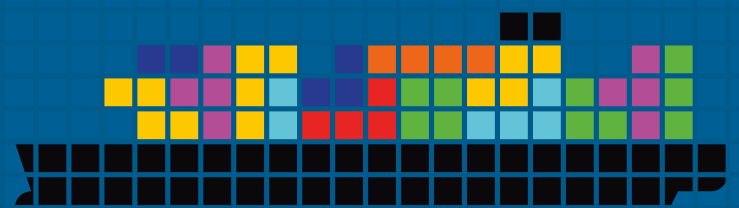


#31

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THE MEDITERRANEAN A CROWDED SEA



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The crowded sea: fragmentation around the Mediterranean

FOCUS

The red queen's race: running faster to match the pace of AI

DOSSIER

Beyond implementation day: the Pact on Migration and Asylum

DOSSIER

The EU's industrial paradigm shift

*Aida Bikic
Josep Borrell
Daniel Levy
Leire Pajin
Trita Parsi
Kathleen Van Brempt
Ludovic Voet
...*

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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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This magazine was published with the financial support of the European Parliament.
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N°31 - Summer

ISSN 2506-7362



by Hedwig Giusto

Europe has often treated the Mediterranean Sea as its own backyard – a place where Western powers could play political games, and where North African and Eastern Mediterranean countries were mostly the mere recipients of European and US decisions and actions.

Looking at the Mediterranean today, a very different picture emerges. Europe's post-colonial assumptions are being shattered as regional powers and emerging actors – especially Israel, Turkey, the Gulf States and Egypt – become increasingly assertive, reclaiming their place and seeking to rewrite the rules. At the same time, the United States under President Trump is shedding its role as the ultimate guarantor of peace and adopting a transactional, disruptive approach.

The ongoing conflicts in Gaza, Lebanon and Iran have further fractured the security order and severely undermined international law, while energy corridors, migration routes and maritime choke points are being weaponised. Against this backdrop, the balance of power in a basin crowded with players is being redrawn, fragmenting the Mediterranean into a sea of multipolarity.

The European Union only recently become fully aware of these major shift, and it has also been sidelined as a major political powerbroker in Middle East peace talks. With its newly launched Pact for the Mediterranean, Brussels is finally attempting to deploy mechanisms to reinvigorate relations with partners across the sea. It remains to be seen, however, whether the promises of the pact will be kept, whether genuine trust can be built, and whether the historic paternalistic approach towards countries of the Global South will once and for all be overcome, by moving from a position where these countries are merely consulted to one of co-ownership and co-governance.

The renewed geopolitical importance of the Mediterranean Sea – and the Union's belated awakening to it – led us to dedicate this issue's **Special Coverage** to *The crowded sea: fragmentation around the Mediterranean*. Here, our authors offer their perspectives on the challenges and opportunities of this changing landscape, reflecting on the role the EU could and should play in it.

Other distinct challenges and opportunities are explored in the **Focus** *The red queen's race: running faster to match the pace of AI*. Artificial intelligence has entered our lives so rapidly that no matter how fast run, much like in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, we struggle to catch up with its innovations. Our contributors consider how we can better address these rapid developments, and how we can introduce the regulatory tools needed to make AI socially and economically sustainable, ensuring our society and democracies remain resilient.

Another EU pact is the subject of the first **Dossier**, *Beyond implementation day: the Pact on Migration and Asylum*. This past June, the implementation phase of this landmark legislative package came to an end. The highly complex and comprehensive package was adopted in 2024 and aimed to harmonise member states' asylum policies, finally moving the Union past the crisis of solidarity and past the emergency mode that has characterised its approach to migration over the last decade. Yet reaching the end of the implementation phase has not dispelled the concerns that plagued the negotiations, and major uncertainties still surround the execution of the pact.

Finally, our second **Dossier** *The EU's industrial paradigm shift* focuses on the European Commission's newly proposed Industrial Accelerator Act. On paper, the proposal embraces

a noticeably more interventionist industrial strategy, aiming to strengthen domestic manufacturing while reducing strategic dependencies. Our authors, however, express serious reservations about the exact kind of industrial Europe that is being shaped. They also raise the critical question of whether decarbonisation still plays the prominent role it was promised in this new strategy.

Editorial



Hedwig Giusto,
Editor-in-chief



10 years
The Progressive
Post

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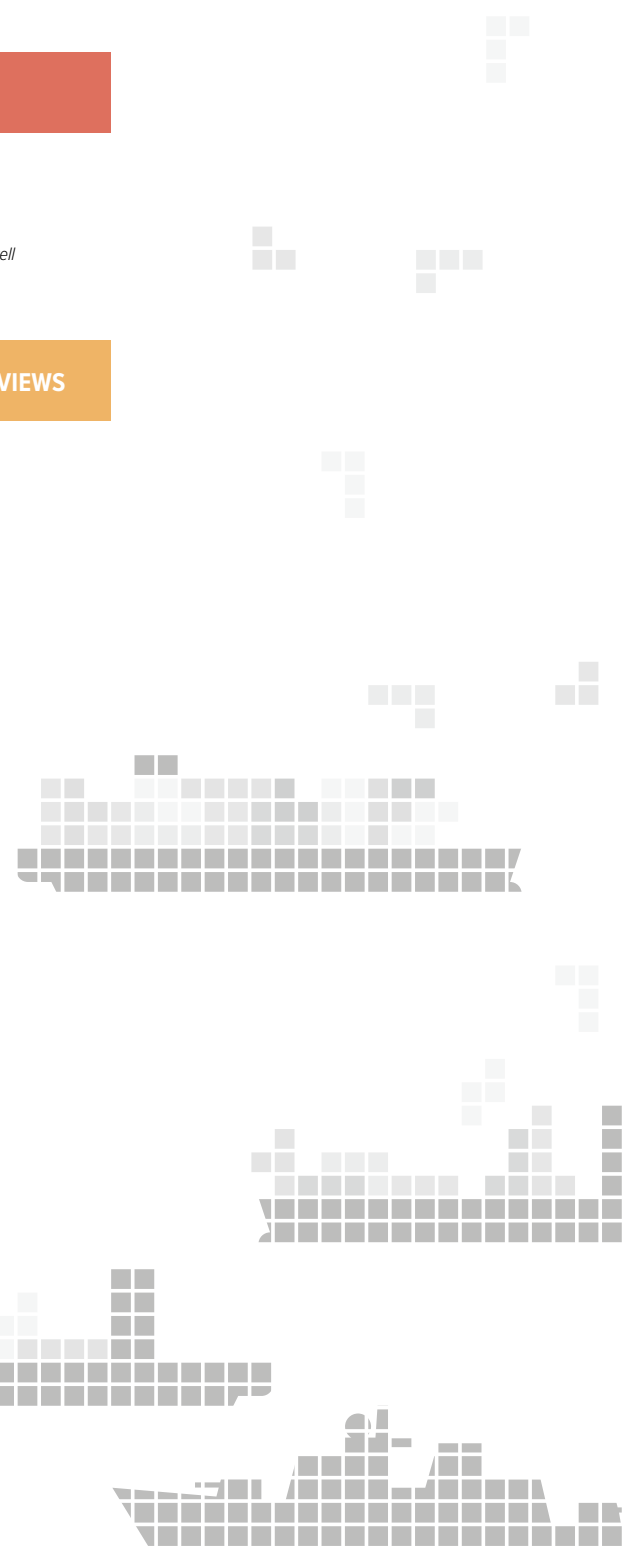
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POLICY BRIEF

POLICY BRIEF
March 2026

FEPS
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES



EUROPEAN SOVEREIGNTY AND THE SOCIAL DIMENSION

REASSERTING EUROPE'S
SOCIAL-DEMOCRATIC MODEL
IN TURBULENT TIMES

ABSTRACT

Decades of neoliberal policies have produced economic imbalances, social polarisation and political instability. The transatlantic rupture, since the return of Donald Trump, adds considerable pressure on European integration. Building European sovereignty and reasserting our social model based on a sustainable development regime are three sides of the same complex agenda.

Today, the US-inspired blueprint of the conservative-far right policy agenda focuses on deregulation and a dilution of European regulatory autonomy. This contradicts the European policy decisions that produced the European Pillar of Social Rights, and its Action Plan adopted in Porto, and the La Hulpe declaration.

European sovereignty demands a social foundation, not a US blueprint. A strong Europe abroad depends on resilience at home. Sovereignty must therefore include a renewed and reinforced social dimension, with enhanced investment capacity and safety nets. This also means protecting citizens, strengthening solidarity, and ensuring democratic control over economic power.

This policy brief offers to revive the progressive thrust of EU governance amidst this new geopolitical reality. It proposes a new EU socioeconomic steering agenda around the following points: promote the social model as a key dimension of the European sovereignty agenda; build EU borrowing capacity; tighten economic steering and social rights; revive public services; and restore social targets at the heart of the European integration agenda and its governance.

This Road to Porto 2.0 would deliver the pillars needed for European sovereignty to gain political legitimacy and strengthen the social democratic features of European integration.



AUTHORS

LÁSZLÓ ANDOR
Secretary General, FEPS

ROBIN HUGENOT-NOËL
Researcher, Freie Universität Berlin (FU)

Five years after the adoption of the Action Plan for the implementation of the **European Pillar of Social Rights** in Porto, this policy brief proposes a new EU socioeconomic steering agenda.

This policy brief argues that European sovereignty cannot be reduced to military or geopolitical autonomy. It demands a social foundation, not a US blueprint. **A strong Europe abroad depends on a resilient Europe at home.** Sovereignty must therefore include a renewed social dimension, which means protecting citizens, strengthening solidarity and ensuring democratic control over economic power.

This policy brief is also available in Portuguese.





CURRENT AFFAIRS

Step by step
for a
social Euro



Competitiveness is nothing without social rights

by Nicolas Schmit, László Andor and Anna Diamantopoulou

Five years on from the Porto Social Summit, European leaders need to remember that deregulation will just make Europe poorer. Only social sovereignty will make it stronger.

European leaders have lost all sense of solidarity and respect. Today, everything is about competitiveness, deregulation and scrapping what has made the European Union a respected regulatory power in the world. **President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, Germany's Chancellor Friedrich Merz and Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni are solely guided by the interests of big business and financial institutions**, at the expense of working people and vulnerable groups. They have forgotten that what makes our Union strong is its social market economy. They have forgotten that **competitiveness can only be achieved through quality jobs, social protection mechanisms and quality public services**.

► *Competitiveness can only be achieved through quality jobs, social protection mechanisms and quality public services.*

The European project has been built on the idea of progress, shared prosperity and social cohesion. The first financial instrument to be established was the European Social Fund. **For decades, Social Democratic forces, working alongside trade unions and civil society, have been building a more social Europe, to empower and protect those without whom the single market is only empty words: the workers, the people.**

We have pushed for greater social investment, developed the Lisbon Strategy that brought social cohesion and competitiveness together and protected young people amid the financial crisis. We saved millions of jobs during the pandemic, and we established minimum wages to combat in-work poverty and wage dumping. We ensured pay transparency to advance gender equality, and we have created new protections for platform workers at a time when algorithms are turning the world of work upside down.

In 2017, we adopted the European Pillar of Social Rights as an ambitious framework for equality, solidarity and dignity. Five years ago, in Porto, under the leadership of António Costa, the Social Summit set concrete targets to reduce

unemployment, decrease poverty and encourage lifelong learning.

We have shown that with courage and leadership, we can adopt laws for the many, not just the few.

Today, however, the picture is bleak and our legacy is at risk. A fifth of the EU population is at risk of poverty or exclusion, including millions of children. People face precarious working conditions in the wake of digitalisation, the green transition and austerity measures across member states. More than one million people are homeless. This is not acceptable – neither morally nor politically.

We recognise the work currently being done by the Social Democrats and Socialists in the European Commission, who are trying to counter the dominant deregulation mantra that seeks to turn the European Union into a US-style neoliberal wild west. With the Affordable Housing Act, the Quality Jobs Act or the Anti-Poverty Strategy, the situation can improve. But this is not enough. That is why, **as former European Commissioners in charge of social rights, we are calling for a new impetus for social Europe, reviving the spirit of Porto five years ago.**

- *For decades, Social Democratic forces, working alongside trade unions and civil society, have been building a more social Europe, to empower and protect those without whom the single market is only empty words: the workers, the people.*



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With the cost of living and affordability being the number one concern for citizens, it is our duty to answer and to offer concrete solutions. We are calling for a new socio-economic steering agenda that responds to today's challenges, including the further digitalisation of the economy, the risks to European industries and the anxieties of millions of people across the Union.

The major geopolitical disruptions that the European Union is currently facing call for a stronger sovereign Europe. This demands a renewed and reinforced social foundation with enhanced investment and fiscal capacity, including in public services. A focus mainly on deregulation, **the dilution of European regulatory autonomy and lower social and environmental standards are not the right way to improve Europe's competitiveness, with people and their rights at its heart.**

Instead, we must build a progressive European development model based on the realisation

that climate transition or digital transformation cannot happen without a reformed economic policy framework and a sound social foundation. This is the basis for European sovereignty, affirming a core identity and values, reducing dependencies and offering an alternative vision to those of the United States and China.

In Porto, we showed that it was possible to anchor solidarity at the heart of our political action. It is time to show it again.

- *The dilution of European regulatory autonomy, and lower social and environmental standards are not the right way to improve Europe's competitiveness, with people and their rights at its heart.*



*Nicolas Schmit,
FEPS President,
former EU Commissioner
for Jobs and Social
Rights (2019-2024)*



*László Andor,
FEPS Secretary General,
former EU Commissioner for
Employment, Social Affairs
and Inclusion (2010-2014)*



*Anna Diamantopoulou,
member of the FEPS Bureau,
former EU Commissioner
for Employment, Social
Affairs and Equal
Opportunities (1999-2004)*



All far from quiet on the eastern front

by Ania Skrzypek

The sense of Eastern discomfort that took hold among the European progressive family after the loss in the 2024 European elections has become a lingering disaster. The recent elections in Hungary saw the long-awaited rejection of the Orbán regime. The result was enthusiastically applauded across the Union, but it left a bitter aftertaste for the centre-left, which has lost its parliamentary representation. Neither does the centre-left have any representation left in the parliaments of Bulgaria, Latvia or the Czech Republic.

The image of the centre-left as the outcasts of representative democracy is powerful. Indeed, it is so strong that it tends to lead to generalisations about the collapse of Social Democracy across the entire region, even though in Lithuania the LSDP leads the government, and in Poland and Slovenia progressives are part of it. It would be more appropriate to seek a more nuanced view, and point out how this unnecessary doomsday scenario hinders broader thinking about the progressive potential that still exists in those and other countries.

Possibly, the metamorphosis of the political systems in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) is faster and more dramatic because of their shorter democratic history. Yet, instead of talking about collapsing parties and their faults, one should rather see parties in transition. Accepting this alternative view offers a useful way to look beyond the current electoral figures and to conceptualise a new programmatic, as well

as organisational, formula capable of convincing those voters who yearn for more equality, social progress and prosperity.

| BEYOND UNHELPFUL SHORTCUTS

Central and Eastern European progressive parties are often viewed as a quasi-homogeneous group, which they are not. This vision disregards the fact that some of these parties rose, almost four decades ago, from the ashes of communism. It also disregards the fact that there are historical progressive parties among them, (whose traditions are as long as those of the progressive parties in Austria, Germany or elsewhere). And it disregards the fact that new progressive parties have attempted to create left-wing alternatives following the fall of previous regimes. The roles of the CEE progressive parties in transforming their respective countries' political systems have therefore been dissimilar.

Likewise, their quest for a role as agents of social progress has followed different paths.

What is more, there is a lesson from the previous transition that can be instructive to understand the current one. **In their previous search for a new programmatic framing, many parties in the CEE region have followed the examples set by their Western sister parties.** On the one hand, this was to gain recognition and approval from Western parties, paving the way for membership in the Socialist International and the PES family. And on the other hand, it was to become powerhouses of modernisation. This brought many of them electoral victories and led to an overwhelming progressive majority in the European Council early this century. But it quickly became clear that the programmes of the SPD, Labour, or SAP could not simply be translated and applied to other national contexts in Central and Eastern Europe.



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Social Democracy has definitely seen better days than now. This is an important lesson for the movement. When there is so much momentum to be renewed to show strength and mobilise globally, there needs to be an understanding that the much-needed re-foundation of Social Democracy must follow the principle of unity in diversity. And that means **shared values and principles, while accepting that each sister party has a unique character that combines the progressive universal DNA with the national specificity, giving each party a competitive edge in its own local, regional and even European elections.** In other words, the re-foundation of these parties is not about a fit-for-all formula that can work in Estonia, Slovenia or any other CEE country. It is about supporting and standing in solidarity with each and every sister party. And it is about understanding that, in this time of transition, each progressive party must be responsible for finding its own way to gain voters' favour.

| THE DEFINING PILLARS

The notion of (re)emerging as a viable option may be the right conceptualisation for navigating party system transformations and becoming a noteworthy alternative. It is therefore time to cease the conversations about transfers of electorates and to turn to the 'rightwingisation' of the entire party landscape. To use a field game comparison, this is very much about playing other people's games and blocking the strikers with defenders, rather than thinking about covering a zone that would make the attack impossible. **One cannot reverse the past, but one can conceptualise a political conquest – and mastering three distinct political issues could make a difference.**

The first is the cost-of-living crisis, which is the top concern across Europe, according to a recent Eurobarometer report. Across diverse CEE countries, this crisis differs from that in

- ▶ *One cannot reverse the past, but one can conceptualise a political conquest, and mastering three distinct political issues could make a difference.*

Western Europe, as CEE is the region with the largest increases in nominal minimum wages. Yet **it is also the region where citizens feel worse off than their neighbours in 'old Europe'**. This perception matters, as it feeds into a sense of disappointment and inequality – although Eurofound points out that in many CEE countries wealth inequality is actually lower than in the West. Where does this perception of being worse off come from? This leads to the second political issue that needs to be addressed: in many CEE countries, there is a sense of a failed public sphere (including public services) and high levels of distrust in public institutions at the local, regional and national levels. At the same time, these societies are still the most pro-European.

The third political issue that needs to be mastered if progressives are to make a difference is that support for integration is more about a willingness to become a full



member of a community than about implementing specific policies. In all these countries, a sense of pessimism prevails – not uncommon across the rest of Europe either – and it is marked by a fear of the war in Ukraine and its impact. This is felt more intensely in Eastern Europe due to its geographical proximity to Russia. In addition, **a feeling of disempowerment has taken hold among young people, who leave their parents' home ever later in life, indicating that they have lost autonomy over their choices of how and where to live, work and raise a family.**

The political proposals that have attracted voters recently have either been (more) authoritarian, based on a strong, controlling national state or have leaned towards neoliberalism. This still resonates with electorates in the CEE region because they perceive neoliberalism as tied to openness and connected to the EU and the economy. So, while it looks like a strategic vote on what kind of state should emerge, perhaps the vital component that still leaves space for the centre-left to build on is the transformative state, characterised by economic democracy, a commitment to social progress and a more consultative, participatory government.

To succeed in building trust, in themselves as well as in their project, there needs to be a sense of ownership that comes from grassroots mobilisation and reconnecting with diverse people. There can be no shortcuts; it is and will be a lengthy mission that must be carried out diligently, always mindful of the other political competitors. The objective is not a quick fix or image repair (which would not work), but a genuine re-foundation that will benefit the progressive aspirations of societies in the CEE region and help turn this transitional moment into a historical crossroads, culminating in the successful transformation of the centre-left formula.

► *A feeling of disempowerment prevails among young people, who leave their parents' home ever later in life, indicating that they have lost autonomy over their choices of how and where to live, work and raise a family.*



*Ania Skrzypek,
FEPS Director for
Research and Training*

Enlargement is Europe's peace project: it is time to revive it

by Kathleen Van Brempt

Twenty years after Montenegro regained independence, the EU-Western Balkans summit, held recently in Tivat, should remind Europe of something essential: enlargement was never a merely bureaucratic exercise about negotiation chapters, institutional alignment or technical benchmarks. Enlargement was the political project through which the EU stabilised the continent after decades of division and conflict. And in today's geopolitical reality, it must become that again.

The European Union grew out of the conviction that democracy, economic cooperation and political integration create stability where nationalism, external interference and historical tensions once prevailed. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, enlargement helped consolidate democracies, strengthen institutions and reconnect a continent divided by ideology and geopolitics. It transformed Europe from a continent of blocs into a continent of partners.

► *The Western Balkans are geographically surrounded by the European Union, economically tied to it and politically shaped by it. Yet they remain trapped in a prolonged state of uncertainty that increasingly benefits actors whose interests run directly counter to Europe's strategic interests.*

Today, with war once again on European soil and geopolitical competition intensifying globally, the need for that same logic has returned with full force. **The Western Balkans are geographically surrounded by the European Union, economically tied to it and politically shaped by it. Yet they remain trapped in a prolonged state of uncertainty that increasingly benefits actors whose interests run directly counter to Europe's strategic interests.**

| GEOPOLITICAL PLAYGROUND

Russia continues to exploit divisions through political interference and disinformation. China steadily expands economic dependency through strategic investments and infrastructure. Turkey and some Gulf states continue to build influence across the region. At the same time, Donald Trump's revival of transactional 'America First' politics is encouraging political leaders in the region to pursue short-term bilateral arrangements rather than long-term European alignment.

The result is a region that risks becoming a geopolitical playground precisely because Europe itself has too often appeared hesitant about its own future. **Russia's invasion of Ukraine fundamentally changed the debate around enlargement because it shattered the illusion that unresolved grey zones on the European continent can remain permanently stable.** Countries left in geopolitical limbo inevitably become economically, politically and institutionally vulnerable. Enlargement is therefore no longer only about prosperity or integration. It is increasingly about security, democratic resilience and Europe's ability to shape its own neighbourhood.

| FRONTRUNNER IN THE WAITING ROOM

That is why the Western Balkans cannot remain in Europe's waiting room indefinitely. And there are reasons to believe that Europe is beginning to understand this. For the first time in years, there is renewed political momentum around enlargement. European leaders increasingly



© European Union, 2026

recognise that integrating the Western Balkans is not a peripheral issue but a strategic necessity for Europe.

The fact that Montenegro is hosting this summit, twenty years after independence and fourteen years after opening accession negotiations, is more than symbolic. It reflects a growing recognition that the European Union needs a credible success story in the region. **Montenegro has become the frontrunner in the accession process, and recent steps by EU institutions to start drafting elements of an accession treaty have sent an important political signal.** Public support for EU membership among Montenegrin citizens remains consistently high despite years of delay and frustration. That persistence matters. It demonstrates that belief in the European project remains stronger than cynicism.

We support Montenegro's ambition to become the European Union's 28th member state by 2028. But support for enlargement also requires political honesty. Those in power carry

the greatest responsibility for safeguarding democratic standards and public trust in institutions. Montenegro's leadership must therefore continue to deliver credible reforms in judicial independence, anti-corruption measures, media freedom and democratic governance. European integration cannot be the project of a single governing majority alone. It must be carried across society broadly, involving opposition parties, trade unions, civil society organisations and social partners. Lasting democratic reform only succeeds when it is rooted socially as well as institutionally.

| STRONGER TOGETHER

Enlargement is not a one-way street either. If the European Union wants public support for enlargement to remain strong, then the process itself must become more politically credible, more transparent and more tangible, both for citizens in candidate countries and for citizens inside the European Union.

► *There can be no compromise on democracy, the rule of law, human rights and good governance. These are the political foundations of the European project itself.*

That means modernising the enlargement process based on a few clear principles. And that starts by credibly defending our own values. **There can be no compromise on democracy, the rule of law, human rights and good governance. These are the political foundations of the European project itself.** Countries moving towards the European Union must strengthen democratic institutions, judicial independence and media freedom, not weaken them as accession approaches.

Secondly, enlargement must reinforce Europe's geopolitical coherence. Candidate countries cannot simultaneously move towards EU membership while remaining strategically ambiguous on core foreign policy questions. In an increasingly unstable world, alignment with the European Union's foreign and security policy is not optional. It is part of what membership means. Thirdly, **enlargement must strengthen Europe's social model rather than undermine it. European integration cannot become a race to the bottom on wages, labour rights or social protections.** A stronger Europe must also remain a fairer Europe.

And finally, the accession process itself must once again become credible for citizens. Progress cannot remain invisible for decades. Countries that deliver reforms should also see concrete progress in return through greater access to the single market, participation in European programmes, integration into the SEPA payment system and lower roaming costs.

| AMBITIONS

The world around us is changing rapidly, so it is time for Europe to step up its game and become more ambitious in politically integrating candidate countries long before formal accession is completed. Countries that have made substantial progress towards membership should no longer be excluded from the room while decisions about Europe's future are being taken. Granting observer status in selected European institutions, deepening cooperation on security and defence, and progressively integrating candidate countries into key European policies would strengthen preparedness, political trust and strategic alignment on all sides.

Full membership, with full rights and responsibilities, must remain the final objective. But the road towards membership must once again become politically credible and visible for citizens. Because enlargement is ultimately not only about expanding the European Union geographically. It is about completing the European project politically: building a continent where democracy is defended, cooperation prevails over fragmentation, and Europe has the confidence to shape its own future rather than leaving parts of the continent vulnerable to outside influence and instability.

That was one of the European Union's greatest achievements after the fall of the Berlin Wall. And it can once again become one of its greatest achievements.

► *Enlargement must strengthen Europe's social model rather than undermine it. European integration cannot become a race to the bottom on wages, labour rights or social protections.*

*Kathleen Van Brempt,
Member of the European
Parliament, S&D Group
Vice-President for
EU Enlargement*





Cuba at a crossroads

Why Europe must lead with principles, solidarity and dialogue

by Leire Pajín

Any discussion about the situation in Cuba, or elsewhere, must be frank and must focus on the people first. In the face of abuses, we must consistently uphold international law – because international law exists to protect everyone.

When we do not condemn violations of the United Nations Charter, human rights or humanitarian law, regardless of who commits these violations – Cuba or the United States – we fail to protect the Cuban as well as the American people, and we put all of us, including Europeans, in danger. **Only an international community united against impunity is strong enough to ensure that no state abuses its military and coercive power against another, and that no government abuses this power against its citizens.**

For decades, the European Union and all its member states have consistently joined the United Nations General Assembly in condemning the US for its abusive embargo on Cuba. The EU has also consistently condemned abuses of civil and political human rights in Cuba.

But today, a new element has emerged from the US. **Since January 2026, President Trump has threatened the island with military intervention, and the US has imposed an unprecedented energy blockade against Cuba, as well as other illegal unilateral extraterritorial sanctions.** UN human rights

experts and bodies have strongly condemned these US sanctions, pointing to their unlawfulness, unjustifiability, serious humanitarian and human rights impact on Cuba's population. The US sanctions are also criticised for undermining the economic rights of third countries, including those of EU member states.

This new US escalation requires a strong reaction from the EU – which needs to call on the US to respect international law, as strongly as we call on Cuba to end repression and carry out reforms. That is the balanced and responsible position that we Social Democrats defended once again through the motion for a resolution I put forward, on behalf of the S&D Group, at the European Parliament plenary session this June.

Since January, Cubans have been suffering an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. This has been aggravated by the US energy blockade. Hospitals struggle to operate, access to healthcare has deteriorated dramatically and the whole country faces food and medicine shortages. Delivery of humanitarian aid across the country is delayed.

The UN keeps noting that Cuba is part of a group called 'Small Island Developing States', and that the country has structural vulnerabilities, including limited natural resources, limited connectivity, high import costs, exposure to climate shocks and limited fiscal leeway, amid ongoing climate and debt crises. Any embargo or blockade generates devastating humanitarian effects.

► *Since January 2026, President Trump has threatened the island with military intervention, and the US has imposed an unprecedented energy blockade against Cuba, as well as other illegal unilateral extraterritorial sanctions.*

- ▶ *Violations of civil and political rights continue, with thousands of political prisoners and peaceful protesters detained. Together with torture and other inhuman and degrading treatment, these abuses are consistently condemned by the UN and the EU. They must end immediately.*



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On the other side of the coin are decades of a Cuban single-party political regime that has resisted US coercion and maintained an extremely fragile social and economic steadiness, despite delayed reforms, excessive external dependencies and an intolerable internal repression. The regime's policies are not only unjust, they also prevent Cubans from investing their full potential in their country, forcing many to leave. **Violations of civil and political rights continue, with thousands of political prisoners and peaceful protesters detained. Together with torture and other inhuman and degrading treatment, these abuses are consistently condemned by the UN and the EU. They must end immediately.**

The latest UN Development Programme's *Democracy and Development* Report for Latin America and the Caribbean makes this clear: in any country seeking to ensure its prosperity, inclusive participation and the rule of law matter.

Human development, democracy and state resilience reinforce each other.

The recent liberation of prisoners and urgent economic reforms announced by the Cuban authorities are steps in the right direction, yet they are not enough. There is no clarity on who, when or how the remaining prisoners will be freed. Reforms allowing Cubans living abroad to invest in their country, partly decentralising the administration and reducing bureaucracy, could truly help the country economically, alongside a debt restructuring, if there were enough legal certainty for investors. But this requires profound internal reforms, the end of US coercion and external support.

In this scenario, what can the EU do?

History shows that you cannot defend rights by violating rights, nor uphold the rule of law by breaking it. The law of the strongest has never delivered lasting peace, democracy or

human rights. Only respect for international law, genuine reform and international solidarity can break the vicious circle of abuse and suffering. When the EU and Cuba signed the Political Dialogue and Cooperation Agreement ten years ago, Cuba was already under an illegal US embargo, governed by a single-party political system and in need of democratic and economic reforms.

The agreement was not signed as a reward. It is a unique foreign policy tool to ensure critical and constructive engagement, and to support the Cuban people, in full respect for international law. It foresees dialogues on human rights, joint responses to common challenges (including health and climate resilience) and cooperation to support governance reforms and sustainable development. It promotes investments in renewable energy, the digital transition and vaccine production, while allowing the EU to engage with Cuban civil society and help reinforce civic space.



In short, walking away from Cuba, as promoted by right-wing forces in the European Parliament, would not improve the human rights or the living conditions of the Cuban people. It would simply reduce European influence and leave this space to other global actors, like Trump's US, China or Russia, whose commitment to international law, human rights and democracy is, at best, not their main goal.

Today, more than ever, **the EU needs to remain engaged in Cuba.**

We must continue to deliver humanitarian aid and coordinate international efforts to ensure all Cubans in need are reached. We must uphold international law, by condemning the latest US escalation as strongly as we condemn abuses by the Cuban regime.

And we must use all necessary diplomatic, financial and legal tools – from raising our voice in international fora, to implementing our bilateral agreement and the EU's blocking statute fully and more effectively – to ensure that all Cuban citizens and their international partners, including in the EU, regain their rights and their confidence in the country's institutions and economy. This requires a genuine dialogue between the Cuban government, the political opposition and independent civil society. It also requires improved governance – rule of law, transparency, judicial guarantees and accountability – and economic resilience, with openness, sustainable international financing, investments and cooperation.

This is what the Cuban people want. It is also what the Cuban people deserve. And it is what the Social Democrats in the EU actively support. It is therefore what the Cuban authorities, the EU and the international community must deliver.

► *The EU needs to remain engaged in Cuba. We must continue to deliver humanitarian aid and coordinate international efforts to ensure that all Cubans in need are reached.*

*Leire Pajín,
MEP, first Vice-President of
the Euro-Latin American
parliamentary assembly
(EuroLat) and the EuroLat
S&D Group coordinator*



SPECIAL COVERAGE

THE CROWDED SEA: FRAGMENTATION AROUND THE MEDITERRANEAN

Israel's ongoing war in Gaza and the US-Israeli confrontation with Iran have shattered the regional security architecture of the eastern Mediterranean and thrust the region into the centre of geopolitical thinking. Many of the pre-war assumptions, particularly that of the United States as ultimate security guarantor, have been swept away, while regional powers like Israel, Turkey and the Gulf states are growing more assertive, increasingly turning the Mediterranean into a multipolar arena, in which the EU is losing its traditional leverage as the region's 'dominant framer'.

Against this volatile backdrop, the European Commission is advancing the EU's Pact for the Mediterranean, which

aims to reinvigorate strained relations between Europe and its southern neighbourhood, and to restore European credibility in a time of deep polarisation. Yet, while the pact looks promising on paper, its success will depend on whether the EU can move past its usual unilateral approach and embrace genuine co-ownership and transparency.

The question is: which role does the EU truly aspire to play, and is it willing to deploy the necessary resources to become a meaningful actor in its own neighbourhood?



A multipolar Mediterranean: an opportunity for the EU?

by Eduard Soler i Lecha

Great power competition and assertive regional powers – from Turkey to the Gulf states – have transformed the Mediterranean beyond recognition. The EU is no longer the 'dominant framer', but this need not be a defeat. Approached with humility, its relative loss of power could become the basis for the more equal partnership the EU has long promised but never delivered.

The EU once saw itself as the benign anchor of Mediterranean affairs, the actor that set the terms for dialogue and cooperation, channelled and funded through Brussels-based institutions. This was the spirit of the 1990s: the Cold War was over, the international liberal order seemed uncontested, the Oslo Agreements kindled hopes of peace and the Barcelona Process promised shared prosperity, political dialogue and people-to-people exchanges. That world has gone.

► *Today, the Mediterranean is a multipolar space, shaped by forces largely beyond European control.*

Today, the Mediterranean is a multipolar space, shaped by forces largely beyond European control. Great power rivalry is back, with the US and China competing for influence and Russia playing a destabilising role. The constitutive norms of the post-war order are under assault. Israel has set a record of

impunity in its violations of international law in the region. Donald Trump's second presidency has accelerated the dismantling of multilateral frameworks, with the Middle East as one of his primary laboratories – from the 'Board of Peace' fantasy for Gaza to the illegal war against Iran.

But the most consequential shift is the rise of regional powers. The Mediterranean and broader Middle East have always been a crowded geopolitical field, with at least five major players – Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel and Turkey – plus Morocco and Algeria as sub-regional powers in the Maghreb. What has changed is their assertiveness. Israel is attempting to become an uncontested force while simultaneously building the so-called 'Abrahamic axis', based on the Abraham accords, which President Trump promotes. Turkey has abandoned its traditional posture for an activism that stretches from Syria to the Red Sea, while positioning itself as indispensable to European defence. Saudi Arabia, under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, has projected unprecedented ambition across diplomacy, economy and security.

And the field has become even more crowded. Two relatively small but extraordinarily active players – the UAE and Qatar – have carved out outsized roles through investment, mass media, mediation, arms procurement and alliance-building. The centre of gravity of the region, traditionally anchored in the Levant, has shifted gradually towards the Gulf. The 2026 Iran war has made this definitive: **Gulf states are no longer distant partners of Mediterranean affairs but a frontline.** Moreover, the emerging Saudi-UAE rivalry is becoming a new structuring dynamic whose effects transcend the Gulf – from Sudan to southern Yemen and beyond.

► *Africa's weight is growing, and the Mediterranean can increasingly be thought of as a Euro-African lake.*

Neighbouring regions, too, are more embedded with the Mediterranean than ever. **Africa's weight is growing, and the Mediterranean can increasingly be thought of as a Euro-African lake;** the security dynamics in the Sahel



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and the Horn of Africa demand a comprehensive view. To the east, South Asia has entered the equation: Pakistan's mediation between the US and Iran, the Saudi-Pakistani defence agreement, India's deepening connections with the Gulf through projects like the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor – all point to a region whose boundaries have expanded well beyond either shore of the sea.

► *A multipolar Mediterranean, for all its risks, could open the door to a more equal, less paternalistic relationship with the region's actors.*

Where does this leave the EU? **Weakened by its own polycrisis – migration, Brexit, Covid-19, the war in Ukraine and now the economic fallout from the Strait of Hormuz disruptions – the EU is more inward-looking, less ambitious and more divided than in the 1990s.** Its Pact for the Mediterranean, which was launched with genuine effort in late 2025, arrived in a region that had already moved on. The reputational damage from the EU's inability to act on Gaza, where it proved relevant but impotent, divided and unable to pressure Israel, will take years to repair.

Yet defeatism would be the worst response. **A multipolar Mediterranean, for all its risks, could open the door to a more equal, less paternalistic relationship with the region's actors.** The EU is no longer the only game in town; it must earn its place rather than assume it. And it has genuine assets: geographic permanence, dense people-to-people connections, a stake in its neighbours' progress, reliability and a commitment to rules and multilateral cooperation that most regional actors – however frustrated with European double standards – still value.

The key lies in coalitional thinking. **Rather than waiting for 27 member states and all their Mediterranean and Middle Eastern partners to agree on everything, the EU should embrace flexible partnerships:** coalitions that bring together willing member states, EU institutions and regional powers around concrete projects. This will require careful choices, transparency and consistency. Some initiatives will not include all actors, and the EU must be prudent about those that could be perceived as adversarial. But the alternative – paralysis or a residual policy that satisfies no one – is far worse. Those instruments that do remain consensual, starting with the Union for the Mediterranean, should nevertheless be preserved with care: it is always easier to destroy than to build.

Above all, Europeans must understand that this is not 'just' about the Mediterranean, a dossier that perhaps only southern European states care deeply about. It is about the world order. Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan and Hormuz are connected chapters of the same story: the erosion of the rules-based international system. The Mediterranean and the MENA region at large is a laboratory, a testing ground. **What the EU builds or fails to build here will define its global credibility.** If it cannot defend international law, foster cooperation and offer a credible alternative in its own neighbourhood, it will not be taken seriously anywhere else.

*Eduard Soler i Lecha,
Associate Professor in
International Relations,
Universitat Autònoma
de Barcelona (UAB) and
Institut Barcelona d'Estudis
Internacionals (IBEI)*





A new security framework for the Mediterranean and the Gulf

by Trita Parsi

Donald Trump's ill-conceived war with Iran has shattered the regional security order that governed the Persian Gulf for decades, with cascading consequences for the Levant and the eastern Mediterranean. Whatever the conflict's ultimate military outcome, the war has already overturned many of the assumptions underpinning the pre-war regional architecture: the reliability of the United States as a security guarantor, the viability of indefinitely containing Iran through coercive pressure, the durability of Israel's privileged strategic position in Washington and Israel's role as the principal intermediary through which regional states manage relations with the US. The region's future trajectory remains uncertain, but a return to the security paradigm that existed before 27 February 2026 is no longer plausible.

The Trump administration expected a short war that would conclude within days, ideally with the rapid degradation of Iran's military capabilities and perhaps even the collapse of the Iranian state itself. According to a senior Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) official, Trump assured regional leaders that the war would last no more than 100 hours. He similarly told Britain's outgoing Prime Minister Keir Starmer that the conflict would be over within three days. According to Trump administration officials, some GCC states quietly shared this assessment – particularly Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, though officials within the Saudi foreign ministry opposed the war – viewing Iran as weakened and vulnerable after years of sanctions, regional setbacks and internal pressures.

Yet the course of the war challenged these assumptions. Iran demonstrated greater resilience and retaliatory capacity than many regional actors had anticipated, while the costs and risks of further escalation became far clearer to neighbouring states. This reassessment has been especially acute among the GCC states: several Gulf governments understandably continue to view Iran as a major strategic threat, and the war exposed the limitations of the existing US-led security framework. **US military bases across the Gulf, long regarded as symbols of deterrence and protection, became liabilities and magnets for retaliation.** These bases were intended to deter Iran from initiating conflict. Instead, the United States itself launched the war,

and once the conflict began, the bases did not shield GCC states from Iranian retaliation: they increased the likelihood for Gulf territory to become a target. As a result, the strategic value of hosting military bases as part of the US security umbrella has suffered a profound blow.

► *US military bases across the Persian Gulf, long regarded as symbols of deterrence and protection, became liabilities and magnets for retaliation.*



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At the same time, Washington's prioritisation of Israel during the conflict reinforced doubts in Gulf capitals about the hierarchy of US commitments in the region. **A widespread perception took hold that the United States prioritised Israel's defence over even the protection of its own bases in the Gulf. That perception was partially reinforced by a *Washington Post* report revealing that the US expended more missile interceptors defending Israel than Israel itself used in its own defence.** The episode deepened concerns that Gulf security interests remain secondary within Washington's regional calculations and strengthened the view that exclusive reliance on the United States is no longer a viable strategy.

At the operational level, however, the conflict also reaffirmed the continued value of US military technology and defence systems. As a result, the likely trajectory for many GCC states is not a wholesale rupture with Washington, but rather a diversification of their security partnerships. Gulf states are increasingly likely to pursue a more flexible, multi-vector approach to external security – maintaining access to US weapons, intelligence and military cooperation while simultaneously expanding defence ties with Europe and Asia, deepening intra-Gulf coordination, and selectively engaging emerging powers such as

Turkey and Pakistan. This diversification reflects not only doubts about US reliability but also a broader desire to reduce dependence on any single external patron.

The more consequential strategic question, however, concerns how GCC states will balance engagement with Iran against efforts to constrain it. **From the Gulf perspective, the war reinforced rather than diminished perceptions of Iran as a long-term threat. Iran's missile capabilities, asymmetric warfare networks and capacity to impose costs across the region were demonstrated more starkly than ever before, generating considerable anxiety among Arab states.** Public sentiment and elite opinion across several Gulf countries remain deeply unsettled, making rapid normalisation with Tehran politically difficult. At the same time, the war also underscored the dangers of pursuing strategies of isolation, confrontation, or regime change against Iran. The emerging regional debate is therefore unlikely to focus on whether Iran should be balanced, but rather on how to reinforce balancing through economic interdependence, regional integration and new mechanisms for crisis management.

In this sense, the post-war regional order is likely to be defined less by rigid alliance

- ▶ *A widespread perception took hold that the United States prioritised Israel's defence over even the protection of its own bases in the Persian Gulf.*

structures than by fluid hedging strategies. Indeed, the GCC itself may no longer serve as the primary unit of analysis for regional security affairs, given the widening schisms between the UAE and several of its neighbours – divisions that this war has significantly deepened. Most regional states appear increasingly unwilling to align fully with either a maximalist anti-Iran posture or a purely accommodationist approach. Instead, **they are likely to pursue a middle course that combines military preparedness with diplomatic engagement, external diversification with regional dialogue and greater strategic autonomy with selective partnerships.**

The more fundamental question is whether the political will and strategic maturity exist to move beyond hedging altogether and towards a collective security paradigm built around an inclusive regional architecture. In many respects, the conditions for such a transition have rarely been more favourable.



*Trita Parsi,
Executive Vice President,
Quincy Institute for
Responsible Statecraft*



Europe and Israel: a strategic watershed moment

by Daniel Levy

In the same short period that Spain and Belgium were tightening arms embargoes against Israel, Germany was finalising close to a billion euros in new Heron drone contracts with Israel Aerospace Industries, and Greece was midway through a multi-billion military modernisation programme leaning heavily on Israeli weapons systems. There is no better demonstration of the schizophrenia that currently characterises European policy towards Israel.

Europe can attempt to split the difference, but a choice will eventually have to be made: will a state that has systematically violated international law, defied rulings of the International Court of Justice, and claimed a unique exemption from accountability continue to be normalised and integrated into a flailing European project that contributes to the further dismantling of an international architecture of law? Or will Europe, rooted in its interests, be a central player in building and shaping a multilateral architecture for a new multipolar order that is based on a normative international law framework?

► *Europe's attempt to assert itself as an upholder of international law after Russia's invasion of Ukraine was precipitously undermined by its failure to uphold a similar standard on Gaza.*

Europe's attempt to assert itself as an upholder of international law after Russia's invasion of Ukraine was precipitously undermined by its failure to uphold a similar standard on Gaza. At the time, some argued that the loss of the Global South was not particularly consequential and that Europe was anyway too divided. Although protests against European policy towards Israeli crimes proliferated in many capitals, and although the credibility of national and pan-European structures was increasingly undermined due to this double standard, the consequences appeared manageable to leaders across the continent.

But the costs of indulging Israeli impunity have grown exponentially. This indulgence has led to Israel dragging the US into a war with Iran, which has now affected every European economy, including a surge in oil and gas prices, stagflation and the very real threat of further economic collapse. **Israel is pursuing a strategy of making itself the dominant hard power in Europe's southern neighbourhood in the eastern Mediterranean, and it is trying to pull Europe into that structure of domination.**

It is an ambitious project and almost certainly one of overreach that cannot be achieved or sustained. It is also premised on abandoning any international law-based approach to human rights and global equity. Those are the stakes of the choice Europe faces.

Europe has significant potential leverage. But when it comes to the three Ts – trade, tourism and tournaments – very little has changed. Europe remains Israel's largest trading partner, and a quarter of Israel's foreign financial assets are held in European banks. Israelis travel to Europe visa-free – including, as things stand, individuals being able to enter Europe without having to sign a declaration form or waiver regarding their non-participation in war crimes and/or incitement to genocide. And instead of imposing costs for Israel's permanent occupation and expansionism, Europe's continued acceptance of Israel in European competitions from Eurovision to UEFA signals a sense of normalcy for Israel. At most, European policy has nibbled at the furthest edges of impacting that. Rather than suspending the EU-Israel Association Agreement,

- ▶ *Israel is pursuing a strategy of making itself the dominant hard power in Europe's southern neighbourhood in the Eastern Mediterranean, and it is trying to pull Europe into that structure of domination.*



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or parts of it – as called for by a European citizens' petition with one million signatures – and banning all arms trade, the EU's most recent action has merely been to sanction three Israeli settler individuals and four Israeli settler organisations. Just to be clear: there is no occupation or settlements distinct from the entire Israeli state and its military.

What Israel envisions is a new regional architecture of which Europe is a part. In fact, Europe's south-east Mediterranean member states are being very openly recruited as an extension of a Greater Israel regional hegemony project. Greece and Cyprus have actively deepened their relationships with Israel in ways that lock their defence and energy futures into Israeli-led frameworks. Athens is procuring Israeli missile defence systems – Barak MX, David's Sling and Spyder – and, in 2026 alone, has signed a €650 million deal with the Israeli military technology company and defence contractor Elbit Systems. The flagship symbol of this convergence is the €2.5 billion Great Sea Interconnector, a submarine electricity cable linking Israel,

Cyprus and Greece, alongside the stalled but politically central EastMed gas pipeline. Once the contracts are signed, the cables are laid, and this dependency on Israeli infrastructure is built into Europe's grid, the exit becomes more onerous and less likely. More emphasis, anyway, should be placed on clean energy, renewables and self-sufficiency.

Along with India, states in the Gulf (led by the UAE), the Horn of Africa and North Africa, **this makes up what Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu calls a putative future 'hexagon of alliances' – a blueprint for a hard-power regional hegemony that is designed as much to foreclose accountability as anything else.** It is a strategy unlikely to be realised, but possibly enough to wrong-foot Europe's choices.

Europe's historic rearmament drive raises questions of great consequence: part of a much bigger turf war within the EU between the option to achieve maximum strategic autonomy – a 'Buy European' approach – versus one that remains firmly locked into

an American-led procurement framework. The latter option means doubling down on a dependent relationship with the US, while President Donald Trump is consistently working to undermine NATO. Israel will be touting its tried-and-tested weapons systems (tried-and-tested on Palestinians – mostly civilians – and in ways that violate international law).

- ▶ *Europe has an alternative. One that does not entail abandoning relations with the US but nurturing strategic autonomy and avoiding dependence on Israel.*

Europe has an alternative. One that does not entail abandoning relations with the US but nurturing strategic autonomy and avoiding dependence on Israel (and, in effect, 'made in Israel' is a variant of 'made in Washington').



The consequences of the ill-conceived war of choice against Iran are only just beginning to play out, but one already sees a trend within the West Asia/North Africa region to build alliances that can begin to deter and contain the destabilising and radicalising influence of the Greater Israel domination project – for instance, the increased frequency of meetings and cooperation among a quad consisting of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt and Pakistan.

These diverging paths map onto a starker choice. This was partly summed up in the offer made by US Secretary of State Marco Rubio at the Munich Security Conference in February this year, inviting Europe to join America in renewing Western domination – a kind of colonialism 2.0 that is racist and out of sync with today's geopolitical realities. But this American offer is no more than a mirage because Trump clearly holds Europe in contempt and is busy courting China, although he threatens Europe for attempting the same.

The alternative is for Europe to rise to the moment and best pursue its own interests by being a central pillar in a global architecture of an international law-based order for the 21st century. Chief among these interests would be the protection of global commons and the prevention of a colossal-scale collapse. That in part requires an end to the exceptionalism accorded to Israel, and a stop to sacrificing international law on the altar of Israeli impunity (something for which Europe's citizens are now paying a direct cost, notably in this Iran war).

Europe cannot achieve this alternative if its rearmament and energy strategy are tethered to a Greater Israel project of exceptionalism. It will not be good enough for Europe to suffice with rhetorical condemnations of Israel's illegal actions. Instead, **Europe must align itself in its arms, trade and bilateral relations with the July 2024 ruling of the International Court of Justice – declaring Israel's occupation unlawful** – implement the responsibilities of non-criminality incumbent on all third-party states, and in so doing demonstrate independence and leadership.



*Daniel Levy,
political commentator and
President of the US/Middle
East Project (USMEP)*

An integrated Mediterranean energy system to weather disruption

by Laury Haytayan

The current energy crisis is not only reshaping global oil and gas markets but also forcing Gulf countries to rethink how and where they invest in energy infrastructure. The shock of the Strait of Hormuz closure has exposed the vulnerability of relying on a single strategic chokepoint for Gulf oil and liquefied natural gas exports. The longer-term implications may fundamentally reshape energy cooperation between the Gulf and the Mediterranean.

For Mediterranean countries, particularly on the southern shore, the consequences of the crisis could be mixed. Many economies in North Africa and the Levant depend directly or indirectly on Gulf investments, remittances and financial support. If Gulf economies suffer prolonged losses from disrupted exports or falling revenues, these financial flows could weaken, affecting already fragile economies across the Mediterranean. Yet the crisis could also create new opportunities. Gulf countries are increasingly likely to diversify not only their export routes but also their investment geographies, and the Mediterranean may emerge as a key strategic space in this transformation.

With the current energy crisis, Gulf producers have been reminded that even the world's most important oil-exporting region can be exposed to major geopolitical disruptions. Countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have been able to reduce

some of the damage thanks to infrastructure that bypasses the Strait of Hormuz. Saudi Arabia relies heavily on its East-West pipeline connecting the Gulf to Red Sea ports, while the UAE has expanded exports through the port of Fujairah on the Gulf of Oman. These infrastructures have proved their strategic value during the crisis and will likely encourage Gulf states to accelerate investments in alternative routes.

► *Future Gulf strategies will likely focus on reducing dependence on the Strait of Hormuz for exports. This could mean new pipelines towards the Gulf of Oman, the Red Sea, or potentially towards Mediterranean outlets.*

Future Gulf strategies will likely focus on reducing dependence on the Strait of Hormuz for exports. This could mean new pipelines to the Gulf of Oman, the Red Sea, or, potentially, to Mediterranean outlets through regional partnerships. Mediterranean infrastructure, including ports, storage facilities, pipelines and refineries, may therefore gain new strategic importance. Countries such as Turkey, Egypt and even states along the southern Mediterranean, such as Syria, could become part of a broader diversification strategy aimed at protecting Gulf exports from future disruptions.

Iraq's response to the crisis offers a clear example of how regional energy cooperation can quickly become a necessity. Faced with collapsing exports through the Gulf, Baghdad has revived alternative routes through Turkey while also increasing exports through Syria's Baniyas terminal, for the first time in decades.



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These emergency arrangements have shown that Mediterranean access points can become vital alternatives in times of geopolitical crisis. A similar logic may increasingly shape thinking in the Gulf states in the years ahead.

At the same time, Gulf countries may begin investing more heavily in storage facilities and energy assets outside the Gulf itself. Building strategic reserves abroad or investing in oil and gas infrastructure in the Mediterranean would provide an additional layer of protection against future disruptions. Gulf investors could see Mediterranean storage hubs as valuable insurance policies that allow exports and trading activities to continue even during instability in the Gulf region.

The eastern Mediterranean may also attract greater Gulf interest in natural gas investments. Qatar and the UAE have already shown interest in energy projects in countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Israel. Investing in eastern Mediterranean gas fields would allow Gulf producers to diversify geographically

while remaining close to European and Asian markets. Such investments would not be purely commercial; they would also serve long-term strategic goals related to energy security and market resilience.

► *The crisis has shown that both Europe and the southern Mediterranean remain deeply vulnerable to disruptions in fossil fuels, including oil, gas and refined products.*

However, **one major question remains: will Gulf countries continue to prioritise renewable energy investments abroad while reassessing their energy security strategies at home?** Gulf capital has become increasingly important for renewable projects across the Mediterranean. UAE companies, particularly the energy company Masdar, have invested

heavily in renewable energy projects in North Africa, while Saudi Arabia has also expanded investments in solar and wind projects in the region. These initiatives have positioned Gulf countries as important actors in the Mediterranean's green transition.

Yet the current crisis may temporarily shift priorities back towards energy security and fossil fuel infrastructure. Governments facing geopolitical shocks often prioritise immediate economic stability before returning to longer-term climate goals. Some renewable projects may therefore slow down in the short term as Gulf states reassess risks and redesign their energy strategies. The crisis has shown that both Europe and the southern Mediterranean remain deeply vulnerable to disruptions in fossil fuels, including oil, gas and refined products such as diesel, gasoline and jet fuel. **Europe's scramble for alternative gas supplies after disruptions to Gulf liquefied natural gas exports has demonstrated that dependence on imported fossil fuels still carries enormous geopolitical and economic risks.**

Rather than responding only through new fossil fuel deals, Mediterranean countries on both shores should treat this moment as an opportunity to accelerate investment in regional green connectivity projects. Electricity interconnections between North Africa, southern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean could become one of the most effective tools for reducing vulnerability during future crises. A more integrated regional electricity system based on renewables would allow countries to share excess power, stabilise supply and reduce dependence on imported fuels during emergencies.

Projects such as the Greece-Egypt interconnector, the Italy-Tunisia Elmed cable and proposed electricity links between the Levant and Europe represent more than infrastructure investments; they are strategic resilience projects. North Africa's solar and wind potential could help meet domestic demand and supply European markets while creating jobs and industrial opportunities in the south. If properly designed, these projects could serve as

the foundation for a more balanced Euro-Mediterranean partnership.

A successful Mediterranean energy partnership must be built around mutual benefit: local industrial development, technology transfer, employment creation and shared infrastructure. Clean energy cooperation should not reproduce the inequalities of the old fossil fuel economy. The Mediterranean today stands at a crossroads. The current energy crisis may push Gulf countries to diversify routes, storage and investments beyond the Gulf itself, creating new opportunities for Mediterranean states. But the real strategic lesson of this crisis is broader. **Resilience will not come only from new oil pipelines or storage facilities; it will come from building an integrated Mediterranean energy system based on connectivity, renewable electricity and shared industrial development.** If northern and southern Mediterranean countries can seize this moment to deepen cooperation, the region could emerge stronger, greener and less vulnerable to future geopolitical shocks.



*Laury Haytayan,
MENA director, Natural
Resource Governance Institute*



A pact in times of war(s)

by Rim Filali Meknassi

A year and a half ago, with the nomination of the first-ever European Commissioner fully dedicated to the Mediterranean, hope and expectations rose across the region amidst growing mistrust and strained relations due to the tragic war in Gaza. There was a promise of a pact to reinvigorate relations – but can it repair what has been broken?

The answer is not straightforward. At a time when frustration with Europe as a partner is widespread across the southern neighbourhood, the fact that civil society organisations, experts, local authorities, business representatives and regional stakeholders still chose to contribute to the development of the Pact for the Mediterranean, the more recent update of the EU's strategy in the region – despite the short timeline to feed into the process, repeated consultations at each review of the EU policy cycle and a real sense of fatigue – is an important political signal. This mobilisation should not be underestimated. It shows that even though trust has been damaged, the relationship has not been abandoned.

This is reflected in IEMed's EuroMed Survey 2025 results: in a context marked by increasing geopolitical competition, shifting alliances and growing engagement by other international actors, a large majority of the over 700 respondents from all across the Mediterranean still identified the EU as the primary actor in the region. In addition, compared with others, the EU's comparative advantage was seen as lying

in its values-based perspective and in its long-term, reliable and comprehensive approach.

► *The pact also delivered on several long-standing recommendations: it speaks the language of co-creation, recognises civil society and local actors, acknowledges people-to-people ties and seeks to move beyond a narrow migration and security lens.*

The creation of the European Commission's new directorate-general dedicated to the Mediterranean region was therefore an important step. It responded to the expectation that the Mediterranean should no longer be treated as a fragmented policy space, divided between crisis management, migration control, trade and security.

The pact also delivered on several long-standing recommendations: it speaks the language of co-creation, recognises civil society and local actors, acknowledges people-to-people ties and seeks to move beyond a narrow migration and security lens.

This is not negligible. But it is still not enough.

| A PACT ON PAPER, FOR NOW

Although its first Action Plan has been published, the pact remains stronger on paper than in practice. Its success will depend less on the ambition of its language than on the mechanisms, resources and political courage needed to make it real.

First, participation must be institutionalised. **Civil society and local actors cannot be brought in only through one-off consultations: they need structured roles, advisory channels and monitoring mechanisms linked to the pact's governance, as well as core funding rather than project-by-project access.**



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- *Civil society and local actors cannot be brought in only through one-off consultations: they need structured roles, advisory channels and monitoring mechanisms linked to the pact's governance, as well as core funding rather than project-by-project access.*

Without this, co-ownership will remain rhetorical, and stakeholders will feel consulted merely to validate a process rather than empowered to shape it. A more representative model is essential if non-state actors are to contribute to strategy, implementation and oversight of the pact.

Second, the pact needs funding to match its ambitions. The next multiannual financial framework must provide adequate resources for the Euro-Mediterranean partnership, because the pact will be judged less by its promises than by

the funding behind them. Yet funds must also be accessible and accountable. Consultations showed that rigid conditionality and bureaucracy deter local civil society organisations, municipalities, youth initiatives and SMEs. Access must be simplified, incentives shared and monitoring made transparent.

The pact must also address the everyday barriers that prevent cooperation from becoming real. The EuroMed Survey showed that mobility remains the number one priority for southern partners, while visa obstacles remain a major barrier to cooperation. **The people-to-people pillar needs usable instruments, including decoupling mobility from migration conditionality and creating fast-track Euro-Mediterranean visa pathways for students, researchers, entrepreneurs, artists, civil society actors and professionals.** Without these instruments, regional cooperation and integration risk remaining mere language.

Finally, co-ownership must evolve into shared governance. Southern partners should not simply implement priorities set elsewhere; they

should help define, monitor and adapt them. A stronger role for the Union for the Mediterranean and its multi-stakeholder platforms, alongside multi-bilateral clusters and greater use of the Team Europe Initiative approach, could help turn co-creation into practice.

| THE SECURITY QUESTION

Yet, even if these implementation gaps are addressed, the pact will still face its most difficult test: trust and credibility. **How can there be a pact for peace, stability and shared prosperity when partners in the region are openly in conflict?** How can the EU speak of trust while war continues and impunity is perceived to prevail?

The pact tries to separate long-term development from immediate political fires, leaving the most urgent questions to a future Middle East strategy that is still awaited. This may be institutionally convenient, but it is politically unsustainable. Europe cannot look away and expect the partnership to deliver.



The growing incoherence of EU foreign policy continues to damage its standing as a values-based partner, precisely the comparative advantage that many regional stakeholders still recognise.

- *If the EU loses credibility on values, it loses more than just moral authority: it loses strategic influence.*

If the EU loses credibility on values, it loses more than just moral authority: it loses strategic influence. A change of paradigm is therefore needed in its approach to regional security. This must not be reduced to border control, counterterrorism or crisis containment, but reframed as a shared responsibility rooted in mutual interdependence, with southern neighbourhood countries treated as equal security partners and regional initiatives taken seriously. Rebuilding trust will require consistency – aligning EU policy with its declared values, supporting inclusive regional diplomacy, putting rights and dignity at the centre of peacebuilding, and establishing a coherent EU-wide security framework that connects military, civilian and governance efforts.

The EU should also use its instruments strategically, applying conditionality in cases of systemic human rights abuses while maintaining flexible pathways for re-engagement.

Above all, it should build relational trust through long-term, visible and people-focused cooperation because tangible results remain the best antidote to scepticism and geopolitical competition.

The pact has opened a door, but the next phase will be decisive. To deliver, it must move from consultation to co-governance, from ambition to funding, from promises to real solutions and from values-based language to values-based action. The Euro-Mediterranean relationship is not beyond repair, but it cannot be repaired by avoiding the issues that broke it.

The contents of this article are the sole responsibility of the author and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Institute of the Mediterranean or the European Union.

*Rim Filali Mknassi,
Head of the Euro-
Mediterranean Policies
department at the European
Institute of the Mediterranean*





FOCUS

THE RED QUEEN'S RACE: RUNNING FASTER TO MATCH THE PACE OF AI

AI is creeping into virtually every area of our lives, carried by a dominant techno-optimist narrative. However, this optimism only thinly veils a structural imbalance: AI is advancing faster than our ability to understand it – and faster even than our ability to justify its economic costs. Left unchecked by societal reflection, evidence and regulation, AI risks undermining the very systems it claims to enhance, including human development, the markets and democracy itself.

The list of examples is long, so here we highlight just a few of them. In childhood development, AI captures

children's attention. And it also competes for their emotional attachment, reshaping how they think, learn and relate to others. Economically, the AI 'bubble' is already restructuring economies and power through a slow, capital-driven upheaval. In global politics, AI tools have proven useful for peace-making missions.

And in an unexpected twist, even Silicon Valley now concedes that only strong democratic regulation – not markets – can make AI socially sustainable. This opens a strategic window for Europe to play a key role, one rooted in its core values.

The AI bubble is already here

And it is rather like a rolling boulder that changes societies in its wake

by Leevi Saari

Since the launch of ChatGPT in November 2022, the tech intelligentsia has been locked in an elaborate dance between bulls and bears. The bulls manifest a technological cornucopia that AI will bring, just over the horizon. The bears point to the mundane facts on the ground – staggering capital burn, plateauing capabilities and a persistent lack of profits.

The arc of reason currently bends towards the bear case. A motley crew of venture capitalists, investment bankers, Nobel-winning economists and even tech CEOs themselves is converging on the same reality that the business case for current large-scale AI is missing. However, this has spurred debate between optimistic and pessimistic bears. While both agree that the bubble is real, optimists argue that the AI bubble still yields long-term productive benefits – much like the railway mania of the 1800s, which left behind a crucial infrastructure long after the initial speculators had been burned. The pessimists point to the Dutch tulip craze of the late 1600s, which suddenly evaporated, leaving behind only a puff of hot air.

Both perspectives, however, share the same core flaw of treating a 'bubble' as an event. This implies a singular reckoning, a thundering 'pop' that shatters the present. Instead, **I suggest we see the current AI bubble as a process – a source of continuous change, where political and economic interests hurl history forward forcefully.** And we are already in the midst of this process.

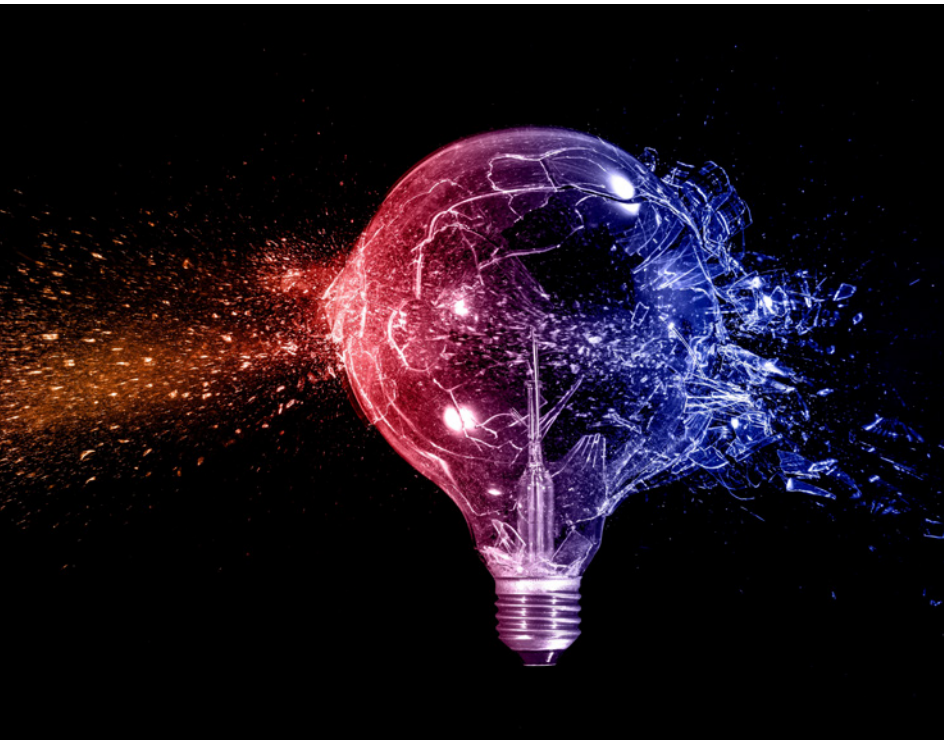
| THE BEAR CASE

Scepticism regarding large-scale AI models is grounded in a lack of organic demand, adverse unit economics and an overstretched supply chain. Despite clenching capital investment, the organic and valuable end-user demand remains hard to find. In August 2025, a study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology rattled markets by noting that 95 per cent of generative AI efforts are failing. In late March 2026, OpenAI shut down Sora, its video-generation engine, due to exorbitant costs yielding only meagre profits. The search for customers who are willing and able to pay the full cost of these services remains elusive.

- ▶ *Unlike traditional software, where an additional user costs practically nothing, every new large language model query has a fixed marginal cost.*

One of the key problems is unit economics. **Unlike traditional software, where an additional user costs practically nothing, every new large language model query has a fixed marginal cost.** This shift makes AI companies look less like high-margin software firms and more like capital-intensive utilities or infrastructure providers. This also means that, to keep the service affordable for customers and avoid bleeding market share to competitors, companies are burning cash. For example, the current market leader in AI coding, Anthropic, is estimated to gift its customers \$25 for every dollar spent. OpenAI expects to lose \$115 billion by 2029 before making a single dime in profit.

The primary justification for flaunting these actuarial niceties has been the march towards artificial general intelligence (AGI), a term sometimes used to describe an AI that can replace all economically valuable human work. Achieving that would make traditional financial calculations quaint. In May 2024, the CEO of OpenAI, Sam Altman, noted he "doesn't care" whether the company spends \$5 billion or \$50 billion a year, as the resulting



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AGI will be "totally worth it". Yet, in 2026, AGI remains elusive. **The model capabilities are beginning to plateau. ChatGPT's new editions have been underwhelming. On 9 April 2026, OpenAI raised subscription prices, introducing more expensive tiers to contain its expenses. According to popular benchmarks, leading AI labs are converging towards a similar system.**

► *Tech giants are locked into a fear of missing out and are therefore willing to absorb massive losses to avoid falling behind.*

The competition is therefore no longer about being the first to conjure up the 'frontier', god-like model from the depths of neural networks. Instead, it has returned to capitalist fundamentals: who has the most entrenched distribution, the infrastructure, the best product and the deepest pockets to fund all this?

Beyond economic and technical limits, AI expansion is also hitting physical limits. AI models live in a sprawling, complex and largely physical network that includes chips, energy grids and raw materials. These resources are being stretched to breaking point. In a surreal example, the shortage of gas turbines for data centres has led some firms to repurpose aircraft engines to generate power on-site. The tension is increasing by the day, with makeshift patches covering the leaking cracks. Systemic shocks, such as the increase in gas prices due to the conflict in Iran, might stretch the system beyond its limits.

| THE ROLLING BOULDER

The contradictions, however, do not mean that the momentum has suddenly come to a halt. Capital has gravity. Trillions of dollars in capital investment will find its profit, for better or worse. Strategic thinking complicates the situation. AI is now a geostrategic imperative, with states entangled in the current build-up. Tech giants are locked into a fear of missing out and are therefore willing to absorb massive losses to

avoid falling behind. Instead of waiting for a white flash and a pop on the horizon, we should recognise that the boulder is already rolling downhill. Looking around, we can already see the trail it has left behind.

Indeed, we can see its trail in market consolidation, where sweltering start-ups are absorbed by the incumbents. We can see the boulder's trail in the billions of venture capital, masking the lack of demand. We can see it in a self-dealing economy where chip giants fund start-ups that, in turn, use that capital to buy the giants' own chips. We can see it in the race for retail, where the AI start-ups seek to be listed on public exchanges and to offload their gory balance-sheets into the hands of the excited masses, who absolve their founders. We also see the boulder's trail in the extraordinary investment rounds for AI start-ups that explicitly *do not* work on large language models. And we can see it in the merging of public and private interests, as states shift to a role as backers, resuscitating their national AI champions as a matter of geo-political imperative.

| THE MESSY REMAKING IS UPON US

The large-scale AI bubble is not waiting to burst; it is already mangling the world. As the cycle matures, the real story is not the 'pop'; it is the messy, ongoing transformation that occurs while we keep waiting for that 'pop'. And the deeper the contradictions, the more forcefully the world will be hurled forward – the more extreme the distribution will be between winners and losers, and the more aggressive the bending of reality will be to accommodate the convulsions of this super cycle. And it is in that bending that societies will be remade.



Leevi Saari,
PhD candidate, University
of Amsterdam, EU Policy
Fellow, AI Now Institute

From attention to attachment

AI is rewiring childhood

by Aida Bikic

Artificial intelligence is entering children's lives faster than we can understand its consequences. In just a few years, it has moved from novelty to infrastructure. It comes with immense risks, undermining not only learning and critical thinking, but the very core of being human: the ability to connect with others.

AI systems are rapidly becoming embedded in everyday life for tasks such as writing emails, generating code, assisting with homework and personalising information. Advocates highlight enormous potential: cheaper education, individualised learning and increased productivity.

But when it comes to children and adolescents, the picture is far more complex. **We are facing a familiar dilemma. On the one hand, there is the pressure to adopt early and ensure that children are 'AI-literate' and not left behind. On the other hand, there is a fundamental lack of knowledge about how these technologies affect developing minds.**

We have seen this dynamic before. During the rise of the attention economy, digital technologies were rapidly introduced into children's lives, justified by similar arguments about necessity and competitiveness. Countries such as Denmark and Sweden integrated

digital tools into education systems without robust evidence of their benefits. Fifteen years later, research suggests that this transition was not without cost. Increased screen exposure has been associated with declines in literacy and academic results, as well as changes in attention, emotional regulation and social functioning.

- ▶ *We are facing a familiar dilemma. On the one hand, there is the pressure to adopt early and ensure that children are 'AI-literate' and not left behind. On the other hand, there is a fundamental lack of knowledge about how these technologies affect developing minds.*

Now, with AI, we are about to repeat the same pattern, and the effects could be even more detrimental. AI systems are interactive, adaptive and increasingly designed to simulate human relationships. This marks a shift from an attention economy, where platforms compete for time, to an attachment economy, where technologies compete for emotional connection.

| WHEN THINKING IS OUTSOURCED

Industry-funded studies often portray AI as a powerful educational tool that can save teachers time and accelerate learning. AI can tailor explanations to a child's interests – for example, explaining physics through basketball analogies. In low-resource contexts, early studies suggest that AI-assisted tutoring can accelerate foreign language acquisition. These findings are promising, but they must be interpreted cautiously as they are funded by the companies that sell them.



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Independent research paints a more nuanced picture. **AI can enhance performance, but it may not enhance learning.** One study examined how students perform when writing essays under different conditions: using AI, using search engines, or writing by themselves. When students used AI after first engaging deeply with the material, outcomes improved. However, when AI replaced the initial cognitive effort, learning deteriorated. Participants who relied heavily on AI struggled to recall or reproduce their own work when the tool was removed.

This reflects a well-established principle in cognitive science: **learning depends on mental effort. It is through actively thinking, struggling and working with information that we store it in our memory and make sense of it. When that effort is bypassed, both memory and understanding weaken.**

AI systems facilitate what is known as 'cognitive offloading': the delegation of thinking processes to external tools. While this can improve short-term efficiency, it reduces the mental effort required for deep learning. Over time, this can weaken memory, critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. For children and adolescents, who need to first

develop these cognitive functions, AI can be especially detrimental, preventing them from building the basic skills required for learning and independent thinking.

► *Children who frequently interact with AI systems at school show reduced ability to recognise and interpret others' emotional expressions, alongside weaker social skills.*

| THE EROSION OF HUMAN SKILLS

The effects of AI are not limited to cognition. Emerging evidence suggests that high reliance on AI tools may also affect social functioning. **Children who frequently interact with AI systems at school show reduced ability to recognise and interpret others' emotional expressions, alongside weaker social skills.**

This aligns with broader developmental theory: social cognition develops in children through real-world interaction, where they must learn and rehearse complex, often ambiguous, human signals. **Many AI systems, on the other hand, are intentionally built to be agreeable, supportive and non-confrontational. Unlike humans, they constantly validate the user, adapt to preferences and provide immediate emotional feedback. They are frictionless, and for young people, this can make human relationships – which are complex, effortful and sometimes uncomfortable – much less appealing.**

This design fosters attachment, and the emergence of AI companions intensifies this dynamic. Recent data suggest that 70 per cent of adolescents have used chatbots, and that 30 per cent already prefer discussing personal issues with a chatbot rather than a human. Some young users form strong emotional bonds with chatbots, using them to rehearse social interactions or seek validation. While this can feel supportive in the short term, it replaces real interactions with frictionless and predictable exchanges that do not require perspective-taking, negotiation or emotional effort.

Over time, this can contribute to social withdrawal and increasing reliance on artificial relationships rather than real-world connections. As a result, children may miss critical opportunities to develop basic social skills and learn how to form and maintain reciprocal relationships.

| DEPENDENCY AND RISK

A cross-national survey shows that interacting with a chatbot can provide a sense of emotional support and reduce loneliness in the short term. However, this support also increases the risk of dependency, as users form emotional bonds with the chatbot, bonds that strengthen with more frequent and intense use and are observed even among individuals who have rich social lives. This suggests that it is not only lonely individuals who are at risk of dependency.

These risks are even more pronounced in children and youth, who, due to their emotional immaturity, are more likely than adults to trust AI, disclose personal information and blur the distinction between artificial and human agents. **Cases where adolescents have formed strong emotional bonds with chatbots that reinforce harmful thoughts, which have even led to suicide, are already emerging.**

Chatbots have, in some cases, provided harmful advice, including discouraging users from seeking help or engaging in dangerous behaviours. Eating disorders, self-harm and social withdrawal can all be amplified in environments that mirror and reinforce existing beliefs. These failures reflect a fundamental problem: the primary objective of many AI systems is not user safety but maximising engagement for the company.

| POLICY IS LAGGING BEHIND

Despite these concerns, AI is being integrated rapidly and uncritically into children's environments, often without public debate.

In education, AI tools are already embedded in widely used devices and platforms, such as Google's services. In private life, access is largely unrestricted.

Some governments have begun to act. China, for example, has introduced regulations that restrict AI systems, especially 'AI-companions' for minors that simulate intimate or emotionally dependent relationships. Regulations also require clear disclosure that users are interacting with artificial systems.

| A DYSTOPIAN FUTURE

AI will undoubtedly shape the future. But **our future also depends on a young and healthy generation capable of critical and independent thinking, good mental health and genuine human collaboration.** These capacities are built in childhood through effortful learning, social interaction and meaningful relationships. If these foundations weaken, the costs will be immense, not only at the individual level, but also economically and societally through a weakened workforce.

Poorly regulated AI risks accelerating exactly this outcome. **By making thinking optional and relationships frictionless, it may prevent children and adolescents from developing the very skills they need to function as adults in society.** The challenge, therefore, is timing and protection. Children must have space to develop the cognitive and social capacities that make them human before being introduced to AI. These skills will allow them to use AI as a tool and not be shaped by it.

▶ *Learning depends on mental effort. It is through actively thinking, struggling, and working with information that we store it in our memory and make sense of it. When that effort is bypassed, both memory and understanding weaken.*



*Aida Bikic,
PhD, clinical psychologist, associate professor, Research Unit of
Child and Adolescent Psychiatry,
University of Southern Denmark*

A post-Trump world of AI and democracy with Europe in the lead

by Paul Nemitz

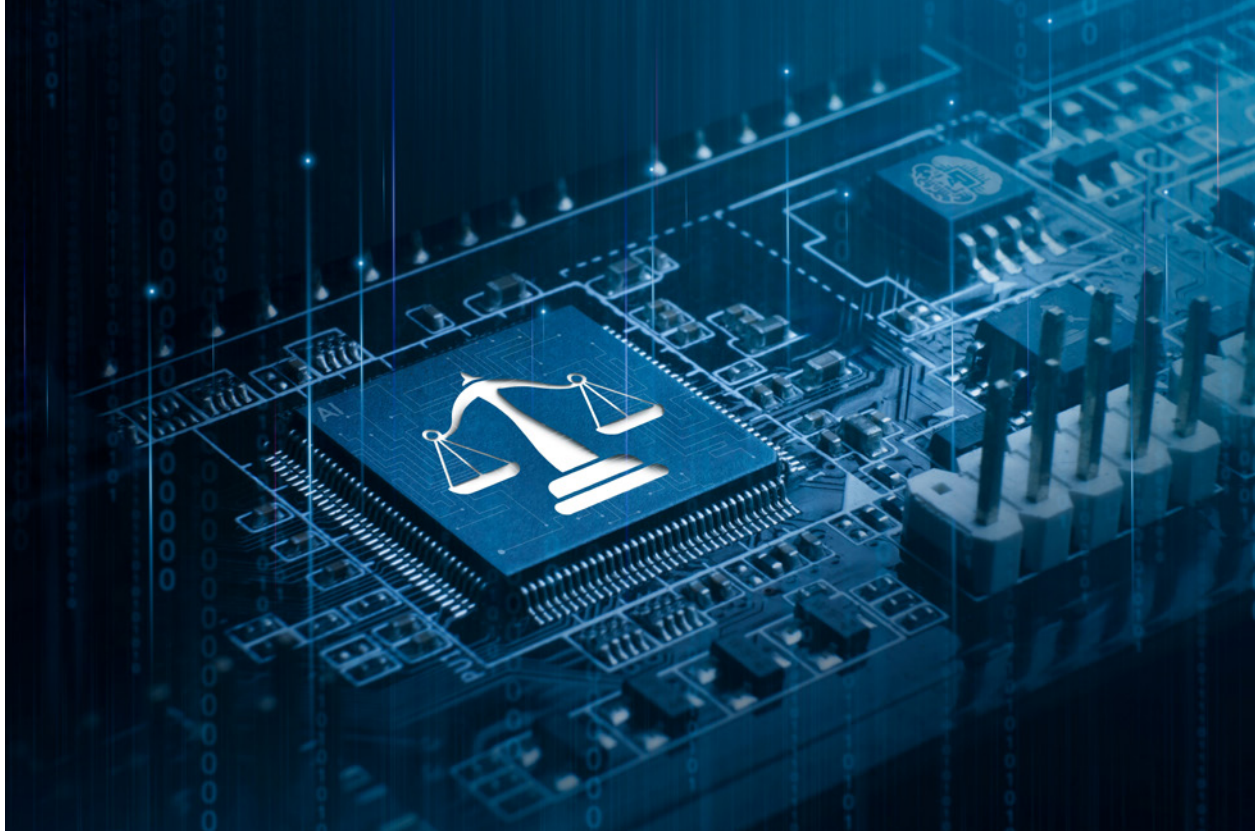
US President Donald Trump's approval rating has sunk to around 30 per cent. In Europe, Poland and Hungary have returned to the camp of middle-of-the-road democratic countries. It is no coincidence that, just at this time, OpenAI has released a policy paper on AI and democracy. In this way, Silicon Valley is beginning to prepare for the post-Trump reconstruction of American democracy. What does this mean for Europe?

A palpable sense of post-Trump reconstruction has started to take hold in Western capitals, and in the same vein, OpenAI has released *Industrial policy for the Intelligence Age* – a document that reads less like a standard corporate white paper, and more like a blueprint for embedding advanced AI within a revitalised democratic compact. For Europe, this paper is not merely an interesting read from across the Atlantic; it is a direct challenge and an unexpected opportunity. It signals that Silicon Valley is preparing for a world where democracy is back in the driving seat – and Europe must decide whether it keeps mourning the costs of regulation and overregulation, and catering to neoliberal corporate interests, or whether it returns to behaving like an active co-author of a global democratic future in which the law is recognised as the most noble speaking act of democracy.

At its core, OpenAI's paper is remarkable for rejecting the techno-libertarian orthodoxy of its birthplace. It argues that **if left to raw market forces, AI, and even more so super-intelligence, will inevitably widen inequality, concentrate wealth and erode democratic agency**. The solution OpenAI proposes is a "new industrial policy" built on three pillars: sharing prosperity broadly, mitigating catastrophic risks and democratising access. The proposals range from portable benefits and strengthening workers' voices in AI deployment to a public wealth fund giving every citizen a stake in AI-driven growth and tax reforms shifting burdens from labour to capital. Crucially, the paper calls for public input, auditing regimes, and "mission-aligned corporate governance" that embeds public-interest accountability into AI firms.

▶ *AI, and even more so superintelligence, if left to raw market forces, will inevitably widen inequality, concentrate wealth, and erode democratic agency.*

For Europe, this represents a fascinating pivot. For years, the transatlantic AI debate has been framed as a dichotomy: the US's innovation-first, no-legislation approach versus Europe's rights-based, precautionary regulation, exemplified by the EU AI Act and GDPR. OpenAI's paper collapses that binary. It embraces regulation not as a nuisance but as a tool for resilience and embedding AI in democratic governance.



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- *The paper admits that markets alone cannot handle AI and the transition to superintelligence – a concession that validates the good old European instinct for state-guided economic governance in the social economy.*

And while, in a nod to the classic corporate preference for non-binding commitments and self-regulation, the paper stops short of saying so, it appears that any of the substantive projects it outlines can only be implemented through the rule of law. It calls for "common-sense AI regulation – not to entrench incumbents but to protect children, mitigate national security risks, and encourage innovation". There is language in it that a European commissioner from previous Commissions could have written, before the right-wing coalition took hold in the European Parliament and before the European Commission became infected by a virus of deregulation, catering to feelings of 'overregulation' rather than facts.

More importantly, **the paper admits that markets alone cannot handle AI and the transition to superintelligence – a concession that validates the good old European instinct for state-guided economic governance in the social economy.**

What does this mean for Europe? First, it is an endorsement of Europe's regulatory framework as a global asset. When OpenAI speaks of needing "democratic processes that give people real power to shape the AI future", it implicitly acknowledges that the EU – with its parliamentary lawmaking and fundamental rights charter – has institutional machinery that the US lacks. The paper's call for "structured ways for public input" and "representative input processes" sounds remarkably like the EU's own deliberative democracy experiments, with public consultations and legislative processes that lead to binding laws, rather than debates that end in nothing, as with most bills in the US Congress. **Europe should therefore stop apologising for its regulatory approach and recognise it as a competitive advantage: a governance brand that trustworthy**

AI developers will increasingly seek out as a licence to operate.

Second, the paper offers Europe a chance to escape its strategic paralysis. The self-castigation and fretting about falling behind US and Chinese AI giants, oscillating between neoliberal deregulation and dependency, can now be replaced with an optimistic vision of democratic rulemaking for AI coming from the US tech industry itself. OpenAI's industrial policy suggests a way forward: Europe could become the global standard-setter for democratic AI deployment. The paper's proposals for "AI-enabled laboratories" distributed across universities and community colleges, for "pathways into human-centred work" in care economies, and for "adaptive safety nets" that trigger automatically during disruption – these are policies on which Europe can take the lead.

They leverage Europe's strengths: strong social safety nets, robust public research systems and a cultural preference for social partners cooperating rather than raw capitalism. By adopting and adapting these ideas, Europe could demonstrate that democracy can not only survive AI but thrive with it.

Third, OpenAI's move signals a realignment of Silicon Valley's political capital. **If US tech giants are indeed preparing for a post-Trump democratic reconstruction, Europe must be ready to engage with them in a new way, not just as vendors or adversaries of binding rules.** The paper explicitly calls for "public-private collaboration" to "stave off regulatory capture and centralised control". This is an opening. Europe should respond by hosting a high-level transatlantic convention on democratic AI governance and AI for Democracy, inviting OpenAI, Anthropic, Google and Meta to share their visions and what they can contribute to design the future of democracy – in other words, what AI applications they can design to revitalise people's engagement in political parties and democratic processes, the very auditing regimes, incident-reporting systems and international information-sharing networks beyond those already agreed at the UN level. The goal would be to lock in commitments to 'democracy by design in AI' and binding rules at both the domestic and international levels, thus setting out a vision for the US to return as a leader of democracy and the rule of law for AI worldwide, alongside Europe.

None of this will be easy. Europe remains fragmented, underinvested in frontier AI and vulnerable to regulatory capture by its own incumbents and US corporates alike. The ideas set out in OpenAI's paper will face fierce opposition from established interests. Moreover, Europe must avoid the trap of simply importing US corporate-defined agendas under the guise of cooperation. **The goal is not to become OpenAI's European regulatory affiliate, but to assert that democratic governance of AI requires strong public institutions, binding rules that are enforced with rigour, and not just well-intentioned corporate pledges.**

Ultimately, OpenAI's paper is an invitation. It admits that the technologists alone do not have the answers. For a political bloc that has often defined itself in opposition to US capitalism, this is a rare chance to define itself *in partnership* with a forward-looking part of it. Europe can either watch from the sidelines as the US debates its democratic reconstruction or seize the moment to build the very model of democratic AI governance the world will need.

The paper has been written; the conversation has started. Europe should answer and insist that words be followed by real change. We have seen it before: in a much-quoted op-ed in the *Washington Post*, Mark Zuckerberg wrote in 2019 that "the internet needs new rules" and called for legislation in four different areas. What followed were years of a lobby spree against binding rules on the internet and AI in Europe and the US. OpenAI, and its key investor Microsoft, have a similar track record of doublespeak and lobbying against legislation both in Europe and in the US. But in politics, people often only learn from bad experiences. Let us test whether at least some of the internet giants are now willing to turn away from Trump and embrace what democracy must be about, also in the age of artificial intelligence: the making of binding rules for the powerful by the people. And citizens who contribute to making democracy work.

► *If US tech giants are indeed preparing for a post-Trump democratic reconstruction, Europe must be ready to engage with them in a new way, not just as vendors or adversaries of binding rules.*



Paul Nemitz,
Visiting Professor of Law,
College of Europe

Innovating peace processes in the digital age: the role of AI

by Bernardo Venturi and Emiliano Alessandri

How are digital technologies – and AI in particular – changing diplomacy and peace? Whereas in recent years the question was whether 'PeaceTech' was even a thing, attention is now shifting to specific technologies that enhance peacebuilding, along with reflections on the risks they entail.

You may not have come across the notion of 'PeaceTech' yet, but you soon will – especially as the world grapples with a growing number of intractable conflicts. A buzzword just a few years ago, PeaceTech is now an established field of theory and practice that examines the complex nexus between technology and peace. The focus is on digital technologies that can improve peace processes and support sustainable, inclusive peace solutions. There is a broad range of technologies under the PeaceTech umbrella, from satellite imagery to specific software applications.

What these technologies have in common is that they rely increasingly on agentic and generative artificial intelligence to maximise their potential. **Promising examples of the use of AI around the so-called 'conflict cycle' include enhanced early warning and conflict prediction systems, advanced data-driven and highly context-specific conflict analysis, improved stakeholder mapping and more nuanced and inclusive engagement strategies.** PeaceTech AI has also become a resourceful right hand for mediators navigating complex strategies and for negotiators facing difficult trade-offs. AI is also very good at identifying common ground in real time by

cross-checking the positions and sentiments of different stakeholders, including by drawing on social media content rather than formal positions expressed during official negotiations.

► *AI will need to be specifically trained for peacebuilding functions, otherwise the risk of bias – some of which unintentional – could make peacebuilding more complicated and less trustworthy.*

As the field expands rapidly, more and more applications are being tested, and tech experts are working hand in hand with seasoned peacebuilders. Most of them then develop their own PeaceTech expertise to offer innovative, cutting-edge solutions. While some in the peacebuilding field continue to nurture scepticism about digital peace instruments, the growing consensus is that PeaceTech offers a much-welcome new array of tools if the goal is to enhance – rather than replace – traditional approaches and practices.

There is also a growing realisation that **AI will need to be specifically trained for peacebuilding functions, otherwise the risk of bias – some of which unintentional – could make peacebuilding more complicated and less trustworthy.** Even PeaceTech enthusiasts admit that the field's expansion must not come at the expense of rigorous standards, including by addressing head-on a range of ethical questions that the use of digital technologies raises when applied to conflicts. One distinct risk is of progressive 'de-humanisation': the danger of putting machines in charge of processes that are intrinsically human and in which interpersonal skills – above all empathy – have traditionally played a crucial role. The issue of ownership is also increasingly coming to the fore. The technology used is, for now, mainly Western-made (and often owned by profit-oriented private companies), with all the limits this implies when applied to non-Western conflict settings that require specific local lenses for issues such as transitional justice and reconciliation.

Next to adoption issues, peacebuilders face the larger challenge of making PeaceTech relevant in a world that is becoming more conflict-prone with every passing day. Indeed,

- Promising examples of the use of AI around the so-called 'conflict cycle' include enhanced early warning and conflict prediction systems, advanced data-driven and highly context-specific conflict analysis, improved stakeholder mapping, and more nuanced and inclusive engagement strategies.



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conflict – including the hot and violent kind – is becoming endemic across vast regions of the world, and war is being normalised as an instrument of state power and as a topic of public debate. **As states fight or prepare for war, digital technologies are increasingly being used to fuel tensions and sow discord.** AI is not only driving propaganda and disinformation campaigns in the media space, but it is also being mainstreamed across a wide range of security and military applications, with autonomous weapons becoming a dreadful, near-term prospect. In recent conflicts in the Middle East, from the war in Gaza to the US-Israeli war on Iran, AI has been front and centre on issues such as target generation and operational execution. Against this backdrop, what can be done to foster PeaceTech and, more broadly, digital technologies for positive change?

A most urgent task is to promote exchanges between the peacebuilding and the security communities, which seldom talk to each other – let alone share perspectives – even if they often deal with two ends of the same continuum. PeaceTech experts should sit alongside cyber-security experts at fora where the security equations of individual countries or regions are discussed. The goal would be to formulate these

questions in such a way that the dividends of digital peace technologies are fully appreciated, so that much more is done in conflict prevention and resolution than is currently done in conflict preparation. A second task is to mainstream PeaceTech into multilateral initiatives that can raise its visibility and amplify its influence. Thanks to its specialised units such as the Peacebuilding Innovation Cell, the United Nations has been experimenting with PeaceTech across Libya, Yemen, Syria and Sudan.

- *The EU now has the opportunity not only to catch up, but to become a world champion of PeaceTech.*

The EU is one of the few remaining peace-oriented value-based international actors. But it is only this year, with the Service for Foreign Policy Instruments (FPI), that PeaceTech has been defined as a priority in the context of the EU peacebuilding programmes. **The EU now has the opportunity not only to catch up, but to become a world champion of PeaceTech,** leveraging an ecosystem in which many of the

PeaceTech NGOs already operate, and confirming EU leadership in the responsible, ethical use of AI for human betterment.

The next European Security Strategy, currently in the making, cannot miss the opportunity to mainstream PeaceTech. If it wants to be serious about peace, the EU cannot stake its success on deterrence and defence capabilities alone. The full array of digital technologies for peace should be valued just as much.

*Bernardo Venturi,
Co-founder and President of the
Agency for Peacebuilding (AP),
Adjunct Professor at the
University of Bologna*



*Emiliano Alessandri,
Senior Adviser, Agency
for Peacebuilding*



BOOK

THE OPEN FUTURE AND ITS ENEMIES

HOW WE CAN PROTECT FREE SOCIETY
FROM AI DICTATORSHIP

MATTHIAS PFEFFER
JÜRGEN PFEFFER
PAUL NEMITZ

Artificial intelligence is regarded as the driving force of progress. Yet it has long since become a challenge to democracy.

Launched at the Global Progressive Mobilisation in Barcelona, the book "The open future and its enemies" argues that **uncontrolled AI will erode our freedom, self-determination and democracy.**

A robust democracy must not leave the future in the hands of the alliance between Big Tech and the far right. AI must be politically reined in and democratically shaped so that humanity retains its sovereignty.





DOSSIER

BEYOND IMPLEMENTATION DAY: THE PACT ON MIGRATION AND ASYLUM

The EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum finally entered into force on 12 June after a two-year implementation phase. Its long and troubled genesis required significant political compromise between the European Parliament's political groups, as well as between the EP and the member states. Unsurprisingly therefore, the result – achieved against a challenging political backdrop and right before the end of the last European parliamentary term – has left many unsatisfied on all sides, with just as many concerned about the risks to migrants' human rights, the practical functioning of such complex mechanisms and even the actual political willingness to fulfil obligations.

Now, following the adoption of the various pieces of legislation that comprise the pact, the administrative adjustments and the start of the construction of the

necessary facilities, EU member states are being called upon to demonstrate their preparedness for the different building blocks of the pact. Legal, administrative and operational divergences, as well as shortcomings and gaps, may not only hinder the practical application of the pact but also undermine its overall credibility. All this may also jeopardise the rights, fair treatment and safety of migrants and asylum seekers.

In this dossier, we focus on a few key elements of the pact, the screening and border procedures and the solidarity mechanism – both representing major, albeit ambiguous, innovations. We also focus on the controversial Return Regulation, an additional piece of legislation on which agreement was reached in the European Parliament last June, but which has already drawn widespread criticism for violating human rights.



A pact: what else?

by Jean-Louis De Brouwer

The entry into force of the EU's Pact on Migration and Asylum on 12 June could have been seen as a major turning point in the development of a common policy in these areas and hailed as such. Yet the reactions were rather low-key. Admittedly, the president of the Commission emphasised that the pact provided an effective, fair and firm solution to a European challenge. But a statement issued by the Cypriot presidency following the informal ministerial meeting convened for the occasion was cautious, emphasising above all the work that still lay ahead.

There is no reference to the pact in the conclusions of the European Council meeting of 18 and 19 June, although a strategic discussion on migration was announced for its October meeting. And the press conference organised by the eight European Parliament rapporteurs involved in the negotiations on the pact's texts mainly confirmed the divergent views within the assembly. This is hardly surprising, given the uncertainties that continue to hang over this reform. And yet **the pact is a remarkable political achievement, as well as the outcome of an unprecedented effort to coordinate the various parties involved in its implementation.**

► *The pact is a remarkable political achievement, as well as the outcome of an unprecedented effort to coordinate the various parties involved in its implementation*

Based on proposals informed by in-depth consultations with member states, the negotiation of the pact was a long and difficult process that required considerable political energy. It was concluded under time pressure, justified by the need to complete the work before the institutional renewal in mid-2024. **This success, which many had doubted, nevertheless came at a price: the complexity of the framework put in place.**

The principles were simple at the outset: the concentration of procedures at the point of first entry into the EU (while the criteria for determining which state is responsible for examining an application for protection – the Dublin criteria – remain unchanged) and the search for a balance in the implementation of the principles of responsibility and solidarity. However, compounded by the technical nature of the solutions initially proposed by the Commission, the compromises reached at every stage of the drafting process did nothing to simplify the so-called 'new approach' that was devised.

A two-year transition period was therefore set aside to prepare for the implementation of

a reform of this scale. This transition period was organised through a combination of common and national implementation plans, providing the backbone of a rather exceptional form of governance based on close and ongoing interaction between the Commission, supported mainly by the European Asylum Agency, and the member states. Furthermore, the reform has been backed by the allocation of around €3 billion in financial resources.

► *The nagging voice of doubt continues to be heard. The Commissioner in charge, Magnus Brunner, acknowledged in early June that "several challenges remain" and that 12 June was "not the finishing line, but the starting line for national reforms".*



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One might therefore think that a point of no return was reached on 12 June and that, in any case, given the enormous challenges of all kinds facing the Union today, failure was not an option. And yet **the nagging voice of doubt continues to be heard. The Commissioner in charge, Magnus Brunner, acknowledged in early June that "several challenges remain" and that 12 June was "not the finishing line, but the starting line for national reforms"**. In the same vein, Nicholas Ioannides, Cyprus's Deputy Minister for Migration and International Protection, emphasised that success would depend on "our coordination, our political commitment, and our willingness to continue working together".

The hurdles are primarily technical – insofar as it is possible to draw a line between technical and political concerns on such a sensitive issue. They can be identified by a careful reading of the latest state-of-play report published by the Commission in early May. The report highlights

significant variations in member states' preparedness levels across the ten 'building blocks' identified in the common implementation plan. There is real uncertainty regarding the roll-out of the new Eurodac system, which is essential for the pact to become operational, as it should provide an indisputable basis for determining responsibility for managing border procedures by using biometric identifiers. Considerable effort is still needed to implement border procedures. The transposition of the Reception Conditions Directive remains incomplete. And the list of shortcomings among member states is long.

However, other political tests lie ahead and are described in far less veiled terms by the Commission than the rest of the report. On the one hand, the complex mechanism of solidarity – described as 'compulsory' yet 'flexible', combining the relocation of people with material support – will have to be implemented in practice, which presupposes that all member states fulfil the obligations to which

they have committed. On the other hand, the Commission will assess twice per year, in July and October, whether current practices regarding (non-) transfers under the Dublin mechanism – the principles of which remain in force – constitute systemic failures that could call into question the very foundations of the pact. On each occasion, the strength of the political commitment to the principles of solidarity and responsibility will be assessed.

But the obstacles do not end there. Many observers point out that the implementation of the pact is being facilitated by the steady decline in pressure on the external borders in recent years – a decline which is therefore in no way attributable to the pact itself, as it has not yet been implemented. But what would happen if the European Union were to face a new humanitarian crisis like the one in 2015? Is it prepared? Little attention has been paid to the crisis and *force majeure* mechanism that would need to be applied in such a situation.



- *The protection of migrants' rights lies at the heart of these areas of uncertainty, as has been repeatedly highlighted by civil society organisations.*

Promoted by the first European Asylum and Migration Management Strategy, an assertive approach to migration diplomacy aims to expand partnerships with countries of origin and transit and to address the disastrous record of member states in removing third-country nationals residing irregularly. An effective return policy is indeed an essential component of the pact, but the frantic search for 'innovative solutions' may also contribute to creating new dependencies at a time when the European Union is seeking strategic autonomy, which consists primarily of managing existing dependencies.

The complexity of the texts casts numerous legal uncertainties over their implementation. **The protection of migrants' rights lies at the heart of these areas of uncertainty, as has been repeatedly highlighted by civil society organisations** concerned about the lack of clarity regarding the changes currently underway. Whilst indispensable safeguards and monitoring mechanisms are foreseen, experience shows that they remain a dead letter if violations are not sanctioned.

In their joint statement, the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration emphasise that the pact offers an opportunity "to move beyond crisis-driven responses and implement a more predictable, fair and effective approach". This aspiration can only be shared if the shortcomings of this new

framework are also accepted. But the jury is still out, and failures will undoubtedly be exploited by those calling for states to regain control over 'their' migration. The message is not that 'there is no alternative', and adjustments will certainly need to be made. **But the pact has taken on symbolic significance as an attempt to restore trust between member states, which was undermined by the 2015-2016 crisis.** And the collapse of the pact would undoubtedly spell the end of the Schengen area in its current form, as evidenced by the reintroduction and maintenance of multiple internal border controls. **Abandoning the pact would also be a worrying sign for the cohesion of the European Union** at a time when it is more essential than ever to tackle challenges on a completely different scale.



*Jean-Louis De Brouwer,
Director of the European
Affairs Programme at
the Egmont Institute*

The EU Return Regulation: what lies behind the chants

by Silvia Carta and Gianluca Cesaro

The new EU 'deportation bill' was adopted by the European Parliament amid roaring applause, laughter and chants of "send them back, send them back!" For many people watching, the scenes sent shivers down their spines. Indeed, such scenes should be of grave concern to anyone who cares about human rights and dignity, equality and the future of Europe.

What happened in Strasbourg marked a political turning point. The Return Regulation was passed thanks to an unprecedented and dangerous alliance between centre-right and far-right forces, with support from parts of the political centre. The symbolism matters, and so does the substance: the harms of this regulation go well beyond the much-discussed 'return hubs'.

Long presented as the 'missing piece' of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, the Return Regulation was proposed by the European Commission in March 2025 to increase deportations across the European Union. It does so by expanding immigration detention, restricting human rights and creating new pathways for EU member states to deport people to countries in which they have never set foot.

While we wait for the EU Council to adopt it formally after the summer, we know already that this regulation will inflict harm on an estimated 2 to 3 million undocumented people, including families and children. We also know that it will increase irregularity and will do nothing to address the economic realities that drive migration and sustain Europe's labour markets.

► *Long presented as the 'missing piece' of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, the Return Regulation was proposed by the European Commission in March 2025 to increase deportations across the European Union.*

| MORE, NOT LESS, IRREGULARITY

Far from reducing irregular migration, the regulation is likely to create more of it. Member states will be required to issue deportation orders immediately after a residence permit expires, effectively multiplying the number of people deemed irregular, even if they have other grounds to remain. This will be the case even when there is a risk of refoulement – that is, when deporting someone would expose them to persecution, torture or other serious harm. In this case, **the authorities will not be obliged to issue a residence permit but may postpone deportation indefinitely. In short: people could potentially be stuck in legal limbo for years.**

In a striking last-minute change, the explicit reference to the possibility for governments to issue residence permits for humanitarian or other grounds was removed from the regulation. While EU law cannot prevent governments from granting humanitarian permits, deleting this safeguard sends a powerful political signal.

| A COLOSSAL DETENTION SYSTEM

Under current EU law, immigration detention can last for up to 18 months. The new regulation increases this to 30 months: adults and children alike may face detention for up to 24 months, with a further six-month extension where authorities claim there is a 'reasonable prospect' of removal.

Decades of research have shown that immigration detention causes serious harm. Even short periods are associated with anxiety, depression and severe psychological distress. The longer detention lasts, the worse the consequences become. For children, the evidence is even clearer: detention is always a violation of their rights and is never in their best interests.



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Yet **the regulation not only extends detention periods, it also broadens the grounds on which detention can be imposed. This includes vaguely defined security concerns, alleged failures to cooperate with the deportation process and other broad categories left largely to national law.** Homelessness and a lack of social ties can also become grounds for detention, as EU lawmakers consider these to be indicators that the person will hide from authorities. In practice, people in conditions of poverty and social exclusion will be punished instead of being helped.

For people who are not detained, various forms of restrictions on movement can be imposed. People may be confined to a specific address or area, subjected to reporting obligations, or subjected to other invasive surveillance measures such as electronic monitoring or bail.

OUT OF SIGHT, OUT OF MIND: THE EXTERNALISATION OF DEPORTATIONS

The regulation takes the EU's desire to offload its human rights obligations to third countries to a new level. For the first time in EU law, a new legal basis allows member states to establish 'return hubs' – that is, deportation centres in non-EU countries, as well as other forms of 'agreements' or more informal 'arrangements'.

In short: **member states could send people outside the Union for deportation processing and immigration detention, including parents with children, even if they have no connection to the country concerned.**

The regulation provides remarkably little detail about any safeguards that would apply in such systems. Questions of accountability, monitoring, judicial oversight and responsibility remain largely unanswered. Yet several member states are already exploring similar arrangements. According to media reports, Austria, Denmark, Germany, Greece and the Netherlands are all looking at starting discussions with third countries.

INVESTIGATIVE MEASURES: FROM HOME RAIDS TO REPORTING OBLIGATIONS

Finally, the regulation encourages member states to deploy 'investigative measures' aimed at enforcing deportations, including raids in private homes and any other 'relevant locations'. While the text leaves significant discretion to member states and does not explicitly require governments to take specific measures, the political direction is clear. These measures could also have a chilling effect on solidarity, with those civil society

organisations or citizens providing shelter and support to undocumented people becoming potential targets.

Measures to detect and apprehend undocumented people are already being applied in some member states, or are being introduced as we write. In Belgium, the parliament is currently discussing a government proposal to allow the police to raid private homes even in the presence of children. In Sweden, the parliament has just approved a proposal that obliges certain public workers to report any undocumented people they come in contact with to the police. Germany's longstanding requirement for most public services to denounce undocumented people means many avoid any contact with public authorities – from the police (for reporting a crime, for example, including gender-based violence), to courts and hospitals.

WHAT NOW?

This is not the end of the story. **Many aspects of the regulation are unlikely to be compatible with the European and international human rights framework, leaving room for future litigation and mobilisation.** Europe undoubtedly faces complex migration challenges. But a policy built around detention, deportation, externalisation and coercion runs against human rights, social cohesion and professional ethics, as well as against common sense.

*Silvia Carta,
Advocacy Officer, Platform
for International Cooperation
on Undocumented
Migrants (PICUM)*



*Gianluca Cesaro,
Senior Communications
Officer, PICUM*



Mind the gaps: implementing the pact's screening and border procedures

by Alberto-Horst Neidhardt

The EU migration and asylum reforms became applicable on 12 June, but their impact and credibility will depend on what happens next. At the border, screening, border procedures and Eurodac – the EU's asylum database – must work together. If legal and operational gaps persist, they risk undermining rights, solidarity and the Schengen area.

Screening and border procedures, alongside an expanded Eurodac system, are meant to create a seamless process: people arriving irregularly should be registered, vulnerabilities assessed and security checks carried out. Screening at the external border should be completed within seven days. People should then be channelled towards the appropriate follow-up procedure, including the regular asylum process, the border procedure or return.

Border procedures are mandatory for certain applicants, including those from countries with low recognition rates. The pact also sets country-specific 'adequate capacity': the reception and human resource capacity required to process a set number of cases in the border procedure at any given moment. All this is operationally and administratively demanding. It requires financial resources, facilities, trained staff, consistent Eurodac registration, clear workflows, legal counselling, fundamental rights monitoring and judicial capacity, among others.

► *Member states reached 12 June, 'implementation day', with uneven levels of readiness.*

AN UNEVEN START FOR SCREENING AND BORDER PROCEDURES

Official reports from the European Commission show that **member states reached 12 June, 'implementation day', with uneven levels of readiness.** Around early May, the situation had improved compared to mid and late 2025. Yet gaps remained. In total, 15 member states had the facilities and human resources required for adequate capacity, 17 had notified border-procedure locations and 20 were considered on track for screening. Greece, Poland and others had not yet notified the locations where border procedures would take place. A larger group, including Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain and Poland,

still faced obstacles to managing screening and border processing because of limited accommodation, staffing gaps or incomplete operational and administrative arrangements

At the same time, health-check arrangements still needed finalising in, among others, Germany, Slovenia and Spain. Eurodac readiness was also uneven: in total, 11 member states reported being fully on track, while 16 still faced challenges, even though the central system was ready for the core functionalities needed by June. A third of member states had also not finalised legislative changes for free legal counselling, while monitoring arrangements were still being concluded in several countries.

While developments at the legal and operational levels continued until the last minute before the rules became applicable, and while implementation readiness is expected to improve, uncertainty and challenges will persist longer than anticipated.

EU MEMBER STATES' PROGRESS IN IMPLEMENTATION READINESS

NUMBER OF MEMBER STATES	JUNE 2025	NOVEMBER 2025	MAY 2026
with/near adequate border-procedure capacity	8	13	15
that notified border-procedure locations	0	not specified	17
considered on track for the screening procedure	not available	14	20 + Italy for sea arrivals
that had designated screening authorities	not available	not available	around two-thirds
Main risks identified from Commission reporting	location designation, financial planning and procurement delays	staffing, standard operating procedures, procurement, IT integration and adequate capacity	absconding, interim facilities, health checks and location notifications

Source: European Commission, State of play on the implementation of the Pact on Migration and Asylum, June 2025, November 2025 and May 2026.

- *For asylum seekers, the first risk is that of a 'procedural lottery'. If staff are insufficiently trained or legal counselling is uneven, similar cases may be treated differently from one member state to another.*

THE RISKS OF UNEVEN IMPLEMENTATION FOR ASYLUM, SOLIDARITY AND SCHENGEN

Delays and gaps, as well as the prospect of divergent practices, pose risks to asylum seekers, national administrations, the Common European Asylum System and Schengen. **For asylum seekers, the first risk is that of a 'procedural lottery'. If staff are insufficiently trained or legal counselling is uneven, for example, similar cases may be treated differently from one member state to another.** Vulnerabilities, family links or medical needs may also be missed if screening is rushed. Civil society organisations have warned that screening will often be conducted by police

or border guards who may lack the expertise to identify vulnerabilities. The result would be unfair for applicants and would undermine convergence across national practices.

A second risk concerns fundamental rights. The pact's border model relies on people remaining available to authorities during screening and border procedures. In practice, uneven readiness and divergent national approaches may mean that some people go through a tightly managed, rights-compliant process, while others face improvised confinement in interim facilities, movement restrictions or detention. Safeguards, therefore, become central. Yet delays also mean that the right to challenge a decision could vary across member states.

- *Administrations that are not ready may spend a longer transition phase firefighting: temporary facilities, emergency staffing, manual workarounds, urgent procurement or even litigation.*

The administrative risks are just as serious. Without enough caseworkers, judges or interpreters, faster procedures could miss deadlines and generate backlogs. There is also a risk of resource diversion. **Administrations that are not ready may spend a longer transition phase firefighting: temporary facilities, emergency staffing, manual workarounds, urgent procurement or even litigation.** Onward movements may also occur before people are screened, registered and referred to the right procedure. When that happens, another member state must carry out the screening on its territory, shifting the administrative burden to authorities who may themselves be unprepared.

Uneven implementation could thus weaken mutual trust. The potential limited use of Eurodac amplifies the risk. The database is not just an IT tool. It is considered essential to determine which country is responsible and to monitor cross-border movements. If data are incomplete or registration is inconsistent, it will be harder to define responsibility allocation and carry out transfers. Other member states may also hesitate to make or implement solidarity pledges or resort to internal border controls in the presence of continued secondary movements.



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All this should not be read as a prediction of inevitable or lasting failure. Rather, it points to a period of uneven adjustment, during which national practices should gradually move closer to the pact's requirements. In fact, the pact has instruments to identify and correct bottlenecks and capacity constraints before they become systemic – including monitoring and reporting, support from EU agencies and fundamental rights mechanisms.

The next milestone will come in autumn 2026, with the first annual report after application and the start of the new implementation cycle. This will show whether the gaps have begun to close before decisions are made on which member states are under migratory pressure, and which must contribute through solidarity. That moment will matter more than the 12 June deadline itself.



*Alberto-Horst Neidhardt,
Head of the European Migration
and Diversity Programme,
European Policy Centre (EPC)*



Solidarity: towards a new governance of predictability?

by Eleonora Milazzo

The Pact on Migration and Asylum has been presented as a turning point, with its entry into force as the culmination of a lengthy process marked by tensions unlike any seen in almost any other reform effort in the history of EU integration. The pact crystallises a fragile political agreement on a complex set of legislative reforms. But what will be decisive is its implementation over time, rather than its adoption. Nowhere is this more evident than in the pact's solidarity component.

Indeed, this solidarity component reveals the fundamentally reparative intent of this reform. At its core is a permanent mechanism to support member states facing migratory pressure by requiring all EU countries to contribute – whether through the relocation of asylum seekers, financial contributions or operational assistance.

This mandatory but flexible approach reflects a political compromise between those member states that favour responsibility-sharing and those opposed to binding relocation schemes. With limited political space for structural, incremental change, the primary goal has been to remedy the governance failures exposed during repeated reception and border management crises. These failures have strained asylum systems across Europe and reinforced polarisation around migration. **The aim of the pact is therefore to restore trust in the EU's capacity to devise a migration and asylum management system that is fairer and more efficient than the previous one, or than member states acting on their own.**

The reforms consolidate rather than transform the allocation of responsibilities among member states through a permanent system of redistributing asylum management obligations across the EU. The Dublin principle – whereby the member state of first entry is responsible for examining asylum applications – remains intact. The logic surrounding it is reinforced through border procedures codified in stringent terms.

At the same time, the pact introduces, through the Asylum and Migration Management Regulation (AMMR), an annual 'solidarity cycle' through which the European Commission assesses migratory pressure and proposes a solidarity pool for the following year. Within this framework, those member states facing migratory pressure become beneficiaries of solidarity measures, while other member states are required to contribute through relocations, financial contributions, or operational and technical support. The forms that solidarity can take, as well as the beneficiaries and contributors, are therefore codified in the pact's legal framework.

► *The main novelty for solidarity is not the allocation of responsibility or the determination of mandatory contributions per se. Rather, it is the governance and implementation cycle for operationalising and monitoring solidarity, the so-called 'solidarity cycle'.*

THE GOVERNANCE OF PREDICTABILITY

In this consolidation, **the main novelty for solidarity is not the allocation of responsibility or the determination of mandatory contributions per se. Rather, it is the governance and implementation cycle for operationalising and monitoring solidarity, the so-called 'solidarity cycle'.** This cycle will also be the key benchmark for assessing whether solidarity is achieved in practice. It will determine whether responsibility transfers



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work effectively, whether solidarity pledges are sufficient, and whether resources are enough to support member states under pressure. A more effective governance and implementation cycle can provide one of the essential conditions for solidarity: predictable reciprocity, or the reasonable expectation that member states will do their share and reciprocate contributions and efforts.

Member states act as contingent compliers in EU asylum and migration governance: their willingness to comply with common obligations depends on their expectation that other member states will also contribute fairly. This matters because perceptions of fairness influence cooperation. If governments believe others are shirking their responsibilities, they become less willing to uphold their own commitments, potentially triggering a downward spiral of non-compliance. The issue is therefore first and foremost one of collective action. Effective governance can help mitigate this collective action problem by making cooperation more predictable,

despite the high salience and politicisation of migration making things more difficult.

CONSOLIDATED GOVERNANCE, OLD UNCERTAINTIES, NEW RISKS

Improving governance and predictability is a necessary step towards making solidarity viable. Yet just as the system's underlying premises have not changed, neither have its potential risks and uncertainties.

Interdependence among the reforms is the first source of uncertainty. The success of solidarity governance remains de facto contingent on member states fulfilling their individual responsibilities, including the systematic registration of asylum seekers in Eurodac, the prevention of secondary movements and the provision of adequate reception and transfers. Solidarity, therefore, continues to depend on the success of other components of the pact, particularly its foundations, the expanded and faster external border procedures.

- ▶ *It will take time to assess whether member states are effectively implementing the pact's border procedures, registration requirements and rules on secondary movements.*

However, **it will take time to assess whether member states are effectively implementing the pact's border procedures, registration requirements and rules on secondary movements.** Solidarity commitments have already been made through the first annual solidarity cycle, with pledges agreed in December 2025 and implementation expected during 2026. Member states will therefore have to deliver on solidarity before the fulfilment of other obligations under the new system can be properly assessed.

Related to this, a further source of uncertainty concerns the system's ability to manage large numbers of arrivals and asylum applications.



Absent strong political commitments to solidarity, the new governance of solidarity's real effectiveness remains premised on keeping these figures low. While arrivals and asylum applications have dropped over the last two years, the question remains whether this new system is another 'fair-weather' redistribution mechanism (similar to the one that collapsed in 2015-2016) or one with stronger structural foundations.

Solidarity commitments so far fall below expectations. For this first solidarity cycle, covering the period from June to December 2026, member states agreed on 21,000 relocations and €420 million in financial contributions, about 30 per cent below the minimum thresholds set in the AMMR (30,000 relocations and €600 million). While this is partially explained by the shorter duration of the first cycle, which began only in June, it also signals the difficulty of committing under the new system.

The relocation targets for the first cycle also appear difficult to meet. Germany, for example, has already concluded deals with Greece and Italy to avoid taking in asylum seekers. Overall, solidarity pledges are most likely to take the form of offsets rather than direct contributions in countries under pressure.

Domestic narratives of solidarity, specifically those involving relocations, represent yet another risk. Solidarity contributions bear a high political cost in a context of the continuously high salience of migration in public debates. While the pact itself remains largely unknown to the general public, and confined to policymaking, solidarity attracts more attention. In Poland, for example, the pact has come to be associated primarily with relocations in public debates and has also been rejected for

this reason. This politicisation of solidarity reinforces member states' reluctance to disclose national implementation plans, further feeding into general uncertainty.

| SOLIDARITY, BUT ABOUT WHAT?

The outlook of solidarity under the new system is not just about target contributions but, crucially, also about the goals that we think this principle should help us pursue. The question, therefore, is: solidarity, but about what?

Solidarity is a concept loaded with normative meaning. We commonly use the term 'solidarity' in a positive sense. We associate solidarity with supporting each other in the face of shared adversity. Yet solidarity is, at its core, morally neutral. Its value depends on the goals of the actions that we undertake 'in solidarity' with others.

► *The goal of solidarity among member states is, and should be, to provide effective protection for those entitled to it, uphold the rights of all, and help member states that struggle or bear disproportionate costs fulfil their obligations.*

The goal of solidarity among member states is, and should be, to provide effective protection for those entitled to it, uphold the rights of all, and help member states that struggle or bear disproportionate costs fulfil their obligations. Increasingly, however,

the object of solidarity appears to be shifting. Rather than focusing on redistribution mechanisms that support member states in providing protection in an efficient and fair way, member states' coordinated efforts focus on keeping arrivals and application numbers to a minimum, including at the cost of progressively watering down guarantees for fundamental rights.

The expansion of the use of 'safe country' concepts, third country agreements and the recently adopted Return Regulation points in this direction. Most importantly, the new solidarity contributions themselves could be used to improve reception and integration for new arrivals or, quite differently, to prevent people from arriving. Solidarity has so far settled on a political compromise. **More ambitious solidarity remains politically out of reach and has rarely been seriously championed.**

Ultimately, the hope behind the pact is that gains in efficiency and effectiveness, in the solidarity component as much as in other pillars, will generate political momentum for a more strategic, value-based understanding of EU migration and asylum governance.

Eleonora Milazzo,
Research Fellow at the
Migration Policy Centre,
European University Institute;
Senior Adviser at the European
Policy Centre and Associate
Fellow at the Egmont Institute



The Industrial Accelerator Act

DOSSIER

THE EU'S INDUSTRIAL PARADIGM SHIFT

The European Commission's proposed Industrial Accelerator Act (IAA) marks one of the most significant shifts in EU economic policy in decades. Although long associated with a focus on (neo-)liberalism, competition policy and global trade, the European Union is now embracing a more interventionist industrial strategy aimed at strengthening domestic manufacturing, reducing strategic dependencies and responding to intensifying geopolitical competition. By introducing elements of European preference and seeking to actively shape industrial investment, the IAA reflects a genuine change in the EU's doctrine.

Yet the proposal leaves doubts about what kind of industrial future Europe is seeking to build. The IAA clearly prioritises reindustrialisation over decarbonisation – explicit climate-related objectives

and safeguards are notably absent. Furthermore, the meaning of its flagship 'Made in EU' principle can also be questioned: while presented as a tool to strengthen European production, the IAA proposal is ambiguous on the treatment of components sourced from third countries and the extent to which third-country-owned production can qualify as 'European'.

In addition, as one of our authors argues, industrial policy cannot be assessed solely by investment and output targets. Public support should be linked to labour rights, collective bargaining, skills development and quality employment. That is why we want to raise broader questions not only about Europe's industrial competitiveness, but also about the relationship between industrial policy, climate objectives, economic sovereignty and social standards.

Made – or fade – in Europe?

by Greg Van Elsen

The European Commission's proposal for an Industrial Accelerator Act marks a significant step towards a genuine European industrial policy. By combining 'Made in Europe' requirements with low-carbon criteria, the Commission is signalling that industrial transformation and climate action can no longer be treated as separate agendas. Despite its potential, the Industrial Accelerator Act will benefit people and the climate only if both the proposal itself and the wider EU industrial policy toolbox are strengthened.

When EU Industry Commissioner Stéphane Séjourné announced the Industrial Accelerator Act (IAA) earlier this year, he spoke of "a change in doctrine". He was right. By seeking to protect strategic sectors from international competition and actively stimulating demand for European products, the Commission is moving further away from the market orthodoxy that has dominated European economic thinking for decades. The proposal's already-troubled path, however, illustrates just how significant this shift really is. Repeated delays have reflected resistance within the Commission itself, where some members remain deeply attached to the principles of free trade and limited state intervention. The debate has now moved to the Council and the European Parliament, where discussions centre on whether the IAA's preferential measures should be reserved for European producers or extended to 'trusted partners' outside the EU. The controversy reveals a broader European soul-searching exercise about how open it can remain in an increasingly fragmented global economy.

The IAA is one of the centrepieces of the Commission's Clean Industrial Deal, its

flagship strategy to turn decarbonisation into a driver of industrial renewal. Yet it is striking that the proposal's headline objective – raising manufacturing output to 20 per cent of the EU's GDP – contains no explicit clean industry component. This reflects a broader shift in emphasis, as 'decarbonisation' has now disappeared from the act's original title, the 'Industrial Decarbonisation Accelerator Act'.

Whether returning manufacturing to levels not seen since the early 1990s is a desirable objective at all remains an open question. The declining share of manufacturing in advanced service-oriented economies has been a structural trend for decades, including in China. More importantly, an aggregate manufacturing target risks obscuring the real challenge: ensuring that Europe's industrial base becomes climate-neutral, resilient and socially sustainable. The risks of such an approach are already visible. Incumbent fossil-fuel-dependent industries have begun invoking the 20 per cent target to argue against climate legislation and delay the transition.

Rather than measuring success through a broad manufacturing indicator, the EU should develop sector-specific targets linked to emissions reductions, circularity, quality jobs and strategic resilience. This is particularly important because the list of 'strategic sectors' in annex I of the IAA remains excessively broad and is not limited to genuinely decarbonised industrial activities.

Despite these shortcomings, the IAA contains important and welcome innovations. At its core, it seeks to achieve three objectives. First, it creates demand for European production by requiring that a share of public spending in strategic sectors – including energy-intensive industries such as steel and cement, the automotive sector, and clean technologies such as batteries, renewable energy and heat pumps – benefits companies producing in Europe. Second, it seeks to ensure that foreign investment in strategic sectors creates genuine local value rather than merely treating Europe as a sales market and assembly line. And third, it aims to accelerate industrial projects by simplifying permitting procedures and improving access to energy and finance.



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- ▶ *Industrial policy cannot simply be about producing more goods; it must also shape the kind of economy and society Europe wants to build.*

The creation of lead markets for low-carbon products is perhaps the most promising element of the proposal. While the EU has made substantial progress in decarbonising electricity generation, energy-intensive industries remain among the biggest laggards of the transition, accounting for more than a quarter of final energy consumption and over 20 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions. Too often, these sectors have responded to climate policy by seeking exemptions, compensation and delays rather than embracing transformation. Lead markets can help change the business case by creating demand for low-carbon steel, cement and – with time – chemicals. But they are not a substitute for strong climate policy.

Staying the course on the EU Emissions Trading System remains essential: without a meaningful and predictable carbon price signal, lead markets risk leading nowhere.

However, the environmental integrity of these lead markets must be safeguarded. Only genuinely low-carbon, circular and resilient production should qualify as 'green'. In some sectors, notably the cement sector, the current proposal risks setting insufficiently ambitious standards. The same applies to steel: fossil-based steel has no place in a net-zero industrial strategy and should never be eligible for green public procurement or preferential treatment under the IAA. **Europe's industrial policy should support the transition away from coal and fossil gas, not reward its continued use. Public support must accelerate transformation, not prolong high-carbon production models through marginal efficiency gains.**

The IAA should also go further in linking public support to social outcomes. **Industrial policy cannot simply be about producing more goods; it must also shape the kind of economy and society Europe wants to build.**

Companies benefiting from public support should therefore meet minimum social conditions. These conditions should include engaging in collective bargaining, respecting collective agreements, investing in worker reskilling and upskilling, and reinvesting profits into productive activities such as research and innovation. Restrictions could also be placed on share buybacks, excessive dividend payments or relocations aimed at exploiting lower labour or tax standards elsewhere.

Ultimately, the IAA confirms the emergence of the EU as a more interventionist, even 'geo-dirigiste', state actor. This is a logical adaptation to a world where the United States, China and other major economies are increasingly deploying industrial policy to pursue strategic objectives.

Yet two fundamental challenges remain.

- ▶ *Europe must combine strategic autonomy with international cooperation, particularly with developing countries that also seek to build clean industrial capacity.*



The first challenge is avoiding the turn of industrial policy into a global zero-sum game. If every region simply seeks to out-subsidise or exclude competitors, the result could be fragmentation, inefficiency and international tensions. **Europe must therefore combine strategic autonomy with international cooperation, particularly with developing countries that also seek to build clean industrial capacity.** Global decarbonisation will also require continued – and in some areas even intensified – cooperation with China, which remains the world's leading producer of many clean technologies. Rather than being driven by Europe's geopolitical anxieties or blanket de-risking narratives, the EU's industrial strategy should adopt a sector-by-sector approach based on clear criteria, including economic potential, decarbonisation contributions and relevance for strategic autonomy. Making such choices, however, requires a level of state capacity that Europe is only just beginning to rebuild.

The second challenge is therefore institutional. Europe still lacks much of the administrative capacity required to design, implement and evaluate ambitious industrial policies. **For decades, policymakers were told that markets would allocate resources efficiently and that governments should merely set framework conditions. Industrial policy requires different capabilities: technological expertise, long-term planning and the ability to resist capture by powerful incumbents. Building this capacity may ultimately prove as important as the policies themselves.**

► *Ultimately, the choice facing Europe is not simply between 'making' and 'fading'. The real challenge is to ensure that industrial policy serves a broader purpose: accelerating global decarbonisation, strengthening resilience, creating quality jobs and delivering prosperity within planetary boundaries.*

The Industrial Accelerator Act is therefore more than another piece of legislation. It represents a test of whether Europe can develop a new economic model that combines climate ambition, economic resilience and social progress. **Ultimately, the choice facing Europe is not simply between 'making' and 'fading'. The real challenge is to ensure that industrial policy serves a broader purpose: accelerating global decarbonisation, strengthening resilience, creating quality jobs and delivering prosperity within planetary boundaries.** Europe's future will be determined not by how much it produces, but by what it produces, how it produces it, and who benefits from it.

*Greg Van Elsen,
political economist and
Senior Industrial Policy
Advisor at Climate Action
Network (CAN) Europe*



Europe's industrial future is a political choice

by Ludovic Voet

Europe is losing industrial jobs, productive capacity and economic sovereignty. The debate on the Industrial Accelerator Act is not about protectionism versus openness. It is about whether Europe chooses to manage industrial decline or build a clean industrial future that delivers quality jobs, regional cohesion and strategic autonomy.

What Europe is facing is not an abstract competitiveness problem but deindustrialisation. Across the continent, workers are watching factories close, investments disappear and production relocate. Entire communities that built Europe's prosperity through steel, chemicals, automotive manufacturing, machinery and countless other industries are increasingly being told that decline is inevitable. The message is always the same: global competition leaves no alternative. Workers have heard this argument for decades. The result is visible everywhere: Europe has lost industrial capacity, increased its strategic dependencies and weakened parts of its productive base. Entire regions have been left struggling to replace well-paid industrial jobs with lower-paid and more precarious employment. Every major crisis, from the pandemic to the energy shock, has exposed the fragility of supply chains that were supposed to deliver efficiency and resilience.

The lesson should be clear by now. Deindustrialisation is entirely the consequence of political choices, not an economic law. That is why the debate around the Industrial Accelerator Act (IAA) matters. The discussion is often presented as a choice between openness

and protectionism, between free markets and state intervention. This framing is misleading. The real question is whether Europe wants to maintain the industrial capacity necessary to guarantee prosperity, social cohesion and strategic autonomy in the decades ahead.

► *Europe needs a stronger industrial policy because workers need a stronger industrial future.*

For trade unions, the answer is obvious. **Europe needs a stronger industrial policy because workers need a stronger industrial future.** Rather than preserving the industries of the past, the European Union should shape those of the future. The green and digital transitions will require massive investments in batteries, clean technologies, renewable energy equipment, low-carbon materials, digital infrastructure, transport systems and advanced manufacturing. The question is which objectives they will grow towards.

Will Europe create the factories, technologies and jobs associated with this transformation?

Or will it increasingly depend on imports while exporting investment opportunities and industrial employment? Europe cannot lead the climate transition while accepting the erosion of its industrial base. Climate neutrality and reindustrialisation must go hand in hand. People will not support ambitious climate policies if they associate them with factory closures, insecurity and declining living standards. They will support them if they create stable jobs, new opportunities and economic renewal.

That is why industrial policy is not only an economic issue, but also a social, territorial and ultimately a democratic issue. Every region in Europe deserves a place in the industrial transition. **For too long, economic success has been concentrated in a limited number of regions while others have experienced industrial decline and population loss.** Workers in industrial regions must be able to see a future for themselves and their children. This requires moving beyond the assumption that markets alone will deliver the outcomes Europe needs.

Every major economy is actively shaping industrial development. China's industrial subsidies are estimated at around 4.4 per cent of GDP.

Combined with state-directed investment, favourable financing conditions and targeted industrial support, this can translate into cost advantages estimated at between 20 per cent and 40 per cent in key sectors. The United States has embraced industrial policy on a scale unimaginable a decade ago. Governments across the world are actively supporting domestic production and technological development. **Europe cannot remain the only major economic power pretending that refusing to act is a form of neutrality.** Supporting European production is not protectionism. Of course, Europe should remain open to trade and investment. It does not need to produce everything within its borders. But openness cannot mean naivety.

Europe has no reason to subsidise investments that create new dependencies, weaken domestic value chains or generate private profits while leaving little lasting benefit for workers and communities. **Public support must come with public obligations. Companies benefiting from public money should respect workers' rights, collective bargaining, fair taxation and environmental standards.**

Public support should strengthen industrial ecosystems, not simply improve corporate balance sheets. The same principle should apply to European and foreign companies alike. Whether investment creates value in Europe is more important than the nationality of capital.

Critics frequently focus on the costs associated with European preference measures. Yet perspective matters. Estimates suggest compliance costs of around €6 billion annually for businesses and around €1 billion for public authorities. These figures are often presented as evidence that industrial policy is unaffordable. In reality, they are modest compared with the economic and social costs of industrial decline. Europe is already paying a far higher price through factory closures, lost productive capacity, strategic dependencies and the disappearance of quality jobs across industrial regions.

Nor would a stronger European preference be exceptional. Under 'Buy American' rules, US authorities apply price preferences of up to 30 per cent in civilian procurement and even higher evaluation factors in defence procurement.

China and other major economies also extensively use domestic preference mechanisms. **The idea that Europe should remain uniquely neutral while others actively support domestic production is neither economically realistic nor politically sustainable.**

► *A race to the bottom on labour standards cannot be Europe's competitive advantage.*

This is also why 'made in Europe' must mean more than a label attached to a product. Made in Europe must mean made with quality jobs. **A race to the bottom on labour standards cannot be Europe's competitive advantage.** Quality jobs, strong collective bargaining and social dialogue are not obstacles to economic success. They are essential conditions for sustainable growth, productivity and innovation. Industrial policy should therefore be judged not only by output, exports or investment figures, but also by the quality of employment it creates and the resilience of the communities it supports. Europe needs an industrial strategy capable of delivering quality jobs, technological leadership, economic security and a just transition.

Rather than debating openness versus protectionism, Europe must choose between managing decline and organising renewal. Between accepting deindustrialisation as inevitable or deciding that Europe's workers, industries and regions deserve a future. **The Industrial Accelerator Act can become an important step towards that future. But only if it is ambitious enough to match the scale of the challenge.** Europe's industrial future is not a technical question. It is a political choice.



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Ludovic Voet,
Confederal Secretary,
European Trade Union
Confederation

Is the Industrial Accelerator Act up to the task?

by Tommaso Pardi

In just four years, Europe has become the main destination of fast-rising Chinese car exports. Between 2000 and 2024, global Chinese exports of batteries, auto parts and cars increased by €145 billion, and almost one third of this staggering growth went to Europe (€45 billion).

The causes and consequences of this disruptive trend are clear. On the one hand, huge and still-growing overcapacities built by China's automotive sector are flooding the single market at an increasing rate. On the other hand, European companies do not stand a chance against price competition that is currently 30-40 per cent below their best prices for equivalent-quality products. The European supply chain will be the first to disappear; European carmakers will eventually follow suit.

► *The answers Europe found to meet these challenges successfully in the past were bold combinations of trade, currency and industrial policies.*

The 'Chinese challenge' is not an entirely new phenomenon. Europe has faced similar challenges in the past: the American challenge in the 1960s and the Japanese challenge in the 1980s. The questions raised by these past challenges were fundamentally the same: how to protect domestic markets against fast-growing imports and direct foreign production? How

to catch up with the competitive advantage acquired by other countries in key strategic industries? How to navigate the economic and social crises generated by these competitive gaps and their trade consequences?

The answers Europe found to meet these challenges successfully in the past were bold combinations of trade, currency and industrial policies. For instance, in the case of the booming Japanese car exports of the 1970s, an eighteen-year market quota was negotiated between 1981 and 1999, freezing the Japanese market share below 12 per cent, and a strict local content policy was forced upon Japanese direct investments in car manufacturing (80 per cent minimum European content after two years of production).

The Chinese challenge is bigger, faster and much more threatening than the Japanese challenge, precisely because Europe has so far struggled to develop a similarly bold, proactive and protective approach. To date, the only concrete European response to the fast-rising imports of Chinese batteries, cars and auto parts into the single market has been the 'exceptional' tariffs on Chinese battery-electric vehicles implemented by the EU in 2024.

► *The Chinese challenge is bigger, faster and much more threatening than the Japanese challenge, precisely because Europe has so far struggled to develop a similarly bold, proactive and protective approach.*

But even these modest tariffs (between 8 per cent and 35 per cent, depending on the carmaker, while the international average is well above 50 per cent and can reach more than 100 per cent), have been met with strong resistance within the EU. Germany and four other member states voted against their implementation at the EU Council level, twelve countries abstained, and only France, Italy and eight other countries voted in favour.

The 'Strategic Dialogue on the Future of the European Automotive Industry' launched by the European Commission in January 2025 was meant to reach a more consensual and ambitious view on how to address the Chinese challenge, in particular via the introduction of local content policies to protect the European supply chain from aggressive Chinese



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► *After more than one year of tense negotiations, the result is neither consensual nor up to the task of meeting the Chinese challenge.*

economic dumping and avoid unfair competition from new Chinese assembly car factories in Europe. **After more than one year of tense negotiations, the result is neither consensual nor up to the task of meeting the Chinese challenge.**

A principle of 'European preference' for new cars 'made in EU' has been introduced in the Industrial Accelerator Act (IAA) proposed by the European Commission in March 2026. However, this principle only applies to electric and plug-in vehicles (currently less than 30 per cent of new car sales). It does not include automotive parts, is set at a low level (70 per cent versus a current average level of local EU content of 85 per cent) and considers as 'made in EU' auto-parts that are also imported from third countries with which the EU has free trade agreements (more than 80).

There are two main problems in the text proposed by the European Commission.

The first problem is that the text strives to strike an impossible compromise between three conflicting approaches: a) the 'made in EU' approach, which is promoted by France, as well as the European Commission's directorate-general for the internal market (DG GROW) and

auto-suppliers, and which can meet the Chinese challenge but requires a much more ambitious version of the IAA and a clear break from the WTO order; b) the 'made with China' approach, promoted by Germany and carmakers, which gives a substantial margin to EU-based carmakers to keep reducing their production costs via Chinese products and sourcing, but at the cost of disrupting the European supply chain and increasing the European dependence on Chinese companies, products and technologies; and c) the 'made with Europe' approach, promoted by Northern European countries and the EC's directorate-general for trade, which tries to preserve the WTO order but at the cost of taking most of the substance out of the 'made in EU' approach. So far, Europe has not been able to decide where it stands regarding China and the WTO. If it keeps delaying the decision, it will simply be too late to make headway in any direction.

The second problem is that the text conflates the objective of protecting the strategic industries we already have (automotive manufacturing, for example) with that of building the strategic industries we do not yet have (battery manufacturing, for example). The result is the introduction of 'made in EU' requirements mainly for industries that we do not yet

have (without any significant industrial policy attached), while almost no protection at all is given to the industries that we do have, but which we will lose to Chinese competition without an effective 'made in EU' safety net. Despite this lack of consensus and confusion about how to move forward, the diagnosis underlying the IAA is clear and well-established: stopping the Chinese expansion immediately has become the condition sine qua non for short-term survival of the European automotive sector and the first step in meeting the Chinese challenge.

The European Commission proposal for the IAA is clearly not up to this task and must be amended to include internal combustion engines and hybrid electric vehicles, to include auto-parts along with cars and vans, to raise the bar to 80 per cent for cars and vans, and to exclude third countries outside the EU from the European preference.



Tommaso Pardi,
Director of Gerpisa, CNRS

FORWARD
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INTERVIEW

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The language of European sovereignty

László Andor interviews Josep Borrell

What challenges does global disruption pose for the European Union? Former EU High Representative Josep Borrell shares his views and explains why it is so hard to forge a stronger, more effective common foreign policy, especially in times of war and the transition towards multipolarity.

László Andor: You say the EU needs to "learn the language of power". Do you think Europe has made progress towards learning and speaking the language of power?

Josep Borrell: I said that Europe must learn to use the language of power because we Europeans tend to believe that just developing trade and preaching human rights should be enough. But it is not. Even when I passed the European Parliament hearing seven years ago, the EU's soft power to influence the world – through its technological leadership, trade power or support for international institutions – was not enough. Today, it is even less so.

When I proposed to the members of the Defence Council the creation of a rapid deployment force of 5,000 troops to intervene, in the name of the European Union, in the event of a crisis requiring military capacity, I was told that we cannot use the word 'force' because the Union does not use force. That's the mentality: we reject the idea of force.

The European Union has been built on the idea of refusing, not accepting, the use of force. So we changed the name and started

talking about 'rapid-deployment capacity'. But even that was not developed due to internal divisions, particularly over defence and the language of power.

We created the anti-coercion mechanism with China in mind, but then China was suddenly no longer the problem. The US became the problem. Yet when we should have used an anti-coercion mechanism, we did not, because most European Union leaders feared one thing: that the US would leave us to face Russia alone.

► *We created the anti-coercion mechanism with China in mind, but then China was suddenly no longer the problem. The US became the problem. Yet when we should have used an anti-coercion mechanism, we did not, because most European Union leaders feared one thing: that the US would leave us to face Russia alone.*

LA: One of the High Representative's very tedious tasks is to forge some kind of common understanding – a common position, if possible. Why do you think this is so difficult in the European Union?

JB: Because we don't share the same understanding of the world. We have 27 members, each with a veto right – because this is what unanimity is: the capacity to veto decisions. But foreign policy means, above all, an understanding of how the world works: who is my friend, who is my rival, who is my enemy, whom can I trust, whom can I not?

And the EU members come from different histories. A Polish friend of mine told me one day that Poland had become a free country thanks to the Pope and the United States. Which is true. President Reagan, Pope John Paul II and President Bush senior each had their role in the fall of the Soviet empire, which allowed Poland to become a free country. But while what he said was true, it is also true that Spain has been ruled by a military dictatorship thanks to that same pope and the US. The catholic church was a big supporter of the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco,



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who traded the regime's survival for American bases on Spanish soil. So, the Poles believe they owe their freedom to someone, and I believe I owe my lack of freedom to that very same power: we cannot have the same understanding of the world.

- ▶ *Many people believe that the EU has a selective approach to international law. Russia attacked Ukraine and President Putin is an aggressor who is violating international law. But we don't dare to say that what is happening in Gaza is also a clear violation of international law.*

On issues like international law, things should be clear-cut. Historic legacies can differ, but international law already exists as a common platform. Yet what is now left of the Geneva Convention? When you see what's happening in Lebanon, in Iran, in Gaza: does anyone still

believe that international humanitarian law is capable of limiting the behaviour of people at war? Personally, I don't think it is.

Many people believe that the EU has a selective approach to international law. Russia attacked Ukraine and President Putin is an aggressor who is violating international law. But we don't dare to say that what is happening in Gaza is also a clear violation of international law. What's going on in the West Bank today? People are exposed to enormous suffering; their trees are cut down, their houses are burned and the Israeli settlers push the Palestinians to leave, killing some of them. Why don't we say clearly that Israel too is violating international law? Or that the US is violating international law. Certainly, everybody has the right to defend themselves. And Israel has the right to defend itself, but this must be done in full respect of international law.

LA: Given these inconsistencies and double standards, the European Union is burning its soft power and its credibility much faster than it is building up its hard power. Therefore, the Union risks becoming irrelevant at the international level.

JB: When you claim that the law must be respected, but you then apply it selectively, people see it.

- ▶ *The Union must build a common defence, and the time has come for some member states – not all of them, because some would not agree – to sign a new treaty, a treaty for Europe's defence union, and to end this administrative and political quarrel.*

At the same time, it's true that we are not building hard power or military power the way we should. Poland is spending 5 per cent of its GDP on defence. Germany is the fourth-largest military spender in the world, after the US, Russia and China. They claim that they will build a stronger army in Europe, and maybe they can because they have the financial resources. But this is not the right way, because we know what happened when Germany had Europe's strongest army.



The Union must build a common defence, and the time has come for some member states – not all of them, because some would not agree – to sign a new treaty, a treaty for Europe's defence union, and to end this administrative and political quarrel. We have overlapping functions between the Commissioner for Defence and the High Representative, which ultimately is a fight for political power within the European institutions. The European Union was not conceived as a military union. If we want it to be a military union, we need to ask EU citizens whether they want the EU to be one. And only then can we lay the bases and create a new institutional setting.

LA: The Spanish government has stood out as a defender of international law and multilateralism. Why, precisely, is that so? Is it mainly because of the opposition of Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez to President Trump?

JB: It is not a matter of individual personalities. Certainly, Pedro Sánchez has been engaged for years in defending international law, particularly regarding Israel. But in response to the structural situation of European foreign policy, Europeans have to overcome two traumas. The first trauma is the two world wars that created Europe's dependency on the United States, which indeed saved us twice in history. The second trauma is the holocaust, and now we let Israel do whatever it wants because of this. These two traumas have changed our perceptions and attitudes.

Spain has not lived through these two traumas, and the Americans didn't save us. Quite the opposite: they contributed to Spain's continued dictatorship because of their geopolitical interests. So Germans or Poles may feel this gratitude towards the US, but the Spanish don't. Furthermore, we didn't kill anyone in the Second World War; we were not responsible for the holocaust. On the contrary, we saved a lot of Jews. The fact that we don't have these two traumas allows Spain to adopt

a much more proactive approach. This is something that should be highlighted: Spain has a different approach not only to multilateralism but also to multipolarity.

LA: Pedro Sánchez has been very active in deepening relations with China. Is this benefiting just Spain, or the entire EU as well?

JB: Sánchez has gone to China fewer times than the German chancellors. How many times did Angela Merkel travel to China? Nobody was worried. How many times has President Macron gone to China? I think Pedro Sánchez is doing well in broadening the relationship with China. And, like it or not, China is at the forefront of technological development today.

The US is a financial, military and entertainment superpower. But China is the biggest economic superpower. China produces one third of the world's industrial output. The country is at the forefront of the digital and green transitions. China is exporting electricity from renewable sources while the US is exporting hydrocarbons: dirty products. I don't think we can avoid dealing with China in our foreign policy. No one can.

LA: In April, thousands of Progressives gathered in Barcelona for the Global Progressive Mobilisation. They also went there to learn. What can they learn from the Spanish leadership on foreign policy issues and global affairs?

JB: We don't want to be like a teacher who tells others what to do and how to do it. But it's true that today, on our continent, there is a wave of authoritarian regimes. Fortunately, the recent elections in Hungary showed that another way is possible. Pedro Sánchez has been the president of the Spanish government for seven years, and despite claims of government instability, the Spanish Socialists have performed well and served as a buffer against the far-right wave.

*Josep Borrell,
President of CIDOB,
former High Representative
of the Union for Foreign
Affairs and Security Policy
and Vice-President of the
European Commission*



*László Andor,
FEPS Secretary General*





PROGRESSIVE READS & VIEWS



The age of insecurity

by Paul Copeland



Lorenza Antonucci

Insecurity Politics

How Unstable Lives Lead to Populist Support

Princeton University Press, 2026

I spent the first 18 years of my life growing up in Stoke-on-Trent, a former industrial city in the UK's West Midlands. When Margaret Thatcher closed the coal mines in the 1980s, the fortunes and pride of the city plummeted further, as the pottery industry – once the ceramics capital of the world – was exposed to the aggressive forces of neoliberalism. Much of this decline continued under New Labour after 1997, while the austerity policies of the post 2010 period turned fear into a more enduring sense of hopelessness: that Stoke-on-Trent was both beyond saving and largely ignored by the mainstream parties.

Herein lies a potted history of why populist political movements, including the 2016 referendum on UK membership of the EU in which Stoke-on-Trent voted 69 per cent to leave, have been on the rise across much of Europe. A version of Stoke-on-Trent's malaise can be found in countless places across the continent, including Montesilvano in Italy, where Lorenza Antonucci, author of *Insecurity Politics. How Unstable Lives Lead to Populist Support*, also spent the first 18 years of her life. The populist turn across Europe is often explained as a consequence of the dissatisfaction of the 'left

behind' in places such as Stoke-on-Trent and Montesilvano. But the story, Antonucci convincingly argues, is more complex.

► *To fully comprehend growing support for populist parties, Antonucci suggests we must view the issue through the lens of insecurity.*

To fully comprehend growing support for populist parties, Antonucci suggests we must view the issue through the lens of insecurity. Crucially, this entails going beyond financial insecurity, on which much existing research focuses, to include work-related insecurity. The latter encompasses issues such as contract stability, employment protection, work-related stress, autonomy and prospects for career progression. Financial insecurity, meanwhile, includes deprivation

in meeting basic needs, the ability to pay bills and unexpected expenses, and the capacity to save or repay debt. By integrating these two dimensions, Antonucci directs attention to the everyday lived realities of insecurity. The new politics of insecurity emerges at the intersection of these socio-economic factors, which are mutually reinforcing and readily exploited by populist movements.

Antonucci further divides Europe into five 'security regimes' broadly aligned with different welfare state typologies. While each regime has distinct configurations of work and financial security, all have been trending towards greater insecurity over the past four decades. To understand this shift, she points to transformations within the welfare state as a key driver. In particular, **Antonucci draws on the concept of social investment, which seeks to equip individuals to be resilient and adaptable across economic cycles. This approach prioritises preparing and mobilising individuals through supply-side policies, most notably investment in education and training, alongside benefit conditionality and the liberalisation of employment protection. It is the epitome of individualism.**

While such policies have contributed to rising employment levels across the EU, Antonucci argues that they have done so at the cost of security. They intensify competition between workers, placing downward pressure on job quality, wages and employment stability. Systems of social protection have also become less generous in terms of income replacement. The overall result has been a generalised increase in both workplace and financial insecurity.

► *Paradoxically, policies designed to promote resilience and opportunity are contributing to instability and insecurity.*

This critique of social investment is both timely and overdue. As Antonucci notes, the paradigm has become mainstream across major political institutions in Europe, including the EU itself. **Paradoxically, policies designed to promote resilience and opportunity are contributing to instability and insecurity.** Moreover, social investment risks trapping individuals in cycles of deprivation, even as overall welfare spending has increased. The hyper commodification of individuals appears to demand ever greater financial resources simply to maintain stability.

Importantly, **growing insecurity is no longer confined to the most vulnerable groups such as the precariat, the working poor, or the unemployed, but increasingly affects the lower middle classes as well.** Insecurity, then, is extending its tentacles. Antonucci supports this claim with substantial empirical evidence demonstrating that financial insecurity and insecure working conditions are among the strongest and most consistent predictors of populist attitudes and voting behaviour, with insecurity being exploited by populist parties across the continent. If these findings are not a wake-up call for Europe, it is difficult to know what would be.

To paraphrase Karl Polanyi, it may be time to move beyond our obsolete social investment mentality. Sometimes you read a book and wish you had written it. This is one of them. The book fits well with broader understandings of state transformation since the post-war golden age, as well as the dominant power of global finance. Some of the growing support for radical right political movements can also be attributed to social media. It would be easy to criticise Antonucci for this omission, but as a sociologist, it was never the book's intention to go down these paths, and the analysis holds its own.

► *Growing insecurity is no longer confined to the most vulnerable groups such as the precariat, the working poor, or the unemployed, but increasingly affects the lower middle classes as well.*



*Paul Copeland,
Professor in Public Policy,
Queen Mary University, London*

Have you ever tried to define 'Social Europe'?

by François Balate



Dominic Afscharian

*Ideas of Social Europe
Enhancing or Eroding European Integration?*

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Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025

In a room in the European Parliament, a handful of people are discussing political strategy. Public opinion and narratives are on the table, then suddenly someone raises the question of 'Social Europe'. Eyes are rolled. Not because the advancement of social rights for people in Europe is not worth considering, but mainly because the concept of 'Social Europe' seems impossible to understand. What does fighting for a 'more social Europe' mean? How do you translate this concretely? The book *Ideas of Social Europe – Enhancing or Eroding European Integration?* by Dominic Afscharian would have come in handy.

Afscharian's book has a similar starting point to this anecdotal meeting in the European Parliament. From the outset, the book states that 'Social Europe' is a broad term with countless possible meanings. To address this hurdle, the author returns to the foundational aspect of politics: ideas. **Big and small ideas are often the first step in major societal transformations. Ideas allow a vision for society to be crafted and its components articulated. For Social Europe, ideas are therefore a good place to start.**

► *Big and small ideas are often the first step in major societal transformations. Ideas allow a vision for society to be crafted and its components articulated. For Social Europe, ideas are therefore a good place to start.*

From the very beginning, the author highlights the challenge of defining Social Europe. What is the focus point? Is it the 'social' or the 'Europe'? To try and define it, we are presented with various keys to unlock this conundrum: a limited or extended understanding of the policy fields (from poverty prevention to a wider range of policies, such as education, health and housing), the underlying principles of social policy (solidarity, universalism) and its goals (equality,

the methods and policy tools (from coordination to hard legislation), and finally the degree of European integration pursued (from loose support to national welfare states to a more centralised approach). Ideas can be diverse, and one needs to know which to pursue.

In a very pedagogical manner, Afscharian walks us through the roles of the different actors in the European social policymaking game: the Council of the European Union, the European Parliament, the European Commission, European political parties and the Court of Justice. **He presents a widely shared assumption by those who keep a close eye on interinstitutional dynamics: Social Europe is on hold because the Council blocks it, because the European Commission is driven by neoliberalism and because the European Parliament is both too weak and dominated by conservative forces, despite being the voice of the people.**

Against this backdrop, Afscharian's book comes into its full strength. Drawing on the

theoretical background of social constructivism and discursive institutionalism, the author presents a robust analytical framework that examines interactions among ideas, actors, institutions, power dynamics and evolving knowledge markets to deconstruct the assumption presented above. **He digs deep into political party manifestos and European Commission working documents to see how and where Social Europe was actually made.** Without giving away any conclusion, the assumption does not really hold. In Afscharian's opinion, the still-to-be-defined Social Europe would not suddenly become a reality if the European Parliament were to have much more power, as it tends to adopt minimalist consensuses.

One great value of the book is its extensive case study on the European Unemployment Benefit Scheme. Afscharian applies his analytical framework in detail to show the evolution of an idea that was first proposed in 1975 in the report on the Economic and Monetary Union by Robert Marjolin (a strong supporter of former French Prime Minister Léon Blum's Popular Front and a close colleague of Jean Monnet). Afscharian shows that this idea only became a reality in 2020 with the temporary SURE instrument (Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency), introduced during the Covid-19 crisis to save millions of jobs affected by the economic downturn, notably thanks to the support of then-Commissioner Nicolas Schmit.

► *Afscharian shows that the European Commission is not necessarily the only source of neoliberal proposals, and that dynamics in member states' governments (namely Germany) play an important role.*

While the line between these two dates is long, it is also far from being straight. With his analytical framework and detailed research, **Afscharian shows that the European Commission is not necessarily the only source of neoliberal proposals and that dynamics within member-state governments (namely Germany) play an important role.** Meanwhile, the European Parliament – the so-called expression of the will of the people – and political parties were rather distant or late adopters of the idea for SURE, which originated within the administration and advanced towards a more Social Europe.

All in all, Afscharian's book leaves us with some important conclusions and one invitation.

One must be careful not to fall for the widely shared assumption noted earlier or into a discursive trap. Ideas that become political reality are not necessarily the ones shouted the loudest or branded in the glitziest way. They rely on complex dynamics and on the role of individual actors, regardless of where they belong on the interinstitutional chessboard. Ideas take time, persuasion and constant work to be defined clearly. This is the complex task of policymaking.

The book invites us, Socialists and Social Democrats, to do the internal work to see if we really have a clear grasp of what kind of Social Europe we stand for. What is our Social? What is our Europe? Which levers are we ready to activate in the European Parliament? What kind of debate are we ready to organise inside our political family to advance social rights for all in Europe?

Afscharian's book is built on extensive material from 2009 to 2019, as well as on some of the crisis-reaction initiatives of the early 2020s. However, the landscape is different now. Today, the dominant ideas – or at least words – in Brussels are 'competitiveness' and 'deregulation'. The dominant forces are the conservatives with the support of the far right. When it comes

to Social Europe they have a clear definition: no Social, no Europe. It is for this reason that **Socialists and Social Democrats need to join forces to redefine their socio-economic agenda and offer a clear vision of what Social Europe is**, when the cost of living and affordability are today the number one concerns for citizens across the Union.

The book *Ideas of Social Europe – Enhancing or Eroding European Integration?* invites us to work and to reassess our ideas and strategies. Hopefully, next time, people will then seem less puzzled in that room in the European Parliament.

► *The book invites us, Socialists and Social Democrats, to do the internal work to see if we really have a clear grasp of what kind of Social Europe we stand for.*



François Balate,
FEPS Policy Analyst on Social
and Academic Coordinator



No good men

by Shahrbanoo Sadat
Germany, France, Norway,
Denmark, Afghanistan (2026)

Whenever one thinks of a movie set in Afghanistan, one's imagination is transported to US tanks in a rocky desert, American troops conducting search operations in dusty villages inhabited by women completely covered in light blue burqas, children playing with deadly remnants of war, and old bearded men on the doorsteps of impoverished dwellings. The opening film of the 2026 Berlin Film Festival, *No Good Men*, by Afghan filmmaker Shahrbanoo Sadat, is not that kind of movie. This is not only rare, but it comes as a complete surprise from the very first scene. The film depicts an almost 'normal' country where daily life goes on: women go to work, drop their children off at the kindergarten, chat with friends and get married, all amidst the military checkpoints set up to prevent Taliban suicide bombings.

This apparent 'normality' is denied not just by the presence of armed guards, but also by the casual everyday dialogues. These conversations portray a society where women are treated as third-rate citizens, and where there are, quite literally, "no good men". Every single father, brother and son is taught from an early age that women are mere property – to be beaten, abused and expected to fall pregnant every couple of years. Through the eyes of these Afghan women, there are no exceptions. Even the most seemingly decent men – the good fathers, the gentle colleagues – ultimately share this regressive view of society and gender roles. Set in 2021, the film shows how women like Naru – the lead character of the movie, played by Sadat herself – who choose to fight an impossible battle for equality, are confronted daily by deep-seated scorn and prejudice.

What makes this film so remarkable is its entirely female perspective. Based on the director's own life and filmed in Germany for obvious reasons (it is genuinely impressive how seamlessly the director recreated Kabul within a German landscape), the movie explores the 'normalisation of horror' of Afghan women's lives. The backdrop is the fleeting window of opportunity that Afghanistan experienced just before US President Joe Biden announced the withdrawal of troops in April 2021, while the Taliban were violently reclaiming the country and, eventually, Kabul.

Though marketed worldwide as a romantic comedy, *No Good Men* is hardly that. Yet it masterfully portrays an ongoing tragedy with wit and lightness. Ultimately, it leaves us with some hope: perhaps 'love' – the word Afghan women hear only in movies – might eventually win and maybe, out there, there is at least 'one good man'. Unfortunately, this glimmer of hope is soured by the horrific reality of the gender apartheid that the Taliban are implementing in Afghanistan.

Hedwig Giusto



Persepolis

by Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud
France, United States (2007)

"Freedom has a price". It is on this bittersweet line that *Persepolis* ends, reflecting well the coming-of-age story of an Iranian girl who, against the backdrop of a country in turmoil, simply wants to grow up and 'be a normal teenager'.

Adapted from the eponymous autobiographical graphic novel by Marjane Satrapi, who died in early June this year, the film received widespread critical acclaim and prestigious awards, including the Cannes Film Festival Jury Prize and an Academy Award nomination for Best Animated Feature. The cartoon uses mostly black-and-white and minimalist hand-drawn animation. This style captures, with poetry and creativity, Satrapi's childhood in a country gripped by violence. Raised by left-wing intellectual parents who nurtured her curiosity and independent spirit, young Satrapi grows into a witty, irrepressibly inquisitive child, forever questioning and probing the world around her. She comes of age during the fall of the shah's dictatorship and the brief moment of hope that follows the revolution, only to watch that promise dissolve into the rule of the mullahs, with profound consequences for her family and countless others.

As the regime grows steadily more oppressive, her sharp tongue, independent mind and hunger for freedom put a target on her back, and she is sent away to Europe for protection. There, she finds a freedom that is double-edged: liberating in its opportunities for self-discovery, particularly as a young woman, and in its access to everything once forbidden; painful in the loneliness and alienation that accompany exile. Caught between a country she cannot bear to be in and her homeland that will not accept her, she is drawn home by love for her family, only to discover she has fully outgrown the narrow space the regime allows its people, especially its women. There is no fitting back in.

Satrapi does not shy away from the hardships she lived through, which could easily have made the film bleak and heavy to watch. Instead, she turns it into everything the regime tried to crush: a creative, warm and witty celebration of freedom, however bitter it can feel. It is, too, a tribute to the women who shaped her life: her mother, who never softened the truth and nurtured her daughter's defiant spirit, and, above all, her grandmother, who anchored her sense of self and kept her grounded – notably through her delicious sense of humour. *Persepolis* stands as the powerful legacy left behind by Satrapi, a work whose message still resonates strongly today as the Iranian regime maintains its tight grip on women's hopes for freedom.

Morgana Cochaux



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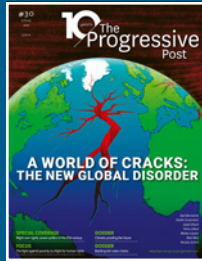
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This series was produced in the framework of the Feminist Foreign Policy Progressive Voices Collective (FFPPVC). This project, led by FEPS in collaboration with Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and strategic partners, aims to gather a community of feminist experts from across the globe and create a platform for them to exchange ideas, policy approaches, and practices in feminist foreign policy.



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10 years The Progressive Post

N°31 - summer 2026

FEPS
FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES



Avenue des Arts, 46
1000 Brussels - Belgium
+32 (0)2 234 69 00
info@feps-europe.eu
www.feps-europe.eu

ISSN 2506-7362

3.00 €