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# The Progressive Post

## THE EU IN UNCHARTED WATERS

### SPECIAL COVERAGE

European defence: between a rock and a hard place

### FOCUS

Tariffs, counter-tariffs and a pause on tariffs

### DOSSIER

Taming the algorithms to protect workers' rights

Sven Biscop  
Lina Gálvez Muñoz  
Laura Kelly  
Pascal Lamy  
Ann Linde  
Almut Möller  
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# The Progressive Post

The Progressive Post is the political magazine of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS). It gathers renowned thinkers, experts and activists from the world of politics, academia and civil society, provides critical analysis of policies, and clarifies options and opportunities for decision-makers.

Our ambition is to undertake intellectual reflection and debate for the benefit of the progressive movement, and to promote the founding principles of the European Union: freedom, equality, solidarity, democracy, human dignity, as well as respect of human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law.

With a focus on EU politics, our crucial interest is the state and future of Social Democracy. We offer a platform (in print and online) for finding progressive answers to climate change, uneven development and social inequality in the European as well as global context. We invite our readers to explore with us the contradictions of our time and our authors to put forward arguments for peace, sustainability and social justice.

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by Hedwig Giusto

If you have not felt in the past three months that you are living in a dystopic reality, that you have been dropped into a surreal B-movie where everything is inverted and where certainty has vanished, then, perhaps, your experience differs greatly from mine.

Yet none of the actions undertaken by the re-elected President Trump came entirely as a surprise. He had proclaimed them loudly throughout his entire electoral campaign: stricter immigration laws; 'America First' trade policies; a more isolationist foreign policy coupled with a 'peace through strength' approach; attacks on the so-called 'woke culture'; expansions of executive power and reforms to the federal workforce – every single move had been announced in advance. And yet the world reacted with surprise. This was likely because, deep down, many found it difficult to believe that Donald Trump could reshape the image of the United States so quickly and even cast doubt on the resilience of American democracy and its institutions.

In a mere 80 days, the United States, the cornerstone of Western security for the past 80 years, has begun to question and destabilise the same world order it helped to build. The US security umbrella, which has protected Europe for decades, is apparently closing, leaving America's allies disoriented. And Ukraine finds itself seemingly unattended as the US attempts to broker peace with a resistant Russia, notably without including European allies in these negotiations. The traditional defender of free trade is now shutting the door to foreign goods, in what most observers consider a hazardous attempt based on faulty theories and calculations, to relocate manufacturing to the United States and correct trade imbalances.

How will the European Union respond to this dramatic change of landscape?

For decades, different US administrations had urged America's reluctant European

allies to increase their defence spending. The US president's behaviour, and the new geopolitical situation that it creates, have undermined transatlantic trust, thus making decisions on the features of European security and defence imperative. But although there is agreement on the urgency of the moment, the positioning of the European states is far from being consistent, and the general attitude has been one of hysteria and overreaction – not exactly the right mindset to make crucial decisions on defence and rearmament.

In our **Special Coverage *European defence: between a rock and a hard place***, our authors discuss European priorities for and implications of a progressive European defence – including the defence budget and relations with NATO – with two crucial premises. First, security cannot and must not be limited to militarisation, as mere militarisation is risky and may simply trigger an arms race. A viable security approach must therefore also safeguard democracy, peace and prosperity. Second, military spending must not compromise social, climate and cohesion spending.

Trump's erratic behaviour is also at the core of the **Focus Tariffs, counter-tariffs and a pause on tariffs**, which revolves around the impact of the US president's April announcements. Our contributors analyse not only the ability of this new tariff regime (currently suspended) to achieve the Trump administration's domestic goals and the consequences on international trade, but also the opportunities that may unfold for the European Union to fill the vacuum left by the US. The crucial question here is whether the Union will be able to stand its ground.

Another bone of contention between both sides of the Atlantic is what the US considers the EU's excessive regulation, particularly in the digital field. Yet if the application of Artificial intelligence and data-driven technologies is opening

up broad prospects for European competitiveness, it can nevertheless have a detrimental effect on labour relations, workers' rights and working conditions. Therefore, the **Dossier *Taming the algorithms to protect workers' rights*** is dedicated to steering this tech revolution and creating better work processes.

# Editorial



Hedwig Giusto,  
Editor-in-chief





# The Progressive Post

# #27 Contents



## CURRENT AFFAIRS

- 6** Trump 2.0's world and European responsibilities  
*by Maria João Rodrigues*
- 9** The discreet charm of the plutocracy  
*by László Andor*
- 11** An antidote to the far-right international: more feminism!  
*by Lina Gálvez Muñoz*
- 14** 30 years after Beijing: progress, setbacks and the road ahead for gender equality  
*by Ann Linde*
- 16** In defence of the rule of law  
*by Enrico Carloni*
- 19** Serbia's students roar, the EU still whispers: time to speak up  
*by Adnan Čerimagić*
- 22** Greenland in the line of fire  
*by Ulrik Pram Gad*



## SPECIAL COVERAGE

- European defence: between a rock and a hard place**
- 26** The EU and the Ukrainian people deserve more than armaments  
*by Laszlo Andor, Beatriz Abellán and David Rinaldi*
- 29** Empowering Europe for progress  
*by Giovanni Grevi*
- 31** How the EU can support Europe's NATO  
*by Sven Biscop*
- 33** Rebuilding European security via a 'supragovernmental avant-garde'  
*by Almut Möller*
- 35** Better, not bitter, peace  
*by Jonas J. Driedger*
- 38** The timeliness of peace  
*by Annika Bergman and Hanna Walfridsson*



## FOCUS

- Tariffs, counter-tariffs and a pause on tariffs**
- 42** Trump's tariff boomerang  
*by Pascal Lamy*
- 44** Trump's tariffs could be a boon for the EU  
*by Anna Kolesnichenko*
- 47** Trade as a force for good jobs  
*by Elena Crasta*
- 49** How Europe can step up on trade and aid as the US retreats from global institutions  
*by Laura Kelly*



## DOSSIER

### Taming the algorithms to protect workers' rights

**52** Reclaiming workers' rights in the age of AI: from data protection to collective justice  
*by Itxaso Domínguez de Olazábal*

**55** Algorithmic management in Europe: from key features to governance and beyond  
*by Aída Ponce del Castillo*

**57** Worker-centric algorithmic governance for Europe's competitive edge  
*by Gerard Rinse Oosterwijk*



## INTERVIEW

**62** Silenced, censored, resisting: feminist struggles in the digital age  
*Interview with Asha Allen  
by Laetitia Thissen*



## READS AND VIEWS

**66** Pluralism in peril: an urgent case for a democratic reboot of the EU  
*by Matteo Dressler*

**69** No Other Land  
*by Rodrigo Bazzano*

**69** Paradise now  
*by Vassilis Ntousas*







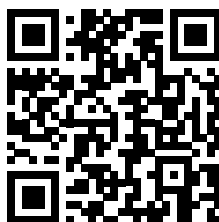
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# CURRENT AFFAIRS

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# Trump 2.0's world and European responsibilities

by Maria João Rodrigues

Faced with a comprehensive agenda which can shift the direction of the world, a democratic and progressive response to US President Donald Trump's announcements and policies cannot limit itself to criticising and resisting. It should be able to build a convincing alternative from now on.

Trump's 'revolution of common sense', as he said in his inaugural speech, is driven by the keen interest to keep doing business without too many hindrances, without climate concerns, without stringent digital regulations, or excessive taxes for top entrepreneurs. Some promises are made to get workers' political support: their wages should be supplemented with untaxed tips or bonuses and their jobs should be protected by trade tariffs as well as by tougher controls on immigration. To force the way for his agenda, President Trump is ready to mobilise and accept all the necessary means, including pardoning participants in 'spontaneous' riots to overturn democratic decisions and elections, if they stand in his way.

Furthermore, **the self-centred agenda to 'Make America Great Again' neglects the rest of the world's challenges regarding health, climate, pollution, poverty, development, access to technology or lack of financial resources** due to the loss of taxation revenue and the high debt asphyxia. This approach translates into the US's

disengagement from multilateral institutions regarding climate, trade, development aid, taxation and AI. International relations will be mainly shaped by bilateral bargaining, giving the US the upper hand by using its stronger powers based on trade, currency, armament, energy and technology.

New sources of power and the decisive factor for hegemony in the future – the digital revolution and AI – will also count on an ambitious plan of financial and political support for US companies operating at home and around the world, counting on the absence of common agreed-upon global rules.

A shocking paroxysm of such an agenda is reached when one single man – Elon Musk – can be a top tech entrepreneur, a rich sponsor of the American president, his main advisor, the head of an important horizontal governmental office, the owner of an influential social media network and, last but not least, a political free-lancer allowed to interfere in military conflicts or elections across the world.

## FORESEEABLE CONSEQUENCES OF TRUMP'S AGENDA

Beyond the unpredictability and the many surprises we will be facing, some of the consequences of Trump's agenda are already foreseeable:

- a weakening of basic market regulations, revising fairer taxation of capital, services and goods. Sometimes with a populist tone, such as the one Trump suggested during his inauguration speech when he said "you can buy the kind of car you prefer!";

► *The self-centred agenda to 'Make America Great Again' neglects the rest of the world's challenges regarding health, climate, pollution, poverty, development, access to technology or lack of financial resources.*





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- the phasing-out of the Green New Deal in the US;
- a reduction in social welfare with the argument of streamlining public expenditure;
- the reduction of women's rights and their equality with men, increasing ethnic- and gender-based discrimination, and undermining general human rights;
- the systematic dismissal of the principles of ESG (environmental and social governance) and of DEA (diversity, equality and inclusion) including for non-American companies located in or exporting to the US;
- a general weakening of the rule of law and a pre-eminence given to the rule of force whenever necessary;
- the active organisation of a far-right international, equipped with political, media and financial means and promoting a (contradictory) mix of national populism, ultra-conservative Christianity and techno-libertarianism;
- in global terms, declining responsibilities in the face of mounting global challenges such as climate change, poverty, military conflicts or unregulated AI;
- finally, the emergence of a new Cold War atmosphere, where the US confronts China in many areas, where the global rules-based order turns into a global bazaar, and new conquests in areas of influence are encouraged – for example of Greenland – as well as autocratic putsches, such as the recent developments in Turkey.

► *A democratic and progressive response cannot limit itself to criticism and resistance. It should be able to start building a convincing alternative from now on.*

## PRIORITIES FOR A DEMOCRATIC PROGRESSIVE RESPONSE

In the face of this comprehensive agenda to shift the direction of the world, **a democratic and progressive response cannot limit itself to criticism and resistance. It should be able to start building a convincing alternative from now on.** Progressive and democratic forces among the American population will be the first to be tested and a lot will depend on them with a view to the US midterm elections in 2026.

Many countries believe that global challenges should be addressed by deeper international cooperation. They should engage in partnerships and coalitions to progress on objectives like the ones recently defined by the Pact of the Future, adopted by a large majority of countries at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2024. Many eyes are now turning towards Europe, perceived as a global actor committed to democratic and multilateral governance, despite its many internal problems and the increasing influence of far-right actors.





In this special historical international juncture, Europe has particular responsibilities:

- to de-escalate a tariffs war which would lead to a lose-lose game destroying jobs and livelihoods and bringing inflation and recession in many regions of the world;
- to keep pushing for a green fair transition, decarbonising all sectors and strengthening its energy sufficiency and security;
- to use this transition to create new forward-looking competitive advantages and to make its social welfare future-proof;
- to shape the digital revolution not only with the necessary regulations, but also with active industrial and innovation policies to build its own capacities in data management, semiconductors, computing and cloud services and AI;
- to protect the rule of law, democracy and the media system against external interference;
- to support developing countries to reduce poverty, fight climate change and improve migration management;
- to reform the existing multilateral institutions and implement the agreed plans to strengthen international cooperation;
- to defend its enlightenment tradition, the role of science, the quality of pluralistic information, human rights, inclusive democracy while also promoting the dialogue among religions and civilisations.

Nevertheless, there are some basic conditions to enhance Europe's autonomy to move on with these priorities. The first is to reach a credible and fair ceasefire solution for the war in Ukraine – which also requires a swift strengthening of Europe's defence capacity. And the second is to ensure a European capacity to decide democratically on the direction to take – which requires stronger protection of its media ecosystem, not only with regulations but also with a stronger European media infrastructure.

The moment to make big decisions is now. The argument of lacking financial resources is not acceptable. Europe has them and can mobilise them via private and public channels. This only requires vision and the political will to meet historical responsibilities and to give a future to the European project. Europeans should fight for their European model and Progressives have a new role to play.

► *The moment to make big decisions is now. The argument of lacking financial resources is not acceptable. Europe has them and can mobilise them via private and public channels.*



Maria João Rodrigues,  
FEPS President



# The discreet charm of the plutocracy

by László Andor

Last November, the US electorate pushed politics towards domestic priorities. Voters in post-industrial battleground states swung behind the ex-president instead of the fast-tracked but soon-to-be-forgotten candidate Kamala Harris. However, it is unlikely that those critical working-class voters can expect much in return from Trump, apart from xenophobic hysteria against the migrant population.

Instead, Trump spearheads the revolt of neo-liberal plutocrats whose main preoccupation is getting rid of environmental, social or other types of regulation that protect workers and consumers. The team mascot of the new ruling gang of the US is Argentina's president Javier Milei, who, on Trump's inauguration day, received the blessing of IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva. For Trump, the self-styled 'anarcho-capitalist' is a MAGA person, notwithstanding the fact that since Milei's inauguration in December 2023, he has generated industrial decline and sharply rising poverty. Just as in the 1970s Chile was the laboratory of Chicago neo-liberals and their neoconservative practitioners in the US and UK, now Argentina is the testing ground for the capitalist revolution. And they want the whole world as a playing field.

Upon his first European visit as US vice president, JD Vance pressed European nations to step back from "excessive regulation" of the AI sector, which, according to him, "could kill a transformative industry just as it's taking off". He said: "we need international regulatory regimes that foster the creation of AI

technology rather than strangle it. And we need our European friends in particular to look to this new frontier with optimism rather than trepidation". Vance's message was centred on AI, but the tone and substance of his remarks fall into line with a Trump administration that has been approaching policymaking – both domestic and international – with the attitude of 'no constraints'.

► *Trump spearheads the revolt of neoliberal plutocrats whose main preoccupation is getting rid of environmental, social or other types of regulation that protect workers and consumers.*

The 2025 Munich Security Conference (MSC) was as much a watershed as the one in 2007 with the intervention of Vladimir Putin.

This time, the show was stolen by Vance, who de facto cancelled the 80-year-old transatlantic alliance. It came after US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth told NATO allies that Ukraine would not become a member, and the Europeans would need to take care of Ukraine's security without the US. To double down, Trump's Ukraine peace envoy Keith Kellogg, who spoke in a 'town hall' meeting in Munich, clarified that neither Ukraine nor the EU would have a seat at the table when the US and Russia discussed the end of the current war. Such a historic operation without anaesthesia can only cause shock, outrage and trauma. **Washington's new line is causing tremendous frustration in Europe, since the Trump administration wants to exercise power without leadership.** The word of the moment is betrayal. Many call for unity, which indeed is crucial, especially concerning the coming trade wars. Unity, however, is not so easy to achieve in practice. It is likely that a great variety of behavioural patterns will appear on the European political map, stretching from Trump-fans to resisters, and in between appeasers, bargainers and balancers.





- *During his campaign, Trump threatened 100 per cent tariffs on countries pursuing de-dollarisation, which has been on the agenda because the rest of the world subsidises US prosperity by using the dollar.*

The first Trump presidency unleashed various forms of economic warfare against Europe and the coming 'golden age' promises nothing less. **During his campaign, Trump threatened 100 per cent tariffs on countries pursuing de-dollarisation, which has been on the agenda because the rest of the world subsidises US prosperity by using the dollar**, while the US has started to weaponise its currency. Trump's threat is primarily a message to the BRICS group, but the EU should also be concerned, since the creation of the single currency itself, but also the promotion of its international role, were partly driven by the need to end the 'exorbitant privilege' represented by the dollar. Since Trump's first presidency, the US has been in constant economic war with Europe. Joe Biden changed the mood music, but he did not remove Trump's tariffs and actually neutered the WTO. More recently, the 'geopolitical' EU added two more channels of subsidising the US: one through purchasing even more US-made weapons and the other by creating dependency on overpriced US shale gas.

**Before last November, it was a cliché in Brussels that we must make European policies and institutions Trump-proof. Now, it seems that the priority is to make them Trump-compatible.** Ursula von der Leyen's rightward turn last autumn and the rise of the EPP-ECR policy axis pushed the endeavour of simplification, or more concretely, deregulation, higher on the EU agenda. This paradigm was once represented by a High-Level Group led by Edmund Stoiber but now it is making a comeback on steroids. Unlike Milei, Von der Leyen may not run around with a ferocious chainsaw, but it seems pro-business action in Brussels will be delivered, while the more essential chapters of the Draghi report may be sabotaged.

- *Before last November, it was a cliché in Brussels that we must make European policies and institutions Trump-proof. Now, it seems that the priority is to make them Trump-compatible.*

**We need to brace for a period when the US redefines its role and strategies in global politics and economics, starting with more direct control over the Western Hemisphere.**

Make no mistake, Americans do not see President Joe Biden's foreign policy as a success. And if Trump really pushes towards peace in Ukraine, the EU should see that as an opportunity and prepare for supporting Ukrainians in their reconstruction effort. With Trump, the world may move from hot wars to trade wars, but it should be clear that neither is in Europe's interest. If possible, international conflicts should be solved through negotiations, and in a multilateral framework. The EU must pursue a more independent relationship with China and cooperation on global challenges, while upholding European values.

At best, **it is surreal that half of the US electorate does not mind voting for a person and a leadership style which most in continental Europe would consider not just extravagant but extreme.** Some even called him fascist, and not only in the heat of the campaign. People wonder how strong the foundations of US democracy are and whether Washington can remain a leader in democratic development worldwide. A transatlantic dialogue on such matters could be proposed, even if a meaningful counterpart in US government circles will be hard to find in the next four years. It is also time to conclude that the general anti-populist language that has dominated the mainstream liberal discourse in the past decade has failed to contain and roll back the increasingly aggressive ultra-conservative trends, which, in the past year, have made a breakthrough on both sides of the Atlantic. Progressive forces – in both North America and Europe – will need a new strategy with a clearer economic and social programme at its heart.

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László Andor,  
FEPS Secretary General



# An antidote to the far-right international: more feminism!

by Lina Gálvez Muñoz

The far right's push against gender equality and women's rights – especially sexual and reproductive health and rights – has become the cornerstone of its narrative and its strategies to promote its authoritarian, nationalist, xenophobic and austerity-driven agenda. But faced with this offensive, we cannot let feminist demands be pushed to the periphery of our political strategy just because, as the excuse goes, it is a divisive issue.

Gender equality and women's rights are the very essence of universal democracy, the principle of equality itself, which is now being questioned by the reactionary wave in substance as well as in form. We need more feminism, not less, because we need more democracy, not less!

Anti-feminism is a central theme of the far-right international. It could not be otherwise, given that feminism is the most profoundly democratic movement of the 20th and 21st centuries, and also the most progressive. It is normal that reactionaries want to combat it by appealing to tradition and what they call 'common sense', which is nothing but the unequal and discriminatory principles of patriarchal and colonial society.

**The far right has made it clear, especially to young men, that their loss of space in society and the economy is due to the supposed privileges that equality policies have given to women.** The reality, however, is that these policies have removed existing discrimination and barriers, allowing for real equality – or at least opening the path in this direction.

A good example is the field of higher education, where for several decades women have outnumbered men among university graduates in Europe and the US. This slowly impacts the labour market, with more women occupying better positions and achieving more autonomy from men. This positive trend, however, is perceived as an example of loss of power by some men as if it was the direct consequence of positive actions to achieve gender equality rather than a consequence of a level playing field. **In a hopeless neoliberal framework of dispossession and post-Covid uncertainty, the dream of a bygone past, when men at least had power over women, now seduces many of them.** These trends

► *The far right has made it clear, especially to young men, that their loss of space in society and the economy is due to the supposed privileges that equality policies have given to women.*

have extreme consequences in voting behaviour among young men worldwide. Education is becoming a divide in politics and society, as young men achieve lower levels in education, and lower career achievements and pay, and often, as a consequence, tend to support far-right parties.

2025 marks 30 years since the Beijing International Conference on Women, a turning point in the demands, unity and institutionalisation of the global feminist movement and its transformative capacity. From that point on, the counter-reaction started getting organised effectively, through international conferences with enormous resources and amplifiers.

At least since 2013, very powerful and well-funded interests from around the world have been meeting in forums that call for a return to traditional family values and control over women's bodies, promoting restrictions on abortion rights worldwide. These meetings and conferences are part of the genesis of the far-right international, which has always had anti-feminism as an essential and unifying objective of its political action.





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Controlling women and their bodies implies controlling who reproduces and who does not, thus controlling the ethnic and demographic balance of countries, which is essential to nationalist, new colonial, xenophobic and exclusionary political proposals.

**These proposals have been very successful in convincing men that feminism is not a movement for equality, but for women's privileges,** which undermines their masculinity and subjugates them, depriving them not only of their privileges – which they do not perceive as such – but also of their supposedly superior role in the natural order of things. This trend has also reached progressive forces, leading to a kind of diversity

trap that dilutes class consciousness and political priorities.

Moreover, the far-right international's strategy has also targeted women. It has done so intelligently and on different fronts: by making the return to a so-called 'natural order' attractive also to some women through well-funded trends on social media, such as the 'tradwives', who show their 'happiness' in accepting their 'complementary' role; by scaring women with the sexual violence of immigrants – as if Dominique Pelicot and his fellow perpetrator-neighbours had arrived on a migrant boat to France – and by scaring mothers and making them believe that their sons will be denounced as rapists for flirting with girls.

► *We are still the 'natural' caregivers, we do not occupy the same positions of responsibility as men, we do not earn the same money, or enjoy the same prestige.*

The international far right exploits the fear and the social exhaustion of women in our multiple roles, as the equality we were promised has not yet materialised. **We are still the 'natural' caregivers, we do not occupy the same positions of responsibility as men, we do not earn the same money, or enjoy the same prestige.** The promised equality is not yet fully here.



For that, we would need universal public services, more investment in care infrastructure (for example through a European Care Deal) improved parental leave, and fair wages for care workers across the EU.

In addition, the international far right is taking advantage of the divisions between part of the feminist movement and the LGBTQI+ movement. It is using this division like a Trojan horse, fuelling the debate against equality and feminist conquests. Our democracies have still only given partial responses to women's demands, such as real equal pay and participation in decision-making, equal job opportunities, free contraception and abortion, financial and legal independence, freedom from violence and sexual coercion, and an end to discrimination in this area. The reality is that we are still being killed or raped simply for being women, that we still are poorer and far away from economic equality even though we have achieved a higher and better education than men, and that we still have less autonomy and freedom.

**To defeat the far-right international's attack on democracy we need more democracy and the inclusion of feminist proposals at the very core of our institutions and political action.** For Progressives, this must be essential because the socialist and democratic parties have been the main defenders of women's rights and the extension of rights such as those for LGBTQI+, in short, the principle of equality itself. Women know this, which is why female voters clearly lean towards progressive political forces rather than conservative and far-right ones.

We want to continue deciding for ourselves. We want to continue being an end in ourselves, rather than a means to an end for others, for example by solving the demographic problem or the fiscal and economic policy options of austerity-supporting elites that wield a chain-saw taking us directly back home to give birth and take care of others, and cutting social expenditure. This especially impacts women as the main users of social services, and as the 'natural substitutes' of these welfare provisions.

It is for this reason that **equality needs to be put truly at the centre of our politics and policies. We want more equality, not less. Equality is not divisive. It is an essential democratic principle without which other fundamental principles, such as freedom, cannot be developed.** Every day must be an International Women's Day for Progressives. Women have been the dam against the return of fascism in Europe. Now we need more men to join us in formulating and promoting proposals that will ensure the well-being and future of our citizens and the growth of the European project of peace and respect.

► *Equality needs to be put truly at the centre of our politics and policies. We want more equality, not less. Equality is not divisive. It is an essential democratic principle without which other fundamental principles, such as freedom, cannot be developed.*

*Lina Gálvez Muñoz, Member of the European Parliament and Chair of the Women's Rights and Gender Equality Committee; FEPS Vice President and Chair of the FEPS Scientific Council*







# 30 years after Beijing: progress, setbacks and the road ahead for gender equality

by Ann Linde

In 1995, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action set out an ambitious vision for gender equality, identifying 12 critical areas requiring urgent attention. These included women's education, healthcare, political participation, economic independence and protection from violence. At the time, I was a political adviser to Sweden's minister of EU affairs and trade, and I recall the excitement as we listened to the landmark speeches, particularly Hillary Clinton's powerful declaration: "human rights are women's rights, and women's rights are human rights". It was a bold call to action, reminding the world that gender equality is a fundamental human rights issue.

Today, 30 years later, as we reflect on progress at the 69th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69) in New York, the picture is mixed. There have been undeniable strides forward – yet troubling regressions threaten these hard-won gains. We must, therefore, ask: how far have we really come? And what must we do next to safeguard and accelerate gender equality?

## ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT: MORE WOMEN IN WORK, BUT NOT ON EQUAL TERMS

One of the most notable changes since 1995 has been women's increasing economic participation. Female labour force participation has risen globally but large regional differences persist. Women now outnumber men in

higher education in many countries, paving the way for better job opportunities. Furthermore, women-owned businesses have grown significantly, now accounting for one in three enterprises worldwide. However, progress remains uneven and insufficient. Women still face significant barriers in accessing capital, with a staggering \$1.7 trillion global gender credit gap. The gender pay gap persists, narrowing from 30 per cent in 1995 to about 20 per cent today – but still stubbornly evident. In executive leadership, despite some gains, female CEOs lead less than 10 per cent of Fortune 500 companies.

In addition, **the burden of unpaid care work remains a critical barrier to gender equality. Women perform approximately 76.2 per cent of global unpaid care work, limiting their ability to engage in full-time employment or leadership roles.** Economic crises, such as

the Covid-19 pandemic and the rise of automation, have disproportionately affected women, demonstrating the fragility of progress.

## POLITICAL REPRESENTATION: GAINS, BUT A LONG ROAD AHEAD

Women's political representation has more than doubled since 1995, rising from 11 per cent to over 27.2 per cent in national parliaments. Some countries have implemented gender quotas with success – such as the Dominican Republic, which saw an eight-percentage-point rise in women's parliamentary representation due to stricter enforcement. Yet progress remains slow. In 2024, only five women were elected heads of state out of 31 presidential elections. Even countries with strong feminist policies, such as France, have



seen setbacks, with women's representation in the *Assemblée Nationale* declining for consecutive elections. The global democratic backslide has further compounded these challenges, as highlighted by the 2025 V-Dem Report, which warns that autocratisation often correlates with setbacks in gender equality and women's political participation.

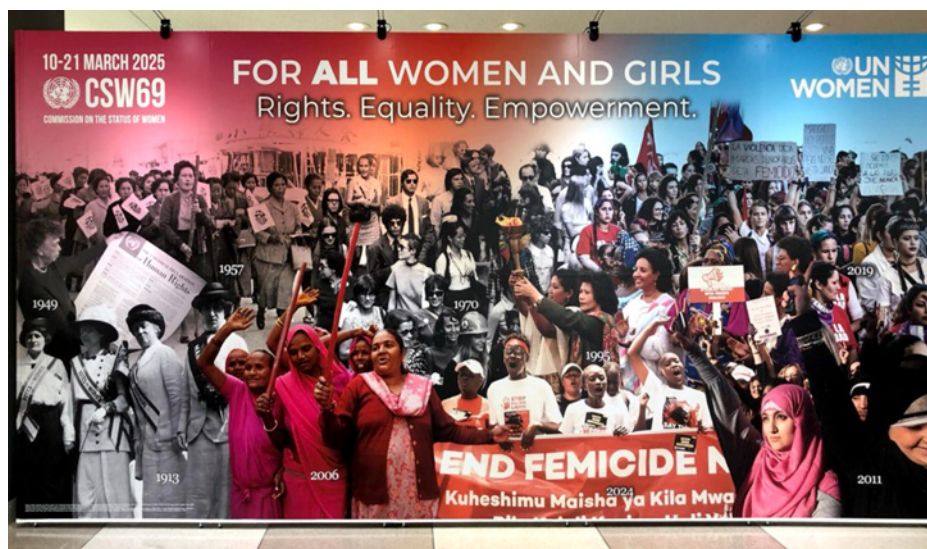
### GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: A PERSISTING CRISIS

**While legal frameworks to combat gender-based violence have strengthened in many countries, enforcement remains weak.** Conflict-related sexual violence has surged by 50 per cent in recent years, particularly in war-affected regions. Meanwhile, conservative and populist movements have intensified attacks on women's rights, rolling back protections for reproductive rights and LGBTQI+ people. The backlash is real, and it is happening at a time when we need more, not less, commitment to gender justice.

### ROLE OF FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY IN ADDRESSING THESE CHALLENGES

Since Sweden pioneered the concept of Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) in 2014, countries like Canada, France, Germany, Mexico and Spain have followed suit. FFP provides a critical framework to counteract gender inequalities on a global scale. If implemented consistently and with ambition, it can be a tool for the progress below.

- 1) **Countering the backlash against women's rights** – diplomatic relations must insist on gender equality as a non-negotiable human rights principle.
- 2) **Advancing women's economic empowerment** – trade agreements should incorporate gender-equality clauses, and investment should prioritise female entrepreneurs.



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- 3) **Ensuring women's representation in peace and security** – the women, peace and security agenda must be reinforced, ensuring women have a seat at the table in conflict resolution and peace negotiations.
- 4) **Promoting climate justice from a feminist perspective** – women in climate-vulnerable regions must have access to leadership positions and funding for sustainable development.
- 5) **Strengthening accountability in global institutions** – gender equality must be embedded in organisations like the UN, the World Bank and the IMF, with stronger mechanisms for measuring impact.

as both a reflection on past achievements and a rallying cry for the future. We owe it to the next generation to ensure that women's rights remain at the forefront of global policy – because, as history has shown, progress is never guaranteed.

The question is not whether we can achieve gender equality, but whether we will have the courage to fight for it. The time for action is now.

► *While legal frameworks to combat gender-based violence have strengthened in many countries, enforcement remains weak.*

### A CALL TO ACTION

Despite undeniable progress since 1995, the current moment demands vigilance and renewed commitment. Gender equality is not a linear path – it requires continuous political will, policy innovation and global solidarity. As we commemorate 30 years since the Beijing Declaration, we must resist the forces seeking to turn back the clock. The 69th session of the Commission on the Status of Women served

Ann Linde,  
FEPS Special Advisor on  
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Progressive Voices Collective







# In defence of the rule of law

by Enrico Carloni

"The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities": the discussion on the fundamental characteristics and values of a democratic society can start from this statement contained in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, and from the role that the guarantee of the rule of law plays within that democratic society.

The rule of law is one of the pillars supporting democratic states, and supporting the European Union as well, which monitors compliance with it. Although the European construction is excessively oriented towards market issues, the monetary system and the economy, there is a clear awareness of the fact that compliance with a set of 'rules of the game' is a fundamental prerequisite for all freedoms, including economic freedoms.

The arduous and centuries-long construction of Europe's modern constitutions – from the Age of Enlightenment, over the French Revolution, the achievements of the bourgeois revolutions of the 19th century, and then through the traumas of the first half of the 20th century – is anything but a secondary aspect in the life of contemporary democracies. Although the EU member states have different national identities and traditions, the essential meaning of the rule of law is the same and can be defined on the basis of a series of principles, including the effective judicial protection of respect for fundamental rights; of legality, which implies a transparent, accountable, democratic and

pluralistic legislative process; of legal certainty; of the prohibition of abuse of power; and of the separation of powers. This judicial protection is provided by independent and impartial courts, with effective judicial review.

► *The popular vote and the consent of citizens are inherent components of the democratic rule of law, but they do not exhaust its complexity.*

The rule of law is thus an established but demanding value that qualifies democracy's very meaning. Indeed, however much JD Vance's speech in Munich tried to convince us otherwise, there is no democracy without the rule of law.

**The popular vote and the consent of citizens are inherent components of the construct we call the democratic rule of law, but they do not exhaust its complexity.**

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz recalled in his response to the US vice president, the glorious and tragic history of Europe is a reminder that without the protection of human rights, without the defence of pluralism, without full recognition of the dignity of every person, there can be no democracy.

Given that democracy thrives on commitments and doubts and less on certainties and absolute truths, it would nonetheless be useful to reflect on the criticism coming from across the Atlantic because it is perhaps true that too many policies in the European Union have been developed with excessive doses of paternalism and elitism. But this is a different matter from the current one at hand: the attacks – from inside and outside the EU – on the rule of law.

**Outside the EU, the questioning of the principles of democracy is now also taking place in stabilised democracies such as the United States, which still sees itself as the supreme guarantor of democracy worldwide, while providing an image of democracy that is too simplistic and dangerous** because it is built



solely around the freedom of individuals and their consent to a leader who expresses their will. Inside the EU, there are numerous cracks in the rule of law in the EU member states, in founding countries as well as in those that have joined more recently.

The list of cracks is long and keeps growing – increasingly recurrent attacks on the judiciary and independent powers, intolerance towards the freedom of the press, attempts at reform that go in the direction of concentrating more and more powers on the executive,

the rejection of the logic of debate and mediation, the corruption of the public sphere, with the subjugation of state decisions to private interests. We are increasingly witnessing an erosion of the pillars of the rule of law, carried out using legal methods. There is a gradual but clear shift towards rejecting the values of pluralism and the role of neutral powers, which are viewed with all the more hostility when called upon to apply European law and thus assert the primacy of European rules over national political decisions. In April 2024, the European Parliament adopted a resolution complaining

about "persistent, systematic and deliberate" violations of the rule of law in Hungary. The Commission's report on the Rule of Law in Europe of July of the same year points to widespread concern in Slovakia, but the situation in Italy is also a cause for worry.

**The political attacks against the rule of law in Italy are multiple, and the sheer number of them reveals a pattern in the chaos.**

The protection of independent and impartial judges is called into question by systematic attacks on the independence of the judiciary.

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These attacks are carried out through public statements by government representatives, but above all through attempts at reform. The ability of the judiciary to operate to protect people's rights is often challenged when decisions conflict with the political will of the government. Democratic legitimacy is brandished to challenge judicial decisions, without even checking whether the decision is correct or not.

► *Outside the EU, the questioning of the principles of democracy is now also taking place in stabilised democracies such as the United States, which still sees itself as the supreme guarantor of democracy worldwide, while providing an image of democracy that is too simplistic and dangerous.*

The strategy of weakening independent powers also encompasses reforms of the judicial system promoted by Minister of Justice Carlo Nordio. The retouches to legislation are constant and all conceived to weaken the role of the judiciary, which is accused of operating as an opposition force, especially when it applies the law and imposes it over the executive power.

In Italy, the legislative process is in the hands of the government. This has been the case for years. However, recently, the role of parliament has been further emptied to the benefit of the executive. The role of lobbies remains unregulated, a shortcoming that is not new to Italy.

Legal certainty is often a mirage in Italy, a country with extraordinary regulatory complexity and in which, above all, the rule is the exception.

**Only in Italy, I believe, is there a system based on constant extensions to legislation and on constant changes even to fundamental laws** (just think of the public contracts code, subject to constant tampering). As a consequence of recent amendments to the Italian penal code, prevarication, clientelism and abuse of public power are no longer crimes. Abuse of power has thus effectively been legalised in Italy.

Although the separation of powers between the legislature and executive has disappeared, it remains, but is weaker, in the relationship with the judiciary. There is a widespread disaffection of politics towards the rule of law, a tendency that concerns the right and the left alike, with their infatuation for a strong leader. Widespread criticism also targets neutral powers and the application of the law, understood as a way to constraint the actions of the executive. Italians will now have to pay the price for these and other flaws. Care and maintenance have lacked when it would have been possible to apply them, and now the rule of law has become fragile at the moment of its test. The rule of law is weak and vulnerable in Italy, but even Europe does not effectively perform the role of control and monitoring that should be among its missions.

**Regaining awareness of the value of the rule of law, and of the importance of the mechanisms that make it more than a mere abstract principle, is decisive for Europe.** The EU must find a renewed sense of purpose in values such as pluralist democracy, founded on the role of citizens within the framework of rights and guarantees – which is precisely the rule of law. If the rule of law is momentarily being disregarded on the other side of the Atlantic, it is Europe's task to take up the role of its standard-bearer with conviction. This precious flame needs to be kept burning and to be carried towards more favourable times in order to give deep meaning to a European construction that must be more than the extraordinarily complex building of a large internal market.

► *Regaining awareness of the value of the rule of law, and of the importance of the mechanisms that make it more than a mere abstract principle, is decisive for Europe.*

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# Serbia's students roar, the EU still whispers: time to speak up

by Adnan Ćerimagić

Over 100 days into Serbia's student-led protests, a call for the rule of law has grown into a roaring outcry against President Aleksandar Vučić's governance model. The EU must stop whispering, and speak – clearly, urgently and truthfully.

What began as mourning after the deadly collapse of the Novi Sad railway station canopy has become the largest protest movement since the fall of former President Slobodan Milošević in 2000. Students are demanding accountability, transparency and the rule of law. Their protests now force the EU to choose: stay cautious or confront Serbia's dangerous drift.

**The movement stands out for its independence. It was not initiated by political parties, civil society groups or foreign actors. Quite the opposite – the students have deliberately distanced themselves from all of them.**

There is no central leadership, no prominent figurehead and no media-savvy spokesperson. Their demands are clear: transparency over the Novi Sad station's reconstruction, withdrawal of charges against protesters, prosecution of attacks on students and professors and a 20 per cent increase in higher education funding. They are not calling for Vučić's resignation – but their demands challenge the foundations of his rule: impunity and opacity.

At first, Vučić ignored the protests. Then he mocked them. When that failed, he pretended

to respond to the students' demands. But behind this facade, another course of action was implemented: government-aligned media targeted student activists, civil society organisations, foreign-funded initiatives and even EU citizens in Serbia – reviving the narrative of foreign plots and external enemies. The rhetoric soon turned into action. In January, student leaders were assaulted in Novi Sad by men reportedly linked to the ruling party. In February, police raided prominent civil society groups like the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA), accusing them of financial misconduct. The pattern was clear: from ridicule to repression.

Vučić, once a master of public messaging, now looked disconnected. The resignation of Prime Minister Miloš Vučević after the Novi Sad violence in January did not quell public anger. Protests intensified. Aware that this political move was not sufficient, Vučić delayed parliament's decision to accept the resignation for an extraordinary 50 days. Since then, he has given the mandate to a candidate without any political experience. The candidate and the proposed government are expected to secure parliamentary confirmation by 18 April.

**Meanwhile, the EU has clung to quiet optimism. At first, it ignored the protests, betting on renewed momentum in the accession process.** Serbia's participation in the EU Growth Plan – potentially unlocking €1.6 billion – seemed like progress. There was hope that new accession chapters could be opened. Brussels sensed an opportunity to regain influence after years of stagnation. Since 2018, when member states declined to set 2025 as Serbia's EU entry date, Belgrade has played its cards skilfully. It deepened ties with China and Russia, as well as with individuals close to US President Donald Trump's inner circle, while the EU watched from the sidelines. Now, it risks making the same mistake again.

► *The movement was not initiated by political parties, civil society groups or foreign actors. Quite the opposite – the students have deliberately distanced themselves from all of them..*





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As the protests grew, the EU did respond, but only faintly. There were general calls for dialogue and defence of civil society, but no clear criticism of Vučić's tactics. No pressure. No proposals. Instead, the EU shifted attention to other enlargement frontrunners like Montenegro and Albania – promising to finalise accession talks with them by 2027: signals that even Vučić's inner circle does not take seriously.

His meeting with EU enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos and the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, in March illustrate the EU's faltering stance. After both meetings, Vučić claimed Serbia would soon join the Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA), highlighting benefits for remittances and businesses. He also spoke of plans to open not one, but several negotiating clusters on enlargement this year. **On reforms, Vučić was vague. He acknowledged the EU's expectations – media laws, changes to**

**the regulatory authority for electronic media (REM) and updates to the electoral register – but gave no firm commitments.** Instead, he offered more optimistic talking points: Serbia could 'reignite the European process'.

► *Without stronger support from member states, the European Commission's offer to finalise accession talks with several candidates by 2030 will fail.*

Kos was more measured. She reiterated that enlargement demands Serbia's clear strategic alignment and said that civil society and media are essential. Six days later, von der Leyen was a little more direct. She stressed that Serbia "needs to deliver on EU reforms", citing the

need for "decisive steps" on media freedom, the fight against corruption and an electoral reform. Their social media posts triggered strong online reactions. Commenters urged Kos to ensure that the EU acknowledged the protests and "showcase the same commitment to this principle [of the rule of law]". Von der Leyen was reminded that Serbia has been "regressing in all key EU accession criteria" for some time.

The irony? The EU has already documented Serbia's decline. Its latest Commission report, published just two days before the Novi Sad tragedy, warned of political pressure on judges, flawed recruitment practices and police violence. It flagged media capture, misuse of public resources and harassment of public employees – all grievances behind the protests. Notably, the report dropped previous language suggesting Serbia was balancing rule-of-law reforms with progress. But the message was buried in dry prose.



**It is time to say it plainly: Serbia's democracy is backsliding, its rule of law falls short of EU standards, and many current policies are incompatible with EU membership.** This message must reach Vučić, the opposition and Serbia's citizens.

Brussels also faces a larger reckoning. Without stronger support from member states, the European Commission's offer to finalise accession talks with several candidates by 2030 will fail. Member states must match this ambition. At the June European Council meeting, they should commit to reforming EU institutions, policies and budgets for future enlargement. They should also guarantee that candidates meeting EU and rule of law standards gain full access to the single market before accession. This would restore the EU's credibility and show that it is ready to reward serious reform.

► *If the EU continues to whisper, Serbia risks sliding further into authoritarianism.*

The status quo in Serbia has cracked. Recently, Ana Brnabić, speaker of the parliament and Vučić's closest ally, described the protesters as a "fascist falange" – militia formations active in the first half of the twentieth century – warning that "fascism is rolling through the streets of Serbia". She claimed that behind the protests are political organisations which are "borderline terrorist organisations". Brnabić noted that so far, Serbia's law enforcement agencies have tried to act against these groups very carefully and cautiously, but she warned that, to protect law

and order, this might soon no longer be possible. The message is clear: the illegal use of 'sound cannons' against protesters on 15 March might be remembered as a troubling preview of what could follow so that the authorities retain control.

What really follows depends on who dares to speak – publicly, clearly and in solidarity with those demanding justice. **If the EU continues to whisper, Serbia risks sliding further into authoritarianism.** Worse, it could destabilise the region and erode what remains of the EU's standing. History will remember whether the EU chose to whisper or to speak up and act.

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# Greenland in the line of fire

by Ulrik Pram Gad

**US President Donald Trump's increasingly aggressive attention to Greenland threatens its long quest for self-determination. Now Greenlandic leaders appeal to Europe for backup.**

Trump Force One hit the tarmac of the newly expanded international airport in Greenland's capital Nuuk on 7 January, bringing in Don Trump Jr as the first tourist flying directly from the US. Painfully attentive to how President Trump's advances oscillate rhetorically between promises and threats, any excitement in Greenland about Trump Jr's visit nevertheless turned to anxiety soon.. Since the advent of transcontinental aviation and missile technology, the US has needed to look out for nuclear attacks from Eurasia. That is why the US never left Greenland after the second world war, and why it still runs the Thule Air Base in the far Northwest. Recently, however, the base has been renamed 'Pituffik Base' not only to honour the Greenlandic heritage of the place but also to signal its transfer to Trump's newly formed US Space Command. While Greenlanders feel anxiety, it might be worth recalling the Monroe Doctrine which says that, as far as the US is concerned, it will not allow other great powers to establish footholds on the North American continent.

Greenlanders have long aimed for independence from Denmark. Their preparations have followed two parallel tracks: the first, gaining independent stature and agency in international affairs in a continuous arm-wrestle with Danish constitutional law; the second, diversifying away from material dependence on

Denmark for trade, subsidies and human resources. The EU has played important roles in both areas. Greenland's original 1979 arrangement on its autonomy from Denmark allowed the island to leave the European Communities. Indeed, it was the first territory to do so (in 1985) since Algeria. The arrangement felt urgent as Greenland's sovereignty over fisheries – all important for the economy, employment and regional development – was about to go south. After 1985 Greenland instead became associated with the EU as an Overseas Country and Territory (OCT), trading fisheries quotas for tax-free access to the European single market and for development aid. A representation in Brussels became Greenland's first one, serving as the training ground for the nascent Greenlandic diplomatic corps.

► *Even if EU subsidies – now under a partnership agreement – remain the most important contribution to Greenland's economy after those provided by Denmark, Greenland has been eager to diversify its revenues, exports, trade and investments further.*

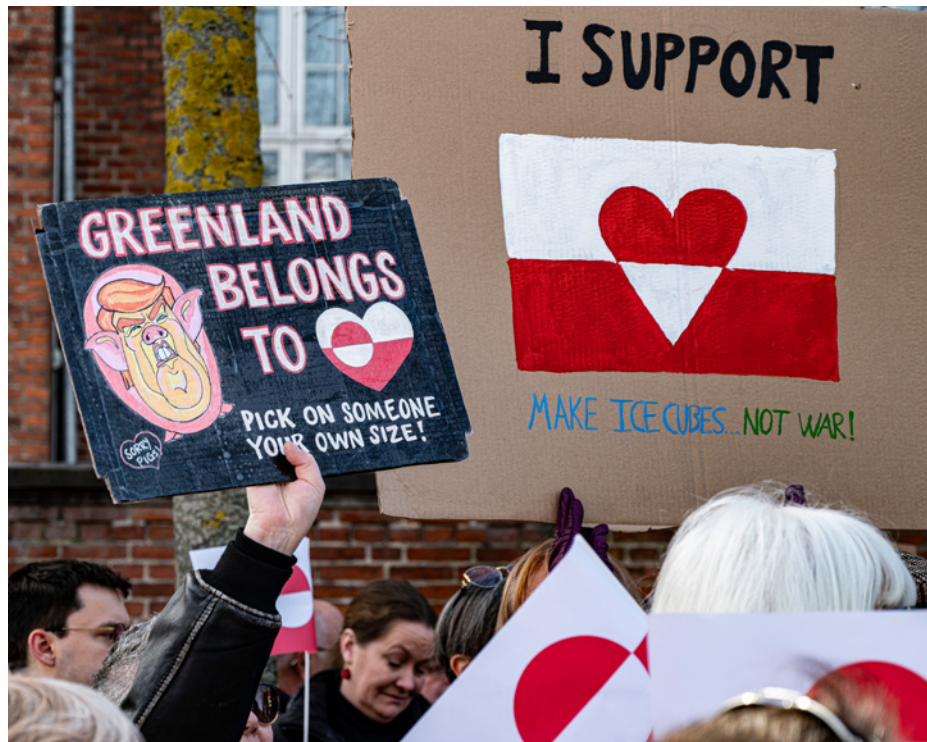
**Even if EU subsidies – now under a partnership agreement – remain the most important contribution to Greenland's economy after those provided by Denmark, Greenland has been eager to diversify its revenues, exports, trade and investments further.** In 2009, an upgraded autonomy arrangement was introduced by which a cap was put on the annual Danish subsidies – but as compensation, revenue from future mining was to stay in Greenland. As the global appetite for new mining projects was low after the financial crisis, inclinations were made towards China for investment in Greenland's mining and infrastructure. However, every time Chinese engagement seemed to be materialising, it evaporated after a range of creative Danish interventions: a dilapidated naval base was taken off the market when a Chinese company put in a bid; Copenhagen stepped in with attractive financing for new airports to keep a Chinese construction company out; satellite receivers co-financed by a Chinese university were taken down; Chinese mining engineers never received their visas. With hindsight, US security concerns about China, which were communicated to Copenhagen and – increasingly – directly to Nuuk, have ultimately proved decisive.

As Greenlandic elected and diplomatic officials have become more directly involved



with their US counterparts, Greenland's earlier pacifist stances have been dialled down to provide assurances that even an independent Greenland will always be a member of NATO, and that US defence needs will be facilitated. Indeed, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine occasioned the Greenlandic government even to over-implement US and EU sanctions regimes. Greenlandic public and private fishing companies have thus stopped their exports and sold their Russian subsidiaries to signal Greenland's solid anchoring in the West. In parallel, **Greenlandic minerals authorities engaged with the efforts of both the Biden administration and the EU Commission in order to bring about a green transition, as well as further strategic independence from Chinese critical minerals. In its 2024 foreign policy strategy, Greenland therefore looked firmly to the West, excited to further reduce its dependence on Denmark.**

Then, even before his inauguration, Trump's ham-fisted campaign to acquire Greenland took off – just as Greenland entered its own campaign for parliamentary elections on 11th March. Not least due to Danish efforts to involve European partners, the pressure on Nuuk and Copenhagen served as a test case for handling a situation in which all European capitals would soon find themselves concerning Ukraine: how to deal with Trump? Europe is still trying to come to grips with this question. And on the fate of both Ukraine and Greenland, the jury is still out. But one encouraging experience is worth noting: the Greenlandic electorate and their political parties managed to conduct an election with impressive integrity. American billionaires were travelling around the country promising investment, and the number of international journalists talking about Trump and independence easily exceeded that of their Greenlandic counterparts on the ground. Every Facebook feed in Greenland was overflowing with alarmist Danish media coverage warning that US promises and Greenlandic anger over dark episodes in Denmark's colonial administration were bound to rush Greenland into independence. Yet Greenlanders ignored this massive international attention, and instead



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let bread-and-butter issues decide their election: fisheries reforms, welfare services and regional developments.

At the time of writing, coalition talks for the new Greenlandic government have just been concluded. Greenlanders have felt immense pressure from unsolicited US attention. Recently, Hercules planes began delivering bullet-proof limousines that descended into hitherto unknown underground garages at the request of a new, fortified US consulate. This was in preparation for what was to be a 'private' visit from the wife of US Vice President Vance. In the end, however, the vice president joined his wife and redirected the visit to the US base. Nevertheless, **the US playbook is reminiscent of Russian President Vladimir Putin's prior grab of Crimea – even though, fortunately, it is difficult to conjure up a scenario in Greenland in which someone ends up shooting others.** Still, some Greenlanders feel they are being invaded and fear for their future.

The EU keeps repeating its insistence on international law, the principle of self-determination and the integrity of the Kingdom of

Denmark. EU member states have, in various relevant ways, expressed willingness to support Denmark and Greenland. When the Vance delegation still planned to go not only to the Pituffik base, but also to 'civilian' Greenland, the caretaker government issued a statement asking friends in like-minded capitals for a more forceful show of solidarity. As a new government has been sworn in in Nuuk, the EU should answer that call. One way would be to initiate a 'summit of international law' in Nuuk – inviting Canada and other like-minded countries to attend. Soon, the time will be ripe for beefing up the EU Commission's representation in Nuuk in order to accelerate cooperation with the government of Greenland on trade, investment and human resources development, and in order to ensure that Greenland does not fall between the shifting tectonic plates.



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# European defence for security and peace

By Roberto Castaldi

POLICY BRIEF  
March 2025

FEPS  
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN  
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES



## EUROPEAN DEFENCE FOR SECURITY AND PEACE

### ABSTRACT

The new geopolitical scenario requires the EU to create a European defence system, also as a European pillar of NATO. The EU urgently needs to develop an autonomous hard power, while also strengthening its traditional soft power. For security and economic reasons, the EU should prefer an integrated defence system to the mere coordination of national defences. Recent polls show that this is also the citizens' preference. A dual model, including an autonomous military capacity and the ability to draw and coordinate national forces, could be set up rapidly, exploiting the Permanent Structured Cooperation on security and defence. A European Defence Union requires adequate financing and democratic governance. EU defence shall be at the service of peace and could be partly put at the disposal of the UN. The EU needs to think out of the box and act with ambition and speed.



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IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



## SHOULDN'T THE GOAL OF THE EUROPEAN DEFENCE UNION BE TO ENSURE PEACE AND SECURITY?

A new approach to the Union's defence policy is underway, but how can it avoid fragmented national policies? Europe's security needs a united European defence.

The brief makes bold proposals to strengthen the EU's foreign and security policy in the framework of current competencies and highlights the need for a **strategic shift towards a defence model that combines shared European military capabilities with the ability to mobilise national forces when needed.**

*By the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS) in cooperation with Centro Studi, formazione, comunicazione e progettazione sull'Unione Europea e la global governance (CesUE).*





# SPECIAL COVERAGE

## EUROPEAN DEFENCE: BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

Since US Vice President JD Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference, European leaders have been reacting hastily to decisions of the US government regarding the war in Ukraine and transatlantic military cooperation. After years of delay and procrastination, what Jean Monnet taught us about the European Union seems to be being confirmed: "Europe will be forged in crisis, and will be the sum of the solutions adopted for those crises".

Europeans realise that the US security umbrella, a cornerstone of what was hitherto called 'the West', might no longer be automatically extended to the Union and its member countries. Europe will have to make more resolute provisions itself for its protection, security and peace.

While the geostrategic pressure is undeniable, a unified EU response has yet to be achieved. Well-known political fault lines, national interests and strategic cultures question the EU's unity on defence matters. And for

many member states, defence planning and capability development without the US is hard to imagine.

The European Commission has reacted swiftly, and with the recent push of an €800 million 'ReArm EU' programme it is boosting the national financing of armaments with EU tools (fiscal rules, EU loans, EIB financing and cohesion policy) by making them more flexible. But alongside this, the Union is entering a different dimension of spending, and decisions that are taken now will have long-term impacts. They should therefore be based on sound assessment instead of on shock and hysteria. The Union should avoid jumping the gun under pressure. For progressive Europeanists the path chosen cannot be a simple militarisation of the Union. The challenge is far more complex: it is about reconciling Europe's self-perception with its global image as a peace project, successful soft power and credible defence and security provider.





# The EU and the Ukrainian people deserve more than armaments

by László Andor, Beatriz Abellán and David Rinaldi

The European Commission's push towards a sizable 'ReArm EU' programme that boosts the national financing of armaments with EU tools (fiscal rules, EU loans, EIB financing and cohesion policy) is to be understood first and foremost as a political response to the reprehensible treatment of Ukraine by the new US administration – and not only to the shameful public humiliation of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky by his US counterpart. Even more importantly, it is an answer to the unreasonable deal with Russia that the US is proposing – a deal that completely disregards Ukraine, and one that would concede Russian President Vladimir Putin parts of Ukrainian territory and key resources.

It is hard to accept that the Union has moved from a discussion on peace and security to a discussion on the European Defence Union, on boosting Europe's defence industry and plans for financing the region's militarisation.

ReArm EU can, at best, only partially respond to Europe's challenges. It is imperative for this financing programme to be accompanied by a more political means to unite military forces, develop a solid European security strategy and align diplomatic efforts at EU level. It should be clear that **true deterrence is not about how much we spend, but how united we can be. Europe's geopolitical peace power depends on our ability to speak with one voice.** And the unifying voice cannot be the most extreme voice in our diverse community.

It is not easy to reconcile all the objectives that need to be attained, but it is at least

useful to bring clarity to the debate by recalling the three different objectives that should today be addressed by EU leaders:

- 1) Providing comprehensive support to Ukraine with diplomatic, military and economic wherewithal, while actively promoting inclusive negotiations and fully backing the country's recovery, reconstruction and EU integration process. The focus must be on Ukraine, and the timeframe for this must be immediate.
- 2) Building a real EU defence and security strategy by integrating national defence systems as much as possible to give our Union a credible and strong stance in the new geopolitical order while boosting EU energy, diplomacy and defence capabilities. Here, the focus is on the EU and the timeframe for achieving this is the mid-term.

- 3) Working towards global disarmament and peace in all corners of the world, starting with conflict areas closer to our borders, fostering alliances with like-minded countries, a fair multilateral system and initiatives for lasting peace and arms reduction. For this objective, the focus is the entire planet and the timeframe for achieving it is the medium to long-term.

► *True deterrence is not about how much we spend, but how united we can be. Europe's geopolitical peace power depends on our ability to speak with one voice.*





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These objectives have different degrees of urgency, different timelines and different geographical foci, but there should still be political and policy coherence in the various sequential moves. The EU Commission presented ReArm EU as a plan to address objective 2. The plan only partly addresses objective 1, and it fails on its comprehensive inclusion of objectives 2 and 3. For instance, the defence investment must be part of a broader and long-term peace and security strategy. Isolating the defence agenda would be a short-sighted mistake.

Although the EC White Paper for European Defence, published on 19th March, offers a preliminary starting point for advancing the EU's defence capabilities, it falls short of providing a comprehensive framework for long-term strategic planning. Some key principles, including all three listed objectives, need to be incorporated into future action papers to design a series of measures that address both short- and long-term objectives coherently.

#### **SECURITY IS MORE THAN MILITARY EQUIPMENT**

Europeans deserve more than just a plan for militarisation. The concepts of defence and security must be expanded. **It is no longer sufficient to equate security solely with guns, tanks and helicopters. True security encompasses intelligence sharing, cybersecurity resilience, diplomatic engagement and all aspects of human security.** Security for both European and Ukrainian citizens must be viewed within a broader framework that includes protection from economic, social, environmental and energy-related threats. A viable security approach is one that offers protection from external and internal threats and that safeguards democracy, peace and prosperity by addressing the root causes of insecurity, disasters and conflicts.

► *It is no longer sufficient to equate security solely with guns, tanks and helicopters. True security encompasses intelligence sharing, cybersecurity resilience, diplomatic engagement and all aspects of human security.*

#### **UPHOLDING A MULTILATERAL RULES-BASED ORDER**

We must ensure that the EU Defence Union complements and does not undermine dialogue and diplomatic mechanisms, including strong engagement in multilateral forums and adherence to a multipolar rules-based order. The EU's peace and security framework, along with its defence agenda, must be rooted in





a strong commitment to international law, particularly international humanitarian law, which is severely under threat. This includes unequivocal support for the International Criminal Court (ICC), strict adherence to arms control agreements and regulations including the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, and the establishment of robust and ethical frameworks for the regulation of AI and autonomous weapons.

### EUROPE IS MORE THAN THE SUM OF ITS MEMBERS

It is widely understood that the room for manoeuvre within the existing treaties is limited and that member states are reluctant to share power and control in a truly integrated system. However, the current moment represents a historic opportunity for the EU to advance towards greater political unity. Given the scale of the challenge, it would be reasonable to expect institutions with the power of initiative – such as the European Commission – to open a political discussion that goes beyond merely addressing the member states' immediate financial needs. The Commission must demonstrate leadership by both giving and demanding, much as Jacques Delors did at his time. At the very least, the Commission should initiate a high-level political discussion, leading to a re-assessment of ambitions and possibilities by the EU Council. As highlighted in the FEPS study "Europe's defence for security and peace", the Commission could have proposed to reinvigorate the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) or to pool together a portion of national military capabilities to create a genuine European contingent. It is about seizing the opportunity to advance the European project. By fostering a collective approach to security, the EU can demonstrate that it is more than the sum of its member states. If we do not achieve more political unity now, when will we?

### MILITARISATION IS NOT WITHOUT RISKS

After correcting the computations of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, the Observatory on Public Finance at the Catholic University of Milan finds that in 2024, the EU spent 18.6 per cent more than Russia on military expenditure. If we add other European NATO allies (the UK, Norway and Turkey), the collective expenditure on defence was 58 per cent above that of Russia, a country at war. Such comparisons should highlight that the defence deficits of Europe should not be simply measured in quantitative terms but rather in qualitative ones.

**EU leaders should be mindful that large rearmament campaigns are not only costly but may also generate a further arms race and escalate conflicts.** Governments should also think twice before making their economic development dependent on investment in the military-industrial complex. Mirroring the US is not a wise approach. **There is also the risk that spending more on defence could be a pretext to cut on public services, the welfare state and development cooperation.** And even in a scenario where social, climate and cohesion spending remain unaffected – which is, unfortunately, not what we are seeing – if citizens perceive that the EU's only real priority is arming itself and funding military industry, the erosion of trust in the European project is certain. A balanced approach is needed, not only in terms of spending but also in setting priorities. Two days after presenting ReArm EU, the affordable and sustainable housing initiative was launched with €10 billion for two years. This is peanuts compared to the €800 billion promised for defence contractors and national armies. At a time when support for far-right political forces is high, and in some countries growing further, safeguards are also needed that boosted weaponry does not fall into the wrong hands.

Ill-conceived armament campaigns or military romanticism should not lead us to repeat the mistakes of history, like, for instance,

the rush to militarisation in the 1930s, when militarisation was partly seen as a cure for the economic depression. While upgrading defence cooperation in Europe is imperative, Ukraine itself will soon need a colossal reconstruction programme, in which Europeans will have to take the lead. The Ukrainian people deserve more than just weapons. And European people deserve more than the prospect of perpetual conflicts and a forever war on our borders.

► *EU leaders should be mindful that large rearmament campaigns are not only costly but may also generate a further arms race and escalate conflicts.*

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# Empowering Europe for progress

by Giovanni Grevi

There are times when history repeats itself, others when it rhymes and yet others when it takes new directions. At the current juncture in Europe, history is accelerating at warp speed, transforming the geostrategic context of European security and European integration. The Trump administration's behaviour in the last few weeks has severely affected strategic trust across the Atlantic.

The US has so far excluded Europe from bilateral peace negotiations with Russia over Ukraine, while expecting Europe to take responsibility for Ukraine's security largely on its own, if a deal is done. The narrative coming from Washington about American commitment to NATO and European security at large is ambivalent. Europeans have also been told that the main threat to Europe does not come from external powers, but from Europe, allegedly, censoring free speech and being undemocratic.

As Europeans process these messages, three considerations can be made. First, **the political and normative disconnect between much of Europe and the Trump administration, which is siding with illiberal and far-right forces across the continent, challenges the principles at the basis of the transatlantic partnership.** Second, Europe finds itself in a conundrum of its own making, having repeatedly failed to define its own priorities, and to empower itself to follow up on them in a more volatile and competitive world. Third, recent developments in Washington clearly call for a drastic shift in the European defence agenda.

Calling upon Europe to chart its own course and become less dependent on the US – in other words, advancing Europe's strategic autonomy – without recognising that large resources are required to strengthen Europe's security and defence, simply lacks credibility. Reinforcing Europe's defence is not the only dimension of the broader agenda of European empower-

► *The disconnect between much of Europe and the Trump administration challenges the principles at the basis of the transatlantic partnership.*

ment that EU member states and institutions are defining – which includes investments in innovation, enhancing Europe's competitiveness and upholding Europe's democracy and welfare – but it is a pressing priority. Relative to the 2 per cent threshold agreed at NATO level, most European countries hugely underspent from the late 1990s until 2022, enjoying the

'peace dividend' while Russia, among various other powers, has been steadily expanding its military for the last 15 years. This pattern has left Europeans with razor-thin weapons stockpiles, as the efforts to support Ukraine over the last three years have painfully shown. Furthermore, relative to major military powers, several EU member states spend far more on personnel than on capabilities, and European defence expenditure is fragmented. Given this background, debating whether Europe as a whole or Russia spend more on defence today is inconclusive. The bottom line is indisputable: Europe sorely lacks critical capabilities, from air and missile defences to artillery, missiles and space, and is largely dependent on the US across the board for its defence – an unsustainable situation that requires spending more, better and, increasingly, European.

European leaders have taken ownership of the defence agenda, meeting since mid-February in smaller groupings and at the European Council level to work out shared priorities for defence and support for Ukraine. This includes the contentious question of the deployment of European troops in Ukraine following a possible





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peace deal, which would involve a coalition of the willing and depend on an (increasingly uncertain) backup from the US.

Upgrading European defence demands consequent financial investment. The defence package outlined by EU Commission President von der Leyen on 4th March, the conclusions of the 6th March European Council and the momentous turnabout in Germany's fiscal stance to finance defence and infrastructure investments, mark important steps forward. At the EU level, the agenda so far builds on three main pillars, namely the exemption of additional national defence expenditure from the budget deficit limits under the Stability and Growth Pact (which is estimated to generate about €650 billion by 2030), the proposed €150 billion loan backed up by the EU budget in order to boost joint investment in key capability domains, and the objective to mobilise private finance. This package is part of a wider evolving picture.

**Member states have asked the Commission to propose additional funding sources from existing EU funding programmes, and the debate will soon start on expanding defence allocations under the next EU multiannual financial perspectives (2028-2034).**

Several questions remain concerning the actual amount of additional resources that will be mobilised, how they will be spent, and implications for other investment priorities. It is essential that additional spending delivers the capabilities that Europe actually needs from a military standpoint. This consideration should drive collaborative efforts – from the research and development phase to procurement – to build economies of scale and strengthen the European defence technological and industrial base. The forthcoming white paper on the future of European defence is expected to advance this debate, further outlining concrete instruments to catalyse efforts.

**These steps are urgent but, ultimately, the sustainability of the European defence agenda will depend on political unity within and between the member states.** This is why it is essential to address the fiscal implications of growing defence spending for other critical priorities. It may be difficult to fully rule out trade-offs, but strengthening Europe's defence cannot come at the cost of weakening its social and political cohesion. Establishing a much larger collective borrowing capacity for European defence and critical infrastructure, which

would help preserve the necessary fiscal space for innovation, welfare, the energy transition and international cooperation, must be part of the solution.

The defence agenda should also be driven by a larger sense of purpose, consistent with Europe's interests and values on the international stage. The case needs to be made that taking responsibility for Europe's security does not amount to a zero-sum mindset but is a necessary condition to pursue a broader global agenda. Empowering Europe should enable the EU and its member states to address major global challenges, such as the impact of climate change, protectionism, armed conflicts, declining human security, the reversal of development patterns in many countries, the growing concentration of wealth and technological power, democratic backsliding and multilateral gridlock.

**In response to these largely regressive trends, Europe's core message should be one of progress and partnership with all those willing to engage in solving problems and delivering global public goods.** This narrative of progress should define Europe in a fraught and contested international context. But to be credible in upholding its values and priorities, at home and abroad, Europe must be strong to deter further aggression from Russia, support Ukraine and maintain peace. The choice for Europe is between becoming a major power – a power for progress – or being powerless in a world where others call the shots.



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# How the EU can support Europe's NATO

by Sven Biscop

There is a paradox at the heart of European defence. Fundamentally, European states do not trust any scheme for harmonising defence planning and capability development that does not include the United States. Yet the reason why such harmonisation is necessary is precisely because the US might not show up. The irony is that just as the focus of the European debate was shifting from the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy to a 'European pillar' in NATO, the US announced its intention to withdraw its conventional capabilities, prodding Europe to take ownership of the conventional defence of Europe, under the American nuclear umbrella. Suddenly, there is no more time to debate – Europe must act, and fast.

The operational dimension of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) works: the EU does conduct military operations, although it could be more ambitious. But not a single EU member state really believes in the CSDP as a framework for defence planning and capability development. For some reason, however, most want to pretend that they do. The EU Military Staff therefore continues to run the Headline Goal Process, aimed at creating an army corps for expeditionary operations that everyone knows will never see the light of day, and the European Defence Agency keeps on updating the Capability Development Plan, which all are aware has zero influence on national defence planning. Knowingly setting pointless tasks: in the private sector, this is called harassment.

One might ask if this matters, apart from the waste of talented people? It does, because Europe is missing intelligence, air defence, deep precision strike, military space and cyber, air transport, command and control as well as secure communications. No European state alone can afford

these strategic enablers in quantities that matter, so they must coordinate and spend their additional defence effort on these strategic enablers. Of course, the US contributes these to NATO, which is why, for decades, Europeans have not seen the urgency. Russia's war against Ukraine finally seemed to have convinced them to take things more seriously.

► *It is not enough for all European states to be increasing their defence budgets. The issue is that all of Europe's armed forces put together do not make up a complete force package.*

Suddenly everyone was talking about a 'European pillar' of NATO, although mostly without defining it, and certainly without any roadmap for achieving it. Yet a 'European pillar' requires a set of European states to take a political initiative. It was not going to drop from the

sky – until it did. The US suddenly seemed to decree that in the European theatre, there would only be a European conventional force.

NATO's new force model actually already went in that direction: it aims for a force of 300,000 troops in a high state of readiness on the Eastern flank. European troops, but it was understood that the US would continue to provide the enablers. Furthermore, there is a rule in the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) that in no area should more than 50 per cent of the capability be provided by a single ally (meaning the US), but this was never enforced. Now, the US seems to be implying that its conventional assets might be withdrawn from Europe, although to what extent and how fast remains unclear. **The US military will definitely want to maintain a considerable part of the base structure, not only to be able to redeploy to Europe if NATO Article 5 is activated, but also to serve American deployments into the Middle East and other theatres.** A transition period will be inevitable





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because it will take time for the Europeans to adapt their defence posture.

It is now very urgent, therefore, for the European allies (and that means everybody except the US and Canada) to sit together and decide which of the strategic enablers that until now only the US provided they will acquire themselves, and in which numbers, over and above their current NDPP targets. They must then order the NATO apparatus to adapt the NDPP accordingly – if Europeans are to take ownership, the logical implication is that they can use the NATO command structure as they see fit. Whether this is an implication that the US has foreseen and is willing to accept also remains to be seen.

The role of the EU is to support its member states to realise this ambition through its investment in the defence industry. One cannot invest productively, however, if one does not know which force one is building: a link must, therefore, be created between the Commission initiatives and the NDPP, which must serve as its guidance. Without a direct channel, a club of states that is a member of both NATO and the EU can provide the Commission with the necessary input, but eventually a formal mechanism for EU-NATO cooperation on classified issues will have to be set up.

► *Following the shameful treatment of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky by the White House, which subsequently cut all aid to Ukraine, many in Europe have begun to wonder if this American president is still our ally, or if he is Vladimir Putin's ally.*

There is still a role for the CSDP, however: organising a pool of forces fit for expeditionary operations outside Europe, on the Southern flank in particular, which NATO is not preparing for. This cannot be the headline goal, though, which is unrealistic. Nor can it be the Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC), which is an empty box – the two battlegroups (the two combat battalions) on which it is based, cannot deal with any but the least demanding scenario. A new initiative is needed.

The new US view on the defence of Europe is not illogical. But the US must be careful that in its haste and ire it does not endanger Europe, and thus its own interests there, by putting in doubt its overall commitment. Of course, the US nuclear umbrella remains the ultimate guarantee (and European leaders, for their part, would do well not to question that prematurely).

But Washington should state unequivocally that although the Europeans will man the first line of conventional deterrence and defence, American reinforcements will be there if ever Article 5 is activated. The seed of distrust has been sown, however, and that is very damaging to the credibility of deterrence. **Following the shameful treatment of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky by the White House, which subsequently cut all aid to Ukraine, many in Europe have begun to wonder if this American president is still our ally, or if he is Vladimir Putin's ally.**

Europe hopefully has learned an important lesson about grand strategy. Only strong players can conclude beneficial alliances, for they are worth having as allies. Such a player defends itself, and calls on its allies only when in need. Weak players pay the price for their dependence. Those who cannot defend themselves ought not to be surprised if their stronger allies end up treating them as a protectorate.

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# Rebuilding European security via a 'supragovernmental avant-garde'

by Almut Möller

Given the profound change of direction of US foreign and security policies, a group of European countries is moving decisively to rebuild the European security architecture. This will impact the EU's cohesion. But the risks of a more differentiated EU are outweighed by the urgent need to preserve Europe's capacity to act in light of the existential threat of another war in Europe.

The return of Donald Trump to the White House means that Europeans are having to adapt fast to a tremendous shift in US foreign and security policy. The impact on Europe and the EU is profound and goes well beyond the future of European security: Europeans will have to do no less than rebuild both the political and security architecture for their continent. The post-WWII architecture exists no longer, and Europe has very high stakes in ensuring it now takes its destiny into its own hands and shapes what comes next.

**This profound European rewiring will have to rethink the old approach of a division of labour between the European pillar of NATO and the EU and its members, as well as non-EU members, such as the United Kingdom, Turkey and Norway.** It will take place as pre-existing internal divisions within the EU deepen further, because these will be fuelled from the other side of the Atlantic. Not all EU members will be pulling in the same direction on these fundamental matters, as interventions by the governments of Hungary and Slovakia suggest, and liberal Europe needs

to take decisive action against being destroyed both from outside and within.

► *This profound European rewiring will have to rethink the old approach of a division of labour between the European pillar of NATO and the EU and its members, as well as non-EU members, such as the United Kingdom, Turkey and Norway.*

The urgent need to form a group of countries that now moves decisively is evident, and we have seen this nucleus emerge around the E5+ grouping (France, Germany, Italy, Poland, the UK plus other countries) since the February 2025 meetings in Paris. This will affect the overall cohesion and purpose of the EU, but the implications of a lack of action would be far worse.

All of this means that questions of governance mechanisms of the EU's contribution to

security need to look much further than the EU, the role of the new Commissioner for Defence, and the interaction with the High Representative/Vice President, the new European Parliament committee, or the European Defence Agency. All of them will have to play a role but in a completely revamped architecture.

**This is no longer about a division of labour between NATO and the EU. It is rather about a new overall structure to keep Europeans safe.**

In a discussion paper in July 2024, the European Policy Centre revisited modes of differentiated integration. Our conclusion then was that the most pressing need to get things done was in European security. The model that we put forward is one that protects the DNA of the EU: if a group of EU countries is ready to move ahead against the opposition of a limited number of national governments and can only do so outside the Union, this process should follow the notion of a 'supragovernmental avant-garde', allowing the willing member states to extend the level of cooperation/integration outside the EU treaty framework, while adhering to a transparent set





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► *This is no longer about a division of labour between NATO and the EU. It is rather about a new overall structure to keep Europeans safe.*

of predefined principles, including the commitment to 'replicate', respect and promote the Union's supranational nature. It must be clear that this avantgarde is not an inter-governmental construct – even if it was established outside the EU treaties – but that it is rather something like a 'mini-EU' with binding rules and strong supranational features, including the specific role and involvement of EU institutions. Given there is a strong role for non-EU countries, first and foremost the UK, such a concept will have to find ways to combine both elements. This will not be easy – mostly for political reasons, but also because of legal and institutional questions.

In more concrete terms, such a supra-governmental avant-garde should: 1) be open to all

member states willing to join and respect common underlying principles; 2) involve or even strengthen the role of EU institutions in the differentiated areas, including the Commission and the European Parliament; 3) keep non-participating member states informed; 4) refrain from setting up new permanent parallel institutional structures outside the Union; and 5) aim to integrate the legal norms adopted and the cooperation initiated outside the EU into the Union's treaty framework as soon as possible.

If the participating member states adhered to these core guidelines, they would not 'only' be able to move forward, they could also do so in a way that would respect the community method.

To be frank, **cooperation outside the Union's framework will create challenges for the EU system, in terms of legitimacy but also in terms of challenging existing areas of integration – for example, by funding no longer being channelled through the Union.** It carries the risk of undermining the EU single market, the backbone of the EU, and it could play into the hands

of political forces on the far right and far left, who want to actively undermine the EU institutions to establish a 'Europe of nation states'.

However, at this point, the risks of a more differentiated EU are outweighed by the urgent need to overcome blockades and preserve Europe's capacity to act in the face of an existential threat of another war in Europe.



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# Better, not bitter, peace

## EU options for a sustainable ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine

by Jonas J. Driedger

The Trump administration's recent actions might well result in a bitter peace in which Ukrainian and European security are precarious, renewed escalation likely and transatlantic relations even worse than they are now. But despite the perils, Europe can secure a long-term ceasefire that safeguards Ukrainian rights, bolsters European security, constrains the Russian regime, stabilises transatlantic relations and reduces the risk of inadvertent escalation.

Amidst the chaos of the Trump administration's recent actions, Europe faces long-term threats that go well beyond the already crucial matters of Ukrainian freedom, sovereignty and security. For starters, the remnants of the global rules-based order are in danger of being sacrificed at the altar of great power politics and the whims of a handful of old authoritarian men. The Trump administration's recent flurry of hectic and unilateral actions could well signify that, to reach a long-term ceasefire and minimise American involvement quickly, the United States is trying to force Ukraine into giving up its rightful claims on the territories that the Russian regime had brutally attacked, conquered and annexed in 2014 and 2022. If successful, this would constitute a potentially catastrophic precedent wherein a state illegally annexed territory and successfully coerced others into accepting these annexations – contradicting the core tenet of the United Nations and damaging norms that have contributed to diminishing warfare across the globe.

► *The strategic situation in Europe could deteriorate even further, locking in an unstable security competition and heightened risk of escalation for decades to come.*

Furthermore, **the strategic situation in Europe could deteriorate even further, locking in an unstable security competition and heightened risk of escalation for decades to come.** The US had been one of the key advocates for extending NATO membership perspective to Ukraine, a claim it maintained even under Trump's first presidency. If Ukraine was now forced into abandoning its membership perspective, the Russian regime would successfully have used offensive war to blackmail the US and NATO. This would spell bad news for the security of Russia's many neighbours that are aligned with NATO or the United States, while Ukraine would be open

to renewed attack and feeling understandably betrayed by the West – paving the way for authoritarian, militarist and revanchist forces that could re-escalate the conflict at any time.

### | PERILS AND POSSIBILITIES

However, three main factors also open significant political leeway for Europe to curtail, contain and minimise these dangers. First, notwithstanding his personality, ideology and volatility, Trump's actions, for now, indicate he wants a quick and sustainable ceasefire. If Europe offered a promising path towards it, the notoriously fickle president might be swayed. Second, the Russian regime might well be ready to be convinced and coerced into compromising on some of its far-reaching war goals, as it is far from being an untiring and single-minded war machine. Third, the actions and pronouncements from the French president, the British prime minister, the EU Commission





and the parties that are likely to form Germany's next government suggest that European policy-makers are starting to realise both the dangers and possibilities they are facing.

and for demands for Russian war reparations. Europe, however, would aid and support Ukraine in maintaining these rights and claims, and in resolving them to Kyiv's satisfaction in the long run and by diplomatic means.

► *The chances of success will be higher if Europe focuses on core goals over others that it deems less feasible or salient.*

## | A CEASEFIRE STRATEGY FOR EUROPE

If Europeans want to avert the great dangers of the current situation and advance their values and interests, they need to 1) identify core goals; 2) accept that achieving secondary goals will be unfeasible in the near future; and 3) implement feasible and sustainable policies to reach the core goals.

Not all Europeans think alike. But many would, and all should, support three goals: safeguarding international law; supporting the human rights of Ukrainians and Ukrainian democracy; and ensuring security from Russian aggression while minimising the risk of inadvertent escalation. Making steps towards these three goals will be tough, as Europe still lacks unity and crucial capabilities, battlefield dynamics disadvantage Ukraine, and the room for potential cooperation with the Trump administration is small, at best. **The chances of success will thus be higher if Europe focuses on core goals over others that it deems less feasible or salient. Such a focused strategy would likely entail that, at least in the short-term, Ukrainian NATO membership and reconstitution of its legal territory should not be prioritised.** The same goes for the criminal prosecution of Putin and other Russian elites,

## | EUROPEAN ACTION

Europe will have to quickly implement and uphold specific measures to realise its core goals. First and foremost, for a sustainable ceasefire, Ukraine requires robust security assurances to deter renewed Russian aggression against unoccupied territory. **Detering the Russian regime in Ukraine would also serve to safeguard the borders Russia shares with the EU and NATO.** Such security assurances would consist of mechanisms of ongoing support that would be increased in case of Russian aggression or escalation, including the training and equipment of Ukrainian soldiers, up to second-line European troops in Ukraine, preferably with some US backing and sanctions. Conceivably, and in the long run, such assurances could also be realised via EU accession and the EU's collective defence clause (42.7 TEU).

A second measure is to help free Ukraine heal. **With a ceasefire and robust security assurances, Ukraine could and should start to repair the immense damage that the war has inflicted on its people and economy, solidify democracy and re-establish a modicum of normalcy.** All this will require economic cooperation and aid as well as expertise across a

wide range of areas. The EU is well-positioned to provide all of this, possibly in the context of the EU accession process. Akin to West Germany during the Cold War, this would also allow Ukraine to pursue justice and reunification as a stable, responsible and strong democracy firmly embedded in what will be left of the political West.

The third measure is about the short-term: getting the Russian regime to finally relent in its aggression and agree to a long-term ceasefire that lays out all the conditions in a transparent, unambiguous and enforceable way. If Ukraine declared that it did not seek to join NATO any time soon and that it would forego military means to regain its rightful territories, the Russian regime would have some positive incentives to agree. Additionally, some sanctions relief could be offered. These positive incentives, however, would need to be accompanied by clear signals that continued or renewed aggression would reliably damage the regime. This would mainly be done by dual efforts of bolstering Ukraine's armed forces while ramping up sanctions. This might be politically feasible: recently, the EU





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adopted its 16th sanction package against Russia while increasing weapons production and responding to the Trump administration's temporary halt in weapons deliveries to Ukraine. Meanwhile, the Trump administration changed course again, reinstating weapons deliveries and threatening sanctions if Russia was unwilling to negotiate.

For Europe, taking this path requires a well-calibrated mixture of initiative, determination, coordination, circumspection, will and patience. Hopefully, it will succeed, as the alternatives will likely be dire.

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# The timeliness of peace

## Why the EU should engage with feminism

by Annika Bergman Rosamond and Hanna Walfridsson

**Militarised responses to ongoing conflicts dominate discussions at the EU level, and in member states committed to a feminist foreign policy. The EU has a responsibility to include a range of voices on war and peace. Yet, the silencing of feminist voices on conflict resolution echoes loudly in the EU's security and defence policy.**

War continues to rage in Europe, as Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has entered its third year. Forced displacement has left women and children vulnerable and homeless, exposing them to insecurity and gendered harm. Conflict-related sexual violence is systematically inflicted upon civilians and soldiers alike, as a tactic of oppression and dehumanisation by the Russian armed forces.

**While it is important to acknowledge the atrocities currently taking place in Ukraine, we should not overlook other ongoing conflicts, defined by gendered violence and oppression – not least in Gaza.** With the brittle ceasefire between Israel and Hamas now shattered, the total death toll in Gaza has surpassed 50,000 victims. Most of these victims are women and children, who are now left without home, food and sanitation. Meanwhile, sexual violence is widely perpetrated in the armed conflict in Sudan, harming lives and unsettling any sense of security. This has left civilian infrastructure in pieces and a staggering 12 million people displaced.

Multiple crises are unfolding globally, not least in Europe and its vicinity. A direct

consequence of this development is the normalisation of militarised responses to crises and conflict, disabling other politicised approaches that do not exclusively build on war preparation. Calling for armament and militarised interventions, EU member states and their leaders – including key EU officials – fail to take account of feminist reflections on armed conflict and gendered harms, even though several member states have professed to conduct feminist foreign policies (FFP).

► *Most of the victims in Gaza are women and children, who are now left without home, food and sanitation. Meanwhile, sexual violence is widely perpetrated in the armed conflict in Sudan, harming lives and unsettling their sense of security.*

While it is perhaps understandable that EU leaders and high-ranking officials feel a need

to focus on armed responses to conflict given the situation in Ukraine, they should, to a larger extent, reflect on non-militarised approaches to conflict resolution. In particular, they lack attentiveness to gender-just peace, with feminist understandings of the dynamics of war being silenced within the Union.

Yet in times of militarisation, feminist deliberations on armed conflict and pacifism could not be timelier. Pacifism as a peace strategy has long preoccupied feminist peace organisations and scholars. As feminist philosopher Kimberly Hutchings notes, **conversations about the destructive forces of war and non-violent alternatives are always timely and should not be confined to periods of peace.** Although the EU does not adhere to absolute pacifism, it provides a framework for considering alternative ways of resolving conflict.

Some feminists have argued that pacifism allows for the use of force in very distinct circumstances to resist oppression or in the name of self-defence. Ukrainian feminists have called for military assistance from the EU, deeming it necessary for the survival of the nation. Admittedly, this is a contentious issue. All EU member





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states that have adopted a feminist foreign policy are of the view that it is compatible with armament, militarisation and the provision of military assistance to Ukraine. Germany has specifically stated that its FFP is not pacifist, a statement echoed by other EU FFP states. Their reluctance to address non-violent alternatives is striking, as FFP is rooted in notions of peaceful conflict resolution and strong support for the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda – an agenda that emphasises women's participation in peacebuilding and the eradication of conflict-related sexual violence.

The European External Action Service is an important hub for the dispersion of the Union's commitment to the WPS agenda. The EU has also adopted several gender action plans. It is quite stunning, then, that there has been

► *Conversations about the destructive forces of war and non-violent alternatives are always timely and should not be confined to periods of peace.*

so little attentiveness to distinctively feminist concerns within the Union in these militarising times. **Such silencing runs the risk of further embedding gendered inequalities, while doing little to address the pressing issue of war in Europe.** As a gender actor, the EU needs to take a stance on the gendered harms of war in diplomatic negotiations and multilateral settings. For FFP EU states this is even more important.

The EU can take a cue from Ukraine, where the parliament has adopted a law to provide reparations and support for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. By specifically integrating references to sexual violence into legislative frameworks, Ukraine has sought to ensure the legal status of survivors so that they can acquire medical and social support. This is an important step towards justice, retribution and recovery. War involves a range of everyday experiences. Many of these are violent and continue to harm civilians in the aftermath of conflict. A just peace, then, requires more than the absence of war.

As a gender actor, the EU should assist Ukraine and other war-torn countries post-conflict. For

example, **the EU should ensure that retributive justice and accountability prevail.** This requires the Union to refrain from further securitisation and to avoid overly militarised approaches, instead opting for political solutions. During times of conflict, breaches of human security can be far-reaching. Conflicts cause ruptures in the fabric of society, infringing the fundamental rights and freedoms of those affected. This is also true in post-conflict settings. **The EU must acknowledge that human security issues cannot be solved by militarism alone.** Moreover, the EU should more visibly consider how it can support the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of Ukraine once a peace deal has been struck.

As the EU seeks to resolve the war of aggression in Ukraine, the member states should address the thorniness of militarism without silencing feminist and other critical voices. While recognising the urgent military needs of Ukraine, the Union should include non-military responses in its deliberations. Echoing Kimberly Hutchings, it is always timely to talk about peace, pacifism and war – and this conversation needs to involve Ukrainian civil society actors.

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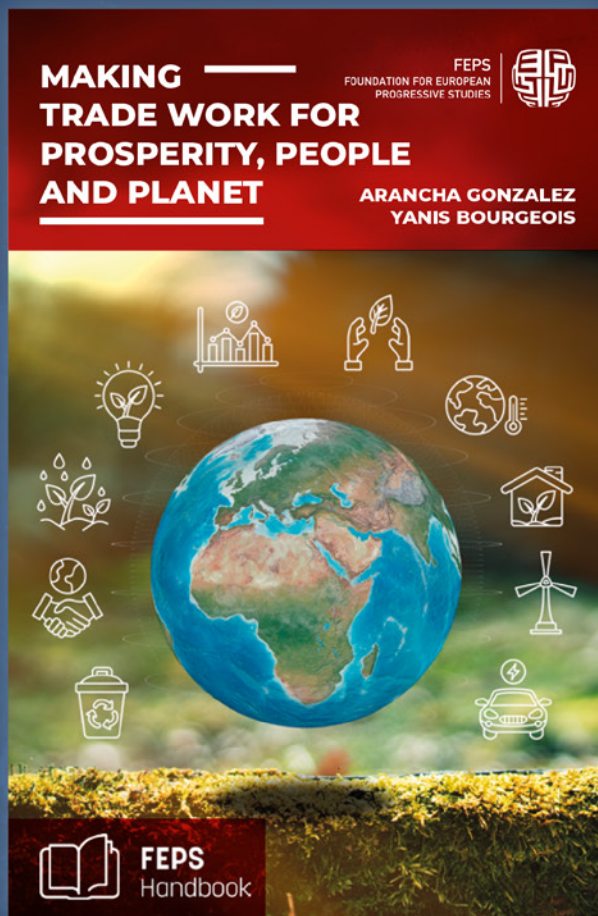




BOOK

# Making trade work for prosperity, people and planet

By Arancha González Laya and Yanis Bourgeois



Arancha González Laya and Yanis Bourgeois offer a comprehensive perspective on the **importance of open trade and economic integration**. The book explores the trajectory of trade, the necessary regulatory mechanisms, and the imperative of making trade a beneficial force for all rather than just a select few.

While past efforts have primarily focused on enabling trade through negotiations and agreements, this primer underscores the importance of **ensuring trade works to advance prosperity, enhance the people's well-being, and safeguard the sustainability of our planet**.

*"In this book, readers will benefit from Arancha González Laya's deep knowledge of all aspects of international trade. It is both a reference book and an inspiration. Trade will always lead to discussions, this book will make the discussion more factual and knowledgeable. The next step is a Feminist Trade Policy!" Ann Linde, Former Minister for Foreign Affairs of Sweden.*



**This publication is part of the FEPS Primer series.**



# FOCUS

## TARIFFS, COUNTER-TARIFFS AND A PAUSE ON TARIFFS

Never before have tariffs garnered such intense public attention. And what was unimaginable in the past – that the fiercest assault on free trade would come from the US, for so long considered the staunchest defender of free markets and laissez-faire principles – has become reality. In addition, US President Trump's new stance frames the EU as an adversary, or even an enemy. Tariffs are now seen as a necessary evil to correct trade imbalances and revive domestic production.

Ironically, the very oligarchs who cheered the US president only a few months ago, now tremble at massive market losses, and lobby fiercely to stall his tariff agenda. More than external pressure from (former?) allies like the EU and Canada, it is this internal backlash that has temporarily frozen Trump's tariff plans. But this delay may prove only strategic: the goal of reshoring supply chains does not necessarily

require immediate tariffs – the mere threat can spur companies to build factories on US soil. By postponing implementation, the US administration buys time for relocation, ensuring that when the tariffs finally strike, they disrupt a smaller slice of the value chain. US imports therefore have time to contract before the tariffs enter into force.

Who will win the fight on trade diversion? Who will win the global restructuring of supply chains? And more importantly, is the EU ready to stand its ground? In this high-stakes game of big announcements, there is a method to the madness: to impact the economy and investment flows, expectations are as powerful as policies themselves. For this dossier, the Progressive Post has gathered outlooks on the future of international trade, and the opportunities that might exist for the EU to be able to seize.



# Trump's tariff boomerang

by Pascal Lamy

Most trade pundits and a few others were shocked by the magnitude of Trump's tariff announcements on 2nd April: a replica of McKinley's famous US tariff wall of 1890, or of the Smoot-Hawley legislation of 1930. If there are lessons of history, these precedents are bad omens indeed. But this is not the only reason to believe that, once again, the US and, to a lesser extent, all of us, will pay dearly for such a massive blunder. Hopefully, however, and as a consequence, it is unlikely to last very long.

There are several other factors at play. Without entering into any technical details, let us consider the three layers of tariffs that were announced: a floor of 10 per cent to increase budget revenues, a sectoral tariff of 25 per cent (for cars, steel, aluminium etc.) to 're-industrialise' the country, and a so-called 'reciprocal' unilaterally (and by many accounts weirdly) determined tariff as a blackmail tool to gain whatever advantages for the US in negotiations in exchange for removing the threat. A typical mafia-like method. All in all, this amounts to a tariff fence around the US of around 25 per cent for 80 per cent of imports, the remaining 20 per cent being raw materials or their equivalent.

If implemented, the immediate impact will be to slow down imports (thus reducing the expected budget bonanza), trigger inflation, prompt interest rate hikes and consequently reduce economic growth. **Industry relocation is unlikely to happen, given the higher production costs in the US and the added cost of imported inputs and components in an economy that presently has quasi-full employment, including immigrants.**

► *Industry relocation is unlikely to happen, given the higher production costs in the US and the added cost of imported inputs and components in an economy that presently has quasi-full employment, including immigrants.*

Arm-twisting negotiations might bring marginal concessions from small countries with no capacity to retaliate, but it will not work with big shots such as the EU, China or India who are unlikely to cave in, even if they keep the door open to win-win negotiations. Add to these meagre benefits the high bureaucratic costs of determining and controlling the rules of origin of imports with different tariffs on different countries and an extensive list of tariff positions, and you get a recipe for failure.

These results should not be surprising given that Trump's trade policy relies on false

premises, starting with his view that the US economy is doing poorly, which is nonsense if you benchmark it with other countries. Or that the US trade deficit is a weakness, whereas, in reality, **Americans can afford to consume more than they produce thanks to the world-wide dominance of the dollar.** Or that the dollar is overvalued, which does not stand the test of serious economic studies.

**The blunt truth is, unfortunately, that while the US economy is in good shape, US society is in a bad one.** What is missing is a proper welfare state that would cushion the impact of technological change and trade opening, an issue we have tried to discuss for many years with our Democratic friends, so far to no effect. The poorest part of American households who voted for Trump will have to pay the price of his tariff vagaries and will hopefully change their minds once they feel the effects of inflation in their pocketbooks. Under these conditions, we should expect a domestic pushback against these trade measures to take shape in the US eventually. This will probably happen later rather than sooner given that many of us were wrongfooted in expecting a quick reaction





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and a more visible containment of the president through 'checks and balances', whether via Congress, the judicial system, the media, or even street protests which could turn violent.

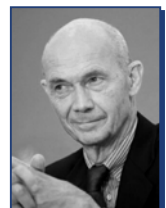
► *Americans can afford to consume more than they produce thanks to the worldwide dominance of the dollar.*

The surprise pushback came on 9th April when bond markets sanctioned the US debt with rising interest rates, which triggered Trump's pause, except with China. But the question of whether this is a U-turn or a short-lived temporisation remains open. **Uncertainty and its negative impact on the economy will persist for some time.** This development also leaves open the question whether some sort of international coalition could be built to coordinate reactions or countermeasures, including to the benefit of poorer or vulnerable countries that

will be disproportionately hit, as is the case in Africa, for example Lesotho, which has been hit with a tariff of 50 per cent on textiles and clothing. Brussels would be well advised to consider this scenario seriously, noting that Japan, Korea and China, for instance, have already begun discussing how to react.

To conclude, contrary to conventional wisdom, this trade conflict between the US and 60 countries is not truly a global trade war. After all, the US represents 13 per cent of world imports, and I see no reason to believe that the rest of the world will adopt Trump's voodoo trade economics. Trump's recent pause for all concerned countries except China on a part (but not all) of his tariffs clearly increases the US-China tensions, accelerating a more intense, hence more dangerous rivalry than just trade tensions. But more importantly, **let us not be fooled by this well-crafted Hollywood-like daily trade show. What matters much more for us, and many others, is the danger the US president embodies for democracy, social justice, international law, corruption, peace and human dignity.** This is the big game.

*Pascal Lamy,  
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European commissioner,  
and vice-president of FEPS*





# Trump's tariffs could be a boon for the EU

by Anna Kolesnichenko

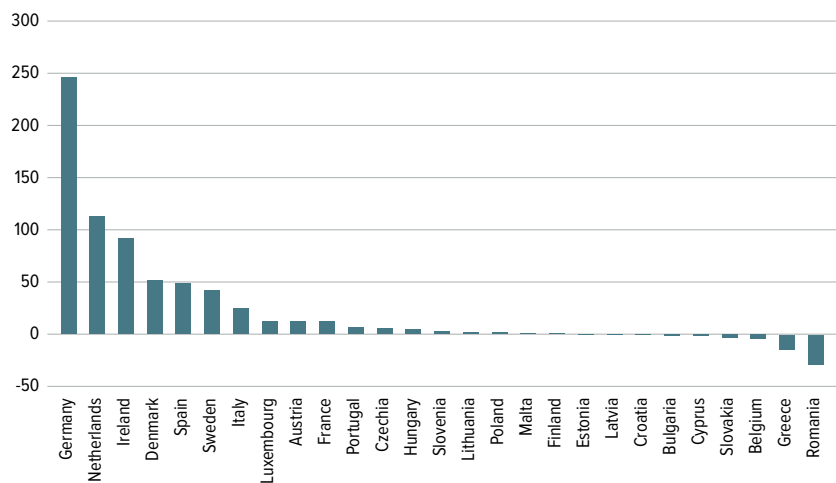
Amid the shock from Trump's tariffs, there is a potential boon. Yes, tariffs will likely be inflationary for the US and may dampen global economic activity. But the kind of rebalancing of global trade and financial flows that they will cause may turn out to be beneficial, in particular for Europe – if it comes up with a proper policy response.

It is well known that the trade regime we have had until now has produced many distortions in the global economy: some countries are running massive current account surpluses (China and Germany), and others (notably the US) run current account deficits. This means de-industrialisation in the deficit countries and overcapacity in exporting countries. Trump is correctly concerned about this. His method, however, is sub-optimal, to put it mildly. A much better solution would be capital controls on financial flows to the US, which would also cause a rebalancing of trade. Yet it is difficult for any US administration to do this, as it would undermine the 'exorbitant privilege' of the dollar as an international reserve currency. Interestingly, in 2019 two US senators proposed a bill, the Competitive Dollar for Jobs and Prosperity Act, which called for taxes on capital inflows, but it did not garner much support at the time. Now these ideas are back on the table. The Trump administration and think tanks close to it are mulling over the idea of taxes on capital inflows.

The apparently increasing difficulty the US has in keeping the reserve role for the dollar and supporting its own economy simultaneously points to the need for the reform of the

international economic architecture. **The idea of an international clearing currency that would help balance the external economic positions of countries, like the 'bancor' proposed by John Maynard Keynes in the aftermath of the second world war, returns to the discussion table from time to time, especially when fragilities in the international economic architecture are exposed.** The idea attracted serious attention in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, when the governor of

the Chinese central bank suggested using IMF special drawing rights (SDR) to balance international positions. SDR is an international reserve asset created by the IMF, like the bancor, but it is not currently used for balancing external accounts of countries. In the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, the Chinese proposal to use it to this aim was rejected by the US establishment. Today, the destruction of the old trade system by the Trump administration might give rise to a new push for global reform.



Current account balance in 2024, in billion euros. Source: Eurostat





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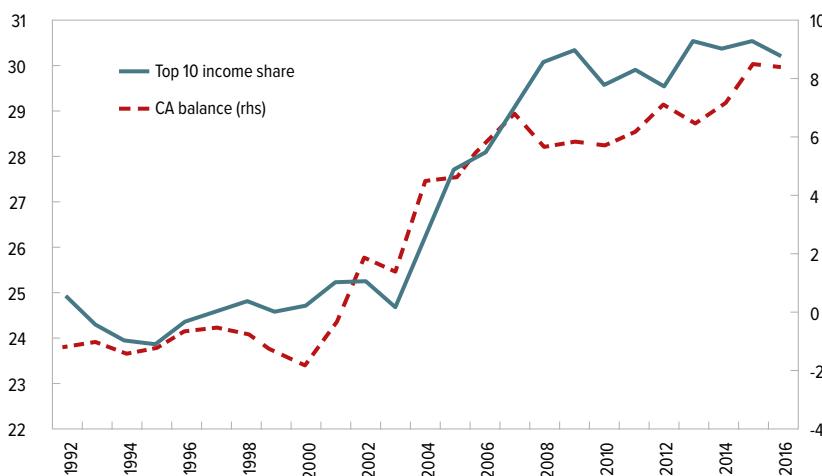
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What can the EU do to navigate global rebalancing? The European problem is a lack of internal demand, as evidenced by the massive current account surpluses. Germany is the biggest contributor, followed by the Netherlands and Ireland. Dutch and Irish data, however, are substantially inflated. In the Netherlands, this is due to the fact that trade is registered at the port of entry, with Dutch ports being the main European ports; and in Ireland the data are distorted due to tax evasion.

The case of German current account (CA) surpluses has been discussed for a long time: the suppression of real wages and low investments lead to a mismatch of supply and demand, with the resulting push to export the excess supply elsewhere. **These trade dynamics contributed to the emergence of substantial imbalances within the euro area and the subsequent debt crisis in the southern EU countries in 2008-2012. After the crisis, when southern Europe could no**

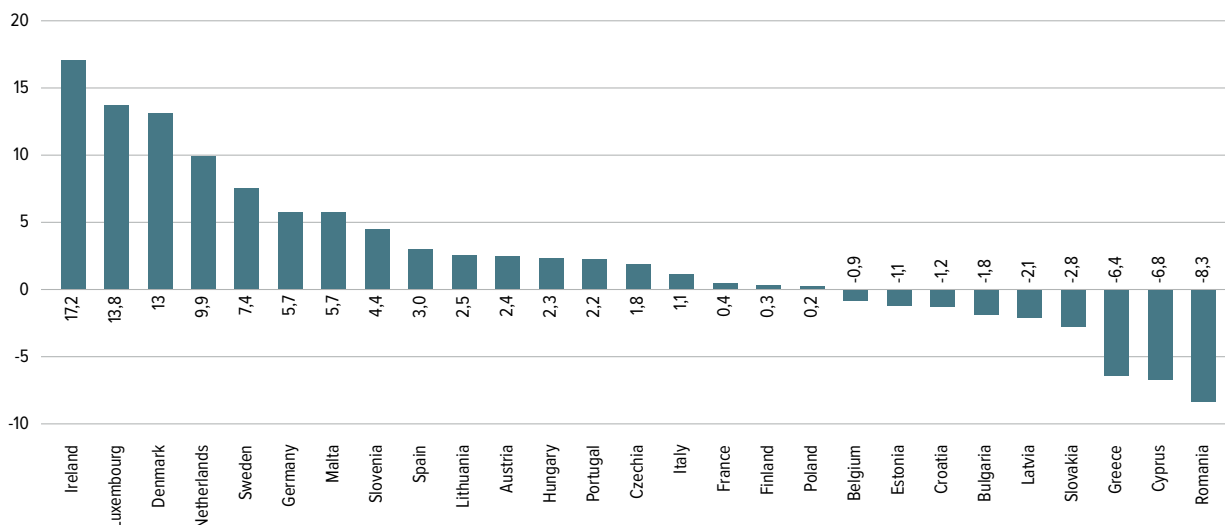
**longer absorb German surpluses, the surpluses increasingly flowed to the US.** With US markets less accessible for European producers under Trump's tariffs, the main solution for the EU will be to stimulate internal demand. In their 2020 book 'Trade Wars Are Class Wars' Matthew Klein and Michael Pettis show that the reason the trade imbalances emerged in the first place is a highly unequal distribution of income and wealth.

**Workers in Germany have been consistently underpaid for what they have produced in recent decades, while business owners have accumulated massive wealth.** Due to wage repression, complemented by fiscal austerity, internal demand in Germany has been very weak, not enough to absorb the goods produced by the German industry. German businesses have offloaded their excess production elsewhere and reinvested their profits abroad. In the meantime, German and other European workers have experienced no upside from this lucrative trade. All in all, the trade regime we have had so far has not benefitted workers and has led to a continuous growth of inequality.



Current account balance and income inequality in Germany in percentage  
Source: IMF (2019) Germany: Selected Issues, Country Report No. 19/214, 10 July 2019





Current account balance in 2024, in billion euros. Source: Eurostat

The *IMF 2019 Country Report on Germany* shows that the German CA surplus was driven by corporate savings and that its benefits were very unevenly distributed. In other words, the growing corporate profits associated with globalisation accrued mainly to households at the top of the wealth distribution, among which business ownership is concentrated.

The balancing of external positions is also needed to make the euro viable. The persistent CA disbalances undermine the single currency as they drive countries apart. FEPS policy study "A macro-development perspective on euro area imbalances" by Juan Montecino (2022) shows that since adopting the euro, the flow of northern (mostly German) exports and capital to southern EU countries has led to a substantial appreciation of their real effective exchange rates and undermined their competitiveness. The chart below demonstrates that several EU countries run massive external imbalances.

This means that a rebalancing of trade and financial flows is also needed for internal reasons of the EU, notably to maintain the coherence of its economy and the euro. In particular, the EU should consider introducing hard constraints on current account imbalances

as part of the European semester, and it should possibly ultimately establish a bancor-like system for internal trade flows in the EU. **In the meantime, if Europe wants to prevent a recession because of Trump's tariffs, it needs to spend and invest more. Stronger government spending and investments need to be accompanied by better workers' remuneration so that they can afford to buy what they produce.** The recent monumental shift in Germany in favour of investments is very helpful. This spending increase needs to happen in a way that reduces income and wealth inequality – the main fundamental driver of external imbalances. A range of other structural reforms should accompany this spending: tax reforms to remove advantages for super-rich individuals and large corporations, the development of local economies, more distribution of power towards workers (through employee ownership) etc. In this way, the current trade shock may become a boon – if it motivates long-overdue reforms.

► *If Europe wants to prevent a recession because of Trump's tariffs, it needs to spend and invest more.*



Anna Kolesnichenko,  
FEPS Policy Analyst on Economy



# Trade as a force for good jobs

by Elena Crasta

Tariffs and trade wars are never good for workers, who inevitably end up paying the price – quite literally. Instead, trade can be a force that creates more jobs and better working conditions that leave no worker behind – but only if the EU is prepared to stand its ground by embracing its values and championing international labour standards.

The world is in turmoil. The benefits of an open market that were once promised to millions of workers have not trickled down evenly at all – not in the US, not in the EU, nor anywhere in the world. Free trade has generated big profits for a few, mostly corporations, but it has also left many working people exposed. Labour, like the environment, has been and continues to be an adjustment variable, bearing the brunt of the impact of powerful market forces, especially where exploitation is rife.

Certain political parties have gained support by exploiting discontent and by stirring resentment towards enemies – real or perceived. Some of these parties have indeed been quite successful in seizing power on the back of this narrative. **International trade is just another field where these parties can profess a commitment to the cause of workers with protectionist slogans, without actually doing anything to improve their livelihoods – sometimes quite the opposite.** The trade war that is playing out before our eyes is an egregious example.

On the eve of the US president's announcement of reciprocal tariffs in early April, the

US trade representative released the 2025 National Trade Estimate Report in which 14 categories of trade barriers were identified. Interestingly, among these barriers are failures by a government to protect internationally recognised worker rights, like the right to join a union and go on strike, as well as levels of environmental protection. These failures – which represent an unfair competitive advantage – influence trade flows or investment decisions that negatively affect US firms and workers, and they are thus considered trade barriers.

**On the face of it, the US tariffs are therefore imposed to counter this type of unfair competition from countries with lower standards, as well as to pursue other aims such as onshoring jobs back to the US, and closing the trade deficit that the US has with most of the rest of the world.** If the intention was really to raise standards, workers worldwide would be unlikely to have a problem with the US or any tariffs. However, tariffs alone hit working people hardest – the opposite of their alleged aim – by threatening jobs and incomes through price increases. An appropriate response to

tariffs for the EU would thus be a comprehensive strategy to stabilise the economy, save jobs and protect incomes.

► *An appropriate response to tariffs for the EU would thus be a comprehensive strategy to stabilise the economy, save jobs and protect incomes.*

On the jobs front, there are measures that were tested during the Covid-19 pandemic and that proved successful. These could be redeployed today – for example joint employment support schemes. Such measures should be targeted first and foremost to safeguard jobs in companies that are impacted by the tariffs. They should not be used to increase profits or for shareholder dividends – trickle-down economics will not do it for workers this time either. Also, tariffs alone will not bring back jobs unless the tariffs are accompanied by an active industrial policy coupled with investment. However, any signs of this seem elusive in the US and in the EU alike, at least for now.





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The situation is evolving rapidly, with announcements of tariffs, counter-tariffs and delays, but while it is important for the EU to continue to seek negotiated solutions with the US, Europe must not water down our rights and rules, otherwise workers will again be the first to suffer from any caving in to US blackmail on standards. Regulatory requirements were a stumbling block during the negotiations for the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, and the agreement eventually failed. But it must be clear that we will not blink first. This also applies to the strategy of trade diversification. Although growth is projected to be slow, the EU remains the largest economy in the world, with a GDP per head of €25,000 for its 440 million consumers. The EU should therefore hold its nerve. Good standards cannot be the trade-off for signing new trade agreements with the rest of the world, especially where working conditions are extremely poor. Any compromise on standards would come back to hit us like a boomerang in the shape of unfair competition – of which there is plenty already.

To end unfair competition based on bad labour standards and very low wages, an overhaul of international trade is needed. We need a progressive reform of the WTO to secure rules-based trade that is open, just and sustainable, providing equal rights and benefits for workers and citizens. As we approach the 2026 WTO ministerial meeting in Cameroon, any reform must confirm the role of the International Labour Organization (ILO) as global leader in social regulation. This is already the case, but any reform must also enshrine a commitment for labour standards never to be considered a protectionist measure and thus never be treated as a trade barrier – because it is the improvement of working conditions that contributes to the elimination of poverty and to the economic development of countries. For this WTO reform to be successful, countries where standards are low must be supported in their efforts to ratify ILO conventions, and they must be incentivised to do better in their implementation of labour standards. It is only this way that international trade will leave no worker behind.

► *The situation is evolving rapidly, with announcements of tariffs, counter-tariffs and delays, but while it is important for the EU to continue to seek negotiated solutions with the US, Europe must not water down our rights and rules, otherwise workers will again be the first to suffer from any caving in to US blackmail on standards.*

Elena Crasta,  
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# How Europe can step up on trade and aid as the US retreats from global institutions

by Laura Kelly

The global economic landscape is shifting rapidly as the United States turns inwards, retreating from key multilateral institutions and disrupting long-standing trade norms. The EU, and Europe more broadly, now face a historic opportunity to step into the void left by the US, strengthening trade partnerships and development aid to stabilise global markets and assert its role as a leader in sustainable economic growth. If Europe takes decisive action, it can enhance its geopolitical influence while fostering economic resilience at home and abroad.

The recent US administration has demonstrated a marked shift towards protectionism, imposing sweeping tariffs on imports from Canada, China, Mexico, and even from its European allies. Simultaneously, it has withdrawn from key international agreements, including the Paris Agreement on climate change, and from the United Nations Human Rights Council. In a drastic move, the US has also suspended all foreign aid, closed the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and signalled its intent to scale back its participation in multilateral organisations.

These actions have far-reaching consequences. **Protectionist policies risk triggering a global trade war, exacerbating economic instability, and slowing the transition to a greener global economy.** With the US stepping back, a leadership vacuum has emerged in international trade negotiations, climate diplomacy and global development. A key question is whether the EU will rise to the occasion.

## EUROPE AS A RELIABLE TRADE PARTNER

The EU is well positioned to reinforce global trade stability in the wake of the US retreat. As the world's largest trading bloc, the EU has the economic leverage to set international trade standards, foster new agreements and promote ethical trade practices. **There are many steps the EU and other European countries could consider to deepen partnerships with the Global South. With the US pulling back, many developing economies will seek more reliable trade partners. Europe could prioritise strategic agreements with African, Latin American and South Asian nations.** Enhancing trade ties through equitable trade agreements and reducing trade barriers can help stabilise low-income countries reliant on exports. This is a potential win-win situation as many European businesses, from food exporters to Asia to manufacturers exporting to Egypt, trade with developing countries.

► *Protectionist policies risk triggering a global trade war, exacerbating economic instability, and slowing the transition to a greener global economy.*

European nations have also prioritised ethical trade and the promotion of regulations to support environmental and social goals. The EU Regulation on Deforestation-free products and the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive are important mechanisms to support reaching the commitments linked to the Paris climate goals and the convention on biodiversity. However, this legislation should be implemented to support compliance among poorer countries and producers. It should not simply burden them with extra costs or shift trade to other countries with less stringent laws.



Supporting compliance among poorer countries and producers will reduce economic vulnerability and create more resilient supply chains. The issue of trade diversion is perhaps most pronounced in the case of China. **As tensions between the US and China escalate, Europe needs to take a balanced approach. While maintaining economic ties with China is crucial, European countries should ensure that fair competition, environmental sustainability and human rights standards are upheld.**

## REVERSING AID CUTS TO BOOST STABILITY

A second key component of Europe as a reliable partner is its approach to development assistance. While the US withdraws from international development aid, Europe has unfortunately followed suit. Several European governments, including France, the Netherlands and the UK, have slashed their aid budgets significantly. However, cutting aid not only diminishes humanitarian efforts but also destabilises global markets and exacerbates migration pressures. Aid needs to be seen as an investment in global stability, not as mere generosity. Economic turmoil in developing nations can lead to security threats, humanitarian emergencies and market disruptions that ultimately affect Europe.

There are a number of relatively low-cost interventions where European investments could be partially beneficial at this time. As traditional aid models are under strain, innovative financing mechanisms – such as carbon taxes, debt-for-nature swaps and expanded carbon markets – could generate billions for sustainable development. Europe could lead efforts to implement these mechanisms at scale. **There is also potential to increase clean energy investments across Africa massively. The continent's renewable energy sector presents a significant economic opportunity.** European countries could increase their financial support for clean energy projects, providing low-interest loans and guarantees to attract



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private investment. A study by Financial Sector Deepening (FSD) suggests Africa's renewable energy sector could generate 3.3 million jobs – potentially reducing migration pressures while bolstering economic growth.

It is recognised that through their remittances migrant workers often contribute more to their home countries than official aid programmes. Yet high transfer fees erode these funds. European countries could take the lead in lowering transfer fees for remittances to 3 per cent, which could save African families \$16 billion annually, reinforcing economic resilience in developing regions.

## POLICY COHERENCE FOR DEVELOPMENT: THE EU'S OPPORTUNITY

To maintain credibility as a global leader, the EU should align its trade, aid and climate policies. Policy coherence is crucial – supporting development while avoiding policies that undercut progress. This means ensuring trade agreements do not exploit developing nations, prioritising sustainability in investment initiatives and leading global climate action efforts. **As the US retreats from global leadership, the EU has an opportunity – and an obligation – to step up. Europe can cement its role as a reliable global partner by reinforcing trade stability,**

**investing in sustainable development and reversing aid cuts.** Multilateralism is under threat, but the EU can uphold its principles, foster international stability and drive inclusive economic growth.

This is not just a moral imperative – it is an economic and strategic necessity. Without US leadership, the EU must act decisively to ensure that the European bloc emerges as the architect of a more stable, fair and sustainable global economy.

► *As the US retreats from global leadership, the EU has an opportunity – and an obligation – to step up. Europe can cement its role as a reliable global partner by reinforcing trade stability, investing in sustainable development and reversing aid cuts.*

Laura Kelly,  
Director of the Shaping  
Sustainable Markets  
Group at the International  
Institute for Environment  
and Development (IIED)







# DOSSIER

## TAMING THE ALGORITHMS TO PROTECT WORKERS' RIGHTS



At a time when the European Commission is proposing to roll back on regulation for the sake of competitiveness – as reflected once again in the announcements made during the Artificial Intelligence Action Summit held in Paris in February – the new digital reality demands new rules to protect workers.

The digital transformation is bringing about rapid change in the world of work. Management decisions are now increasingly taken by algorithms. We have already seen the detrimental effects of algorithmic management

for platform workers, but the latest figures show that 80 per cent of employers are now applying these tools in traditional workplaces too. The AI revolution is having a profound impact on working conditions on the shop floor. And it is also impacting on labour relations between trade unions and businesses.

The European Union needs to navigate this interplay of worker data, their data rights and traditional workers' rights.





# Reclaiming workers' rights in the age of AI: from data protection to collective justice

by Itxaso Domínguez de Olazábal

As AI and data-driven technologies reshape the workplace, they often undermine workers' rights, privacy and autonomy. However, regulatory frameworks, such as the EU's General Data Protection Regulation, and worker mobilisation can combat algorithmic exploitation through advancement of collective data rights and systemic reforms to ensure fairer and more transparent digital labour practices.

Artificial intelligence (AI) and data-driven technologies are redesigning the workplace at an unprecedented pace. From recruitment algorithms to employee monitoring systems, AI tools are increasingly deployed to make decisions that profoundly affect workers' lives. While these systems promise efficiency and streamlined operations – claims that are not always substantiated – they often come with significant costs to privacy, fairness and dignity. It is therefore urgent to address how these systems are currently being used to redefine power dynamics and undermine workers' rights.

For many workers, **algorithmic management systems are far from neutral tools. Instead, they operate as mechanisms that reinforce existing inequalities, stripping workers of autonomy and agency through opaque metrics and decision-making processes.** These

systems not only reshape the nature of work but also undermine the capacity of individuals and unions to assert their rights effectively.

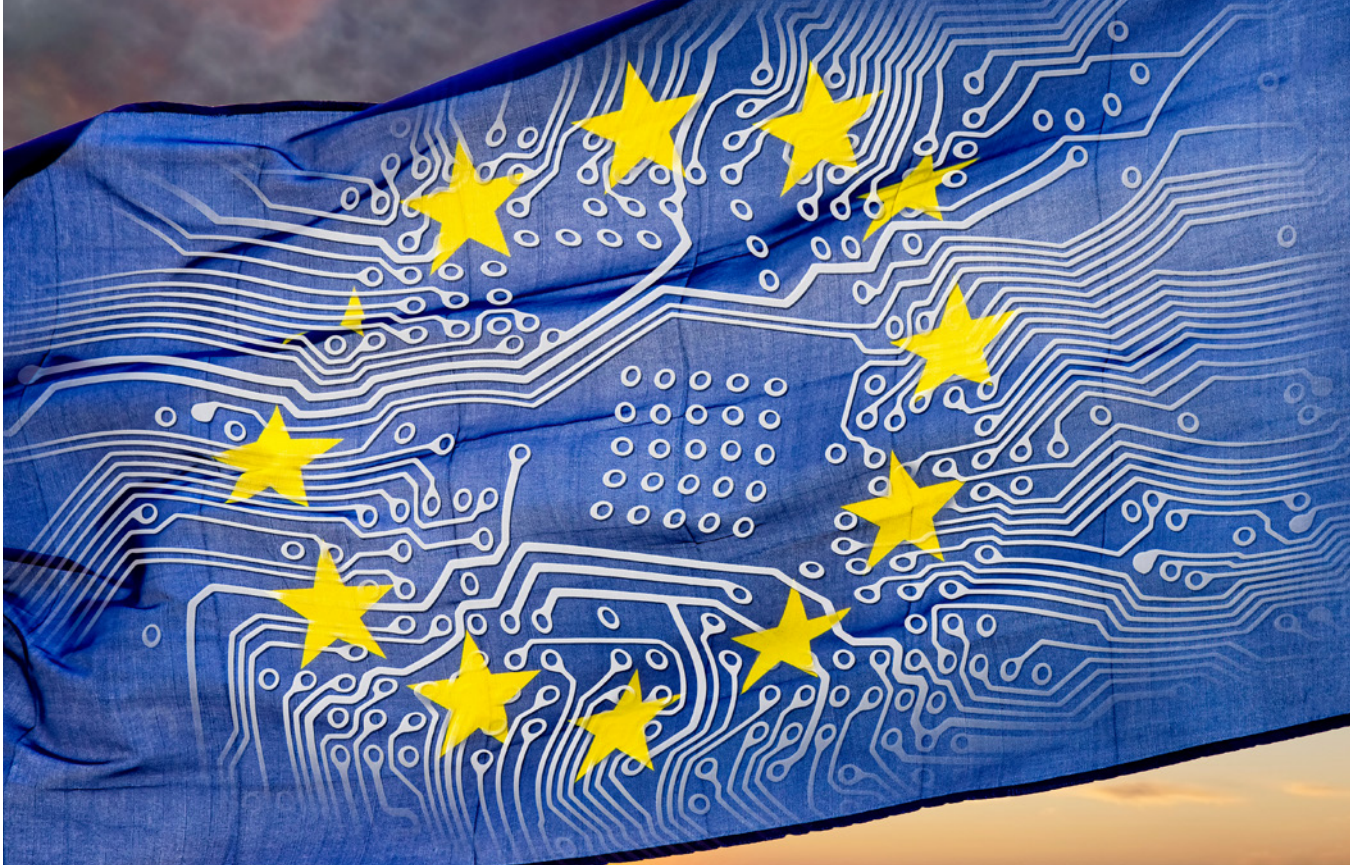
► *Algorithmic management systems reinforce existing inequalities, stripping workers of autonomy and agency through opaque metrics and decision-making processes.*

The stakes are particularly high for gig economy workers, who are often subject to intensive monitoring and evaluation by AI-driven platforms. These platforms frequently operate under the guise of neutrality – a convenient narrative readily embraced by employers.

However, the reality is far more insidious: workers are constantly monitored and reduced to data points, stripped of autonomy and agency by metrics they cannot see or influence. This structural imbalance not only jeopardises workers' privacy but also perpetuates systemic discrimination, as algorithms replicate biases embedded in their training data. Worse, these systems weaponise data to deepen precarity and penalise any deviation from rigid and often inequitable rules.

**Without accountability – and the transparency necessary to achieve it – the gig economy risks entrenching inequality and exploitation in the labour market.** Nevertheless, in the midst of these challenges there is hope: regulatory frameworks, worker mobilisation and union-led advocacy present tangible opportunities to counter these dynamics and reclaim agency in the digital workplace.





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### DATA PROTECTION AS A TOOL FOR LABOUR JUSTICE: LESSONS FROM THE GLOVO CASE

A recent case illustrates both the challenges and opportunities in addressing these issues. Glovo, a delivery app headquartered in Spain and a prominent player in the gig economy, was fined €5 million by the Italian data protection watchdog for its misuse of workers' personal data. Reversing.Works, an initiative exposing abuses within gig economy platforms, had uncovered how the platform's algorithmic management practices included tracking workers outside their shifts, maintaining hidden performance scores and sharing detailed monitoring data with third parties. These practices violated both Italian labour law and the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Glovo's fine highlights the double risks of data protection breaches and exploitative workplace dynamics.

The Italian data protection authority not only fined Glovo, but also mandated corrective measures, marking a significant victory for

workers and their rights in the gig economy. **This outcome demonstrates the potential of combining GDPR's legal tools with advocacy and investigative efforts to hold employers and companies accountable. It also highlights the indispensable role of grassroots organisations and unions in this struggle.** Furthermore, the case sheds light on a broader issue: the opacity of AI systems. Proprietary algorithms often operate as black boxes, making it nearly impossible for workers to understand or contest decisions that impact their livelihoods.

### REGULATORY EFFORTS AND SHORTCOMINGS

The data protection framework is crucial in addressing these challenges. **The recent scrutiny of algorithmic management systems under GDPR provisions shows that this regulation has teeth – but only if supported by proactive enforcement and worker mobilisation.** By establishing

transparency, accountability and purpose limitation principles, the GDPR offers a framework for regulating how AI systems handle personal data. However, enforcement has remained the weak link for years. There are many reasons for this, but a critical one is that workers have not had access to clear information about how their data is processed. Nor have they had robust mechanisms to challenge misuse.

In addition to the regulatory framework, systemic changes are also needed in order to mitigate the risks associated with AI in the workplace. Certain technologies, such as biometric surveillance and emotion recognition, pose inherent threats to workers' rights and should be banned outright. The EU's AI Act received mixed evaluations regarding workers' rights in this area. Although the act introduces safeguards on high-risk AI applications such as automated decision-making and recruiting (included in Annex 3.4, which will hopefully be expanded in the future), it does not go as far as addressing the broader implications of AI on workers' rights. For instance, it does not adequately address the





► *Without accountability, the gig economy risks entrenching inequality and exploitation within the labour market.*

power imbalances between employers and workers, nor does it guarantee the right to challenge algorithmic decisions that affect employment conditions. Furthermore, its seemingly positive ban on emotion recognition in the workplace also suffers from a major loophole in the form of a frequently misused 'health and safety' exception.

The adoption of the Platform Work Directive also represents a significant advance and an additional layer of protection. This directive will empower workers to challenge the opaque practices of gig economy platforms thanks to its clearer rules on algorithmic management, enhanced data rights and stronger collective labour rights, alongside its robust enforcement mechanisms. However, the broad discretion afforded to national legislators means it will be crucial for trade unions, employers and labour advocates to ensure that the directive leads to effective regulations, avoiding fragmented or ineffective enforcement.

Looking ahead, there is reason for optimism that future regulatory efforts will address some of the gaps outlined above.

**A key development is the initiative on algorithmic management outlined in the mission letter to the vice-president of the European Commission, Roxana Minzatu.**

This initiative is set to pave the way for a directive on algorithmic management, which is expected to include crucial provisions such as prohibitions on the most harmful practices, transparency obligations and rights for workers to challenge, monitor and rectify automated decision-making in the workplace. Additionally, the future directive on algorithmic

management should ensure information and consultation rights for worker representatives, providing a framework that upholds worker rights in the face of emerging digital labour practices.

## SHAPING THE FUTURE OF WORK

**Ultimately, the promise of AI in the workplace must align with principles of fairness, transparency and respect for workers' rights.** Cases like Glovo's highlight that accountability is achievable when regulators, advocates and workers join forces. By leveraging existing legal frameworks like the GDPR and parts of the AI Act, and by amplifying the voices of those most affected, we can challenge the unchecked power of algorithmic management.

But that is not enough. It is essential to move beyond merely enforcing and adapting current legal frameworks. A more transformative approach should involve establishing a public digital infrastructure that prioritises fairness, transparency and accountability. Unlike the surveillance-driven business models of Big Tech that are not held accountable in the EU, these public systems should be designed with the collective well-being of workers, and with all individuals and collectives, at their core. This includes ensuring that algorithms are developed to promote equal treatment and protect against bias. By fostering an ecosystem that encourages democratic oversight and user control and that centres on fundamental rights, we can mitigate the risks of algorithmic discrimination while simultaneously enhancing the power of workers to challenge and shape the systems that govern their labour.

Last but not least, it is crucial for the EU to recognise collective data rights as a fundamental aspect of protecting individuals in the

digital age. While the Representative Actions Directive has marked a positive first step in empowering citizens and organisations to take collective legal action against infringements of data protection laws, it is not sufficient on its own. **The current framework does not fully address the complex and widespread nature of data harms that affect entire communities, especially when individuals lack the resources or knowledge to assert their rights individually.**

To achieve meaningful protection, the EU must also move beyond piecemeal efforts on data rights and instead establish a comprehensive, legally recognised structure for collective data rights. This would enable groups of affected individuals to collectively claim redress and hold companies accountable, guaranteeing algorithmic transparency, notably regarding workers' rights negotiations. It would also prevent systemic violations of privacy and data protection laws. This approach would ensure that the EU's commitment to fundamental rights extends to the digital realm in a way that reflects the scale and impact of the modern data practices that have proven so harmful for vulnerable groups like workers.

► *Ultimately, the promise of AI in the workplace must align with principles of fairness, transparency and respect for workers' rights.*

*Itxaso Domínguez de Olazábal,  
Policy Advisor at the international  
advocacy network  
European Digital Rights (EDRi)*





# Algorithmic management in Europe: from key features to governance and beyond

by Aída Ponce Del Castillo

In today's increasingly digitalised workplaces, automated systems orchestrate and monitor tasks, measure performance and even steer careers – often with little clarity on how they do so. Professionals in almost all sectors can unexpectedly be rated negatively and lose their chances of promotion and professional development. Arbitrary automated decisions can be taken that severely disrupt livelihoods, underscoring the need for a more transparent governance of systems that contribute to algorithmic management.

'Algorithmic management' is a concept encompassing a range of operational practices that use a variety of personal data to make decisions. While not new in academic literature, it is a new concept in EU law, introduced only in 2024 with the Platform Work Directive. Essentially, algorithmic management can be used in an organisation to do two different but interconnected things: monitor workers (health, physiological parameters, stress level etc) and make automated decisions about them (allocation of tasks, suspension, termination, increase or decrease in pay etc). Algorithmic management can also be applied, beyond the traditional boundaries of an organisation, to that organisation's relationship with other actors, including consumers, suppliers and providers.

► *Surveillance tools and techniques are often invisible and non-material, embedded within other technologies and devices.*

**Researchers, including David Stark and colleagues, have highlighted several distinctive features of algorithmic management: it co-opts and organises both agents and users of algorithms; it is characterised by immediacy, meaning it operates continuously and ubiquitously, fostering a sense of urgency.** It is also unmediated, providing direct and unrestricted access to decision-making processes. Furthermore, algorithmic management functions in a synthetic mode, as algorithms synthesise outputs, processes and classification systems. Another key feature is its 'twisted accountability', which complicates the assignment of responsibility for decisions made by algorithmic systems.

While algorithmic management promises to enhance efficiency and accelerate decision-making, its power comes from processing workers' personal data, raising serious concerns regarding accountability, unpredictability, opacity and privacy risks.

In some cases, monitoring can extend beyond what is considered 'necessary' and 'proportional' and turn into surveillance. Modern surveillance tools now exist that can capture data points related to the worker's emotional state (anxiety, frustration, boredom, happiness, fear, insecurity etc); safety (exposure to hazards, risk levels, movements, fatigue, microsleep episodes etc); health (physiological data such as heart rate, blood pressure, breathing rate, temperature, and ergonomic data such as 'good' or 'bad' posture, stress levels, possible burnout etc); wellness (sleep patterns, fatigue management, level of physical activity etc); brain activity; security (use of company assets, information leaks, risky behaviours etc); and productivity (engagement with teammates, working time vs rest time, contents of e-mails, internet use etc). **Surveillance tools and techniques are often invisible and non-material, embedded within other technologies and devices. This, coupled with the broad range of data points collected, makes it a markedly distinct practice from monitoring, which can harm workers and has, in several cases, been penalised with hefty fines.**





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► *Algorithmic management is a complex socio-technological construction, in which those who control data and algorithms possess an outsized influence on the labour market and the working conditions of others.*

## GOVERNANCE

Algorithmic management, as a core feature of the platform business model, is addressed in the Platform Work Directive. One of the essential aims of this directive is to promote transparency, fairness, human oversight, safety and accountability in algorithmic management. The directive does so by establishing limitations on the processing of personal data and by granting specific rights to platform workers.

These rights emanate from the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), but the Platform Directive focuses more specifically on algorithmic accountability, transparency, explainability, review, profiling prevention, biases and opacity. Its provisions on accountability are key in relation to how workers' data are processed and the limitations of such processing (Articles 8, 12); the transparency provisions aim at preventing opacity by ensuring that national authorities and workers have access to key information about the automated systems. This helps prevent the risks of sudden and unilateral changes that can affect workers negatively (Article 9). Additionally, the directive gives workers the right to seek human

intervention (Article 10), challenge decisions and review them (Article 11), thereby providing safeguards against unfair or opaque automated decisions and monitoring.

Also, because algorithmic management can rely on AI systems, it can fall within or overlap with the high-risk categories outlined in the AI Act. According to Annex III of the AI Act, algorithmic management typically appears in two forms of AI uses that are classified as high-risk:

- AI systems employed for the recruitment or selection of natural persons (for example, placing targeted job advertisements, analysing and filtering job applications or evaluating candidates);
- AI systems used to make decisions affecting terms of work-related relationships (such as promotion or termination), to allocate tasks based on individual behaviour or characteristics, or to monitor and evaluate performance and behaviour.

As a result, organisations using such systems must comply with the requirements of the AI Act, in addition to other obligations established by the GDPR and, for platforms, the Platform Work Directive.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Algorithmic management is a complex socio-technological construction, in which those who control data and algorithms possess an outsized influence on the labour market and the working conditions of others.

The von der Leyen Commission II has promised a new initiative on algorithmic management, incorporating the 'human in control' principle. Implementing this essential principle, together with a proactive, anticipative and collaborative form of precautionary governance, will help reduce the asymmetry of power between 'controllers' and workers, and will limit the risks of further inequality and protect those who have the least power. Social dialogue can also play a key role in protecting workers while, at the same time, encouraging responsible innovation.



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# Worker-centric algorithmic governance for Europe's competitive edge

by Gerard Rinse Oosterwijk

Does regulation make Europe uncompetitive? Or is the well-protected European social model a blessing when we need to innovate in the interplay between workers and AI systems? Specific rules on algorithmic management and AI in the workplace can boost productivity if the EU empowers workers and trade union representatives to steer this tech revolution and co-create better work processes.

So far, the second von der Leyen Commission has chosen one central theme for its work: the competitiveness of the European economy. This was expected, given the Draghi and Letta reports. It also reflects the reality that European industry is heavily impacted by the current geopolitical situation. However, the EU has neither matched the US Inflation Reduction Act nor provided state support equivalent to what China provides to its electric car producers.

**The harsh reality is that the Union's financial power is limited, so the advice for deregulation to ease the burden on businesses has more traction than recommendations to invest strategically in specific sectors and industries.** We will have to see the impact of the Competitiveness Compass launched by the Commission and the content of the omnibus package, which is aimed at repealing certain burdensome rules

but that can potentially roll back Europe's green and social ambitions.

While reducing the number of rules is the current buzz, it is interesting to examine what the European Commission has committed to regulating. One hint is in the mission letter to the socialist vice-president of Commission, Roxana Mînzatu, who is tasked with developing an algorithmic management initiative. A FEPS study found that about three quarters of businesses use one or more algorithmic management tools; a more recent OECD study found that 79 per cent of European companies use these innovative tools to steer and control their workers.

The world of work is changing profoundly because of these AI-powered software tools, which adversely affect workers, leading to less motivation, loss of trust, higher workload and more stress. That is

why **more specific rules are required, in addition to the AI Act which has already indicated that the workplace is a high-risk use case for AI.** The automation of decisions – which were previously in the hands of managers – with algorithmic governance tools makes it necessary for labour laws to be updated. We can think of specific rules on the transparency of and worker influence over algorithmic systems, the human in command of decisions that affect

► *The EU's financial power is limited, so the advice for deregulation to ease the burden on businesses has more traction than recommendations to invest strategically in specific sectors and industries.*





workers, and putting a stop to the deterioration of occupational health and safety risks due to algorithmic management. These rules already apply to platform workers under the new Platform Work Directive but should be applied to all workers.

► *More specific rules are required, in addition to the AI Act which has already indicated that the workplace is a high-risk use case for AI.*

At FEPS, we hosted newly awarded Nobel laureate Daron Acemoglu to reflect on this matter. One thing I learned is that this algorithmic management revolution of our work does not have to mean bad news for labour and trade unions. Specific forms of automation made possible through algorithms – what Acemoglu calls 'so-so automation' (self-checkout in grocery stores for example) – will merely replace workers but not increase productivity. **Real innovation using the potential of the algorithmic tools will require knowledge of the production process. This is precisely why firms need their workers and organised labour to work with them for better results.** The firms that understand this might get ahead of their

competition, but there will be a push to cut costs and achieve short-term gains from the so-so automation. The European legislator should not therefore shy away from setting rules that empower workers to innovate with AI and, at the same time, protect them from the more destructive aspects of algorithmic management.

Our research shows that workers' influence and transparency mitigate the adverse effects caused by algorithmic management. However, these aspects of co-creation should actually be seen as a precondition for making the introduction of AI effective and attaining the potential productivity rise. That is why the European Social Model, with its consultation and co-determination, could give us a competitive edge over other economic models like the Anglo-Saxon one where trade unions are weaker, and workers' rights are less of a concern.

To make something of this opportunity, the last thing we need is to roll back on worker rights or introduce a new 28th regime of company law that could be used to circumvent certain protections. **We need to enable trade unions to co-create, together with management and the workers they represent, the right conditions to use the potential of algorithmic tools** while upholding or even improving working conditions and sharing the benefits of productivity gains. However, to do this, management must also control the tools they deploy, which, often, they do not. These tools are black boxes

for them too, usually purchased from Silicon Valley big tech firms that do not consider the role of trade unions in the processes of their European clients. This is where the discussion of algorithmic management links in with another big topic: Europe's tech dependency.

Currently, the EU depends on foreign (non-European) providers for 80 per cent of its tech. This lack of autonomy is felt in the workplace when algorithmic systems are deployed and developed in a different context. European-developed algorithmic management solutions should be high on the agenda of EU Commissioner Henna Virkkunen's tech sovereignty goals. **One could envisage an ecosystem of open-source algorithmic tools that can be deployed and adjusted in coordination with workers.** This is





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not just because it is good for their well-being but, first and foremost, because it is a strategy to use our competitive advantage to innovate – a highly skilled workforce that, due to its workers' rights, can co-create the new work processes that will bring about the gains of the AI revolution for businesses and society.

An algorithmic management directive is badly needed because it will give the framework for trade unions to negotiate. Even better, the limits we put on the big tech surveillance capitalist tools that we are all forced to use create the space for tech alternatives to be developed based on European values like workplace democracy.

► *We need to enable trade unions to co-create, together with management and the workers they represent, the right conditions to use the potential of algorithmic tools.*

*Gerard Rinse Oosterwijk,  
FEPS Expert Consultant and  
political advisor to the S&D  
Vice-President Alex Saliba*

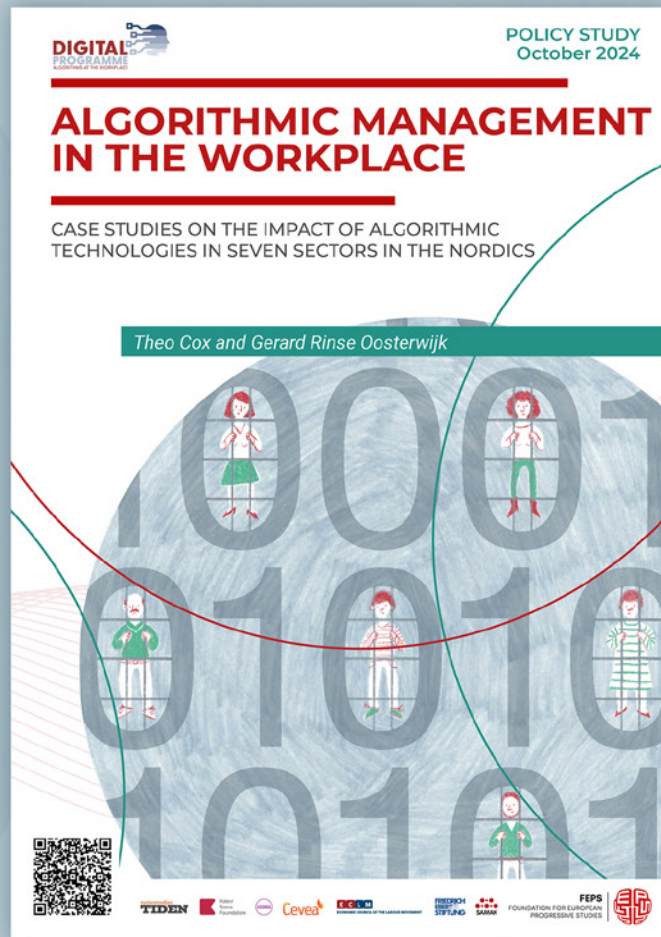




POLICY STUDY

# Algorithmic management in the workplace

CASE STUDIES ON THE IMPACT OF ALGORITHMIC  
TECHNOLOGIES IN SEVEN SECTORS IN THE NORDICS



This policy study explores the impact of automated and digitalised management on the unique labour environments of the Nordic countries **where long-standing traditions of labour organisation intersect with rapidly advancing technologies.**

Through case studies across sectors including transport, retail, and finance, the study highlights critical issues such as **the erosion of worker rights, the consequences on workers' health, the increasing imbalance of power between labour and capital and the pervasive nature of workplace surveillance.** However, it also identifies scenarios where worker participation and union involvement have mitigated these negative effects.

It provides **recommendations for EU policymakers,** urging the implementation of stronger legal safeguards, greater transparency in algorithmic processes and enhanced roles for trade unions.

*This policy study series is part of the Digital Research Programme — a collaborative project between FEPS, Friedrich–Ebert–Stiftung, CEVEA, SAMAK, the Kalevi Sorsa Foundation, Tankesmedjan Tiden, Tankesmien Agenda and the Economic Council of the Labour Movement.*







# INTERVIEW

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# Silenced, censored, resisting: feminist struggles in the digital age

Interview with Asha Allen, Director and Secretary General of CDT Europe  
by Laetitia Thissen

Feminist movements face mounting threats from rising authoritarianism and big tech's growing role in shaping public discourse. In this interview, Asha Allen speaks about the increasing censorship of feminist and LGBTQI+ advocacy by platforms like Meta and X, the rollback of diversity and inclusion commitments by major tech companies and the growing wave of online gender-based violence. She explores the role of the EU Digital Services Act and the Directive on Violence Against Women, examining how these measures can effectively curb disinformation, algorithmic bias and platform-driven suppression. While the Trump 2.0 government legitimises anti-gender movements and far-right forces are gaining ground, what can activists and policymakers do to resist digital suppression and protect equality?

***Laetitia Thissen:** What are the biggest risks that big tech poses to equality and civic participation?*

**Asha Allen:** The risks to civic participation, access to information, and free expression online have been well-documented for nearly a decade now. We're almost ten years from the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which brought many of these issues to the forefront of public consciousness. In the last EU mandate, we spent considerable time assessing, debating, and finally regulating this space to address these concerns. Key legislation like the Digital Services Act and the AI Act have been implemented. However, there's a growing concern about a rollback

of commitments to respect people's online rights. The current geopolitical situation is emboldening this retreat. **We worry that despite existing frameworks, particularly in Europe, there's a retreat, by platforms, from their commitments to ensure respect for people's rights online.** What's especially concerning is that there might not be effective accountability mechanisms in place to prevent this regression. This situation isn't unique to Europe; it's part of a broader international trend. The challenge now is to ensure that these newly established frameworks don't become mere window dressing, but are actively enforced and expanded upon to protect digital rights and civic participation.

***LT:** How does the suppression of content by platforms like META and X affect feminist movements?*

**AA:** Feminist, LGBTQI+, and intersectional movements are often the first to be impacted by policy changes on these platforms. We've seen numerous instances of this, such as black feminist posts being censored on platforms like Instagram. **Meta's recent policy changes, such as the recent update to their hateful conduct policy, are particularly concerning. What's alarming is that these policies weren't even consulted with Meta's own civil rights advisory body** – a group they established themselves. This lack of consultation is a red flag in terms of corporate accountability and transparency.





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The policy itself seems to target specific groups, particularly the LGBTQI+ community. For instance, it appears to allow discussions about excluding certain communities, like LGBTQI+ or migrant groups, from public spaces. This is an extremely dangerous road to go down, as it can normalise discriminatory rhetoric and potentially lead to real-world exclusion and harm. The impact of these policies extends beyond just LGBTQI+ groups. They also affect people with disabilities and other marginalised communities. Such policies inevitably chill speech and cause self-censorship among affected communities, making them feel unsafe on these platforms. It's important to note that while some of these changes have happened in the US context, we can't separate them from developments happening in the EU and globally. For instance, while certain policies on fact-checking and hateful conduct haven't been applied in the EU due to the Digital Services Act, we're still in the early days of seeing how platforms will comply with these new regulations. One concerning trend we've observed is the lack of meaningful consultation with civil society in the risk assessments that large online platforms are required to conduct. This first round of assessments, completed at the end of last year, showed very little engagement with impacted communities and civil society organisations. This doesn't inspire confidence that future assessments and policy changes will be more inclusive or transparent.

*LT: What does this lack of consultation say about corporate accountability and the fight for equality?*

**AA:** This trend is part of a broader movement pushing back against inclusivity and accountability. **Large platforms are actively rolling back commitments to transparency: we've seen major lay-offs in trust and safety teams, deprioritisation of human rights policies, and a shift toward profit-driven content moderation.** It's becoming increasingly difficult to advance progress in an environment that's growing more hostile, both from a corporate accountability perspective and a political one. Decision-makers seem less enthusiastic about keeping fundamental rights at the forefront of policy discussions. Other priorities are taking precedence, and we're concerned that rights will be deprioritised in this context. If we don't take action, this lack of accountability may continue unchecked. This means civil society needs to adapt its strategies, work together more collaboratively, potentially

► *Despite existing frameworks, particularly in Europe, there's a retreat by platforms from their commitments to ensure respect for people's rights online.*

in non-traditional ways, and learn from those who have been fighting for these issues for a long time. The pushback we're seeing requires a united and innovative response from civil society organisations.

*LT: How can journalists and media organisations better report on and counteract online disinformation and harassment against women?*

**AA:** This is a crucial issue because the entire media sector is experiencing significant pushback on their fundamental role as civic space actors. Their job of bringing information, stories, and truth to the wider public to foster healthy civic debates is threatened. Here I would note that it's important to emphasise that **fact-checking, a role many journalists fulfil, is not censorship – it has never been censorship**, and even Meta's own policies around fact-checking show that they didn't foster censorship. Fact-checking is a vital tool for maintaining journalistic integrity and combating disinformation.

When we talk about media pluralism and diversity, we have to think about those who are bringing information to the forefront. Women journalists, in particular, face a disproportionate amount of online gender-based violence. This extends to politically engaged women in the online space more broadly. The Center for Democracy & Technology (CDT), and our partner organisation, the International Center for Journalists, have conducted extensive research in this area. The findings show how this online harassment impacts women's ability to do their jobs and their willingness to enter or remain in the media sphere. We need to consider this in the context of how the media landscape has shifted to the online space. If the online space is unsafe for women journalists to engage in, what does that mean for media pluralism, participation and diversity? From a diversity perspective, we're moving towards a weaker media environment if women are disproportionately experiencing harassment and removing themselves from these spaces. Plan International has also done fantastic research over the





years into how young women and girls view this environment. Sadly, more young women and girls are saying they don't want to engage in online debates or pursue careers in politically engaged jobs, like journalism, because they understand the level of harassment they may be subject to. This has a generational impact on gender equity, with younger generations opting out of participation due to safety concerns.

*LT: How does the silencing of women and marginalised groups erode democratic participation?*

**AA:** To understand this, we need to contextualise democratic participation in the current digital age. **A significant portion of our democratic debate now occurs in online spaces, whether on social media platforms or other digital forums. If these spaces are unsafe for people from minoritised communities to engage in, it impacts their ability to enjoy their right to freedom of expression and access to information.** This goes beyond specific conversations and affects how issues concerning these communities are discussed and politicised in society more broadly. When we talk about online gender-based violence, for example, it's not just about individual instances of harassment. We need to look at it in a broader, more holistic context to understand how it impacts the ability of women and minoritised communities to engage in society. The key question becomes: who has access to participate in these democratic processes? When certain groups are forced to self-censor, are being silenced, or have their speech chilled, they're effectively excluded from important societal discussions and decision-making processes. This silencing effect has far-reaching consequences. It affects how issues are framed in public discourse, which topics receive attention, and ultimately, how policies are shaped. When diverse voices are missing from these conversations, our democracy becomes less representative and less effective.

*LT: How can we strengthen protection for these groups?*

**AA:** There are mechanisms in place, particularly in the regulatory framework, that we can

leverage to strengthen protections. The Digital Services Act, for instance, puts in place specific due diligence obligations for the largest online platforms. These obligations go beyond just dealing with illegal content. Platforms are required to assess societal risks, including specific requirements to assess online gender-based violence for very large online platforms. They must then mitigate these risks. This shows a real recognition in the law that these risks have a huge impact on society, and platforms operating in this space must address them with users' rights at the forefront. We're still in the early days of these laws coming into force, but it's crucial that they are enforced in a human rights-respecting way. We want to ensure that rights are at the forefront of enforcement and that these obligations aren't just empty tick-box exercises for the platforms. What we want to see is continuous improvement and meaningful engagement with civil society organisations and groups representing affected communities. This process should be iterative, evolving as the systems and products of these platforms change. We hope to use these mechanisms to advocate for increased transparency, understand what's really happening with these systems and products, and recommend more comprehensive approaches to addressing these issues.

*LT: With Donald Trump's return to the White House and the emboldening of anti-gender movements globally, how might platform accountability measures shift, and what should Europeans do to mitigate these effects?*

**AA:** The European frameworks, such as the Digital Services Act, should be seen as baseline standards to build upon. They're not perfect, and we haven't seen how they'll fully operate yet, but they provide a foundation for accountability that we should aim to improve upon. In the face of this pushback and attempts to roll back accountability, European bodies and those working in this context need to stand firm on the rules that have been put in place. The rules are there, they are in force, and platforms will need to respect them. We cannot allow the narrative that less accountability is needed to proliferate. There needs to be a continued

► *More young women and girls are saying they don't want to engage in online debates or pursue careers in politically engaged jobs, like journalism, because they understand the level of harassment they may be subject to. This has a generational impact on gender equity.*

global effort to push for accountability and a balanced approach to facilitating free expression online. It's crucial to remember that facilitating free expression doesn't mean allowing harmful content to spread unchecked. We need to find a balance that protects free speech while also safeguarding vulnerable groups from harassment and discrimination. Europeans should focus on ensuring robust enforcement of existing regulations, pushing for greater transparency from platforms, and continuing to advocate for the rights of marginalised groups in digital spaces. This might involve supporting civil society organisations, engaging in public discourse about these issues, and holding both platforms and policymakers accountable for their actions and decisions. Ultimately, protecting democratic participation and equality in the digital age requires ongoing vigilance, collaboration between different stakeholders, and a commitment to upholding fundamental rights in the face of changing political and technological landscapes.

Asha Allen,  
Director and Secretary General  
of the Center for Democracy  
and Technology (CDT) Europe



Laetitia Thissen,  
FEPS Senior Policy Analyst  
on Gender Equality





The image features a vintage television set with a stack of four books resting on top of it. The entire scene is overlaid with a semi-transparent orange filter. The title 'PROGRESSIVE READS & VIEWS' is written in a bold, white, sans-serif font across the middle of the image. A thin white horizontal line is positioned below the title.

# PROGRESSIVE READS & VIEWS

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# Pluralism in peril: an urgent case for a democratic reboot of the EU

by Matteo Dressler



Tom Theuns

*Protecting Democracy in Europe:  
Pluralism, Autocracy and the Future of the EU*

London: Hurst & Company, 2024

With Europe's far-right emboldened by global illiberal trends, exemplified by Donald Trump's second presidency, the urgency of safeguarding democracy in Europe has never been clearer. Tom Theuns' book, *Protecting Democracy in Europe: Pluralism, Autocracy and the Future of the EU*, makes a timely and provocative contribution beyond typical discussions of the EU's rule-of-law mechanisms. Although clearly academic, it is an essential read for those seeking practical solutions beyond the passive acceptance of the status quo.

► *EU membership alone no longer guarantees democratic progress, as shown by democratic regression in Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and rising illiberal pressures elsewhere.*

Central to Theuns' analysis is the observation that **EU membership alone no longer guarantees democratic progress, as shown by democratic regression in Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and rising illiberal pressures elsewhere**. He identifies three key reasons why EU institutions must urgently address these threats:

- Autocratic consolidation and the risk of autocratic playbooks spreading from one country to another make democratic recovery increasingly challenging.
- Even a single autocratic member state can significantly compromise the Union's overall democratic legitimacy.
- EU institutions themselves have inadvertently legitimised autocratic governments through economic support and funding. Rectifying this complicity must become an institutional responsibility.

Theuns' pragmatic and practice-oriented approach offers feasible, real-world strategies to effectively counter democratic backsliding, making this book a valuable resource for policymakers aiming to defend and reinforce democracy across Europe.

The first part of the book (chapters 2-4) offers a critical exploration of why the EU has struggled to respond effectively to democratic backsliding. It argues compellingly that fatalism and depoliticisation within EU institutions have hindered decisive action. Theuns introduces the concept of 'membership fatalism' – the entrenched assumption that member states retain absolute sovereignty over their EU membership, despite clear and systematic breaches of democratic standards.

Further, **Theuns examines the roots of depoliticisation, whereby the EU has increasingly deferred responsibility for addressing democratic erosion to legal procedures**. The book



identifies the EU's weak response to Austria's far-right FPÖ entering government at a critical juncture in 2000, and it vividly illustrates how initial symbolic outrage and sanctions rapidly faded due to fragmented coordination and reliance on bilateral actions rather than a unified European response. This failure, Theuns argues, has haunted EU policymakers, deterring stronger political measures in subsequent crises. Consequently, current EU actions towards Hungary and Poland remained fragmented, treating violations in isolation rather than confronting systemic threats to democracy head-on. The value of this genealogy lies in revealing how existing paradigms for addressing democracy in member states have emerged – a crucial step toward rethinking and improving these approaches.

► *Theuns examines the roots of depoliticisation, whereby the EU has increasingly deferred responsibility for addressing democratic erosion to legal procedures.*

**Analysing 155 EU commissioner speeches on democracy, Theuns further unpacks the European Commission's narrow, legalistic and depoliticised conceptualisation of democracy – a deliberate choice rather than one mandated by EU treaties** (chapter 3). He aptly characterises the Commission as acting more like an "ombudsman of the EU rather than its main political executive actor", reflecting an overwhelming emphasis on the rule of law. Although vital, this narrow focus neglects the pluralistic dimensions essential to a healthy democracy. **Theuns also criticises the EU's prominent but superficial emphasis on fact-checking and disinformation. While fact-checking is important, he highlights the absence of deeper considerations – like determining**

**which facts matter politically and how to respond meaningfully.** One might add to Theuns's analysis that this gap remains evident today, as EU policy continues to overlook the domestic political and cultural drivers of disinformation – often fuelled by far-right actors in Europe that are also central to democratic backsliding – while placing important, but disproportionate emphasis on foreign interference.

Transitioning to actual protective measures, the book scrutinises the coherence of existing EU tools against democratic backsliding (chapter 4). Theuns argues that Article 7.3 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) is normatively flawed: suspending a member state's voting rights in the Council paradoxically violates the very fundamental democratic and equality principles set out in Article 2 TEU, by subjecting that state to laws it can no longer help co-shape. While some advocate this approach under the banner of militant democracy – using undemocratic means to defend democracy against the background of a grave threat to democracy, and seeing no other alternatives to react – Theuns firmly rejects this for the case of the European Union. He underscores that such incoherence is not merely philosophical; it directly compromises policy effectiveness, as two competing EU policies can never reach their objective simultaneously. Importantly, he also demonstrates that more coherent and practical alternatives exist.

#### **A BETTER WAY FORWARD: PROTECTING THE EU FROM DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING**

Part Two presents alternative responses to democratic erosion, offering original – and at times radical – proposals that move the debate beyond the largely ineffective and incoherent Article 7. This shift is welcome: alongside Theuns' critique of the internal contradictions of Article 7, the debate addresses the procedure's sluggishness and the growing sense that Article 7 is simply unfit to contain democratic

backsliding within the EU meaningfully. Before outlining his proposals, Theuns turns to a crucial and often overlooked issue: the complicity in the democratic backsliding of EU institutions over the past 15 years (chapter 5). **He highlights deliberate inaction and counterproductive responses – from the EPP's long-standing protection of Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, to the Commission's hesitation on infringement procedures, delayed Article 7 actions, and the Council's watering down of conditionality tools.** While autocratising member states remain the main culprits, Theuns makes a compelling case that EU institutions share responsibility – and therefore have a duty to act. Drawing on existing ideas, he proposes strengthening infringement procedures by bundling multiple violations of the fundamental rights set out in Article 2 TEU to withhold EU funds more effectively. This would increase pressure on governments to implement real reforms and help end the cat-and-mouse dynamic of repealing one problematic policy while autocratising member states are introducing two new ones.

Maintaining a pragmatic stance and explicitly rejecting utopian solutions like ambitious treaty reforms, chapter 6 proposes realistic strategies for politically isolating autocratic influence beyond existing economic sanctions. **Theuns advocates "hard legal containment", such as preventing autocratic states from holding EU Council presidencies** – measures he argues face fewer legal constraints and normative contradictions than Article 7 procedures. Theuns also recommends consistent "soft political containment", such as denying legitimacy and prestige to autocratic leaders by withholding symbolic gestures like congratulatory messages or official photo opportunities – advice not consistently applied by EU leaders, for example in relation to Hungary, in recent years.

Finally, the book pragmatically suggests exploiting divisions among autocratic or backsliding states – as effectively demonstrated by Poland and Hungary's differing stances on supporting Ukraine against Russia's aggression – to strategically weaken their collective influence.



In chapter 7, Theuns calls for a shift from the EU's narrow view of democracy towards a more pluralistic approach. He highlights the essential role of free media, civil society and political opposition in sustaining democratic pluralism. Drawing on Chantal Mouffe's agonistic theory, he argues that democratic conflict should be addressed openly in a vibrant public sphere – not endlessly deferred through compromise, as is typical in particular for addressing democratic backsliding by EU institutions. Consequently, he recommends stronger, proportionate partisan engagement by EU institutions in explicitly supporting civil society, independent media and democratic opposition within backsliding member states. He stresses that neutrality in defending democracy can dangerously weaken it. Additionally, Theuns points out the limitations of blunt sanctions – such as withholding substantial EU funds – which often harm ordinary citizens and pro-democratic actors more than autocratic governments, and he advocates indirect support mechanisms empowering democratic forces.

**Theuns concludes with a radical proposal: if all else fails, democratic EU member states should collectively withdraw from the Union to reconstitute it without autocratic regimes. Given the absence of formal expulsion mechanisms (apart from voluntary exit under Article 50 TEU), and the low chances of being able to change the treaties to include such mechanisms, this strategy would create a credible, ultimate deterrent.** Although mindful of the serious repercussions, particularly for citizens of the states left behind, Theuns maintains that this drastic measure may ultimately be necessary to preserve democracy within the EU framework. The measure presents an alternative to the above-discussed militant democratic proposals of using undemocratic

means in kicking out member states by staying within the bounds of the rules of law. Even if this may seem a far-fetched strategy, the lack of real progress on stopping backsliding, the credible threat it presents to the European Union and the absence of other viable proposals make this interesting food for thought.

Overall, this book is a highly valuable and insightful contribution to the debate on European democracy, offering original and provocative arguments supported by thorough analysis. Yet one minor critique relates to its stylistic tendency – particularly in the first part – to repeatedly summarise and reinforce key points. While understandable for emphasising important and original ideas, less repetition might have enhanced readability. Additionally, readers might wonder why the author did not engage even more extensively with international relations literature on sanctions, particularly regarding their effectiveness, risks and unintended consequences. Although some insights – like the risks of rally-around-the-flag effects and the benefits of directly supporting non-state actors – are addressed, a deeper exploration of these aspects could have further enriched the analysis of the complex interactions between the EU and its increasingly autocratic member states. But overall, the book captures many thought-provoking and well-argued ideas within its 200 pages, and one cannot expect to cover everything in such a short book.

► *Theuns concludes with a radical proposal: if all else fails, democratic EU member states should collectively withdraw from the Union to reconstitute it without autocratic regimes.*



Matteo Dressler,  
FEPS Policy Analyst on  
Democracy and Participation





## No Other Land

Basel Adra, Hamdan Ballal,  
Yuval Abraham and Rachel Szor, 2024

The essence of *No Other Land* is, paraphrasing a famous feminist slogan, the radical notion that Palestinians are people. They gather for dinner, chat about life, joke and laugh. They work, study, open businesses and start families.

Basel Adra, co-director and main character, is a young Palestinian from Masafer Yatta, a group of villages declared a military zone by Israel, making every building there illegal. With his camera, Basel captures the daily life of Palestinians under Israeli occupation.

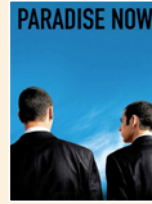
A line of bulldozers, military jeeps and Israeli trucks appear unannounced. Soldiers and officials step out to demolish houses and schools, or fill water wells with concrete. Palestinians, children in their arms, flee their homes screaming. When asked why, Israeli officials reply they are simply following the law. If a Palestinian gets too close, they shoot to kill. Despite the stunning violence, they are mostly normal, mediocre people who follow orders. While destroying the lives of defenceless people, they hide behind bureaucratic responses, the kind you would hear at a traffic office. In Hanna Arendt's words, it is the banality of evil.

This brilliant Palestinian-Israeli documentary allows us to witness injustice as if we were there. We also watch the evolving friendship between Basel and Yuval Abraham, a young Israeli journalist and co-director of the film who has chosen not to look away. "I live under civil law and Basel lives under military law. We reside just 30 minutes apart; I have the right to vote, but Basel does not. I can move freely, while Basel, like millions of Palestinians, is confined within the West Bank", Yuval said at the Berlinale Film Festival.

More than 3 million Palestinians live in the West Bank and East Jerusalem's occupied territories, in a regime Amnesty International defined as "apartheid" and a "cruel system of domination". Another two million are crowded into the Gaza Strip, an 'open-air prison' now reduced to rubble by Israel, in what the ICJ described as a plausible case of genocide.

In his Oscar acceptance speech, Basel said, "I hope that [my daughter] will not have to live the same life I am living now, always fearing settlers' violence, home demolitions and forcible displacements". Only a few weeks later, Palestinian co-director Hamdan Ballal was brutally attacked by Israeli settlers, arrested and then released by the military. Although we may feel hopeless, the co-directors invite us to "act now [...] for a future where we can live in peace, equality and dignity for all".

Rodrigo Bazzano



## Paradise now

Hany Abu-Assad, 2005

Hany Abu-Assad's *Paradise Now* is a tense and quietly devastating film. Winner of the Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language Film (2005) and nominated for an Academy Award in the same category, it tells the story of Said and Khaled – two young Palestinian men, friends since childhood – who are recruited to carry out a suicide attack in Tel Aviv. As the operation begins to fall apart, the two are forced to confront the incredible weight of their decision, torn between loyalty, political conviction and the fragile hope of another path.

The film engages one of the most politically sensitive issues of our time through an unflinching but intimate lens: what leads ordinary people to commit extraordinary acts of violence? It manages to approach this question without descending into propaganda, cliché, or easy moralising. Instead, it offers a rare, unsettling portrait of two individuals navigating the unbearable pressure of their situation – revealing that violence, far from being abstract, is profoundly personal.

Much of the film's emotional power lies in the raw, almost naturalistic performances of its two protagonists. Their chemistry anchors the story, giving life to a character-driven narrative about the intended loss of it. Each actor brings to the screen a quiet intensity, carrying the burden of doubt and emotion without falling into caricature. The film deliberately avoids framing them as heroes or villains and, in doing so, asks the audience to confront and sit in discomfort with the moral and psychological complexity of their choices.

Visually, *Paradise Now* adopts an understated style. The use of handheld cameras and natural lighting lends it a grounded, realistic tone. Abu-Assad keeps things stripped back, with minimal music and little sentimentality. The result is a film that feels immediate and honest – at times, almost unbearably tense. There are no easy binaries here, just people shaped by deep-seated frustrations and desires, trying to make sense of what meaning, if any, is left to them.

This is not comfortable viewing, nor should it be. The film's refusal to offer moral clarity may leave some unsettled, but that is precisely what gives it its raw yet enduring emotional core. Long after the screen fades to white, what remains is the stark awareness of how far we still are from any kind of paradise – let alone one that is possible now.

Vassilis Ntousas



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