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The Progressive Post

DOES PEACE STILL HAVE A CHANCE?

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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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Editorial

by Hedwig Giusto

'War and peace': in my lifetime, these words have never resonated with such agonising frequency as they have in the last few months.

War. The brutal invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces in February 2022, and Israel's devastation of Gaza following the deadly terror attack by Hamas in October 2023, consistently dominate global headlines. Yet, tragically, these crises are not isolated. As Europeans, we are biased towards the conflicts on our doorstep, but this proximity often renders us woefully oblivious to the bloodshed and humanitarian catastrophes happening elsewhere – from Sudan to Yemen, to name just two.

The war in Ukraine and the re-election of Donald Trump in the US have further destabilised an international landscape that was already undergoing dramatic transformation. The certain assurance of the US security umbrella is visibly cracking, giving rise with critical urgency to the idea that the European Union must achieve greater self-sufficiency in defence. This imperative for strategic realignment, coupled with rising militaristic rhetoric and new defence investments across the continent, appears to be rapidly erasing the foundational idea that the European Union was primarily a peace project born to prevent future bloody conflict.

Peace. Trump is currently proposing 'peace plans' for both Ukraine and Gaza. A stunning lack of inclusivity characterises both efforts. Under the far-from-impartial mediator role of the US president, whose not-so-secret wish is to be granted a Nobel peace prize, the interests of Russia and Israel (and the US), respectively, are clearly prevailing. The terms of peace are traditionally designed by the victors, and it would be naive to believe we have evolved beyond that brutal precedent. Generations of Europeans, including my own, have grown up under the assumption that diplomacy, international cooperation and multilateralism are the best – if imperfect – tools available to settle disputes and ensure prosperity. But this foundational belief, too, is being ruthlessly shattered.

So, what kind of peace will it be possible to build in the future, given these premises? Will the European Union be able to stand by its founding values? What steps should be taken to preserve the key principles of a durable peace – a peace that is not only the absence of war, but a much broader concept including justice and social justice, the respect of people's dignity, and their well-being? These are the critical questions we must answer. We explore these ambitious themes in our **Special Coverage** ***Does peace still have a chance?***, designed to steer the debate away from the tragic insistence on war towards the urgent necessity of peace.

The decision of how much money the European Union will allocate to defence expenditure is part of a wider debate on the next European Union budget, the so-called multiannual financial framework (MFF). The European Commission presented its proposal for the next MFF last July, which is now at the core of heated negotiations. The **Focus** ***The next MFF: turning the glue into solvent*** revolves around criticism of the Commission's proposal, particularly regarding the fate of the cohesion funds.

Our **Dossier** entitled ***Benefits for all? The EU's international partnerships*** goes back to the European Union's international relations by looking at how the nature of the Union's international partnerships is changing. Can the EU and its member states pursue their strategic interests while simultaneously fostering their partners' genuine development? This dossier focuses in particular on the Global Gateway, the EU's flagship initiative in this field, as well as the relations with two key continents: Africa and Latin America.

The last **Dossier** of this issue of *The Progressive Post* is entitled ***COP30: looking past the elephant in the room***, where the elephant is fossil fuels – which were intentionally omitted from the conclusions of the complex multilateral COP30 negotiations held under the Brazilian presidency. The result of this climate conference is, again, a suboptimal agreement. The main takeaways from it are two: despite the frustration, the COP arena for discussion remains crucial if we still believe in multilateralism; at the same time, the European Union must look to other countries outside the COP framework in order to find suitable partners that are willing to reduce the use of fossil fuels.

Hedwig Giusto, Editor-in-chief

The Progressive Post

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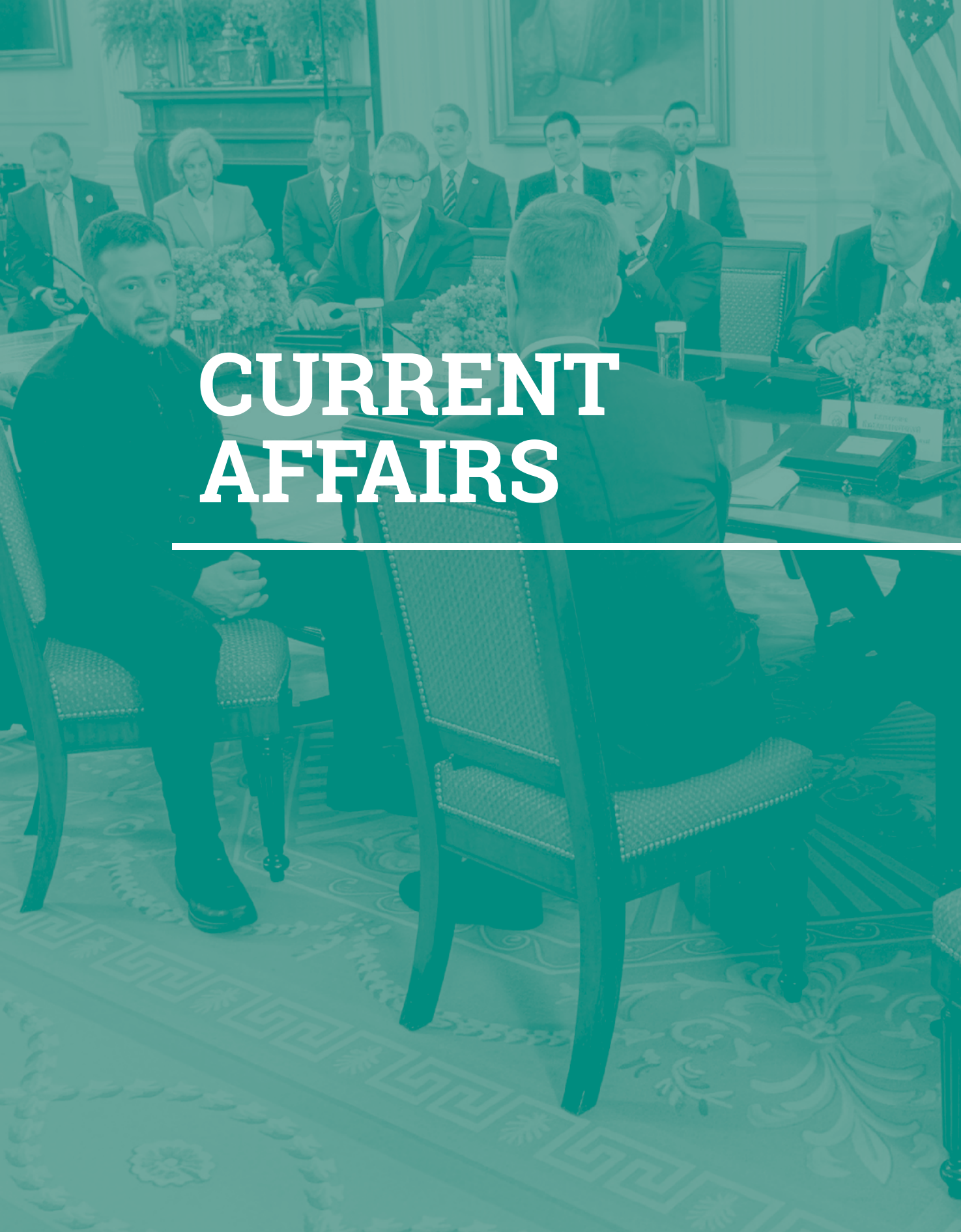


CURRENT AFFAIRS

For a progressive alternative to the far right in the 21st century

by Maria João Rodrigues

We are living in a strange world. Humankind lacks the global governance capacity to cope with current global challenges – notably climate change, conflicts, hunger, poverty, health risks and digital transformation. And a rampant political movement claims that global governance or international cooperation are not needed any longer. This movement advocates disengagement from the multilateral system and other cooperation forums, such as the G20 and even the G7. Key components of the United Nations system, such as its basic functioning budget or development aid, are being depleted, and recent developments, such as the UN Pact for the Future to update the UN system, are just being ignored. Consensual agendas, like that for the sustainable development goals, are simply just despised.

This political movement, 'to make nations great again' and to neglect international cooperation, has steadily been spreading across the world and reached a qualitative leap when it started leading the United States. The US has been able to keep its global role due to its unparalleled military and financial power in spite of the visible difficulties regarding its competitiveness in traditional manufacturing sectors – as witnessed by the current trade war. Let us be clear, however, that the current American leadership in digital transformation and AI can enable the US to prolong its dominant role in reorganising the global order, not only in its technological and economic dimensions, but also in its cultural and political ones.

This new political movement is also bringing a big shift on the domestic front. **Beyond a populist recipe to protect traditional working-class jobs with higher tariffs and harsh migration controls, what is really happening is the liberalisation of the labour market with regard to collective bargaining and free AI algorithmic labour management.** Furthermore, universal access to healthcare and to social protection is being reduced, and corporate social responsibility – meaning environmental, social and governance (ESG) standards, and diversity, equality and inclusion (DEI) standards – is being actively undermined.

This radical conservatism, as the movement is called, also reveals worrying ideological foundations. Its leading voices openly attack the cultural and political tradition of the Enlightenment, which is still well rooted in modern societies, not only in Europe but across different civilisations. These leading voices put Social Democrats, traditional conservatives, liberals and neoliberals all into the same bag, which the radical conservatives call the 'party of destruction'. By contrast, the radical conservatives announce themselves as the 'party of creation' that will radically transform our

Beyond a populist recipe to protect traditional working-class jobs with higher tariffs and harsh migration controls, what is really happening is the liberalisation of the labour market with regard to collective bargaining and free AI algorithmic labour management.

societies on the basis of certain fundamental principles: god, nation, family and unrestricted ownership. All these principles are used with a very conservative, in fact reactionary, interpretation. One of the movement's goals seems to be to recreate white male supremacy under the inspiration of a god who is very far away from the original christian message.

How can this be happening in the 21st century? If we look back at the long-term historical trends, it is helpful to recall the 'great transformation' – well-analysed by Karl Polanyi – when the violence of primitive capital accumulation destroyed the social bonds provided by the feudal society. This generated three main and contrasting historical developments: firstly, the communist-soviet kind of revolution; secondly, the deepening of a free market agenda, which led to a financial and social collapse followed by the rise of fascism and the second world war; and thirdly, Roosevelt's New Deal as well as the Social Democratic agenda, which was invented in the European Nordic countries and which then expanded to Western Europe after the second world war.

We should draw a historical parallel with another great transformation – the transformation generated by the recent phase of globalisation, spanning the turn of the 20th century towards the 21st, when a systemic neoliberal agenda imposed financial deregulation, free trade without standards, harsh fiscal consolidation, social cuts and political regime change whenever there was democratic resistance. This is the root of the current far-right movements, and we are again at a crossroads where the real alternative can and should be provided by progressives and Social Democrats. They have highly challenging tasks on their hands.

Their first task is to update the way of regulating labour markets, product and service markets and financial markets, while also supporting the right kind of innovations for sustainable development. The second task is to build up a welfare system 2.0 that can respond to the new needs of populations in deep re-composition: young people with new aspirations, women's emancipation, trends of accelerating population ageing and migration flows. The third task is to revamp public budgets – the big investment which is necessary for a fair green and digital transformation requires a reshuffling of the taxation system to slash the current blatant inequity. The fourth task is to reset democracy as a political system where political decisions must be based on sound debate and regular discussion between citizens and their elected representatives. And the fifth task for progressives and Social Democrats is to reform global governance so that it fosters international cooperation and strives for a New Global Deal.

But progressives and Social Democrats can only pursue these tasks successfully if they develop new political competences – otherwise, they will remain stuck in the past, and they will decline in their influence.

One of these new political competencies is to master the ongoing digital and AI transformation. This is without a doubt the most significant transformation of our lives, and we are still only at the beginning. Its implications are across the board, affecting everyday life, living conditions, working conditions, job trends, access to public

services, business operating models, value chains and platforms in all sectors, the functioning of our institutions and, most important of all, the shaping of our mindsets via media, science, culture and education.

Another crucial political competence is to develop multilevel policy solutions. Let us not be under any illusion: **just as local political action is more effective if it is combined with more decisive political action at the national level, so it is also more effective if it can be combined with more decisive political action at the European and international levels**. This is particularly apparent when dealing with issues such as climate change or pandemics. The need for multilevel policy solutions became especially evident after the painful financial and eurozone crisis. It should also be evident for areas such as the cost of living, the housing crisis, managing migration and countering digital social dumping.

When it comes to the European project, we have reached a pivotal moment. Without stronger European sovereignty, national democratic sovereignty will erode. Furthermore, this also means that the progressive agenda is only feasible at the national level with much stronger European democratic sovereignty. Over recent years, European progressives have been decisive in reshaping the European project with the European Pillar of Social Rights, the European Green Deal, and a reformed Economic and Monetary Union. Yet these are tasks that must be completed alongside the launch of much needed new ones: a European Digital Union, a stronger European voice in the world, and a real political union with the competence to decide and to invest in the future. The citizens' aspirations that were expressed during the Conference on the Future of Europe should not be forgotten.

Finally, there is also a third political competence that should be highlighted: a new approach to doing politics, with stronger means to listen to citizens, explore new ideas, promote open internal debate, and develop multimedia communication which can then be focused on the delivery of real solutions. People's mindsets and opinions are changing rapidly, and we are at a crossroads between either a deeper form of alienation and nihilism or a new form of enlightenment. Progressives and Social Democrats need to strive for the second road, if they want to build and lead a large coalition of forces to counter the influence of the current far right. This should be the basis of a new democratic revolution, empowering citizens by providing access to the truth and an honest debate, rather than fake news and manipulation.

Just as this far-right movement is organising itself at the international level with strong financial, political and media instruments, so our progressive forces need to be promoting the same qualitative leap. Our motivation should be made very clear: we have a beautiful planet, and our world should not be led by autocrats, but by democracies that take care of our people and planet.

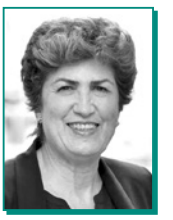
On a personal note, my political awakening occurred during a democratic revolution in my own country, Portugal, and I saw firsthand how powerful such a revolution can be. I would like this same opportunity to be given to many other citizens, men and women, across Europe and the world. This is indeed a beautiful task for progressives over the coming years.

As this is my last contribution for the Progressive Post as FEPS President, I would like to express my gratitude for this remarkable publication that is produced by European progressives for progressives worldwide.

▶ *When it comes to the European project, we have reached a pivotal moment. Without stronger European sovereignty, national democratic sovereignty will erode. Furthermore, this also means that the progressive agenda is only feasible at the national level with much stronger European democratic sovereignty.*

The *Progressive Post* extends its deepest gratitude to Maria João Rodrigues for her years of inspirational leadership at FEPS and her many insightful contributions to this magazine. While we thank her for her service in this role, this is not a farewell, as we look forward to her continued presence as a valued contributor.

Find all publication authored or edited by Maria João Rodrigues' for FEPS and the *Progressive Post* here:



Maria João Rodrigues, FEPS President

Europe's *annus horribilis*

by László Andor

2025 should have been the time for the EU to prove that 'strategic autonomy' is not an empty concept. That in the face of adversity, we can step up our game and, once united and energised, take the bull by the horns. Among the tests the EU faced in the course of the year were the trade debate with the United States, the launch of the new cycle of the multiannual financial framework and responding to President Donald Trump's calls regarding the end of the Russia-Ukraine war. Nobody should pretend that the EU leadership faced an easy challenge. These were tests of strength, courage and cunning, reminiscent of the 12 labours of Heracles. But that is where the comparison ends. The events exposed our weakness at all levels and turned into a nightmare from which we now await a proper wake-up call.

First, European leaders – with the notable exception of Pedro Sánchez – accepted Trump's crazy demand to drive up military expenditure to 5 per cent of annual GDP, in the hope that the general tariff level the US imposes on Europe could be limited to 10 per cent. But Trump does not know mercy, and a 15 per cent tariff was imposed. Then the EU accepted this tariff with a smile on Ursula von der Leyen's face in the hope that perhaps Trump would not walk away from the war in Ukraine. Shortly afterwards, but not surprisingly, Europeans had to witness Trump not only hosting Vladimir Putin in Alaska but also parroting his narrative about the 'root causes' of the war, and dropping the demand for a ceasefire, as well as the entire sanctions agenda.

During a press conference in Scotland by the end of July, **von der Leyen could not give a straight answer when asked on what exactly the Americans had made concessions, as the US had not made any**, and demanded even more. The 15 per cent (and on some products, higher) tariff hurts but – even more dramatically – the EU leadership failed to stand up for multilateralism in international trade and instead echoed Trump's false narrative about 'rebalancing' through bilateral deals. In addition, promises were made that European companies would 'turbo charge' investment in the United States, contradicting the entire EU paradigm based on the Draghi Report, highlighting the need to fill the investment gap not in the US or elsewhere in Europe, but within the EU itself.

When it comes to investment, the EU's key tool is the multiannual financial framework (MFF), and by mid-July, all eyes were on the Commission when the new MFF proposal was unveiled for the upcoming two-year period. 'Retreat camouflaged as innovation' could have been the motto of this event. Von der Leyen remained true to herself, as in her second mandate, she is tending to undo what she built in her first.

In 2020, there was a kind of budget revolution in response to the Covid-19 crisis. This resulted in a surge in EU fiscal capacity with the establishment of NextGenerationEU. Now, **although we nominally speak of the largest ever MFF (€2 trillion), the real value of key EU programmes is about to decline**. The ill-conceived nationalisation (which would apply to both agricultural policy and cohesion) will undermine the MFF's potential for funding European public goods and for steering the lower-income and more peripheral regions towards competitiveness.

Von der Leyen could not give a straight answer when asked on what exactly the Americans had made concessions, as the US had not made any.

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Then, in August, the EU had to face up to the harsh reality that Donald Trump was not joking when he disowned the war in Ukraine and blamed it all on Joe Biden. After three and a half years of war, the choice is between a horrible end and an endless horror. Trump apparently prefers the first, while most European leaders would opt for the second. A new transatlantic divide has thus emerged. All this was displayed in the White House once Trump returned from Alaska and a sample of European leaders flew in.

When it comes to peace negotiations, the situation in the theatre of war is the most important determinant of the dynamics and the eventual outcome. **In Ukraine, Russian troops are still advancing, but this does not mean that Russia is on track to achieve all its goals**; far from it. For over two years, since the botched counteroffensive in June 2023, the situation has been one of stalemate, subject to diverse interpretations.

Russia has not lost, but Ukraine has not won. It is unlikely that the war will end with a clear-cut victory or defeat for either side, but one thing is for sure: both countries have lost a lot, and Trump has created the momentum for a settlement, as long as the two sides, Russia and Ukraine can converge. This would also mean that the maximalist goals that some Europeans have been trying to uphold will become unattainable.

The maximalist approach that some European leaders are taking on Ukraine has been in sharp contrast with their negligence on Gaza and failure to sanction Israel. The EU had a legal obligation to impose sanctions on Israel due to the breach of Article 2 of the EU-Israel Association Agreement and other international legal obligations. Sadly, this was only stated publicly by the previous EU High Representative, not by the incumbent.

So, the big picture is that on trade there is still some rearguard action after the surrender;

In Ukraine, Russian troops are still advancing, but this does not mean that Russia is on track to achieve all its goals; far from it.

on Ukraine, there is a search for a new position after the EU was wrong-footed by the US; and on the MFF, the existing proposal falls very short and is being rejected by a majority in the European Parliament – while this should be a key tool for Europe to upgrade itself. The latest comparable crisis was in 2010-2012, when European leaders did not realise for far too long that they were digging themselves into a hole. In the summer of 2012, the EU stepped back from the brink, but the recovery took some further years. Today, there is no immediate threat of disintegration, but the simultaneous stress in the economic, financial, and security dimensions may become too great. In such times, much depends on good leadership, which is currently lacking.

Ursula von der Leyen was fortunate that a motion of censure against her in the European Parliament was rejected just before the geopolitical winds turned into a dramatic storm. On 10 July, 175 MEPs voted in Strasbourg for the motion, 360 voted against, and 18 abstained, on a turnout of 77 per cent. Some of the MEPs who voted against her dismissal did so to avoid a potentially lengthy period (five to six months) of uncertainty until a new European Commission could be established. This means that the votes against the motion cannot all be interpreted as an expression of strong confidence in von der Leyen, but as a rejection of instability and of a further shift to the right that such a transition might entail.

The culmination of events in the summer of 2025 also serves as a cautionary tale about politicians who want to play geopolitics without understanding geoeconomics, and who only demonstrate timidity and cognitive dissonance in difficult moments. In addition to the transatlantic crisis, such a lack of preparedness at the leadership level results in a new intra-EU divide between the verbally courageous who would be keen to militarise the EU and the quiet pragmatics who wish to maintain the integrity of the European single market and social model without making the case for it publicly. The question is whether the EU can continue to represent its own values without undermining its strategic interests (to the extent that the latter have been defined at all).

There is some truth in the statement that the room for manoeuvre for EU leaders in these negotiations could only be limited, and that the asymmetry between the EU and the US would have determined the outcome, no matter what. However, von der Leyen herself had weakened the Commission by establishing an autocratic regime and overruling the established methods of coordination, thereby suppressing the logic of specific portfolios and eliminating the if seperated, it has to be 'heavy-weights' from the Commission who could have helped face the challenge and pursue a viable strategy. Nonetheless, today the main discussion should not be about individuals but the cohesion and viability of the European Union as a community.

In 2003, when the US and the UK launched their illegal war against Iraq, the neoconservative author Robert Kagan wrote, "on major strategic and international questions today, Americans are from Mars and Europeans are from Venus". At the time, such comments were made to mock the Europeans, many of whom developed a kind of inferiority complex, having seen the military manifestations of US unilateralism. **After Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the beginning of the European '*Zeitenwende*' or 'turning point', some Europeans started to walk with their heads held high, believing that we too were from Mars, and emancipated from the US. Three and a half years later, it is time to think again about which planet we are from and what kind of world we want to build for ourselves.**

László Andor,
FEPS Secretary General

The culmination of events in the summer of 2025 also serves as a cautionary tale about politicians who want to play geopolitics without understanding geoeconomics, and who only demonstrate timidity and cognitive dissonance in the difficult moments.

The quest for progress in Europe

by Ania Skrzypek

It is with pride that we call ourselves the European progressives. By using this name, we are prompted to reflect on the movement's grandest traditions, the inspiring legacy endowed by previous generations, and the significant historical crossroads that the Union has navigated thanks to the steadfast political perseverance of our representatives.

We understand where we have come from, we know why we joined, and we recognise the values that drive us forward. And while this gives us strength and helps us stand firm amidst today's challenges and against today's popular trends, perhaps far too frequently, we let ourselves be taken to a position where we feel we must defend ourselves, our issues and our achievements. So here is a thought to be pondered – being true to our political bequest should not be about shielding ourselves from the past. No, it should be about preserving the past by perpetually reaching for more.

While we hear all the claims about the European way of life being under threat, about the crisis of the Western world and the EU making concessions under external pressure, this is a moment like no other to dare to talk about a different Europe. One that will be progressive, that will outlast our generation and that will deliver on the aspirations of generations to come. Now is the moment for the audacity to trust ourselves and to ask voters to put their trust in the fact that we Social Democrats are still here, on the side of social justice and progress. This is what the current moment should be about, when we mobilise and come together.

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POLITICS HAS CHANGED...

There is nothing infantile in being idealistic, and there is nothing incriminating in imagining that our movement could emancipate itself by thinking beyond the limits of the current political map, the current composition of institutions, and the current approval rates. Political systems have indeed evolved. After a period of professionalisation and mediatisation, which left many believing that the traditional political parties all resembled one another, there came a period of counter-reaction. Resentment towards the establishment, the political elites and the traditional parties paved the way for the rise of protest politics – when what used to be at the fringes entered forcefully into the political arena, and in some cases even took centre stage.

This fragmented landscape and ensuing radicalisation and polarisation has impacted the rules of conducting politics. Indeed, politics has now become a brutal spectacle marked by confrontation – and neither the local, European or global level is exempt. **Progressives may ring alarm bells that this will destroy democracy, but at the end of the day many voters perceive today's system as something that does not work for them.** Defending the current system with the language of reform and apologising for its complexity, is not good enough and stands out as oddly minimalistic when compared to the magnitude of the global unravelling or the tone set by the MAGA movement.

Our instinctive reaction has thus far been to study the reasons for the popularity of the far right. But the truth is that the radical right organisations in particular never cease to

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> *Progressives may ring alarm bells that this will destroy democracy, but at the end of the day many voters perceive today's system as something that does not work for them.*

surprise and to shock, moving between the incredible and the impossible. Alongside their loud and unashamed narrative, this gives them a clear advantage and drives political conversation into fields where complex evidence-based answers do not stand a chance of competing. Progressives have tried to counter-react, to ridicule and to portend doomsday scenarios. But if anything, this has only added grist to their opponents' mill.

... SO IT IS TIME TO CHANGE GEAR

It is high time for Social Democrats to change gear. Our focus must shift to the future we can build, namely a Europe that offers hope and prospects, one that stands by the idea of the peaceful world it wants to co-shape and that stands by cooperation in order to ensure progress for all. In the circumstances of the still-fresh post-war wounds of the 1950s and 1960s, it was possible to rise above everyday hardship and to offer bold scenarios that first benefited just a few, but over the course of time, emancipate and empower many. In the 1970s, it was possible to alter the integrational trajectory. This required a new dimension that united Social Democrats behind the project of Social Europe. And this all took place amidst the consolidation of neoliberal hegemony.

In the 1990s, it was possible to think about a united continent that would deliver on a new promise – full employment – labelled then by the Party of European Socialists (PES) as 'a United Europe that works'.

Then, just after the upheaval of the failed attempt at the Constitutional Treaty for Europe, progressives rejected the claims of an existential crisis. Although we were under growing electoral pressure, we still had the audacity to propose a New Social Europe project, cautioning against the predicted perils of financial capitalism, and putting the PES ahead of the political curve. So why on earth should we doubt today in the power and attractiveness of progressive thought?

Indeed, **what if progressives today risked trimming down our lengthy list of issues? Although this list provides clear proof of our political orientation, it fragments our proposal and risks creating a situation where by trying to own so many issues, the Social Democratic movement does not in reality have primacy on any of them.** What if the overwhelming degree of complexity and detail, to which many have grown accustomed thinking that it makes us appear proficient, prolific and predictable, were to be reduced? What if the centre-left were to embrace the idea that citizens are disenchanted by the transactional approach to politics and its limitations in these turbulent times. Indeed, a transactional approach does not make citizens any less susceptible to following values and to needing to belong to a greater common project. In other words, what if the progressives were again to be the pioneers – this time making European politics a space for grand and inspiring ideas?

The name of the game should now be 'thinking ahead'. This would enable us to escape our current defensive modus of perpetual 'respondism', which often causes our Social Democratic movement to lag. We are now at a historical turning point, and it calls for a new European doctrine. Progressives need to dare to dream. Nothing must prevent us from mobilising around a project that will enthuse us, make us reach for the impossible, and ensure that we are the ones to define the future course of history.

Ania Skrzypek,
FEPS Director for Research and Training

How progressives win when democracy is on the line

by Robert Benson

Across democracies, the threat to liberal institutions no longer comes from the margins. It sits at the centre of politics – in ruling parties that rewrite constitutions, normalise disinformation and turn resentment into strategy. Yet the story of recent years is not only one of democratic decline. In several key countries, progressives have begun to find ways to fight back. Their experiences point to a common truth: when the left organises around broad coalitions, offers a credible vision of material security and resists imitating the grievance-based populism it seeks to defeat, it can still win – and govern with purpose.

Poland's 2023 parliamentary election offered one of the clearest examples of partial democratic recovery in recent memory. After eight years of rule by the Law and Justice party (PiS), the country's democratic institutions had eroded to the brink: captured courts, state-controlled media and a politicised public administration. Yet civil society persisted, and so did a fragmented opposition. When elections approached, three opposition parties – the centrist Civic Coalition, the Third Way and the progressive Left – directed their messaging against PiS in an effort to restore the rule of law.

That informal alliance, if implausible, broke the populist stronghold. Despite ideological differences, Poland's opposition recognised that pluralism itself was at stake. The victory did not come from a single party but from the collective credibility of a pro-democracy camp willing to work together. The lesson is straightforward: **when the threat is existential, various parties must set aside ideological divides and act as a united front in defence of democracy**. Factional infighting cannot stand up to authoritarian discipline.

UNITED STATES: RECLAIMING AN AFFIRMATIVE VISION

In the United States, the challenge has taken a different shape. President Donald Trump's brand of authoritarian populism has proven durable because it channels real grievances – economic insecurity, social precarity and the sense that government no longer delivers. Progressives have learned that moral outrage alone cannot defeat that narrative. Voters respond to tangible improvements in their lives, not just appeals to democratic norms.

That reality has produced an emerging consensus within the Democratic coalition. In the off-cycle elections at the beginning of November, both the democratic socialist Zohran Mamdani in New York and pragmatic centrists like Governors-elect Abigail Spanberger in Virginia and Mikie Sherrill in New Jersey have shown that a commitment to affordability – from housing to healthcare to education – can unite voters across class and ideology. Their approaches differ, but their underlying message converges: **dignity is not a partisan concept. When citizens can afford opportunity, they become less vulnerable to the politics of resentment.**

> *Dignity is not a partisan concept. When citizens can afford opportunity, they become less vulnerable to the politics of resentment.*

Progressives cannot out-fearmonger the right. But they can disarm its appeal by addressing the structural inequities that give it oxygen. The fight for democracy, in this sense, is inseparable from the fight against economic precarity. If people live in constant want, the promise of self-government loses meaning.

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UNITED KINGDOM: GOVERNING HONESTLY

Prime Minister Keir Starmer's government entered office with historic momentum and broad public trust. Yet its early months have revealed a worrying instinct to govern by focus group rather than by principles. The abrupt reversal on heating benefits was emblematic – a policy decision made without clarity of purpose, then abandoned without real explanation. The result was confusion and frustration among both supporters and critics.

Labour's challenge mirrors that of centre-left parties elsewhere: to balance pragmatism with real leadership. Voters do not expect perfection, but they do expect honesty. **When progressives treat politics as a game of tactical avoidance rather than moral leadership, they erode the trust required to sustain their popularity.** Governing seriously means explaining difficult trade-offs, not ducking them – and it also means refusing to cater to the lowest common denominator by tacking right on, for example, social benefits.

The rise of Reform and the collapse of the Conservative Party under Kemi Badenoch's leadership have shown that imitating the far right does not succeed in winning over its voters. A lesson Labour would be wise to heed.

THREE LESSONS FOR THE DEMOCRATIC LEFT

Across these cases, three lessons stand out.

First, big tents win. Poland's opposition understood that defeating authoritarian populism required unity, not ideological conformity. The left must embrace broad coalition politics as a form of democratic self-defence.

Second, right-wing grievance cannot be met with right-wing grievance. In the United States, progressives are learning that the most effective way to counter populism is to address its material roots. **When politics restores people's sense of agency and economic dignity, the emotional terrain shifts.**

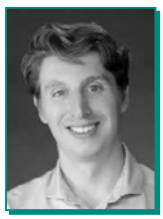
Third, imitation corrodes credibility. Labour's early missteps show the dangers of chasing right-wing narratives or governing through short-term calculations. The public can forgive mistakes; it does not forgive drift.

THE PATH FORWARD

Progressives will face hard elections ahead – in the US next year, across Europe soon after. The forces arrayed against them are disciplined, well-funded, and united by grievance. But the last two years have shown that **the authoritarian tide is not inevitable. Where the Left organises broadly, governs responsibly and leads with purpose, it can still renew democracy's promise**.

The challenge is not just to win elections but to rebuild belief in the possibility of democratic government itself – that the state can protect rights, deliver stability and make life fairer. That belief remains the most powerful weapon against authoritarian populism. The task for progressives is to prove it true.

> *The authoritarian tide is not inevitable. Where the Left organises broadly, governs responsibly and leads with purpose, it can still renew democracy's promise*



Robert Benson, Associate Director, National Security and International Policy, Center for American Progress

When justice is blind to algorithms

by Charlotta Kronblad

We are in the midst of a digital transformation. One of its consequences is that countless automated decisions, powered by algorithms, are made every day. This may sound abstract, but a case in Sweden shows how a seemingly straightforward algorithmic system caused extensive detrimental consequences for thousands of schoolchildren. This is but one example of public sector automated decision-making, commonly used for determining eligibility for economic and social benefits, and for such diverse purposes as taxation, policing and healthcare.

While these new digitally empowered ways of administration are necessary for delivering modern welfare, we should not be blind to the increased risks. Some recent cases of where digitally empowered administration went wrong are the childcare benefit scandal in the Netherlands and the post office scandal in the UK, wrongly criminalising and punishing ordinary citizens. Research – and experience – also shows that automated decision-making (ADM) systems carry dangers of discrimination, bias and unequal distribution. A Swedish ADM application for school placements illustrates perfectly how algorithmic injustice can arise and persist.

In the spring of 2020, the city of Gothenburg decided to use an algorithm to place children in public schools, but it went terribly wrong. Blinded by technological trust (although probably without intent), the city coded the system incorrectly. Instead of using parents' preferences (their elected schools) and children's walking distances to the schools as the decisive principles for school placement (stipulated by the Swedish law), **they coded the system to optimise placements only on geographical distances as the crow flies. It is therefore no surprise that this caused massive problems in a city divided by a large river, because children cannot fly**. The incorrect algorithm made several hundred children ending up in schools on the opposite riverbank, resulting in lengthy commutes. To make matters worse, these initial faulty placements meant that children were now taking up school spots far from home, forcing an equal number of children (who lived in the actual vicinity of these schools) into other placements further away, also against their will. In this way, every error was multiplied several times over.

This is an example of a systemic error, where the problem can be traced to the code, not individual decisions. However, our legal systems primarily allow for individual correction. This means they call for individual appeals if you do not believe your decisions are correct. But systemic errors can never be corrected by individual redress. Also, how would you even know if a decision is correct, when the decision-making is hidden, and your decision may depend on another faulty decision five steps down the chain? In fact, **ADM systems bring an opacity that makes errors particularly difficult to see and contest**.

> *ADM systems bring an opacity that makes errors particularly difficult to see and contest.*

Motivated by the injustice of the situation – and one of my sons being placed by the algorithm – I decided to sue the city. Not with the intent to correct the individual decision concerning my son, but to address the systemic aspect and every faulty decision resulting from incorrect code. I therefore asked the administrative court to assess the legality of the code and the implementation of the ADM system. In fact, with a background in law and a PhD in digital transformation, I was intrigued by this digital enigma and decided to make it into a research project.

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Our current legal systems have become outdated, which effectively prevents legal redress when algorithms fail.

This project would explore what happens when algorithms end up in court. In reality, **I wondered if the judges would understand algorithms as evidence, and whether they would grasp the legal implications of ADM**.

To my despair, the case was lost. The court had, in fact, placed the burden of proof on me as the applicant. The evidence I had provided to support my claims included a list and analysis of actual placements, where I tried to deductively argue how the algorithm must have looked – given these particular results. The court, however, demanded hard proof. To win the case, I would have needed to show the unlawful elements of the code and to prove its illegal application. But how could I do that? How can a civilian without access to the code ever prove that it is illegal? This puts the burden of proof on the party that has no way of accessing it. In this case, I had requested access to the algorithm in about 20 emails to the city, but it was never provided. **This shows how even a fairly simple ADM system can still be blackboxed, whether intentionally or unintentionally, by its users.**

A year later, however, the truth came to light. Triggered by media attention, the city auditors of Gothenburg decided to scrutinise how the ADM system had been used, and what errors the faulty implementation had caused. Their report confirmed the points that I had already made through reverse engineering. However, for most of the affected children in Gothenburg this was too little and too late. About 700 of them still had to complete their entire junior high school years at the wrong school.

The Gothenburg case – whose analysis is part of a forthcoming book by FEPS, *Algorithmic Rule. AI and the Future of Democracy in Sweden and Beyond* – shows that **our current legal systems have become outdated, which effectively prevents legal redress when algorithms fail**. Without a fair opportunity for systemic appeals, the efficient scrutiny of the legality of code, and the burden of proof being placed where it belongs, we will never accomplish algorithmic justice, no matter how many new laws we make. Instead, we need to ensure that the rulebook still fits.

Charlotta Kronblad, a former lawyer with ten years of experience in the legal field, holds a PhD from Chalmers University of Technology. She is currently conducting research on digital transformation at the Department of Applied IT at the University of Gothenburg

The resolute persistence of feminist foreign policy

A thread of hope in troubled times

by Spogmay Ahmed

Since launching the Feminist Foreign Policy Collaborative in 2023, I asked myself oftentimes whether a feminist foreign policy is really, truly, possible. The world has become scarier, closing in on every opportunity to advance gender equality and human rights. But something inside me has not wanted to let go. And this year I have been so glad I never did.

When we launched the Feminist Foreign Policy Collaborative in 2023, feminist foreign policy (FFP) was rising in popularity and interest. That year, up to 15 governments across the world committed to a feminist foreign and/or development policy.

> *Contrary to our fears and anxieties, feminist foreign policy efforts were persisting in ever more challenging contexts.*

But 2024 held other plans. Starting with Sweden, then Argentina, the Netherlands and Germany, the official renouncements on FFP kept on coming. Meanwhile, others like Libya and Luxembourg quietly stepped away. The surviving cohort was deeply divided, with Northern governments sounding the alarm on Ukraine and Southern governments calling for justice in Palestine. Official development assistance for gender equality was cut because of rising and unprecedented levels of military expenditure.

Enter 2025. As we began our research for the *Defining Feminist Foreign Policy 2025* report, we expected to find the beginning of the end, with our work becoming an archival report on the rise and fall of FFP'. Instead, **we found a far more hopeful picture than we had anticipated. Contrary to our fears, feminist foreign policy efforts were persisting in ever more challenging contexts**.

To start, we found that feminist foreign policies have actually survived more elections than they have lost, including in Canada, France, Liberia, Mexico, Slovenia and Spain. Several governments have developed or expanded their feminist foreign policies during this period, including by publishing new frameworks, action plans and commitments. For example, **France launched its International Strategy for Feminist Foreign Policy in March 2025 – a long seven years after initially expressing its intention to do so and engaging with this field.** Similarly, Colombia published its feminist foreign policy framework in November 2024 – the first and only FFP framework to explicitly embrace a pacifist approach. At the United Nations, France and Colombia co-chair the FFP+ Group, an informal set of member states that, despite the growing number of questions surrounding multilateralism, has continued to bring together foreign ministers year after year to reiterate their commitment to this agenda.

Multilateral, regional and bilateral activities on FFP have also persisted. Last October, in France, we held the fourth annual ministerial-level conference on this topic, following the examples set by Germany in 2022, the Netherlands in 2023 and Mexico in 2024. **The stakes are high, but governments are gathering to publicly express their support for women's rights – a much-needed effort in this time of intense rollback.** We have at least three international declarations on the topic, two regional declarations, and multiple South-South and circular cooperation efforts. For example, in 2024, Chile and Mexico signed a memorandum of understanding on FFP, diplomatic training and indigenous cooperation. Chile, Colombia, Germany and Mexico also agreed to develop a

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regional community of practice on FFP. Examples like these demonstrate that, behind the headlines, allies inside governments are still pushing for progress where they can.

One of the biggest concerns over the past few years has been the question of institutionalisation. In other words, when you have the political will for gender-transformative change, how do you make sure it is not easy to overturn when tides change? In our *Defining Feminist Foreign Policy 2025* report, my colleagues and I have identified five strategies for institutionalisation. These include:

1. Policy, through legislative or administrative frameworks;

2. Architecture, through the establishment of dedicated departments or units for this work;

3. Budgetary, through the earmarking of specific funds or investment in key initiatives;

4. Leadership, through the tapping of dedicated high-level roles or positions;

5. Capacity, through staff training on feminist foreign and/or development policies.

Throughout our period of analysis, we found that both **governments and civil society have been innovating with these strategies, finding ways to protect gender equality from impulsive political shifts**. For example, in recognition of the global attacks on reproductive rights, France passed a constitutional amendment on the right to abortion, setting a model for other countries to follow suit. Chile established the first gender unit at its ministry of foreign affairs, which will be tasked with the implementation of its FFP, and Spain codified its feminist approach into law with its landmark Cooperation Law on Sustainable Development and Global Solidarity. Our civil society colleagues from Sweden – the first government to both announce and renounce a feminist foreign policy – cautioned against tying FFP too closely to a singular political party and/or politician, instead encouraging more expansive buy-in and cross-party consolidation.

The story of FFP continues. Participating in the Fourth Ministerial Conference on Feminist Foreign Policy in Paris has given me a vision for what I would like the world to look like. Through all of FFP's ups, downs and contradictions, the conference has raised the bar for what we know we can accomplish. I hope we will at least get a bit closer.

▶ *Governments and civil society have been innovating with these strategies, finding ways to protect gender equality from impulsive political shifts.*

Spogmay Ahmed, Senior Policy Adviser for the Feminist Foreign Policy Collaborative

BOOK

ALGORITHMIC RULE

AI AND THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY IN SWEDEN AND BEYOND

Edited by Maja Fjaestad and Simon Vinge

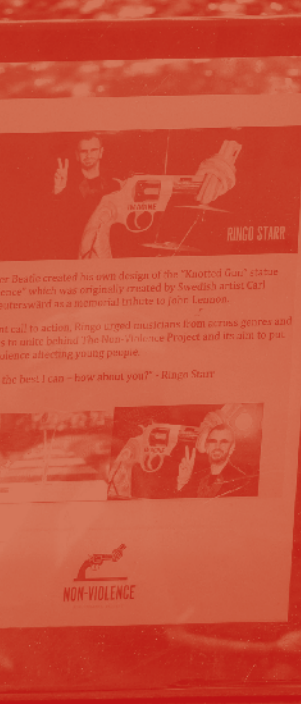
The future is not simply digital; it is algorithmic. The book "Algorithmic rule" explores what can be described as algocracy – rule by algorithms. Algorithms now shape not only what we see and hear through the media, but also how public administrations function, how work is managed, and decisions about health, employment and even children's education.

We need a progressive algorithmic future - an alternative that resists surrendering sovereignty to Big Tech. Transparency is essential, but it is not enough; the deeper challenge is to ensure that citizens and workers themselves influence the algorithms that govern them.

This book is part of the FEPS–Nordic Digital Programme.

SPECIAL COVERAGE

DOES PEACE STILL HAVE A CHANCE?



Against the backdrop of a changing world order, where the norms established by the international community after the second world war are eroded without being replaced by new and more up-to-date rules, the very idea of peace is increasingly disregarded, if not directly threatened.

Certainly, the idea of peace is not immutable. Throughout the 20th century, we transitioned from a peace determined by the victors of war to one shaped by liberal states within a liberal – or allegedly liberal – world order. Nowadays, countries around the world, from East to West, are engaged in a form of political revisionism that is bringing the nation state, borders, territories and political violence back to the centre of international dynamics, undermining multilateralism, multilateral institutions and political cooperation.

In this context, the number of conflicts is increasing, transactional mediation is on the rise – promoted also by US President Donald Trump's approach to diplomacy – and countries are increasingly reinforcing their defence capabilities, while showing a declining interest in, and cutting resources for, those tools that in the last 80 years have supported peacemaking and peacekeeping.

While the debate seems to focus almost exclusively on war and rearmament, at the *Progressive Post* we want to steer that debate towards peace. Our goal is twofold. First, we want to make a meaningful contribution to the debate on the EU's multiannual financial framework, which will define how money on defence, peace and development is spent in the future. Second, and even more importantly, we want to ensure that the utmost effort is made to prevent new conflicts and to prepare ourselves with regard to the peace that will follow the end of the current conflicts, with a clear vision of the kind of peace we want to build. We are convinced that – now, more than ever – we must give peace a chance.

Past and future peace

by Oliver P. Richmond

Theories and concepts of peace have been scientifically and empirically developed and proven over time. They exist somewhere beyond practice in the 'real world', allowing us to evaluate how states, governments, donors, political leaders, officials, civil society, social movements and others are performing. By all measures, today's performance is poor and regressing when compared to what we know about peace from a scientific and scholarly perspective.

Historically, the concept of peace has revolved around a 'victor's peace', which was most common in imperial eras. Then, after the first world war, it came to revolve around Versailles – a 'liberal peace' in which liberal states were to replace the imperial system and its tendency to collapse into large-scale war. This latter version of peace came to be nested within what became known as the US-backed 'liberal international order' after the second world war. This 'liberal peace' has, over the last decades, provided the most dynamic basis in history for innovation in peacemaking: institutions, law, constitutions, rights, civil society, development and trade have been incorporated into its attempt to banish violence as a central tool of politics and to promote the 'good life'.

This complex agenda led to the standard liberal elements of a peace agreement, pieced together after 1945 and expanded after 1990 into a more comprehensive form (including, for example, a ceasefire, an elite-level power-sharing agreement normally of liberal constitutional design, related political and economic reform, democratisation, human rights, non-violence, the rule of law, active civil society, development and international support). This solidified the modern international peace architecture, a layered and complex system of peacemaking mechanisms and tools, which itself rested delicately on the historical victor's peace and balance of power models of the 19th century.

> *As the liberal international order fragmented with the mistakes in the American-led 'war on terror', and the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan in the 2000s, liberal peace began to be undermined by what can often be seen as anti-scientific, 'counter-peace' dynamics.*

As this concept of liberal peace came into contact with more varied types of political entity during decolonisation and again after the end of the cold war, liberal peace hybridised and localised. This enabled it to connect more closely with local social movements, cultures and identities, as seen in countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, Colombia, Kosovo, Nepal and Timor-Leste, often in quite different and innovative ways. It also had the effect of widening our understanding of violence and peace, adding more layers to what can be seen as a deeply rooted and layered international peace architecture.

However, this expansion of the remit of peace had the unanticipated effect of weakening the system of checks and balances that belonged to liberal peace, as well as sometimes becoming a platform for more conservative and reactionary forces. **As the liberal international order fragmented with the mistakes in the American-led 'war on terror', and the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan in the 2000s, liberal peace began to be undermined by what can often be seen as anti-scientific, 'counter-peace' dynamics.** The subsequent argument that multipolarity and authoritarianism can support peace is not supported by historical evidence. In fact, multipolarity and authoritarianism tend to undermine the liberal international order's proscription of violence, return unchecked power to political, economic and military elites, and block the increasingly science-based, broad

rights and sustainability focus of peace, where doctrine and scholarship are closely aligned (for example, in the UN's New Agenda for Peace of 2023). This 'backsliding' process can be clearly observed in the lack of progress on peacemaking in Ukraine since the Minsk agreements in 2014-2015, which then culminated in a Russian invasion aimed at preventing liberal peace there. Similarly, this backsliding process also prefigures the collapse of, and disregard for, any Middle East peace process.

The allegory of good and bad government by Ambrogio Lorenzetti (1338) – © Steven Zucker

PAST AND PRESENT PEACEMAKING: NO PEACE WITHOUT JUSTICE

There is little scholarly doubt that contemporary peace has to be associated with justice. This has been the argument of social movements and civil society for time immemorial (as well as of scholars and leaders such as Immanuel Kant, Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela). The link between peace and justice is now well-represented in UN and donor policy documents, although perhaps more rhetorically and hypocritically on the part of individual state donors. By contrast, this same link between peace and justice has been roundly rejected throughout history by power holders, elites, politicians and officials, who focus instead on what they often euphemistically term the 'art of the possible'. Indeed, they often have much to lose by linking peace with justice.

As a consequence of the rejection of the peace-justice link, the old tribalisms of nationalism, ideology and authoritarianism, and their relations, regional war, proxy war, oppression and even strategies on (or over) the brink of being genocidal, are today reappearing. Making the peace-justice link even more complex and challenging is that it has become clear from academic study that the justice element must be understood in its broader sense, encompassing global justice for peace to be comprehensive and sustainable. This global justice should encompass material and structural reforms if the outcomes of peacemaking, peacekeeping, peacebuilding and political reform are to be sustainable and widely accepted by the global and local public, particularly in the Global South. Most peace processes and related tools have only recently begun to engage with such extensions. However, as noted above, there is an academic and policy debate that cautions against these ambitions, instead suggesting that basic agreements or ceasefires are all that can be achieved. Such arguments tend to see the concept of peace as interchangeable with interests or security, as determined by great powers, rather than by science and scholarship. This instrumental approach characterises US President Trump's recent dalliances with peacemaking in Ukraine, in Gaza and the Middle East.

COUNTER-PEACE AND AN AUTHORITARIAN INTERNATIONAL ORDER

What happens when the gulf between what is scientifically understood to be necessary for peace, what politicians can practically implement, and what is legitimate for the public, is so great that a peace agreement merely reflects very basic security and rights, if even that? **The current direction of travel for peacemaking appears to represent a regression towards outcomes built on victory, the use of violence, and longstanding stalemates, with their eventual collapse. In practice, this framing also means the rejection of human rights, justice and human security, as can be seen in the recent failures experienced in Syria and Ukraine, and now Gaza.** These countries are, at best, subject to 'peace-washing' processes of so-called peacemaking, which disguise the escalation of violence by expectant victors.

At the state level, this gulf can be seen in the donor system and within the UN, EU, the African Union (AU) and other organisations, whose security interests have often been constrained since the 'war on terror'. International institutions and organisations often acknowledge scientific findings on peace in their doctrines (such as with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals), but in practice these findings have been increasingly undermined. The central role of the US has been particularly unstable given that it underpinned the liberal international order after the second world war, and yet has often selectively failed to support standards and norm

(as can be seen in relation to the Responsibility to Protect doctrine) during the war in Syria. The US has also allowed (or even enabled) human rights standards to collapse in Afghanistan, the Middle East and elsewhere. As far as the EU is concerned, it is also fairly clear that security, markets and the economy matter more than the norms and principles associated with peace in practice. However, the EU makes a greater effort to disguise the hierarchy that prioritises politics over law and principles.

> *Peace is now being blocked and undermined by political revisionism around the world – in Russia, China, some of the BRICS, as well as the West.*

Peace is now being blocked and undermined by political revisionism around the world – in Russia, China, some of the BRICS, as well as the West (supported by leaders such as Trump in the US, and his fluctuating cast of counterparts in Hungary, Israel, the UK and others at various points). This revisionism has sought to re-establish the nation state, valorise borders and territorialism, undermine global cooperation, and exploit the political use of violence. It can be seen as a kind of counter-peace, which strips peace back to its most basic, Hobbesian qualities: a brief respite before the next war. The prospects for a peace that matches scientific scholarship in a multipolar and authoritarian world are extremely limited, if not implausible.

It has become clear that peace and peacemaking practices must carry emancipatory goals to be widely legitimate – otherwise, any 'authoritarian peace' will need to be enforced coercively by the political elites holding power. Historically, similar moments of existential crisis have occurred when the most dynamic thinking has taken place about the future of peace, and when this thinking has been linked to the nature of governance and the reform of political order (as depicted in Lorenzetti's 14th-century painting, the Allegory of Good and Bad Government).

FUTURE PEACE

It is at the most dangerous moments in history that a future peace is imagined, often by civil, social and subaltern groups, perhaps even by the war victims. Their common equation of peace with justice means that the terms of an agreement and of any subsequent political reform would have to address questions of historical justice, economic inequality, gender justice, racial justice and environmental justice to be sustainable and durable. This is where the most advanced scholarship points, and this pathway is also reflected in the UN's Sustaining Peace Agenda. Central to this is the goal of pushing the use of violence in all of its forms (structural, cultural, gender, racial and environmental) as a political tool to the farthest edges of politics.

Yet, in an era when wars are resurfacing in the heart of international politics, it is striking how little innovation is emerging in the pursuit of peace. The tools on which we rely – diplomacy, mediation, peacekeeping and peacebuilding – are mostly relics of past centuries, designed to maintain the liberal international order rather than reform it. They were designed for the cold war, or earlier, and now fail to meet the challenges of today's fractured and multipolar world. If humanity is to have a sustainable 'future peace', we must think beyond patching up a failing system. This requires innovation, not renovation — because history shows that political orders without peacemaking tools eventually collapse as violence escalates.

Connecting peace with global justice offers broad legitimacy and sustainability, which conceptually helps overcome many of the difficulties the liberal peace model faced, as it limited its goals to the renovation of the existing hierarchy of states and refused to expand rights beyond the very basic. Connecting peace with global justice marks the starting point for a rethink of peace and political order during this current period.

Breakthroughs in peacemaking usually emerge only after devastating wars, when structural innovation becomes possible. During the interim periods, only tactical 'renovations' were possible, aiming to moderate violence through ceasefires, modest peacekeeping missions, mediation and dialogue – typically without addressing more profound injustices. These renovations temporarily stabilised the system but did not resolve the underlying causes of conflict, resulting in the erosion of the system's legitimacy over time.

This all helps us understand the current situation, in which predatory capitalism, wars, illiberal populism, and geopolitical rivalries have eroded the liberal international order. In the vacuum that has emerged, authoritarian powers are reviving older models of authoritarian order, characterised by a victor's peace through force, hierarchy and domination. Neither approach now offers a credible path towards sustainable peace, although the liberal international order clearly hosted thinking about innovation, even if this was not put into practice. A 'future peace' – a conceptual framework for bridging the gap between scholarly knowledge and practice – entails creating new foundations for peace in the realms of politics, society, economics and culture. These foundations should be inclusive, just, and capable of adapting to past and emerging threats. True innovation in peacemaking would confront these structural issues directly.

Oliver P. Richmond, Professor of International Relations, Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Manchester

Peace for sale?

How transactional deals disregard the law and corrode peacemaking

by **Erin McCandless**

As rules of war are ignored and leaders seek elite deals around minerals and land, peace itself is increasingly threatened. Transactional mediation – where elite bargains and resource concessions replace inclusive processes and efforts to target root causes of conflict – is on the rise. The costs are high: for civilians, for justice and for the sustainability of peace.

As global military spending has hit record levels (up 37 per cent over the last decade and expected to further increase, notably across Europe), and international norms and institutions corrode, peace is paying the price. Decades of consensus on what sustains peace – inclusivity, justice and addressing root causes – are being eroded, as securitised and marketised conceptions of peace take hold. Transactional mediation thrives in this environment, resting on short-sighted elite bargains, zero-sum calculations and material concessions that placate armed actors and reassure allies. Such bargains rarely include broader constituencies or address justice claims, tend to disregard multilateral norms and are often tied to securitised protections.

Meanwhile, conflict continues to rise (56 wars in 2024, the highest number since the second world war) and internationalise (with almost half of the world's states, 92, involved in wars beyond their borders). The paralysis of the UN Security Council (UNSC) reflects and compounds this, as veto-wielding members are often parties or patrons to the very wars the UN is asked to mediate. This means deadlocked mandates, biased resolutions and little room for UN mediators to manoeuvre. Internationalised conflicts reduce incentives for compromise, drain legitimacy from UN-mediated talks and prolong war. Two particularly pernicious dynamics are driving this corrosive shift: elite economic pacts that trade access, revenues, or land for short-term stability (in theory) while excluding societies, and the trampling of international law – including humanitarian norms, human rights, territorial integrity and accountability.

TRANSACTIONAL DEALS AS ECONOMIC PACTS

Transactional bargains often surface when countries are most vulnerable, with external sponsors tying aid or security guarantees to resource concessions that distort national recovery priorities and erode legitimacy.

US President Donald Trump's approach to Ukraine epitomised this logic. In early 2025, he demanded the US be "paid back" for its military aid since Russia's invasion through access to Ukraine's cobalt, lithium and rare earths – including proposals of 50 per cent US ownership of revenues and troops to guard mines. The final US-Ukraine Minerals Agreement created a Reconstruction Investment Fund granting Washington priority project access in exchange for investment – explicitly tying aid and security to resource concessions and instrumentalising Ukraine's natural wealth at a moment of existential crisis.

> *Beyond legality, reducing critical resources to bargaining chips skews reconstruction towards external gains rather than inclusive recovery, justice or environmental safeguards.*

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Transactional deals – whether minerals for security or land for recognition – may silence the guns briefly, but they corrode legitimacy, entrench violence, and deny societies the chance to rebuild social contracts that serve citizens.

Legal experts cautioned that threats to withhold aid or connectivity could amount to coercion, raising questions under the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties.

Beyond legality, reducing critical resources to bargaining chips skews reconstruction towards external gains rather than inclusive recovery, justice or environmental safeguards – entirely at odds with building post-war social contracts that serve citizens rather than outside powers.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) also illustrates this 'new scramble' for resources in the name of peace. With the M23 rebels backed by Rwanda seizing swathes of the east, Kinshasa sought US support by offering access to 4 trillion-US dollar worth of cobalt, coltan and other minerals in return for security guarantees. A US-brokered Declaration of Principles was signed with Rwanda in Washington on 25 April 2025, aiming to secure Kinshasa's short-term survival. Washington secured strategic mineral supply chains, while Kigali strengthened its leverage through its rebel proxy. Congolese citizens were excluded. Civic leaders demand sovereignty and accountability over such deals with international actors, notably the US.

TRANSACTIONAL DEALS TRAMPLING INTERNATIONAL LAW

Transactional deal-making sidelines the very rules meant to protect civilians and limit the use of force. When the law is ignored, coercion becomes the organising principle of talks, impunity spreads and agreements lose legitimacy. The human costs are devastating. Civilian deaths in conflict surged by 40 per cent in 2024, killing some 48,384 people – evidence of a broad collapse in protection. **Since late 2023, at least 247 journalists have been murdered in Gaza alone.** Attacks on humanitarian personnel hit a record too: 383 aid workers were killed in 2024, nearly half in Gaza. Violations of international law in conflict reveal rising child soldier recruitment, widespread sexual violence against women and girls and collective punishment as conflicts internationalise.

Beyond targeting individuals, Trump's proposal to redevelop the Gaza Strip's coastline into a luxury 'riviera' rests on mass violations of international law and Palestinians' human rights, involving displacement, dispossession and expanding illegal settlements.

The 9 September Israeli strikes in Doha, aiming to kill Hamas negotiators during deliberations on a US ceasefire proposal, reflect, as Qatar argues, the actions of a rogue state – a violation of sovereignty and international law, with impunity. This should be alarming for the peace community: if a negotiating table is fair game, mediation itself becomes a battlefield. International law is the framework that protects people, establishes settlements, and enables accountability. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres stressed in opening the 80th United Nations General Assembly last September, **peace must be rooted in law, not raw power; impunity is the mother of chaos**.

RESCUING PEACEMAKING FROM DEAL-MAKING

Rescuing peacemaking requires rejecting elite bargains and returning to mediation rooted in law, accountability, pluralism and inclusive development. **Transactional deals – whether minerals for security or land for recognition – may silence the guns briefly, but they corrode legitimacy, entrench violence, and deny societies the chance to rebuild social contracts that serve citizens.**

> *Smaller, non-Western powers may well hold greater legitimacy than great powers in the future: they are contextually attuned, culturally closer, and more acceptable to parties sceptical of Western-led processes.*

Economic concessions must not drive agreements. Financing should strengthen social contracts between states and societies, foster equitable services and livelihoods, promote transparent revenue management and ensure environmental safeguards. Minerals should fund inclusive recovery, not be traded for external leverage.

Mediation must be re-anchored in law from the outset. Civilian protection, humanitarian access, accountability and respect for sovereignty cannot be disregarded or used as bargaining chips. The UN must play a stronger role in curbing the internationalisation of conflict – providing platforms for external powers to address the rivalries that fuel wars. Where the UNSC is paralysed, other UN bodies can act under the 'Uniting for Peace' mechanism, upholding principles and enabling regional actors to lead. When states defy International Court of Justice (ICJ) orders – as Israel and its arms suppliers are doing – the UN should impose sanctions.

A broader coalition of principled mediators must be strengthened and protected. The African Union, if adequately resourced, offers continental legitimacy and regional ownership. Non-Western and small states play important principled mediation and wider intervention roles. Qatar brings a sustained record of mediation marked by agility, access and principled engagement – even under direct attack. South Africa grounds its diplomacy in its liberation legacy and inclusive transition, and in justice and accountability. Its legal action at the ICJ accusing Israel of genocide is catalysing international action and drawing attention to root causes.

These actors exemplify why **smaller, non-Western powers may well hold greater legitimacy than great powers in the future: they are contextually attuned, culturally closer, and more acceptable to parties sceptical of Western-led processes**. Europe's support for this shift is needed. Transactional mediation undermines the very rules the EU claims to defend and alienates Global South partners, who are vital to a fairer order. The choice is not idealism versus realism; it is between unstable bargains that mortgage the future and law-anchored settlements that can hold. **Peace is not a commodity. Reduce it to deals, and we lease instability. Anchor it in law and justice, and peace can endure.**

Thank you to Patrick Bond, Nontando Ndlovu and Abdulla Moaswes for comments.

Erin McCandless, Professor of Politics and International Relations, and Director, Qatar-South Africa Centre for Peace and Intercultural Understanding, Faculty of Humanities, University of Johannesburg, Non-resident Fellow at the Centre for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies in Doha

What future for peace and peacekeeping in a world preparing for war?

by **Cedric De Coning**

It seems paradoxical that at a time when conflicts and tensions are increasing, policy attention and resources devoted to peace and peacekeeping are in decline. A young military officer in Europe today is far more likely to be training or advising Ukrainian forces or engaging in NATO exercises than to be deployed as a United Nations peacekeeper. And yet, when the wars in Ukraine and Gaza end, we will need peacekeepers to monitor the ceasefires and implement the peace agreements. Will we be ready?

We are living in an era characterised by uncertainty and fear. After nearly 80 years of relative peace since the end of the second world war, the Russian war in Ukraine and the Israeli war on Palestine have reintroduced the spectre of war to a new generation. These conflicts are symptomatic of a larger trend – a shift to increased multipolarity where power is widely dispersed across several countries, regions and blocs, but also across the private sector, civil society and formal and informal systems that modulate the flow of money, goods, commodities, technology, travel, communications and other vital elements of our interconnected world.

The global order is in transition, and in the vacuum created by this transition, the actions of countries like Russia and Israel, and in the last few months also of the president of the United States, Donald Trump, have disrupted the legal foundations underpinning the rules-based order, including especially the norms around the inviolability of sovereignty, the use of force to pursue national interests, the norms of what is permissible in the conduct of war and the responsibilities of occupying powers. As a result, **for the foreseeable future, we will have to cope with a global system where at least two major powers and permanent members of the UN Security Council, as well as several other regional powers and states, are choosing to operate outside the parameters of a rules-based international system**. They are the minority. Most states and organisations around the world are trying to preserve the multilateral system.

A few, especially in Europe, are shifting significant resources and attention to strengthening their national defence and security capabilities in the hope of increasing the opportunity costs for any would-be aggressor. The relationship between military capabilities and deterrence is complex and shaped by numerous political, economic and strategic factors. **In some scenarios, military spending can increase the risk of war.** Understanding the conditions under which deterrence is more likely to be effective and investing in shaping the conditions that sustain peace require a comprehensive, whole-of-society approach to peace and security.

> *In some scenarios, military spending can increase the risk of war.*

A recent report by the UN secretary-general *The Security We Need* warns of the risks associated with reorienting our societies and economies towards military-centred policies that change the long-term outlook for public finance, affect long-term social investment in health and education,

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> *Investments in cooperation via diplomatic, security, economic, technology and science channels, as well as in fields such as art and culture, reduce the risk of war.*

and lock our political and economic debate for decades into discourses that self-justify prioritising defence spending. **We live in a world of shared systemic challenges, ranging from climate change to global public health to trade, peace and security. These global systemic challenges require more, not less, global governance.** We cannot afford to give up on multilateral institutions like the United Nations, even if they do need significant reform.

I have singled out Ukraine and Palestine, but in the context of a changing global order, the number of conflicts is increasing and has now reached the highest level since the end of the second world war. In contrast, **policy interest and budget allocations for peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding institutions, programming and research funding have been in sharp decline**. Trump's United States is not only withholding its obligatory assessed contributions to the UN and UN peacekeeping but has also cancelled the payment of its debt to the UN. In response, the UN secretary-general has introduced austerity measures to manage the UN's immediate liquidity crisis, which will inevitably impact the capability of UN peacekeeping operations to protect civilians and support humanitarian assistance.

The UN's financial crisis is a symptom of a deeper pattern. Trump's US is opting out of multilateralism, and other powers, including the permanent members of the UN Security Council, are not filling the vacuum. UN peace operations not only have to adapt to significant financial cuts, but they also have to manage conflicts in places like the Central African Republic, Cyprus, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lebanon, Libya and South Sudan, amid increased geopolitical tensions. Most permanent members of the UN Security Council and other regional powers have a vested interest in these conflicts, which means that peacekeepers must navigate fragile host state consent in complex political environments.

Investments in cooperation via diplomatic, security, economic, technology and science channels, as well as in fields such as art and culture, reduce the risk of war. It is thus alarming that despite this obvious fact, we are currently witnessing a significant weakening of global cooperation and multilateralism. At the same time, the vast majority of states share an interest in a strong multilateral system, with the UN at its centre. The challenge is to mobilise these states in a cohesive effort to sustain the multilateral system during this period of uncertainty. Despite all these challenges, peacekeeping remains a critically important global tool. In discussions about a ceasefire in Ukraine or the future of Gaza, the options mentioned usually include some form of peacekeeping. It is thus essential that bodies like the African Union, the European Union and the United Nations maintain the knowledge and capacity to deploy peacekeepers when needed. **In the current geopolitical, defence-focussed and UN reform context, talking about peace and peacekeeping might seem to be unpopular – until a tipping point is reached, and the discussion turns to monitoring ceasefires and implementing peace agreements.** The lesson from 80 years of UN peacekeeping is to keep the tool sharp and ready, because somewhere a war is coming to an end, and peacekeepers will be urgently needed.

Cedric de Coning, Research Professor at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs

A practitioner's perspective on peace funding

by Audrey Williams

At the April 2025 FEPS roundtable on funding for conflict prevention, I emphasised that dialogue and peacemaking are central to Europe's resilience and security. As the EU prepares its next multiannual financial framework, it faces a defining choice: will Europe reaffirm its commitment to being a global leader on peace?

Europe finds itself at a crossroads, caught between its founding identity as a peace project and the pressing need to respond to mounting security threats amidst a rapidly shifting geopolitical landscape. In recent years, Europe has witnessed a proliferation of high-level defence initiatives – such as the Strategic Compass and the Schuman Forum – and taken significant steps to bolster collective security, including through Readiness 2030. Yet there has been no comparable emphasis on peacemaking. While enhancing Europe's military preparedness is undoubtedly important, there is a real risk that this focus comes at the expense of the very tools that make peace possible and sustainable. **Too often, efforts to prevent, resolve and sustain peace are perceived as at odds with deterrence.** But this does not have to be the case: peacebuilding, dialogue and mediation can – and should – go hand in hand with collective security measures.

As Europe scales up defence spending – including as part of NATO's recent 5 per cent commitment – it must not forget that dialogue, diplomacy and mediation are essential components of comprehensive security and resilience for both the EU and its partners. A purely securitised approach is insufficient: **even the most effective military deterrence needs to be accompanied by credible efforts to facilitate dialogue, support inclusive political processes and engage affected communities to address their underlying concerns**. Neglecting this balance risks prolonging crises, sowing the seeds of future instability and undermining Europe's credibility as a global peace actor.

Too often, efforts to prevent, resolve, and sustain peace are perceived as at odds with deterrence. But this does not have to be the case: peacebuilding, dialogue and mediation can – and should – go hand in hand with collective security measures.

Dialogue may not always provide an immediate solution, but it is always worth pursuing. Resolving conflicts through dialogue or mediation is far less costly – both in terms of human lives and financial resources – than resorting to military escalation. By keeping communication channels open, what seems impossible today may become possible tomorrow.

As Europe prepares to negotiate its next multiannual financial framework (MFF), it should explore ways to ensure that investments in peacemaking and dialogue stand alongside defence and deterrence as indispensable pillars of a credible and comprehensive European security posture.

THE CURRENT FUNDING ENVIRONMENT

The waning political support for dialogue is reflected in the funding environment for conflict prevention and peacemaking work, as resources are incrementally diverted to hard security and crisis response.

Even the most effective military deterrence needs to be accompanied by credible efforts to facilitate dialogue, support inclusive political processes, and engage affected communities to address their underlying concerns.

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This trend has been exacerbated by the closure of USAID, creating a significant funding gap that European governments are struggling to fill. At the same time, as the United States retreats from its traditional role as Europe's primary security guarantor, EU member states are left scrambling to safeguard both domestic and Ukrainian security interests – with a knock-on effect on already diminished development budgets. Peace practitioners across Europe and beyond already feel the impact of shifting priorities. The funding environment is becoming increasingly difficult to navigate, and we find ourselves competing over ever-shrinking funds.

As a result, **many peace organisations are under immense strain. While we have not yet seen widespread closures in Europe, it may only be a matter of time**. Numerous organisations have already been forced to make painful staffing cuts. The UN Secretariat also faces significant financial challenges, with looming workforce reductions likely to undermine its ability to effectively sustain international peace and security. Reading the wave of Linkedin posts of former colleagues and counterparts over the years, what has struck me is that although they face the loss of their own livelihoods, which for us is not just a job, but a vocation and a life purpose, practitioners have overwhelmingly expressed more sorrow over the disruption to the work itself and loss of hard-won momentum.

Local mediators and civil society organisations have been hit particularly hard by the funding crisis. Many grassroots organisations in conflict affected regions – which are often led by highly skilled professionals with deep contextual knowledge and community ties – have already been forced to shut down. When they disappear or move to other sectors, so does a vital link in the peacebuilding chain.

THE NEXT MFF AND PEACEMAKING

Within this environment, the ambitious European Commission's proposal for the Global Europe instrument under the MFF provides some hope. Unlike many other traditional donors, the EU is making it clear that foreign policy lies at the heart of its priorities, and it is increasingly asserting itself as a global leader in these difficult times. The draft text of the MFF also includes numerous references to peacemaking and crisis response. However, past experience shows that funding for external action is usually one of the first areas to be cut during negotiations, as member states often prioritise their own national or sectoral interests. Protecting the proposed Global Europe budget will therefore be the main challenge for peace advocates. **Delegates participating in the MFF negotiations should prioritise Global Europe early, rather than leaving it until the end, as in past processes, since delaying external action makes it especially vulnerable to cuts as other instruments absorb available resources.**

The latest MFF draft introduces a significant move towards greater flexibility by merging several existing external financing instruments

– the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) 'Global Europe', the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) and Humanitarian Aid (HUMA) – to allow the Commission more room to adjust funding allocations. **While flexibility is important for responding to unexpected crises and urgent conflict prevention needs, flexibility must complement – rather than replace – predictability.** Effective mediation and dialogue require steady, long-term investment. Too much emphasis on flexibility risks favouring short-term, high-profile emergencies over the slower, incremental work of building peace. Without safeguards, peacebuilding and conflict prevention are likely to slip through the cracks. Furthermore, as the EU increasingly focuses on projects under the Global Gateway Initiative, it should ensure that international cooperation funding continues to be allocated to conflict-affected and fragile contexts.

> *There is something uniquely meaningful about supporting divided societies in healing their wounds – rather than simply placing a bandage over them.*

Finally, the draft proposal provides a starting point for addressing peacemaking and crisis response. In particular, it will be important to preserve article 23(4), which provides essential flexibility for reconciliation and mediation activities. However, the language needs to be stronger and more consistent. **Peace, mediation and dialogue should not be tucked away in annexes or non-programmable envelopes, but instead woven into the main body of the legal text and across both geographic and global funding streams.** Embedding these priorities throughout the instrument would create multiple entry points for funding and policy support. A dedicated provision for peacebuilding and peacemaking would help anchor them as core elements of EU external action, and help ensure that they cannot be diverted to serve shifting, short-term political interests at the expense of a longer-term investment in peace.

As someone who has worked across humanitarian aid, development, conflict resolution and peacebuilding, I can say **there is something uniquely meaningful about supporting divided societies in healing their wounds – rather than simply placing a bandage over them**. As peace practitioners, we see the impact of our work firsthand. But we do not always do a good job of making the case for it to policymakers – the decision-makers who shape funding priorities at the highest levels. Part of the challenge is that much of our work requires a high degree of discretion, which is essential to building trust and doing this work effectively.

In my current role at the European Institute of Peace, I have had the privilege of sitting at the table as we built bridges between southern Yemeni political groups, fostering consensus on the deeply divisive issues driving tensions in the country. Every day, I hear stories from colleagues working across the globe to engage hard-to-reach actors, mediate between conflict parties, resolve emerging political crises before they escalate into violence, and support the United Nations, the European Union and other regional organisations in designing and implementing sustainable peace processes.

This type of work requires enormous patience and engagement over the long term to build trust and cultivate meaningful relationships with partners on the ground – often extending well beyond political or funding cycles. It is also what is at stake in the ongoing discussions around the MFF.

Audrey Williams, Programme Officer, European Affairs, European Institute of Peace

Palestine: in pursuit of a just and inclusive peace

by Mattia Giampaolo

The 20-point plan, initially proposed by the Trump administration in September and subsequently endorsed at peace talks in Sharm El-Sheikh, has now achieved its formal legitimacy through a resolution by the United Nations Security Council. But despite securing substantial international support (in part because it benefited from a perceived absence of political alternatives), the plan is critically assessed by international law experts and scholars as insufficient to deliver genuinely just and durable peace. Specifically, it fails to incorporate core Palestinian demands and lacks the fundamental element of an inclusive political process.

The presentation of the 20-point plan for Gaza, proposed by the US president and endorsed by key Arab states, has been widely regarded by the international community as a significant political breakthrough. The plan emerged amidst a catastrophic humanitarian crisis, exacerbated by the scale of hostilities: over 70,000 Palestinian casualties caused by the Israeli army (83 per cent of these casualties were civilian) and the near-total destruction of critical civilian infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, universities and water supply systems. In this context, the truce mandated by the so-called 'Trump plan' provided a crucial, albeit temporary, relief for Palestinians residing in the Gaza Strip. While numerous observers, particularly from the progressive political sphere, have acknowledged the inherent limitations of the plan and questioned its efficacy as a long-term tool for sustainable peace, the international community appears to have legitimised its implementation trajectory. This legitimacy was underscored by the vote in favour of UN Security Council Resolution 2803 (2025) on 17 November. Yet while the vote demonstrated a broad consensus among global powers (despite the opportunistic abstentions of Russia and China) it is also true that there was an apparent absence of viable alternatives to the proposed plan. This perceived lack of alternatives can partly be attributed to the substantial political support provided by Arab and Islamic nations to the US administration.

The UNSC resolution formally marked the initiation of the second phase of the Trump plan. This phase is designed to establish a Board of Peace (BoP) to serve as a transitional administrative body in Gaza. The BoP's mandate includes coordinating extensive reconstruction efforts and authorising the deployment of a temporary International Stabilisation Force (ISF) within the territory. While **the first phase secured Hamas's acceptance of the ceasefire terms, the second phase – which notably includes provisions for the disarmament of the movement – has elicited its strong opposition**. Besides Hamas's opposition for its provisions on disarmament, the plan is also more generally criticised for its structure and methodology.

> *The plan was notably developed without the meaningful inclusion of Palestinian representatives, and it failed to integrate their political goals into its foundational framework. This top-down approach has been a consistent characteristic of the Trump administration's policy in the Middle East since the proposal of the Abraham Accords in 2020.*

Foremost among the reasons for this criticism is the way the plan was formulated and imposed. Given the profound complexity inherent in achieving Palestinian self-determination,

the plan was notably developed without the meaningful inclusion of Palestinian representatives, and it failed to integrate their political goals into its foundational framework. This top-down approach has been a consistent characteristic of the Trump administration's policy in the Middle East since the proposal of the Abraham Accords in 2020. Such a methodology risks not only contributing to further instability within the Palestinian national and political landscape but also fundamentally failing to account for the political realities on the ground.

The second reason for criticism of the plan concerns the disconnect between the way the plan is required to be implemented and the way reality is evolving on the ground. Since the commencement of the truce, the security environment has demonstrably failed to stabilise: Palestinian casualties in Gaza persist due to continued actions by the Israeli military. Simultaneously, the situation in the West Bank has reached unprecedented levels of volatility, driven by escalating attacks from Israeli settlers against Palestinian civilians, villages and property.

This volatile security context is further complicated by legislative developments within Israel, specifically the draft of a Knesset bill concerning the annexation of the West Bank. Indeed, the draft lends official sanction to the presence of over 700,000 settlers currently residing in the territory – a presence considered illegal under international law.

Given this comprehensive deterioration of the political and security landscape – marked by ongoing violence and de facto annexation attempts – the prospect of formulating a possible and sustainable solution becomes profoundly challenging. **Without the application of clear and decisive international pressure on the Israeli government to halt all settlement projects immediately, the peace initiative imposed by the US risks being interpreted not as a genuine instrument to resolve conflict but rather as a tool to institutionalise and entrench permanent colonial relations.**

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The final reason for criticism of the Trump plan is fundamentally political and pertains directly to the legitimacy and representativeness of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and its current leadership. A pronounced vertical chasm exists between the PA and the Palestinian population – a divergence that has not only undermined the PA's legitimacy but also necessitates a deeper scholarly engagement with Palestinian civil society. For years – predating the events of 7 October 2023 – Palestinian civil society organisations, including social movements, peace groups, individual activists and the diaspora, have repeatedly advocated a profound reform of the PA, emphasising the urgent need for comprehensive change within the Palestinian political landscape. Critically, these domestic actors – the very custodians of popular demands for justice and self-determination – are currently excluded from the formal peace process. Furthermore, within the broader political process, Hamas remains the 'elephant in the room'. Despite its marginalisation and its diminished legitimacy compared with the past, Hamas continues to constitute a relevant actor in the Palestinian political landscape, beyond its military dimension. This represents one of the most significant challenges that the construction of a Palestinian state must address at the strictly political level.

The political and social exclusion of Hamas raises a profound question regarding the viability of the current plan. How can a just and sustainable peace be credibly envisioned without the central participation of the affected individuals and of the civil society organisations that represent their concerns?

A comprehensive political approach must prioritise the inclusion and demands of the marginalised party. While focusing solely on grassroots movements may be deemed idealistic or romantic in terms of realpolitik, one cannot dismiss the historical precedent that a genuine push for lasting peace, grounded in justice, can rarely be imposed by a reactionary or armed order. Looking at the demands and agency of the population, or 'looking below', surely has to be the most effective strategy for countering attempts by external powers to impose a mere armed peace that lacks the foundational element of real justice.

Mattia Giampaolo, research fellow at the Center for International Political Studies (CeSPI), specialising in Middle East and Mediterranean Politics

FOCUS

THE NEXT MULTIANNUAL FINANCIAL FRAMEWORK: TURNING GLUE INTO SOLVENT?

In July, the European Commission submitted a proposal for the EU's multiannual financial framework (MFF) from 2028 to 2034. It opens a negotiation process between the European Parliament and the member states in the Council, which will last months before any agreement can be reached.

The MFF is important because it sets long-term budget priorities for a period of seven years. On paper, the draft presented by the Commission proposes the largest and most ambitious EU budget ever (still a fraction of national budgets, though). It promises a more competitive and flexible Europe, following the mantra of Mario Draghi's report. In practice, however, the proposed budget falls behind the total financial firepower that the EU held in the 2021-2027 period, notably including the NextGenerationEU recovery package. In addition, the new draft MFF kick-starts a centralisation process that will undermine the green transition, as well as the EU's cohesion policy – the glue that holds Europe together.

It is not just a question of figures – however important they are – but one of methodology and criteria. Indeed, the ultimate goal of the European Union – cohesion – is at risk of dissolving if the European Commission gets its way on this new MFF.

EU budget 2028-2034: beware a 'Big Ugly Deal'!

by Kata Tüttő

The EU's 2028-2034 budget proposal centralises the new 'shiny' priorities of the European Commission while nationalising cohesion, social and agricultural funds and undermining regional ownership. It paves the way to a 'Hunger Games' of priorities, and it risks division, weakened cohesion and the loss of Europe's integrative glue.

When the Commission president presented her 2028-2034 EU budget back in July, I came to understand why there had been so much secrecy surrounding the preparation of this new MFF proposal. Indeed, from behind the smokescreen of simplification and efficiency, a monster emerged in the form of a budget that aims to swallow up cohesion policy (among other things), breaking its backbone by nationalising, centralising and defunding it.

When I read this MFF proposal, I was immediately reminded of *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins: a glittering Capitol using 'games' to maintain a pathological order in the empire. I have named the MFF proposal the 'Big Ugly Bill' – after President Donald Trump's 'Big Beautiful Bill' – because reading it sends chills down my spine. Indeed, this new MFF proposal seems to usher into the European Commission the typical Trumpian transactional spirit.

So what, in simple terms, is the deal that the Commission president is offering the EU's national leaders? **Half of the Union's budget goes to member states through flexible national envelopes. In return, the Commission retains control of the other half, which will be dedicated to big, shiny projects such as investments in giga-factories.** The deal basically consists of offering national governments full control over nationalisation, with full flexibility on cohesion, social and agricultural funds – approximately half of the budget – to obtain in return *carte blanche* for a new competitiveness fund: a centralised, territorially blind investment tool.

> *Half of the Union's budget goes to member states through flexible national envelopes. In return, the Commission retains control of the other half, which will be dedicated to big, shiny projects such as investments in giga-factories.*

WHY IS THE DEAL SO UGLY?

Coming from Central and Eastern Europe, I feel an instinctive suspicion whenever a central committee starts talking about top-down 'five-year industrialisation plans'. Living in Budapest today, I have also developed a very strong allergy to the idea that centralisation and nationalisation can solve all problems.

I read the draft MFF as technocratic populism. While it points to real pain, I am highly sceptical about the proposed cure. The Commission says it will reduce the number of EU-level programmes from 52 to 16, and operational programmes from over 500 to 28. How? By dumping everything into one big monstrous fund (the so-called European Fund for Economic, Social and Territorial Cohesion, Agriculture and Rural, Fisheries and Maritime, Prosperity and Security). One fund, one rule. But this will not make complexity disappear – it will just displace it. How does the Commission propose to reduce operational programmes? By nationalising regional programmes. Indeed, the Commission is rewriting the idea and spirit of a 'Europe of and with the Regions' – through a budget proposal.

THE OLD AND THE NEW

The MFF proposal divides EU priorities into two categories: a first bag comprising

the new shiny priorities (competitiveness, defence, technology, global EU and space); and a second bag comprising the 'old' boring priorities, weighed down by debts of every kind (social, territorial and economic cohesion; agriculture; migration; climate and biodiversity; just transition and paying back the NextGenerationEU loan).

The proposed MFF centralises the first bag – the shiny new priorities – in Brussels, while the second bag, full of conflicts and obligations, is divided into national envelopes. Each national envelope has a relatively big number written on it, as well as a note: 'Deal with farmers, people, border control, migration, cities and regions... Just do not bring your tractors to Brussels again'.

At first glance, such a flexible national envelope may look tempting – like when Bilbo was drawn to the 'Ring of Power' in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. But take a second look, and you see the leash attached: conditionalities attached to 'reforms' inspired by the Recovery and Resilience Facility. Indeed, you see a control mechanism that gives more power to the Commission. National governments get lump sums but no longer have to involve their regions in shared management. **Cohesion policy – Europe's most democratic, place-based tool – is dissolved into a monster fund in which local voices are drowned out.**

COHESION AS INVESTMENT, NOT CHARITY

Cohesion policy has been the EU's most important long-term investment and stabilising tool. It is available to all regions and relies on their ownership. It ensures that no matter where people live – whether in a metropolis or a rural village – regions and cities have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

> *Cohesion is not charity. It is an investment tool. Through shared incentives, it mainstreams European priorities into every project.*

Cohesion is not charity. It is an investment tool. Through shared incentives, it mainstreams European priorities into every project. Cohesion funding thus requires rainwater preservation, energy-efficient street lighting, renewable energy production, accessibility, citizen participation, gender equality, walking and cycling, and biodiversity to be considered. In this way, cohesion teaches Europe to act as a Union: it is a school of European integration.

THE HUNGER GAMES LOGIC

By throwing all funds into one closed bag, the new MFF proposal turns European solidarity into 'hunger games'. Inside each national envelope, farmers will be pitted against cities, migration against social services, child poverty against border control, climate adaptation against mitigation, housing against roads, and biodiversity against food security.

With limited funds, short-term emergencies will always trump long-term investment. Political noise will outweigh strategic needs.

And those who lose out will be those with the quietest voice. Instead of building trust across Europe, the proposed budget risks fuelling new resentments within each member state.

DRAGHI'S SHADOW

Of course, the official myth is Mario Draghi's report. He tells us that Europe must either become competitive or die.

But the paradox is that **the EU budget is not really Europe's budget. It is only around 1 per cent of EU GDP – a fraction compared with national budgets. And yet, it is the only money that actually binds Europe together**. It is the glue, the transcendental minimum of solidarity. With the new MFF proposal, we risk turning that glue into solvent.

Maybe unwittingly, **Draghi has set up a nice Lacanian opposition: you must choose, but whatever you choose, you lose. If you choose only competitiveness, you destroy cohesion – but without cohesion, there is no competitive Europe.** If you choose only cohesion, you risk inefficiency. The 'truth' of the EU is not in choosing one side. The EU survives only by holding contradictory demands together. Europe is not weak because it is afflicted by contradictions. Europe is Europe because it lives with them: cohesion and competitiveness, sovereignty and unity, freedom and security.

The EU budget is not really Europe's budget. It is only around 1 per cent of EU GDP – a fraction compared with national budgets. And yet, it is the only money that actually binds Europe together.

Kata Tüttő, member of the Budapest City Council, president of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR)

Cohesion needs reform, not nationalisation

by Andrés Rodríguez-Pose

The EU's proposed budget overhaul risks turning cohesion policy from a shared, democratic development tool into a centralised crisis fund. Cohesion policy needs reform – but replacing regional voices and long-term investment with national control and sticking-plaster solutions that merely respond to media headlines would be a strategic mistake, not modernisation.

Europe's next seven-year budget, presented by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on 16 July, is being sold as a leaner, simpler way to get things done. In reality, the proposal for the 2028-2034 multiannual financial framework shifts the centre of gravity from regions to capitals, from partnership to permission and from long-term development to crisis redeployment. The price will be paid in legitimacy as well as in growth.

Let us begin with a concession. Cohesion policy needs reform. The rules are too complex, silos persist and evaluation can be an exercise of mere box-ticking. The EU should simplify procedures, sharpen objectives and align investments with some of the structural challenges it faces. But what is on the table is not reform. It is a new policy that centralises control, loads payments with political conditionality, sidelines regional voices and – at the worst possible moment – risks intensifying the mounting wave of disaffection with European integration.

Under the plan, cohesion ceases to stand alone. It would be folded into a single 'National & Regional Partnership Plan' that also wraps in agriculture, migration, defence and climate. **Funds would be managed primarily through national envelopes, with regional and local authorities competing for attention in capital cities.** This is not the evolution of an instrument: it is the nationalisation of an idea.

The Commission insists this will "strengthen and modernise" cohesion, "with regions at its core". The likely outcome is a more centralised, more conditional and opaquer regime. Payments would hinge on reform milestones and results-based triggers, with the threat of payment suspension over rule-of-law concerns or other disputes never far away. Predictability – the dull but vital virtue of seven-year programming – would yield to the politics of the moment. A budget designed to drive development across the EU would be repurposed as a flexible war chest for the priority *du jour*.

> *Roads, skills, research capacity and the many unglamorous investments that build productivity help prevent crises from happening.*

That flexibility will be used. The proposal explicitly allows rapid redeployment to "geopolitical flashpoints". Crises are real and must be managed. But **roads, skills, research capacity and the many unglamorous investments that build productivity help prevent crises from happening**. During the pandemic, the Recovery and Resilience Facility proved its worth as an emergency tool. Its architecture – national plans, central oversight and minimal citizen input – now threatens to swallow the regular budget.

> *Centralising territorial policy validates the populist caricature of a remote Brussels that does not listen. The message to the so-called 'places that don't matter' is bleak: the centre knows best.*

The timing could hardly be worse. With a third of Europeans opting for Eurosceptic parties, the EU proposes to dilute the one policy that citizens can see and shape locally. Cohesion is where a mayor can point to a bridge, a worker to a training course and a researcher to a lab.

Remove its participatory essence and you remove a tangible warrant for belonging. The High-Level Group on the Future of Cohesion Policy warned about rising territorial disaffection; this proposal reads like a stress test of that warning.

There is symbolism as well as substance. **Centralising territorial policy validates the populist caricature of a remote Brussels that does not listen. The message to the so-called 'places that don't matter' is bleak: the centre knows best.** Yet the green and digital transitions will succeed or fail precisely in those places. A Europe of grand strategies with shrinking consent is no recipe for either efficiency or unity.

Defenders call this modernisation: fewer silos, faster delivery and better alignment with Union priorities. The first two aims are worthy; the third is an indictment. Cohesion was never meant to be the cashier for whichever headline dominates. Its mission is to promote development by correcting structural imbalances that markets will not fix and national politics will not always prioritise. Turn it into a conditional annexe to national plans, and the territorial dimension, making a union more than a common market, is eroded.

What would nationalisation look like in practice? Expect tougher bargaining in capitals, where line ministries and governing parties pick winners and losers. **Expect less transparency as regional envelopes dissolve into omnibus plans. Expect more short-termism as money chases milestones rather than building capacity.** And expect fewer 'basic development' projects – local transport, vocational education, business support – that rarely become trending topics but can lift productivity over decades. The cumulative effect would be slower convergence and a deeper sense of neglect and abandonment across many parts of Europe.

There is, however, an alternative that is neither nostalgia nor inertia. **The EU can preserve what worked – partnership, multi-level governance, a clear regional voice – while adapting to transition demands.** If a single partnership plan is to be the new vessel, it must be given legal teeth. That means mandatory regional operational programmes and ring-fenced territorial envelopes that cannot be quietly reallocated in a ministerial corridor. It also means restoring additionality so EU money complements rather than substitutes national spending.

Traceability should be non-negotiable. Citizens need to see where the money goes and why, project by project, through public regional dashboards. Conditionality, too, should be fit for purpose. Tie conditions to development performance – uptake, outcomes and capability-building – rather than to extraneous bargaining chips. And improve governance: genuine multi-level participation from the start, ex-ante capacity support for weaker administrations, and protected funding for vulnerable territories, which are not always the poorest.

Above all, the European Parliament and Council should insist on a clear legal firewall to prevent most cohesion resources from being siphoned to non-development emergencies except by super-majority and with explicit regional consent. Crises will surely come. However, they should not be financed by raiding the cupboard marked 'long-term'.

Finally, **citizens should be treated as partners, not supplicants**. Cohesion and development succeed when power sits close to the ground. For durable reform, Brussels should protect local agency rather than outsource decisions to national ministries.

Europe's cohesion is the glue that binds all Europeans together. It can be the true motor of development and competitiveness, mobilising potential wherever it is found. Replace it with a centralised, conditional, nationalised adjunct, and you may still deliver expenditure. You will not deliver belonging or a better use of funds. The Union often speaks of an 'ever closer union'. **Without a living, participatory territorial development policy, it risks widening the already yawning gap between Brussels' elites and EU citizens.** And that is no technical tweak, but a strategic mistake.

Andrés Rodríguez-Pose is the Princesa de Asturias Chair and a professor of Economic Geography at the London School of Economics. He chaired the European Commission High-Level Group on the Future of Cohesion Policy

Green ambition or green illusion?

Decoding climate and nature spending in the Commission's future budget proposal

by Olivier Vardakoulias

To achieve its climate and environmental targets, the EU urgently needs to ramp up its investment levels. Additional investment of 1.7 per cent to 2 per cent of European GDP is needed annually to meet the decarbonisation targets until 2040, while €19 billion is needed yearly to close the biodiversity funding gap. In an environment of national budgets that are constrained because of austerity and competing priorities – like defence expenditure – the role of the EU budget is central for closing the climate and nature investment gaps across the Union.

To put it simply, the climate and nature contribution of the multiannual financial framework (MFF) is a function of four key parameters: (1) the size of the EU budget; (2) the green mainstreaming target which determines the share of the budget dedicated to green objectives; (3) the green tagging methodology determining which investments are classified as green and (4) the 'Do No Significant Harm' (DNSH) screening, which aims to ensure that the EU budget does not finance any investment that is harmful to the climate and nature.

DECODING THE REAL SIZE AND AMBITION OF THE EU'S NEXT BUDGET

The headline figure of 'almost €2 trillion' is designed to signal ambition and resolve in the face of multiple crises. An increase in the EU budget size is undoubtedly positive. However, a closer and more analytical look reveals a far less generous picture.

The European Commission (EC) advertises its proposal for the 2028-2034 MFF as nearly doubling the EU's long-term budget compared with the 2021-2027 period. But this is a misleading claim. When comparing like-for-like using Eurostat's GDP deflator, and subtracting the funds dedicated to the repayments of the NextGenerationEU recovery package (NGEU, roughly €120 billion), the proposed figure shrinks considerably to €1.32 trillion (in 2018 prices). This represents a real increase of 23 per cent compared with the 2021-2027 MFF, with additional resources amounting to approximately €250 billion. However, the most telling comparison is not with the 2021-2027 core MFF, but with the total financial firepower the EU had at its disposal during the 2021-2027 period, including NGEU.

When the NGEU's €750 billion (in 2018 prices) is added to the current MFF, the 2021-2027 total reaches €1.82 trillion. Measured against this, the proposed €1.32 trillion for 2028-2034 represents a significant decline of around €500 billion in available funding. **As a share of the EU's Gross National Income (GNI), the Union is potentially moving from spending about 1.8 per cent to just 1.15 per cent after subtracting NGEU repayments.** This is the true shortfall facing policymakers – a looming cliff edge in funding after the NGEU phase-out.

▶ *As a share of the EU's Gross National Income, the Union is potentially moving from spending about 1.8 per cent to just 1.15 per cent.*

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GREEN TRANSITION AMBITIONS

Turning to climate and nature mainstreaming, the EC has announced that €700 billion (nominal) is earmarked for the green transition, in addition to a raised green mainstreaming target of 35 per cent across the entire budget, up from 30 per cent in the current MFF. However, the devil is yet again in the detail. When adjusted for inflation and compared with the green financing in the 2021-2027 MFF plus NGEU combination, there is a shortfall of earmarked funds for the green transition of about €100 billion.

The gap between discourse and reality can be seen when assessing the breakdown of planned expenditures in respective EU funds. For example, the proposed European Competitiveness Fund, earmarks only 15 per cent (€58.6 billion in 2025 prices) of the total funds allocated for the "clean transition and industrial decarbonisation" – compared, for instance, with 29 per cent (€115.5 billion) earmarked for 'Resilience and Security, Defence Industry and Space'.

THE RISK OF GREENWASHING

Beyond the raw numbers, the integrity of the proposed climate spending approach is problematic due to the methodology used to track green investments ('green tagging'). Indeed, the European Commission's proposal relies on an 'adjusted Rio Markers' methodology for determining the contribution of investments to the green transition, despite this methodology being strongly criticised by both the European Parliament and the European Court of Auditors.

Firstly, the Commission's 35 per cent target is a single, broad-brush goal for all environmental objectives, crucially lacking a distinct and legally binding target for each objective. This allows for vague accounting where a single project can be counted towards multiple goals without delivering tangible benefits for any.

Secondly – and more alarmingly – the proposal includes a catalogue of investments that could be classified as 'climate-friendly' under dubious criteria, creating a high risk of greenwashing. Indicatively, according to the proposed regulation setting a horizontal performance framework for the EU budget, **investments in 'the extraction and processing of critical raw materials' would count as positive contributions to climate mitigation, while 'expanding airport capacity or constructing new runways' and 'building new parking infrastructure on highways' would count as investments contributing to climate adaptation**.

> *The climate and environmental tagging methodology is designed to hit a numerical target rather than to ensure that every euro spent actively decarbonises the European economy or contributes to biodiversity protection, pollution reduction and circular economy objectives.*

This approach undermines the target itself. If, as mentionned, building new runways and car parks can be counted as green investments, the 35 per cent minimum green spending target becomes a statistical exercise, not a genuine measure of the EU budget's contribution to a transformative green transition. In short, **the climate and environmental tagging methodology is designed to hit a numerical target rather than to ensure that every euro spent actively decarbonises the European economy or contributes to biodiversity protection, pollution reduction and circular economy objectives**.

Similarly, although it is undoubtedly positive that the EC proposes to streamline the 'Do No Significant Harm' principle horizontally across the EU budget (which was not the case in the 2021-2027 MFF), including the setting of an exclusion list for harmful activities in future DNSH guidance, the legal text that has been proposed paves the way for exemptions for 'defence and security' investments as well as for 'investments of overriding public interest'. The loopholes in the proposed regulation could thus smooth the path for the eligibility of investments that are harmful to the climate and nature, such as investment subsidies for fossil gas infrastructure.

AN ELIMINATION OF CRUCIAL INSTRUMENTS

Two of the proposal's most significant regressions are the quiet abolition of the Just Transition Fund (JTF) and the LIFE programme. As regards the former, while the relevant regulation makes a passing reference to 'just transition areas', the onus is placed entirely on member states to voluntarily prioritise such spending within their national plans. Without ring-fenced funding or strong incentives, there is a serious risk that the Green Deal's social justice and regional equity dimensions will be sidelined, thus breeding discontent and hampering the transition.

As regards the LIFE programme, this is merged within the general 'clean transition and industry decarbonisation' component of the European Competitiveness Fund – without any funds being earmarked for LIFE's specific objectives, especially concerning biodiversity finance as well as the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of environment and climate policies and programmes.

> *From a climate and nature perspective, the limitations of the EC's proposals for the next MFF mean that significant amendments are required throughout the negotiation process.*

From a climate and nature perspective, the limitations of the EC's proposals for the next MFF mean that significant amendments are required throughout the negotiation process. It will be of paramount importance to increase the green mainstreaming target while ringfencing finance for respective environmental objectives, improving the climate tagging approach, ensuring that the DNSH guidance fully excludes harmful investments, and safeguarding the finance that currently falls under the JTF and LIFE.

Olivier Vardakoulias, economist at Climate Action Network Europe

POLICY BRIEF

STRENGTHENING AND MAINSTREAMING JUST TRANSITION GOALS IN THE EU BUDGET

By Amandine Crespy and Tiago Moreira Ramalho

POLICY BRIEF
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FEPS
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES

STRENGTHENING AND MAINSTREAMING JUST TRANSITION GOALS IN THE EU BUDGET

ABSTRACT

The EU's legally binding commitment to achieve **climate neutrality by 2050** demands a far-reaching **socioeconomic transformation**. While the green transition promises sustainable prosperity, it also carries profound and unequal social and economic consequences. To meet this challenge, **a just transition** ensuring fairness, inclusivity and social protection is indispensable. This policy brief argues that the EU budget, particularly the forthcoming Multiannual Financial Framework after 2027, must be **strategically leveraged to integrate just transition goals** across all policy domains.

The policy brief highlights the progress made through instruments such as the Just Transition Fund, the Recovery and Resilience Facility and the "galaxy" of funds derived from the Emissions Trading System (Innovation Fund, Modernisation Fund and Social Climate Fund). These tools have helped to identify and address the initial wave of **eco-social risks**, notably, in carbon-intensive regions and vulnerable communities. Yet, as the climate emergency becomes more acute, so too does the scale and complexity of risks in relation to health, work and income, housing, or mobility.

To future-proof the EU's just transition agenda, **five policy goals are emphasised in this brief**: (1) ensuring inclusive and participatory governance; (2) strengthening territorial resilience; (3) developing an eco-social security system; (4) preparing workers and communities for profound transformations; and (5) investing in knowledge and governance capacity.

The policy brief recommends a major consolidation and reinforcement of EU budgetary instruments through a complementary strategy of **dedicated instruments** and **budget mainstreaming**. It argues for the **consolidation of the JTF**, the generalisation of the **"Do No Significant Harm" principle and eco-social earmarking** to all EU funds, and the establishment of an EU Just Transition Network. It also calls for deeper investment in **local research** and **policy capacity** to address asymmetries across regions.

The upcoming EU budget will be implemented at a critical moment for the delivery of a collective project of environmental, economic and social transformation that will last for more than a generation. It needs to be **fit for purpose.**

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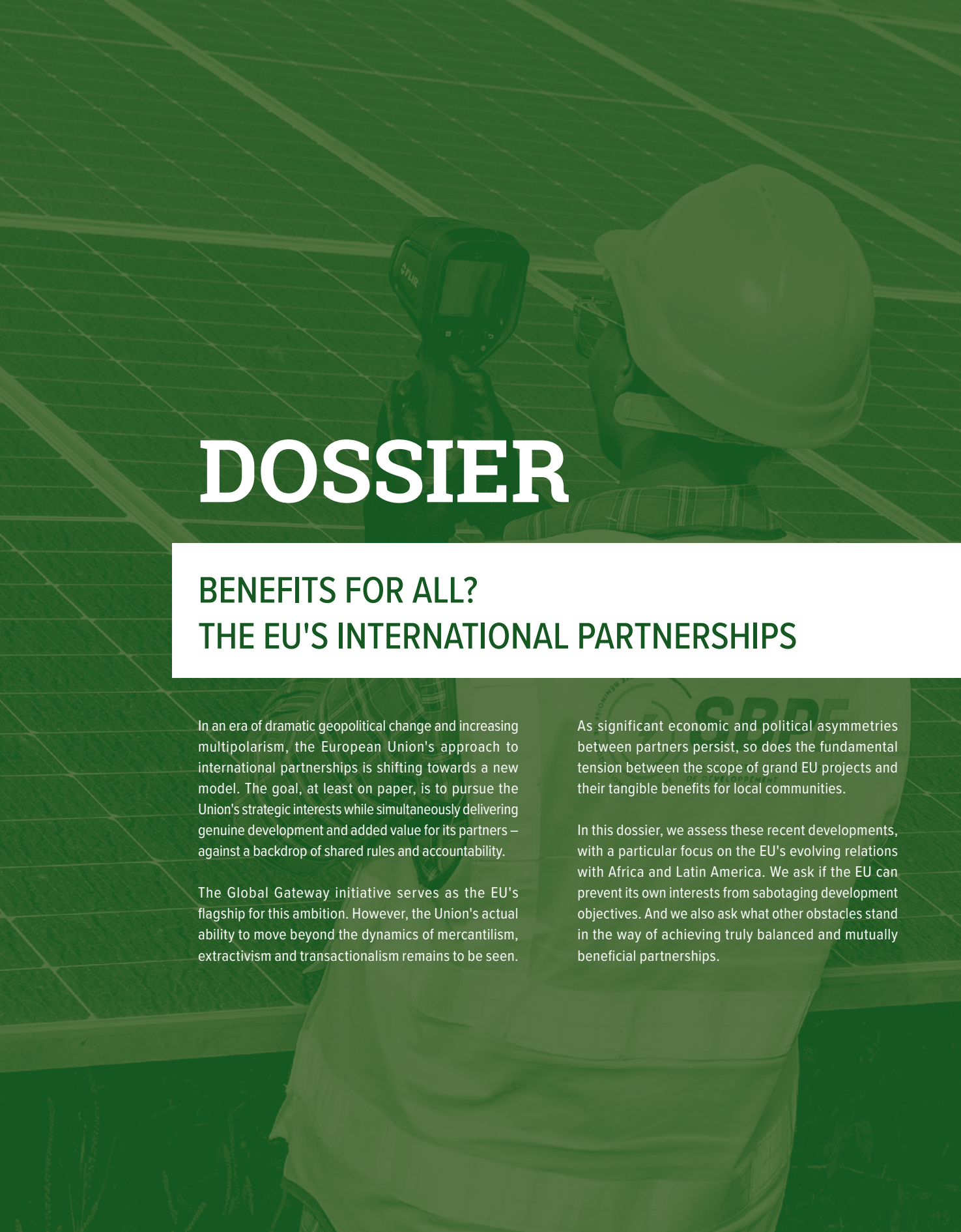
The EU's legally binding commitment to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 demands a **far-reaching socio-economic transformation**. While the green transition promises sustainable prosperity, it also carries profound and unequal social and economic consequences.

To meet this challenge, **a just transition ensuring fairness, inclusivity, and social protection** is essential and should be supported in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).

This policy brief assesses **how the current MFF addresses eco-social risks**, highlights five policy goals that should be central for a just next MFF, and offers clear recommendations to strentgthen and mainstream just transition.

This policy brief was prepared by FEPS in collaboration with Solidar.



DOSSIER

BENEFITS FOR ALL? THE EU'S INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

In an era of dramatic geopolitical change and increasing multipolarism, the European Union's approach to international partnerships is shifting towards a new model. The goal, at least on paper, is to pursue the Union's strategic interests while simultaneously delivering genuine development and added value for its partners – against a backdrop of shared rules and accountability.

The Global Gateway initiative serves as the EU's flagship for this ambition. However, the Union's actual ability to move beyond the dynamics of mercantilism, extractivism and transactionalism remains to be seen.

As significant economic and political asymmetries between partners persist, so does the fundamental tension between the scope of grand EU projects and their tangible benefits for local communities.

In this dossier, we assess these recent developments, with a particular focus on the EU's evolving relations with Africa and Latin America. We ask if the EU can prevent its own interests from sabotaging development objectives. And we also ask what other obstacles stand in the way of achieving truly balanced and mutually beneficial partnerships.

The Global Gateway in context

Europe's dual ambitions to align geostrategy and development

by San Bilal

The Global Gateway is the EU's strategic plan for secure and quality connectivity and infrastructure globally. It has a dual ambition: to strengthen EU strategic interests, autonomy and security, while building mutually beneficial partnerships that foster sustainable development and growth for partner countries. Achieving success hinges on carefully managing the synergies and trade-offs between these geostrategic and development objectives.

The Global Gateway represents the European Union's flagship initiative to strengthen its international engagement through strategic investment partnerships. Announced in 2021, the strategy aims to position the EU as a key global actor in sustainable, high-quality infrastructure and secure connectivity, with the target of mobilising €300 billion by 2027. Following recent announcements by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen at the Global Gateway Forum, the EU has already surpassed its initial goal, reaching €306 billion in investment mobilised by October 2025. The strategy is now poised to scale up its target to €400 billion by 2027.

At its core, **the Global Gateway aims to combine external investment, development cooperation and economic diplomacy within a single strategic framework. The intention is to go beyond traditional development finance and to build long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships that align with both partner countries' priorities and European interests**. This reflects a broader shift in the EU's external policy – from a primarily development-centred approach towards a more geostrategic use of investment tools.

> *Achieving large-scale mobilisation of capital in a more geopolitically fragmented, polarised and competitive world will require greater participation from European private investors and companies.*

A STRATEGY EXTENDING BEYOND DEVELOPMENT FINANCE

One of the defining features of the new Global Gateway is its effort to move beyond traditional development finance by development finance institutions (DFIs) and public development banks (PDBs), particularly the European Investment Bank (EIB), which serve as the central vehicles for external investment. While these actors remain central to the EU's approach, the strategy also seeks to engage the European private sector more directly, through trade and investment promotion.

The rationale is that **achieving large-scale mobilisation of capital in a more geopolitically fragmented, polarised and competitive world will require greater participation from European private investors and companies**, particularly in areas such as digital infrastructure, renewable energy, transport, healthcare, cleantech and innovation, and food. By mobilising capital in this way, the Global Gateway reflects dual ambitions: to strengthen Europe's own interests, enhancing the EU's economic resilience, strategic autonomy, competitiveness and security, while also providing investment opportunities that can contribute to partner countries' priorities towards sustainable growth and achievement of the sustainable development goals (SDGs),

in mutually beneficial partnerships. In this context, the Global Gateway functions not only as a development instrument but also as a geoeconomic strategy. The balance between these dual ambitions will be at the centre of the success of the Global Gateway. Managing synergies and trade-offs, avoiding the potential capture of EU development policy by European self-interest, and enhancing the coordination of the EU's external financial tools will be key.

DEVELOPING TOOLS FOR EUROPEAN AND GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT

To implement this strategic ambition, the European Commission has introduced new coordination mechanisms and financial instruments to better align the various components of the EU's external investment architecture.

A central feature is the Global Gateway Investment Hub, which should serve as a coordination platform for the European Commission, EU member states, DFIs, PDBs, export credit agencies (ECAs) and technical development agencies. Building on Team Nationals – national groups coordinating Global Gateway initiatives, bringing together a country's government ministries, public financial institutions and development agencies – the Hub is designed to enhance coherence between different financing sources and ensure a more strategic alignment between the actions of the EU and those of member states' in a 'Team Europe approach'. Ensuring an effective and lightweight coordination mechanism that is accessible to the European private sector while building on strong local ownership in the EU's partner countries will be essential but challenging.

A proper transparent governance mechanism for the Global Gateway must also be established, providing strategic guidance and accountability to the EU member states (via the Council of the EU) and the European Parliament, while remaining flexible and adaptable to investment opportunities in a rapidly evolving international environment.

▶ *Global Gateway initiatives are expected to be accompanied by technical assistance, policy dialogue, and institutional cooperation, reflecting the EU's traditional emphasis on partnership and capacity building.*

The European Commission also emphasises the need for a 360-degree approach that combines financial investments with broader support for institutional capacity, skills development and regulatory reform. Such complementary actions are intended to enhance the sustainability of investments by strengthening local ecosystems and governance frameworks. In this respect, **Global Gateway initiatives are expected to be accompanied by technical assistance, policy dialogue and institutional cooperation, reflecting the EU's traditional emphasis on partnership and capacity building**.

Looking to the future, proposals under the EU's next long-term budget – the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2028-2034 – should be further elaborated and envisage a clearer distinction between the MFF's two complementary pillars. The first pillar would focus on supporting European private sector internationalisation, potentially through an external pillar of the European Competitiveness Fund (ECF) and stronger engagement with ECAs. The second pillar, under the Global Europe Instrument (GEI), would continue to focus on development cooperation and finance, mostly based on official development assistance (ODA), relying on development agencies, DFIs and PDBs to address partner countries' structural challenges. **Together, these pillars could help streamline the EU's financial external action and improve coordination between instruments with distinct objectives.** As it stands, the European Commission's initial proposal, while making cross-references to the ECF and GEI, combines all Global Gateway objectives under the GEI, with the possibility of using ODA (and therefore tied aid) to support Europe's own interests and the EU private sector.

LEVERAGING DEVELOPMENT FINANCE IN NEW WAYS

While the Global Gateway signals a desire to engage new types of financiers, development finance remains an important part of the strategy. The EU has expressed its intention to continue leveraging DFIs and PDBs, including through policy-based and results-based loans, as well as innovative financial instruments such as green, social, sustainable and sustainability-linked (GSSS) bonds.

> *The emphasis should remain on portfolio-level operations, rather than individual project deals, as a means to achieve scale and manage risk across diverse markets.*

Additional approaches to be considered should include sustainable debt swaps, local currency lending and mechanisms to mobilise institutional investors through guarantees and securitisation structures. While the Global Gateway narrative focuses on individual 'flagship' projects, the emphasis should remain on portfolio-level operations, rather than individual project deals, as a means to achieve scale and manage risk across diverse markets. These instruments should be part of a broader effort to expand the EU's financial toolkit and to utilise public resources in ways that can attract additional private capital towards sustainable investment goals.

A BROADER GEOSTRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

Although investment is at the centre of the Global Gateway, the EU should continue to stress the importance of addressing wider development challenges that cannot be resolved through infrastructure or financial instruments alone. **The Global Gateway should thus remain part of a more comprehensive policy framework that encompasses peace and security, governance, migration, climate adaptation and human development**, as well as contribute to the provision of global and regional public goods and the resilience of partner societies. This integrated perspective aligns with long-standing EU priorities in external action, notably the commitment to sustainable development, multilateral cooperation, and rules-based partnerships.

San Bilal, Executive Director, European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM)

The importance of shaking hands

Tracking the AU-EU partnership between talk and action

by Rachel Dubale

AU-EU diplomacy has been busier than ever in 2025: handshakes, summits and multi-billion-euro pledges all multiplied as the 7th AU-EU summit approached in late November. Yet as the number of these gatherings has increased, debates have grown louder – and thus also the risk of drifting further away from impact on the ground.

There are countless situations that the Covid-19 pandemic made us (re)appreciate here in Europe. Everyday events that once felt trivial suddenly became important: gathering with loved ones, seeing faces in full rather than half-covered by masks, or even simply shaking hands – that small, human act we had so casually taken for granted.

Watching the leaders of the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU) meet over the course of time, I cannot help but feel that few years have offered as many chances to literally and symbolically shake hands as 2025. From the third AU-EU Ministerial meeting in May, where foreign affairs ministers from both continents met to take stock of progress, to the 7th Summit of African and European heads of state and government in Luanda, Angola – marking 25 years of the Africa-Europe partnership – the calendar has been packed with meetings that, on paper, would have seemed almost unimaginable a decade ago.

One of the most remarkable meetings in recent years was the 6th AU-EU summit. This was originally scheduled for 2020 but was delayed by the pandemic, and finally took place in Brussels in February 2022. It was one of those meetings that seemed almost cursed by circumstance: postponed, re-planned and overshadowed by a global health crisis that had strained the trust between the two continents, leaving vaccine inequities and fostering a lingering sense of geopolitical neglect. One might joke that, had diplomacy not existed, a few leaders might have been tempted to point fingers rather than shake hands. But the **summit did indeed take place – and that was important because diplomacy, like trust, only exists if it is continually renewed. Every meeting remains a small but necessary occasion to restore it**.

And yet confidence in these meetings and their outcomes remains fragile in both Brussels and Addis Ababa. Of course, both continents share an intricate and delicate story, where every EU action in Africa carries complex implications. But **three years after the 6th AU-EU summit, a clear risk is emerging: much of the discussion is slipping into debate for debate's sake, eroding trust in the relevance of these gatherings and the credibility of their outcomes**. Today one thing is clear: debate alone, however spirited, does not guarantee results that reach communities on the ground.

▶ *Three years after the 6th AU-EU summit, a clear risk is emerging: much of the discussion is slipping into debate for debate's sake, eroding trust in the relevance of these gatherings and the credibility of their outcomes.*

SO...WHAT?

Among all the declarations and joint communiqués, one announcement has continued to dominate discussions. At the 6th AU-EU summit, the European Union unveiled smart, clean and secure investments worth €300 billion by 2027, half of which – around €150 billion – would be channelled into Africa, supporting green and digital transitions, sustainable growth, decent job creation, health systems, education and training.

Since then, the AU-EU bubble has buzzed with talk of the Global Gateway, often in a binary, almost Manichean way. The optimists hail it as a grand investment platform, but the question remains how much of that €300 billion is genuinely new, and how much is merely repackaged. The sceptics view the Global Gateway as a geopolitical instrument – a European response to China's Belt and Road Initiative in Africa. **The official narrative, meanwhile, presents it as a new form of partnership grounded in value-based cooperation, strategy and mutual accountability, with local value and local value addition at its core.**

Reality, of course, is rarely binary. But let us focus on one of the most debated notions within the Global Gateway: local value and, by extension, value addition, are both concepts that are per se difficult to turn into tangible recommendations. This is true both in my own experience navigating their implications on the ground, and for large initiatives like the Global Gateway where billions in pledges must ultimately deliver concrete benefits to communities.

To illustrate this point, I was talking to my cousin in Ethiopia back in May about the AU-EU ministerial and mentioned that the Ethiopian foreign minister might be near where I was working in Brussels. My cousin's voice, a little robotic and interrupted by a shaky connection, came back: "Listen, can you ask him why our electricity has been so unreliable lately? I have not been able to cook injera for days". Would an exchange like this ever happen so easily between a minister and a citizen? Rarely. Yet it captures an essential truth: what is said and decided in those formal meeting rooms has the power to shape everyday realities – and that should not be dismissed, as happens all too often today.

Just as high-level meetings and personalities need to be held accountable, initiatives like the Global Gateway need to be subject to the same scrutiny. Take, for instance, the Team Europe Africa-Europe Green Energy Initiative, which aims to deploy 50 GW of renewable electricity and provide 100 million Africans with access to power by 2030. Achieving this ambitious target is a significant goal, but the real test lies in the detail of who builds and maintains the infrastructure, and whether local communities gain skills or employment from the process.

▶ *Just as high-level meetings and personalities need to be held accountable, initiatives like the Global Gateway need to be subject to the same scrutiny.*

This tension between grand projects and tangible local benefits is also evident in other Global Gateway initiatives across Africa. Take the Lobito Corridor, a major transport and infrastructure project connecting the mining regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo's Katanga province to the Angolan port of Lobito, with Zambia also linked along the route. Often hailed as a model of regional connectivity, it also revives familiar debates about the dynamics of extractivism, with critics worrying that it could function primarily as a conduit for raw materials leaving Africa rather than as an engine of local development.

In a nutshell, does this mean that nothing – from grand summits to multi-billion-euro initiatives – will ever be enough? Not quite. However, it is true that debates around Africa-Europe cooperation risk drifting in that direction, where every

effort is seen as falling short and the easiest option seems to be to wrap oneself in a blanket of guilt and lose sight of practical approaches. Perhaps a more helpful perspective would be to restart the debate from scratch and to go back to the ABCs of Africa-Europe cooperation, accepting the reality that Africa needs Europe – or, as the South African president Cyril Ramaphosa said more concretely a few years ago, "Africa needs investments" – just as Europe needs Africa, and the Global Gateway is here to stay. **Only if policymakers keep these realities in mind will it be possible to ensure that these meetings and forums, and the debates they generate within the AU-EU space, translate into tangible and practical outcomes on the ground.**

THE GLOBAL GATEWAY FORUM AND THE WAY FORWARD

One of the most recent tests of whether the AU-EU partnership is keeping its promises was the Global Gateway Forum held in Brussels in October. This two-day event offered a clear headline: while €300 billion had been pledged for 2027, more than that – €306 billion – has already been mobilised, with projections to reach €400 billion, largely through private-sector leverage. The announcement raised a few eyebrows. How is that possible? The lack of accessible detailed data, still one of the EU's weak spots, was quickly highlighted, with questions around which projects have actually been launched, where funds are being deployed and how outcomes are measured.

Easier solutions to these challenges are hard to provide in the short term, but the gap also reveals a clear opportunity: Brussels could demonstrate its comparative advantage through transparency, traceability and accountability, as AU stakeholders have repeatedly requested, making information publicly accessible, showing exactly how investments reach local communities and providing mechanisms to monitor progress in real time. Taken together, these measures could help make summits and debates in the AU-EU space far more informed, practical and outcome-oriented.

Thus as AU and EU leaders convene again in 2026, all that remains is for us to clasp our own hands in a small gesture of hope, praying that what has been written here will resonate.

Rachel Dubale, Research Officer at the Africa-Europe Foundation

Beyond mercantilism: rethinking EU-Latin America relations

by Julieta Zelicovich

Despite decades of partnership, ties between the EU and Latin America remain largely transactional. Trade dominates, asymmetries persist and global crises continue to test the limits of existing frameworks. To thrive, the relationship must move beyond mercantilism, embracing shared strategies to address global challenges and fostering more balanced, rules-based cooperation.

With the international order in turmoil, the EU-Latin America relationship is once again in the spotlight. The war in Ukraine, the US-China rivalry and the global race for critical raw materials have renewed Europe's strategic interest in Latin America. Yet despite the rhetoric of partnership, many long-standing issues remain. The asymmetry of the relationship and the lack of adequate instruments to address emerging challenges have become an inescapable problem, exposing the limits of a model that still rests mainly on a mercantilist vision of trade rather than on shared strategies for sustainable development.

Why does the relationship matter? **The EU and Latin America are long-standing partners with many unique and meaningful ties that span from cultural bonds to trade and investment.** Latin America, as a whole, ranks as the EU's fifth-largest trading partner, while Europe stands as the third-largest market for Latin American goods. The relationship is framed by a web of sub-regional free trade agreements (FTAs) and the forum of the EU and the Community of Latin America and Caribbean states (CELAC), which serves as the leading platform for political dialogue.

> *The EU and Latin America are long-standing partners with many unique and meaningful ties that span from cultural bonds to trade and investment.*

If we were still in the first decade of the 21st century, this network of FTAs and political forums would indeed be considered a measure of success in itself. But the world has changed. Trade is increasingly intertwined with geopolitical considerations. Climate change and technological transformation have reshaped competitive sectors and altered the importance of entire industries. Above all, **geopolitical rivalry has led to an unprecedented erosion of global governance mechanisms. In this context, what matters most is that both regions share a belief in cooperation, democracy and the rule of law – values that are becoming increasingly rare elsewhere**.

International cooperation and regional integration lie at the core of both regions' identities, shaping the way they structure their internal relations and external partnerships. Like many other parts of the world, Latin America and the EU share common threats – climate change, the erosion of the rule of law, the negative externalities of US-China competition – but, in contrast to other partners, they also share a common understanding of how these problems should be addressed: not through power-based solutions, as the US or China might propose, but through rules-based approaches grounded in cooperation and a long tradition of international law.

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▶ *By working together, Latin America and Europe can make a difference – standing apart from US-China competition and the rising geopolitical tensions.*

The puzzling question is why, given this supposed joint understanding and long-standing relationship, the bridges between both regions have so far yielded limited results in addressing pressing issues such as the energy transition or development. Nor have they managed to come up with joint proposals to deal with global challenges and their externalities – for instance a reform of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

A closer examination of the EU-Mercosur negotiations and their current discussions in Brussels can offer some insights. This partnership agreement has taken more than 20 years to conclude, with two – not one, but two – 'agreements in principle': one in 2019 and a revised one in 2024. The agreement promises a modest but positive economic improvement for both the EU and the Mercosur states. But it raises serious concerns regarding its distributive effects, as some employment would be lost in import-competing sectors. While **the agreement formally aims to serve as a platform for strengthening and safeguarding climate commitments, human rights and democratic values, in the end, it might fail to do so because the European side is unwilling to pay its share of the partnership's costs**.

Indeed, when leadership is needed the most, Brussels seems unable to move beyond a 21st-century mercantilist approach to governance, in which its trade and economic ambitions clash with its political role. The European Commission has introduced quotas limiting market access for many Latin American products. As the EU-Mercosur Interim Trade Agreement moves forward through the European process, there are announcements of new safeguard mechanisms that come on top of other unilateral European measures. Ultimately, these steps seem aimed at reducing the potential gains Mercosur could obtain from the agreement while further promoting EU exports to South American markets. Although sustainability has become more visible in the text of the agreement, the core negotiations still revolve around tariffs, quotas and sensitive sectors. This could leave the resulting agreement in a position where many wonder whether compliance is even worth it.

In the meantime, global governance is increasingly eroded, and trust among regions is at risk as protectionist unilateral responses emerge. But **by working together, Latin America and Europe can make a difference – standing apart from US-China competition and the rising geopolitical tensions**.

To make trade a driver of inclusive and sustainable growth, both regions need to update their instruments and broaden cooperation beyond market access. This requires not only creativity to develop a new template for agreements and renew interregional governance, but also the political will to embrace the costs of true partnership rather than perpetuate imbalances against Latin America. Genuine cooperation is needed. Europe would benefit from starting to consider Latin American countries as partners in jointly addressing global problems, rather than merely as reliable and inexpensive suppliers and convenient markets for its own goods.

The CELAC-EU Summit – held in Colombia on 9-10 November – offered only shallow results in this matter. Ursula Von der Leyen's non-attendance signalled the downgrading of CELAC-EU as a mechanism for interregional relations. As many other national leaders cancelled their participation, following the Commission President's decision, the summit ultimately ended up at a diplomatic level rather than a high-level political one. The final communication highlights the relevance of sustainability and multilateralism to the inter-regional dialogue, but fails to move forward the agenda on urgent matters. Without a renewed commitment and true leadership, the EU-Latin American partnership will be unable to deliver the expected results or gain the strategic relevance it aspires to have in an increasingly fragmented global order.

Julieta Zelicovich, Associate Researcher at the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET), Argentina, and Associate Professor at the Department of International Relations of at the National University of Rosario

POLICY BRIEF

EUROPE'S STRATEGIC ROLE IN GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

A CALL FOR AMBITION AND REFORM

By Stefano Manservisi and Mario Pezzini

POLICY BRIEF
June 2025

FEPS
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EUROPE'S STRATEGIC ROLE IN GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

In a world marked by geopolitical tensions, climate crises and weakening global cooperation, this policy brief argues that the EU must redefine its relationships with developing countries – moving from its current partnership approach to a strategic alliance, the terms of which are grounded in mutual interest and defined in common.

The policy brief identifies four urgent imperatives: (1) renewing multilateralism through more inclusive governance; (2) rethinking development priorities and metrics beyond GDP; (3) reforming cooperation instruments to foster joint action, peer learning and national ownership; and (4) overhauling the global financial architecture to generate sustainable fiscal space for developing countries, protecting them from recurring debt crises. These reforms are not merely technical – they are political. They require the EU to act as a convener of alliances and an architect of common goods, particularly in cooperation with the Global South.

At the heart of this redefinition lies the Global Gateway, which should evolve from a flagship investment strategy into a truly global platform for co-created transformation. To succeed, it must redesign its governance, connect the priorities of the EU and its partners, and invest in capacities and ecosystems beyond infrastructure. This requires rapid and visible reforms, from radically simplified delivery procedures to the creation of inclusive dialogue mechanisms and robust certification frameworks.

The EU's credibility will depend on the level of resources it commits to external action and on its determination to change – beginning with how it listens, decides and collaborates. The upcoming UN Conference on Financing for Development in Seville represents a crucial opportunity for the EU to demonstrate its willingness to shape, together with the countries of the Global South, a new compact aimed at achieving the sustainable development goals. This will be essential to the EU's global relevance and resilience.

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The EU must redefine its relationships with developing countries, grounded in mutual interest and defined in common.

In June 2025, the EPP aligned with the far right to vote down the European Parliament's report on financing for development ahead of the UN's International Conference in Sevilla (FfD4).

This vote undermines the Agenda 2030 and weakens the EU's global reputation when multilateral cooperation is crucial. The EU's credibility will depend on the level of resources it commits to external action - and its willingness to truly listen, share decision-making power, and collaborate differently. The EU must step up and lead by example in defending human rights, equality, and democracy.

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DOSSIER

COP30: LOOKING PAST THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

The COP30 climate conference was held in Belém, Brazil, this November – a symbolic location on the edge of the Amazon. It took place against a complex backdrop of international geopolitical and trade tensions, the withdrawal of the US from the Paris Agreement, and a glaring gap between ambition and implementation in the nationally determined contributions (NDCs) submitted by countries this year.

Although expectations were high and Brazil's progressive leadership attempted to foster a consensus by introducing the concept of *mutirão* (joint effort), the main culprit of CO2 emissions and hence of the climate crisis – fossil fuels – was deliberately overlooked. It was, in the words of one of the authors of this COP30 dossier, like a global conference on the prevention of lung cancer never mentioning tobacco.

Disappointingly, the 'global mutirão' decision at COP30 fell short of ensuring a fossil fuel phase-out, but instead focused on increasing contributions to adaptation finance. Although COP meetings remain essential for maintaining multilateral discussion and engagement on climate action, the climate crisis urges us to look beyond them. There are over 80 countries ready to discuss a concrete and just roadmap to phase out fossil fuels. To move forward, the EU should forge durable coalitions with climate-vulnerable countries, African partners, progressive Latin American states, Oceania and climate-ambitious Asian economies.

COP30 shows that it is hard to lead when isolated

by Mohammed Chahim

Set against the backdrop of the Amazon, guided by the concept of *mutirão*, and backed by a broad coalition seeking genuine progress, the climate conference in Brazil raised high expectations. However, despite incremental steps, the conference fell short of delivering the clarity and ambition needed to combat the climate crisis: a global phase-out of fossil fuels.

The stage in Brazil was promising. Close to the rainforest, with a strong presence of indigenous communities, in a democratic country under the progressive leadership of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, it seemed to have all the right ingredients. With the concept of *mutirão* (joint effort), the Brazilian presidency hoped to secure a breakthrough. Unfortunately, not everyone was on for the joint effort. **Is it possible to imagine a global lung cancer prevention conference that never mentions tobacco? Most probably not. Yet this year's COP30 conference did the climate equivalent.** It managed to avoid mentioning fossil fuels in any part of its conclusion, even though they are the primary cause of the climate crisis. They were not mentioned a single time! The only indirect mention of them is in a reference to the 'UAE consensus', the agreement made on fossil fuels during COP28.

For the European Union, the outcome is particularly painful. The EU arrived in Belém determined to lead a coalition of high-ambition countries, building on its 2040 climate goal and a revived focus on international climate responsibility. Leaders such as President Lula had high expectations. Civil society had mobilised across continents. A new coalition advocating a concrete plan to transition away from fossil fuels – supported by more than 80 countries – offered genuine momentum.

> *Attempts to preserve ambition on fossil fuel phase-down and on more robust emissions reductions were largely watered down or blocked entirely. In exchange, countries agreed to increase contributions to climate adaptation finance.*

But when it mattered, the EU found itself rowing against the tide. **Attempts to preserve ambition for a fossil fuel phase-down and more robust emission reductions were largely watered down or blocked entirely. In exchange, countries agreed to increase contributions to climate adaptation finance** – a vital and justified measure, yes, but politically unbalanced if not paired with mitigation ambition.

ADAPTATION WINS

One of the few achievements of COP30 is the agreement to triple global adaptation finance. This matters. For frontline countries – from small island states to climate-vulnerable nations in Africa and Asia – adaptation is not a distant concern but a daily reality. The consequences of the climate crisis are already grim. Floods and heatwaves already cause food insecurity and displacement.

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But even this achievement is bittersweet. The tripling of funding sounds transformative, but the gap between needs and actual resources remains immense. Worse still, without strong commitments to cut emissions, the scale of future adaptation needs is only set to increase. By only addressing the symptoms, we risk overlooking the cure.

MORE AMBITION NEEDED

Most countries had submitted their nationally determined contributions (NDCs) before the COP in Brazil started, ten years after the climate conference in Paris. These NDCs contain the national pledges that countries make to fulfil the Paris promise of limiting global warming to a maximum of 2 degrees, with the ambition not to exceed 1.5 degrees. However, when all national pledges are combined, global emissions are projected to decrease by only 12 per cent by 2035, whereas meeting the 1.5-degree goal requires cuts of at least 55 per cent. The gap between ambition – or lack thereof – and reality is considerable.

> *The EU must insist, relentlessly, on a global framework for phasing out fossil fuels. Ahead of forthcoming climate conferences, we must therefore engage and close deals with economies of the future, countries like China and India, that can massively reduce emissions.*

The EU has not felt this isolated at a climate conference in years. It now faces a clear strategic imperative to form new alliances and to do so quickly. The EU cannot enter future COPs isolated and on the defensive. It must forge durable coalitions with climate-vulnerable countries, African partners, progressive Latin American states, Oceania and climate-ambitious Asian economies. These alliances must be based on finance, technology and, above all, a credible political partnership. In addition, **the EU must insist, relentlessly, on a global framework for phasing out fossil fuels**. Ahead of forthcoming climate conferences, we must therefore engage and close deals with the economies of the future, countries like China and India, that can massively reduce emissions. Waiting for an annual two-week-long negotiation, where these countries can hide behind the voices of oil states, should not be the only option for climate action. These conversations should start the day after COP – because we cannot wait another year.

An example is the summit announced for phasing out fossil fuels, which will be co-hosted by Colombia and the Netherlands in the Latin

American country next April. This conference should be able to deliver on its promise and prove to be a catalyst for other and new forms of international climate cooperation outside the annual COP climate conferences. It is an example of how we can forge these new alliances and hopefully reap the fruits of cooperation before the next COP conference.

Ambition at home strengthens credibility abroad. Ambiguity does the opposite. By stripping ourselves of ambition – whether it is on due diligence, deforestation, or other – we undermine our global efforts.

UPPING AMBITION

Furthermore, the EU must get its own house in order. **Ambition at home strengthens credibility abroad. Ambiguity does the opposite. By stripping ourselves of ambition – whether it is on due diligence, deforestation, or other – we undermine our global efforts.** This emboldens fossil fuel states and weakens the EU's diplomatic leverage. Initiating a race to the bottom will ensure that we will never see the top. Countries at the COP30 rightly held a mirror up to us when we discussed reforestation, human rights and climate efforts. We must walk the talk, as consistency is key.

The promise of COP30 has not been fulfilled. Reforestation has not received nearly as much attention as hoped, the concluding text remained too ambiguous, and the discrepancy between national pledges and necessary reductions remains too large. Yet, this climate conference also revealed a strong undercurrent: some countries are willing to move forward, make a change and take responsibility. These should not be slowed down or discouraged by notorious laggards. **It is time to support the coalition of the willing and expand it. That is one of the significant wins that Europe must secure before COP31 in Turkey.**

Mohammed Chahim, Vice-President for the Green Deal for Industry, Energy and Climate, and Financing the Just Transition for the S&D Group in the European Parliament. Vice-Chair of the European Parliament's Delegation to COP30

COP30: towards a coalition of the willing for a just transition

by Chloé Deffet

Ten years after the Paris Agreement, over 80 countries are finally ready to discuss a concrete and just roadmap to phase out fossil fuels. But in the absence of consensus, this year's COP30 in Brazil ended without any substantial progress towards a global just transition. Some promises were nevertheless made of action outside the COP framework.

The Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), commonly known as COP, is famous for its extensive use of jargon, whether picking up existing concepts or developing its own terms and acronyms. Ever heard of loss and damage, CBDR-RC, Global Stocktake, article 9.1 or NCQG? Probably not, unless you are a climate geek. The Brazilian presidency even launched its own special term this year – *mutirão* – to convey the importance of joining forces in a major global effort for climate action.

The relatively well-established yet fuzzy concept of 'just transition' was first mentioned in the context of international climate negotiations at COP16 in 2010. The concept found its way into the official COP lexicon in 2015, with the preamble of the Paris Agreement stating that the Parties take "into account the imperatives of a just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work and quality jobs in accordance with nationally defined development priorities". The international momentum around a just transition has continued to build, and a Just Transition Work Programme was established at COP27 in 2022. A year later, **COP28 ended with a key, and long-overdue, achievement: the first direct reference to "transition away from fossil fuels" in a COP outcome document**.

> *OECD countries should at least commit to the following phase-out timeline: coal by 2030, fossil gas by 2035 and oil by 2040.*

The Paris Agreement reflected the original narrow meaning of 'just transition', focusing on protecting workers and jobs. However, **with the influence of COP28, the concept 'just transition' is also increasingly used to refer to the overall process of phasing out fossil fuels in a just and equitable manner, seeking to protect all vulnerable people and taking into consideration the specific situations of countries**. Many countries of the Global South, as well as civil society, women and Indigenous groups, have been advocating this broader and more international approach, highlighting the need to integrate just transition principles into all relevant UNFCCC processes and to respect human rights and the rights of local communities and Indigenous people.

This year, with the Brazilian presidency making just transition one of its priorities, COP30 felt to many like the 'just transition COP', and expectations were high. To achieve real progress on the global just transition, an essential first step is to translate the mandate to 'transition away from fossil fuels' into a credible and concrete roadmap to phase out fossil fuels. Indeed, countries must define clear end-dates for the production and use of fossil fuels. These end-dates must be aligned with scientific assessments in order to stay as close as possible to a 1.5-degree warming, and they must be anchored in the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities' (CBDR-RC). For example, **OECD countries should at least commit to the following phase-out timeline: coal by 2030, fossil gas by 2035 and oil by 2040**. In a welcome and unprecedented move, a group of over 80 countries announced at COP30 their support for a Transition Away from Fossil Fuels (TAFF) roadmap. While the roadmap was not included in the final COP30 decision due to the

opposition of the usual countries (including Saudi Arabia, Iran and Russia), the Brazilian COP30 president, Ambassador André Corrêa do Lago, still announced his intention to move forwards with a roadmap outside the UNFCCC process. Colombia and the Netherlands will also co-host the first international conference on transitioning away from fossil fuels in April 2026.

Another step to support a global just transition is the creation of a platform, mechanism or other institutional arrangement to coordinate just transition efforts, support the inclusive design and implementation of national just transition plans, share knowledge and best practices, build capacity and match projects with appropriate funding. The idea has been circulating among many civil society groups. For example, FEPS and the Brazilian think tank Plataforma CIPÓ have proposed a Just Transition Match-Making Facility. In the halls of COP30, the Climate Action Network was advocating the adoption of a Belém Action Mechanism (BAM) for a Global Just Transition to "address the current fragmentation and inadequacy of global Just Transition efforts". During the two weeks of negotiations, various countries expressed support for the creation of a Just Transition Mechanism.

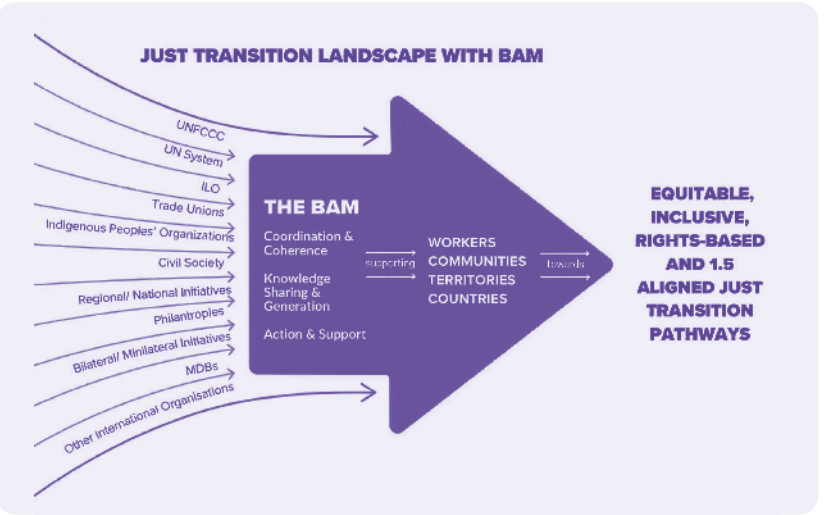


Illustration of the Belém Action Mechanism © Climate Action Network

The adopted text on the mechanism constitutes an essential step forwards to improve coordination and implementation and to better acknowledge human rights.

Overall, did COP30 manage to reach an outcome that reflects the emergency of the climate crisis? The answer is a definite no. The 'Global Mutirão' decision is, for the most part, an empty document without any reference to fossil fuels. **Nevertheless, as imperfect and frustrating as they are, the COP meetings and negotiations are essential for maintaining multilateral discussion and engagement on climate, even with the most reluctant countries.** Small victories were achieved, and the emergence of a coalition of the willing for a fossil fuel roadmap is an encouraging sign. Images of Indigenous people protesting for their rights, as well as images of civil society advocating action and images of countries showing ambition, all need to stay with us until the next COP – to remind us that the essential and ultimate goal is to protect people.

Chloé Deffet,
Policy Analyst on climate and environment at FEPS

Ocean action is climate action

Homework for Europe after COP30

by Vera Coelho

COP30's failure to secure meaningful commitments to shift away from fossil fuels makes it even more urgent to protect the ocean and increase its resilience. The EU must seize the opportunity of the Ocean Act to lead global action for ocean health – for the sake of people and the planet.

The 30th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP30) laid bare the absurd paradox that undermines global climate negotiations. Ten years after the Paris Agreement set the course for a net-zero emissions future, deep divisions among countries meant that the final COP30 decision failed even to mention the most critical action needed to address the climate crisis: phasing out the use of oil, gas and coal. Also missing were widely backed proposals for roadmaps to implement the phase-out and halt deforestation, even though COP30 was held in the Amazon, the planet's largest forest.

Given the failure of COP30 to close the gap between countries' promised emission cuts and what is necessary, the urgency of ensuring ocean health and resilience is even greater.

The final text does, however, refer to the other great lung of the planet – the ocean. It acknowledges the urgent need to address ocean degradation and the "vital importance of protecting, conserving, restoring and sustainably using and managing" nature, including marine ecosystems, for "effective and sustainable climate action". **Given the failure of COP30 to close the gap between countries' promised emission cuts and what is necessary, the urgency of ensuring ocean health and resilience is even greater.**

OCEAN ACTION IS CLIMATE ACTION

The ocean plays a central role in regulating our climate system, absorbing more than 25 per cent of human-caused CO2 emissions and around 90 per cent of the excess heat that they produce. It is the largest carbon sink on the planet and acts as a powerful buffer against climate change. Yet the ocean is also under threat. Climate change exacerbates the long-standing impacts of overfishing and pollution, as warming and acidifying waters cause extensive harm to species and ecosystems, and diminish the ocean's capacity to continue absorbing carbon dioxide. Many marine ecosystems are in a dire situation, but at the same time a healthy ocean is a critical part of the solution.

Decisions aimed at protecting and restoring habitats, as well as rebuilding fisheries, increase the resilience of marine ecosystems and of the communities that depend on them for their livelihoods and nutrition – while helping to address the climate emergency.

Decisions aimed at protecting and restoring habitats, as well as rebuilding fisheries, increase the resilience of marine ecosystems and of the communities that depend on them for their livelihoods and nutrition – while helping to address the climate emergency.

There is a direct link between preserving the ocean and ensuring a liveable future for people. Consider seagrass meadows – they absorb even more carbon and produce more oxygen than rainforests, and they act as barriers against storm surges, coastal flooding and erosion. Marine sediments store nearly twice the amount of carbon in the top metre of the seabed than terrestrial soils, so leaving them untouched *is* climate action. Protecting the ocean is climate action. This is where the EU must step up and assume a leadership role in protecting and restoring ocean health and abundance.

Regardless of countries' political compasses and shifts over time, when it comes to ocean restoration and protection, the EU simply cannot afford to wait for laggards. Many EU fish stocks are still overfished and require time and effort to rebuild. Meanwhile, we import 70 per cent of the seafood we consume. Destructive fishing practices like bottom trawling plague the EU's marine 'protected' areas, and the unwanted bycatch of commercial and sensitive species detrimentally affects marine ecosystems. The climate crisis exacerbates these pressures.

The case of the Mediterranean Sea is a paradigmatic example. The most heavily overfished sea in the world is also warming 20 per cent faster than the global average. Record marine heatwaves already pose grave threats to marine life and ecosystems and put coastal communities at risk – with dire consequences. Increasingly severe weather events show that both people and nature are suffering from the climate crisis, and that unprecedented changes will only become more frequent – and more deadly – if we fail to take action.

THE EU OCEAN ACT AS A FUNDAMENTAL TOOL

The forthcoming European Ocean Act can be a powerful tool to make the EU a global driving force in the fight against the climate crisis. **A robust Ocean Act must put at the centre of EU marine policies the essential need to restore our seas, to support Europe's food supply, create jobs, preserve the way of life of coastal communities and provide resilience to climate change.** The ocean supports 5 million jobs in the EU, and they need a future – a sustainable, regenerative blue future.

The Ocean Act must first make international targets legally binding, such as protecting 30 per cent of the oceans by 2030, as adopted in the Kunming-Montreal Biodiversity Framework. It must also ensure that current regulations (like the common fisheries policy) are fully implemented, and that what exists on paper translates into real results underwater – like ending destructive activities inside marine protected areas.

And it must go beyond. The Ocean Act needs to support the fishing sector's transition to more sustainable practices and support small-scale, low-impact fishers – who contribute considerably more to the social and economic fabric of EU coastal communities than their large-scale counterparts. For instance, the EU should reserve its territorial waters (12 nautical miles from the coast) exclusively for low-impact activities, including sustainable small-scale fishing. It needs to set a solid basis for blue jobs and blue food.

Now that EU climate negotiators have returned to this side of the Atlantic, we need policymakers to adopt an Ocean Act that raises ambitions in EU marine policy, brings coherence and ensures implementation, to achieve healthy seas and prosperous coastal communities.

LEADERSHIP IS NEEDED: THE EU MUST PROVIDE IT

The urgency of the climate crisis calls for bold, immediate and large-scale efforts. Building climate resilience by enhancing ocean resilience is a winning strategy to ensure climate stability, coastal protection, livelihoods and jobs. This is the long-term vision that the world – and Europe – need. The EU is not alone in this endeavour. COP30 has shown that many other countries are seeking commitments as well, and that both science and traditional knowledge support climate action. **A decade ago, the EU was the first world economy to develop an International Ocean Governance agenda to foster healthy oceans, halt the loss of biodiversity and fight climate change. Now is the time to revive this leadership.** Adopting and enforcing solid legislation at home is a first, much-needed step. Prosperous communities need climate-resilient seas.

▶ *A decade ago, the EU was the first world economy to develop an International Ocean Governance agenda to foster healthy oceans, halt the loss of biodiversity and fight climate change. Now is the time to revive this leadership.*

Vera Coelho, Executive Director and Vice President of Oceana in Europe

BOOK

FACING THE FUTURE

HOW TO MAKE SOCIAL DEMOCRACY A POWERHOUSE AGAIN

By Ania Skrzypek and Patrick Diamond

In this pamphlet, the authors challenge the idea that social democracy is in terminal decline, highlighting instead the opportunities for **centre-left renewal** and the urgency of developing a politics rooted in security, dignity, and aspiration.

They propose a **new social democratic programme** – designed as inspiration, not a blueprint – built on three pillars:

1. Restoring order and social cohesion
2. A new contract for freedom and fairness
3. Owning the future

This book was prepared by FEPS in collaboration with Karl-Renner-Institut.

INTERVIEW

Mistrust in democracy is mistrust in a captured democracy

László Andor interviews George Papandreou, general rapporteur for Democracy, Council of Europe

Democracy today faces pressures that are unprecedented in scale – from inequality and oligarchic influence to the destabilising power of digital platforms. Former Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou, now general rapporteur for Democracy at the Council of Europe, discusses why democratic backsliding is accelerating, how global capitalism and technology have reshaped politics and which reforms Europe must undertake to restore trust and resilience in democratic life.

László Andor: *You are active not only in the Greek parliament, but also in the Council of Europe, where you focus on questions of democracy, a subject of great concern in Europe today, as well as challenges outside the European Union. What is the focus of your current activity within the Council of Europe?*

George Papandreou: The Council of Europe rests on three pillars: democracy, the rule of law and human rights. Democracy has become increasingly prominent, especially as trust in institutions erodes across Europe and beyond. As General Rapporteur for Democracy, my mandate is to examine the causes of democratic backsliding and to explore how we can innovate our democratic institutions to keep them resilient. The new secretary general, Alain Berset, who was elected last year and who was formerly president of the Swiss Confederation has also made democracy a priority for his mandate at the Council of Europe – and he is now proposing a new democratic pact. Additionally, we are exploring possible innovations and new approaches to democratic institutions to ensure that democracy remains robust. I am also examining areas that are not typically discussed in the Council of Europe – for example, how the economy, global economic developments, global capitalism, new technologies, social platforms and digital platforms have affected democracy, polarisation and democratic debate.

LA: *You mentioned the word 'backsliding'. Can you reassure me that this is not only about Hungary?*

GP: I am one of the rapporteurs for Hungary. What is interesting about Hungary is that much of the Heritage Foundation's *Project 2025* – which is the plan that Donald Trump has adopted, even if he has not publicly recognised it – was very much inspired by Viktor Orbán and the way he governs in Hungary. We have always primarily focused on the institutional dimension of democracy, including the courts, human rights violations and media freedom. However, **I think we have forgotten the market and how the economy shapes politics – and as Socialists, we need to pay more attention to this. More specifically, the market has created huge inequalities at the global level.** We have seen this in the United States where, over the last 50 years, a small portion of the population has become significantly wealthier, and where the economy has become more productive, but where workers and the middle class have become poorer. The combination of inequality with a sense of insecurity is the fuel that creates extreme reactions against the system. So the anti-systemic mood is there.

The current global system, established after the second world war, has not delivered what people need. We need to rethink the Bretton Woods system, which not only created globalisation but, I believe, global capitalism. Wealth is now found in many parts of the world, but so are huge inequalities. In addition to extreme wealth concentration, global capitalism has also created precarious situations, such as

climate change and the massive movements of people triggered by inequality. And inequality has grown and become more massive since the financial crisis. One would have expected that, due to the banking system crisis, we would have had better regulation to ensure a more equitable redistribution of wealth both within countries and globally. But this has not happened. Since the pandemic, we have seen billionaires become even richer, while 99 per cent of the world's population has become poorer.

> *When I speak about mistrust in democracy, I am referring to mistrust in a democracy that has been captured. This is evident in the United States. The power of oligarchs – which Trump said he would reduce – has instead increased.*

However, it is not just a wealth issue. The problem is also that the concentration of wealth translates into the concentration of power, which has undermined our democratic institutions. **When I speak about mistrust in democracy, I am referring to mistrust in a democracy that has been captured. This is evident in the United States. The power of oligarchs – which Trump said he would reduce – has instead increased**, as he has become one of them. Indeed, he is serving them and being used by them to concentrate power further, to undermine democratic institutions and checks and balances, and to create scapegoats. And this is what the ultra-right is doing: targeting a portion of the population. In the past, it may have been the Jews. Today it is migrants or students who are protesting or speaking out about Gaza. In fact, this is only a pretext to create a machine of oppression.

We need to have a response, and we need more democracy, not less. We need to liberate our institutions from the capture of powerful oligarchs and others. This is one of the issues we have been discussing in the Council of Europe. And the Council of Europe can be seen as a preparatory chamber for EU membership.

LA: *To some extent!*

GP: Indeed, not all Council of Europe countries are going to become members of the European Union. However, when Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia were granted candidate status due to the war in Ukraine, de-oligarchisation became one of the new prerequisites for their membership. The Venice Commission of the Council of Europe prepared a paper and discussed with these countries what should be done for their de-oligarchisation. A significant question arose: is this a systemic problem, or is it a matter of the personalities of those who seized power? The conclusion was that the problem is primarily systemic. And it is not limited to countries in the former Soviet sphere. It is also a problem in the West.

> *Social Democracy was founded on a social contract, a fundamental agreement between governments, employers and employees. The employers and companies would make profits, which would be fairly distributed to benefit the wage earner and public social needs, including education, health, the environment and working conditions. But once capital is globalised and can move wherever it wants, it no longer has responsibility to its country.*

LA: *When you say the West, I suppose you mean both sides of the Atlantic? Because it would be too easy to say, 'OK, the US is a drama, but the European Union is flawless'. But you would then develop a more nuanced and less critical perspective on European affairs.*

GP: We may not have such blatant oligarchs in Europe as in the United States, but there is an increasing sense of inequality and of the undermining of social rights. This is, in fact, a global issue. **Social Democracy was founded on a social contract, a fundamental agreement between governments, employers and employees. The employers and companies would make profits, which would be fairly distributed to benefit the wage earner and public social needs, including education, health, the environment and working conditions. But once capital is globalised and can move wherever it wants, it no longer has responsibility to its country.** It has no country, no patriotism, if you like. These are some of the issues that Europe must address.

LA: *A conclusion that could be drawn is that in the European Union, the fiscal union is very much a matter of democracy. Many people view a fiscal union as an unpredictable burden of sharing and transfers, which countries cannot easily control. However, this highlights that there is an element of democratic deficit closely connected to the ways and methods of economic governance.*

GP: Europe needs robust economic institutions. There is talk of a minister of finance, for example. Ultimately, what we need is a democratic approach to working and decision-making. We also need to be more sovereign in our decisions when dealing at the global level, within the global economy, if we truly want to maintain a social Europe, which is so important to us as Social Democrats. We need a more united Europe, one that is stronger in regulation. There were discussions under the presidency of Joe Biden about a global tax. The French economist Thomas Piketty talked about this – and Europe should champion it. But some people in Europe resist this global tax. That is where European progressive forces really need to push if we want to create a more autonomous Europe, in defence and beyond, as our defence is also intertwined with our social system and our democracy.

LA: *Do you think this principle – connecting democratic and social integration – can also be applied in the context of EU enlargement? Until recently, most discussions on backsliding have focused on the democratic side. However, if I translate what you have just explained, then we also need to insist that the enlargement process has a stronger social dimension.*

GP: I agree. I believe that this should be a key element for Europe. If Europe is to survive politically, it has to be socially cohesive. If you don't have that, you will experience huge emigration from these countries, which will create tensions. But it is basically about investing in people. And if you don't have young people, you won't have much investment. In the Central and Eastern European countries and the Western Balkans, a significant portion of the youth have left, undermining the need for reform, as these are people who also desire better and more democracy. If we really want these countries to be cohesive, we need to invest in social cohesion.

> *In today's societies – characterised by such inequality, with a significant concentration of power in wealth and on social platforms, and with a public debate largely controlled by algorithms not chosen by us but by oligarchs – what prevails is not genuine representation, but primarily the question of who is in power.*

Another issue we need to examine is how we innovate our democratic institutions and how we facilitate greater citizen participation in politics, such as through participatory and deliberative democracy. I say this because representative democracy has two sides: one is representing the people, and the other is gaining power. However, **in today's societies – characterised by such inequality, with a significant concentration of power in wealth and on social platforms, and with a public debate largely controlled by algorithms not chosen by us but by oligarchs – what prevails is not genuine representation, but primarily the question of who is in power**.

This is one of the issues that has undermined trust in democracy. We are also examining other forms of democracy that can more effectively engage people. This, of course, will require a power shift, and there will be resistance.

Take Ireland, for example. They adopted the ancient Greek concept of citizens' assemblies. Citizens are randomly selected to form a task force for a specific period, tasked with developing proposals. They deliberate with experts, other citizens and various groups. They did this on abortion, which is a very controversial issue in Ireland. They proposed a change to the constitution, and then a referendum was held. Or take the case of France where, after the *gilets jaunes* movement, a citizens' assembly was created to discuss environmental taxes. One could envision an electronic agora, for example, where policies can be posted for deliberation by the people. Now, with AI, you can actually create transparent algorithms that can facilitate a debate. On the other hand, Facebook and X create an ecosystem of debate that undermines genuine democratic deliberation. (I have written a Report approved by PACE – the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe – on *Strengthening Democracy through Participatory and Deliberative Processes*).

LA: *On the use of AI, there are two main opinions. Some believe that AI and digitalisation bring numerous opportunities in terms of communication and collecting opinions. Others fear that AI can easily be abused. What should be done when communities become more vulnerable due to less transparent channels?*

GP: Freedom does not exist by itself. It only exists within society. It exists only if you have rules that allow you to respect the views of others. So, understanding the rules of debate is therefore crucial. The rules of debate embedded in the algorithms created by Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk, or others are profit-driven, and they have led to the creation of fanatical groups. Why? Fanaticism keeps you fixated on the issue – on your tablet, phone, computer and social platform – allowing these social media owners to generate more revenue. So they have purposely created algorithms that do not help debate, but encourage cocooning and fighting one other, not for mutual understanding but for hate speech and bullying. If they want to operate in the EU, they must disclose what their algorithms are and how they function. Moreover, we need to develop our own algorithms that enable genuine debate, genuine freedoms and genuine democratic procedures.

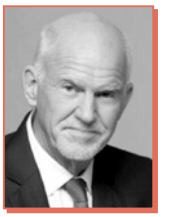
LA: *Do you think the EU and its leadership have the strength to do that?*

GP: I think there will be a big fight. These platforms want to be completely free to do as they wish without any European regulations.

I have spoken with Joe Stiglitz, the Nobel Prize winner and a member of the UN High-Level Expert Group on Beyond GDP established by António Guterres. When Stiglitz discusses trade, he notes that what we refer to as 'free trade' during globalisation was not, in fact, free trade. If you examine the trade deals of US multinationals, you will find clauses that are preferential to these corporations over workers. For example, in Latin America if a strike resulted in losses to the American corporation, the trade deal stipulated that the country would be liable for these losses, not the corporation. That is why I say that regulations exist, and regulations are important, but we must be careful about what is in the regulations. Do they really help our citizens? Are they for our citizens? Are they for sustainable growth?

We also need to consider the concept of abundance, which has gained increasing popularity in the US. **We need to shift our mindset from one of scarcity to one of abundance. Investing in a social Europe – in our society and its citizens, in better education and health – will enable our society to thrive and our economy to develop.** This is where we should be competitive, and this is what will make us truly thrive in this new global world. So that's about taking care of our future. Europe now faces the major challenge of becoming more autonomous – not only in defence. Investments in defence are important and can also have a positive impact on our society, supporting innovation. But they should in no way undermine our social welfare.

A strong social Europe is not a luxury – it is a strategic asset for our prosperity, our democracy, and our future.



George Papandreou, former prime minister of Greece, general rapporteur for Democracy at the Council of Europe

László Andor, FEPS Secretary General

POLICY BRIEF

HEALTHY MINDS, STRONGER EUROPE

PROGRESSIVE SOLUTIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN EUROPE

By Tomáš Petříček, Jana Michailidu, Aida Bikic and Sara Bojarczuk

POLICY BRIEF
September 2025

FEPS
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES

HEALTHY MINDS, STRONGER EUROPE: PROGRESSIVE SOLUTIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN EUROPE

ABSTRACT

Deteriorating mental health has emerged as one of the defining challenges for Europe and its citizens in the 21st century. The COVID-19 pandemic, growing digital pressures, precarious labour conditions and the rising problem of addictive behaviour have underscored the urgency of a comprehensive European strategy. This policy brief demonstrates that mental health is not just a health sector issue, but a cross-cutting priority affecting productivity, social cohesion and resilience of both individuals and our society. The analysis reviews EU policy evolution, highlights progress with the 2023 Commission communication and identifies gaps where European action is most needed. Three key domains are explored: workplace wellbeing and mental health; impact of digital technologies on mental health; and the link between addictions and mental health. Each issue is also addressed through a gender-sensitive approach. Context, existing evidence, best practices and analysis are highlighted. Recommendations are presented under each headline. The policy brief concludes that the EU must advance a comprehensive mental health strategy, mainstreaming mental health into policies, supporting prevention and early intervention, introducing adequate monitoring practices, regulating harmful practices, and fostering coordination through a harm-reduction lens.

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IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

PAC

Institute for rational addiction policies

Despite the work done to put it at the top of the agenda, and the impact it has on everybody, every day, **creating real momentum and policy work on mental health that reflects progressive values has been lacking in the recent EU budget and Commission mandate**.

The policy brief draws on evidence, best practices and inputs from experts to propose a **progressive policy framework in support of a comprehensive EU strategy on mental health**. It focuses on three priority dimensions: addictions, psychosocial risks and mental health at work, and digital technologies

Short on time? The recommendation summary "Healthy minds, stronger Europe" highlights **concrete, actionable proposals for policymakers**.

This policy brief was prepared by FEPS in collaboration with Progressive Analytical Centre and the Institute for Rational Addiction Policies.

PROGRESSIVE READS & VIEWS

A leader who has become a legend

by Ania Skrzypek

Jacinda Ardern

A Different Kind of Power

Pan Macmillan, 2025

One of the most iconic scenes in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy is when Eowyn, Eomund's daughter and courageous shieldmaiden of Rohan, shouts at one of the story's dark characters, "But no living man I am. You look upon a woman". And within seconds, she defeats him with a mighty stroke, demonstrating how narrow-minded he was to believe himself invincible just because prophecy had foretold that no man could ever overthrow him. There is much to unpack from this short scene. One of the key takeaways is never to underestimate the transformative power of female leadership when it is grounded in the genuine belief that the world can be a fairer place. Another is that a better future is totally worth striving for. Indeed, this remains an ageless message – and a modern version of it can be found in the captivating book *A Different Kind of Power* by Jacinda Ardern, which is both thrilling and inspiring.

The story Ardern shares in her book is decisively personal yet at the same time universal and instructive. The introduction finds her in her friends' bathroom, where she is captured in a state of suspense, waiting for the conclusion of some governmental negotiations, as well as for the results of a pregnancy test. Many will remember the scene from *The AM Show* on television when Ardern was asked if she planned to start a family, while she was at that time trying to resurrect the Labour Party from its feeble position in the opinion polls and, by default, lead it with herself as a candidate for prime minister. While she had openly stated in the past that she wanted to be a mother, her answer was that asking her this question when she was running for a job (of leading a country) was unacceptable. With that, she set clear ethical boundaries. **Ardern insisted that she had the right to pursue her own ambitions and define how to handle diverse life opportunities, as well as make her own choices. The recording then went viral after it was picked up by various international broadcasters. It became an encouragement for young women worldwide, as well as a striking phenomenon.** In times when it seemed that all must be exposed to the public eye, here was Ardern insisting that some issues are private. She thus possibly became easier to relate to than any politician who had tried the opposite approach.

Ardern insisted that she had the right to pursue her own ambitions and define how to handle diverse life opportunities, as well as make her own choices.

It is in this spirit that Ardern's narrative allows the reader to feel a personal connection with the story she chooses to share about herself. It all starts in a small town, Marupara, where her family moved when she was four, and where her father took a post at the local police station. It continues, through the prism of various memories from her school years, including friendships and family reunions, as well as her experiences as an active member of the Mormon Church. Ardern discloses how much her faith has shaped her. She also explains the difficult process of later choosing to leave her Mormon faith behind – but not all of its teachings, like the obligation to share, to help one another, to respect possessions, which led her,

even during her parliamentary service, to have a very limited wardrobe, composed mostly of hand-me-down items. **Readers learn about the struggles the people close to her were going through, including the suicide of her closest schoolfriend's brother, and the hardship of a queer boy growing up in a traditional small city.** The storyline follows Ardern to school (where she loved history), to her first job at a fish-and-chip shop, to her debating clubs, to her door-knocking Church evangelism, to her first engagements in politics, to university, to her youth activism (including as president of the International Union of Socialist Youth, p. 124), to her time abroad with experiences like volunteering in soup kitchens in the US and mobilising Kiwi voters in the UK. At every step, Ardern appears curious, open-minded, empathetic and ready to engage and challenge herself, with each experience contributing to the consolidation of her own integrity and shaping her into the leader she was becoming. Although political scientists reading this book might find it too down-to-earth, they should perhaps consider whether the leadership style that Ardern forged for herself and describes in simple terms is not something that successfully breaks out from the overly restrictive criteria of leadership theories. **For Ardern, it is clear that politics – despite all that has happened to it in many different party systems – is not a profession. She does not take shortcuts; she does not outsource. Instead, for her, politics is a mission that one gets the honour to carry out.**

> *For Ardern, it is clear that politics is not a profession. She does not take shortcuts; she does not outsource. Instead, for her, politics is a mission that one gets the honour to carry out.*

> *Ardern has stood proudly for her country, representing it in all its aspects – the past and the future, uniting diverse communities and advocating for reconciliation and moving forward.*

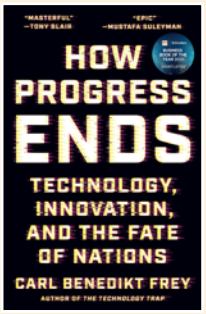
Throughout the book, we learn a great deal about the reality and society of New Zealand, which also serves to highlight why Ardern's prime ministership was so memorable. She frequently alludes to the fact that her country is small and may be seen as one of the world's peripheries, thereby making it particularly vulnerable. It is for this reason that one of the important aspects of her work was to elevate her country to the world stage and place it on the map as a relevant stakeholder, setting the tone for New Zealand's role in international relations. This also contributed to her priority of negotiating trade deals within the Asia-Pacific region, as well as continuing to advocate for policies against climate change, which are key for her country and crucial for the entire globe to pursue to prevent further environmental deterioration and global warming. In this sense, Ardern can be highlighted as a leader who understands the responsibility of both governing and demonstrating patriotism in a progressive sense. **Ardern has stood proudly for her country, representing it in all its aspects – the past and the future, uniting diverse communities and advocating for reconciliation and moving forward.** This was exemplified when she spoke Maori at the UN. The mutual responsibility and sense of togetherness that she insisted on is what helped New Zealanders persevere through Covid-19, as well as through times of natural disasters and the tragedy of the Christchurch shootings. These were moments of extreme stress, through which Ardern led her country with a sense of compassion and humanity. Furthermore, they are recorded in some of the iconic snapshots that she shares in the book – like those taken in Christchurch through a stained glass window, or like the one featuring her in a traditional Maori cloak at Buckingham Palace during the Commonwealth heads of government meeting in London.

In all the defining moments, Jacinda Ardern stood tall and she stood out, leading by example. Many claim that this was because she was not like other leaders of her contemporary era. In fact, she was not even the first choice of Labour, nor was she a member of the dominant party's faction. She had only stepped in after former party leader Andrew Little's unexpected resignation amid scandals and the party's plummeting numbers. She recalls how tough it was, how it was initially about damage-control and somehow safeguarding the bare minimum — already ambitious goals when she took charge just two months before the 2017 general elections. However, while commentators have suggested that it was her leadership style – which stood in stark contrast to the cynical style of contemporaries like Donald Trump – that made her unique, she believes that this explanation is belittling. **In her mind, it is insufficient not to be someone else. To lead, do it well and in the service of others, one first and foremost has to be oneself.** That is what she was, and this authenticity and integrity are what shone out, and what will continue to shine out as Ardern now engages in social and political activities by investing effort in shaping women leaders for the new generations to come.

Ania Skrzypek,
FEPS Director for Research and Training

No guide for the future

by Paul Nemitz



Carl Benedikt Frey

How Progress Ends. Technology, Innovation, and the Fate of Nations

Princeton University Press, 2025

Carl Benedikt Frey's *How Progress Ends* begins with the dramatic language of crisis, bowing to the attention economy, but offers a measured reflection on the sources and limits of modern innovation. Building on his earlier work, Frey attributes contemporary stagnation to alleged growing caution, institutional rigidity, and the fading spirit of discovery that, in his opinion, once drove economic growth. Yet the history of progress he invokes is far from innocent: much of it came from simple greed and depended on exploitation, from enslaved labour to the industrial working class.

> *Prosperity depends on governance, law, and institutional design – factors that are often overlooked in today's technology narratives.*

Frey's economic history is rich and well-argued, and his challenge to the myth of unstoppable progress is a welcome one. He rightly reminds readers that **prosperity depends on governance, law and institutional design – factors that are often overlooked in today's technology narratives**. However, his diagnosis overlooks the deep structural flaws of the modern economy: the failures of markets to serve public needs, the distortions and abuse of corporate power, widening inequality, and ecological breakdown.

At the centre of Frey's thesis lies a tension between two forces. One is the decentralised creativity of individuals and small networks – visible in Enlightenment cafés or Silicon Valley garages. The other is the bureaucratic capacity of large corporations to standardise and scale ideas, reaping economies of scale and enabling worldwide distribution. Progress, he argues, occurs when societies manage to match these models to the needs of the time. When institutions lose flexibility and fail to adapt the framework to the signs of the time – whether by favouring experimentation or size – stagnation follows. It is a clear and elegant framework, but one that ultimately separates the politics of who benefits from 'progress' and who bears its costs. The question is also of how to foresee the tipping point of change from one regime to the other. Where are we today, according to Frey? The answer is unclear.

That omission shapes much of Frey's argument. His scepticism towards regulation and democratic constraint echoes the libertarian optimism of technology's most vocal champions. **He frames environmental and legal safeguards and the precautionary principle as obstacles to innovation, aligning – perhaps unintentionally – with right-wing billionaires like Peter Thiel, who equate freedom with deregulation, low taxes and the right to be contrarian and reckless. In doing this, Frey mistakes symptoms for causes.** The problem is not that societies have grown risk-averse; it is that private interests have captured innovation. What he calls timidity is often the public's rational response to an economy where the rewards of innovation in technologies or business models are privatised and its harms socialised.

This misreading becomes most visible in Frey's silence on the rise of digital capitalism. The 21st-century economy is not a neutral arena for discovery, but a system shaped by

financialisation, shareholder-value ideology and data extraction. These mechanisms have redirected creativity towards surveillance, speculation, and the manipulation of people and societies rather than towards productive or social ends. The so-called 'productivity paradox' – where immense technological investment produces meagre social and macroeconomic returns – reflects a deeper dysfunction: innovation has been decoupled from the common good and digital technology has been hyped.

> *Regulations aimed at preserving the planet represent not stagnation, but a redefinition of what progress means. Growth that undermines the conditions for life cannot be called advancement.*

The same pattern is now visible in artificial intelligence. Despite enormous investment, most corporate AI projects yield little practical benefit. The issue is not bureaucratic inertia but the market incentives that reward short-term hype and a quick run to monopolistic control. When the brightest engineers are designing advertising AI for social networks instead of addressing planetary challenges, the obstacle to progress lies not in regulation but in capitalism's priorities and incentives.

Equally problematic is Frey's treatment of environmental protection as a brake on development. **Regulations aimed at preserving the planet represent not stagnation, but a redefinition of what progress means. Growth that undermines the conditions for life cannot be called advancement.** Real progress in the 21st century requires aligning innovation with ecological survival, ethical responsibility and democratic accountability.

Frey's institutional dialectic – between creative freedom and bureaucratic order – is intellectually neat but politically thin. It treats progress as a management issue, an optimisation of institutional settings, rather than a moral and social question. By reducing history to cycles of adaptation, Frey's model sidelines the struggles that have shaped modern societies: class conflict, labour rights and movements for justice. His analysis seeks flexibility within the existing order but never questions the order itself – one structured around profit, social injustice and exclusion. He laments the concentration of corporate power but stops short of confronting how profit imperatives dominate innovation and abusive market behaviour. The privatisation of knowledge and the subordination of science to commercial interests are treated as regrettable side effects, not defining features. Even his call for 'institutional flexibility' can be read as an endorsement of the very neoliberal policies – deregulation, precarious labour, weakened governance – that have fuelled inequality and environmental degradation.

> *In Frey's narrative, collective action and civil society are barely addressed. Politics becomes a balancing act between institutional settings, rather than a contest over values and the allocation of risks and opportunities in society.*

In Frey's narrative, collective action and civil society are barely addressed. Politics becomes a balancing act between institutional settings, rather than a contest over values and the allocation of risks and opportunities in society. The aspirations for justice, equality, and democratic shaping of the future by people themselves have no value of their own in his vision of progress. Progress, stripped of its social meaning, becomes a question of technical efficiency – how best to stimulate innovation rather than how to direct it towards humane ends. If the story of modern technological progress is indeed nearing its conclusion, that ending need not be tragic. The exhaustion of a purely technological and profit-driven model might open the door to a new vision of advancement – one grounded in democracy, social equity and ecological resilience.

Progress must be redefined to include social and democratic creativity: the ability of communities to organise sustainably, share resources and govern collectively. Such a transformation would shift the measure of progress from speed and output to direction and purpose – toward a society that values well-being and democratic self-determination over accumulation.

How Progress Ends is worth a read as an interesting meditation on the historical rhythms of innovation, but the book falters as a guide to the present. Its admiration for unregulated creativity and suspicion of democratic restraint obscure the real sources of stagnation: inequality, corporate capture and ecological overshoot. Frey calls for renewed dynamism; what the moment demands instead is deliberate direction – a democratic reorientation of innovation towards democratic, social and ecological sustainability and the collective good.

Paul Nemitz, Visiting Professor of Law, College of Europe; Retired Director and 'Consigliere principale' of the European Commission

Made in EU

by Stephan Komandarev
Bulgaria, 2025

What price is a worker willing to pay to preserve a job and protect a meagre salary? In Stephan Komandarev's poignant new film, the answer is ghastly: they would go as far as to conceal a deadly illness. They would continue to return to the factory – a workplace that ruthlessly exploits them and punishes absence, even for serious health reasons – risking not only their own life but the rapid spread of a mortal disease throughout the community.
Bulgarian film director and co-screenwriter Komandarev frames the tragedy of the Covid-19 pandemic through the lens of economic exploitation. His film, based on a true story, follows a woman working in a Bulgarian factory that manufactures clothing labelled "Made in EU" for an Italian brand. The film portrays a situation that is all too common in the European Union where, in the name of the single market and under the flag of capitalism, companies delocalise to where the cost of labour is cheaper, and to where workers' guarantees and protections are loose.
The fragile daily rhythm of this small Bulgarian community, which relies entirely on the clothing factory for its survival, is shattered when coronavirus reaches the town. Iva, one of the factory workers, is the first to fall critically ill. Erroneously identified as 'patient zero', she quickly and conveniently becomes the town's scapegoat. Desperate to continue production at any cost, the clothing company wages a cruel campaign against Iva, willing to destroy her reputation and her life simply to evade its accountability for the rapid spread of the disease.
Presented at the 2025 Venice International Film Festival, *Made in EU* explores the question of workers' exploitation, and it does so without rhetoric, employing a dry and essentially visual language that is reminiscent of the films of Ken Loach. Like a punch in the stomach, the film provokes the viewer's immediate anger and outrage. This is thanks also to the intense and measured performance of Gergana Pletnyova, who plays Iva, a figure of profound dignity who resists with silent courage a community that has ruthlessly abandoned her.
Overall, *Made in EU* is a powerful protest movie that depicts the social issues of contemporary Europe effectively: the famous big brands that thrive because of underpaid and precarious work (the final scene of the film is particularly emblematic), or the use (and misuse) of social media – which will eventually serve Iva's truth. Despite delving deeply into Iva's bitter story, the film has a less incisive ending than expected, as it unfolds too hastily and oversimplifies the power of social media, rather disappointingly.

Hedwig Giusto

Metropolis

by Fritz Lang
Germany, 1927

The message behind Fritz Lang's masterpiece *Metropolis* remains powerful and fitting in today's debate even though the film is almost a hundred years old.
Starting under the shining sun of the Eternal Gardens, we quickly discover that the beautiful upper part of the city is nothing without the hard labour of millions of exploited workers underground. In their misery, however, these workers have hope. They gather to listen to stories of unity and solidarity, bringing together the 'head', the 'hands' and the 'heart', like an unsung version of *The Internationale*.
Fearful that the workers may revolt, the corporate power running the city turns to technology, instructing the chief engineer to spy on the workers. The Machine-Man is then used to become a messenger of hate and destruction, which ultimately leads to the central power source of the city being stormed and brought down by a violent crowd. With the fooled workers eventually realising their mistakes, they hope to find their leader again. In the end, the film brings the workers and the corporate leaders together: 'the mediator between the head and the hands must be the heart.'
When *Metropolis* was shot, the Weimar Republic was still a place of hope and social innovation, building on the legacy of its first president, Friedrich Ebert, who passed away two years before the film was released. Despite its ill-fated ending, the Weimar Republic brought representation for employees. It also brought unemployment benefits, as well as training and support for workers in transition. The film, which was made in 1927 but projects forward so that its events take place in 2026, is an important reminder that nothing in the world runs without workers; that technology, without being bad by nature, can be used to solve societal problems on condition that it is democratic and that its benefits are shared; and that social dialogue is of fundamental importance.
Today's political debate is framed by the same tension, from platform workers to algorithmic management. Billionaires still live in eternal gardens run by millions of oppressed workers, depleting the strength of an exploited planet. Technology is the vehicle for polarised and inflammatory messages that have already shaken the power foundations of our society. It can only be hoped that the time of transition and turbulence we live in today will unite workers in a more peaceful manner, without bringing our world to destruction – but instead ensuring that the heart remains the true mediator of public policies.

François Balate

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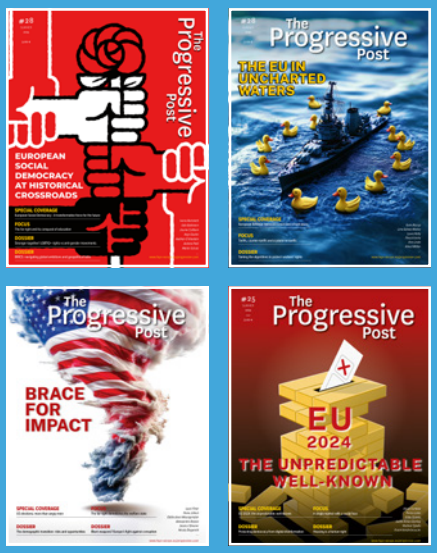

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