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A lost generation? The challenges and hopes of European youth

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Europe's young people are at a critical crossroads. They were born into the promise of a safe and prosperous continent, but today face a perfect storm of challenges. The issues explored in this edition of the *European View*, from economic instability and the complexities of the digital world to the threats of disinformation and rising extremism, are not abstract. They are concrete realities that shape the daily lives of millions. They are why well-educated graduates cannot afford homes of their own, why promising careers are being overshadowed by automation and why trust in our democratic institutions is eroding.

We must confront *three core problems* facing the younger generation in Europe.

- *Economic insecurity*. The dream of economic stability, which was a given for past generations, has become incredibly hard to reach. Soaring housing costs and the rise of precarious gig-economy jobs make it extremely difficult for young people to build a stable financial foundation. Addressing this economic instability must be a top priority for the EU.
- *The digital divide and disinformation*. While the digital world offers unprecedented opportunities, it also brings significant risks. The constant flood of disinformation and the isolating effects of social media erode trust, fuel division and make it hard to distinguish fact from fiction. We must give our youth the tools to navigate this complex information landscape.

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- *The rise of populism and extremism*. For my generation, the main enemy was the Iron Curtain of Communism, a clear threat to freedom. Today's challenge is the new wave of demagogues who exploit fear and division. They offer simplistic solutions to complex problems, eroding democratic values and trust in established institutions. This is not just an EU problem; it is a global one. The spread of disinformation and emotional manipulation creates virtual walls between people and nations, leading to increased international tensions and the breakdown of global cooperative efforts. The rise of insular, nationalistic policies undermines international alliances and security frameworks, making the world more volatile and unpredictable.

Despite these challenges, three hopes remain for the future. This is a generation with immense talent and resilience. Their hopes are not for a return to the past, but for a future that is more just, sustainable and inclusive. They are the innovators, activists and entrepreneurs who are already forging a new path forward.

- *Resilience and engagement*. I am encouraged that young people have not become apathetic about public life. They are voting in elections and demanding that politics serves them. This active engagement is a powerful driver for positive change that we must support.
- *Optimism about the EU*. This generation is not burdened by the historical baggage of the Cold War. They see Europe not as a fragile political project, but as a shared home where they can freely live, study, work and travel. They hope for a more unified, secure and just Europe—one that leads on security and affordability.
- *European values and identity*. Values are the guiding principles in a complex world. The values of Judeo-Christian teachings and secular humanism provide a strong foundation for our society. At their core is freedom—freedom of thought, expression and choice. This is the most important thing we have. We must not let anyone take this freedom from us, whether demagogues or those at the ideological extremes.

It is our duty, as policymakers, thinkers and leaders, to listen, understand and act. We must not just treat the symptoms of young people's frustration but also confront the underlying systemic problems that have created this situation. This is not just about helping them: it is about securing the very future of the European project. The Martens Centre is dedicated to this mission, and I am glad we can present this collection of insights. I hope it will contribute to an even deeper understanding of what troubles the younger generation and help us to find ways to effectively face these challenges.

Author biography

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Article

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Creativity or submission? Young Europeans face generative artificial intelligence in a hyper-regulated market

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Abstract
Young Europeans are already immersed in a new world where generative technologies are developing in unpredictable ways. The article aims to assess the growing risks and opportunities of work and to identify ways to be creative leaders in the new productive processes. The risk of submission to algorithms might depend on the hyper-regulatory framework and the consequent worry of civil or criminal liability. Simple, clear and soft rules, holistic education, full involvement in firms' strategies, objective-focused working, profit sharing and appropriate remuneration should promote young workers' sense of responsibility and critical thinking. Only a business-friendly environment will stimulate a creative approach to generative artificial intelligence. In this context, young people in Europe might promote a new season of entrepreneurship and self-employment.

Keywords
Generative AI, Soft regulation, Business-friendly environment, Creativity, Submission, Holistic education, Workers' involvement, Appropriate remuneration

Introduction

Young Europeans are facing significant challenges in the new productive and working world. The second industrial revolution is now definitively over. But, paradoxically, the organisational models typical of mass production are still used in services and even in education. Technology is changing very quickly and in unpredictable ways. This is the result of human intelligence, even if technology seems to be developing a growing

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ability to generate itself. In some situations, this could lead to people being controlled and led by machines. However, as Pope Leo XIV recently stated, 'the person is not a system of algorithms: he or she is a creature, relationship, mystery' (Leo XIV 2025). The present article aims to assess the risks and opportunities for young people at work and to identify the ways for them to become creative players in the new productive processes.

The European regulatory framework in the time of artificial intelligence

Consistent with its traditional vocation, with the arrival of AI the EU has immediately introduced new rules (Artificial Intelligence (AI) Act, European Parliament and Council 2024). This heavy-handed regulation introduces prohibitions even before the phenomenon has been fully understood, based on the incorrect belief that it can be restrained. More broadly, European institutions should now reconsider the entire regulatory framework that has been developed over a long period of stability and predictability. In this new context, it is precisely the excess of rigid, sanctioning rules that could cause European citizens to adopt the wrong attitude towards intelligent machines. Strong deregulation could increase people's capabilities while, *sic stantibus rebus*, new machines could be largely used as a shield to protect individuals from possible civil or criminal liability. The former would raise the level of human creativity, while the latter would result in a dangerous decline due to the persistent delegation of decisions to algorithms, as recent research, albeit limited to routine tasks, has shown.

The study, produced by researchers at Microsoft and Carnegie Mellon University, entitled 'The Impact of Generative AI on Critical Thinking: Self-Reported Reductions in Cognitive Effort and Confidence Effects From a Survey of Knowledge Workers' (Lee et al. 2025), provides significant findings. The report is based on a survey of 319 individuals, who provided 936 examples of how they use generative AI in their work. Notably, the report reveals that excessive reliance on these tools can impair critical-thinking abilities and result in a 'deterioration of cognitive faculties that ought to be preserved' (Lee et al. 2025, 1). According to researchers, 'a key irony of automation is that by mechanising routine tasks and leaving exception handling to human users, you deprive them of opportunities to exercise their judgement and strengthen their cognitive abilities' (Lee et al. 2025, 1). This results in their cognitive abilities becoming atrophied, leaving them unprepared when exceptions do arise.

In Europe, we should also consider the less-regulated frameworks of our main competitors. One of the new US president's first executive orders was to revoke Biden's act on AI (The White House 2023). That legislation required AI developers to carry out safety tests to ensure the AI met certain standards before releasing their products to the public and sharing the results with the government. However, the paradox here is that Europe considered President Biden's action to be late and weak. This greater freedom in the US has immediately attracted significant investments aimed at competing with

China, which is no longer content to simply copy others' ideas. Thanks to its entrepreneurial state and lack of constraints protecting users and workers, China is now producing powerful innovations. In this context, Europe's inclination to hyper-regulate will only serve to sideline the continent in terms of technological evolution, causing the entire EU economy to lose competitiveness. Therefore, it is clear that Europe will also have to adapt to a global framework characterised by few rules. In its own way.

This technological leap forward requires a new approach that aligns with its dynamism and the legitimate goal of orienting it towards the common good. In the initial phase, at least, careful and continuous monitoring, alongside the production of simple, adaptable documents, such as guidelines, technical standards, best practices, codes of conduct and collective bargaining regulations, could be more effective. Soft laws or certified self-regulation by economic and social actors would encourage competitive innovation and promote transparency, thereby enabling institutional control.

Holistic education

The above perspective highlights the importance of equipping young Europeans with the skills needed to use technologies creatively and engage with generative AI with critical thinking. This involves providing them with the ability to discern information, think divergently, make autonomous and responsible decisions, take calculated risks and embrace the *schöpferische Zerstörung* (creative destruction) described by Joseph Schumpeter (1942). It also means accepting that failure can be a stepping stone to success.

The talents of every young person can be identified at an early age and matched with the appropriate educational guidance. A wide range of interlinked educational pathways, including dual apprenticeships based on the German model, could provide all young people with access to higher education, regardless of their social background. These pathways could also help to reduce the number of school dropouts. In each pathway, albeit in different ways, it is necessary to review traditional teaching methods and content thoroughly, with the aim of providing individuals with a well-rounded education. In the works of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, 'heart, mind and hand' are the three pillars of holistic education. These correspond to moral education, theoretical knowledge and learning based on practical experiences. These three dimensions are clearly interconnected, encouraging dialogue and joint programme planning between educational institutions, families and businesses. Taking such an approach would help schools to overcome corporate and self-referential attitudes, develop transversal capabilities such as interpersonal skills and creative problem-solving, and address the most challenging issue of moral education.

In this regard, the theme of the shared roots of European culture and our anthropological perspective emerges once again. Conversely, the issue of freedom of educational choice among the available options arises. Europe has long been multicultural, but as with any welcoming land, it does not abandon its identity or its principles. Rather, it

affirms them as a prerequisite for tolerant dialogue, though obviously not to the extent of tolerating acts that offend human dignity.

At a time of clear need for radical innovation in education, the EU could initiate a decision-making process to remove the legal status of educational qualifications. Within an essential regulatory framework, this would encourage competition between education providers and ensure that the most effective training environments are recognised by the market, guaranteeing access for all deserving young people.

It is only by fully educating the younger generation that Europe will be able to transform itself into a vast start-up community and spearhead creative initiatives.

Workers' involvement and profit sharing

Young Europeans are joining companies that have adopted new organisational models, moving away from rigid vertical hierarchies and repetitive, segmented tasks. Employees at these companies are expected to work towards objectives and achieve results, enjoying greater flexibility in terms of working hours and locations. However, this does not mean working in isolation. On the contrary, horizontal collaboration and relationships develop within teams assigned to specific projects. Everyone is expected to contribute all their abilities to the company's goals, not just their technical skills. Consequently, the interests of the company and the worker's desire to participate in decision-making processes tend to align.

The experience of EU member states with regard to collective labour relations has been varied. These relations have ranged from regulated forms of co-determination to recurring ideological conflicts within companies throughout the twentieth century. The present moment is optimal for the initiation of a virtuous convergence towards participatory experiences that are consultative, organisational, financial and managerial. In circumstances where companies encounter difficulties in both recruiting and retaining young talents, the provision of involvement opportunities has been demonstrated to engender a sense of belonging to the company among employees more than a rhetorical declaration of corporate identity principles (Waller 2021).

Appropriate remuneration of young people

In a time when employees are requested to dedicate themselves entirely to the objectives of the company, they are entitled to be rewarded on the basis of their own expectations and needs, as well as those of their families. It is evident that younger employees have strong aspirations for rotational programmes of experiences that engender personal fulfilment and enhance their professional competences. Furthermore, they seek remuneration that is perceived as being in fair proportion to their contribution to organisational outcomes. In addition, there has been an expressed desire for social benefits and services that facilitate day-to-day living, bolster purchasing power and foster a sense of identification with the corporate community. This shift signifies a transition in collective labour

relations from the national to the company level. National collective agreements, due to the critical mass they guarantee, should retain the mission of developing sustainable health, social welfare and pension funds that supplement the benefits provided by the state. However, it is only at the local level, through the establishment of collective agreements and personalised contracts, that the periodic recognition of wage increases linked to additional skills and responsibilities, the definition of bonuses connected to results, and the addition of further benefits dedicated to the well-being of workers and their families can be achieved.

The concept of remuneration encompasses both direct and indirect forms, serving not only to address fundamental material needs but also functioning as a gauge of the quality of work performed. Consequently, young people demonstrate an aversion to a system in which wages are determined exclusively through national collective bargaining in a uniform manner, evolving predominantly in accordance with age. The ongoing transformation in the workforce has resulted in a scenario where adequately trained and motivated young individuals can often exhibit significantly higher levels of creativity and productivity in comparison to their older colleagues. In a strong transition, long-standing experience and habits might be a hindrance to the necessary discontinuity.

Conclusion

The young generations of Europe, both in the present and the immediate future, will encounter remarkable opportunities due to generative AI, provided they receive adequate education and are motivated to assume risks. As has been demonstrated, there are inherent threats; however, these can be mitigated by liberating creativity from the numerous constraints of hyper-regulation, which has been generated on the unrealistic assumption of zero pathology. In particular, Europe will need to encourage self-employment and a fresh start after failures in good faith. It is imperative that fiscal and bureaucratic deregulation is both bold and discontinuous with respect to the previous European legislature. The decarbonisation targets must be reasonable in terms of deadlines and, through technological neutrality, defined in such a way as to drive innovation. The alternatives, between creativity and submission of labour, will be contingent on the quality (and quantity) of rules. Two opposing outcomes are both possible.

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Article

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Who will pay for young people's pensions? Filling the gaps with the capital markets union

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Abstract

Demographic ageing poses severe challenges to the sustainability of public pension systems in Europe. Many member states rely heavily on pay-as-you-go arrangements, which, combined with longer life expectancy and relatively low retirement ages, are generating persistent pension deficits. Traditional reforms, such as increasing the retirement age, raising productivity or adjusting benefits, have proven politically difficult due to deficit bias, the problem of political agency and widespread loss aversion. This article argues that, in addition to such measures, the EU's capital markets union could play a central role in addressing pension shortfalls. By fostering deeper financial integration, the capital markets union could enhance investment opportunities, promote growth and reduce the vulnerability of member states to the sovereign-bank 'doom loop'.

Keywords

Pension deficits, Ageing society, Pay-as-you-go, Capital markets union, EU, Financial integration, Sovereign-bank doom loop, Intergenerational fairness

Introduction

The future finances of EU member states are in trouble. That is, if you take the projections of pension deficits seriously. Demographic changes combined with pay-as-you-go

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provisions will lead to large and persistent shortfalls in state-provided pensions. Dealing with this will be an important issue for many years to come.

This article traces the causes of the pension shortfall and moves from there to a vision for future developments. Specifically, I will focus on the potential for the capital markets union (CMU) to play a role in improving investment opportunities, increasing economic growth and mitigating financial market stress in times of crisis.

The problem: a large pension shortfall

Pensions are expensive. In the social model of most European countries, life after the period of paid work is one in which pension funds, the state or any other institutions are expected to pay retirement benefits. These benefits need to be high enough to sustain a reasonable living standard.

Pensions in most countries are high enough. Although pensioners in most countries are not as well-off as those in the Netherlands, a retired person in a European country can be expected to get by without having to work. People do work in retirement, and usually for their own good and that of others. But in all but exceptional cases, this is not necessary for survival.

Although the replacement rate of a typical pension plan is not 100% of the final wage, people get by because costs are lower in retirement. Commuting, lunches and other costs are gone. And there is time to do 'housework', maintaining and repairing things yourself. People suffer a bit of a consumption shock around retirement (Banks et al. 1998), but they adjust fairly quickly once they have adapted to the new situation.

The bad news is that public pension costs—the spending by governments on providing retirement benefits—are rising. Figure 1 documents the projections for the rising costs in a selection of European countries.

The reasons that costs are rising differ from country to country and depend on the extent to which pension plans are funded (Pape 2023). The shortfall countries have pension systems through which retirement benefits are mostly state-provided. The benefits received by pensioners are paid from the contributions of the working population. In pension jargon this is called 'pay-as-you-go' (PAYG), as the state pays the pensions as it goes along through time. No capital is set aside, and no investment returns accrue that could pay for future pensions.

In countries with low expenditures, a PAYG system is combined with a funded system of occupational pensions. The pension funds provide capital to businesses, and the investment returns contribute to the affordability of retirement incomes. Countries with funded pension plans have relatively stable government expenditures which are not expected to rise much in the future.

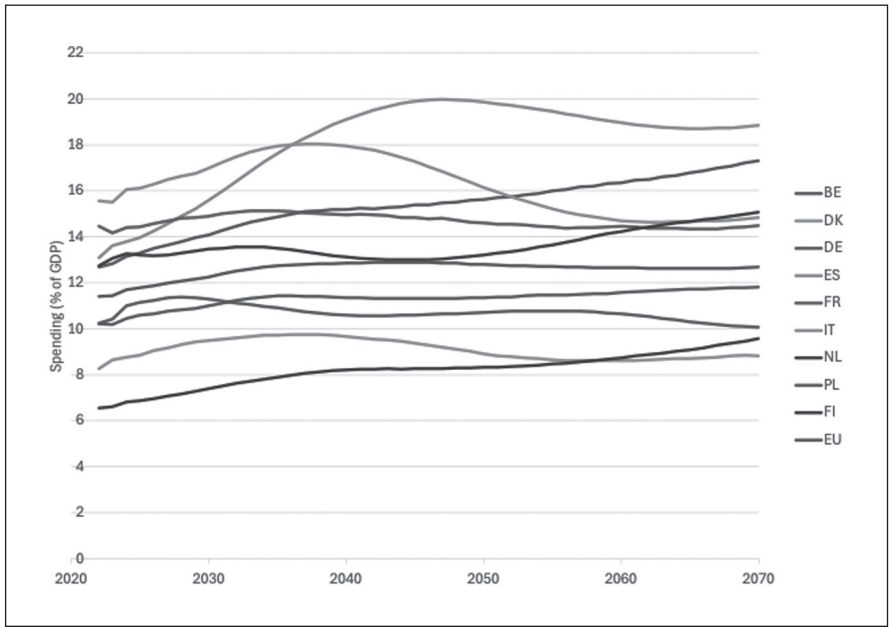

Figure 1. Projections for public pension costs 2022–70.
Source: Data from European Commission, Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs 2024, Table II.1.93, 219.
Note: Public pension costs as a percentage of GDP, for selected European countries. The calculations assume no reforms, that is, the pension age, as well as the labour participation rate of workers aged 60 and over, is unchanged.

It is not merely the way they provide pension benefits that characterises the countries with a projected shortfall in the PAYG system. They also suffer from a relatively low retirement age, and unemployment is usually higher. This is a triple problem: an out-of-pocket expenditure for the state, a long retirement period and a low base of workers to pay the necessary taxes.

To add to the bad news, the situation in Figure 2 visualises just one element of higher costs in an ageing society. Depending on the country, other costs, such as healthcare, can pose a larger problem than the one presented by pensions. Figure 2 shows the 'grey pressure' as computed by the United Nations.

The demographics shown in Figure 2 will lead to pressures on more than just the pension systems. For example, in the Netherlands the increase in PAYG payments is much smaller than projected healthcare cost increases. The predominant cost in the future will be expenditure on long-term care.

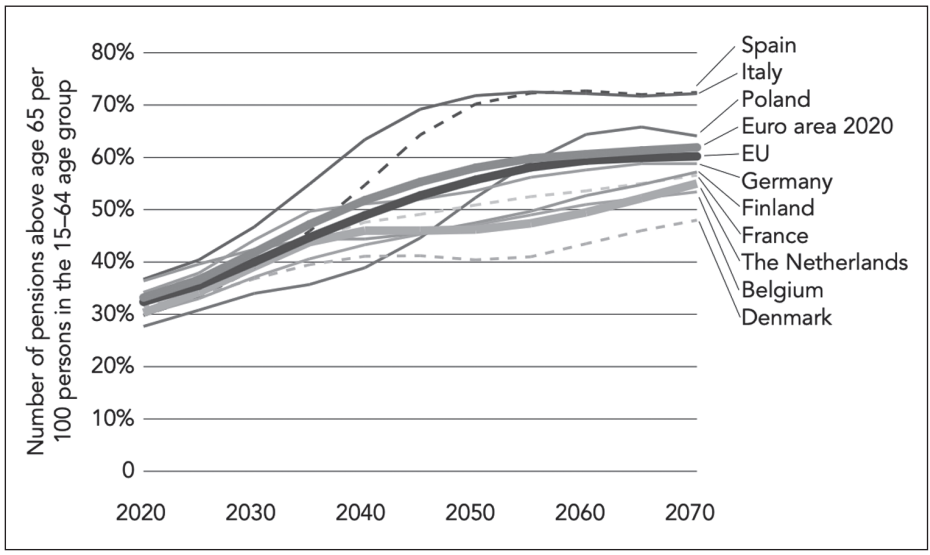

Figure 2. Estimated population pressure 2020–70.
Source: Reproduced by permission from the Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy 2024, 9.
Note: United Nations projections for the number of people aged 65+ as a percentage of the number of those aged 15–64, for the years 2020 to 2070.

Origins of the pension problem

The pension problem has been known for decades. Why was it not solved earlier?

Three insights from the field of political economy can help us to understand the causes. First, it has been known for a long time that governments have a tendency to overspend. Most countries run a budget deficit, for most of the time (Alesina et al. 2008). This pattern, also called the *deficit bias*, is a result of political forces that, apparently, make it difficult to balance the budget. The deficit bias is also seen in the reluctance to undertake pension reform: the financial costs are in the future while the real political costs of reform are now. So, reform is postponed, and spending on other priorities can continue.

Second, there is political agency. Concrete and current spending projects can be communicated to voters easily. Far-away cost run-ups are much more difficult to communicate. Voters are limited in their ability to effectively monitor the state's real financial situation. The demise of traditional parties in the centre of the political spectrum has made this problem more salient (Mair 2006). This is not to say that past generations of politicians found it easier to avoid deficits, but certainly the new generation is faced with new problems of legitimacy and agency.

Third, people are loss averse. In the words of Burton Malkiel, 'a dollar loss is 2½ times as painful as a dollar gain is pleasurable' (Malkiel 2014, 190). And since both politicians and voters are only human, they are both susceptible to this bias. The bias occurs

because a 'loss' is coded against a reference point that can be arbitrary, anchored to some past event or expectations of the future (Kahneman and Tversky 1979).

The loss-averse bias is another factor that induces people to postpone painful interventions until they are really necessary (Vis 2009). Small losses, in particular, are the most avoided. This pattern precludes political interventions that are relatively small, such as raising the retirement age by a few months: the political costs are high, but the gains are slight.

The above mechanisms should not be read as excuses for politicians who have pushed finding solutions into the future. Politics is about making the choices necessary for current and future generations. Given the projected shortfalls, more should have been done to ensure that government finances are sustainable. However, these mechanisms outlined help to explain how *hard* these choices are and what forces are preventing the implementation of easy solutions. Politicians are representatives, and the will of the people has clearly not been in the direction of enacting painful reforms.

To make pensions sustainable in the longer term, a number of measures are available that could alleviate the stress in the system: raising the retirement age, raising productivity and labour force participation, cutting indexation or increasing taxes (European Commission, Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs 2024). Sensible policies will be a combination of measures rather than any single action.

The CMU as a growth mechanism

In his 1933 paper 'National Self-Sufficiency', John Maynard Keynes argued that international trade and openness would benefit all nations. The exception was finance, an idea expressed in his famous quote, 'above all, let finance be primarily national' (Keynes 1933, 756).

It seems that the EU's member states have heeded this advice. It has long been clear that the EU lacks a proper, functioning single market for savings and investment. The CMU has been on the agenda for a long time (Demertzis et al. 2021). It is necessary to improve financial stability and to finance high-growth sectors. This includes investments in emission-reducing technologies. European economies are mostly bank-based and must take a quantum leap in this respect.

The Letta report of 2024 made more concrete proposals on why the CMU is needed and what it should achieve (Letta 2024). It is needed because, in the EU, companies and financiers seeking to lend and invest across borders face more 'capital frictions' (i.e. obstacles) than they would in the US.

These capital frictions are not necessarily regulatory in character. Campos et al. (2025) show that in product market competition as well as financial market regulations, the harmonisation that has taken place in the EU has led to a decrease in the regulatory burden. However, most EU member states have forms of labour protection that hamper growth and innovation. This is not to say that US-style flexibility is necessary, but that

attention is needed to the design of these policies. It is possible to have labour security *and* growth, but only Germany and the Nordic countries seem to have achieved this (Schoefer 2025, 47).

Also, non-tariff trade barriers are estimated by the International Monetary Fund (2024) to be as high as 44% for goods and 110% for services. These estimates have been arrived at by comparing the amount of intra-EU trade that takes place with what would be expected given similar economies, distances and so on. Apparently, EU member states trade much less with each other than we would expect. For a free-trade area like the EU, this is quite worrying and deserves more political attention.

The need for a CMU is shown in the recent refusal by the German government to allow the acquisition of Germany's Commerzbank by the Italian UniCredit, although the anti-trust authorities had approved the plan (*Reuters* 2025). This is typical for the EU, a union in which cross-border banking firms are still rare (Montagner 2025).

Of course, EU member states need more than financing to raise productivity. The prospects of young people in some of the southern and eastern countries are not always hopeful, as the high youth unemployment shows. Labour market rigidities could be a leading cause of these abysmal statistics (Campos et al. 2025). Countries will have to make sensible changes to lower the cost of starting a business and competing with existing businesses. That this should be possible without having to become more 'American' by adopting the ultra-flexible labour laws seen in the US is shown by the performance of the Netherlands, for example (Schoefer 2025).

Preventing another doom loop

If the debt levels of EU member states keep rising at the current pace, partly caused by the pension obligation, it will be reflected in credit spreads. Rising credit spreads make government borrowing more expensive, which limits the ability of governments to honour their obligations. At the same time, banks' balance sheets deteriorate because they hold government bonds from member states. This co-dependency between banks and governments is the 'doom loop' described by Gómez-Puig and Sosvilla-Rivero (2024).

The doom loop is not only a threat to financial stability, but it has also been a way for banks to artificially increase profits (see Acharya and Steffen 2015). Because governments are aware of their inter-relationship with the banking sector, banks have been able to count on this privileged position to fund themselves cheaply and to profit from the mispricing of risks in sovereign bonds. They can achieve greater returns at lower risk or decrease the risk on the existing levels of return. With a cheap lending facility provided by the European Central Bank in times of crisis, such constructions have come close to being a 'money machine'. This is not good.

The initial shock that exposed the existence of the doom loop was the US mortgage debt crisis of 2007–8, which led to the global financial crisis. This time, however, the

initial shock could come from government debt. US debt levels currently exceed 110% of GDP, and the projected deficit for 2026 stands at 7%. Some European countries have similar levels of debt and deficits that are not coming down. An exception is Greece, which has sharply declining debt levels.

European sovereign spreads are still too sensitive to market frictions. For example, spreads have been rising recently due to the Dutch pension funds selling off around €125 billion of long-dated government bonds. They are preparing for a change in the pension system starting in 2026 (McDougall 2025). The fact that a few pension funds can produce such an effect speaks to the limited size of European debt markets and the need for more integration.

If the European banking system, or financial system as a whole, comes under pressure again, the value of financial assets will drop and the economy in its entirety will suffer. This makes it a dominant concern for the pension deficit. The deficit itself might not be affected directly by financial stress, but it will be an increasing burden on government finances. If growth remains low, the prospect of the pension shortfall will gain in significance.

Through the CMU, the likelihood of another doom loop could be greatly reduced. Banks would be more diversified geographically, both in their funding sources and in lending. They would depend less on the economic cycle in one country and more on the eurozone as a whole. And when a bank does get into trouble, governments would feel less need to save a national ‘champion’.

The fragility of the EU banking system in relation to Federal Reserve policy

At the height of the 2008–9 financial crisis, it was the US Federal Reserve that provided a backstop to Europe (a credit line in dollars) to save the European banking system. But of course, the US caused the financial crisis in the first place. All the same, the US was apparently needed. But this points to an inherent weakness in the European banking system. In times of crisis the US dollar is the reserve currency of choice, and people flock to it. And this, in itself, makes the European banking system fragile—beyond its current weakness and relatively low capital, low profitability, fragmentation and vulnerability to political interference.

In 2013 the swap line of the Federal Reserve to the European Central Bank became permanent, and the world is all the better for it (see Spielberger 2025). The US Federal Reserve has effectively become the liquidity backstop for the global financial system. However, with this global role comes greater responsibility. The actions of the current US government in raising tariffs for its former trade partners call into question that government’s commitment to global financial stability. This, and potential future actions that weaken the position of the dollar, could hasten the move from a unipolar (dollar) system to a multipolar currency system (Gensler et al. 2025).

Conclusion

Although Keynes believed that finance should remain national, he did acknowledge that change might need to happen. If it did, 'It should not be a matter of tearing up roots but of slowly training a plant to grow in a different direction' (Keynes 1933, 756). The message of the current article is similar. It has considered the potential benefits of the CMU for the looming pension deficits in a selected number of European countries: we need to grow in a different direction.

Pension shortfalls in many European countries appear to be entrenched. As long as they are not addressed, these projected shortfalls could be an impetus for a new debt crisis. It appears that the growth of government debt in the EU is already becoming unsustainable; it would start to become painful if interest rates were to rise. Another debt crisis could again start in the US, where deficits are at unprecedented peacetime heights. A small initial shock could lead to feedback loops in financial markets, where the projected pension shortfalls become relevant for sovereign spreads.

This article argues that pension concerns could be addressed in a way that benefits the current economy. It does not have to be a zero-sum game in which the gains of one generation (the elderly) are obtained at the cost of another (the younger). Developing a better capital market in the EU provides a win–win opportunity. The CMU would be able to unlock growth potential in the European economies, improve investment returns and increase the financial system's capacity to deal with stress. It should be complemented by other reforms, but it will be an essential building block.

The economist Herbert Stein once said, 'If something cannot go on forever, it will stop' (United States, Congress, Joint Economic Committee 1986, 262). Stein was talking about the sustainability of the US debt. We should take seriously what has become known as 'Stein's law' for the EU's debt situation as well. We can only hope that policymakers do not waste the opportunity to improve intra-EU trade and capital flows before a looming crisis makes it necessary to do so under suboptimal conditions.

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Three inconvenient truths: How to stop housing radicalising the young and killing the political centre

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Abstract
This article utilises the experiences of Italy and Ireland to highlight how political failures to combat intergenerational housing inequalities have contributed to the rapid disaffection of huge segments of the population. In this context, this article identifies three inconvenient truths that Europe's centrist political parties need to face before real progress can occur. First, all property markets are national and are driven by a complex set of historical, social and economic norms. The EU cannot directly impact these domestic markets. Second, home ownership can only succeed in a diversified-tenure model. To protect home ownership as a viable pathway for middle-class families, Europe's centre–right must also deliver on social and affordable housing. Third, widening the tax base (and reducing the burden of income taxes on working people) should be a core centre–right principle. The centre–right has to confront its most inconvenient truth—the fact that its most important voter group (older and retired people, who mostly live mortgage free) needs to contribute towards ensuring a more sustainable economic model for their children.

Keywords
Housing, Debt, Intergenerational, Inequalities

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Introduction

House prices increased by 48% in the EU between 2015 and 2023 (European Parliament 2025). Prices more than doubled during the same period in countries as diverse as Portugal (106%), Czechia (112%), Lithuania (114%) and Hungary (172%). In addition, 'from 2013 to 2023, rents skyrocketed 50% to 100% in many major cities, such as Lisbon, Dublin, Budapest, Berlin and Luxembourg' (Lefort 2025). Housing affordability has declined significantly across Europe since 2010, particularly for single-person households (Langen 2025).

Yet, rising prices and rents tell only half the story. Recent data also clearly highlight that increases in household income—in particular after-tax disposable income—are significantly lagging behind the growth in house prices. For example, an approximate 45% rise in gross disposable income between 2010 and 2023 nearly matches house price growth (48%) across the same period. However, when adjusted for inflation, the real increase in household disposable income has not exceeded 3% per annum since at least 2003, with real declines evident in 2022 and 2023 (Eurostat 2024). The sad reality is that housing affordability continues to decline for those seeking to enter the housing market for the first time.

Soaring house prices across the EU are also entrenching intergenerational wealth divides, with property ownership increasingly concentrated among older cohorts. Older people continue to own the vast majority of property assets across the EU. This is a trend that is becoming more pronounced over time. For the younger generations the opposite issue has emerged. In 2010, 50% of EU residents aged 25–34 owned a home; by 2023, this figure had dropped to 43% (Dubois and Nivakoski 2023).

Young people's ability to access property markets is increasingly dependent on the financial capacities of their parents, or other close family members. 'In France, nearly one-third of low-income young households were homeowners in 1973, compared to just 16% four decades later, in part because in later years they did not benefit as much as their more affluent peers from personal family financial support to buy a home' (OECD 2021, 12). This dependence on family support is often coupled with the ongoing difficulties for young people in accessing secure employment (often a prerequisite to gaining mortgage approval).

This article is structured as follows. Part one provides a snapshot of the property market in Italy and highlights how existing household wealth, coupled with low growth and a lack of employment opportunities, is widening intergenerational inequalities. Part two offers a similar assessment for Ireland, noting how its failure to keep up with housing demand is also a recipe for increased dissatisfaction among young people. Part three offers conclusions by identifying three inconvenient truths that Europe's centre–right will have to address if the failures seen in Italy and Ireland are to be overcome on a broader level.

Italy: a gerontocracy in action

Economically, Italy and Ireland appear polar opposites. Italy with its high public debt, low growth and demographic decline stands in contrast to modern Ireland, which is characterised by high growth, low unemployment and an increasing population caused by mass immigration (McGreevy 2025). However, on the issue of housing—specifically widening intergenerational inequalities—Italy and Ireland are both clear examples of policy failure.

Despite house prices only rising 8% in Italy between 2013 and 2023 (compared to an EU average of 48%), the lack of housing opportunities for young people continues to worsen. In spite of perceptions in Brussels, Italy remains a very wealthy country. Italian households' overall wealth amounted to €5.2 trillion in 2023: €80 billion more than in the previous year and €552 billion more than in 2019. This wealth corresponds to two and a half times the national GDP (€2.1 trillion), and is nearly twice as high as the value (€2.9 trillion) of public debt (Mercuri 2024).

Italian households are also characterised by a very low level of household debt relative to overall income (57% in 2023). This compares to 78% in Germany and 95% in France (Eurostat 2024). Italians' strong propensity to save is deeply rooted in both historical experience and constitutional values. One of the most distinctive aspects of Italian financial culture is that Article 47 of the Italian Constitution explicitly mandates that 'The Republic shall encourage and safeguard savings in all forms' (Italy, Senate of the Republic 2023). Given the financial turbulence associated with much of Italy's twentieth-century history, the focus on personal savings is understandable.

The question then arises—why are young Italians finding it increasingly difficult to access the housing market? Particularly, in an economy with relatively stable property prices and very high levels of household wealth? The answer lies in a combination of the labour market challenges facing young people and the concentration of housing wealth in the older generations—a concentration that is becoming stronger due to the declining number of births in Italian society. These factors are giving rise to a growing generational chasm which successive Italian governments have deliberately failed to tackle over the past three decades.

The lack of well-paying, secure employment opportunities for young Italians is well documented (e.g. Bitetti and Morganti 2017). As the oldest society in the EU—24% of Italians were aged over 65 years in 2024—Italian public services are defined by a social security system focused almost exclusively on the needs of older generations: over 77% of public social spending in Italy benefits people over the age of 65. Conversely, just 3% of total expenditure ends up with families and children (Eurostat 2025a; Drea 2024).

The distribution of Italian wealth is thus monopolised by very well-off, home-owning older generations, the vast majority of whom are now mortgage free. Remarkably, only

15% of Italian homeowners have a mortgage, compared to 61% of homeowners in the Netherlands (Ditta 2024). Conversely, younger workers struggle to find stable long-term employment—a prerequisite for saving the capital required to access mortgage lending in Italy. It is no wonder that young Italians are living with their parents for longer and delaying family formation (Drea 2024).

Italy has become a nation defined by the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. Increasingly, inherited family wealth is the defining factor in young Italians' ability to become economically independent and socially mobile. The 'have nots' face a much more insecure economic future in a state which continues to entrench generational inequalities. This has given rise to a whole generation of young Italians who are dependent on inherited wealth.

Ireland: an 'inheritocracy'

Unlike Italy, for the past decade Ireland has enjoyed high economic growth, full employment and considerable inward migration to meet the growing need for labour. However, Ireland has also experienced one of the most severe boom-to-bust (and back to boom) property price cycles in the world. Between 2007 and 2012 property prices declined by 55%, with the global financial crisis forcing Ireland to accept an external financial bail-out in 2010 (Ireland, Central Statistics Office 2023). However, following a decade of strong economic growth, Irish house prices are now over 13% higher than their 2007 peak and have risen by over 150% since 2012 (Campbell 2024).

This has created unstable socio-economic conditions as the legacy effects of the 2008–12 period continue to shape Irish property market dysfunction. Ireland's construction output and employment have never recovered fully from the collapse of the early 2010s (CIOB 2023). As a result, Ireland is experiencing a severe housing shortage—exacerbated by a strong economy and inward migration.

The dramatic post-crisis rise in house prices, combined with stricter lending rules and a lack of supply, has priced out many would-be buyers. 'Close to 80 per cent of people over the age of 40 in Ireland own their home . . . yet barely a third of adults younger than 40 are homeowners' (Flanagan 2023). This has occurred in a very strong economy with very little unemployment, even among the young. It is no wonder that housing continues to top the concerns of people living in Ireland (Eurobarometer 2023).

Without parental support, homeownership is increasingly out of reach for younger cohorts. Ireland has become a global example of a 'broken' property system (Stothard 2024). Complementing these trends is the traditionally short-term and insecure rental system in Ireland where average rents are now over €2,000 per month (Cox 2025). In response, Irish policymakers have flip-flopped on rent caps, with a more flexible—but confusing—policy recently announced (Fletcher 2025).

In response to the shortage of housing, successive Irish governments have brought in a wide range of policies. While well-meaning, some of these initiatives have just added

to the distortion of the wider property market. The establishment of bodies such as the Land Development Agency and Home Building Finance Ireland has been complemented by a bewildering number of other schemes designed to provide varying financial incentives to home buyers, developers and state bodies.[1] The Help to Buy Scheme directly helps first-time buyers to either buy a newly built house/flat or to self-build a new home by offering tax rebates of up to €30,000. The Irish government now spends a staggering €8 billion a year, directly and indirectly, on housing policy (Taylor and Bowers 2024).

One other notable characteristic of the Irish property market has been the increasing outsourcing of social and affordable housing provision. Rather than being directly constructed by local councils, a significant proportion of social housing provision in Ireland is now delivered by private developers (by leasing/selling units to local government or through public–private partnerships) or by approved housing bodies (not-for-profit organisations or private companies).

Three inconvenient truths

Italy and Ireland have fundamentally different economic models, growth patterns and demographic profiles—yet both suffer from malfunctioning property markets and significant intergenerational inequalities. Italy's and Ireland's traditional home-owning models are failing their young people, resulting in a wide array of socio-economic issues. These include, but are not limited to, delayed family formation and increased dependence on inherited wealth. This is not a sustainable model for healthy societies.

What's Europe got to do with it? Very little

As Italy and Ireland clearly show, housing markets are distinctly national in nature and reflect varying historical, social and economic norms. Ireland is currently suffering from a chronic supply shortage of affordable homes, while Italy is struggling with a tepid labour market for young people, excessive financial caution among households and a conspicuous concentration of wealth among its older generations. None of these issues can be directly solved by the EU, nor does their resolution sit within any established European competence.

The issues in Italy and Ireland require differing responses. Brussels may be involved in setting the overall parameters (e.g. standards for the energy efficiency of new buildings), but it will have no meaningful impact on the national-level issues impacting domestic housing markets. As Ireland shows, a lack of financing is far from the fundamental issue restricting supply. In Italy, the question is not so much the lack of capital, but the distribution of household wealth among an older (mostly mortgage-free) population while younger home buyers face very conservative mortgage-lending requirements.

In this context, the EU would be better served by focusing on broad macroeconomic policies that will deliver higher economic growth and more stable public finances at the

member state level. This in turn will give national capitals more financial options to address their specific housing needs. In this context, Ireland provides a clear warning as to the need for a consistent output of new housing, rather than the stop–start model it has experienced since 2008.

Home ownership can only succeed in a diversified-tenure model

Ireland and Italy both emphasise 'home ownership' as the cornerstone of their property model. However, when this objective is pursued to the detriment of all others it can 'undermine growth, fairness and public faith in capitalism' (*Economist* 2020). This was most evident during the sub-prime mortgage crash in the US between 2007 and 2010.

The home-ownership model, particularly for young working families, can only succeed if the wider political approach also caters adequately to the lower paid (social and affordable housing), long-term renters, students and the retired. Ireland and Italy have different approaches to public housing—it accounts for a little more than 10% of total housing stock in Ireland but just 3% in Italy (OECD 2021). Furthermore, while in Ireland social housing is increasingly provided by the private sector or non-governmental actors, in Italy such provision is still viewed as a suboptimal solution compared to home ownership.

If the centre–right in Europe is serious about maintaining home ownership as an achievable model for the middle class, it must disentangle the private home ownership market from the necessary role of government in providing social and affordable homes for those on low incomes.

Europe has experienced a significant reduction in expenditure on social and affordable housing over the last two decades (OECD 2001). Yet, social housing is integral to well-functioning private property markets. To deliver on the home ownership model Europe's centre–right must also deliver on social and affordable housing. And it is in this context that countries such as Denmark—where public/cooperative housing equates to over 30% of the total housing stock and relatively stable private markets—should be studied more closely (Housing Europe 2023).

Widening the tax base should be a core centre–right principle

The social market economy model is based on the principles of personal responsibility and sustainability. Yet, younger generations in Europe are now being confronted by structural inequalities which are increasingly rendering social mobility and economic success less dependent on hard work, talent and flexibility. Inherited wealth is becoming increasingly important as a driver of progress for young people. In Ireland, 50% of first-time home buyers are receiving financial help from their parents (Lynott 2023). This has created an 'inheritocracy' which is widening societal divisions.

Nowhere is this seen more than in the generational differences in household wealth which are underpinned by property values. Mortgage-free older generations are now faced with their children and grandchildren struggling to buy or rent an affordable property. These divisions are exacerbated by a taxation system which disproportionately penalises young people by being heavily skewed towards income taxes. These are paid by the working generations who are also paying significant social security contributions to fund the very generous pensions of their parents and grandparents. This is not a sustainable social contract.

Across the EU27 taxes on earned income account for 20% of total GDP, while taxes earned on property account for just 1.9%. Taxes on property account for only 4.7% of total taxation across the EU27 (European Commission 2025).

For the centre–right this issue may require significant political trade-offs to be made. The traditional approach has been to try to increase the affordable housing supply for young people, including by providing direct financial support to younger generations to buy a home. However, this approach has only had a limited impact and—in some cases—may have just further stimulated housing inflation.

The reality is that housing's structural imbalances are becoming so pronounced that the centre–right must deal with its most inconvenient truth—the fact that its most important voter group (older and retired people, who mostly live mortgage free) needs to contribute towards ensuring a more sustainable economic model for their children. Addressing this issue will not be an easy task, but if it is not addressed it is one that will ensure that the support for centrist political parties among young people continues to decline as these voters become radicalised.

Conclusion

The political consequences of soaring house prices across Europe are now clear. They are a prime driver of deepening intergenerational inequalities and are feeding a sense of hopelessness among younger generations. This article utilises the experiences of Italy and Ireland to highlight how political failures to combat intergenerational housing inequalities have contributed to the rapid disaffection of huge segments of the population. In this context, this article identifies three inconvenient truths that Europe's centrist political parties need to face before real progress can occur.

Note

1. These include initiatives such as the Croí Cónaithe fund, which provides finance for building flats to sell to owner–occupiers and also to refurbish vacant properties. A new Secure Tenancy Affordable Rental scheme provides equity to private developers and authorised housing bodies to build cost-rental homes, along with a cost-rental equity loan scheme which loans money to approved housing bodies for these developments. Cost-rental properties are properties where the rent is set at a rate that only covers construction costs.

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Article

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Is it protest or policy? What are young people saying that mainstream parties refuse to hear?

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Abstract

Youth participation in democratic elections is at a historic low. Moreover, growing numbers of young voters, particularly from Generation Z and Millennials, are supporting far-right parties. This shift is striking given that today's youth are among the most educated generations. For mainstream European parties, this trend signals a pressing need to understand the causes of both youth abstention and extremist support. Are these votes acts of protest, or symptoms of deeper political dissatisfaction? To retain relevance and counter the rise of extremism, centrist parties must engage directly with young people, listen to their concerns and respond meaningfully. This article examines how ideology, gender and policies influence the younger generations' motivation for participating in elections. Scholars have proposed various explanations, but urgent action is needed to reconnect with this critical demographic.

Keywords

Youth, Europe, Elections, Mainstream, Democracy, Far right, Gender

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Introduction

Youth political participation across Europe is undergoing a significant transformation. Although Millennials and Generation Z[1] are among the most highly educated generations in history, they are also increasingly disengaged from traditional democratic processes. Voter turnout among young people in the 2024 European Parliament elections declined notably, reversing the encouraging rise seen in 2019 (European Parliament 2024). At the same time, a growing number of young voters are supporting far-right populist parties, particularly in countries such as Germany, France and Spain. This raises an urgent question: are these voting patterns driven by ideology, or are they acts of protest against political systems that young people feel no longer represent them?

This article aims to explore the reasons behind both the declining electoral participation of young people in the EU and their increasing support for extremist political movements. The article investigates the factors influencing young voters' decisions to abstain or to support far-right parties, with a particular focus on three key dimensions: ideology, gender and public policy. While, historically, young people have supported extreme left movements, this article focuses specifically on the increasing trend of young voters supporting far-right parties in European democracies. Drawing on recent data from surveys and studies, the article examines how and why political behaviour among younger generations is shifting.

First, the article outlines current trends in youth voting behaviour across EU member states, identifying key generational disparities and their socio-economic context. Second, it examines the motivations behind youth support for far-right parties, with special attention to gender differences and the appeal of populist political messaging. Third, it assesses the influence of policy issues—such as education, economic insecurity, climate change and housing—on young people's political preferences. Finally, the article reflects on the implications of these patterns for the future of mainstream centrist parties in Europe and the necessity for renewed engagement with young voters.

By exploring whether youth support for populist and far-right movements is fundamentally ideological or primarily a form of protest, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the political change among the younger generations. It argues that unless mainstream parties make a concerted effort to respond to the specific concerns of young people, they risk further alienating a crucial segment of the electorate—and leaving space for radical alternatives to fill the void.

Young people's voting behaviour in national and European elections

Age continues to be a significant determinant of electoral participation within the EU. Data from the 2024 post-electoral Eurobarometer survey reveal that older citizens are consistently more likely to vote than their younger[2] counterparts. In the 2024 European Parliament elections, voter turnout was 58% among those aged 55 and over, compared to

51% for those aged 40–54, 46% for the 25–39 age group, and just 36% among 15–24-year-olds, where eligible. This marks a notable reversal of the upward trend seen in 2019, when youth turnout had increased by 14 percentage points compared to 2014; the 2024 figures show a 6-point decline among young voters (European Parliament 2024).

This age-based participation gap is also reflected in voting habits. Studies indicate that older voters are more likely to regard voting as a civic duty (45% vs. 38%) and to maintain long-term party loyalties—53% report always voting for the same party, compared to only 25% of under-25s (European Parliament 2024). Youth voting is further characterised by fluidity and issue-based decision-making. Younger voters, particularly students and the unemployed, are more inclined to decide their vote at the last minute and are less committed to traditional party affiliations, indicating that political engagement is increasingly shaped by short-term factors rather than enduring partisan alignment (European Parliament 2024). These findings highlight that the contemporary younger generations exhibit lower levels of party loyalty compared to older generations, but they are more prone to vote because of specific issues that concern them and can easily change their mind when going to vote.

Policy preferences also diverge across age groups. Young voters are more likely to prioritise education, gender equality and digitalisation, while older voters tend to focus on defence and security. Although climate change has declined somewhat in prominence compared to previous years, it remains an important concern for younger generations. However, studies have shown that economic issues are a primary concern for young voters across the EU member states. Both Gen Z voters and Millennials identified rising prices and the cost of living as their top priorities (European Parliament 2024).

Studies show that anxiety over socio-economic issues is especially prominent in countries such as Greece and Ireland. Furthermore, unemployment continues to be a significant issue for young voters, particularly in southern European member states such as Italy and Portugal. In Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Denmark, climate change is a significant concern. Education and international politics are also prominent areas for young people, which shows their desire to improve their educational levels and their geopolitical awareness (European Parliament 2024; Lavizzari 2025). It is noteworthy that young people have diverse priorities which also vary across member states.

Although generational cohorts such as Generation Z and Millennials are far from politically homogenous, patterns in electoral behaviour indicate that a significant proportion of young people—particularly young men—are gravitating towards far-right populist movements. This trend was clearly illustrated in the February 2025 German federal election, in which approximately 25% of men aged 18–24 voted for Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD). A similar pattern emerged in the 2024 UK general election, in which 12.9% of young men supported Reform UK, in contrast to only 5.9% of young women (Ipsos 2025). The next section will explore whether young people who vote for far-right parties do so because of their beliefs or just to protest against the current political system.

Is it an ideological or protest vote?

Recent elections have revealed increasing polarisation among young voters. While many continue to back progressive parties, support for far-right groups is also rising. Economic challenges such as the lingering effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, high living costs, inflation and housing shortages, along with mental health concerns, have intensified feelings of insecurity among youth. Additionally, the war in Ukraine has heightened anxiety, especially in Eastern Europe. These overlapping crises are driving some young people towards more radical political options. For instance, far-right parties such as Germany's AfD, France's National Rally (Rassemblement national, RN) and Spain's Vox are gaining popularity among younger voters. This trend reflects broader shifts linked to economic uncertainty, dissatisfaction with mainstream politics and concerns about the socio-economic impacts of climate policies such as the Green Deal (Lavizzari 2025; Azmanova 2024).

This emerging trend is further accentuated by institutional reforms that have extended voting rights to younger age groups. For instance, the voting age has been lowered to 16 in Austria, Germany, Belgium and Malta, and to 17 in Greece. Consequently, the political preferences of these cohorts have become increasingly influential. In Germany in 2024, 16% of young voters supported the AfD, tripling its previous share among this age group and bringing it nearly level with the centre–right alliance between the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands) and the Christian Social Union in Bavaria (Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern) (*Deutsche Welle* 2024; Azmanova 2024).

These developments underscore a growing disconnect between younger voters and traditional political parties. Despite persistent engagement with issues such as climate change and social justice, many young people appear disillusioned with the lack of capacity of the mainstream parties—both centre–left and centre–right—to address their immediate socio-economic concerns (Azmanova 2024). This disillusionment is occurring as a result of declining youth well-being. According to the 2024 *World Happiness Report*, younger generations now report lower levels of overall life satisfaction compared to older cohorts (Helliwell et al. 2024). Data from the 2022 Autumn Eurobarometer also reveal that 93% of Europeans are concerned about the rising cost of living, while 82% express fears regarding poverty and social exclusion (European Parliament 2023).

It is therefore noteworthy that, while far-right parties frequently foreground issues such as immigration and national identity, they have nevertheless managed to attract support from younger voters whose primary concerns are socio-economic. France provides a clear example of how far-right parties are adapting their platforms to attract younger voters. The RN has broadened its appeal by focusing on issues traditionally associated with the left, such as workers' rights, pensions and the quality of life for ordinary citizens (Lynes 2025). This suggests that the appeal of far-right movements may not lie solely in their ideological stance, but also in their ability to capitalise on perceptions of economic insecurity among young voters and the inability of mainstream parties to solve their main

concerns. Research further indicates that while older generations often vote to protect existing socio-economic positions, younger voters are motivated by concerns about their ability to attain such status in the future, which they feel they cannot do despite their educational achievements (Schnetzer et al. 2024; *Deutsche Welle* 2024).

Voting patterns show that many young people are more concerned with where candidates stand on important issues than with traditional party loyalty or ideology. This highlights their desire for meaningful and authentic representation in politics (Lavizzari 2025). Unlike older generations, who tend to maintain consistent affiliations with parties, or at least with a particular section of the political spectrum, younger voters often exhibit a more fluid and pragmatic approach to political engagement. This reflects a broader transformation of the political landscape, where conventional left/right distinctions have become increasingly blurred. Parties traditionally considered far-right now incorporate elements typically associated with liberal or progressive agendas. For instance, the RN in France, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands and the AfD in Germany advocate policies such as tax relief for young people, gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights. However, these policy positions are frequently framed as efforts to defend 'European values' against perceived threats posed by immigration (Azmanova 2024).

The strategic repositioning of far-right parties has allowed them to appeal to young voters by addressing issues of economic marginalisation and cultural displacement, often using progressive rhetoric to justify exclusionary policies. This fusion of economic populism and cultural nationalism represents a departure from traditional ideological categorisations and further complicates the task of interpreting youth support for these movements (Azmanova 2024).

Social media is an important instrument to reach and inform young voters, making it a key tool for future political campaigns (Lavizzari 2025). Through social media platforms such as TikTok, the far-right has capitalised on youth discontent with the current political situation and has normalised the far-right ideologies among younger people and brought them closer to the far-right parties (Serhan 2024). The RN's increased youth support in France can be partly attributed to its young leader, Jordan Bardella, who effectively engages younger audiences through social media platforms such as TikTok. Bardella's relatable online presence helps the party connect with young voters, but analysts note that broader factors, such as dissatisfaction with the current government and concerns over immigration, play a more significant role. Similar trends are observed across Europe, where far-right parties attract youth by combining anti-EU, anti-immigration and anti-elite messages (Cokelaere 2024).

Finally, the growing appeal of far-right parties among young voters should be viewed as a form of political protest. According to Bergh (2004, 385), 'protest voting is the act of voting for a political party as a means of expressing political distrust. The extent to which supporters of a particular party are protest voters is measured by the effect of political distrust on support for that party'. In that sense, Rooduijn (2018, 356–7) argues that the explanation for why people support radical right parties through protest voting is

less about their agreement with far-right ideology and more about their anti-elite stance, which challenges the established political order. Mainstream centre–left parties have struggled to deliver inclusive social policies in the context of the green transition and global economic volatility, while centre–right parties have not done enough to ensure job security and social mobility. In this context, support for populist movements may reflect a broader crisis of political representation. If traditional parties remain unresponsive to the structural challenges facing younger generations—such as affordable housing, employment and ecological sustainability—the political space may become increasingly vulnerable to exploitation by parties offering simplistic solutions to complex problems (Azmanova 2024).

The gender gap in voting among young Europeans

When we refer to increasing 'far-right appeal', electoral results and research have confirmed that we should add 'among (young) men'. Young men and young women are diametrically opposed in their ideological perspectives and electoral preferences. While 21% of young men supported far-right parties at the European elections, only 14% of women did so, being more inclined to vote for progressive, green and pro-European parties (Katsanidou 2025).

That the gender gap among young Europeans mirrors a global trend is a concerning societal phenomenon. Generally, younger generations (Millennials and Gen Z) are more progressive than their parents and older generations, more open to diversity and progressive social values, and more likely to support climate action, gender equality and EU integration (Kiss et al. 2022). This global trend is in line with the increasingly prevalent establishment of policies on female emancipation and gender equality. The significant increase in the completion of tertiary degrees between 2002 and 2020 among women (25% to 46%) in comparison to men (21% to 35%) (*Economist* 2024) is a significant factor when we attempt to analyse these trends and behaviours.

What has caused the 'U-turn' among young males? While there is still not much research on this topic, there are some societal and behavioural observations that could potentially respond to this question. The changed gender norms and female economic independence and empowerment could be identified as contributing factors. Evidently, the abandonment of the traditional breadwinner/provider role is making young men vulnerable. Alongside the general economic challenges such as housing, precarious employment and dependency on parental support, women pose competition for higher-status jobs (Milosav et al. 2025). In the formative years—the teenage years and young adulthood—the confusion young men experience over their personal identity can drive them to seek 'refuge' in far-right movements, which construct their communication strategies around cultivating ideals of masculinity and modern sexism ('feminism has gone too far') rather than dealing constructively with the root causes of these young men's anxiety (Anduiza and Rico 2024).

This divide among young males and females is not concerning solely for electoral purposes. If there are such fundamental differences in the worldviews between men and women, this societal polarisation will influence every aspect of life—relationships, work culture and socialisation—and then, in the long run, it will impact demographic trends (in marriage, having children, etc.) (Milosav 2025).

How can youth be brought to the middle?

The dangers of successes on the far-right front and the threat to liberal democracy and civic freedoms as we know them are multifaceted. It would be foolish to expect a single policy to achieve a miracle and bring (young) voters back to the mainstream parties.

What is urgently needed is for political actors in the centre to stop ignoring the youth and start legitimising their concerns about the future and the challenges to their personal development. It is not the case that young people are just rebellious and want to party carelessly, as others might believe. The younger generations, Gen Z in particular, are recognised as being the most socially aware and engaged generations in Europe (and North America) (Martinez 2024).

Addressing the root causes of their discontent and protest must become a priority for the mainstream parties. The economy is the biggest concern for all voters, but policies to tackle precarious employment or unemployment, housing shortages and the low quality of life for youth need to be concretised. While politics might still be perceived as a job for older people, nominating young candidates for national and European Parliament positions could not only boost engagement but also make youngsters face reality regarding what it actually looks like to contribute to change and decision-making. It is a practice which has succeeded for certain far-right parties. Furthermore, as these generations have been 'bred' online and heavily influenced by social media, digital literacy and media education are needed more than ever to fight disinformation. Being able to critically select and recognise the validity of content and information is a crucial skill in this modern online world, as far-right movements have taken advantage of the lack of existing programmes.

Finally, though the list should be longer and much more complex, at the core of everything is education. Well-informed, educated people are less likely to be influenced by xenophobic, racist political messaging, and are less likely to accept and spread hate speech or be prone to manipulation by malign influences. Education policies must be in line with the new societal challenges and technological advancements and be able to prepare the current younger generation for the future that awaits.

Conclusion

A profound transformation in the European democratic landscape is happening as a result of the growing disengagement of young people from mainstream politics and their

increased support for far-right parties. This shift is not merely a reflection of ideological alignment but a complex interplay of protest, socio-economic anxiety and a search for authentic representation. While young people remain deeply concerned with issues such as climate change, education and equality, their immediate priorities—economic insecurity, housing and job prospects—are often overlooked by traditional parties. Far-right movements have taken advantage of this gap, adapting their communication strategies to resonate with the youth.

The gender divide in youth political preferences is another alarming sign that there are deep societal transformations taking place, with potentially enormous consequences. As young men increasingly gravitate towards radical alternatives, and young women lean towards progressive platforms, the risk of societal polarisation grows. To counter this trend, mainstream parties must move beyond symbolic gestures and implement concrete policies that include addressing structural inequalities, promoting inclusive education, ensuring economic opportunities and fostering digital literacy.

Ultimately, the future of European democracy relies heavily on its ability to interact with its youngest citizens—not by dismissing their concerns as fleeting rebellion, but by legitimising their demands and their need for a more inclusive and responsive political system while recognising that they represent the future of the continent.

Notes

1. Generation Z, popularly referred to as Gen Z, is generally defined as people born between 1997 and 2012, whereas Millennials were born between 1981 and 1996.
2. The standard definition of young people used by Eurostat is those between 15 and 29 years old.

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Article

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‘Safe spaces’ vs. free spaces: Reconciling student activism with academic freedom in European universities

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Abstract
This article explores the tension captured by the phrase ‘safe spaces’ vs. free spaces: the growing challenge of reconciling student activism with academic freedom in European universities. While calls for inclusion and protection from harm have prompted important discussions around equality and justice, they have also raised concerns about the erosion of academic freedom through practices such as de-platforming and ideological pressure. These dynamics risk narrowing the scope of academic inquiry and undermining the university’s democratic role as a space for open debate. Drawing on recent European policy developments, the article argues for a balanced approach that safeguards academic freedom while responding constructively to student concerns. It concludes with practical recommendations aimed at fostering both pluralism and inclusion across European higher education.

Keywords
Academic freedom, Free speech, Cancel culture

Introduction

In recent years, European universities have increasingly found themselves navigating a difficult balance between protecting academic freedom and responding to growing demands for greater inclusivity. Students and activists have called for the creation of ‘safe spaces’ to shield individuals from views perceived as harmful or offensive. At the

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same time, concerns have emerged about the erosion of academic freedom through practices such as disinvitations, de-platforming and ideological pressures—a phenomenon often described as 'cancel culture'.

While these debates are often framed as a conflict between freedom and equality, the reality is more complex. At stake is not only the character of academic life, but also the health of democratic society more broadly. Academic freedom enables critical inquiry and informed public debate—both essential to democratic resilience. When this freedom is compromised, the university's role as a space for reasoned disagreement and intellectual pluralism is at risk.

This article explores the challenges posed by cancel culture and safe-space activism in European higher education and proposes a set of policy recommendations aimed at safeguarding academic freedom without dismissing legitimate concerns around inclusion and justice.

What is cancel culture?

In recent decades, disputes over academic freedom have not just threatened academic institutions: they have arisen at the individual level, too. In some cases, scholars have been silenced by university communities or excluded from academic platforms (i.e. de-platformed) due to their perceived objectionable minority moral or political views—a phenomenon often referred to as 'cancel culture' (Kovács and Spannagel 2025, 19). At the same time, some students have called for the creation of 'safe spaces' within universities, advocating for restrictions on academic expression as a means of shielding themselves from unsettling or controversial ideas (Kovács and Spannagel 2025, 19).

As Moody-Adams explains, the safe-space movement can be seen as a modern articulation of the enduring belief that liberal democracies remain incomplete in their pursuit of justice until they successfully reconcile the tension between liberty and equality. At its core, the movement prompts a fundamental question: can strong protections for academic freedom coexist with, or even contribute to, such a reconciliation? (Moody-Adams 2018, 38). This question becomes particularly pressing in the context of so-called cancel culture, where efforts to promote equality or protect against harm sometimes result in the marginalisation or suppression of unpopular academic voices, thereby testing the boundaries of what a just balance between liberty and equality should entail within the university.

This advocacy for safe spaces often presents an additional challenge to academic freedom when the political moral norms it invokes become entangled with cultural attitudes and normative frameworks that are unrelated to, or even in tension with, core academic values. Calls for protection from harmful expression are sometimes linked to (1) market-oriented norms that frame students as consumers entitled to shape the educational 'products' they receive; (2) anti-intellectual tendencies that devalue scholarly inquiry and foster scepticism towards the epistemic authority of academic expertise; and (3) mental health discourses that draw uncritically on what some have termed the 'master

narrative' of late modernity, which defines individuals primarily through their susceptibility to psychological harm and trauma, rather than also acknowledging their resilience and capacity for recovery. This conflation—of justice-based concerns with consumerism, anti-intellectualism and the elevation of trauma—risks not only undermining academic freedom, but ultimately weakening the very efforts of safe-space advocates to advance justice within the university setting (Moody-Adams 2018, 38).

The creation of safe spaces has also led students in many European universities to adopt no-platforming policies. Cram and Fenwick explain that the term 'no platforming' encompasses a variety of measures aimed at restricting external speakers from participating in university events. It has been used to describe cases where invitations are rescinded due to a speaker's views, where speakers are disinvited following pressure from students who object to their presence or where speakers are subjected to burdensome conditions (Cram and Fenwick 2018, 849).

A notable incident occurred in the UK in 2016, when efforts were made to exclude Peter Tatchell from a debate titled 'Re-Radicalising Queers' at Canterbury Christ Church University. The event's organisers received communications from the National Union of Students' LGBT+ representative, who refused to participate if Tatchell was included. Her objection was based on his endorsement of a 2015 open letter in the *Observer* that defended free speech and criticised the growing trend of no-platforming figures such as Germaine Greer. She alleged that the letter amounted to support for the incitement of violence against transgender individuals. Ultimately, the attempt to exclude Tatchell was unsuccessful, and the representative chose to withdraw from the event instead (Cram and Fenwick 2018, 849–50). Such examples confirm Moody-Adams's suggestion that while the movement aspires to reconcile liberty and equality within liberal democracies, in practice, efforts to protect against perceived harm may suppress dissenting academic voices and compromise the values of intellectual openness and debate that are central to academic freedom.

More worryingly, even some governments have made attempts to 'cancel' certain academics by excluding them from public dialogue. Following the tragic murder of history teacher Samuel Paty, who was beheaded in a religiously motivated attack, the then French Minister of Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer, gave an interview in which he drew a connection between the incident and the perceived 'devastation' caused by 'Islamo-leftism' within universities (Perroud 2020). He went so far as to suggest that some academics were guilty of 'intellectual complicity with terrorism', both in a radio interview and during remarks in Parliament. These statements were made in support of a legislative amendment that made the exercise of academic freedom conditional upon adherence to the values of the French Republic. On Twitter, far-right politician Marion Maréchal Le Pen welcomed the minister's stance, claiming it validated her concerns about the influence of leftist intersectional ideologies in higher education (Perroud 2020).

These cancel-culture phenomena can therefore originate from both the left and the (often far-) right. Even if the right seldom uses the term 'safe spaces',

conservative objections still exist (Moody-Adams 2018, 39). These typically arise in response to curricular efforts aimed at promoting dialogue around cultural or religious diversity (see Ballentine 2015). What is crucial here is that, on both ends of the political spectrum, these offence-based reactions often reflect a broader climate of intolerance. This intolerance frequently stems from an anti-intellectual resistance to the idea that deeply held disagreements can be addressed through civil and respectful discourse. As such, anti-intellectualism emerges as a central driver of the safe-space phenomenon (Moody-Adams 2018, 39).

It is evident from the above that such phenomena may undermine free academic discourse, a core element of academic freedom. When open debate is restricted in the name of shielding individuals from offence, the university's function as a forum for critical inquiry and the exchange of divergent ideas is compromised. The consequences of this extend well beyond the academic sphere: by eroding the norms of reasoned disagreement and intellectual pluralism, these developments threaten the deliberative foundations upon which liberal democracies rest. In this respect, the dynamics within universities both reflect and shape the broader democratic culture, prompting the need for urgent reflection on how societies can uphold inclusivity without sacrificing the principles of open inquiry.

In the following section, I examine the role and significance of academic freedom in contemporary democracies, before turning to potential pathways to address the challenges outlined above.

Academic freedom and cancel culture

Although it may seem self-evident, one of the primary benefits of free academic dialogue lies in its capacity to generate new knowledge. However, knowledge for its own sake is insufficient to justify the enhanced speech protections that academic freedom entails. What gives academic knowledge broader societal significance is its capacity to inform the public and contribute to a well-functioning democracy. The pursuit of truth through scholarly inquiry equips citizens with the information and analytical tools necessary for meaningful participation in public life. Informed and engaged public discourse is, by near-universal agreement, a cornerstone of democratic health.

As Robert Post (2012, 95)—one of the most influential voices on academic freedom—has argued: 'A people without knowledge is a people without power or sovereignty. To preserve the self-government of the people, we must preserve their access to knowledge'.

This view is echoed by Peonides (2022, 142), who convincingly asserts that at least a basic level of scientific literacy is essential to enable citizens to effectively engage with the complexities of modern democratic governance. In a similar spirit, Cram and Fenwick (2018, 859) emphasise that citizens cannot fully participate in democracy without a well-informed understanding of political matters, making open and inclusive public debate essential. De George (2003, 16) adds:

> A democratic society benefits from having citizens who can think critically and imaginatively. . . . Hence a democratic society should value, treasure and support education that produces citizens who can engage in intelligent debate about social and political issues, critically evaluate and take part in their governance and government, and resist demagogues, refusing to follow blindly political or other ideologies posing as knowledge.

These perspectives highlight the democratic imperative of safeguarding academic freedom, particularly the kind of freedom that permits scholars to express controversial or minority views. However, as shown in the preceding discussion of cancel culture and safe spaces, this freedom is increasingly being challenged—often in the name of inclusivity, equality or harm prevention. While such motivations may be legitimate in certain cases, the suppression of dissenting academic voices through de-platforming or ideological policing risks undermining the very function that academic freedom serves in democratic society: the promotion of informed, critical and pluralistic public discourse.

In my view, education can only foster such discourse when it takes place under conditions that safeguard academic freedom—including the freedom of expression. Fuchs has rightly observed that there exists a reciprocal relationship between academic freedom and democratic vitality, with each reinforcing the other (Fuchs 1963, 435).

Quinn and Levine (2014, 901–2) build on this insight, arguing that academic communities 'model and pass into society the skills and knowledge necessary for democratic value systems to function properly, most notably a democratic "knowledge-over-force" principle that rejects violence and force as determinants of outcomes, in favour of process, evidence, reasoned discourse and quality'.

These observations reflect a broad consensus: academic freedom—especially freedom of academic expression—is vital to sustaining democratic societies. It enriches public debate, sharpens citizens' critical faculties and fosters the competences required for active democratic engagement (see also Tierney and Lechuga 2010, 120). One can reasonably conclude that academic freedom of expression plays a key role in empowering the demos and enabling democratic processes. When this freedom is restricted—whether by government interference, student-led activism or institutional policies aimed at avoiding giving offence—democratic values are placed at risk. It logically follows that in illiberal settings—such as those found in some 'safe space' environments where dissent is discouraged—academic expression is stifled, making it far more difficult to cultivate democratic values.

This brings us to a particularly challenging question: should academic speech that openly challenges or even contradicts democratic principles fall within the protective scope of academic freedom? The instinctive reaction may be to answer in the negative. Indeed, this assumption often fuels cancel-culture dynamics, where academics are silenced or de-platformed not for inciting violence, but for voicing unpopular, provocative or politically incorrect views. When academic speech is perceived by a majority as offensive or as conflicting with the dominant interpretation of democratic norms, the typical response is to suppress it in order to maintain a 'safe' environment.

However, Cram and Fenwick offer a more nuanced and principled counterpoint. They note:

> Speakers in universities advocating anti-democratic positions, such as that Islam is incompatible with democracy, or that Muslims should not vote since candidates are usually unbelievers, could be defended in stable democracies such as the UK, as Heinze has argued, in principle, as the communication of a minority opinion (and thus as a contribution to self-government) where it does not carry an actual or implicit threat of violence against others. (Cram and Fenwick 2018, 861)

In principle, even anti-democratic speech can contribute to the pluralism that defines healthy democratic debate. Pre-emptively excluding such views would conflict with the very democratic rationale used to justify academic freedom. This is especially important in an era when accusations of harm are increasingly invoked to disqualify academic speech, even in the absence of incitement or intent to cause real danger. Crucially, however, these views must remain subject to open contestation—something that does not always occur, particularly in emotionally charged or ideologically polarised contexts. The university, with its norms of structured debate and intellectual rigour, may be one of the few spaces where such views can be critically examined. Academic freedom ensures not only the right to express controversial opinions, but also the right of others to challenge them. On this basis, the expression of even anti-democratic views within academia may deserve protection, as the exposure of such views to critique ultimately serves democratic robustness.

A final issue arises concerning whether the conferral of special expressive protections on academics is compatible with democratic equality. Why should scholars enjoy greater freedom of speech than other members of society? Does this not undermine the democratic ideal of treating all voices equally? While this may appear undemocratic at first glance, the issue requires deeper analysis.

A compelling insight is offered by Isaac Asimov, who wrote in 1980, ‘There is a cult of ignorance in the United States, and there always has been. The strain of anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means “my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge”’ (Asimov 1980, 19).

This critique highlights the danger of conflating democratic equality with epistemic equivalence. If we adopt the view that uninformed opinion carries the same weight as scientifically grounded knowledge, we not only undermine academic freedom but negate the very purpose of academia. Years of rigorous research and expertise would lose their significance if all views were treated as equally valid regardless of their basis in evidence. Such a position would carry serious consequences for democratic governance. A functioning democracy requires that decisions be informed by expert knowledge. For experts to contribute meaningfully to public debate, they must be granted a distinct expressive space—protected and valued. Without such protection, the marketplace of

ideas risks being governed not by quality, but by popularity, emotional appeal or ideological orthodoxy—precisely the dynamics we see in cancel-culture environments. Providing such protection is precisely the function that academic freedom of expression fulfils.

How to fix this?

If academic freedom is a prerequisite for democratic participation, critical thinking and knowledge-based policymaking—as this article has argued—then its erosion through cancel culture, politicisation and anti-intellectualism must be actively addressed. This is not just a cultural or institutional concern; it is a matter of democratic resilience. The European People's Party (EPP) has already taken an important step in this direction. In April 2025 the EPP adopted a resolution that the author was personally involved in drafting, which calls for coordinated EU action to safeguard academic freedom across the Union (EPP 2025). Building on this momentum, several targeted reforms should be considered.

Embed academic freedom in the EU rule of law framework

The EPP resolution rightly calls for academic freedom to be recognised as a core component of the EU's democratic governance architecture. Article 13 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union already provide a legal foundation, but enforcement remains inconsistent. The European Commission should integrate academic freedom indicators into its annual rule of law reports, establishing a structured monitoring mechanism to assess violations and support member states in upholding standards. This would align the EU's internal governance with its external commitments to freedom of thought and inquiry.

Equip universities to resist ideological and political pressures

Cancel-culture pressures—from both student activism and government interference—can only be resisted if universities enjoy meaningful institutional autonomy. Member states must guarantee that scholars and institutions can operate free from arbitrary ideological, political or economic coercion. The EU should incentivise member states to adopt national academic freedom strategies—including legal protections, clear definitions and internal grievance procedures—while reaffirming the importance of diverse perspectives and open debate in higher education.

Reorient safe spaces towards pluralism, not censorship

While the safe-space movement stems from legitimate concerns about equality and inclusion, its conflation with intellectual fragility or censorship must be avoided. Academic institutions should distinguish clearly between emotional safety and epistemic openness. 'Safe spaces' must not become closed spaces. EU funding frameworks (e.g. Erasmus+, Horizon Europe) could be leveraged to support programmes that foster

intellectual resilience, reasoned disagreement and dialogue across difference, especially on campuses facing rising polarisation.

Strengthen support for scholars at risk and academic mobility

The EPP has rightly highlighted the importance of Europe as a safe haven for scholars at risk. The EU should expand existing support schemes (such as MSCA4Ukraine) and embed guarantees of academic freedom in all cross-border cooperation and mobility projects. Funding for international partnerships, including with non-European institutions, should be contingent on upholding core values such as freedom of thought, institutional independence and pluralism.

At the same time, safeguarding academic freedom is not only a necessary defensive measure—it is also a strategic asset for Europe's innovation and competitiveness. The 2024 Draghi report on *The Future of European Competitiveness* explicitly highlights Europe's struggle to both attract and retain top research talent. To remedy this, Draghi suggests creating an 'EU Chair' programme 'to attract and retain the best academic scholars' (Draghi 2024, Part A, 33). Moreover, the report emphasises that bolstering research and innovation spending—advocating a spending commitment of 3% of GDP on research and development (Draghi 2024, Part B, 234)—requires open academic systems that welcome and protect diverse viewpoints. By positioning Europe as a place where scholars operate with full intellectual autonomy and civic respect, the EU will not only be honouring its democratic principles but also enhancing its ability to compete globally for talent and ideas.

Promote a pro-knowledge culture in civic and political life

Finally, reversing the tide of anti-intellectualism requires more than regulatory tools—it demands a cultural shift. Policymakers, educators and civil society leaders must promote a public ethos that values evidence, expertise and open inquiry. As the EPP resolution affirms, universities are essential pillars of democratic competence, providing citizens with the tools to resist disinformation, engage critically in politics and uphold liberal democratic values. The EU should support public awareness campaigns, civic education programmes and science communication platforms that re-establish the link between democratic self-government and the freedom to think, question and know.

In an era of political volatility and ideological rigidity, academic freedom is not a luxury—it is a democratic necessity. The EU has the legal instruments, institutional mechanisms and political will to act. What is needed is the resolve to translate these into coordinated, values-based action. As the EPP has recognised, defending academic freedom is not only about protecting scholars—it is about fortifying democracy itself.

Conclusion

The tension between 'safe spaces' and free academic spaces is emblematic of a deeper struggle within contemporary democracies: how to reconcile the values of inclusion and

equality with those of open inquiry and dissent. As this article has argued, academic freedom—especially the freedom of academic expression—is not merely a privilege of scholars, but a cornerstone of democratic life. It enables the critical thinking, informed debate and pluralism upon which liberal democracy depends. Yet, in the name of protecting individuals from harm, both institutional actors and political forces have increasingly engaged in practices—such as de-platforming, ideological policing and legislative constraints—that threaten to erode this essential freedom.

This erosion is not confined to fringe cases or specific ideological camps. From student-led no-platforming to ministerial attempts at academic disciplining, the drivers of cancel culture and anti-intellectualism are both diffuse and systemic. In response, universities must reclaim their role as spaces where controversial ideas can be aired, challenged and debated in good faith. But this cannot be left to individual institutions alone. It requires a coordinated policy response at the European level—one that embeds academic freedom in the EU's rule of law framework, strengthens institutional autonomy and counters cultural trends that equate intellectual discomfort with injustice.

Defending academic freedom is not a matter of protecting elites; it is a matter of safeguarding the democratic process itself. If Europe is to remain both a global centre for knowledge and a beacon of democratic values, it must treat academic freedom not as an optional principle, but as a strategic and civic imperative.

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Article

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Are young Europeans tired of the digital world?

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Abstract

Digital burnout has become an increasingly urgent issue affecting young people's mental health across Europe. This article examines the rise of youth digital fatigue, especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw screen time surge and reported well-being decline. Drawing on empirical data from the World Health Organization, Eurofound and recent surveys, it explores how excessive online engagement correlates with deteriorating mental health outcomes among European youth. It also investigates the growing digital detox movements spanning Europe, as well as those in the US and Asia (including China's *tang ping* phenomenon), as a cultural backlash against always-online lifestyles. Policy responses are considered, focusing on the present and the future of the 'right to disconnect' in labour law and new EU regulations such as the Digital Services Act, particularly its online age-verification measures and their limitations. The article is framed through a Christian Democratic lens which emphasises that technology needs to align with human dignity and the common good. The conclusion offers a reflection that, much like the way the post-war social market economy balanced liberalism with social justice, our digital future must balance technological innovation with mental well-being and human-centric values.

Keywords

Digital burnout, Youth mental health, Screen time, Digital detox, Right to disconnect, Digital Services Act, Christian Democracy, Technology and human dignity, Social media fatigue, EU policy

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Introduction

'Digital burnout' refers to the state of mental and physical exhaustion stemming from excessive use of digital devices and constant connectivity. Among Europe's youth this phenomenon has become increasingly visible as smartphones, social media and remote learning blur the boundaries between leisure, education and rest. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, health experts had noted worrying trends in adolescent mental well-being. For instance, in the late 2010s the World Health Organization's surveys had observed a decline in self-reported life satisfaction and mental health among European adolescents (Inchley et al. 2020). Many young people reported feeling 'always on' and overwhelmed by the incessant flow of online interactions and information. The pandemic, however, dramatically amplified these issues, making digital burnout a widespread concern in the context of youth public health. Education and work shifted online during lockdowns, and social life followed suit, often leaving young people with little escape from screens in daily life. Psychologists describe digital burnout as akin to classic burnout syndrome—featuring fatigue, anxiety and detachment—but triggered by overuse of technology (Kovacs et al. 2020). Anecdotal reports from students and young professionals in Europe increasingly speak of 'Zoom fatigue' and the pressure to remain reachable on messaging apps at all hours. This form of digital fatigue is often reflected in the reluctance to even answer phone calls. A survey conducted by Uswitch in 2024 highlights a concerning trend: nearly one in four young adults aged 18–34 reported that they avoid answering incoming calls. Furthermore, approximately 70% of respondents admit to disliking phone conversations, which they perceive as 'stressful' and frequently associated with 'bad news' (Uswitch 2024). The real-time nature of phone interactions appears to be a significant source of anxiety, with many young people showing a clear preference for asynchronous communication methods, such as text messages and voice notes. The European Parliament itself has acknowledged the problem, debating resolutions on digital well-being. European youth organisations and mental health charities have also raised the alarm about the toll of 24/7 connectivity on young people's concentration, sleep and emotional resilience (OECD 2023). This introduction has outlined the concept of digital burnout and its emergence as a critical issue; the next section will quantify these trends with empirical data on screen time and mental health outcomes.

Empirical data on youth digital fatigue

Surveys indicate that pandemic restrictions led to a sharp increase in recreational screen hours for children and adolescents (Nagata et al. 2022). Empirical evidence strongly links the pandemic era to a spike in youth screen time and a concomitant decline in mental health indicators. A systematic review of studies across several countries found that average daily screen time for children and adolescents rose from about 2.7 hours pre-pandemic to 4.4 hours during Covid-19 lockdowns, roughly a 60% increase (Stiglic and Viner 2020). In some cohorts the rise was even more dramatic—one longitudinal study in the US reported that 12- to 13-year-olds doubled their non-school screen use from 3.8 hours to 7.7 hours per day during the spring 2020 lockdown (Nagata et al. 2022). European data mirror this trend: home confinement and the shift to online learning led

many youths to turn to streaming media, social networks and gaming to cope with isolation (OECD 2023). While digital tools provided important social connections during quarantine, excessive use has been associated with negative outcomes. Surveys by the British Standards Institution (BSI) in 2025 found that 68% of UK youth felt worse about themselves after spending time on social media (BSI 2025). Such findings underscore the concept of digital fatigue: young people are not just spending more time online but are reporting diminishing returns and increased emotional exhaustion from that time.

Mental health metrics among Europe's youth have deteriorated in parallel with these digital behaviour shifts. Even before 2020, the mental well-being of young Europeans was trending downwards—the World Health Organization's study Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children noted a decline in adolescents' life satisfaction and a rise in psychosomatic complaints (see Inchley et al. 2020). The Covid-19 crisis then exacerbated matters. Eurofound's large-scale Living, Working and Covid-19 e-survey recorded a precipitous rise in the share of young people at risk of depression. In 2016 about 22% of Europeans aged 18–29 were at risk of clinical depression; by spring 2021, after a year of on-and-off lockdowns, that figure had nearly tripled to over 65% of young adults reporting depressive symptoms (Ahrendt et al. 2022). This made youth the most vulnerable age group in terms of mental health impact, reversing the typical pre-pandemic pattern in which older adults had worse mental health outcomes. Notably, self-reported loneliness, anxiety and stress surged among teenagers and people in their twenties during periods of strict lockdown (Sándor et al. 2021). While these indicators improved somewhat once lockdowns eased, youth mental health has not returned to pre-pandemic baseline levels.

In spring 2020, around half of young adults were at risk; by spring 2021 nearly two-thirds of 18–29-year-olds were at risk of depression, a significantly higher rate than in older groups (Ahrendt et al. 2022). By spring 2022 the youth risk rate had fallen but it still remained above pre-pandemic levels. In addition to these broad trends, specific surveys illustrate young people's growing ambivalence towards digital life. The 2025 BSI study of 16–21-year-olds in Britain revealed striking figures: 47% said they would prefer to grow up in a world without the Internet, and 50% supported the idea of a nightly social media curfew to improve well-being (BSI 2025). These responses suggest that many youths themselves perceive an imbalance and crave more offline time. Similarly, a Harris Poll in late 2024 found a majority of American Gen Z respondents wished that popular apps such as TikTok or Instagram had never been created, blaming them for added stress (Harris Poll 2024). Such data offer quantitative backing to the notion of youth digital fatigue: after a decade of ever-increasing connectivity, today's young generation is increasingly aware of the downsides of constant digital immersion and is open to steps that restore a healthier balance.

The rise of digital detox movements

Nearly half of young people would prefer life without the Internet, and a majority report negative feelings after heavy social media use (BSI 2025). This sentiment is fuelling the popularity of 'digital detox' trends among youth. Around the world, a cultural

counter-movement has emerged in response to digital burnout: the rise of digital detox initiatives and a renewed valorisation of offline life. In Europe especially, young adults have begun forming communities and holding events that encourage people to unplug. For example, The Offline Club, founded by three Dutch entrepreneurs in 2022, organises phone-free gatherings and retreats across cities including Amsterdam, London, Paris, Milan and Copenhagen (Höppner 2025). At these events, participants surrender their smartphones at the door and spend hours or days engaging in face-to-face activities—playing board games, making art, meditating or simply conversing without digital distractions. The motto of The Offline Club, 'swap screen time for real time', encapsulates a growing desire among youth to reclaim control over their time and attention. What started as niche meet-ups have quickly gained popularity; the concept spread Europe-wide within a year, indicating that it struck a nerve. Many young Europeans, despite being avid users of technology, are consciously seeking breaks from it—a trend confirmed by surveys such as a Deloitte study in Germany, where 84% of 18–24-year-olds reported feeling that they used their phones 'too much' and had taken steps to curb usage (Deloitte 2024). The digital detox trend suggests that younger generations are self-organising to find balance, even as society at large struggles to set norms for healthy technology use. In the US, similar movements have taken hold. Tech executives in Silicon Valley have famously embraced 'digital minimalism' for their own families (limiting screen exposure for their children), and on the consumer side an increasing number of young Americans are buying 'dumbphones' (basic mobile phones without the Internet) to escape the risk of becoming addicted to apps (*Guardian* 2024). National campaigns such as the National Day of Unplugging have also encouraged people of all ages to voluntarily abstain from screens for 24 hours. A Harris Poll found that 81% of US Gen Z respondents believe regular digital detoxes are important and wish it were easier to disconnect (Quad 2025).

In Asia, too, youth have fostered their own forms of push-back against hyper-competitive, tech-driven lifestyles. In China this has crystallised in the form of the *tang ping* movement (躺平, meaning 'lying flat'), which emerged around 2021 as young Chinese openly rejected the pressures of long work hours and constant productivity. *Tang ping* is a philosophy of opting out: individuals choose minimalism and rest over the high-tech rat race. While not exclusively about Internet use, *tang ping* resonates as a reaction to burnout in all forms—digital included—and has been described as capturing 'the pervasive mood of alienation and burnout among Chinese youth' (Day 2021). Online forums in China dedicated to 'anti-technology dependency' likewise have tens of thousands of members exchanging tips on reducing smartphone use and reviving offline skills (Wutao and Davey 2024). Across cultures, these movements share a common message: in the face of digital overload, young people are seeking greater equilibrium by consciously disconnecting and re-engaging with the non-digital world. It is worth noting that these trends often flourish at the grass-roots level, independent of top-down guidance. The popularity of meditation apps, mindfulness practices and 'phone-free' spaces speaks to a hunger for respite. Restaurants and clubs in cities from Berlin to New York have started asking patrons to put away their phones to encourage real socialising. Even schools and universities have begun implementing device-free zones on campus to help students

focus and socialise in person. In sum, the rise of digital detox movements represents a cultural balancing act led by the youth themselves. While few advocate abandoning technology entirely, the growing consensus among young people is that intentional breaks and boundaries are necessary to safeguard mental health in an age of ubiquitous screens.

Legal instruments: the right to disconnect and the Digital Services Act

Policymakers in Europe have started to respond to digital burnout and over-connectivity through legislation, with a focus on protecting workers and young users. One prominent policy idea is the 'right to disconnect', which has gained traction in several EU member states. The right to disconnect refers to an employee's legal right to disengage from work communications outside official working hours without fear of reprisal. France was a pioneer, enacting a law in 2017 requiring larger companies to negotiate disconnection policies with employees (France 2016). Since then, other countries have followed: Belgium's government, for example, passed a law in 2022 granting its 65,000 civil servants the right to ignore work emails and calls after hours (Wood and Shine 2023). Spain, Italy and Ireland have also implemented variants of the right to disconnect in labour codes or collective agreements. The purpose of these laws is explicitly to combat the 'always on' culture that can lead to stress and burnout. Legislators note that with remote working on the rise, the line between work and personal life has blurred, sometimes to the detriment of employee well-being (European Parliament 2021). By establishing a right to disconnect, governments seek to restore that boundary. Early evidence suggests such measures can indeed reduce burnout: companies that adopt disconnect policies report improved employee morale and work–life balance (Weber and Adăscăliț ei 2023). However, enforcement remains an issue—many fear that a 'right' on paper may not change workplace expectations unless accompanied by a broader shift in culture. To strengthen this policy, in January 2021 the European Parliament passed a resolution calling for an EU-wide directive on the right to disconnect, aiming to harmonise protections across member states (European Parliament 2021). No such directive has yet been issued, but pressure is mounting for EU-level action. The growing legal recognition of disconnection shows that society—not just individuals—is rethinking the virtue of constant connectivity.

Another regulatory front impacting youth digital life is the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA), a sweeping piece of legislation that came into force in 2023 to govern online platforms (European Parliament and Council 2022). The DSA contains specific provisions aimed at protecting minors online, including measures relating to age verification and content moderation. For instance, very large online platforms (such as major social media networks) are required to assess and mitigate systemic risks to minors using their services (European Commission 2025). In practice, this has led to debates on how platforms should verify users' ages to enforce age-appropriate experiences (e.g. restricting adult content or the use of targeted ads for users under 18). The DSA encourages platforms to implement 'appropriate and proportionate measures' (European Parliament and

Council 2022, art. 28(1))—but this has proven challenging, both technically and ethically. On the one hand, robust age verification (for example, uploading government ID) can improve child safety by keeping under-age users out of harmful services. On the other hand, such methods raise serious privacy concerns, potentially forcing all users to divulge personal data or biometrics. Digital rights advocates warn that invasive age checks could erode privacy and exclude those without ID, while automated age estimation (such as facial analysis by artificial intelligence) is often inaccurate and biased (York 2025). In May 2025 the Commission issued draft guidelines on the protection of minors under the DSA (European Commission 2025; Cooper and Somaini 2025). The guidelines acknowledge these pitfalls, noting that self-declaration of age is unreliable but that more reliable methods must be proportionate and privacy-preserving (Cooper and Somaini 2025). The DSA stops short of mandating any single solution, instead pushing platforms to innovate safer designs (such as high-privacy default settings for minors, easy parental controls and restrictions on addictive features aimed at children). While the DSA represents a landmark attempt to create a safer digital ecosystem for young people, its effectiveness will depend on implementation details. Early enforcement has seen the European Commission open investigations into major platforms' handling of minors—including whether they adequately prevent under-age access to adult content sites and remove harmful material (European Commission 2025). Some member states, too, are taking their own steps: for example, age-verification laws for pornography websites have been discussed or enacted in countries such as France and Germany, albeit with mixed results and legal challenges. The 'age verification and its limits' question thus remains unresolved: how to balance a child's right to online safety with everyone's right to privacy and free expression. It echoes the broader theme of balance in the digital age—a theme that resonates strongly with certain political philosophies, including the Christian Democratic tradition discussed in the next section.

A Christian Democratic perspective on technology and human dignity

Christian Democrats often emphasise a 'human-centric' approach to innovation, insisting that the measure of any economic or technological development is its impact on human flourishing. In the context of digital burnout, this perspective urges caution against treating people as mere users or data points in tech companies' algorithms. As Kadioglu Kumtepe and Riley (2024, 156) write, 'technology should be "humanised", which we can take to mean . . . not subsuming human interests into social efficiency and not unduly negating human autonomy'. In other words, any digital transformation should be continually evaluated against the criterion of human dignity. Does a given app or platform respect users' autonomy, privacy and mental well-being? Does it enhance their capacity to live a good life, or does it exploit their psychological vulnerabilities for profit? From a policy standpoint, contemporary Christian Democrats might advocate for stronger safeguards and social frameworks to protect individuals from the excesses of the digital market. This can mean support for regulations such as that which ensures the right to disconnect (to protect family life and health), data privacy laws grounded in the

idea of 'informational self-determination' (a concept born in Germany that ties privacy to human dignity), and laws which ensure oversight of artificial intelligence and algorithms to prevent dehumanisation. We see such support reflected in initiatives such as the EU's ethics guidelines for artificial intelligence, which stress human agency and oversight—a vision very much in line with Christian Democratic concerns about keeping technology at the service of humankind. Pope Francis, speaking to these issues, cautioned that the digital revolution must not come at the expense of human personhood and community; in 2019 he warned policymakers not to let technology override ethics and human rights (Francis 2019).

Conclusion: towards balance in our digital future

In the face of unprecedented technological change, the experiences of Europe's youth with digital burnout offer a cautionary tale and a call to action. The Covid-19 pandemic dramatically underscored how vital yet how taxing our digital lives have become. On the one hand, connectivity kept education, work and social contact alive during lockdowns; on the other, overuse of digital media contributed to record levels of youth anxiety, depression and fatigue. Finding the equilibrium between these two realities is now an urgent societal task. The trends and responses surveyed in this article—from the grassroots digital detox movements to legislative proposals such as those that seek to establish the right to disconnect and new regulations under the DSA—all point towards an emerging consensus: our digital future must be more deliberately balanced to safeguard mental health and human dignity.

This echoes a lesson from history. After the Second World War, European nations adopted the social market economy model, pursuing a middle path that balanced economic liberalism with social welfare and justice. That model, championed by Christian Democrats among others, understood that unfettered markets needed humane constraints to produce broad prosperity and uphold human dignity. Today, we face a similar balancing act in the digital realm. Unrestrained technological innovation and commercialisation, while driving growth and convenience, have also generated externalities such as burnout, privacy erosion and social fragmentation. As a society, we must temper digital liberalism with digital well-being measures. This means implementing policies that ensure tech companies design products responsibly (prioritising safety features for youth, for example) and empower users to set healthy boundaries. It also means investing in education that fosters digital literacy and resilience, so that young people develop the skills needed to navigate online life critically and mindfully. The encouraging news is that young people themselves are leading the way in demanding this balance—their voices call for a future where innovation and mental well-being co-exist in synergy. In conclusion, if we heed these lessons, we can aspire to a digital society that is dynamic and inventive, yet also healthy, humane and in harmony with our fundamental need for balance. Just as the social market economy once reconciled economic growth with social justice, our task now is to reconcile the digital revolution with the timeless requirements of human mental health and dignity—a call for balance in the fullest sense.

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Know thyself to know the truth: Fighting disinformation in the age of artificial intelligence through foundational, psychological and emotional literacy

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Abstract
In the age of artificial intelligence–driven manipulation, deepfakes and algorithmic distortion, the crisis of truth is not merely technological but epistemological. Traditional digital literacy efforts are insufficient if they do not address deeper vulnerabilities in human cognition and communication. In this article, a radical, long-term strategy is proposed, one centred on foundational literacy (in terms of etymology, linguistics and translation), psychological literacy and emotional literacy. By empowering individuals to decode not only information but also their emotional and cognitive responses to it, such education can counter both polarisation and corrosive scepticism. This three-tiered approach draws on ancient wisdom—'*gnōthi seauton*', or 'know thyself'—to reframe resilience to disinformation as a journey to self-knowledge. This article presents a call to action for policymakers to invest in education that fosters discernment, self-awareness and social cohesion, building not only critical thinkers but reflective citizens capable of safeguarding democratic societies.

Keywords
Information, Disinformation, Misinformation, Malinformation, Artificial intelligence, Deep-fakes, Fake news, Digital literacy, Functional illiteracy, Emotional illiteracy, Psychological illiteracy

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Introduction

If, after seeing this screenshot[1] and reading its content, you googled this headline and hoped, even for a second, to find out more, the next 5–10 minutes you spend reading this article could be very useful. Do not feel discouraged; nobody is immune to the power of disinformation, and mystification can infiltrate every environment, not only the digital one.

In this article, ideas on how to empower individuals and improve their discernment will be presented. These ideas will focus on the crux of the problem: the ability to master communication and one's emotions. The main argument of this article is that in order for digital literacy programmes to be effective, they also need to address functional, psychological and emotional illiteracy.

Throughout the article, it will become increasingly clear that information disorders, as described below, thrive on the inability of individuals to critically analyse both messages and their psychological responses to their exposure to such messages. This inability is particularly pronounced among younger generations. As will be discussed later, it is precisely younger cohorts who prove the most vulnerable to challenges such as functional and psychological illiteracy. In what has been defined as a post-truth society,[2] where emotions and beliefs outweigh objectivity in shaping public opinion, foundational literacy can allow individuals to recognise their own feelings and analyse them before they take over from their discernment skills. When truth becomes fragmented and perception is shaped by emotional narratives, traditional markers of credibility erode. Therefore, the inability to distinguish between true and false is not only an informational crisis, but also an epistemological one, challenging the traditional markers of credibility, knowledge, truth and authority.

The link between information disorders and the erosion of trust in institutions is very strong. Therefore, in this article, a call to action is presented. The problem can be addressed by institutions, but their initiatives must mirror its multilayered and complex nature, which cannot be tackled only by regulations or digital literacy campaigns. In the first section, the historical and conceptual framework of information disorders will be outlined, tracing their evolution from propaganda to the artificial intelligence–driven era of deepfakes. In the second section, the psychological and sociological mechanisms underlying susceptibility to disinformation will be examined, highlighting how these

mechanisms provoke two main societal reactions: polarisation and scepticism. In the third section, the unintended effects of certain countermeasures will be analysed, showing how some educational tools can inadvertently fuel distrust. In the final section, existing regulatory measures and innovative proposals will be presented, culminating in the central contribution: that reinforcing literacy in its broadest sense will provide the essential foundation for more effective digital literacy initiatives. The conclusion will stress that only a long-term, foundational approach can safeguard meaning, truth and social cohesion in an evolving information environment.

Understanding the spectrum of information manipulation: a historical and conceptual framework for information disorder

The use of the term disinformation is fairly recent. It first appeared in English dictionaries towards the end of the 1980s. Its origin dates back to the Russian neologism 'дезинформация' (dezinformatzija), which was coined in 1923 when the vice-president of the State Political Directorate (the body that preceded the KGB) called for the establishment of a special disinformation office to conduct tactical intelligence operations. From this point onwards, disinformation became a tactic used in Soviet psychological warfare (Pacepa and Rychlak 2013).

After this brief introduction, one might assume that information manipulation is a Russian invention. However, this is not the case. Distorted information is a deeply human phenomenon and, as such, has existed for as long as humankind itself. This may explain why the terms disinformation, misinformation and malinformation are so frequently used interchangeably. To grasp just how ancient information manipulation techniques are, one need only consider what is often cited as one of the earliest documented disinformation campaigns in history: the smear campaign orchestrated by Octavian against Mark Antony, in the pre-Christian era. Octavian portrayed Mark Antony as a traitor to Rome, suggesting that his loyalty lay more with his lover Cleopatra and the interests of Egypt than with his own country.

While information manipulation itself has a long history, academic research on the topic is new, as are attempts to assign each term a clear and distinct meaning. We can define the ensemble of distorted information as 'information disorder', where the different actions distorting information each have a univocal meaning, denoting the intentions of the sender of a message.

Within information disorder, there are three main categories:

1. *Malinformation:* genuine information that is shared with the intent to cause harm.
2. *Misinformation:* information that is simply false or incorrect, for whatever reason.

3. *Disinformation:* fake or inaccurate information that is intentionally spread to mislead and/or deceive. It is misinformation coupled with a psychological intention to deceive or harm others.

To these categories we can add the following subcategories:

1. *Propaganda:* when disinformation is deployed in the service of a political agenda.
2. *Fake news:* news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers (Shu et al. 2020; Van der Linden 2023).
3. *Deepfake:* the fake video output of a deep-learning-based technology in which the face of a person is swapped with the face of another person. This term originated in late 2017 after a Reddit user named 'deepfakes' claimed to have developed a machine-learning algorithm that helped him to transpose celebrity faces onto pornographic videos (Tolosana et al. 2020).

Moreover, information disorders have a dynamic nature and can overlap. Disinformation can, for example, turn into misinformation. Let us consider a disinformation campaign spread on social media with malicious intent. The user who sees this content may not be aware of its falsity and might share it with his or her communities or friends. In this case, the user's action cannot be classified as disinformation; rather it is misinformation because the intent was not malicious (Shu et al. 2020). An example of this is the health crisis caused by hydrogen peroxide and alcohol poisoning that occurred in Pakistan during the Covid-19 pandemic. At the time, a disinformation campaign claimed that ingesting hydrogen peroxide or pure alcohol could eliminate the virus. Communities then shared this false advice, believing it to be helpful. As a result, many consumed these toxic substances, triggering a public health emergency (Van der Linden 2023).

From propaganda to deepfakes: three phases of information disorder

Three stages of information disorder can be identified in modern history. The first occurred during the twentieth century. Throughout the century, the practice of spreading propaganda became institutionalised, most notably during the First and Second World Wars, when state actors systematically harnessed media to mobilise support and vilify opponents.

The second phase stretches from the beginning of the twenty-first century to 2022, the year in which ChatGPT was released. During these 23 years, the scale and velocity of the growth of the digital environment transformed the spread of information disorder. The speed of information dissemination in digital environments started to outpace the capacity to fact-check. Moreover, because algorithmic curation on social media platforms tends to amplify emotionally charged or sensational content, the visibility and reach of false or misleading information increased. The Covid-19 pandemic represented a wake-up call in this regard.

We are now living in the third phase of information disorder, where artificial intelligence (AI) has democratised the production and dissemination of false information, enabling virtually anyone to act as both creator and distributor. Unlike traditional centralised and state-driven propaganda, contemporary disinformation often emerges from a diverse array of actors, including individuals. Driven by the recent technological advancements in generative AI tools, the proliferation of deepfake content on social media platforms grew by 550% between 2019 and 2023. This exponential increase has triggered concerns about the scale of the phenomenon and led the World Economic Forum to point to deepfakes and disinformation as one of the key global challenges in 2024 (Deloitte 2025). This trend is particularly alarming given that individuals aged 18 to 25 spend an average of three hours per day on social media, with younger cohorts exceeding four hours daily—a figure that continues to rise. At the same time, these platforms are increasingly relied upon as primary sources of news and information. The capacity to evaluate authenticity is therefore vital for younger generations, who often lack the habit of actively seeking a plurality of sources.

But what is at stake that makes information disorder so concerning? Apart from the economic and political impacts, the most concerning risk is existential: the inability to discern what is true and what is false, and the consequent two reactions: strong polarisation or widespread unconditioned scepticism. Individuals who are not aware of or careful about the information they consume might become further polarised; whereas those who are aware might become increasingly alive to the fact that malicious actors are deliberately and systematically producing false content with considerable speed, frequency and intensity. As a result, the latter may adopt a more cynical and distrustful attitude, questioning the legitimacy of any informational source. Although these are contrasting dynamics, both progressively erode trust, not only in the information ecosystem itself but also in institutions, organisations and all forms of authoritative knowledge.

Behind these two opposing reactions lie deeper psychological and social dynamics. These will be explored in the following sections.

The comfort of falsehoods: how disinformation satisfies psychological needs and fuels polarisation

What psychological mechanisms drive individuals to believe in distorted narratives and conspiracy theories in the first place? This section offers a list of factors that lead individuals to embrace distorted information:

1. Perceptual bias: beliefs, emotions and desires influence how we interpret reality, leading people to perceive what they wish to be true rather than what is factual. This factor is also called *truthiness*—the idea of conferring truth to what your gut feelings perceive as such (Van der Linden 2023).
2. First-narrative bias: in moments of uncertainty or in an information vacuum, the first narrative to emerge, regardless of its accuracy, tends to dominate and shape public opinion, highlighting the importance of timely and accurate communication.

3. Cognitive biases, which fall into two subcategories:
   - availability bias: prioritising information that comes to mind easily;
   - anchoring bias: fixating on initial information, which distorts people's understanding.
4. Confirmation bias: people tend to favour information that aligns with their pre-existing views.
5. Trusted-source bias and the familiarity heuristic: information received from personal contacts is deemed more accurate than information coming from verified sources.
6. Conformity bias: the tendency to change one's beliefs or behavior to fit in with others.

The other two mechanisms that our minds are sensitive to are the *illusory truth effect*, which leads us to perceive repetition as truth, and *fluency*. This latter can be defined as the ease with which information is processed by the brain. Something is fluent when it is easy to understand. This can influence the brain's judgement ability, leading it to make fast and intuitive judgements, rather than assessing the facts analytically (Van der Linden 2023). Moreover, *social recognition* is also crucial. Disinformation in particular exploits psychological domains such as an individual's social identity and sense of group belonging. Judgements on the veracity of information can be based on one's ability to build a social consensus, find evidence to support the latter, build its internal coherence and establish its credibility (Pinhanez et al. 2023). The influence of social motivation in the information environment is so powerful that it can overrule *accuracy*—the innate desire of humans to seek the truth. This leads to another bias: the *worldview backfire effect*. This occurs when corrective information, challenging an individual's beliefs or ideology, strengthens his or her original beliefs instead of undermining them (Van der Linden 2023).

The most sensitive to these mechanisms are, once again, young people. Youth, and adolescents in particular, are especially susceptible to the need for social recognition, which translates into a strong desire to feel accepted by their in-group. For this reason, they are more vulnerable to confirmation bias and conformity bias, both of which provide fertile ground for disinformation to thrive.

The above illustrates how disinformation fills psychological gaps users might not be aware of. Being unaware of the existence of these psychological mechanisms and unable to analyse the emotions that they trigger provide fertile ground for polarisation. Moreover, faced with a choice between comforting certainty and the unsettling pursuit of truth, many avoid risk, allowing disinformation to flourish and deepen polarisation both online and offline. In the digital world, polarisation is represented by digital environments called echo chambers, filter bubbles and rabbit holes:

- Echo chambers are social environments in which individuals are primarily exposed to information that confirms their existing beliefs. Dissenting views are excluded or discredited, reinforcing groupthink and amplifying misinformation.

Echo chambers are created by users themselves (e.g. a WhatsApp group with like-minded people).

- Filter bubbles are algorithm-driven information environments that tailor content to a user's past behaviour. This passive curation shields users from opposing perspectives, deepening cognitive biases without their awareness. They are technologically created (e.g. an Instagram feed).
- Rabbit holes are a specific kind of filter bubble, where algorithmic viewing recommendations encourage users to watch more and more extreme content over time, on a path of escalating exposure to increasingly extreme or misleading content, often driven by algorithmic recommendations (Van der Linden 2023).

The definitions of these various polarising environments highlight the distinction between spaces that are created socially and those created technologically. The question arises: is social media to blame for steering users into echo chambers and ultimately leading them down rabbit holes? Or does social media merely reflect offline polarising dynamics? Extensive research is being conducted to analyse the spread of disinformation offline. One study (Brown and Enos 2021) geolocated 180 million registered voters in the US and found that even in the same neighbourhoods, Republicans and Democrats cluster away from each other. This finding raises the distinct possibility that online echo chambers are not a product of social media but are instead induced by the offline environment.

Although social media has not created these phenomena from scratch, it has reshaped the speed at which information is shared, its scale and the medium through which this sharing takes place (Van der Linden 2023). For this reason, awareness campaigns have been established and policies introduced to tackle the issue, leading to the extreme opposite result: diffused scepticism. This will be the topic of the following section.

The cynicism trap: when fighting disinformation backfires

Research shows that higher levels of education reduce the likelihood of believing fake news and conspiracy theories. Inspired by medical science, the research community has experimented with 'inoculation' methods to protect against the 'disease' of disinformation. The idea mirrors the way in which antibiotics work: expose individuals to weakened 'strains' of misinformation so that they can better recognise and reject them.

Among these methods are interactive games, such as the University of Cambridge's 'Bad News' and 'Go Viral', which present users with both true and false statements to refine their discernment skills. After playing, participants were more likely to flag fake news as fake but were also more likely to label genuine news as false. The ability to distinguish truth from falsehood did not improve; instead, players became more cynical about all information (*Financial Times* 2024). This outcome reveals a dangerous side effect of the 'antibiotic' approach: in medicine, antibiotics kill pathogens reliably, but in the information realm, they can create widespread scepticism. While the World Health

Organization declared a worldwide 'infodemic' in 2020, the analogy between medical treatment and information defence ultimately falls short.

If fake news alters how people interpret real news, deepfakes directly reshape what counts as 'real' in the first place. These AI-generated videos, audio recordings or images can depict public figures making statements or engaging in actions that have never happened. Their strength lies in perfect mimicry: voices, gestures, facial expressions and physiognomy remain intact, but the content is fabricated to be indistinguishable from authentic material. This precision makes deepfakes powerful tools for manipulating public opinion.

Whether spread through fake news or deepfakes, disinformation undermines trust—the cornerstone of social contracts, economic exchanges and democratic life (Pinhanez et al. 2022). Repeated exposure to fabricated stories fosters cynicism, leaving people unsure of whom or what to believe. This distrust weakens institutional effectiveness by discouraging public cooperation and engagement. The damage extends to democracy itself. Fake news and deepfakes distort the flow of information that citizens rely on for informed decision-making. This was seen in Donald Trump's false claims about the 2020 US election, which even among a small, misinformed minority had the ability to inflict significant harm, as seen in the Capitol Hill attack (Van der Linden 2023). Moreover, the exhausting task of discerning truth from falsehood can discourage participation altogether, fuelling abstentionism and weakening democratic legitimacy.

Finally, disinformation threatens social cohesion. Targeted falsehoods can incite mistrust, hatred and even violence between groups. In this sense, polarisation is not the only danger; the paralysing scepticism generated by constant exposure to both fake news and deepfakes can be equally corrosive to the democratic fabric.

So how can one draw a line between true and false, real and fake? The next and final section of this article will dive into the policy measures that have been taken to address both polarisation and scepticism, and some new solutions, aimed at tackling the very heart of the problem, will be put forward.

From regulation to education: reinforcing literacy as the foundation of information resilience

Academic and institutional actors have long been committed to developing strategies to both prevent and mitigate the effects of information disorders. Two main approaches can be identified: educational and regulatory. The educational approach seeks to empower individuals by equipping them with the skills, knowledge and critical tools necessary to approach a state of 'immunity' to misinformation and to recover from exposure to distorted content. The regulatory approach, by contrast, targets the structural level, focusing on digital platforms and addressing the systemic factors that facilitate the production and dissemination of manipulated information.

Let us start by delving into the regulatory approach. The EU has taken proactive steps to regulate deepfakes. The EU AI Act, for instance, requires creators of generative AI to label their content as such, making it clear that the media has been manipulated. Anticipating the potential for election interference, in 2024 the EU published the Digital Services Act Election Guidelines for Very Large Online Platforms and Very Large Online Search Engines, which outlined potential mitigation techniques to address the risks of deepfakes and disinformation (Deloitte 2025). The Digital Services Act itself is a broader policy that builds on the 2000 E-Commerce Directive. It seeks to respond to three core problems: first that citizens are exposed to increasing risks online, particularly on very large online platforms; second, that the supervision of online platforms is largely uncoordinated and ineffective in the EU; and finally, that national-level regulations risk leading to increasing barriers in the internal market and reinforcing competitive advantages for established very large platforms and digital services (OECD 2024). The EU has even gone a step further and regulated deepfakes through the Strengthened Code of Practice Against Disinformation and the Code of Conduct Countering Illegal Hate Speech. Moreover, through the above-mentioned AI Act, the EU is the first supranational institution to have regulated AI. Under the Act, the opportunity for disinformation is limited through the compliance requirements for developers of general-purpose AI models. These include the conducting of systemic risk assessments, which started in August 2025 (Deloitte 2025).

Alongside the EU's initiatives, OECD member governments are adapting their policy frameworks to counter the threats posed by disinformation. In Germany, for instance, efforts to address disinformation have been integrated into the national security strategy. Indeed, disinformation is part of the broader concept of hybrid threats, which can be defined as

> actions conducted by state or non-state actors to undermine or harm democratic governments by influencing decision-making. These threats combine military and non-military, as well as covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyber-attacks, economic pressure, migration, deployment of irregular armed groups, and use of regular forces. Such actions are coordinated and synchronised, using a variety of means and designed to remain below the level of detection and attribution. (NATO 2024)

Due to the growing use of these hybrid threats, governments and institutions have increased their focus on disinformation to such an extent that the language surrounding it has become warlike, with institutional figures using expressions such as 'the fight against disinformation'. This shift has also elevated the issue to a priority on political agendas, leading to a proliferation of regulations aimed at protecting not only individuals but also national interests.

However, legislation does not address the core issue of human judgement and decision-making (Van der Linden 2023). For this reason, the final part of this section will focus on the educational approach. The main product of this approach is the concept of digital literacy (here this term is used interchangeably with the term media and

information literacy). UNESCO defines media and information literacy as 'empower[ing] people to think critically about information and use of digital tools. It helps people make informed choices about how they participate in peace building, equality, freedom of expression, dialogue, access to information, and sustainable development' (UNESCO 2023). Digital literacy focuses on the competences needed to live and work in a society where communication and access to information increasingly occur through the use of digital technologies (OECD 2022).

We can therefore think of digital literacy as a set of skills to develop and prescriptions to follow. The University of Cambridge has concentrated its research on the creation of 'antigens', maintaining the parallel with the medical realm. Here are the most relevant:

- The truth has to be more fluent. As explained in the second section of this article, one of the main reasons why the public falls victim to distorted information, especially fake news, is that it is more accessible, more quickly understood and catchier. Although difficult, because science-based content, history and legal texts take time to explain, it is necessary to make these subjects more appealing and accessible, and hence, more fluent. It is also necessary to raise awareness of the fact that lies are often presented as simple and short statements that reduce the complexity of any issue.
- The politicisation of content must be prevented. This would resolve the tension between people's desire for accuracy and their need to be liked and accepted by members of their own social network.
- Echo chambers must be avoided and platforms' algorithms left unfed. Despite the existence of offline echo chambers, studies show that social media networks play a critical role in their spread because the algorithmic filtering of content acts as a funnel, nudging users towards further polarisation and extremism (Van der Linden 2023).

Other researchers are focusing on the development of a new science of disinformation intended to enable the labelling of information disorder as a cybersecurity problem. This approach aims to protect hardware devices, with one idea being to create a shield to protect against fake media through software installed on a user's device that can check the media the user is being exposed to, reacting not only by warning the user of possible issues with that content, but by providing methods to question and verify its veracity (Pinhanez et al. 2022). Such a tool, combined with educational programmes, could enhance the effectiveness of digital literacy campaigns. Users should not have to rely solely on their own judgement, which can be fallible and biased, especially when they lack the means to verify the true origin of the content. While individuals can assess the final message they see, they cannot retrace the full digital history of every piece of media. Having access to a tool that performs this preliminary verification, flagging false content before it spreads, would allow users to focus on reliable messages from authoritative sources. They could then move to the next stage of discernment: evaluating the quality

of the information and deciding for themselves whether it is sufficiently neutral to represent the facts accurately or is excessively framed to promote a particular perspective.

The proposals analysed so far are undoubtedly relevant. However, they do not address the heart of the problem. Because, as previously mentioned, people can also be vulnerable to information disorders offline, it is necessary to target the root causes of this: that is, the ability of individuals to understand the messages they receive, process them, discern their meaning and formulate a well-thought-through opinion about them, while being aware of the psychological effects that such content may have on them.

Let us start by considering the ability of individuals to understand messages. Before the advent of AI disinformation campaigns, a widely discussed topic in public debate was *functional illiteracy*. This refers to a condition whereby a person is unable to understand, evaluate, use and engage with written texts in order to actively participate in society, achieve their goals, and develop their knowledge and potential (Schlechty 2004). According to the PISA[3] studies carried out by the OECD, the number of young people underachieving in reading is on the rise in the EU.

Let us linger for a moment on this phenomenon. If a person is unable to *understand*, *evaluate*, *use* and *engage with* a written text, how can they be expected to *understand, evaluate, use* and *engage with* manipulated content? This is why the main argument of this article is that the only way to tackle the problem of disinformation and to prevent phenomena such as polarisation or extreme scepticism is to return to the very roots of literacy. Individuals must be provided with the tools necessary to fully grasp the meaning of any message, not only those potentially distorted with malicious intent. Because communication today is increasingly complex and multilayered, providing invigorating text analysis and interpretation in compulsory education could make all the difference.

Some European countries have already begun promoting educational initiatives aimed at developing students' discernment and improving the ways in which they engage with the world of information. For example, Finland has introduced a National Media Education Policy (2019) that promotes media literacy across sectors, involving schools, libraries, non-governmental organisations, universities and civil society. Students study misinformation, disinformation, propaganda and misleading statistics, creating their own media for peer review (Salomaa and Palsa 2019).

While this example represents a promising approach, it still requires a foundational layer of literacy to serve as the basis for digital literacy initiatives. This is the first proposal of this article, to introduce foundational literacy initiatives. These could include the following:

- Etymology courses: understanding the origins of terms and their evolution over time enables individuals to be more precise in formulating and interpreting

messages, bringing them closer to the ideal circumstance in which each chosen word has an unambiguous meaning, reducing the space for miscommunication.

- Linguistics courses: learning the structure of language increases the sensitivity of information consumers, improving their ability to spot manipulation. An intrinsic feature of human language, absent from AI language, is the link between signifier, signified and referent—the triad described by Ferdinand de Saussure (de Saussure 2011). The signifier refers to the arbitrary sequence of sounds making up a word, the signified covers its semantic field, and the referent indicates the object or idea represented. AI cannot engage with referents rooted in physical reality, which often makes AI-generated messages feel inhuman. A shared awareness of these concepts would help people detect such messages.
- Translation courses: one principle of translation is that there is no perfect translation—something is always lost: a nuance, a sound device, a cultural reference. The same occurs when conveying information: each narrator emphasises different aspects of an event, and unconscious mental re-elaboration can alter details without malicious intent. Understanding this would encourage users to consult multiple sources to form the broadest possible view and to develop opinions that are truly their own, rather than mediated.

The strands mentioned above could form the three main pillars underpinning the literacy programme initiative.

The second proposal is to invest in psychological and emotional literacy. The second section of this article outlined the psychological mechanisms exploited by disinformation campaigns. Psychological literacy could address this problem. Psychological literacy refers to the ability to apply psychological knowledge to solve real-world problems, understand behaviour and communicate effectively. A lack of psychological literacy results in difficulties in understanding our own and others' mental processes, and in the inability to critically evaluate emotional responses or contextualising actions. A related, more established concept is emotional illiteracy. This refers to the difficulty of recognising, labelling and managing the emotions that psychological processes trigger. If programmes of psychological and emotional literacy were established, the aforementioned mechanisms (confirmation bias, illusory truth, cognitive biases etc.) would be widely recognised and more easily defeated.

Finally, a short-term measure is to raise awareness among producers of viral content regarding their responsibility for shaping the information ecosystem, both online and offline. In 2024 a Danish study found that 52% of those belonging to Gen Z had purchased a product recommended by an influencer they follow on social media (Opeepl 2024). If influencers can shape consumer choices, their potential to influence opinions and beliefs is even greater, especially among young people. It is therefore essential that this role be treated with the seriousness it deserves, with influencers adhering to clear standards and ensuring the accuracy of their messages before disseminating them.

Through this foundational scheme, we can build an educational framework that transcends time, generations and technological change, replacing short-sighted policies reacting to the latest developments with a lasting, adaptable approach to safeguarding meaning and truth.

Conclusion

Disinformation has always been part of human communication, but new technologies, such as AI and social networks, have dramatically expanded its scope. Today, the two main societal reactions to information disorders—polarisation and excessive scepticism—are often perceived unequally, with the former seen as more dangerous. Such a view is short-sighted: widespread scepticism can be just as corrosive to trust, democracy and social cohesion. While regulatory frameworks and digital literacy programmes are crucial, they remain incomplete without addressing the basic problem: individuals' lack of capacity to understand, evaluate, use and engage with information. The proposals presented here, grounded in etymology, linguistics and translation studies, aim to strengthen this foundation so that educational efforts can endure across time, generations and technological change. In the long run, only an education that goes beyond reacting to the latest technological threat can build the resilience needed to protect both truth and the public's trust in it.

Notes

1. Generated by the author with AI.
2. This term was popularised in the 2010s thanks to its appearance as the Oxford Dictionaries' 2016 'Word of the Year'.
3. Programme for International Student Assessment.

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Article

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The next generations need a new social contract for European defence

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Abstract

In response to escalating geopolitical threats, particularly from Russia, compounded by climate-related crises, European nations are reconsidering how to rebuild their military services by engaging the younger generations. This article argues that there is a need for a new social contract to align national defence imperatives with the socio-economic realities of Gen Z. While traditional patriotic calls resonate with older generations, younger Europeans—disconnected from the military paradigms of the past—prioritise economic stability, mental health and institutional trust. The success of defence mobilisation thus hinges on repositioning service as an opportunity for skill development, civic participation and social advancement. This article draws from Central and Eastern European experiences, particularly those of Poland, proposing a framework that links defence to dual-use innovation, voluntary engagement and tangible state support. Rebuilding trust between young people and state institutions is crucial to securing democratic legitimacy, societal cohesion and preparedness in the face of emerging hybrid threats. Mainstream parties must lead this transformation to outpace both the populists and institutional fatigue.

Keywords

Next generation, Youth, Military, Social contract, Warfare, Modernisation, Conscription

*The views expressed in this article are solely personal and do not reflect the official position of any institution, government or organisation with which the authors are affiliated.

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Introduction

After nearly 20 years on pause, conscription is making a comeback in Europe—driven by Russia's aggression and mounting global threats. The invasion of Ukraine has prompted a reassessment of defence strategy, with climate shocks adding to the strain. While Russia's strategic documents emphasise defensive adaptation and opportunities for cooperation, they subtly frame climate as a battleground against Western 'hegemony' (Russia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023). Olivia Lazard (2022) at Carnegie Europe argues that Russia is exploiting climate change in its asymmetric warfare and to achieve resource dominance. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine reflects Putin's strategy to leverage climate disruptions to shift global power. Russia, benefiting from global warming, aims to control resources and create dependencies through force in a climate-destabilised world. Russia's invasion of Ukraine targets its agricultural lands (Europe's 'breadbasket') and the critical minerals (e.g. lithium and titanium) vital for the EU's Green Deal. The Russian occupation of eastern Ukraine is jeopardising Ukrainian mineral partnerships with the EU and the US, dating from 2021 and 2025, respectively. This aspect of the Russian strategy is globally important. Lazard links it to the Wagner Group's African operations, in which supply chains are being weaponised to undermine EU decarbonisation by securing control over mining sites for critical minerals (e.g. lithium and titanium) in order to disrupt the EU's economic security. In effect this is undermining the EU's Green Deal and decarbonisation efforts by creating dependencies, restricting access to the resources needed for green technologies such as batteries and renewable energy infrastructure, and exploiting climate vulnerabilities, thus enabling Russian resource dominance in a destabilised global landscape. Russia justifies its aggression with historical narratives while exploiting Western climate vulnerabilities, betting on delayed climate action. The Western focus on climate is also closely linked to geostrategy, as epitomised in British strategic culture, which is widely discussed in many policy documents (UK Parliament 2023). For instance, in 2023 Hungarian–American investor and philanthropist George Soros updated his Munich Security Conference focus on global warming to include the implications of the war for climate action (Soros 2023). Council of the European Union studies demonstrate how the Russian aggression has worsened the global food crisis (Council of the European Union 2025), while some researchers point to food supply issues as being one of the driving factors that contributed to the Arab Spring revolutions which began a decade ago (Wanat and Aarup 2022).

Countries on NATO's eastern flank—such as Poland, the Baltics, Finland and Romania—face shrinking populations and growing recruitment gaps. Further west, similar demographic decline is testing NATO's ambition to muster the will to fight and, at the same time, societal acceptance of increased military spending. Tensions are mounting against the backdrop of a necessary increase in other spending, on needs such as pensions and healthcare, due to changing demographic pyramids.

Nationalist sentiments—resurfacing across the West—are frequently embracing a militaristic mode in which 'might makes right', while mainstream parties—particularly the Christian Democrats—bear a responsibility to imbue this resurgence with values-driven moral substance. Even more importantly, such an infusion would enhance the

democratic legitimacy of European leadership. The latter is facing a paradigm shift that extends beyond NATO to the EU, with nearly all countries in the global West transitioning from a peace-ensured, globalist project to one that ties trade and regulations to robust security measures, as Trubowitz and Burgoon explain in *Geopolitics and Democracy: The Western Liberal Order from Foundation to Fracture* (2023, 87–108). They observe that today both far-left and far-right populists share strong anti-globalist sentiments, and they propose that the mainstream parties regain ground by drawing lessons from their winning strategies of the twentieth century, namely focusing on delivering prosperity through trade tied in all respects to security (military, domestic and international).

A testing ground for democratic resilience

In this context, the political and strategic considerations required on the eastern flank provide a critical sandbox for European mainstream parties to adapt their democratic strategies to real-world wargaming realities. On the one hand, the twenty-first-century challenge remains the rise of radical populists, who are gaining ground across the continent; on the other, the pressing urgency of Sino-Russian military power poses a threat to NATO and the Global West. Poland's lessons are particularly telling. Donald Tusk's security-driven narrative in the 2023 election—centred on border security, support for Ukraine, countering Russian aggression and alignment with the West—secured a coalition majority of mainstream parties, sidelining the far-right and radicals, also due to significant support from younger voters. The coalition government increased defence funding (to 4.7% of GDP, among the highest in NATO), along with social spending initiatives such as *babciowe* (grandparental leave support), demonstrating that 'bread and butter' policies can coexist with security priorities. It further bolstered its focus on prosperity, tapping into EU funds and promising to cut red tape for entrepreneurs. At the same time, this political narrative underpins Poland's ambitious militarisation target of 300,000 troops, with Tusk outlining plans in March 2025 for 500,000 trained personnel (active and reserve). However, the coalition's momentum faces uncertainty following a disappointing loss to far-right candidate Karol Nawrocki in the 2025 presidential election, with the durability of the strategy to be tested by the 2027 elections.

Other Central and Eastern European countries face similar struggles in adapting to the new geostrategic realities. The Baltic states, which have mobilised citizens for compulsory military training and army service in response to Russia's threat, share Poland's defence-oriented mindset and struggle against left- and right-wing populists, who collectively achieve up to 30% support in each of the countries. Similarly, Czechia—though not directly bordering Russia but mindful of the 1968 Soviet invasion—has been increasing its professional military service.

However, demographic constraints limit these countries' potential compared to Poland's ambitious targets. The Baltics and Czechia can only muster a fraction of Poland's planned half a million in reserve, highlighting the need for a tailored approach to mobilisation that accounts for regional differences and demographic realities.

Russia's aggression and ongoing military mobilisation, which has quickly built up army numbers despite major losses in Ukraine, has shattered complacency, reigniting conscription debates. Even though today's youth across all of Europe prioritise their daily struggles over concern for military danger—poised as they are between the heightened Russian threat perception and their own vulnerability to interference in their everyday lives (via rigged elections, social media disinformation etc.)—their attitudes lean towards defending their nations or even the European continent. The military numbers from the aforementioned Central and Eastern European countries, together with Finland's exemplary whole-of-society approach,[1] are, however, hardly enough to match the Russian army's numbers, given the completely different attitude to military service in other parts of Europe. In addition, the new generation comes with a whole set of psychological burdens from the post-Covid digital age, which must be factored into European defence posture plans.

The war in Ukraine underscores the critical importance of numerical strength: Russia's conscripts are pitted against Ukraine's motivated volunteers. Within NATO, disparities abound—Poland currently maintains over 200,000 troops with plans for 300,000, including territorial defence; Finland adheres to a comprehensive total defence paradigm; and Germany exhibits ongoing reticence. Meanwhile, a lack of youth participation (National Democratic Institute 2024) is jeopardising overall preparedness, with young people being detached from the historical legacies of the Second World War—which contrasts with Russia's strategic invocation of such narratives for mobilisation.

From Gen Z to GI Joes in Central Europe

They may sound right to the ears of the older generations, but for Gen Z, born at the turn of the century, emotional appeals to build up defence and resilience should be coupled with a new model of socio-economic incentives fit for their specific context.

Today's 18-year-old Europeans are too young to recall NATO countries suspending or abolishing compulsory military service. NATO's demilitarisation marked the culmination of the 'peace dividend' in recent Western history. Eastern flank countries, once fielding hundreds of thousands of troops trained under Warsaw Pact directives to invade Berlin on Moscow's orders, downsized their armies upon EU and NATO accession. Conscription ended in Czechia in 2004 and in Poland in 2009 (where conscripts had supplied around 300,000 troops in 1990). Germany abolished conscription in 2011, dismantling its once-formidable 500,000-strong continental force. In the same period, Russia also decreased its forces from nearly 2 million to about 1.5 million service personnel. The 'end of history' seemed assured, nurturing a generation in a markedly different world.

But for a member of Gen Z who has just entered adulthood, the military numbers and personal choices related to military service are quite abstract. Their lifetime geopolitical frame of reference includes Bulgaria and Romania's entry into the EU when they were born; the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, along with the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the global financial crisis when they were just a year old; the Lisbon Treaty's activation and Michael Jackson's death at the age of 2; Hungary's Fidesz's supermajority reshaping democracy at 3; Netflix's European launch at 4; Obama's second US term at 5; Russia's

annexation of Crimea at age 6; Brexit at 8; TikTok's debut at 9; the release of Squid Game at 12; the Covid-19 pandemic halting the world at 13; and Russia's invasion of Ukraine at 15. Many things we perceive as obvious feel surreal to those who are 18 years old or just a bit older and who are now considering putting on a military uniform.

This article argues for a new social contract—an intergenerational deal—to be established. It should take into account both the objective military needs and the realities of the social fabric of today's potential recruits. Even in Poland, which has a population of 38 million and in 2022 adopted a bill to achieve 300,000 troops by 2035—passed with the unique bipartisan support of nearly all members of Parliament—recruitment seems an uphill battle. This article explores why this challenge is so strongly linked to the next generations. While focusing on Poland, it offers observations that might be applicable in other countries. It makes recommendations on how to meet the necessary mobilisation levels while avoiding a major societal backlash that could threaten the democratic legitimacy of the mainstream parties.

Understanding the next generations

Europe's leaders are rediscovering the vocabulary of conscription—but many of its young citizens are speaking a different language. As Russia's war in Ukraine sharpens traditional security reflexes, policymakers are rushing to revisit old frameworks of national service and military readiness. However, if you want to draft a new social contract, you must begin by discarding outdated assumptions. Policies built on yesterday's certainties will not line up with today's realities.

Differentiate fear from anxiety

Russia's war in Ukraine has reawakened a continent-wide sense of vulnerability, reviving fear-based threat perceptions across Europe. But this psychological shift is uneven—filtered through the lenses of generational and regional differences. For many younger Europeans, the spectre of war ranks lower than more immediate, tangible concerns. In a 2024 survey, respondents aged 18–30 identified rising prices and the cost of living (40%) as their top priority for EU action over the next 5 years, followed by climate change and environmental protection (33%), and economic growth and job creation (31%). Close behind were calls for stronger welfare systems and improved access to healthcare (29%), according to Eurobarometer (2024). Education, housing, and even defence and security all registered as important, but for fewer than one in four respondents. In short, while hard power has returned to the continent, soft pressures still dominate the minds of its younger citizens. Clearly, young people fear not only war but also daily systemic uncertainties.

Let us now look at countries in detail: in Germany, in 2019, 46% of young people said that they were afraid of Russia (while 71% mentioned environmental pollution, 66% terrorist attacks and 65% climate change); in 2024, 81% pointed to Russia as the biggest threat (the other threats standing at, respectively, 64%, 61% and 63%) (Whittle 2024). In Poland, the young consider the most important issues to tackle to be increasing prices and the cost of living (88%), healthcare (84%) and—in third place—Russian aggression (77%) (Horonziak and Pazderski 2024, 58).

Transitioning to adulthood is a difficult process in itself: in Poland, while 77% believe youth is a time of opportunity, 70% feel stress and nearly half (49%) report deep uncertainty (Gagatek et al. 2025, 12). Fear of war is acute but external; anxiety is chronic and internal. Understanding both is key to interpreting young people's attitudes towards military service.

Modern patriotism: 'Why fight for a country that leaves me alone?'

Many young people in Europe feel abandoned by the state, and this has weakened the motivation to defend it. This issue is more complex than one may think. We can observe, on the one hand, declining trust in political leadership and traditional institutions, which breeds anti-system attitudes. On the other hand, we see a rising distrust of institutions and a shift towards individualised values, which are shaping modern civic attitudes. Look at the numbers: in Poland 65% of respondents aged 18–29 declare that in crises, they can only rely on themselves and their loved ones, while just 35% believe that they can count on support from the state. What is more, young people are unequivocal in their opinion that the government cares more about the elderly than about the young. Eighty per cent of respondents and the vast majority of voters for all parties (73%–86%) agree with this statement. Support for this statement declines with age. The cohort above 60 is more likely to believe that the government cares more about young people than older people. However, even among this group, 46% admit that the government cares more about them than about young people (Gagatek et al. 2025, 40).

Across Europe many young people no longer feel the sort of strong bond to the state that would inspire its defence. This is not mere apathy—it reflects a more complex erosion of civic trust. Disillusionment with political leadership and traditional institutions has fostered anti-systemic sentiment, while a broader cultural shift towards individualism has reshaped young citizens' expectations of the public sphere. This feeling is linked to anti-establishment voting—young people are more likely to vote for parties on either the extreme left or right of the political spectrum, as these parties seem to offer the novelty young voters find lacking in traditional parties (Cokelaere 2024). Yet, the latter are often the ones that govern. The result is a generation that feels increasingly left to fend for itself.

On the European level, when considering the possibility of a crisis, nearly half of young Europeans (aged 18–35) expect to face armed conflict, yet only around 30% would volunteer (Testoni et al. 2024, 28–30).

Civic responsibility must be earned through reciprocity—states must provide before demanding sacrifice. Instead of responding to coercion or guilt-based appeals, young people want to choose responsibility, not have it imposed upon them. Underlying this growing frustration is a material reality that politicians have failed to address meaningfully: job insecurity (Woods 2024).

The result is a worrying paradox—a generation expected to uphold democratic and security commitments yet given little reason to feel the state is invested in them. Until

that imbalance is redressed, asking young Europeans to rally around institutions they do not trust may prove a losing proposition.

It is not what it used to be: war in the era of technology

Modern warfare has transcended the physical battlefield. It now fundamentally incorporates cyber-attacks, artificial intelligence, logistics chains and information warfare—what the EU refers to as warfare in the 'fifth domain' (cyberspace). Although this complicates war theatres, it also creates new opportunities: conscription or national service could offer training in dual-use skills (e.g. cybersecurity or engineering). Today's conflicts require more than infantry—there is space for tech, education and innovation. Both governments and societies are failing to understand this. GLOBSEC (2025) reveals that among respondents from B9 countries,[2] 90% and 87% think that their governments need to build resilience and capacity in, respectively, countering cyber-attacks and disinformation.

So, what can be done? A 2024 International Centre for Defence and Security review shows that Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland have volunteer cyber conscription programmes, which encompass cyber operations, information technology support and programming, often in partnership with academia and industry. Pilot projects in Denmark train conscripts for 165–347 days in cyber defence, yielding talent deployable in both military and civilian sectors. Estonia offers extracurricular robotics and programming clubs but lacks formal 'cyber-conscript' pathways (Hurt and Somer 2024, 12–13).

There is also a need to bridge the knowledge and engagement gap. How can one become passionate about a job without knowing that it exists? Ninety per cent of young Western Europeans cannot name a single European defence company. Moreover, while they associate defence with weapons, only 20% link it to research and development or advanced tech sectors, and at least 20% do not consider companies in the defence sector to be committed to peace and conflict resolution, protecting democracy or fighting climate change (Testoni et al. 2024, 42–52). This information indicates the huge potential for reframing defence as innovation.

A reimagined readiness

To modernise national service, incorporating civil, cyber, environmental and logistical dimensions is essential. Dual-use education, such as scholarships for engineers and information technology specialists in crisis management, could bolster national research and cultivate 'cloud troops', as evidenced by Estonia's cyber conscription initiatives which take place in collaboration with private employers (Hurt and Somer 2024, 8–9). Poland's 2022 army bill exemplifies this by offering post-service educational opportunities. Moving away from conventional conscription, states should integrate civilian occupations with dual-use potential into crisis-response frameworks, fostering voluntary participation through civic recognition and expertise development, aligning with Gen Z's values of community solidarity and resilience (Braw 2025).

Education must evolve beyond traditional methods to rebuild trust in institutions. Innovative channels such as tailored social media campaigns and local ambassadors could disseminate defence literacy and preparedness, resonating with youth through a 'follow-me' approach. Drawing from regional examples, Denmark and Lithuania provide employment and educational support both during and after service, while Latvia offers free tuition to volunteers and Sweden issues transferable skills certificates. By offering clear incentives and encouraging open dialogue, governments can empower young people, ensuring national security supports democratic engagement and delivers lasting societal benefits. Here, leveraging NATO's 2025 5% pledge might be helpful as well. The spending target is divided into two categories: at least 3.5% of GDP 'based on the agreed definition of NATO defence expenditure' to 'core defence requirements', and up to 1.5% of GDP being spent on other 'defence- and security-related spending', including to '*inter alia* protect our critical infrastructure, defend our networks, ensure our civil preparedness and resilience, unleash innovation, and strengthen our defence industrial base' (NATO 2025). That 1.5% paves the way for decision-makers to invest in projects that serve society but for which it has been difficult to find funding in national budgets until now. An 'outside the box' approach is needed here as it opens up the possibility for dual-use investments to be allocated to the research and development sector or to education to create a ready and resilient civil society.

Capitalise on holiday intervals for engagement

Poland's Ministry of Defence organises complimentary, voluntary one-day Saturday training sessions accessible to individuals aged 15–65, encompassing practical exercises in marksmanship, combat techniques, survival skills and crisis response—without entailing oaths or mobilisation obligations. Approximately 28,000 Poles participated in the inaugural event, with 99% endorsing their continuation. Complementing this initiative, the 'Holidays with the Army' scheme remunerates participants (up to €1,500) for 28-day cycles, targeting those aged 18–35; it attracted over 11,000 enrollees in 2024 and is poised for expansion in 2025 (Poland, Ministry of Defence 2025; Polish Army 2025). Analogous programmes in Czechia cater to teenagers and young adults through summer camps focused on combat instruction, rifle proficiency, field tactics and survival drills, compensating completers with around €1,800 and conferring eligibility for active reserve status subject to supplementary basic training (Kravchuk 2025).

Regional frameworks should be viewed as enablers rather than hindrances. The Nordic–Baltic region, encircling the 'NATO lake' and abutting Belarus, Ukraine and Russia, has regained strategic allure. The Council of the Baltic Sea States, instituted in 1992 to advance cooperation among the Baltic Sea–adjacent nations, comprises 10 states—all aligned within NATO and the EU. Amid Russia's ostracism from such bodies, policymakers ought to accord priority to the Council of the Baltic Sea States as a non-military vehicle for collective resilience, youth involvement and cross-sectoral innovation. Its rotational presidency mechanism empowers each member to imprint its agenda; Poland, having commenced its term in July 2025, could spearhead exchanges of best practice and the formation of working groups on youth engagement in defence.

The playbook to win

It is tempting to assume that centre–right parties are naturally equipped to forge a renewed social contract—balancing stability with opportunity, and order with aspiration. But this assumption risks overlooking a deeper paradox. Precisely because these parties are so embedded in the political establishment, they may be poorly placed to credibly spearhead systemic renewal. The public appetite for change increasingly gravitates towards forces perceived as untainted by the status quo—new, anti-establishment movements that promise rupture rather than reform. And yet, it is exactly the centre–right's institutional memory, social rootedness and command of statecraft that could allow it to reclaim the initiative—if it is willing to act not as a steward of continuity, but as a credible architect of transformation. The new social contract needs to be a combination of security and personal and communal advancement.

Four pivotal recommendations

1. *Elevate national service to an aspirational paradigm.* Dispense with derogatory caricatures of military service as 'grunt' work. Forge connections with climate-response mechanisms (as delineated in the EU Preparedness Strategy), technological innovations and drone operations—positioning gamers as prospective sentinels.
2. *Position service as an integral career milestone.* Embed dual-use training as a foundational component, rather than a peripheral supplement. Safeguard resilience in the employment market by harmonising public- and private-sector contributions, drawing lessons from Ukraine's entrepreneurial military innovators. Ensure that post-service trajectories are elevated, not impeded.
3. *Harmonise 'guns and butter'.* Recast expenditure discourses by aligning NATO procurement with employment opportunities. The appreciable ascent in Rheinmetall's stock value exemplifies market enthusiasm. Introduce instruments such as defence-oriented exchange-traded investment funds to underwrite social provisions, such as childcare and educational facilities, thereby neutralising economic populists.
4. *Confront appeasers.* Avoid empty promises of globalism or unrealistic leftist ideals. Promote steadfast commitment to democratic principles. Offer targeted incentives, such as job training and educational opportunities tied to national service, to strengthen centrist support and counter the appeal of Moscow's influence.

Conclusion: it is time to formulate and execute

The exigencies of European defence necessitate a revitalised social contract, one that integrates the technological insights gleaned from Ukraine's experiences with a renewed emphasis on voluntary commitment. During the Cold War, conscription epitomised societal solidarity: young individuals fulfilled their patriotic obligations through service, the middle-aged contributed through financial support and the elderly reaped the benefits of enhanced security. However, the erosion of welfare systems has disrupted this delicate equilibrium.

The ReArm initiative, an EU framework to enhance European military readiness and resilience, emphasises fiscal priorities, often overlooking the societal trust needed to boost troop recruitment. However, effective national service can create a fair agreement, enabling young people to serve, gain skills and thrive, with society providing robust support. The alienation felt by youth in the eastern-flank countries poses a risk of escalating crises that will likely lead to recruitment shortfalls, even in Poland. Foreign players have been exploiting this possibility by manipulating information and interfering in other ways.

Therefore, to answer the question raised by this issue of the *European View*, no, this is not a lost generation, nor will the next be. The matter lies in the hands of those with the ability to act—the decision-makers. To ensure that these generations do not become lost, a new social contract is urgently needed—one that the new generation and those generations culturally and economically anchored in the twentieth century can all agree on, sign and adhere to.

Notes

1. As per the United Nations (2023, 10), a whole-of-society approach 'embraces both formal and informal institutions in seeking a generalized agreement across society about policy goals and the means to achieve them'. Finland is known for championing this type of leadership in its security and resilience policy.
2. Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia.

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From principle to policy: Intergenerational solidarity as a pillar of the EU's long-term governance

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Abstract
This article reflects on the evolution of intergenerational solidarity from being a conceptual value to becoming a policy concern within the EU institutional system. It analyses the current strategies which aim to mainstream intergenerational fairness across EU policymaking and argues that, despite recent progress, the EU still lacks binding mechanisms to assess the long-term impact of its decisions on future generations. The article highlights that, for the sustainability and legitimacy of EU action, intergenerational solidarity must evolve from a principle to a governance tool—guiding not only social and climate policy but also emerging areas such as EU defence, fiscal strategy and digital transformation. As growing defence spending reshapes EU priorities, the importance of aligning security investments with the interests and rights of younger and future generations is underlined.

Keywords
Intergenerational solidarity, EU governance, Long-term policymaking, Generational fairness, Sustainability, Youth inclusion, EU defence

Introduction: from value to governance principle

Intergenerational solidarity—broadly understood as mutual support and responsibility between age groups—has moved from the periphery of political rhetoric to the heart of debates on sustainability, justice and democratic legitimacy. While its moral appeal has

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long been recognised, only in recent years has it begun to influence institutional discourse within the EU (Age Platform Europe 2023; Ellerich-Groppe et al. 2021).

In the EU context, the concept has gained traction in response to overlapping crises: demographic ageing, the growing precariousness of employment for young people, the climate emergency and the long-term costs of public debt. Intergenerational solidarity is increasingly framed not only as a normative principle but as a strategic imperative—the foundation for sustainability, equity and democratic renewal (European Commission 2024b; EESC 2024).

Despite rhetorical progress, one can observe that concrete policy implementation remains limited. Although the EU treaties enshrine intergenerational solidarity as a foundational value—particularly in Article 3(3) of the Treaty on European Union, which calls for 'solidarity between generations' as a cornerstone of sustainable development—this principle is seldom operationalised in binding legislation or fiscal frameworks (Jensen and Pfitzner 2025; EESC 2024).

In practice, many EU policies prioritise short-term fiscal discipline over long-term societal investment. For instance, the Stability and Growth Pact (SGP) sets limits on national debt and deficits, aimed at ensuring macroeconomic stability, yet fails to distinguish between current spending and future-oriented investment. This structure discourages public spending in critical areas such as education, climate resilience and housing—sectors that disproportionately affect younger and future generations (Darvas et al. 2024). In the domain of pension reform, political reluctance to rebalance benefits between current retirees and younger contributors has led to worsening intergenerational inequalities in social spending (European Commission and Social Protection Committee 2024).

Finally, while the European Green Deal and the EU Climate Law are steps forward, implementation remains fragmented and insufficient. Fossil fuel subsidies still persist in several member states, and climate transition funds are not always tailored to reach the young or vulnerable workers of the future (European Commission 2024a).

From welfare to forward-looking justice: the evolution of intergenerational solidarity in the EU

For much of its history, the EU's approach to intergenerational solidarity was rooted in a narrow welfare-state logic. In this paradigm, solidarity between generations was primarily understood as the protection of older people through public pensions and healthcare systems. This model, common in post-war Europe, reflected demographic realities—younger populations, growing life expectancies and political consensus on the need for the welfare state (Vanhuysse and Goerres 2012). However, this setup gave little structural thought to the rights, opportunities and burdens facing younger generations—especially those not yet born (Kuslits and Sulyok 2024).

As a result, intergenerational fairness was not a guiding principle in EU policymaking. For decades, policies were reactive and risk-averse, focused more on managing demographic ageing than on equipping future generations for social, economic or environmental challenges (European Commission 2020). Fiscal rules, such as those enshrined in the SGP, reinforced short-term thinking by penalising deficits but failing to distinguish between consumption and investment—a flaw that disincentivised long-term spending on education, climate action and digital transformation (EESC 2024).

This began to change in the late 1990s and early 2000s, due to a convergence of factors, which included the following:

- *Demographic alarm*. The growing visibility of Europe's ageing population—and its long-term implications for pension sustainability, healthcare costs and labour markets—began to reshape EU priorities (Eurostat 2023). The Lisbon Strategy (2000) and the European Year of Active Ageing (2012) linked ageing with lifelong learning and active labour participation, offering a first step towards cross-generational thinking.
- *Crisis-driven awareness*. The eurozone and financial crises of the 2008–14 period acted as a wake-up call. Austerity disproportionately affected younger generations—via cuts to education, youth unemployment programmes and innovation funding (European Commission 2014). By contrast, older cohorts were often shielded due to their stronger political voice and reliance on institutionalised benefits. This gave rise to a growing academic and civic discourse of generational injustice (Mulkeen 2025).
- *Climate mobilisation*. Perhaps the most transformative factor has been the rise of youth-led climate activism. Movements such as Fridays for Future succeeded in reframing intergenerational fairness not just in economic terms, but as a matter of planetary survival (Sieverding et al. 2024). This shifted the debate beyond pensions and into existential questions about what kind of world the current generations are leaving behind. The European Green Deal and the EU Climate Law now explicitly reference the obligation to safeguard the environment 'for future generations' (European Commission 2019).

As a result of these factors, the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic triggered a fiscal and symbolic rupture with past practice. In response to the crisis, the EU adopted NextGenerationEU, a €750-billion recovery instrument financed through common EU debt. The initiative was explicitly branded as an act of solidarity with future generations and represented a turning point (European Commission 2021). For the first time, the EU raised funds in the name of young people, investing in the digital transformation, education, employment and climate resilience. This represented a tangible, institutional acknowledgment that younger generations should not be left to pay the price for today's crises.

Recently, institutional shifts have reinforced this evolution. The Conference on the Future of Europe (2021–2) provided a platform for young people to demand youth quotas, climate justice and future-oriented policy impact assessments. In 2024 the European Commission appointed a commissioner for intergenerational fairness, and a comprehensive Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness is now under development, supported by a public consultation and new metrics such as the Intergenerational Fairness Index.

Finally, survey evidence shows that younger Europeans remain committed to the EU project but expect it to align with their priorities: education, health, climate protection, housing and meaningful participation. They support common EU action on defence and security, but only when it is balanced against the need for sustainability and inclusion (European Commission 2024b).

Together, these factors and the subsequent shifts outlined above have pushed the EU from having a passive and one-dimensional understanding of intergenerational solidarity to setting a multidimensional and future-oriented agenda. While implementation remains uneven, there is growing recognition that the legitimacy of the EU increasingly depends on its ability to safeguard the interests of all generations—especially the young and the not yet born.

Institutional advances and the remaining gaps in the mainstreaming of intergenerational solidarity

In recent years, the EU has made visible institutional progress in elevating intergenerational solidarity from a rhetorical ideal to an emerging pillar of policymaking. The appointment of a dedicated EU commissioner for intergenerational fairness, youth, culture and sport in 2024 marked a notable milestone. This shift has been further institutionalised through the ongoing development of an EU Strategy on Intergenerational Fairness, expected in 2026. The strategy aims to embed a cross-cutting intergenerational lens across key domains: climate action, housing affordability, the digital and green transitions, employment precarity and pension sustainability. It recognises that today's decisions—fiscal, infrastructural and ecological—will shape the life chances of both current and future generations (EU Policy Lab 2025).

Several innovative mechanisms are proposed within this strategy:

- the creation of an Intergenerational Fairness Index, assessing how well EU and national policies protect the long-term interests of younger and future citizens;
- the introduction of intergenerational impact assessments, evaluating the long-term consequences of laws and policy proposals; and
- the promotion of participatory structures, ensuring young people and civil society are included in consultations and long-term planning.

However, as promising as these developments are, serious gaps remain between institutional ambitions and operational delivery. One of the most glaring limitations is the absence of a dedicated EU budget line for intergenerational fairness. Without earmarked funding, even well-designed strategies risk remaining aspirational. Existing EU programmes such as Horizon Europe, Erasmus+ and the Just Transition Fund contribute only partially to generational equity, and lack a coordinated investment framework focused on supporting intergenerational priorities across policy areas.

Moreover, the EU's core fiscal governance frameworks, especially the SGP, continue to act as barriers to future-oriented investment. Designed in the 1990s to ensure macroeconomic stability, the SGP focuses on short-term deficit and debt reduction, with little distinction between current expenditure and investment with long-term returns—such as in education, digital infrastructure or green innovation (Darvas et al. 2024). As a result, member states are often discouraged from borrowing for or spending on youth-focused public goods, even when such investment would be economically and socially sound.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) has taken an important step towards making intergenerational solidarity more actionable. In its influential 2024 opinion, it recognised that although the importance of fairness between generations is gaining political traction, it still lacks coherence and visibility within EU policymaking structures. To address this, the Committee urged the European Commission to publish a Green Paper on Intergenerational Solidarity—a move that could consolidate the EU's vision and provide a conceptual foundation for further action (EESC 2024).

Beyond this, the EESC calls for the mainstreaming of intergenerational fairness across all EU policies and funding instruments, including the European Social Fund and cohesion policy. Rather than treating it as a niche concern, the aim is to embed a generational lens horizontally across employment, housing, health and innovation.

Crucially, the opinion also highlights the need for legal mechanisms to assess the long-term impact of EU laws and regulations. These would involve integrating future-oriented impact assessments into the legislative processes, ensuring that today's decisions do not impose unfair burdens on tomorrow's citizens (Kuslits and Sulyok 2024). It even proposes the creation of a European Pact on Intergenerational Fairness—a governance framework to coordinate efforts across the Commission and member states and avoid fragmented approaches.

Finally, the Committee stresses the role of civil society and youth organisations in shaping and monitoring EU policy. Intergenerational fairness, it argues, cannot be achieved through top-down planning alone. It requires a culture of participatory democracy, where those most affected by future outcomes—especially young people—are involved in co-designing the rules and strategies that will govern their lives.

Defence spending and intergenerational trade-offs: a test for European solidarity

Nowhere is the tension between present-day imperatives and long-term responsibility more visible than in the EU's evolving approach to defence. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, escalating global competition and mounting pressure from partners such as the US have catalysed a dramatic shift in European security thinking. The Union has moved towards greater coordination and joint procurement, and has even floated the idea of EU-level defence bonds (European Commission 2023). While this shift responds to legitimate threats, it also raises difficult questions: who pays, who benefits, and how do today's decisions shape the futures of younger and unborn Europeans?

From the standpoint of intergenerational solidarity, the defence debate represents a major cross-roads. On the one hand, young Europeans are not indifferent to security concerns. According to the 2024 Eurobarometer, 77% of those aged 15 to 30 support the creation of a common EU defence and security policy—revealing strong support for shared responsibility at the European level (European Commission 2024b). However, when asked about their investment priorities, young people clearly ranked education (57%), health and well-being (55%), and climate action (49%) far above defence (24%). In short, younger generations support defence cooperation—but not at the cost of social and environmental investments that secure their future.

This points to a broader dilemma: public resources are limited, and increased military spending inevitably entails opportunity costs. Expanding defence budgets may come at the expense of investments in affordable housing, digital education, green infrastructure or youth entrepreneurship. The challenge is not only fiscal but also normative—a matter of distributive justice between generations.

Moreover, this concern is also geographically and socio-economically layered. Defence investments disproportionately benefit countries with large defence sectors—such as France, Germany and Italy—creating structural asymmetries in who gains from EU-level defence coordination. Smaller or less industrialised member states may contribute to collective funds but see little local return in jobs or innovation, risking the creation of resentment across both generations and regions (Wolff et al. 2025).

From a policy perspective, the key challenge is to redefine what constitutes a 'just' defence policy. Intergenerational solidarity does not imply neglecting defence needs, but it requires that choices in this domain be forward-looking and inclusive. This could mean prioritising dual-use technologies—such as cybersecurity tools, space systems and sustainable logistics—that enhance both defence capabilities and civilian resilience. Investments in security could also be channelled into programmes with wider societal benefits, such as artificial intelligence for disaster relief or cyber-resilience infrastructures that protect governments, businesses and households alike (European Commission Expert Group on the Economic and Societal Impact of Research and Innovation 2025).

As underlined in its 2024 opinion, the EESC insists that solidarity must be mainstreamed across all policy areas, including defence and security. This involves assessing not only the financial implications of defence choices but also their broader social and ecological footprint—particularly whether they displace youth-oriented policies, exacerbate inequalities or slow down the EU's green transition. The proposed Green Paper on Intergenerational Solidarity could provide the institutional space for a transparent, democratic debate on these trade-offs.

The evolving EU defence agenda is therefore both a test and an opportunity. Approached with foresight, it could reflect the values of shared security, technological innovation and collective responsibility. But if advanced through opaque budgeting, the uneven distribution of benefits and disregard for the long-term consequences, it risks becoming yet another policy area where intergenerational fairness is sacrificed to the pressures of urgency.

Embedding intergenerational solidarity: a way forward

For the EU, advancing meaningful intergenerational solidarity requires moving beyond declaratory principles towards durable institutional frameworks. As demographic change, climate emergencies and rapid technological transformation reshape the foundations of European society, the challenge is not only to safeguard today's citizens but also to secure the well-being of those yet to come. In this sense, protecting future generations has become a litmus test of the Union's capacity to govern with foresight and credibility over the long term.

A critical conceptual shift lies in redefining what solidarity means. Public debate too often frames intergenerational solidarity as a one-way transfer, with older cohorts expected to give up privileges for the benefit of the young. Such a zero-sum perspective overlooks the potential for mutual reinforcement. Investments in youth—affordable housing, quality education, inclusive labour markets and climate resilience—are not only about fairness for the next generation; they also strengthen long-term economic stability, improve public health and enhance social cohesion.

To embed this vision of reciprocal solidarity, the EU must institutionalise intergenerational fairness within its governance architecture. Several measures stand out as priorities:

- Systematic intergenerational impact assessments should be carried out on all major EU laws, fiscal instruments and strategic frameworks. These tools could help to forecast how today's decisions affect the rights and opportunities of future generations.
- Enhanced strategic foresight capacities are needed across all institutions. Each directorate-general, agency and advisory body should be equipped to anticipate

long-term risks and design resilience-oriented policies, rather than relying on reactive measures.

- Meaningful youth representation and future-generation participation must go beyond tokenistic consultations. Youth assemblies, ethical panels and permanent citizens' dialogues could help to ensure that long-term perspectives are embedded in critical domains such as artificial intelligence, climate action and fiscal planning.
- Reform of fiscal governance is equally vital. The SGP continues to conflate current consumption with investment, thereby discouraging future-oriented spending. New rules should allow productive investments in green infrastructure, digital education and health—areas essential to intergenerational equity—without penalising member states under deficit constraints.

Taken together, these proposals are crucial to turning normative commitments into durable institutional practice. Without such structures, the EU risks losing legitimacy not only among younger Europeans but also in the eyes of future generations.

Conclusion

Intergenerational solidarity can no longer be treated as a distant aspiration; it must become a foundational principle of the EU's future. The challenges facing the Union—climate breakdown, demographic ageing, technological disruption and mounting security threats—are inherently intergenerational. They require a Union capable not only of managing immediate crises, but of safeguarding rights, resources and opportunities across time.

The legitimacy of European governance will increasingly depend on its ability to protect those with the weakest voice: the young, the marginalised and the unborn. Turning the concept of intergenerational fairness from rhetoric into reality will demand institutional courage, cross-sectoral coordination and, above all, a cultural shift in political reasoning—from reactive crisis management towards long-term stewardship.

The foundations are already in place. Europe's youth have demonstrated not only their concern but their commitment to building a more just and sustainable Europe. They do not reject security or stability, but they expect the Union to match its ambitions with credible promises for the future. The real question, then, is not whether young people are ready to contribute—it is whether the EU's institutions are prepared to listen, adapt and act.

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Article

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The dynamics of Latin America-EU relations in global trade agreements

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Abstract
This article addresses the relationship between Latin America and the EU, examining historical ties; current trade frameworks, such as the Association Agreements with Mercosur and Chile; and the modernisation of the Global Agreement with Mexico. It also explores the socio-economic and geopolitical implications of these alliances. Furthermore, it discusses challenges such as asymmetric power dynamics, environmental concerns and political instability in Latin America. The article also presents future projections for trade relations, emphasising the challenges presented by inclusive policies and environmental issues, and their impact on the global sustainability agenda in terms of ensuring equitable growth and resilience within an interconnected global economy.

Keywords
Latin America, EU, Trade agreements, Global economy, Strategic cooperation, Bilateral relations, Partnerships, Global Agreement, Mexico

Introduction

The dynamic relationship between Latin America and Europe reflects a deep and unique bond that has evolved over the decades. Anchored in historical, cultural and economic ties, this relationship has fostered strategic cooperation within the current global context. The two regions face common transnational challenges—such as climate change, inequality and the need for effective global governance—which underscores the imperative to strengthen their bonds through comprehensive trade agreements and robust cooperation frameworks.

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This article examines the bi-regional partnership, with particular emphasis on comprehensive agreements, such as those concluded with Mercosur and Chile, as well as the protracted negotiation process that culminated in the modernisation of the Global Agreement with Mexico, finalised in January 2025. These developments are assessed within the broader context of current geopolitical tensions, notably the trade conflict marked by the imposition of tariffs by the US.

The strategic relevance of these agreements lies in their potential to enhance market access, stimulate investment flows, and align with international sustainability and development objectives. Nonetheless, their implementation is not without challenges, including persistent economic asymmetries, environmental pressures, socio-political instability and shifting geopolitical dynamics.

The historical context of trade relations between Latin America and Europe

The relationship between Latin America and Europe has deep roots, influenced by colonial history and cultural connections. However, in recent decades it has been transformed into a strategic partnership based on shared economic and political interests.

The EU has recognised Latin America as a key region for diversifying its alliances, especially in response to the growing influence of the US and of China in recent years through the Belt and Road Initiative.

Strengthening trade relations with other countries began with the European development cooperation strategy, through agreements based on the idea that trade would be the main driving force. Against this backdrop, asymmetric and unilateral agreements began to emerge, under which the European Economic Community benefited from tariff reductions on their exports through preferential trade arrangements. Following certain challenges within the WTO in the second half of the 1990s, the EU began basing its trade relations on the principle of reciprocity and within the framework of free trade areas. These agreements establish trade liberalisation between the countries involved and incorporate issues such as services, investment, public procurement and intellectual property.

In accordance with the legal provisions established in the Treaty on European Union concerning external action, common commercial policy, development cooperation, humanitarian aid and international agreements, the EU has progressively diversified its relations. As reported by the European Parliament (Gomez De Agüero Lopez et al. 2025), the EU currently maintains agreements with 27 of the 33 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, positioning itself as the region's largest investor, third-largest trading partner and principal contributor to development cooperation.

The EU's main economic partners are Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Mexico and Peru. Chile and Mexico were the first of these countries to conclude negotiation agreements, also known as Global Agreements. These will be analysed later. Other regions that

have negotiated agreements include the Central American Integration System, made up of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama; the Andean Community of Nations, comprising Peru, Ecuador, Colombia and Bolivia; and the Mercosur bloc, which includes Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela. Furthermore, bi-regional connections have been strengthened through summits. One example is the EU–CELAC (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) Summit, which took place in Brussels in July 2023 (Council of the European Union 2023) and is scheduled to take place on 9 and 10 November 2025 in Colombia, as it is held biennially.

On the other hand, parliamentary diplomacy has taken on an increasingly important role through EuroLat, a forum with 150 members—75 from the EU and 75 from Latin America—which includes representatives from the regional parliaments and congresses of Chile and Mexico. Fifteen meetings have been held since 2006. The meetings of the Mexico–EU Joint Parliamentary Committee have also been successful: delegations made up of Members of the European Parliament and Mexican legislators have held 31 meetings to date.

The Joint Communication issued on 7 June 2023 by the European Commission (2023) to the European Parliament and the Council, in collaboration with the Office of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, outlines six strategic pillars: (1) the renewal of the political partnership; (2) the reinforcement of the joint trade agenda; (3) the Global Gateway investment initiative aimed at promoting equitable green and digital transitions while addressing social inequalities; (4) enhanced cooperation in the areas of justice, public security and the fight against transnational organised crime; (5) joint efforts to advance peace and security, democratic governance, the rule of law, human rights and humanitarian assistance; and (6) the development of a robust and dynamic people-to-people partnership.

This initiative laid the foundation for the EU's renewed agenda with Latin America and the Caribbean, acknowledging the region's strategic geopolitical relevance. Mexico is considered to be particularly important, given its deep economic interdependence with the US through the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement, which designates the US as Mexico's principal trading partner.

Nevertheless, bilateral relations experienced significant tensions following the inauguration of Donald Trump as president of the US. In this context, from the US's perspective, several critical issues in Mexico have adversely impacted the bilateral dynamic, including irregular migration, drug trafficking—particularly of fentanyl—rising levels of violence, widespread criminal control across national territories and the alleged collusion between organised crime and public officials. Additionally, the Mexican government's reluctance to classify these criminal organisations as terrorist groups has further exacerbated tensions. These developments have led to the imposition of tariffs and accelerated the scheduled review of the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement, originally planned for 2026, which was moved forward to the second half of 2025.

Conversely, the growing influence of the Chinese market has been strategically leveraged through China's engagement in the region, resulting in at least 21 Latin American

countries joining the Belt and Road Initiative, also known as the New Silk Road. Among these are Argentina, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Chile, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela.

In this geopolitical and economic context—marked by escalating tariff disputes that are significantly undermining regional economies—it becomes imperative for both Latin America and the EU to pursue market diversification as a means of enhancing economic resilience and reducing dependency on dominant global actors.

Trade agreements between Latin America and the EU

The EU has actively pursued the development of comprehensive trade agreements with Latin American countries, characterised not only by market access provisions but also by the inclusion of political dialogue and cooperation mechanisms. This section highlights the most relevant agreements currently awaiting ratification, namely the EU–Mercosur Association Agreement, the Advanced Framework Agreement with Chile and the modernisation of the Global Agreement with Mexico, which has concluded its technical negotiations and is now pending formal signature and ratification.

Mercosur

Following 25 years of negotiations, the EU and Mercosur—comprising Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay—successfully concluded the association agreement on 6 December 2024. In addition to trade liberalisation, the agreement incorporates pillars of political dialogue and cooperation, covering a market of approximately 780 million consumers across both regions. The ratification process remains ongoing, as approval by the national parliaments of the EU member states is required for the agreement to enter into force. Although a preliminary agreement had been reached in 2019, negotiations were subsequently reopened to reinforce commitments to sustainability. The agreement aims to eliminate 91% of tariffs on EU exports to Mercosur countries and 92% of tariffs on Mercosur exports to the EU. These tariff reductions are projected to generate annual savings of nearly €4 billion for European companies. Key sectors expected to benefit include agriculture (notably beef and poultry), the automotive industry and chemicals. For Mercosur, the agreement is particularly advantageous for expanding agricultural exports, which constitute its access to key agricultural markets and represent approximately 60% of its exports to the EU.

Chile

The partnership between the EU and Chile is governed by an association agreement signed in 2002 and implemented in 2003. This agreement has recently undergone a comprehensive modernisation process aimed at updating the institutional framework and addressing contemporary global trade challenges. The revised agreement is anticipated to improve access to the European market and establish a permanent, effective, impartial and predictable investor–state dispute settlement mechanism.

Notably, the agreement incorporates ambitious commitments to sustainable development, including strong environmental and labour protections. It also features a dedicated chapter on gender equality, promoting equal opportunities and treatment, as well as provisions on digital trade. Under the revised terms, the share of Chilean products enjoying tariff-free access to the European market will increase from 94.7% to 99.6% (Government of Chile Undersecretariat of International Economic Relations 2025), effectively covering nearly all Chilean exports to the EU. On 13 December 2023, Chile and the EU signed two texts: first, the Advanced Framework Agreement, which encompasses political, cooperation, trade and investment pillars and requires approval by the European Parliament as well as by the parliaments of the EU member states; and second, the Interim Trade Agreement, which covers only trade and investment liberalisation and requires approval solely by the European Parliament. The Interim Trade Agreement will be repealed once the Advanced Framework Agreement enters into force.

This agreement will enter into force upon the completion of the respective legislative and administrative procedures by both parties.

Mexico

For the EU, Mexico serves as a strategic bridge between North and South America due to its geographic location, as well as its deep historical and cultural ties with the region.

The entry into force of the Economic Partnership, Political Coordination and Cooperation Agreement in 2000—commonly referred to as the Global Agreement—established a bilateral political dialogue that has progressively deepened. This is attributable to the agreement's comprehensive nature, encompassing economic and social cooperation, along with commitments in areas such as democracy and human rights. Furthermore, in 2008, the strategic partnership was established, further reinforcing linkages in fields such as politics, security, the environment and socio-economic issues. As a result, Mexico has become the only country to hold both a trade association agreement and a strategic partnership with the EU. High-level dialogues between the EU and Mexico are regularly held to address shared challenges, including in security and law enforcement, migration, the promotion of democracy and human rights, economic development, and environmental and climate change concerns. The Global Agreement also provides for the establishment of the EU–Mexico Joint Parliamentary Committee, responsible for overseeing its implementation since 2005. To date, 31 meetings have been held, with the committee convening twice a year to examine and assess the current status of the agreement.

The importance of trade in goods between Mexico and the EU is reflected in the record figure of $90.6 billion reached in 2024, positioning the EU as Mexico's third-largest trading partner, following the US and China. Since 2000, bilateral trade has accounted for approximately 7% to 8% of Mexico's total trade, establishing Mexico as the EU's thirteenth-largest partner globally and its second largest within Latin America. The EU also stands as the second-largest foreign investor in Mexico, with $202.1 billion

in investments, primarily from Germany, Belgium and Spain, concentrated in key sectors, such as the automotive, pharmaceutical and aerospace industries. Hence the relevance and importance of accelerating the negotiations to modernise of the Global Agreement between Mexico and the EU, which began in May 2006. A lengthy negotiation process culminated in 2018 with a 'political agreement in principle', meaning that only legal revisions, minor adjustments and the final signature of the agreement remained pending.

These negotiations incorporated advanced disciplines and included areas not addressed in the original agreement. According to data from Mexico's Ministry of Economy, 86% of agricultural and fisheries products were liberalised, opening new export opportunities for Mexican goods, such as orange juice, agave syrup and asparagus. This liberalisation makes the agricultural sector one of the main beneficiaries of the agreement. The agreement also includes trade facilitation measures aimed at simplifying customs procedures and increasing transparency in documentation. A specific chapter dedicated to small and medium-sized enterprises was introduced to enhance their access to the benefits of the agreement. In the area of services, the coverage was expanded to include sectors such as telecommunications, maritime transport and e-commerce. Regarding intellectual property, the agreement recognises 20 Mexican geographical indications and 6 spirits (distilled alcoholic beverages), while also protecting 19 traditional crafts such as Talavera and Olinalá. In return, Mexico grants protection to 340 European products. Rules of origin were relaxed by 55% to accommodate cutting-edge operational processes in key sectors such as automotive and aerospace.

The agreement also introduces chapters on anti-corruption, measures to strengthen institutional and financial integrity, and on trade and sustainable development, which include commitments on labour rights, biodiversity, climate change and the possible recognition of the Paris Agreement as an essential clause. Furthermore, regulatory transparency is reinforced, requiring the timely publication of generally applicable measures in any area of the agreement, thereby fostering a predictable environment for economic operators from both regions.

However, despite the conclusion of the negotiations, the signing and ratification of the modernised agreement were delayed due to political issues in Mexico. During the administration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, foreign policy and international trade were not considered priorities. Nevertheless, during the administration's first year, negotiations for the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement were concluded and ratified.

However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, all non-health-related issues were relegated to the background. Europe, meanwhile, faced its own crisis, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which reshaped its priorities, leading to the imposition of sanctions against Russia and multiple diplomatic efforts to negotiate peace. On 17 January 2025, it was officially announced that negotiations for the modernisation of the Global Agreement had concluded. The agreement is currently undergoing legal review, which will be

followed by translation and subsequent approval by the 27 national parliaments of the EU member states and the European Parliament.

Among the challenges and opportunities for future collaboration, both Mexico and the EU must commit to ratifying the agreement promptly, allowing it to enter into force as soon as possible, particularly in the current context of ongoing uncertainty and the threat of new US trade and tariff policies.

Once approved and ratified, the modernised Global Agreement between Mexico and the EU will constitute a cutting-edge instrument for cooperation. It is expected to serve as a relevant platform for advancing collaboration in critical areas such as energy and sustainable development. These topics are of particular concern for Mexico, as the recent constitutional reform eliminating autonomous regulatory bodies—including the Energy Regulatory Commission, the Federal Telecommunications Institute and the National Hydrocarbons Commission—has significant implications for existing international agreements. The reform raises doubts about regulatory independence and may undermine investor confidence.

Consequently, certain issues must still be clearly defined and adjusted in the final stages of this negotiation, with the hope that the energy chapter of the modernised agreement will not be diminished to a mere formality.

Conclusions

The relationship between Latin America and the EU has become one of the world's more dynamic region-to-region partnerships. However, it must be acknowledged that, due to various political and geographical factors, the development of cooperation has progressed at a slow pace. The negotiation of trade agreements that also incorporate chapters on political dialogue and cooperation is of paramount importance. The strong influence of other markets, such as those of the US and China, poses a significant challenge, in particular in the current context of the emerging new international order, in which overcoming global challenges such as world peace still appears distant.

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Unlocking the European Defence Union: Independent and values-based

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Abstract
The EU is now faced with a highly possible scenario that, in reality, it has not had to address since the Second World War: the eventuality of a threat to its territory that it might have to deal with without resorting to the US or even NATO. For the EU to either deter this scenario or, perhaps, effectively face it, it will have to build a credible military capacity. The independence of this capacity from all non-EU factors is key. Otherwise, it will risk its functionality and it will increase the likelihood that it could be held hostage to external leverage, thus jeopardising the EU's ability to implement its own decisions and protect its values and interests. For the above to materialise, strong political will is essential. The rationale behind the need for this political will should be found in the fundamental values on which the EU was historically constructed: intertwined peace and prosperity for all member states.

Keywords
European defence, EU autonomy, Political will, Values

Introduction

If we wanted to capture in a nutshell the very essence of today's EU defence situation and its future challenges, there is no more eloquent depiction than that of the first meeting between the newly elected US president, Donald Trump, and the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky. The notion of strength versus that of values was imposed in the bluntest way during that conversation, as exemplified by the absence of 'cards' on the part of Zelensky. And, hence, on the part of the EU, which had insisted that Ukraine should be supported all the way in defending its territorial integrity. However, the EU has

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now been dragged into a process that is leading far from its fundamental goals and principles. And, together with it, Ukraine.

This was a shock for an EU that, since the end of the Second World War, has taken its security and peace, as well as the US's catalytic involvement in guaranteeing these, for granted. And although wars have erupted on its periphery during that time, today the perception of a possible conventional threat against its very self is ringing the strongest alarm bells ever. All the more so, in the face of a US that is manifestly withdrawing from confronting Russia in Ukraine and has even exhibited signs of rapprochement with Moscow. A first assessment of this shocking realisation would downplay this as a temporary tendency, ascribed exclusively to Trump's presidency. However, a more careful examination would demonstrate that the US urged Europeans to take more defence responsibility for their own continent as early as in the aftermath of the Second World War, and certainly in the aftermath of the Cold War. More notably, the 'pivot to Asia', which shifted US focus away from the European and Middle Eastern sphere, was a strategy of the Obama administration, adopted in 2011.

The truth is that, on many occasions since the end of the Second World War and, more imperatively, in the aftermath of the Cold War, Europeans have been faced with the challenge of building a reliable common military capability of their own for a high-intensity conflict. The key to their failure to do so has been the fact that, ultimately, they could still count on the US to provide the military capabilities they could not. Today, it is clearer than ever that those days are coming to an end and that, this time, it is crucial not only for the credibility of the EU, but also for existential reasons, that they deliver.

What the history of the Common Security and Defence Policy tells us

The vision of a European Defence Union goes back as far as the end of the Second World War. In the aftershock of two devastating world wars, the need to protect European states from conventional threats led to the first attempts at unification. The signing of the unsuccessful plan for a European Defence Community in May 1952, the establishment of the Western European Union in 1954 and the fruitless plan of the Fouchet Commission in 1961 were all steps in this direction. However, European military weakness compared to Soviet power, the need for European economic reconstruction and the lack of sufficient political cohesion did not allow for the implementation of a European solution.

The American commitment to the security of the European continent was thus essential, particularly in the light of the Cold War. The establishment of NATO institutionalised this reality. In this way, the US prevented the possible 'Finlandisation' of Europeans and ensured their allied stance. However, even this early, and with the war in Korea demonstrating the need for US involvement in other parts of the world too, American pressure on Europeans to assume greater responsibility for the defence of their continent could be observed. This pressure would also develop into the constant threat that NATO would be dissolved should Europeans not take on this responsibility (Howorth 2000, 10).

The end of the Soviet threat removed the direct and pressing need for an American presence in Europe and, with it, US tolerance. At the same time, the wars that then broke out on the EU's periphery, in the former Yugoslavia and the Persian Gulf, established the complete inability of Europeans to defend their continent and their wider neighbourhood on their own. The war in Kosovo acted as a catalyst for the creation of what is now the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) (Shepherd 2009). The risk of the US staying out of the game next time was visible, and pressure from the US Congress to increase burden-sharing intensified European concerns. Moreover, in Kosovo, Europeans realised the extent of their weaknesses on the battlefield, which also led to their limited role in strategic decision-making. The leading role of the US in operations gave the Americans such a sense of superiority that it even led politico-military circles in the US to question the system of unanimity in NATO, as they considered the American contribution to be disproportionately large compared to the one vote that the US had in decision-making (Evans 2000).

It is evident that no one in Europe can claim that there have not been any warnings about the situation we are in today. For almost 80 years, Europeans have known that they do not have the capacity to defend the security of their continent and its periphery on their own. And they have been urged by the US to prepare themselves to take on these responsibilities, as they have also been warned that there may come a day when they will be left alone to do so. In addition, they have been faced with the possibility of having to leave decisions about their own continent to be taken by Washington due to this inadequacy. However, the perception of the absence of a tangible conventional threat and the fact that the US would ultimately always get involved in hard times gave Europeans the luxury of believing that there was not really a need to do more than they were already doing, at least within the CSDP. The withdrawal of US involvement in Ukraine has made clear that the CSDP, as it is, is not enough.

The CSDP's handicaps and the way forward

The CSDP faces inherent limitations. Such limitations include its fragmentation into member states and their heterogeneity, the lack of coherent leadership, the European deficit in military capabilities, and the priority given to economic and development policies within the EU. And yet, it is its relations with NATO and the US that are the major obstacle to its development.

The EU's autonomy vis-à-vis NATO has perhaps been the most critical issue since the CSDP began to be shaped (Howorth 2003). Today, the CSDP is the product of negotiations between Europeanists, that is, those who have a more visionary approach to the EU's place in the global system and who support Europe's autonomy from the US, and Atlanticists, that is, those who have a more practical approach, favour the leading role of the US in European security and do not trust the prospect of developing an independent EU defence capability. Indicative of the obstacles to the development of the CSDP is also the fact that the US, despite its admonitions to Europeans to take more military responsibility, did not wish to jeopardise its own hegemonic role in transatlantic relations. And that is why the US opposed and undermined any attempts to make the CSDP autonomous. Thus, in all basic texts governing the formation of the CSDP, the need for close

cooperation and coherence with NATO is emphasised. But most detrimental to the autonomy of the CSDP was the US insistence on avoiding overlaps between the two organisations and on the EU resorting to the use of NATO assets and capabilities and not creating its own autonomous ones to conduct operations. This insistence led to the so-called Berlin Plus agreement that stipulated the rules for the use of NATO's assets and capabilities by the EU (Brenner 2002; Albright 1998).

However, this discussion took place in an era when the EU could only envisage its missions as being crisis-management operations of low intensity. But in the context of the war in Ukraine and the US threat to disentangle itself from it, the unthinkable has now become a possibility: the EU could be called upon to undertake a major operation on its periphery, and maybe even a collective defence operation, without the involvement of the US or even NATO (Lunday et al. 2025).

This is not an unlikely scenario. The case of Ukraine has now demonstrated, in the most emphatic way, the striking divergence of perceptions and approaches between the US and the EU. What is most alarming, though, is how the EU's inadequacy in the field makes it unable to defend its principles and values, as well as its interests, and results in it acquiescing to US decisions that are far from aligned with its own perceptions and pursuits. At the same time, an overt lack of respect is being exhibited towards the EU, which is being excluded from discussions and decisions on issues of vital importance to its own continent. Consequently, the EU's credibility is being damaged on the international scene and in the eyes of its citizens. Likewise, within NATO, the US's hegemonic role may henceforth not allow the Alliance to adequately address European concerns, also in the light of the current divergence of opinions on Ukraine. Let us not forget that this possibility had already begun to emerge in the 2000s (Brzezinski 2009; Webber 2009; Flockhart and Kristensen 2008; Daalder and Goldgeiger 2006; Talbott 2002). The US's different priorities may result in NATO forces being directed to support those and actions that are more important for Europeans being blocked. American intentions to transform NATO into a global security organisation and promote 'global partnerships' are indicative of this.

Thus it is crucial that the European Defence Union can rely on its own assets and capabilities, if necessary, and not depend on US and NATO ones. It has been argued that a constructive duplication could prove beneficial, both for the EU and the US, but also for the more effective conduct of operations (Schake 2001; 2002). For example, the case of the operation in Kosovo, where NATO essentially had to employ all of its rapid reaction forces and took up the full capacity of its headquarters, raises questions about the Euro-Atlantic ability to handle a second such crisis simultaneously (Silvestri 1999, 13). Furthermore, the Berlin Plus agreement entails that decisions on the availability of NATO assets for the conduct of EU operations are made on a case-by-case basis by the North Atlantic Council, so a veto is always possible. This would allow the US to either block operations to which it objects, or to prioritise those it considers more important. In the light of the diverging worldviews that have begun to emerge in Euro-Atlantic relations, such an action could not be ruled out, even in a collective defence case—that is, an attack on a NATO member state—if the US considered the defender to have 'started the

war' or to 'have no cards'. By the same token, the European Defence Union should avoid becoming dependent on NATO also because of other Allies that are not members of the EU. For example, Turkey could veto the use of NATO assets by the EU due to a dispute with the latter or with Greece and Cyprus (Gnesotto 2004, 109). In fact, during the negotiations on EU–NATO cooperation for the CSDP, which lasted almost two years due to Turkish objections, Ankara succeeded, among other things, in having Cyprus excluded from EU military operations conducted using NATO assets and, to this day, it requests the exclusion of Cyprus from all EU–NATO meetings, a fact that poses obstacles to cooperation between the two organisations.

But even in cases of an autonomous EU operation, while working together with like-minded non-EU partners is important, dependence on them for conducting operations or for armaments procurement, especially when their like-mindedness is questionable, could be suicidal. Again, the case of Turkey, about which there is a lot of talk, stands out. Turkey maintains a very low alignment rate (5%) with Common Foreign and Security Policy and CSDP statements and decisions (European Commission 2024, 82). Ankara does not participate in sanctions against Russia, but rather facilitates sanctions evasion, and has acquired Russian military systems that endanger Allied military technology. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine Turkey providing military assistance to an EU operation in which it would have to confront Russia in the field, such as a collective-defence operation. In addition, Ankara implements an interventionist policy in its wider region, in most cases by military means, permeated with a neo-Ottoman, revisionist ideology, while also promoting an Islamist agenda, as demonstrated by its support of Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood and other radical movements, and its threats of war against Israel (Bozkurt 2025; Suryadnaya 2024; Schanzer 2025). The possibility of its participation in the ReArm Europe fund will result in EU resources being used to strengthen Turkey militarily against EU members Greece and Cyprus, and to support Ankara's interventionist policy in the region, which is often contrary to Euro-Atlantic values and interests. Given its conflicting agenda with the EU on fundamental issues, Turkey's contribution to the European Defence Union would grant it enormous leverage over the EU. An example of how Turkey uses every lever it has to put pressure on the EU is the failed attempt in 2020 by the Turkish state to pull off a massive migrant invasion at the Greek border, using thousands of migrants as a hybrid threat—a strategy that was later copied by Belarus (Tzimas 2021). Ankara also uses its Turkish and Islamist diaspora to meddle in EU member states' domestic affairs and policies (Cornell 2017; *Arab Weekly* 2020). Finally, its democratic, rule of law and human rights records pose serious moral concerns. The Turkish veto in NATO, which was used as leverage over Sweden and Finland with regard to the extradition of Turkish dissidents from these countries, among other demands, points to serious dilemmas. It is, therefore, paradoxical that the European Defence Union should seek autonomy from the US only to become dependent on Turkey.

Hence, it is absolutely vital for the EU to acquire its own, completely autonomous, military tool if it wishes to be truly safe and protected.

The key parameter for the construction and use of this tool is unified political will. The rule of unanimity, but also the large number of EU member states, makes reaching a consensus on CSDP issues difficult. The particular perceptions in relation to what constitutes a threat; the particular interests, internal factors and histories of the member states; and also the differing aspirations regarding European integration and the relationships with the US and NATO affect the achievement of consensus. Proposals for decision-making reform are very difficult to implement as the CSDP touches upon core national interests, which, in some cases, are of vital importance. A possible relaxation of the unanimity rule could be more easily accepted by some member states if it were accompanied by automation in the imposition of consequences and sanctions against aggressors and by a system of binding security guarantees in the event that any state was subject to a military threat. Nonetheless, crucial for achieving consensus is the existence of a clearly defined threat. During the Cold War, the existence of such a threat also implied a certain automatism in terms of the response to it. For this reason, we will examine below the importance of an a-priori unified and clear perception of who or what constitutes a threat to the EU and requires an automatic response.

A values-based strategy

Political will is the key to the development of a European Defence Union, to assuming the cost for its autonomy and to the readiness to use it. Political will is always a complex matter in terms of EU mobilisation. In order to overcome this complexity, those elements that unite the member states and constitute their common goals, aspirations and imperatives must be brought to the fore, so that a common approach can be formulated as to the need for a European Defence Union and the conditions under which action will be taken. So far, such efforts have been made in various texts.

The Common Foreign and Security Policy sets among its objectives the safeguarding of the independence of the Union. The gradual development of a common defence policy was envisaged, which could eventually lead to a common defence. With the Treaty of Amsterdam, the safeguarding of the integrity of the EU was added, particularly concerning its external borders. The Treaty of Lisbon introduced a 'mutual defence clause' (Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union), which provides that, 'if a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter', which concerns the right of states to self-defence.

Until the invasion of Ukraine, however, during a time when a conventional threat against a member state was considered unthinkable by most member states, the scope of the CSDP was essentially limited to Petersberg missions, that is, smaller crisis-management operations, on which consensus could be achieved more easily. As regards a mutual defence provision, the negotiations preceding the Lisbon Treaty divided the member states. Once again, the fixation on relying on NATO and US security guarantees deterred many member states from adopting a commitment similar to that of NATO's Article 5, for fear of undermining the Alliance and transatlantic relations with an organisation that could not offer such guarantees. Yet, in the light of current developments, the issue of

mutual defence is becoming key to the CSDP's development and requires a different approach to be taken, especially given that neither US nor NATO assistance is at all guaranteed anymore. In this respect, the mutual defence clause that was eventually included in the Lisbon Treaty could provide the framework for meeting today's demands. Also, the *Strategic Compass for Security and Defence* (Council of the EU 2022) called for mutual assistance and solidarity in the case of aggression against one of the member states. Considering these texts and as a matter of credibility, deterrence and, ultimately, survival, it therefore seems inescapable that the EU becomes able to react militarily, within NATO or outside of NATO, should a military threat arise at its borders.

As regards a common threat assessment, the *White Paper for European Defence* (European Commission 2025) singles out Russia. It also stresses the importance of the defence of all EU land, air and maritime borders, but again it singles out the eastern border. Nevertheless, looking at the EU's south-eastern border, we should also take into account that another front has been underestimated; while identifying Russia's revisionist and aggressive character, it is contradictory not to recognise the same characteristics in Turkey. Turkey occupies 37% of EU member state Cyprus; it constantly threatens EU member state Greece with war, most notably should Greece exercise its right to extend its territorial waters in accordance with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (a threat also officially stated by a Declaration of the Turkish Parliament); it claims 152 Greek islands to be Turkish, contrary to the relevant treaties; it demands the demilitarisation of 23 Greek islands, disputing Greece's sovereignty if it does not comply; and it has officially adopted the expansionist Blue Homeland doctrine, claiming half of the Aegean Sea and almost all of Greece's and Cyprus's Exclusive Economic Zone in the Eastern Mediterranean. It also persistently advertises its historical rights and zones of influence in the wider region.

But, at the end of the day, the EU should take action based on the lowest common denominator, its values. The EU has traditionally been perceived as a values-based power. Its success and the power of its attraction derive from the fact that it is a unique model in history constructed upon values-based reasoning: the ideal of a pacified European continent, where war would henceforth become inconceivable. And yet the idea of it being based upon values was not utopian. What makes this endeavour a remarkable case in point was not the absence of interests in its construction, but the mobilisation of those interests to serve values, and thus the creation of interwoven interests among the member states that consolidated solidarity (Skordeli 2012).

Hence, in the search for the political will to enhance and mobilise EU defence, the key is this values-based paradigm. Member states should always keep in mind that peace and prosperity within the EU have become intertwined among the member states and that it is as a result of this that they have become possible. So, despite the distance of a member state from a threat or its individual interests, peace and prosperity within the EU are indivisible. And therefore, in a world that is becoming dominated by power politics, transactionalism and challenges to the inviolability of borders, the EU's answer can only be 'values', such as the core values that dictated its establishment—notably international law, non-aggression, independence, territorial integrity and solidarity. 'Values' should

apply to threats against all member states, without double standards, as otherwise the EU's deterrence and credibility as to its defence of values will be equally compromised.

Conclusion

Today, the key issue for EU defence has become its ability to defend the Union's territorial integrity. It has become apparent that EU dependence on the US and NATO for its security may no longer be an option, even if it wanted to remain dependent. It is, therefore, critical that the Union develops its own military capacity independent of all external dependencies that could compromise its actions and values. For the above to happen, strong political will is required. Historically, the EU has become a success by responding to great challenges with values-based reasoning, which has created common interests in solidarity. Values should thus remain the guide in the search for the political will to advance and mobilise EU defence.

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Article

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The *Code of Camaldoli*, the Christian Democrats and the pursuit of a 'third way' between the state and the market: A new industrial policy

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Abstract
Inspired by the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* and drafted at the end of the Second World War, the *Code of Camaldoli* became an economic bible for many Catholic politicians. In short, the *Code* applies the principle of subsidiarity to the economy. This means that, in the event of market failure, the state may intervene to address the economic outcomes. One successful application of these Catholic values was in the operation of the Italian Institute for Industrial Reconstruction in the 1960s. Currently, the export-led growth system is experiencing a period of crisis. To pull Europe out of stagnation, the EU should stimulate domestic demand. Many countries plan to rely on the state to achieve this objective. The EU could use the European Investment Bank Group and the European Stability Mechanism as an industrial policy instrument to oversee 'European champions' across a diverse range of sectors, with a particular focus on defence.

Keywords
Common good, Social justice, Third way, Industrial policy, Principle of subsidiarity, State intervention, Full employment, Market failures

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Introduction

This article explores the relationship between the *Code of Camaldoli* (Torresi 2024, 347–444), the Italian Christian Democrats, and the pursuit of a 'third way' between the state and the market. This investigation seeks to identify a model for the EU that can inform approaches to industrial policy and nation building.

The encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, promulgated by Pope Leo XIII on 15 May 1891 (Leo XIII 1891), has emerged as a subject of contemporary pertinence in the aftermath of the election of his successor, Pope Leo XIV, born Robert Francis Prevost (Ondarza 2025, 1). Composed during a period of social and economic transformation, the text is notable for its opposition to both collectivism and unrestricted capitalism. In summary, *Rerum Novarum* established the social teaching of the Catholic Church. The conceptual framework encompassing these principles, in conjunction with the tenets delineated within the *Code of Malines*,[1] served as the foundational basis for the formulation of the *Code of Camaldoli* at the end of the Second World War (Parolin 2023, 1).

The summer of 1943 was a critical juncture in Italy's historical trajectory, particularly within the context of the nation's precarious military situation, which posed a substantial threat to the stability of the fascist regime. It had become evident that the war was proceeding unfavourably for the armed forces of both Germany and Italy. This development prompted political and social groups that were antagonistic towards fascism, or had become so in recent years, to determine what should be changed after the conflict. In this particular context, the prominent Catholic intellectuals of the era resolved to organise a series of clandestine study days. These were to be held in Camaldoli, specifically in the Cenobio dei Padri Camaldolesi, from 18 to 24 July 1943. The objective of the conference was to serve as a response to the papal invitation extended to scholars encouraging them to engage with social and economic issues through a lens of Christian understanding. Each participant was assigned the task of preparing a concise written contribution centred on their respective area of expertise, under the guidance of Monsignor Bernareggi (Persico 2014, 66–9).

Following the premature interruption of the conference due to the escalating war and political climate, 76 statements were endorsed. These statements were formulated in concise terms and supplemented by extensive references to papal documents (including both the social encyclicals and documents by Pius XI that criticised totalitarian regimes and the radio messages of Pius XII) and to Thomistic doctrine. In particular, the drafters of the *Code* were inspired by St Thomas's views on the *character of the natural right of property* and the idea that if the ownership of property is an inherent right of human beings, it is the state's duty to guarantee the social function of wealth (Persico 2014, 58).

The final draft of the text was overseen by Sergio Paronetto and Pasquale Saraceno from September 1943 to May 1944, with contributions from other Catholic intellectuals. Among the younger participants in this work were Giulio Andreotti and Aldo Moro, who would become two of the most prominent and long-serving Italian prime ministers. The *Code* was subsequently printed in its entirety in early 1945, bearing the title 'Per la comunità cristiana. Principi dell'ordinamento sociale' ('For the Christian Community: Principles of Social

Order'). The aforementioned intellectuals also exerted a significant influence on Alcide De Gasperi. Indeed, the same line of thought found in the *Code* is also present in 'Idee ricostruttive della Democrazia Cristiana' ('Reconstructive Ideas of Christian Democracy'). This pamphlet was distributed surreptitiously in July 1943 under the pseudonym Demofilo. In this document, De Gasperi, the true author, presented his political manifesto, based on Christian Democratic traditions, in the hope that it would inspire the reconstruction of the country once fascism had collapsed and a new era of political discourse had begun. The document was initially distributed in very limited numbers. However, commencing in July 1943, it was printed in several Italian cities with the objective of promoting its dissemination on a broader scale. Subsequent contributions from De Gasperi in 1944 resulted in the transformation of the programme into the political manifesto of the party Christian Democracy (Democrazia Cristiana) (Persico 2014, 49).

Despite the passage of nearly eight decades, the *Code*'s contents remain a valuable resource for contemplating the political and social involvement of believers in a period characterised by complexity and parallels to the historical context in which it was composed. The concept of solidarity, understood as an obligation to collaborate, including in the economic domain, with the objective of achieving the collective well-being of society, is of paramount importance. The Christian Democrats of the time felt compelled to commit themselves to the development of a doctrine that was necessarily intermediate between two extreme concepts: unbridled capitalism and Communism. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, a doctrine that had hitherto been in place underwent a gradual weakening, with the result that unregulated globalised capitalism came to the fore (Deaton 2013). In a curious twist of fate, the most progressive and left-wing governments were also the most liberal, perhaps driven by a desire to demonstrate their progressive credentials. The Clinton era is likely to have exerted a significant influence, precipitating a transformation in which the market became the new secular religion, the totem of new ideologies (Valeri 2024, 9).

The economic theory behind the *Code of Camaldoli*, and the Institute for Industrial Reconstruction as key to industrial policy

In the *Code of Camaldoli*, there was a combination of personalism and solidarity. This combination is analogous to the 'social market economy' outlined by Wilhelm Röpke (1960), as explicitly referred to in Paronetto's notes (Persico 2014, 45–7). In contrast to the Austrian school of von Mises, in which he was trained, Röpke ascribed a positive role to the state as the regulator of the economic system, guarantor of competition and social equaliser. Nevertheless, the function allocated to the state within the economic structure as delineated by the *Code of Camaldoli* was more extensive. Indeed, the idea of the *Code* was that the economy should be driven by the principles of free enterprise, the free market, the division of labour and competition, but the objective of achieving full employment necessitated a reallocation of resources towards the production process. In fact, work was considered both an individual and a social duty. Indeed, according to the *Code*, a close mutual relationship exists between the individual's obligation to engage in gainful employment and society's responsibility to furnish opportunities for such employment (Persico 2014, 83–4).

Consequently, the *Code of Camaldoli* established a distinct approach to the role of the state in the economy, grounded in the principle of subsidiarity. In particular, the following aims of public economic activity were considered essential: creating conditions that enable the available workforce to find adequate employment (art. 55), and promoting, where necessary, economic activities that are deemed profitable for the common good but neglected by private initiative (art. 76). This objective was accomplished through the implementation of a mixed economy, in which there was a close correlation between private and public economic activities. It was evident that when the necessity for state intervention in a developmental policy aimed at the common good had been rendered obsolete, a corresponding reduction in intervention had to be implemented.

The experience young Catholic graduates gained within the Institute for Industrial Reconstruction (IRI) was fundamental to the drafting of the *Code* (Persico 2014, 15–19). The IRI was established by the Italian government in 1933 as a response to the banking crisis that had erupted in the aftermath of 1929. The institute assumed control of the country's primary credit institutions. These entities exercised significant influence over numerous corporations, particularly within pivotal sectors such as mechanical engineering, steel, shipbuilding, defence and electrical engineering. The IRI was the incarnation of a mixed economy model that generated the Italian economic 'miracle' in the post-war years and long afterwards. It functioned as a crucible and a laboratory for a core group of highly professional public managers and technical executives (Castronovo 2012, 53–4), including the young Catholics who were involved in drafting the *Code*.

The IRI is a great example of clever technocratic policymaking. It was very innovative and set in motion some of the solutions for today's bailout plans. The IRI formula was based on a set of simple ideas: the IRI would (a) operate in the market under the same rules as market players; (b) use the same tools they used; (c) maintain the structure of the stock companies of participating firms, so that they could be sold back more easily; and (d) not grant any company a monopoly unless it already had this under a private management arrangement (Russo 2012, 426).

The value of the IRI formula has been widely recognised, by, among others, EU member states that have established IRI-like public bodies. For instance, the UK established the Industrial Reorganisation Corporation, France the Institut pour le développement industriel, Sweden the Statsfiretag and West Germany the Vereinigte Industrieunternehmungen (Russo 2012, 427).

The IRI then became an instrument of public industrial policy. However, IRI action was still driven by efficient and profit-oriented intentions. The situation worsened when, in the second half of the twentieth century, the IRI became part of the patronage system of the most powerful political parties at the time (Russo 2012, 428). The entrepreneurial state was transformed from a paradigm of excellence to one of inefficiency, thereby precipitating its dismantling. However, in the aftermath of corruption scandals, the baby was thrown out with the bath-water, with no discernible distinction between judicious and profligate expenditure (Artoni 2013, 15).

Making changes to EU financial institutions to support a new industrial policy

Many of the politicians who participated in the Camaldoli talks subsequently played a pivotal role in the process of European integration. In summary, while the Treaty establishing the European Economic Community (commonly known as the Treaty of Rome, or TEEC) does not explicitly mention the Camaldoli principles, the underlying inspiration for these principles, which emphasise the value of work, social justice and the common good, has contributed, albeit indirectly, to shaping the vision of a Europe that seeks to combine economic freedom with social responsibility. Indeed, the EU's founding fathers explicitly articulated in the TEEC, amongst other principles, the necessity of ensuring a 'balanced and smooth development' of the common market (art. 130, TEEC), or the 'harmonious development of world trade' (art. 110, TEEC). As set out in the TEEC of 1957, one of the instruments provided for the practical realisation of its objectives was the creation of the European Investment Bank (EIB).

The EIB immediately entered the process of European construction, and its institutional history began in the years immediately following the Second World War. The first call for the creation of a financial institution owned by European states was made in 1949 (Manzella 2007). The main reasons behind the establishment of this bank were to intervene where imbalances would hit the less-favoured regions due to the formation of a single market for goods, services and capital, and to seek a certain balance between the advantages and obligations incumbent on the six countries participating in the TEEC (Strangio 2011).

The current crisis, which is economic, social and security-related, has sparked renewed interest in industrial policy around the world (Mazzucato and Rodrik 2023, 4). Antonio Tajani predicted this as early as 2012. In his role as vice president of the Commission and European commissioner for industry and entrepreneurship, he consistently advocated for a greater focus on the real economy and manufacturing. Notably, he launched the objective of revitalising the EU economy, calling for the endorsement of raising the contribution of industry to GDP to 20% by 2020 (European Commission 2012). There is a growing realisation, particularly in Western countries, that the market alone cannot address its own failures or new geopolitical challenges. It is evident that, over the last two decades, economic growth in the EU has been consistently lower than in the US, while China has rapidly caught up. European families have experienced a decline in their standard of living, with real disposable income growing at a rate almost twice as fast in the US as in the EU since 2000 (Draghi 2024). The potential growth of the EU economy is projected at just above 1% (Arnold et al. 2025).

The EU's reputation as the 'sick man of the West' is mainly attributed to its political incompleteness, which hinders the effective functioning of the internal market and dashes hopes that the euro will become a reserve currency alongside the dollar. The issue of fragmentation of the internal market has been identified as a key factor contributing to various challenges, including the potential for constrained growth prospects and the presence of regional imbalances (Arnold et al. 2025; Draghi 2024; Letta 2024). This fragmentation risks

becoming more acute because the industrial policies of different member states are often implemented through derogations from state aid rules. In the contemporary era, characterised by the prioritisation of defence in industrial development policy, reliance on individual states to pursue autonomous spending policies, already significantly weakened by the pandemic and geopolitical tensions, is a strategy that carries substantial risks. Even the most optimistic scenario that can be envisaged still includes increased market distortions and fragmentation.

In this regard, following the precedent set by the IRI and analogous entities in various European states, it is hereby proposed that the EIB Group undergo a restructuring process that would incorporate and control the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) under the same governance framework as the EIB. The proposed restructuring process would result in the merging of the ESM and the European Investment Fund. Consequently, the ESM would no longer follow the intergovernmental method. Rather, it would be rendered an integral part of the EU under the democratic control of the European Parliament. Of particular note is the utilisation of the ESM's unallocated financial resources, amounting to €428 billion (lending capacity), in conjunction with its human capital. The new European Investment Fund would facilitate investment in venture capital funds that support small and medium-sized enterprises (as it does currently), as well as in prominent European champions. This is of particular importance for capital-intensive industrial sectors that contribute to the definition of 'European public goods', such as defence, energy and technology.

Indeed, it would be imprudent to expect venture capital to assume a primary role in the nascent and most hazardous phases of novel economic domains. It is important to note that the role of public funds in the development of biotechnology, nanotechnology and the Internet is often underappreciated. It is noteworthy that venture capitalists frequently arrive on the scene 15 to 20 years after significant investments have been made by public funds (Mazzucato 2013).

Consequently, this article suggests that the new European Investment Fund could serve as a mechanism through which European champions could transition from being state-owned enterprises to EU-owned enterprises. A policy of this nature, which would benefit from the EIB's expertise (which is equivalent to that of the private sector), would also provide an opportunity to create for a less-fragmented internal market and would remove obstacles to the construction of a common defence force, since the major European champions in the sector would no longer be linked to a state or group of states, but would be controlled by the EU itself. Such an industrial policy would also serve the valuable function of stimulating European domestic demand at a time when a trade war with uncertain outcomes renders this lever essential to compensate for any loss of export quotas.

Note

1. This document brought together a set of guidelines for solving social problems in light of Catholic morality, reflecting the movement of thought sparked by Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*. It was drafted between 1924 and 1926 and published the following year in the Belgian city of the same name by the International Union of Social Studies.

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Article

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Dealing with dissent: Recommendation to leave the EU

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Abstract
Plato's admonition to 'know thyself' appears to be most appropriate for the EU in the twenty-first century. For decades, the EU has cherished a deliberate ambiguity concerning the nature of the Union and the future of Europe. This carefully maintained deadlock, however, has prevented the EU and its academics from accounting for its evolution from an internal market into a European democracy. The present contribution finds that the Lisbon Treaty constructs the EU as a democratic international organisation. The EU is neither a state nor an association of states but has evolved into a union of democratic states which also constitutes a democracy of its own. Faced with increasing challenges from political parties eager to dismantle European democracy from within, the EU has to embrace its democratic identity and to replace its traditional ambiguity with the firm determination to defend its constitutional achievements.

Keywords
European Union, European democracy, Values of the Union, Democratic backsliding, Political philosophy, Resilient democracy

Introduction

The recent award of the Charlemagne Prize to Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen 2025) presents a fine occasion for congratulating the EU on establishing itself as the first-ever democratic union of democratic states. At the same time, however, the EU must be criticised for its inability to protect its democracies. Thus, it must be asked whether the EU can claim to be a

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democratic union of democratic states if one member state purposely and consistently undermines the values of the Union.

The transformations of Europe

Against this backdrop, the initiative of the Martens Centre to address the challenges posed by the surge of political extremes is most timely (Welle and Reho 2025). The collection of essays and analyses published at the start of 2025 merits a wider discussion than it has caused so far. The present article aims to give the debate an extra dimension by emphasising the need for a conceptual rethink of the EU. It is triggered by the observation that the EU is currently experiencing a second 'transformation of Europe'. The first one saw a patchwork of bellicose nation-states become an internal market. It has been meticulously described and analysed by Weiler in his seminal essay 'The Transformation of Europe' (Weiler 1991). The second transformation has been brought about by the introduction of EU citizenship in the 1992 Maastricht Treaty and the inclusion of the values of the Union in the treaties of Amsterdam, Nice and Lisbon. From a philosophical perspective, the EU has replaced the utilitarian vision of human beings as 'market people' enjoying economic freedoms with the Aristotelian idea of people as political beings (Hoeksma 2023a). In line with this approach, Article 10(3) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) stipulates that every citizen has the right to participate in the political life of the Union, while Article 10(4) underlines the contribution of political parties at the European level to forming a European political awareness and to expressing the will of the citizens of the Union.

A democratic international organisation

The conceptual consequences of the EU's metamorphosis from an internal market to a transnational democracy should not be underestimated. In the process, the EU has outgrown the Westphalian system of international relations and has established itself as a democratic union of states and citizens. As the EU has surpassed the Westphalian paradigm, it can no longer be identified in terms of that outdated template. In its present form, the EU is neither a state nor an ordinary association of states but forms a union of democratic states which also constitutes a democracy of its own (Hoeksma 2023b). As the EU is the only international organisation which functions on the basis of a transnational model of constitutional democracy, it can be identified as a democratic international organisation. From the perspective of its citizens, the EU may be described as a democratic union of democratic states. From their point of view, the hallmark of the Lisbon Treaty is that respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law are no longer exclusive obligations of the member states but are also concerns of the Union.

The EU can only thrive if its democracy thrives

Translated into practical politics, these treaty provisions imply that the institutions of the EU and their representatives are bound by the values of the Union in the same way as the member states and their leaders are. In her acceptance speech for the Charlemagne Prize,

President von der Leyen embodied this spirit by underlining that the EU 'can only thrive if its democracy thrives' (von der Leyen 2025). At the same time, however, she continues to present the EU in her communications as a simple union of states. According to the European Commission's current description, the EU is no more than 'a unique economic and political union between 27 European countries' (European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication 2022, 7). As it is obvious that the EU cannot present itself as an ordinary union of states and simultaneously pretend to be a democracy, the president would be well-advised to take the lessons of the Court of Justice of the EU to heart. Interpreting the law as laid down in the treaties, the Court has established in a number of verdicts that the EU has evolved from an ordinary union of democratic states into a European democracy. In plain language, the Court finds that the EU is a union of democratic states which also constitutes a democracy of its own. These findings do not only solve the age-old conundrum concerning 'the nature of the beast' but also create conditions for the EU to defend itself against threats from within and from abroad.

The threat to abolish European democracy

In view of the rise of the political extremes during the 2024 European Parliament elections, the crucial question for the survival of the EU as a democratic polity of states and citizens can be reformulated as follows: Can the EU work as a democratic union of democratic states if a member state ceases to be democratic? Does the EU have the means to defend its democratic identity against autocrats determined to undermine the EU from within?

The threat is real. After a decade of successfully challenging the values of the EU in his home country, the Hungarian prime minister, Victor Orbán, has ventured to go continental by launching a transnational party under the misleading name 'Patriots for Europe'. His main goal is to destroy European democracy and to dismantle the European Parliament. At present, the EU's toolbox contains two instruments: the twin procedures laid out in Article 7 TEU aim to address serious breaches of the values of the Union by member states. In addition, the EU institutions have introduced a conditionality mechanism linking the disbursement of EU funds to respect for the values of the Union. While the procedures of Article 7 have hardly had any significant effect, the withholding of funds appears to have bite—though not sufficient to convince Orbán to restore democracy in Hungary.

Recommendation to leave the EU

So, what strategy is most advisable for the EU after the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Schuman Declaration? First, the institutions should stop sending diffuse signals about the nature of the beast and instead start to embrace the democratic identity of their Union. Second, 'Brussels' must make clear that the EU does not envisage abolishing the member states but wants to include them and their citizens in the construction and functioning of the Union. Finally, the Commission has to accentuate the message that the EU and the member states must combine efforts to defend the accomplishments of the polity. They should emphasise that the Union is built on trust. Member states trust each other to the

extent that they share the exercise of sovereignty in a supranational organisation. As the desire to create an ever-closer union is no longer destined to lead to the proclamation of a federal European state, the question must be addressed as to how to deal with disloyalty and to preserve the democratic identity of the EU as a whole.

In contrast to the Statute of the Council of Europe, the EU treaties do not permit the Union or its constituent parts to forcibly expel from the polity a member state violating its values. In addition, the Court of Justice of the EU has established that accession to and withdrawal from the Union are both expressions of the sovereign will of the member states (arts. 49 and 50 TEU). As Article 7 TEU and the conditionality mechanism demonstrate, this does not preclude the EU as a polity from defending its values against erosion by backsliding member states. Faced with an unforeseen challenge, the Union therefore needs a new instrument for the protection of the polity as such.

Since Orbán's policy is to enjoy the benefits of the Union without bearing its burdens, the aim of the EU's strategy should be to deprive disloyal member states of the fruits of membership. This can be done by broadening the scope of the conditionality mechanism to include all EU payments made to dissident member states in combination with making a recommendation for them to leave *(consilium abeundi)*. The experience of the Council of Europe, which applied this procedure in the cases of Greece, after the *coup d'état* of 1967, and Russia, after its invasion of Ukraine, indicates that the addressed state prefers to accept the consequences over being publicly humiliated. In the case of the EU, the recommendation to leave should be combined with a freeze on all payments to the member state in question and the suspension of voting rights in the relevant councils. In this way, the EU can make dissent so unattractive that autocratic leaders will think twice before resorting to the practice of undermining the Union from within.

Conclusion

While Article 7 TEU envisages the restoration of the values of the Union in a member state, the rationale of the current proposal is to preserve the identity of the EU as a whole, to protect its functioning as a democratic polity of democratic states. Obviously, results will not be accomplished overnight. The practice of European integration shows that important innovations have been achieved by initiatives outside the treaties, as epitomised by the establishment of the European Council. The message of the proposed initiative is that moral hazard will not pay off and that member states unwilling to carry the burdens of EU membership will not be allowed to reap the fruits thereof.

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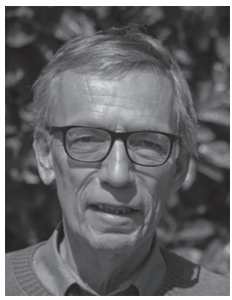

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Securing Europe's lifelines: The new strategy for critical medicines

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Abstract
The persistent shortage of critical medicines in the EU has emerged as a pressing challenge to public health. In response, the European Commission proposed the Critical Medicines Act in 2025, building on post-Covid strategies to enhance pharmaceutical resilience. The Act promotes domestic manufacturing, diversified supply chains and strategic partnerships with third countries. This article highlights, among other priorities, the importance of scrutinising every link in critical supply chains, fostering solidarity among EU member states and ensuring consistency across legislative frameworks. While these efforts will impose higher costs on citizens—both as patients and taxpayers—such costs could be largely offset by improvements in public health outcomes.

Keywords
Health, Medicines, Chemicals, Trade, Competition, Industrial policy

Introduction

At the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the globalised economy was jolted by a stark revelation of its vulnerabilities: supply chains,[1] once celebrated for their efficiency, proved ineffective due to a lack of resilience. Efficiency and resilience can coexist, but only as long as trade flows freely under the just-in-time model. However, when disruptions occur—whether accidental or geopolitical—the cracks become visible. Suddenly, for products long sourced from distant markets, domestic production has emerged as a strategic necessity in a world where political geography has returned with a vengeance.

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In recent years, most EU countries have experienced shortages of critical medicines—those essential for the continuity of care and the protection of public health. This emergency has prompted the EU to draw lessons from the pandemic by adopting a new governance model to assess supply chain vulnerabilities and by proposing a new regulation aimed at strengthening resilience and stimulating domestic production.

This strategy is perfectly aligned with the spirit of 'open strategic autonomy', a concept introduced in the EU (European Commission 2021, 4). In response to the shortages of critical products experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic, the EU must now consider a multi-pronged strategy: boosting domestic manufacturing, redesigning the geography of supply chains through diversification and building strategic partnerships with third countries. After decades of prioritising efficiency, the focus must now shift towards resilience, that is, developing supply chains that can better withstand future shocks.

The shortage of medicine in the EU has worsened

Despite being home to one of the world's leading pharmaceutical industries, the EU has been grappling with medicine shortages for years (PGEU 2019, 3–4). The Covid-19 crisis exacerbated the problem, as soaring demand for anaesthetics, antibiotics and muscle relaxants collided with supplier shutdowns, logistical bottlenecks and national stockpiling and export bans. Even after the end of the pandemic, the situation has not significantly improved: the percentage of European countries experiencing medicine shortages remained very high in both 2023 and 2024, and, for most medicines, a growing number of countries reported supply issues (PGEU 2024, 6; PGEU 2025, 6).

A survey on shortages (AEMPS and WP5 Beneficiaries 2024) identified that over 50% of reported shortages are caused by manufacturing issues, a category which includes shortages related to the availability of active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs).[2] These shortages primarily affect generic medicines (or generics),[3] which account for 70% of those dispensed in Europe (Troein et al. 2024). Production of generics has increasingly shifted abroad, while the European pharmaceutical industry has focused on more profitable market segments. According to Fischer et al. (2023, 24) and the Chemical Pharmaceutical Generic Association (CPA 2025, 95), those segments are research and development (R&D), and products that require high-tech infrastructure, a skilled workforce and complex manufacturing processes. As a result, Europe's dependence on third countries for less complex, high-volume, low-margin medicines, such as basic generics, has increased.

For instance, 80% of APIs and 40% of medicines sold in Europe originate from China and India. This dependency is particularly evident for antibiotics,[4] which top the list of medicines in shortage, and amino acids, which are essential to pharmaceutical manufacturing. According to Eurostat data, the EU has recorded a trade deficit in antibiotics since 2000 (the first year of available statistics) and in amino acids[5] since 2014. In 2024, 68% of the EU's antibiotic imports and 86% of its amino acid imports came from China (Figure 1), underscoring the country's growing role as a leading global exporter.

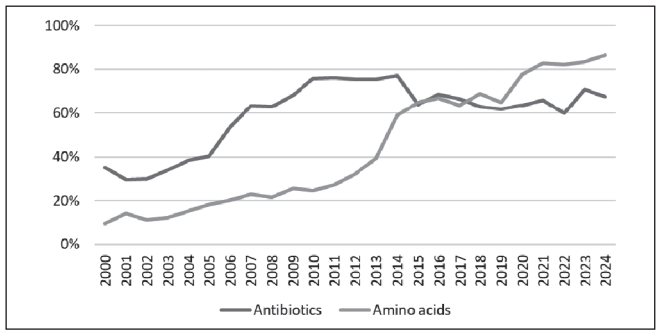

Figure 1. The EU's import of antibiotics and amino acids from China (% of extra-EU27 imports).
Source: Eurostat 2025.

As of today, for many critical medicines, China is the only country that hosts the whole industrial structure required for the entire supply chain within its territory.

The EU develops a new approach to governance to strengthen the availability of critical medicines

During Covid-19 the EU coordinated common solutions in a policy area—public health—that had traditionally been managed at the national level. In November 2020 the European Commission launched the European Health Union initiative (European Commission 2020), which granted the EU greater powers to act during cross-border health emergencies. This was followed in September 2021 by the creation of the Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA) (European Commission, Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety 2021). HERA was tasked with managing cross-border health threats and addressing Europe's strategic dependencies on essential health-related goods, including medicines.

Since March 2022 the European Medicines Agency (EMA) has assumed expanded responsibilities to prepare for, prevent and manage public health emergencies. These include monitoring and reporting on medicine shortages. Within the EMA, the Medicines Shortages Steering Group was established to oversee supply and demand across the EU through a harmonised system for tracking shortages, export bans and manufacturer withdrawals.

Recognising the growing risk of disruptions to pharmaceutical supplies, in October 2023 the Commission proposed stronger coordination among national authorities (European Commission 2023). One key recommendation was publishing a list of essential medicines for which the EU must ensure a continuous and secure supply.

In December 2023 the EMA published the first Union List of Critical Medicines. These medicines consist primarily of the APIs used to treat serious conditions, often with limited or no therapeutic alternatives. The list includes mainly generic medicines across

a broad range of therapeutic areas, including antibiotics. It is updated annually and currently contains 276 critical medicines. Once a medicine is designated as critical, it becomes essential to assess the vulnerability of its supply chain, that is, the weaknesses in production, sourcing or distribution that increase the risk of disruption. The goal is to identify potential risks so that appropriate EU-wide measures can be implemented to strengthen the supply chain and ensure resilience.

Building on this initiative, the European Commission published the first assessment of supply chain vulnerabilities for an initial set of 11 critical medicines[6] (HERA 2024). This pilot assessed factors such as the EU's industrial capacity, supplier diversification, market concentration and demand predictability. However, it also revealed significant limitations such as the absence of a robust legal basis for data collection and information sharing.

To further improve the governance of pharmaceutical supply resilience, the Critical Medicines Alliance was launched in April 2024[7] to analyse the supply chains of medicines listed by the EMA as critical, identifying excessive dependencies, limited diversification and capacity constraints.

Alongside new governance measures aimed at strengthening the supply of critical medicines, in March 2025 the European Commission (2025) proposed a regulation—dubbed the Critical Medicines Act (CMA)—to enhance the availability of critical medicines within the EU. The CMA also seeks to improve access to certain medicines of common interest that are affected by market failures.

The following sections present the key characteristics of the specific objectives of the proposed CMA, accompanied by our comments.

Vulnerability: a (supply) chain is as strong as its weakest link

With the proposed CMA, the EU aims to reduce its exposure to shortages of medicinal products through the diversification of supply sources and investment in local production. Regardless of the strategy adopted, understanding the complexity of pharmaceutical supply chains is essential.

Behind every medicine lies a supply chain spanning multiple stages. Finished pharmaceutical products—such as tablets, injectables and creams—comprise APIs and excipients. APIs are synthesised from intermediates that undergo several chemical or fermentation steps. These intermediates, in turn, are derived from basic chemicals (e.g. solvents, reagents and acids), natural extracts (e.g. plant derivatives) or biological materials (e.g. enzymes, cultures and tissues used in biotech medicines). Every link in this chain can become a point of vulnerability if disrupted. The supply of many of these inputs is highly concentrated, often in specific countries or at specific sites, leading to potential vulnerabilities in the pharmaceutical supply chain.

For example, consider a strategy of diversifying imports of critical medicines—also shaped by geopolitical factors—by increasing reliance on India to reduce dependence on China. The CPA (2025, 30) explains that, although India is the second-largest exporter of many medicines and APIs after China, it remains heavily dependent on Chinese imports for raw materials and APIs. As a result, such diversification may be less effective than initially assumed. This is why the Critical Medicines Alliance (2025, 10) argues that, to strengthen supply chain resilience and flexibility, financial incentives should prioritise projects that integrate multiple tiers of the pharmaceutical supply chain. These efforts aim to ensure continuity of supply and support the creation of industrial consortia of manufacturing sites strategically distributed across the EU, involving diverse regions and member states.

Moreover, evidence in the pharmaceutical sector shows limited short-term capacity to change the geography of sourcing (OECD 2025, 33), due to constraints such as legacy investments in manufacturing facilities and supplier relationships, lengthy regulatory approvals, intellectual property complexities and a lack of alternative suppliers. Greater flexibility is expected in the longer term. Foreign direct investment trends show, in fact, that companies are adjusting their supply strategies. Since 2022 there has been a notable shift in production-focused investments towards destinations that are geographically and geopolitically closer, indicating that pharmaceutical firms have begun adopting strategies to minimise risk and to enhance supply chain resilience (OECD 2025, 34).

International trade agreements and other forms of cooperation, as envisaged under the CMA, can play a key role in supporting the redesign of the geographic structure of medicine supply chains.

Financial support for innovation and manufacturing

One of the main factors behind recent medicine shortages is the decline in the production of generic drugs within the EU, driven by low profitability, high capital investment requirements, rising energy costs and stringent environmental regulations. To address these challenges, the EU should adopt an industrial policy that supports both process and product innovation.

As far as process innovation is concerned, according to the CPA (2025, 110–116), several enabling technologies can support the efficiency of generics production: green chemistry, which emphasises the use of non-toxic solvents and renewable raw materials; flow chemistry, which employs microreactors to enhance scalability and process control compared to traditional batch production; photochemistry, which uses light to catalyse chemical reactions; and artificial intelligence, which can optimise processes from early stage R&D through to manufacturing control.

For product innovation, funding should be directed towards the development of medicines that rely on shorter, more resilient supply chains. A particularly promising area is biotechnological drugs, or biologics, which are derived from living cells such as bacteria, yeast or

mammalian cultures. These advanced therapies play a vital role in high-impact therapeutic fields, including oncology, immunology and rare genetic diseases (CPA 2025, 109).

In addition to financial support, the proposed CMA emphasises the importance of streamlining national permitting procedures for new manufacturing facilities and the expansion of existing ones. Nonetheless, even though modern pharmaceutical manufacturing can be environmentally friendly and aligned with EU 'green' legislation, such projects often face local opposition—commonly referred to as the NIMBY ('Not In My Back Yard') phenomenon.

Human capital remains a critical driver of innovation in the pharmaceutical sector, even in an era increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence and robotics.[8] However, the European API industry faces significant challenges in attracting qualified professionals, such as chemists and biotechnologists. In contrast, India and China have made substantial investments in education and benefit from favourable demographics, providing a large pool of young, cost-effective talent for API R&D. To remain competitive, Europe must preserve and strengthen its solid scientific foundation by fostering deeper collaboration and integration between universities and industry.

Collaborative procurement, not just for the cheapest supplier

EU health systems have increasingly relied on generic medicines, prioritising procurement based on the lowest price to reduce pressure on national healthcare budgets (Critical Medicines Alliance 2025, 4). However, when supply depends on a single supplier, the pursuit of efficiency can expose vulnerabilities and undermine resilience. Therefore, the CMA advocates for procurement rules based on the Most Economically Advantageous Tender, which goes beyond simply selecting the lowest-cost option. The Most Economically Advantageous Tender incorporates additional factors that enhance supply chain resilience, such as stockholding obligations, a diversified supplier base, contract performance clauses ensuring timely delivery and contingency measures for potential delays. Where appropriate, national procurement procedures should also adopt multi-winner approaches and consider the extent to which a medicine's supply chain is located within the EU. Furthermore, since fragmented national procurement practices often lead to less favourable contract terms, the proposed CMA supports the development of collaborative procurement mechanisms, building on the successful experience gained during the Covid-19 pandemic.

EU solidarity in the supply and demand of critical medicines

The CMA encourages action on both the supply side (manufacturing) and the demand side (procurement). To avoid inequalities between EU member states, the principle of solidarity should be made effective on both fronts, ensuring that countries with production capabilities and strategic stocks can support those without.

On the supply side, although the CMA regulation references the use of state aid, such measures must be applied judiciously. It is neither feasible nor desirable for every member state to scale up the production of vulnerable medicines independently. From an industrial perspective, the production of generics depends on economies of scale, which are viable only within a market larger than any single EU country; otherwise, the EU risks inefficient overcapacity. From an equity perspective, member states differ in their fiscal capacity to provide state aid, due to differences in debt-to-GDP ratios and borrowing costs, leaving some countries at a disadvantage when it comes to investment. For this reason, the Critical Medicines Alliance (2025, 12) recommends leveraging the Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform[9] to channel investment towards essential pharmaceutical capabilities across the EU.

On the demand side, some EU countries may be negatively affected by an unequal distribution of critical medicines across borders, often as a result of national procurement requirements. This issue is frequently linked to the widespread use of contingency stock obligations, which require suppliers to maintain reserves of critical medicines for national use. Because these reserves are typically restricted to domestic consumption, they can limit exports to other member states in need.

As a partial solution to the risk of inequitable access within the internal market, the CMA proposes collaborative procurement, such as arrangements through which the European Commission procures certain medicines on behalf of, or in the name of, the member states. However, participation in such joint procurement initiatives remains voluntary. As long as one or more member states do not participate in these joint initiatives, a structural vulnerability persists, undermining the resilience of the EU as a whole.

Environmental policy and generics pricing

In addition to the proposals outlined above, the EU must address inconsistencies between EU and national legislation that can unintentionally exacerbate medicine supply issues, as illustrated by a case reported by Müller (2025).

Metformin, a first-line generic treatment for type 2 diabetes, is at risk of reduced availability due to new environmental compliance costs. The Urban Waste Water Treatment Directive (European Parliament and Council 2024) mandates advanced treatment of wastewater to remove micropollutants, including pharmaceutical residues. Under the directive, pharmaceutical manufacturers are required to cover at least 80% of the cost for this additional treatment stage.

Because metformin is excreted largely unchanged in urine, its environmental footprint is significant. However, in EU member states where generic drug prices are strictly regulated and cannot be increased, manufacturers cannot recover the added environmental costs. As a result, metformin could become economically unviable and thus unavailable in certain markets, forcing patients to turn to more expensive alternatives. This risk extends to other critical medicines as well, such as amoxicillin, used for bacterial infections, and tamoxifen, used in the treatment and prevention of breast cancer.

Conclusion: it won't be cheap

The regulation proposed by the European Commission in March 2025—the CMA—marks the latest step in the EU's strategy to strengthen the availability of critical medicines. After decades of prioritising efficiency, the focus must now shift towards resilience, that is, developing supply chains that can better withstand future shocks.

Yet, enhancing resilience comes at a cost. Any policy aimed at reducing the risk of supply disruptions for critical medicines will inevitably lead to higher expenses. Abandoning the just-in-time model in favour of just-in-case stockpiling entails upfront procurement costs and greater spending on storage (Masters and Edgecliffe-Johnson 2021). Diversifying supply sources often means sacrificing economies of scale, which are particularly significant in the pharmaceutical sector. Rebuilding domestic production capacity will face challenges, especially due to the higher labour and energy costs within the EU compared to those in the traditional supplier countries. Ultimately, these measures will impose financial burdens on citizens, either as patients, through higher drug prices, or as taxpayers, through increased public spending. Nonetheless, these additional costs could be largely offset by improvements in public health outcomes.

Notes

1. A supply chain is the coordinated system of processes and actors involved in transforming inputs into finished goods or services, beginning with research and development, continuing through the sourcing of diverse inputs from multiple suppliers, manufacturing, logistics and distribution, and culminating in delivery to the end customer.
2. The API is the component of a medicine that produces the intended therapeutic effect; in other words, it is the part that actually treats or prevents a disease or condition. Medicines also contain excipients, which are inactive substances (e.g. binders, fillers, coatings) used to help deliver the API and to improve stability, absorption or taste. For example, ibuprofen is an API incorporated into finished pharmaceutical products used for pain relief, fever reduction and anti-inflammatory treatment.
3. Generics are off-patent medicines that contain the same API and have the same intended use as their brand-name counterparts. Compared to the latter, generics are typically sold at lower prices because their manufacturers do not bear the original development and marketing costs.
4. Data refer to product code HS 2941: Antibiotics.
5. Data refer to product code HS 292249: Amino acids and their esters; salts thereof (excluding those with more than one kind of oxygen function, lysine and its esters, and salts thereof, and glutamic acid, anthranilic acid, tilidine (INN), and salts thereof).
6. Alteplase, Amoxicillin, Amoxicillin/Clavulanic Acid, Benzathine benzylpenicillin, Clonazepam, Fludarabine, Glucagon, Hepatitis B vaccine, Rifampicin, Verteporfin and Vincristine.
7. Like other 'alliances' created by the EU for other products (batteries, semiconductors and critical raw materials), the Critical Medicines Alliance is a consultative mechanism that brings together relevant stakeholders from EU member states, key industries, civil society and the scientific community.
8. Robotics, for example, is highly useful in medicine manufacturing due to its precision in performing repetitive tasks such as filling and packaging, and its ability to reduce the risk of contamination in sterile environments.

9. The Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform was set up by the EU in 2024 under the 2021–27 Multiannual Financial Framework to support European industry and boost investment in critical technologies in Europe.

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Satirical Review

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The EU–US trade deal: The start of a 'Trump submission syndrome' pandemic?

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From the beginning of his political career in 2016, US President Donald Trump has provided us with some of the most unbelievable quotes, projects and promises, which have redefined American conservatism and given populism a new face more generally.

His most recent brainchild (even though it was really that of his administration, but they do say that greatness is contagious) is the invention (or discovery) of a new mental disease: 'Trump derangement syndrome' or TDS. No, this is not an officially recognised medical condition; it is a pejorative term used by the US president to discredit his adversaries' arguments and demonise those who dare to oppose the MAGA movement (Hoffman 2025).

Nevertheless, Trump's supporters have called for the matter to be studied and funded. Representative Warren Davidson from Ohio, for example, introduced the 'TDS Act' earlier this year, calling on the National Institutes of Health to conduct a real, scientific study on this 'toxic behaviour' that has 'divided families and caused disdain all over the country' (Davidson 2025).

However, this article does not intend to explore the Trump administration's scientific exploits and knowledge of modern medicine but rather to discuss another new sociological/psychiatric concept, and to analyse it through the lens of the EU–US framework trade agreement: 'Trump submission syndrome' or TSS as 'experts' call it. It is unclear to whom the credit for such an avant-gardist term should be attributed, but undoubtedly political consultant and ex-presidential counsellor David Axelrod was one of the first to

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use it. On 8 June 2025 he posted on X: 'They talk about Trump Derangement Syndrome. But the real challenge we face is TSS: Trump Submission Syndrome. Members of Congress, surrendering their authority out of fear; law firms, prizing their business ahead of their oath, as advocates, to the law; universities, forfeiting their principles and independence, only to be further attacked' (Axelrod 2025).

If we consider this a serious psychological condition, it might be time to start worrying since it may have developed into an intercontinental pandemic. From the moment of Trump's arrival in the White House, he has spared no one his unconventional political bullying, setting tariffs like normal people change their socks, and pursuing a loud and aggressive foreign policy in his fight against this China-led world of ours. If you follow the news, you will know that a much-anticipated meeting between Trump and EU representatives, including Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Commissioner for Trade and Economic Security Maroš Šefčovič, was held in July at Trump's Turnberry golf resort in Scotland. Millions hoped that Europe would put all its cards on the table in order to remove the announced tariffs and get a better deal, but it seems our dear representatives might have been contaminated by the highly contagious TSS on encountering the president's entourage (McCool 2025).

To keep it brief, the US and EU representatives reached a framework agreement which, in the words of the Commission, will 'reinvigorate our economies' and 'reflects acknowledgement by the European Union of the concerns of the United States' (European Commission, Directorate-General Trade and Economic Security 2025). The main points to focus on are the US's willingness to reduce all previously imposed tariffs on EU products from 30% to 15%. Exceptions to this include cork, aircraft parts, pharmaceuticals (although this exception remains undecided) and chemical ingredients, which will only be subject to the traditional Most-Favoured-Nation impositions set by the WTO. In return, the EU must annul all tariffs imposed on US products, and it has until 2028 to buy a total of $750 billion of energy and $40 billion of artificial intelligence chips from the US. Furthermore, the EU will commit to investing around $600 billion in US companies during the same period. EU member states must also agree to increase their procurement of US military products. Finally, concerning the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism tariffs imposed on carbon-heavy products imported to the EU, the Union has also agreed to reduce constraints on US goods (European Commission, Directorate-General Trade and Economic Security 2025).

This seems, therefore, to be quite a blow for transatlantic commercial relations. US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer defined this as the birth of a new international order, the 'Turnberry System', coming to replace the 'unsustainable Bretton Woods' system (Scott 2025).

He must be right; after all, who needs the outdated economic practices of ignoramuses such as Keynes, Smith, Friedman or Locke . . . The Bretton Woods system built the way to the 'golden age of capitalism', fostered growth in the post–Second World War era, and encouraged trade through the creation of the International Monetary Fund and the WTO, but does any of that really matter?

All in all, what does this non–legally binding framework mean, precisely? Are there winners and losers? In the eyes of his voters, Trump is the undisputed winner; he has finally sealed the 'biggest deal' of them all and made Europe pay for it. Similarly, stocks in Asia and Europe seem to have increased because there is now at least some sense of stability; 15% tariffs are not ideal, but do at least offer a conservative baseline. US energy producers have hit the jackpot, as has the aviation industry; the former will see deposits of several billion US dollars into their bank accounts from the European Commission, while aircraft producers will be relieved of tariffs.

American consumers, however, will pay the price, as a bottle of Montepulciano will now cost an extra $15. Similarly, car makers in Germany will also suffer: they are already dealing with strong competition from Chinese electric vehicle manufacturers and will now lose millions on exports to the US. The most significant blow, however, targeted European solidarity. The already politically divided member states will now have to vote on a deal that affects their individual interests and about which they each have their own opinions (Fitzgerald and Geoghegan 2025).

Maroš Šefčovič's take on the matter seems to be quite positive and encouraging; he recently praised the White House for reducing the previously imposed 30% tariffs, noting it was a 'crucial step' (Alipour 2025).

There is, however, some positive irony to these circumstances. US car manufacturers might find themselves in a sort of self-inflicted financial pain. At first sight, they look like the winners, since the EU has reduced tariffs on US car imports from 10% to 2.5%, but American cars are mostly assembled abroad, in Canada or Mexico, countries which are now subject to 25% tariffs when exporting to US soil. The US consumer will now have to choose between an American car made by Mexicans with a 25% price increase and a beautiful Audi that has only increased in price by 15%. Talk about a snake biting its own tail . . . (Fitzgerald and Geoghegan 2025).

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Is Draghi Right? Designing the Way Forward

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The phrase 'Whatever it takes' made Mario Draghi world-famous. Everybody speculating against the European currency knew from that moment onwards that, confronted with the overwhelming firepower of the European Central Bank, you could only lose money. That speech effectively ended the 'euro crisis'. The Draghi report requested by the European Commission on how to strengthen European competitiveness throws a big stone into the water. It will be the point of reference for both political debate and action over the current five-year legislature. Draghi makes everybody face their responsibilities. And he makes the consequences of non-action extremely clear: in the absence of decisive action, we will no longer be able to reach all our strategic targets. We will have to choose. The Draghi report comprises six basic truths that will inspire the legislative proposals of the European Commission in this term, even more so as it was requested by the European Commission President herself. While acknowledging the importance of the Draghi report, this publication will also provide policymakers and the interested public with a critical view of its limitations.

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The Future of NATO: Demise, Reform, or Rebirth?

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Pax Americana and the US-led global order as we have known it are vanishing. US President Trump has driven a wedge between US and European security, and is eroding NATO – to the delight of Vladimir Putin. However, si vis pacem, para bellum – this old adage is as true as ever. As the tectonic plates continue to shift beneath us, NATO needs to prepare for all eventualities. With the US becoming more transactional or even antagonistic, Europeans in NATO and the EU must change gear and focus on what is needed to become a serious geostrategic actor. The stakes could not be higher: If Europeans want to prevent the world from returning to an era where might makes right, they need to forge a shared vision of their future, including for defence and security. They need to find new leadership formulas, take a fresh look at institutional frameworks and laser-focus on building a broad range of capabilities. This policy paper outlines the strategic context, defines plausible scenarios, and then charts out key policy recommendations focusing on three main areas: leadership, enabling frameworks and structures, and key capabilities. Europeans in NATO and the EU can avoid a doomsday scenario where they would become the playball of strongmen in Washington, Moscow, or Peking. But that requires leadership, a firm belief in their strength, and determination to acquire the tools of an assertive geostrategic actor

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Gaining Insights Into the Gender Gap and Orientations of Young European Citizens: An Analysis of Longitudinal Glocalities Survey Data From Eight European Countries

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This report examines the perceptions, aspirations, and challenges faced by young Europeans, focusing on the widening gender gap and shifting value orientations. Based on comprehensive longitudinal Glocalities survey data from eight European countries, it reveals a growing divergence in values between young men and women, with young women increasingly embracing liberal and anti-patriarchal ideals, while young men lean towards traditional and conservative ideologies. This divergence poses a significant challenge to the conventional view of a uniformly progressive youth demographic.

The study highlights the critical dimensions of hope versus despair and freedom versus control, which illuminate generational and gender-specific differences in (political) behavior. It uncovers a troubling trend of pessimism and societal dissatisfaction among young men aged 18–29, leading to decreased engagement, increased polarization, and the rise of right-wing populist movements. Young women have also been experiencing

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increasing despair, even more so than men. Economic and educational disparities further exacerbate these feelings, as structural changes in the global economy disproportionately impact young citizens, limiting job opportunities in traditional sectors. Despite these challenges, there is the potential for centrist parties to reclaim leadership by addressing generational divides, fostering inclusive narratives, and promoting trust in liberal democratic systems. By involving young people in substantive roles and by addressing their concerns, it is possible to reinforce European values and navigate the complexities of the future, while at the same time acknowledging the challenges and uncertainties that lie ahead.

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Rethinking Europe's Middle East Strategy in a Changing World

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This analysis explores the need for a new European strategy towards the Middle East, amidst a radically changing global order, emphasising cross-regional cooperation. We see a groundbreaking transformation of the Middle East from a U.S.-centric to a multipolar framework, significantly driven by emerging middle powers such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Türkiye. These nations leverage their economic and diplomatic influence to reduce the reliance on superpowers while fostering regional independence. The authors argue that Europe must move beyond its reactive approach and strategically engage with the Middle East and Asia, forming a "middle strategic sphere" to diversify its foreign and economic relations and counter superpower competition.

Key initiatives like the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and minilateral frameworks such as I2U2 present opportunities for Europe to enhance trade, energy, and technological ties. The study underscores the rising importance of minilateralism and economic pragmatism in addressing shared challenges. If Europe misses these chances, it risks its relevance globally and regionally amidst intensifying geopolitical competition.

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From Taiwan to Malaysia: The Silicon Alley of the East

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As significant global players in the semiconductor industry, Malaysia and Taiwan are connected by a high degree of economic complementarity. They both rely on a complex supply chain, in which Europe has an important role to play. While still catching up in the chip industry, the EU must project itself as a stable, innovation-driven, and value-aligned semiconductor partner to Malaysia and Taiwan. Driven by a shared interest to boost resilience, the EU and member states must invest strategically in regional dynamics in ASEAN, capitalise on trends shaping the global semiconductor arena, and understand Taiwan's crucial role in securing resilient supply chains.

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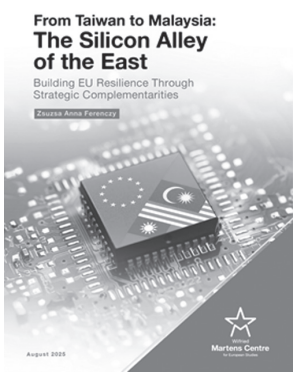

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Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies

Executive Summary

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Strengthening the LGBTQI+ Voice As Part of the Centre-Right Narrative

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For too long, the discourse on the rights of the LGBTIQ+ communities and individuals has been neglected in the political narrative and campaigning of conservative and Christian-democratic parties in Europe – leaving this space to be occupied by left-wing and green parties. Consequently, voting for EPP-affiliated political parties remained low in several countries. However, there is no reason for the EPP family to stay in this weak position.

The core values of the EPP and its member parties are built upon respect for each individual and the unwavering demand for individual freedom, inclusion, and openness. Our objective is to keep building a society where each and every citizen can live freely and safely as individuals, as a part of a family and of society, and be respected for who they are.

We strongly believe that these basic values endorsed by the political family of EPP are the strongest guarantee to ensure the rights of the LGBTIQ+ communities across Europe: freedom, respect, and the right for individuals to be different; but also to see and recognise the multitude of individuality, of which sexual orientation and gender identity are as important as other characteristics. In acknowledging and emphasising this fact, we reject the notion that being LGBTIQ+ is just some form of ideology.

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