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# STRATEGIC POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

for the European People's Party



Wilfried  
**Martens Centre**  
for European Studies

Mikuláš Dzurinda  
Peter Hefele  
Dimitar Lilkov  
Eoin Drea  
Ionela Ciolan  
Federico Ottavio Reho  
Vít Novotný

## Credits

The Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies is the political foundation and think tank of the European People's Party, dedicated to the promotion of Christian Democrat, conservative and like-minded political values.

Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies

Rue du Commerce 20  
Brussels, BE 1000

For more information, please visit [www.martenscentre.eu](http://www.martenscentre.eu).

Assistant Editor: Theo Larue, Editorial and Publications Officer

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## Table of contents

<i>Strategic Recommendations for the EPP</i>	4
<i>Climate Realism – A Better Deal for Decarbonisation and Energy</i>	8
<i>Safeguarding Competitiveness and Driving Economic Growth</i>	12
<i>Protecting EU Borders and Improving Migrant Integration</i>	20
<i>Addressing the Silent Demographic Revolution</i>	26
<i>Building the European Defence Union in an Unstable World</i>	30
<i>How to Resist the Extreme Right?</i>	36

# **Strategic Recommendations for the EPP**

Mikuláš Dzurinda  
President, Martens Centre



## Introduction

As the largest European political party, the EPP has the responsibility and capacity to shape the future path of the European Union. The Union, standing at a crossroads, needs a strong compass and clear vision of Europe as a strong global actor, grounded in its values, to regain the trust of European citizens.

The Martens Centre has developed the following recommendations that address *six key policy fields* for Europe's future: defence, competitiveness and growth, migration, demography, climate change, and resisting the extreme right. Based on a concise description of the challenges, the Martens Centre proposes concrete and decisive steps for the current legislative term.

To start with, I have outlined a few suggestions for the reform of the European Union, which I believe will foster the decision-making processes between the European institutions, strengthen its economic and fiscal foundations, and enhance economic and social fairness for all Europeans.

## Strategic recommendations

- ***Become the mastermind of the European Defence Union (EDU), with a new European Security Council (ESC) at its core.***

Today, the EU depends mainly on the United States for its security. For the future, the EU must enhance its capabilities and strengthen the willingness of its citizens to defend themselves and deter any potential aggressor. However currently, member states still have the prerogative for foreign, security and defence policy, leading to a cumbersome coordination of 27 member states. To streamline decision-making processes and prepare concrete proposals for the EU Council to decide, we need a robust body, such as a European Security Council (ESC). This body would be open to all EU27 members, and include strategic partners, such as Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and Norway as associate members in a non-voting capacity. Decisions of the ESC will be adopted by a qualified majority vote in case of missing consensus.



- ***Promote the transition from unanimity to qualified majority voting in foreign and security policy.***

Given the rapidly changing geopolitical environment, we need swift decisions at the level of the European Union in the area of foreign and security policy. We have to overcome the blockades by several member states and make the Union enlargement-proof. At the same time, the prerogative of member states should be strengthened in the area of culture and education. To avoid culture wars and preserve natural culture and national identity, issues such as minority rights and political demands have to remain at the national level, respecting the constitutional principle of subsidiarity.

- ***Appoint one person as a special EU envoy for Ukraine, representing a united European voice and coordinating with their counterpart in the US, UK, Canada, Japan, and other stakeholders.***

As a cornerstone of a lasting peace agreement in the Ukraine war, Europe, in alliance with other partners, has to prepare for security guarantees. The EU must speak with one voice to both like-minded partners and the aggressor Russia, avoiding different positions and interpretations – to end the war and to establish an enforceable security architecture.

- ***Advocate for a low-income tax for all - for citizens and entrepreneurs - as a key instrument of rekindling growth, strengthening competitiveness and social mobility of working families.***

The EPP has always been the voice of the European middle classes, providing a fair share of national income and strengthening the motivation for work, doing business and paying taxes. However, increasing tax burdens have undermined the trust in the model of the Social Market Economy and its opportunities for higher living standards. Lower income taxes can boost labour motivation and investment, even if it has to be compensated for by raising other taxes, such as excise tax, capital gains, or property taxes.

- ***Advocate for tightly controlled external EU borders.***

Illegal migration is perceived as a major domestic problem for European societies, stirring the rise of right-wing populism and the decline of trust in governments. The EU must strengthen its external border control, a measure that is achievable and will restore trust among its citizens, as it is in “our hands” – unlike instruments that depend on other countries, such as readmission. Only by restoring strict and enforceable external control can we restore the free movement of people within the EU and strengthen our internal unity.



- ***Motivate the member states to promote reforms of our economies, social systems, education and health care.***

The debate on the next MFF should encourage us to push ahead with far-reaching reforms as a political priority. The warning signals are numerous and prevent us from maintaining the status quo. National governments must foster deep structural reforms to rekindle growth and strengthen competitiveness throughout European economies. The primary objective is to finalise our internal market as the vital space of future EU prosperity and resilience – making use of digitalisation, cutting-edge technologies and moving manufacturing to a next level of development.

Brussels, October 2025



## **Climate Realism – A Better Deal for Decarbonisation and Energy Security**

Dimitar Lilkov  
Senior Research Officer, Martens Centre





## Introduction

### ***The EU's Current Approach to Decarbonisation at a Deadlock***

Environmental degradation is a fact. Within the EU political mainstream, these realities have resonated in policy and resulted in the most ambitious climate agenda globally. The goals for European carbon neutrality by 2050 are praiseworthy but presuppose the mobilisation of huge financial and material resources, as well as fundamental changes in the economic, industrial, transport, agricultural and energy sectors of European states.

Climate spending already dominates the EU's MFF and the post-COVID-19 recovery fund, with hundreds of billions of euros earmarked for the transition. Currently, EU-27 spending on decarbonisation ***has climbed to over 2% of EU GDP annually***, surpassing the collective expenditure of our Union on defence. Regardless of the massive spending spree on decarbonisation, the Commission has repeatedly warned about a growing ***“investment gap”*** of more than 300 billion euros annually if the economic bloc is to meet its highly ambitious 2030 climate targets.

The constantly increasing ‘green investment gap’ is an indication that the ***private sector is falling short on climate investment***. We already see that major European companies and industries are backtracking on their climate pledges due to rising costs and unrealistic goal-setting. The recent refusal of major European banks to commit to the international Net-Zero Banking Alliance is an additional sign that global climate coalitions are struggling to keep their level of ambition, faced with objective reality.

In parallel, the EU's sustainability track record is far from convincing. The EU has pledged for renewables to account for 42.5% of total energy consumption by 2030, with current numbers at circa 23%. It is difficult to see how the EU can almost double its current share by the end of the decade. The only notable movement is in the decline of final energy consumption. However, this can be linked to the EU producing fewer goods, especially in energy-intensive industries. Green and progressive political actors see this as a success. In contrast, responsible policymakers see this is a clear example of a ***degrowth mentality and clear signs of the deindustrialisation of Europe***.

The EU's decarbonisation effort is borne mainly by the European ***middle class and puts a heavy strain on poorer households***, which are already fighting material poverty. Over 40 million Europeans continue to struggle annually with paying their energy bills as energy poverty continues to worsen in the EU. Disturbingly, many European policies underestimate or simply ignore the societal cost of the transition. ***High energy costs*** have become embedded across the EU and put our economic bloc at a long-term disadvantage compared to international actors like the US or China.



Regrettably, the EU is in a completely different financial and geopolitical position compared to 2019, when the European Green Deal was announced. We already see clear signals that the current framework is neither generating 'green growth' nor putting the continent on a fast track towards carbon neutrality. The *European quest for sustainability has become economically and societally unsustainable*.

### ***Climate Realism: Towards True Sustainability and European Competitiveness***

Decarbonisation should remain among the EU's policy priorities given the urgent challenge of climate change and the long-standing need for reducing European dependencies on third countries and autocratic regimes for oil and gas energy imports. However, it is high time to recalibrate our climate policies so they do not jeopardise European competitiveness and become an uncontrollable spending spree with a very limited effect on climate change mitigation.

For the European People's Party (EPP) this means navigating a sensible path forward *between the extremes of climate denialism* to the far-right and the *delusion of over-ambitious environmentalism* on the left. The latter has become apparent in the previous political mandate of 2019-2024 due to the heavy push towards arbitrary climate targets and burdensome regulatory obligations, which have undermined European prosperity.

The EPP and its member parties should demonstrate political will and determination to pursue *a course of climate realism* in order to guarantee true decarbonisation, which respects physical realities and ensures the financial sustainability of the energy transition. Climate realism has a number of basic foundations and political pillars.

*First of all*, European policymakers have to come to terms with the fact that *the energy transition is a slow and gradual linear process, not a rapid exponential one*. Advances in solar power deployment have galvanised political actors and international media with the conclusion that clean energy is skyrocketing internationally. Truly, there are serious advances in the deployment of clean electricity, but electricity alone constitutes only around 20% of total energy consumption. Renewable shares are improving, but *we are a decade away from a true energy revolution*. The EU continues to use more than 70% of fossil fuels for its energy needs, whereas the global figures stand at 82%. Solar power currently accounts for less than 2 % of global final energy consumption. *Bureaucratic management and wishful thinking* about top-down climate goals provide a certain direction, but do not ensure rapid progress or economic advantages.



**Second**, in order to ensure its *prosperity, the European member states need more and affordable energy*. The decarbonisation drive of the last half-decade made Brussels pursue sustainability as the ultimate goal, undermining the importance of energy security and price stability. Policymakers need to be aware that even though decarbonisation remains a long-term goal, *our European prosperity is tied to affordable natural gas and petroleum products*. Steel, cement, fertiliser, plastics, chemicals, food security, transport needs, domestic heating and manufacturing all rely on affordable and abundant energy flows. This is to say nothing of digital infrastructure, quantum computing or next-gen technologies, which would require ever-expanding energy resources.

**Third**, the daunting reality is that the current design of the Green Deal generates little to no growth in Europe. *European companies and businesses are not profiting from the transition* due to our internal regulatory environment, limited material resources and intense international competition. China is the country that is cannibalising most of the clean energy profits, while the US will likely pursue a course of all-in fossil fuel, along with strategic investment in nuclear. A successful Green Deal enables European companies to generate profits from the transition, boost the economy, and export the necessary technologies internationally. This objective has, so far, failed.

**Lastly**, Europe's decarbonisation drive *makes little difference* for mitigating the effects of climate change, unless the rest of the world takes the energy transition seriously. *The EU-27 is responsible for less than 7% of dirty emissions, with China's annual share climbing year-on-year to circa 30% of total emissions, followed by the United States (12%) and India (8%)*. The majority of GHG emissions in the next decade will originate from the *developing world*, which has little motivation to invest in clean energy if it has cheaper and more available fossil alternatives. Unless the rest of the world is incentivised to contribute to the global fight against climate change, the EU's efforts would count for little. *Net-zero is a Eurocentric goal, not a globally shared ambition*. Far from it.



## Recommendations

### **1. Simplification and Financial Predictability**

The EU should continue its current drive for simplifying the European Green Deal, eliminating futile reporting obligations and ensuring **additional flexibility**. However, these efforts should not stop here. Public budgets are already under strain from growing deficits and are unable to answer the call for more climate spending. The private sector will not support the clean energy transition if it is constantly subject to new rules and legal unpredictability. In its current term, the Commission **should consider limiting new climate proposals**. **Review or withdrawal** should be a possibility if specific files prove extremely burdensome or unachievable in terms of goals.

### **2. Put an End to Energy Austerity**

A lack of energy means a lack of prosperity. Climate change cannot be the only driver of Europe's energy policy. The immediate priorities should be balanced with **energy security and price stability**. Gambling with energy austerity means placing numerous households and businesses under severe pressure due to volatile prices with extreme seasonal variations. The EU's traditional pipeline and LNG imports from non-Russian sources should be bolstered and diversified globally (i.e Africa, Canada, Australia), with long-term contracts providing the best price.

European member states should also reassess their capacity to produce more **domestic resources**. Capitals should be encouraged to open new **mining sites** for certain critical materials, abiding by high European environmental standards, even if this requires at minimum years of permitting. Certain European regions are abundant in critical minerals such as cobalt and lithium, and it is high time for additional political will for more ambitious mining and production goals. Stockpiling and shared pools of resources would prove critical for the future, given geopolitical tensions. An increase in domestic production and processing could bring the EU closer to curtailing its reliance on autocracies. A similar approach should apply to natural gas exploration activities within the Black, North and Mediterranean Seas.

### **3. Technological neutrality, funding and enabling the transition**

The European Commission should focus on the desired outcomes of its policies and not favour or positively discriminate specific technologies. European policymakers should reconsider their approach to 'picking winners' and prematurely backing certain technological solutions or clean energy alternatives. There was an institutional rush to back specific solutions, such as green hydrogen (H<sub>2</sub>) as a panacea for our energy needs. Green H<sub>2</sub>, as well as many other clean energy innovations, shows good promise in theory but is decades away from actual implementation or even final investment decisions of key infrastructure.



The European Commission needs to ***pool additional shared resources*** into research and development for renewables and support European companies' efforts to create clean energy breakthroughs. There are already comprehensive proposals for a European Strategic Investment Fund to mobilise considerable investment that would generate European added value and serve geopolitical objectives. ***Streamlining is essential*** as European companies report that current grant schemes are patchy, administratively burdensome and time-consuming.

The EU should re-double its efforts in infrastructure investment, connectivity and grid improvements. Unless there is sufficient infrastructure ***connectivity, grid investment, and modernisation***, new clean energy capacities will not be able to feed power into the systems. Consideration should also be given to ultra-high voltage lines and sufficient storage capacity to compensate for the intermittency of renewable power. Digital solutions and 'smart' grids should improve real-time supply-and-demand adjustments and optimise overall performance.

#### ***4. International Cooperation Has No Alternative***

The lacklustre implementation of the 2015 Paris Agreement and the painstakingly slow progress suggest that the EU should also be active in more ambitious and ***more flexible climate coalitions***. The UK is a natural partner in expanding climate diplomacy efforts internationally and scaling climate finance commitments for developing countries. There is ample opportunity for expanding international partnerships in Africa, Latin America and Asia through leveraging Global Gateway projects as part of the EU's strategic initiative for supporting connectivity and infrastructure with key international partners. This would allow for the promotion of European companies and 'made in Europe' clean tech ready for export. Climate goals and overall sustainability provide an important opportunity for the EU to reconsider some aspects of its development cooperation and suggest new approaches to development aid.

#### ***5. Supporting European Companies and Ensuring Economic Security***

Europe's response to China's continuous international clean tech dumping and the US's pivot towards protectionism has been primarily on paper, not in action. The EU cannot match China's illicit state subsidies nor its cheap labour, but it needs to bet on its own ***comparative advantages*** when it comes to human talent and scientific excellence. There are huge opportunities for strategic investment in improved wind-generation design, carbon capture and storage (CCS), electrolyzers and next-generation nuclear capacity. They offer opportunities for developing strategic European economic advantages in the long run. The EU needs to make sure that its ***clean-energy transition makes a compelling business case***; its products and patents need to be competitive internationally.



The European Commission should continue its active *anti-dumping provisions* and restrict Chinese imports that benefit from exorbitant state subsidies. New countervailing duties on Chinese EVs, batteries and other clean tech imports should be imposed where there is clear evidence of illicit support. Special consideration should be given to tightening rules to ensure that dedicated EU funding for clean energy projects benefits European companies and has explicit criteria that favour local industries.

## **6. Investing in Resilience at the Local and Regional**

European member states should invest sufficient resources in their own resilience and climate adaptation. Investing in *preparedness* to limit the impact of floods, wildfires or extreme weather events has immensely reduced the death toll globally. Making progress in early-warning systems, climate-resilient infrastructure, and overall climate adaptation will be essential. Europe's cities and regions will be key here, as local authorities are responsible for more than 70% of climate change measures. *Enhancing subsidiarity* and fostering stronger political engagement with the various local political stakeholders are necessary to build a solid backbone for climate governance across the EU.

## **7. Changing the Political Narrative**

It is important to highlight that technological breakthroughs are one of the reasons to remain somewhat optimistic in the fight against climate change. The major progress towards a net-zero economy will most likely come from scaling the technological solutions of today and tomorrow rather than drastically altering people's lifestyles. European citizens are *bombarded with negative messaging about doomsday climate projections* and a sense that each individual is to blame. This has extremely demotivating effects, especially for the younger generation, who register high levels of climate anxiety for the future and even hesitation over whether to have children.

The over-ambitious rush towards costly decarbonisation policies has also antagonised many sensible and centrist voters across the continent. The EPP and its member parties should communicate openly and honestly that we are faced with new political and economic realities. This is a pivotal moment to reinvigorate the debate with a sober direction that considers climate change as a challenge, but also balances it with European prosperity and the other pressing necessities for the citizens and enterprises of our Union.



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## **Safeguarding Competitiveness and Driving Economic Growth**

Eoin Drea  
Senior Research Officer, Martens Centre





## Introduction

There is a consensus that Europe needs further reform to boost growth and competitiveness. The Draghi and Letta Reports are both attempts to present an agenda to improve this issue by addressing deficiencies in the European Single Market, including competition policy, telecoms policy, the Capital Markets Union (now Savings and Investment Union), energy policy and investment. At the same time, Europe must enhance its industrial competitiveness while avoiding an excessive regulatory burden on businesses.

The demands for increased public spending must also be set in the context of supporting Ukraine, increased trade uncertainty with the US, de-risking from China, negotiations on the future EU budget and the need to maintain Europe's longer-term path to decarbonisation.

Underpinning all this must be an economic and monetary policy that maintains price stability. This is a situation further complicated by the unfinished architecture of the Eurozone and very high public debt levels in several member states. Therefore, ensuring public debt sustainability is a prerequisite for the continued success of the wider European integration process. A return of the euro debt crisis would endanger not only macroeconomic stability but also the EU's aims of prosperity, green transition and open strategic autonomy. The Single Market is the key to ensuring the EU's future economic wealth. At the core of enhancing its attraction is the need to improve its internal accessibility through regulatory simplification. Bureaucracy costs Europe €150 billion per year – an excessive burden, felt most heavily by millions of businesses, especially SMEs.

There are five clusters identified:

***Ensuring the sustainability of public finances to ensure the EU has the financial stability which is a prerequisite for all its longer-term objectives;***

***Restoring the Single Market as the core mechanism for wealth generation and growth in the EU (including targeted simplification for businesses and consumers alike);***

***Balancing growth and fairness - increasing social mobility must become a clear objective of a defined 'middle-class' strategy;***

***Implementing a credible EU budget to meet future requirements. A budget which places debt sustainability at its core while recognising future commitments; and***

***A globalist trading strategy seeking to building networks of likeminded-trading nations, starting with the UK, Japan, and South Korea.***



## Recommendations

### **1. Lower and Fairer Income Taxes**

EPP Party leaders at the national level should be encouraged to promote lower and fairer income taxes. If the EPP is serious about confronting the generational wealth gap and tackling declining social mobility, they need to put more money in the pockets of working families. Previous experience in Ireland, Slovakia, Bulgaria and recent proposals from the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) in the Netherlands show this can be done in a fiscally responsible way.

### **2. A Low, But Broad, Tax Base**

At national level, the EPP should become a consistent voice for a low, but broad, tax base. Broadening the tax base will result in lower overall rates, a fairer revenue raising system, increased receipts and less evasion. By diversifying taxation across income, property, assets, consumption and other economic activity, the EPP can stimulate innovation, particularly among the younger generations. New Zealand should be studied as a relevant example.

### **3. Establish an Independent, Nonpartisan European Parliament Office of Budgetary Responsibility (EPOBR)**

EPP leaders in the European Parliament should set up an independent, non-partisan Office of Budgetary Responsibility (EPOBR). The EPOBR will fully cost all EU legislative proposals and analyse their financial impact over the long term. They should produce a cost estimate for every bill that is approved by a full committee of the European Parliament. This tool will allow policymakers to better avoid future budgetary crises and provide important accountability in the use of public money. The United States and Britain are examples of how important these offices can become.

### **4. Complete Banking Union NOW!**

A finalised Banking Union is now over a decade overdue and exposes Eurozone savers to unnecessary risk. EPP leaders at national and EU level must complete the Banking Union to ensure that banks are robust and able to withstand any future financial crises. The Bank Crisis Management and Deposit Insurance framework should be agreed to immediately.

### **5. Focus on the Single Market – Capital Markets 1**

A true Savings and Investment Union can only be built from the member state level up. EU member states – both individually and regionally – should be incentivised to develop savings/investment schemes for the general public to stimulate cultural change. Best practices from France, UK and Sweden (and other states) should be utilised. Recent proposals from the German government to offer the young a subsidy to invest in equities as a pension supplement is a good example of the shift in culture required.



## **6. Approve Mercosur and Build a Global Network of Trading Partners**

EPP leaders at national and European level must continue to develop the EU's role as a leader in global trade. The Mercosur agreement should be finalized without delay. Brussels's conception of the transatlantic alliance must be broadened into that of a transoceanic network. Global trade requires a global strategy. Deeper trade links should be focused initially on UK, Japan, South Korea, Canada and Australia.

## **7. Joint EU Borrowing Only in Exceptional Circumstances**

Current events in France show the dangers of having no political will to tackle rising public debts. At an EU level, joint borrowing can interfere with the connection between national fiscal policies and market confidence. Joint EU debts should only be introduced in exceptional circumstances for clearly defined goals, and only with prior agreement on how the loans will be repaid.

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## **Protecting EU Borders and Improving Migrant Intergration**

Vít Novotný  
Senior Research Officer, Martens Centre



## Introduction

Immigration to the EU has been on the rise for decades. Measured by inflows, between 2015 and 2023, immigration more than doubled, with 2.5 million first-residence permits issued in the latter year. If more than 4 million Ukrainians under temporary protection are added to the count, immigration flows to the EU increased sixfold between 2015 and 2023. Net immigration is the only factor that has kept the EU population still growing.

Measured by the stock of migrants residing in the EU, family reunification combined with marriage migration represents the most frequent gate of entry to the EU. Refugee protection is the second most frequent category measured by the stock of immigrants, followed by employment reasons, temporarily protected Ukrainians and students. The EU's expansive interpretation of human rights, combined with its geography, has determined the composition of EU-headed immigration, both in terms of nationalities and the type of immigrant.

With family immigrants and refugees being so predominant in the immigrant population, the integration of some categories of newcomers (and sometimes the second generation, too) has proved difficult. Other migrants have assimilated extremely well. People who are selected for their skills tend to integrate more quickly into host societies. Those who are not selected for their abilities may stay out of work, and their contribution to public budgets tends to be negative. Unfortunately, European governments have been downplaying emerging problems for decades. In a minority of EU countries, the challenge is amplified by crime committed by some migrants as well as by terrorism perpetrated by radicalised Muslims.

At the same time, foreign workforce can be helpful to boost the competitiveness of European companies and the sustainability of our health, welfare and pension systems. This concerns both the existing diasporas and workers coming from abroad. On average, Ukrainian refugees, as of 2022, although their admission has not been on the basis of their skills, tend to perform well in the labour markets of those EU countries that provide the right incentive structures. Some non-EU countries, including Egypt, have begun cooperating with the EU on migration, working together on preventing illegal migration and readmissions while creating opportunities for legal migration.

Foreign students of any nationality can assist with improving trade ties after they have returned home. Those who stay tend to become valuable members of host societies.



As a separate point, illegal immigration represents a small fraction of total immigration. For example, in 2020, for one irregular entry that was detected, 12 migrants entered the EU lawfully. Furthermore, while the media focuses on illegal border crossings, more than half of illegally staying non-EU nationals have arrived legally, as tourists, with a short-term visa or on a visa-free regime. Colombians, Venezuelans and Georgians stand out for arriving visa-free and then claiming asylum, usually unsuccessfully. Much illegal migration is driven by the availability of non-registered work in the EU, a phenomenon that public authorities tend to ignore.

Public opinion surveys demonstrate that the European public is not entirely negative about immigration. Surveys indicate that even those respondents who are critical of immigration in general tend to view positively those immigrants who work.

Still, those voters who are unhappy with immigration can be mobilised by far-right parties. In particular, these parties draw support from the images of illegal border crossings, migrant crime and the overall perception that elites drive immigration. This strengthens the far-right vis-à-vis the mainstream, including the centre-right.

Finally, emigration from southern and eastern European member states is causing economic, social and political difficulties, including the emergence of emigration populism, and increasing regional disparities.



## Recommendations

### **1. Address chaos at EU external borders**

**National governments and EU institutions:** Minimise the number of individuals who illegally cross the EU's external border. Incentivise the countries of departure to prevent such border crossings, strengthen controls along migration routes in Africa and Asia, and improve the surveillance of the external border. Tackle criminal smuggling networks outside and inside the EU. Provide Frontex with the necessary resources and consider enhancing its powers. Adjust EU asylum legislation, especially for the situations of instrumentalisation of migration by hostile neighbouring countries.

### **2. Reconstitute immigration**

**National governments and EU institutions: Attempt,** through a concerted long-term legislative and political effort, to turn the existing unfavourable composition of EU immigration towards labour and education migration and away from family and refugee migration. Altering immigration flows would also make a difference to immigrant integration.

### **3. Enhance the political reflection of immigration**

**National governments, the EPP and its member parties: Develop** political discourse to convey a more accurate picture of the pros and cons of migration stocks and flows. Doing so would support the legitimacy of EU immigration policies and our constitutional democracies. Failing to do so opens the space to political extremes on the right and left.

### **4. Bring diasporas into the labour market**

**National governments: Facilitate** the entry of diaspora members residing in the EU into the national labour markets. Targeted labour market measures, training and non-discrimination legislation should all be put in place to enhance the low labour participation rates of some ethnic groups, and especially migrant women.



## **5. Widen channels for labour immigration**

**National governments:** *Improve and widen* the channels for labour immigration from outside the EU. Answer the employers' call for workforce. Admission policies should be based on strict criteria and accompanied by active integration measures.

## **6. Provide incentives for Ukrainian refugees' labour participation**

**National governments:** *Make* work pay more than welfare benefits. Offer training and language education. Provide allowances or bonuses to Ukrainian refugees who begin employment. Offer wage subsidies for employers who hire refugees.

## **7. Widen the channels for educational immigration**

**National governments:** *Revise* policies, regulations, and support systems to facilitate the study and integration of more international students into the host countries' educational systems.

## **8. Restrict family immigration**

**National governments:** *Increase* the requirements for marriage migration and family reunions, including by pre-departure language and income tests, demanding proof of stable accommodation, and restricting eligibility to only nuclear family members.

## **9. Address the main pull factor for illegal immigration**

**National governments:** *Crack down* on those European employers who hire illegal migrant labour, including in agriculture, construction, hospitality and household work.

## **10. Improve migration cooperation with non-EU countries**

**National governments and EU institutions:** *Experiment* with schemes where a non-EU country cooperates with the EU on controlling illegal migration and, at the same time, sends workers who are needed on EU labour markets. Explore also the options for circular migration.





### **11. Address the problem of illegal stay following legal entry**

**European institutions and national governments:** *Revise* visa requirements for those countries whose citizens frequently abuse visa-free access. In general, pay attention to occurrences of unauthorised residence after lawful entry.

### **12. Focus on the negative aspects of free movement**

**National governments:** *Make* employment in the Southern and Eastern Euro-pean member states more attractive. Where workers do move to other member states, ensure a level playing field and decent working conditions

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# **Addressing the Silent Demographic Revolution**

Peter Hefe  
Policy Director, Martens Centre



## Introduction

Europe, like most developed societies, is undergoing a major demographic shift. For decades, birth rates have stayed below replacement levels (a “demographic winter”), while life expectancy has risen. The result is an ageing population, a shrinking workforce, and growing pressure on traditional pensions and social security systems, which primarily rely on the contribution of the active workforce. Within the EU and candidate countries, Southern and Eastern Europe are especially affected by emigration and regional depopulation, which deepens existing demographic imbalances.

Across many countries, young people are taking longer to move into adulthood. High housing costs and limited access to secure jobs delay family formation and harm their mental health. Although girls and women excel in higher education, this success has not fully translated into equal access to better-paid careers. At the same time, the relative social and economic position of many men has weakened. A worrying share of young people are neither in education, employment, nor training. Meanwhile, older adults often leave the labour market earlier than needed due to rigid retirement rules or health issues. Together, these demographic dynamics touch every part of European society and, if left unaddressed, threaten the EU’s welfare model, productivity, competitiveness, and even internal and external security.

Fertility decline will likely continue or, at best, might be stabilised below a self-sustaining level. This reality, however, does not tell us how to steer through the uncharted waters of an ageing society. Despite tight public finances, Europe can still mobilise new models of intergenerational solidarity, new forms of value creation, and greater resilience. There is no magic wand for all solutions; local and regional approaches that reflect diverse needs will matter more.

Political leadership should put forward a shared vision of a sustainable demographic future one defined not by competing group interests but by cooperation across generations.

There are five clusters of challenges during this demographic change:

***Maintain a high level of available labour by lifting participation across gender, age, and origin, so that productivity gains and growth can continue.***

***Equip people with strong skills and motivation to master demographic and technological changes.***

***Build inclusive societies to avoid deeper polarisation between generations, along ethnic and religious lines, and by income.***

***Prevent widening regional disparities and accelerating brain drain in large parts of Europe; revive depopulated and disadvantaged areas.***

***Promote and secure fair, sustainable migration policies that match labour market needs.***



## Recommendations

### ***1. Enable a Child- and Work-Friendly Environment***

Adopt integrated policies on the national and regional level that make work–life balance easier, encourage men to share care work, and provide universal child benefits. Expand high-quality preschool places and full-day schooling with nutritional and learning opportunities. This eases the double burden on parents and supports equal sharing of responsibilities between parents and partners.

### ***2. Promote Gender Equality in the Labour Market***

Ensure, in cooperation between national governments, employers' associations and trade unions, equal gender pay, transparent and fair career pathways, and access to flexible yet secure work arrangements. Target skill-building to enable people to return to work or to reduce the employment risks from automation. Ensure that underrepresented groups, such as women, people with disabilities or from remote areas, can participate fully in the labour market.

### ***3. Encourage Longer and Flexible Working Lives***

Raise the retirement age while allowing a more flexible transition to retirement. Provide lifelong learning and requalification for older workers to encourage longer and more productive work lives. Adjust tax incentives on the national level to prevent unnecessary or unwanted exclusion from work.

### ***4. Reform Educational Systems for Inclusivity and Digital Readiness***

Modernise schools, as a joint responsibility of local, federal and national governments, to handle much greater demands for social inclusion, reduce dropouts—especially among students from disadvantaged or migrant backgrounds—and integrate digital literacy across curricula. Invest in digital training for older citizens as well.

### ***5. Integrate Migrants into Labour Markets Based on Employability***

Redefine admission criteria around skills and employability in European labour markets. Simplify recognition of qualifications in other countries to enhance mobility within Europe and attract global talent by creating a more mandatory framework on the EU level. Contribute to successful integration by investing in pre-departure language and training programmes.



## **6. Address Depopulation through Targeted Cohesion Policies**

Align EU cohesion instruments with demographic goals. Share best practices between regions, direct more cohesion funding to low-density or declining areas, and deepen cross-border cooperation. Create new opportunities—especially for young people and women—to stay in or return to depopulated regions.

## **7. Incentivise Remote Work and Rural Resettlement**

Leverage remote and hybrid work for people in peripheral regions by investing heavily in broadband, mobile healthcare, housing, and public transport. Connect these areas to efforts to diversify Europe's supply chains and bring production back to Europe to build local value – as a joint effort by the European, national, and subnational authorities.

## **8. Tackle Labour Market Gaps in Healthcare and Care Services**

Invest in innovative models of healthcare and care delivery so that all citizens—regardless of age, status, or location—receive basic support. Build regional centres of excellence to train and upskill professionals, especially in nursing and caring.

## **9. Promote Inclusive Migration and Diaspora Engagement**

Boost labour market participation of female migrants via preschool access, language learning, and social services, as a joint initiative of the state and labour market partners. Counter discrimination and foster integration through local initiatives. Activate the potential of well-integrated diaspora communities.

Improve Demographic Monitoring Using Big Data

Strengthen the knowledge for policymakers by harmonising EU-wide data systems under the umbrella of EuroStat. Use AI to trace migration and identify population trends more accurately.

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# **Building the European Defence Union in an Unstable World**

Ionela Ciolan  
Research Officer, Martens Centre



## Introduction

Europe faces its gravest security crisis since the Second World War, driven by Russia's aggression, hybrid warfare, cyberattacks, and interference in democratic processes. Moscow's invasion of Ukraine marked a strategic turning point, exposing the EU's dependence on US military capabilities and the fragility of Europe's defence architecture. Beyond Russia, the growing alignment between Moscow and Beijing, tensions in the Arctic, the Taiwan Strait, and the South China Sea, along with systemic threats such as climate change and pandemics, underscore the need for a comprehensive security architecture that integrates civilian and military tools.

The potential US retrenchment adds further pressure. Under the Trump 2.0 administration, Washington expects Europeans to take the lead in Ukraine, increase defence spending, and become net contributors to their own security. America's strategic shift toward the Indo-Pacific suggests that NATO may evolve into a more European-driven organisation, with the US playing a reduced role. While a complete US withdrawal remains unlikely due to core national interests in European stability, the trend of disengagement highlights the necessity of a credible European pillar within NATO.

The war in Ukraine sits at the heart of this debate. Russia's invasion is not merely a territorial conflict but a direct assault on European security architecture and the principles of sovereignty. While President Trump pushes for a quick resolution, European allies remain wary of a hasty deal that could undermine Ukraine's sovereignty and embolden further Russian aggression. With the US commitment in doubt, Europeans are under increasing pressure to take the lead - offering military assistance, formulating credible security guarantees and considering proposals such as a multinational peacekeeping force. Yet national divisions and reliance on US strategic capabilities persist.

On top of that, Moscow's maximalist goal—to erase Ukraine's statehood—makes compromise impossible. Ceasefires or “Potemkin” negotiations would only serve as strategic pauses for Russia. The war will be decided on the battlefield, and the outcome will determine Europe's credibility as a security actor.

The outcome of the war in Ukraine will shape Europe's security architecture for decades. A weak outcome for Ukraine might embolden Russia to continue with its revisionist strategy and attack EU/NATO territory. Many intelligence services are already raising the alarm that the Kremlin could attack EU territory within the next two to five years.





There are five clusters of challenges in the European defence discussions for the upcoming year:

### ***Strategic US Retrenchment***

The new US administration has sent an unmistakable signal. America's strategic priorities are shifting, and Europe is no longer at the top of Washington's agenda. Plans for troop withdrawals are underway, and critical assets such as intelligence, surveillance and strategic lift could be next. The positions of Europe and Ukraine in the forthcoming American National Defence Strategy and Global Posture Review will determine the objectives and direction of US defence policy towards our region under the Trump 2.0 administration, but there are plenty of signs that Europeans should develop their strategic responsibilities more independently. Europeans need to develop a strategic culture of military cooperation that enables them to defend the continent together, even without US support. The question is no longer whether to strengthen the European pillar within NATO, but how quickly we can make it a reality.

### ***Safeguarding Ukraine's sovereignty and European future***

Ukraine's survival as a sovereign and independent state is inextricably linked to the stability of the wider European security architecture. In recent months, European leaders acting under the 'Coalition of the Willing' format have shown their commitment to supporting Kyiv against Russia's brutal aggression, establishing Europe as an active participant in future peace negotiations. Their concern is justified: a premature or imbalanced settlement that forces Ukraine to capitulate would betray Ukrainian sovereignty and fatally weaken Europe's own long-term security. To prevent this, European leaders must uphold the following non-negotiable principles: First, Ukraine must be fully represented in all negotiations. Second, its right to maintain capable armed forces and international partnerships must not be constrained. Third, Russia cannot hold veto power over Ukraine's EU or NATO accession. Fourth, borders cannot be redrawn by force. Fifth, decisions on Ukraine's territory must rest exclusively with Kyiv. Beyond principles, Europeans must take tangible action. Alongside the United States, they should provide robust and credible security guarantees to Ukraine, stepping in to cover potential gaps created by reduced US involvement. Military aid, training and defence production must be scaled up to ensure that Kyiv can continue to resist aggression. Finally, Europe must address the difficult but unavoidable question of designing and committing to a credible peace enforcement mechanism, potentially in the form of a European-led peace force, that could secure and enforce a future ceasefire.





### ***Fragmented European Defence Industries***

European states need to place their own security and defence at the forefront and cooperate to build a strong European Defence Union that strengthens NATO's European pillar. Despite progress since the Lisbon Treaty, EU defence remains hampered by fragmented industries, political reluctance, and fears of undermining NATO. Lack of coordinated procurement and investment weakens Europe's ability to scale capabilities. Currently, Europeans are unable to defend themselves independently. There are critical shortfalls in key areas such as intelligence, secure communications, air defence, deep precision strikes, and strategic lift. No single European state has the capacity to address these gaps alone. Therefore, collective action is essential: acquisitions must be coordinated, resources pooled, and joint capabilities developed. Priority should be given to investing in C4ISR (command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance), without which Europe's defence architecture will remain fragmented, vulnerable and ineffective. In addition, priority should be also given to the implementation of the White Paper for Defence and Readiness 2030 Plan.

### ***Nuclear Deterrence Uncertainty***

Nuclear security remains the most sensitive challenge. NATO's current deterrence relies heavily on US strategic nuclear forces and the nuclear-sharing arrangement involving 100 US B61 bombs deployed in six European countries. Future scenarios include maintaining US nuclear guarantees; relying solely on France and the UK's arsenals; creating a Franco-British-led European deterrent under or outside NATO; or developing an EU-wide "Eurodeterrent" jointly managed by member states. Any such shift would need to balance strategic credibility with political realities, including opt-outs for neutral EU countries.

### ***Hybrid and Non-Traditional Threats***

The security challenges facing Europe are wide-ranging. Beyond the conventional threat posed by Russia, the continent is confronted with hybrid tactics, cyberattacks, assaults on critical infrastructure, disinformation and foreign interference in electoral and democratic processes within member states. Addressing these risks requires a comprehensive 'whole-of-society' security strategy that puts civil preparedness at its core. On top of that, climate change and pandemics further complicate the security landscape, requiring an integrated civil-military approach.



## Recommendations

The time to act is now. European member states must put defence policy at the heart of their decision-making. The following recommendations are addressed primarily to EPP leaders, decision-makers, policymakers, and government officials at both the European and national levels, who are responsible not only for defining the strategic direction but also for implementing security and defence initiatives.

### ***1. Increase Defence Spending and Strategic Investment***

Allocate 3.5% of GDP to core defence and an additional 1.5% to broader security and resilience. Prioritise rapid capability development in the next five years.

### ***2. Accelerate the European Defence Union***

Establish a fully integrated European Defence Union focused on joint procurement, shared logistics, and a European Defence Technology Industrial Base (EDTIB) to reduce dependency on non-EU suppliers.

### ***3. Strengthen the European Pillar of NATO***

Build a credible European pillar within NATO to close the gap between US disengagement and European readiness, ensuring Europe can sustain operations independently if necessary.

### ***4. Appoint an EU Special Representative for Ukraine Peace Negotiations***

The European Union should designate a Special Representative to lead its role in peace negotiations on Ukraine. This envoy would ensure that the EU speaks with one voice—both to like-minded partners, to Ukraine, and to the aggressor, Russia—thereby preventing fragmented positions or conflicting interpretations.

### ***5. Initiate a European Security Council (ESC)***

The EU should create a European Security Council to streamline high-level political discussions on security and defence. Anchored within the Council of the EU to reflect the intergovernmental character of the security and defence policy, the body would be chaired by the President of the European Council. Membership would be open to all 27 EU member states, with the ESC becoming operational once at least 15 states ratify its format. Strategic partners—Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and Norway—would be invited to participate as associate members without a voting right. In addition, the President of the European Commission (or the Commissioner for Defence) and the President of the European Parliament would hold non-voting seats. This format would give the EU a more coherent and inclusive platform on which to develop its security and defence agenda, enabling it to respond more quickly to growing security threats to the European continent.



## **6. Develop C4ISR Capabilities**

Invest heavily in command, control, surveillance, interception, and reconnaissance systems to replace critical US enablers and enable autonomous European military operations.

## **7. Address European Nuclear Deterrence**

Launch structured dialogue on a European nuclear posture, exploring options for a Franco–British-led deterrent or a joint EU “Eurodeterrent” under a NATO or EU framework.

## **8. Implement the White Paper for Defence and Readiness 2030 Plan**

Focus on creating a common understanding among the member states of the urgency of coming together and working to implement the objectives of the White Paper on Defence, as well as utilising the instruments provided in the Readiness 2030 Plan, in order to strengthen the EU’s defence and deterrence capabilities in the event of a conventional or hybrid attack.

## **9. Forge Security and Defence Partnerships**

Expand strategic partnerships with like-minded nations worldwide to diversify security networks, strengthen supply chains, and reinforce EU’s position as a global security actor.

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## **How to Resist the Extreme Right?**

Federico Ottavio Reho  
Strategic Coordinator and Senior Research Officer,  
Martens Centre



## Introduction

Across Europe, the rise of radical right-wing populist parties (RRPs) poses a growing challenge to the democratic centre-right. These parties, often rooted in nativism, authoritarianism, and anti-liberalism, have gained ground by exploiting public discontent, economic insecurities, cultural anxieties, and institutional fatigue. Their success is not merely electoral—it reshapes political discourse, undermines democratic norms, and threatens the European project itself.

The European People's Party (EPP), as the leading force of Christian Democratic, conservative and centre-right politics in Europe, must respond with clarity, confidence, and coherence. The challenge is not only to contain the extreme right electorally, but to resist its ideological encroachment and prevent the erosion of the EPP's own identity and values.

The Martens Centre's extensive research on the radical right, conservatism, Christian Democracy, and the future of the centre-right provides a rich foundation for this effort. These studies reveal that the rise of the extreme right is not a passing phenomenon but a structural shift driven by long-term socio-economic, cultural, and political transformations. The EPP must therefore adopt a strategic, values-based, and future-oriented approach.

This briefing identifies five clusters of challenges that must be addressed to effectively resist the extreme right:

***Ideological Identity and Boundary-Setting. The blurring of lines between mainstream and radical right positions risks legitimising illiberal ideas and confusing voters about what the EPP stands for.***

***Socio-Economic Discontent and Cultural Anxiety. Economic insecurity, regional inequality, and perceived cultural dislocation connected to immigration and value changes (e.g. LGBTQ+ demands) fuel support for RRP, especially among the working and lower middle classes.***

***Democratic Fatigue and Institutional Distrust. Many citizens feel alienated from political institutions and elites, creating fertile ground for anti-establishment narratives.***

***Strategic Dilemmas in Party Competition. Mainstream parties face difficult choices between confrontation, accommodation, and isolation of RRP, with each approach carrying different risks and benefits, depending on specific contexts.***

***Narrative and Communication Deficits. The extreme right often dominates the political narrative with emotionally resonant messages, while the centre-right struggles to articulate a compelling alternative.***

To address these interlinked challenges, the EPP must act decisively to renew its political offer, strengthen its democratic foundations, and reconnect with citizens across Europe.



## Recommendations

The following recommendations are generally addressed to EPP leaders, strategists, and policymakers at the EU, national, and/or local level, depending on the specific issues, initiatives, and policies involved.

### ***1. Reaffirm the EPP's Democratic and Pro-European Identity***

Insist on the clear and public reaffirmation of the EPP's commitment to democratic checks and balances, the rule of law, and European integration. This should include a principled rejection of cooperation with parties that promote authoritarianism, xenophobia, or ethno-nationalism. A renewed declaration of values will help draw a clear line between the EPP and the radical right, while facilitating cooperation with moderate conservative and right-wing forces currently outside the EPP.

### ***2. Promote a Vision of Protection Without Closure***

Develop a centre-right narrative of protection that is inclusive, future-oriented, and rooted in shared values. This includes protecting communities, cultural heritage, and economic security without resorting to fear-based or exclusionary rhetoric. It should also include a stronger protection of national competences and subsidiarity whenever centralisation and harmonisation at the EU level are not needed. The EPP must show that it can offer security without sacrificing openness.

### ***3. Address Economic Insecurity and Regional Inequality***

Invest in policies that rekindle growth, improve purchasing power, reduce regional disparities, revitalise left-behind areas, and promote upward mobility. This includes targeted infrastructure, education, and employment initiatives, particularly in rural and post-industrial regions where RRP's have gained support. However, it also requires drastic deregulation and bureaucratic simplification, not least at the EU level.

### ***4. Articulate a Civic and Inclusive European Identity***

Promote a vision of national and European identity based on civic values, democratic participation, and cultural confidence. This identity should be inclusive of diverse backgrounds while rooted in our shared Judeo-Christian cultural heritage and commitment to freedom, responsibility, and solidarity. Patriotism and national pride should not be left to the radical right, but incorporated in a multi-level continental patriotism going from the local community to Europe.



## ***5. Strengthen Democratic Institutions and Civic Education***

Support initiatives that enhance civic education, media literacy, and democratic participation, especially among the youth. This includes promoting critical thinking, understanding of EU institutions, and engagement in public life to counter-act populist simplifications.

## ***6. Avoid Policy Mimicry and Strategic Ambiguity***

Reject the temptation to imitate radical right positions on migration, identity, or sovereignty. Instead, offer principled and pragmatic alternatives that reflect the EPP's values and long-term vision. Clarity and consistency are key to maintaining trust.

## ***7. Build Broad Centre-Right Alliances Without Compromising Values***

Expand the EPP's reach by integrating conservative, liberal and Christian forces that share its key democratic and European commitments, while not being currently part of it. At the same time, maintain a firm stance against cooperation with anti-system actors. Everything possible must be done to encourage divisions between forces to the right of the EPP, and separate constructive conservatives from real radicals. A "fusion party" remains the best model to strengthen the centre-right without diluting its principles.

## ***8. Engage Credibly with Cultural and Identity Issues***

Acknowledge citizens' concerns about cultural change and identity without stoking fear. This means forcefully rejecting the illiberal excesses of the left as much as those of the right, including on issues such as political correctness, the woke culture and attempts to criminalise conservative social stances at the EU level by promoting a too ambitious and expansive interpretation of Art. 2 TEU. A strong subsidiarity should be applied to controversial moral disagreements, to protect national cultural differences and avoid the EU becoming associated with progressive values and causes.

## ***9. Modernise Political Communication and Digital Engagement***

Upgrade the EPP's communication strategies to compete effectively in the digital age. This includes investing in emotionally resonant storytelling, social media outreach, and rapid response capabilities to counter disinformation and populist narratives.



## **10. Monitor and Respond to Radicalisation Trends**

Establish a permanent EPP task force to monitor the evolution of RRP, assess their impact on public discourse, and coordinate strategic responses across member parties, associations and experts. This will ensure a proactive and in-formed approach to the radical right challenge.

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Wilfried  
**Martens Centre**  
for European Studies