the European Army and Digital Sovereignty require authenticity, social legitimacy, and collective consent among those involved; therefore, they require democratically representative governance systems to ensure their continued success.

As Klein suggests, European innovation requires a supportive regulatory environment that promotes progress rather than restricting it. This includes a unified definition of technological sovereignty within the Single Market, harmonized implementation of EU laws such as the AI Act and Data Act, and clear sector-specific rules that industry and public authorities can apply at scale.⁶¹

In conclusion, the EU has launched regulatory initiatives on artificial intelligence (AI), data governance, and platform governance, grounded in ethics, accountability, and the public good, both in how technology is advanced and in how people use it. Europe needs to demonstrate that there's no clear distinction between political authority and collective agency in governing platforms, technology, data, and critical infrastructure for users. All of these efforts demonstrate that the same idea of strategic autonomy that embodies independence is, in fact, about creating the conditions for the European polity to exercise sovereignty, protect fundamental rights, and sustain a resilient and cohesive political community amid technological dependency and increased geopolitical competition. Will over-regulation kill innovation? This remains to be seen. Nevertheless, Regulation doesn't inherently kill innovation; the challenge is to strike a balance among ethical safeguards, public trust, and market dynamism and advance innovation.

11. Conclusion: Exiting the Interregnum

Europe finds itself at a pivotal juncture. The post-1989 promise of integration, expansion, and collective security has not fully actualized, leaving the continent in an extended interregnum, a space of uncertainty between ambition and achievement. Strategic autonomy, military coordination, societal resilience, and cultural cohesion remain only partially and in fragmented ways developed, exposing Europe to internal and external vulnerabilities. The greater the diversity of interests and values among member states, the harder it becomes to reach successful policy agreements. The European Union's enlargements, from 6 to 25 members, especially after the 2004 expansion, illustrate this challenge. As membership grows, negotiations

⁵⁸ Claire Lemaire, "EU Prioritises DMA Enforcement despite US Tariffs Threats," Brussels Signal, March 20, 2025, <https://brusselssignal.eu/2025/03/eu-prioritises-es-dma-enforcement-despite-us-tariffs-threats/>

⁵⁹ Ian King, "Is a Digital Cold War Brewing Between the U.S. and Europe?" Banyan Hill Publishing, September 10, 2025, <https://banyanhill.com/is-a-digital-cold-war-brewing-between-the-u-s-and-europe/>

⁶⁰ European Commission, Data Act, Shaping Europe's Digital Future, accessed January 9, 2026, <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/data-act>

⁶¹ Christian Klein, "What Digital Sovereignty Really Means in a Fragmented World," Politico Europe, sponsored content, February 24, 2026, <https://www.politico.eu/sponsored-content/what-digital-sovereignty-really-means-in-a-fragmented-world/>

become more complex and consensus more difficult, as observed in many critical periods that required unison decision-making and agreement. Therefore, under the current institutional rules, consensus on essential issues and further enlargement could intensify these difficulties, helping to explain the limited political enthusiasm for further enlargement. Hence, to make governance and further enlargement workable, the EU would need institutional reforms, more flexible integration models that also take into account geopolitical demands and priorities, and stronger coordination among diverse member states and aspiring member states.

To exit this interregnum, Europe must choose purposeful reconstruction over strategic drift. A central component of this choice lies in reforming the EU's enlargement policy. The Enlargement Paradox, particularly evident in most of the Western Balkan Cases, illustrates how stabilitocracy, resource-driven interests, and limited conditionality have undermined democratic consolidation. To restore credibility, enlargement must combine principled engagement with civic empowerment, linking institutional reform and democratic accountability to tangible prospects for integration. The EPC provides a platform for this approach, offering a flexible, informal forum where EU and non-EU states can engage in sustained dialogue, coordinate on security and economic matters, and experiment with joint initiatives without being constrained by procedural rigidity. Operationalizing the EPC, through structured follow-up, clear objectives, and stronger connections to EU decision-making, can transform it from a symbolic meeting into a strategic instrument for integration, security coordination, and shared political learning. EPC should not just be a periodic gathering but an idea aimed at operationalizing a "social Europe" capable of defending itself against modern risks and revisionist ambitions. An idea that transcends thinking boundaries from the "individual" and "his national" to the European society,⁶² where the plurality of cultures, if strategically thought and used, can strongly support.

Europe's capacity for integration, security, and technological advancement depends not only on institutional strengths, regulations, and political and economic coordination, but also on strong societal and cultural foundations that foster trust, solidarity, and a shared sense of purpose.

As Schaumman and Maurice⁶³ observe, Europe's security architecture is increasingly discussed and shaped through the EU and ad hoc formats rather than through a fully institutionalized European Political Community (EPC). Over the past year, bilateral security and defence partnerships have multiplied: Moldova, Norway, North Macedonia, and Albania have formalized commitments with the EU; Iceland initiated a security dialogue; and the UK is expected to conclude an agreement with the EU. Meanwhile, in Ukraine, a tighter "Coalition of the Willing" led by France and the UK has assumed operational prominence. These developments underscore both the EU's centrality in shaping security and the fragmented nature of European defence cooperation, reflecting a mix of hard-power initiatives and normative influence.

In this regard, the unification of capacities across member states, coordinated defense, joint technological innovation, and harmonized regulatory frameworks enable Europe to act cohesively and effectively on the global stage. Culture, as previously argued, as strategic infrastructure should be instrumentalized to foster civic ownership, bonds, and shared understanding that legitimize both soft- and hard-power initiatives. Youth engagement, educational exchange, and civic mobilization, exemplified by grassroots movements in the Western Balkans, demonstrate the potential of bottom-up political agency. By integrating citizens and private actors into discussions on defense, security, and European values, the EPC can cultivate a broader European political community where collective action is grounded in legitimacy and democratic participation rather than imposed from above.

Finally, strategic autonomy must be operationalized across the dimensions of protection, provision, and projection. Thoughtful regulation in the field of technology need not stifle innovation. By coupling ethical safeguards with targeted investments and robust digital infrastructure, the EU can foster a trustworthy and competitive AI ecosystem. In this way, digital sovereignty becomes not only a means of protecting public values but also a strategic tool to strengthen Europe's political community and global influence in the technology sector. Hard power, in the form of interoperable forces and coordinated defense initiatives, gains credibility only when coupled with soft power: the cultural, civic, and normative legitimacy that motivates citizens and partners to support common policies. The EPC can act as a bridge between these domains, connecting cultural cohesion, societal mobilization, and military coordination into a coherent European strategy.

62 Jan Berting, *Europe: A Heritage, a Challenge, a Promise* (Delft: Eburon Uitgeverij B.V., 2006), ISBN 9059721209/9789059721203

63 Eric Maurice and Tabea Schaumann, "Without Reform, the European Political Community Risks Becoming Irrelevant," European Policy Centre, May 15, 2025, <https://www.epc.eu/publication/without-reform-the-european-political-community-risks-becoming-irrelevant/>

In sum, Europe can exit the interregnum by embracing mutually reinforcing steps: reforming enlargement to uphold democratic values, operationalizing the EPC for structured political dialogue with follow-up initiatives and policies, empowering civic actors to foster societal legitimacy, and recognizing culture as an open space of acceptance and communication and as a strategic asset underpinning both soft and hard power. Together, these measures can generate a politically cohesive construct, strategically autonomous, and culturally understood European political community, capable of navigating geopolitical uncertainty, protecting shared values, and advancing Europe's global role in an increasingly competitive and digitally-driven world.

11.1 Strategic Policy Recommendations for the EU

- Europe's autonomy project should go beyond the military area to cover important sectors like AI and technological infrastructure, as well as critical raw materials, especially aiming to reduce dependence on China. It should also strengthen industrial resilience against outside economic and political shocks. At the same time, European policymakers should steer clear of public confrontations that offer little strategic benefit. Instead, they should maintain functional, stable political relations with the United States. They should prioritize discreet, effective negotiation when needed and focus on making real progress in capabilities rather than empty rhetoric.
- The EU should accelerate the development of the European political community through coordinated policies at both the EU and broader European levels. This means tackling the economic, social, cultural, security, technological, and geopolitical challenges that influence Europe today. Strengthening the EU's political community relies on fostering a shared democratic and normative culture that unites diverse identities around a common goal: a stronger, more united "Europe of European citizens," including those aspiring to join the EU, with greater global influence.
- The European Political Community serves two key functions: it enhances visibility and cohesion while providing a forum for addressing shared strategic challenges. Its effectiveness, however, depends on clear objectives, sustained follow-up, and stronger integration with EU structures. To be meaningful, the EPC must move beyond symbolism by translating dialogue into concrete policy outcomes, ensuring continuity, and aligning more closely with EU decision-making, thereby strengthening Europe's capacity to navigate complex geopolitical dynamics.
- The EU should more consistently include culture in its policies and initiatives. This will help build unity and strength within the European project. It will also support a more inclusive, innovative, and progressive Europe that can tackle complex challenges with better societal readiness. The European cultural and creative sectors would gain from a dedicated pan-European "culture agora." This would serve as a structured space for citizen engagement. Such a platform could help make EU dialogues with stakeholders more significant and participatory. It would shift from formal consultation to real co-creation and more meaningful democratic engagement.
- The European Army debate shows that an effective and credible European defense framework requires more than capabilities, interoperability, and command structures. It must also rest on shared political and cultural foundations that ensure democratic legitimacy and societal cohesion. Only by linking defense capacity with civic engagement, social legitimacy, and a shared sense of purpose can Europe develop a defense model that is both operationally effective and consistent with the values it aims to defend.
- The EU should connect AI, data, and platform regulations with the growth of European digital infrastructure and strategic options. This includes EU-supported public-interest systems, such as cloud services, data sharing, and interoperability, to reduce reliance on external sources while enhancing private-sector innovation.
- Digital platforms and data infrastructures should be seen as strategic assets that are linked to democratic sovereignty, rights protection, and geopolitical strength. This will improve the connection between regulatory power and collective digital action. Regulation should strike a balance that supports innovation, upholds ethical standards and public trust, and promotes competitiveness and long-term technological growth.

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