



Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

Grip or Grapple

Towards a Europe that Protects
Without Protectionism

Wouter Beke



October 2026

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.

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This publication receives funding from the European Parliament.

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Foreword

Dr. Peter Hefele

The Russian assault on Ukraine has demonstrated with brutal clarity that Europe is far more than a mere geographical expression or an institutional construction. It is a civilisation, now under attack, that has repeatedly been forced to rediscover itself at those decisive moments when history has seemed either to exhaust its vitality or to place it on the brink of being overrun by authoritarian powers.

From the ashes of war emerged the conviction that lasting peace in Europe could only be secured through the pooling of sovereignty, the creation of common legal and political institutions, and the cultivation of an ever-deeper sense of mutual responsibility. Few, if any, political projects have transformed a continent so profoundly or stand as such a compelling testament to the power of cooperation.

Yet this extraordinary success also gave rise to one of Europe's greatest illusions. For decades, Europeans grew accustomed to believing that the achievements of integration were somehow irreversible (Brexit, however, should have warned us!); that peace had become permanent, democracy secure, and historical development, with its bouts of bloodshed and tragedy, for the most part overcome. Economic interdependence, both within Europe and with the wider world, would therefore ensure that geopolitical rivalry was tamed thanks to the mutual prosperity it engendered. In other words, the steady expansion of common rules, institutions and legal norms seemed destined to deliver an ever-closer Union and, through the so-called "Brussels effect", to extend European influence far beyond its borders. However, in this manner integration came to be understood purely as a matter of technical administration, rather than the (perceived as) out-of-fashion, distasteful and unliberal concepts of political destiny, strategic power or a shared civilisational vision.

We now know otherwise. The return of war to the European continent has not merely shattered the assumptions upon which our post-Cold War security architecture rested; it has fundamentally challenged Europe's collective imagination and the political assumptions that accompanied it. Moreover, and inconveniently, although maybe inevitable, it has arrived at a moment when profound technological transformation, demographic decline, intensifying geopolitical competition and an increasingly fragmented international order are exposing the fragility of Europe and its socio-economic foundations. The assumptions that shaped the post-war era can no longer be taken for granted. Many have already faded; others have collapsed altogether. The emerging world is more competitive, more uncertain, less governed by rules, and far less forgiving of political complacency or strategic hesitation. This watershed therefore demands more than better policies or institutional reform. It calls for a fundamental reorientation of how Europeans



understand politics itself: not as the technocratic management of stability, but once again as the prudent exercise of statecraft in the service of security, freedom and the preservation of European civilisation.

Nevertheless, it is worth recognising that Europe has become remarkably successful at managing complexity. Over the decades, it has developed sophisticated institutions, intricate legal frameworks and perhaps the world's most advanced system of multilevel governance, albeit not always in full accordance with the principle of subsidiarity. Yet this success has at times come at a cost. The language of European politics has too often been reduced to that of procedures, regulations and governance, rather than one capable of inspiring purpose, sacrifice and hope. As a result, the European project has increasingly struggled to capture the hearts and minds of its citizens. This challenge is becoming all the more pressing as Europe embarks upon a new phase of enlargement and deeper integration, for such a historic undertaking cannot be sustained by administrative competence alone. It requires political imagination, strategic vision and a compelling narrative capable of giving meaning to the next chapter of European integration.

Yet none of this should be mistaken for a fundamental indictment of the European project. Quite the contrary. The very success of European integration has brought it to a new historical juncture, one at which the achievements of the past are no longer sufficient to sustain the momentum of the future. What Europe now requires is not a rejection of its founding vision, but the articulation of a renewed political horizon. Politics is, after all, more than the art of solving problems. It is the task of defining a common direction, especially under conditions of uncertainty. It demands judgment where certainty is unattainable, courage where consensus remains elusive, and imagination where inherited answers no longer suffice. The founding architects of European integration understood this well. They did not merely react to crises or follow the prevailing currents of public sentiment. Rather, they transformed moments of disruption into opportunities for political innovation. Thus, contrary to the shallow proclamations of some, their ambition extended far beyond the preservation of peace, important though that objective undoubtedly is. Rather, they sought nothing less than the construction of a new political order.

In particular, for too long we have mistaken stability for permanence. We assumed that economic strength would naturally translate into geopolitical influence, and that prosperity alone would sustain democratic legitimacy. Recent years have demonstrated, with unsettling clarity, that neither assumption can be taken for granted. Power never disappeared from international affairs; it merely returned in new and often unexpected forms. Technology, data and artificial intelligence have become the central arenas of geopolitical competition, while Europe's demographic decline raises profound questions about the resilience of our societies, the sustainability of our welfare systems and the long-term foundations of our social contract. Taken together, these developments compel Europe to confront a more fundamental question: what kind of political actor it aspires to become if it wishes to continue being.



Should the European Union remain primarily an extraordinary regulatory and economic community, renowned for its ability to produce common rules? Or should it go beyond and develop the political capacity and strategic resolve to advance its interests, uphold and defend its values, and shape the international environment in ways that allow those great values not merely to survive, but to flourish? The answers that Europe's nations, statesmen and citizens give to these questions will determine the continent's place in the twenty-first century.

It is precisely at this juncture that Wouter Beke's reflections begin, and where his recommendations prove especially valuable. Rather than treating Europe as a completed construction requiring only incremental refinement, Beke invites us to reconsider Europe's strategic purpose and political vocation. His analysis addresses the fundamental challenges of strengthening Europe's strategic capacity, renewing democratic legitimacy and restoring confidence in a civilisation whose achievements remain both unique and worth defending. Whether discussing enlargement, competitiveness, governance or Europe's place in the world, a single question binds his reflections together: how can Europe recover both the confidence and the instruments necessary to shape its own future, rather than continually adapting to circumstances determined by others?

Readers will not agree with all of Beke's proposals. That is both inevitable and desirable. But it is not in Europe's character and history to advance through conformity, but through vigorous and open debate, even if, in recent decades, we have too often retreated from the boldness and creative ambition that once characterised Europe's Faustian spirit. The value of this book, therefore, lies not only in the solutions it offers but also in the questions it poses to European citizens, who are too often caught between complacency and alarmism.

Europe thus needs the confidence to acknowledge its shortcomings without losing sight of its extraordinary achievements, and to elevate them to a renewed and courageous vision of its future. It requires the humility to learn from a changing world, yet also the self-belief never to abandon the principles that have made European unity one of the most remarkable political achievements in history.

We have all inherited two version of Europe. One is the Europe patiently, and at times painfully, built by previous generations, whose achievements we too often take for granted and simply live off. The other is a Europe still waiting to be imagined, discussed and ultimately brought into being.

It is to this second Europe that Wouter Beke's reflections are addressed. And it is in that same spirit that this book should be read.



Introduction

Is Europe grappling with decline? More importantly, can Europe regain its grip? These are the questions this publication seeks to answer.

Today, Europe seems more often to react to events than to determine them. “The US innovates, China imitates, and Europe regulates,” goes the oft-repeated analysis. For years, the problematic nature of this did not show. Europe could focus on prosperity and well-being, while the United States guaranteed its security, Russia supplied cheap energy as a lubricant for the climate transition, and China produced lower-cost goods for European consumers. But this comfortable, if somewhat naïve, era has come to an end. “Europe has just returned from a vacation from world history,” said German Chancellor Friedrich Merz at the Munich Security Conference in February 2026.

Europe is familiar to many Europeans, but it is not always meaningful to them. They feel at home on the continent, yet detached from the project. That is the paradox. While we follow the daily political spectacle of Donald Trump as he seeks to Make America great again, we often feel reduced to a dumping ground for Chinese exports and a pawn in the geopolitical rivalry between Washington, Moscow, and Beijing. One leader sets the tone with power politics, another has launched the first large-scale war on our continent in eighty years, and a third regards Europe as a gullible marketplace. The sense is growing that Europe is largely subject to decisions made by others, with the US often serving as the benchmark.

Yet a closer look reveals a far more nuanced reality. In terms of quality of life, Europe still ranks at the top. Life expectancy is on average four years higher than in the United States, infant mortality is half as high, and poverty levels are also significantly lower. Whereas in the United States, despite higher overall healthcare spending, one in three people struggles to afford healthcare, in Europe that figure is ten times lower.

Nor does the United States outperform Europe across every economic measure. Government debt is markedly higher there, as are household and business debt. Inflation and average government interest rates are higher, while the European Union, despite a weaker dollar, exports more to the US than it imports from the US. In terms of sustainability, the US emits about 2.5 times as much CO₂ per capita as the EU, and its share of green energy is significantly lower. Nor does Europe trail the United States in terms of its safety. Europe has three times fewer homicides, lower drug use, four times fewer undocumented migrants, and a much smaller prison population. European society is simply safer.

While Donald Trump dreams of annexing Canada and Greenland, Vladimir Putin seeks to restore a Greater Russian empire through a brutal war in Ukraine, and China turns its gaze toward Taiwan, we see the opposite



in Europe. Countries such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Ukraine are all knocking on the door to join the European club. This alone speaks volumes about the enduring appeal of the European model and the quality of life it offers.

And yet, Europe is grappling with profound challenges. Not without reason. Europe accounts for just over 5 per cent of the world's population, produces around 6 per cent of global CO₂ emissions, generates 18 per cent of global GDP, but is responsible for half of the world's social spending. The European welfare model cannot withstand without stronger growth. Achieving it does not require favours from America, concessions from China, or accommodation with Russia. It requires Europe to unlock its own potential by tearing down the barriers that still divide its internal market.

Just as we can reduce the many rules that make entrepreneurs feel trapped, not only in Europe but, in many cases, because of our own rules. And just as we must take more responsibility for our own security, rather than leaving it subject to the shifting priorities of the White House. Anyone who seeks to strengthen European sovereignty will have to be willing to surrender a measure of national sovereignty. The paradox is that the pursuit of absolute national independence can ultimately lead to strategic dependence. By contrast, those willing to pool their strength can help build a European counterweight capable of navigating a new geopolitical era on its own terms.

Europe can once again regain its grip on the social market economy, the Rhineland model, and a renewed future, but only if we are willing to make the necessary choices. Only if we are prepared to shape our own destiny rather than allow others to shape it for us. Only if we have the courage to pursue growth, secure our strategic autonomy, and build a genuine European defence.

However, the greatest resistance to such unification does not come from outside the continent but from within it. Many people today still view and experience Europe as an economic project, a financial space, but not as the realm where one feels at home. That is why we must once again dare to name and defend the European way of life. If the European Union is seen merely as a project only for those cosmopolitans who view globalisation and technological innovation as market opportunities, it will never secure the support needed to move forward. It must also resonate with the citizens for whom rapid change and globalisation are often experienced less as opportunities than as threats, and whose sense of belonging remains rooted in familiar places, traditions, and communities. In this manner has arisen the conflict between people and elites, with all its attendant dangers, and thereby the ground is laid for authoritarian leaders to draw inspiration from political models like Trumpism which exploit this tension. Like Putinism, Trumpism embodies an increasingly autocratic mindset, one in which the interests of the state and the ambitions of the leader are progressively fused.



The European way of life has been forged over centuries, drawing on the moral and cultural influence of Christianity, the democratic innovations of Greece, the legal genius of Rome, and the enduring imprint of both the French Revolution and the Habsburg tradition. Without great proclamations for a United States of Europe, there is a need for a stronger European Union. A Union capable of making decisions, overcoming internal blockages, and no longer sleepwalking from one crisis to the next. That also means we must have the courage within Europe to evolve towards decision-making that is no longer paralysed by unanimity. After all, we can no longer assume that the United States will provide the inspiration and leadership it once did, particularly as it grapples with deep internal divisions among states and Washington, between the rich and the poor, and between the digital and industrial economies.

The EU is itself grappling with profound challenges and often draws its citizens into that struggle as well. Yet it can once again provide a sense of purpose and agency. This publication seeks to chart a path towards a stronger Europe, so that Europeans can once again feel that they are masters of their own destiny.



From a peace project to a prosperity project

Although alien and far from our lived experience, Europe was at war somewhere on the continent for more than half of the five centuries between 1450 and 1950. In 1945, a period of peace began that lasted through the wars in the former Yugoslavia and Kosovo, and then up to 2022, before war broke out in Europe once again. This can be attributed to the successful establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), meant as it was to seal cooperation between Germany and France. These two countries, which had fought each other for centuries, now deliberately chose to cooperate in economic sectors crucial to both the war industry and post-war reconstruction. The idea was clear: economic cooperation can lead to political stability. In this way, the Habsburg principle (i.e., “live and let live” in a multi-ethnic political entity) became a guiding idea in Europe.

Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg formed the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), which in 1957 evolved into the European Economic Community (EEC). Fifteen years later, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Denmark joined. These nine countries, which had firmly opted for democracy after the Second World War, were joined in the 1980s by three countries that had until then lived under authoritarian regimes and sought accession precisely to secure their young democracies. Greece joined in 1981, followed by Spain and Portugal in 1986. In 1995, Sweden, Finland, and Austria also became members.

To ensure prosperity, the focus gradually shifted towards deeper economic integration. The oil shocks of 1973 and 1979 brought an abrupt end to the Trente Glorieuses, the thirty years of sustained economic growth after the Second World War. Consequently, many European countries fell into a deep crisis and struggled to recover. Gradually, the realisation grew that this could only be achieved by completing the internal market. In 1985, the President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, launched “The 1992 Project”, aiming to complete the internal market by that year. Delors thereby took concrete steps to realise the free movement of persons, goods, services, and capital. In 1986, the Single European Act was adopted, marking the first major overhaul of the European treaties since 1957.

Alongside the strengthening of the internal market, a financial plan was introduced to expand cohesion and structural funds. According to Jacques Delors, economic and social development had to go hand in hand. The European Economic Community was renamed the European Community (EC) from then on, signalling that the project was no longer purely economic but also social and political. In pursuing this ambition, Delors frequently clashed with Margaret Thatcher, who pursued a neoliberal course in the United Kingdom. “I did not break up government in the UK to see it rebuilt in Europe,” she argued.



In 1989, Jacques Delors launched a three-stage plan for an Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). He proposed the free movement of capital, the creation of a European Monetary Institute (which would later become the European Central Bank), and the introduction of a common currency. The idea of a single currency was not new, but through Delors' plans it acquired far greater political significance. Until then, the idea of a single currency had faced strong national objections. There was not only the fear of losing political identity, since a national currency also carries strong symbolic value, but above all concern about the loss of sovereignty in economic and monetary policy. How could the different European economies converge sufficiently for a single currency to reflect an economic reality and coherent policy? Would strong currencies, such as the German Mark, have to be debilitated to accommodate weaker ones? And how could control over interest rates and inflation be maintained? In Germany in particular, these issues were highly sensitive, for the country's experience of the 1930s had left a deep trauma of inflation, and there was a strong determination to avoid any risk of weakening control over price stability.

When German reunification came onto the agenda at the end of 1989, momentum built quickly. The Treaty of Maastricht formally established the Euro in 1992, along with the criteria that countries had to meet to join the monetary union. At the same time, the European Community was renamed again: from then on, it became the European Union.

The Single Market launched under Jacques Delors gave the European economy a strong boost of 1.5 to 2 percent in the 1980s and 1990s. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, other European countries also applied for membership. And with the reunification of East and West Germany, the European Community gained 16 million inhabitants in one stroke.

In 2004, the European Union underwent its largest enlargement ever, with ten new member states joining: Cyprus, Slovenia, Czechia, Slovakia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, and Hungary. Altogether, this brought in around 75 million additional inhabitants. In December 2002, the European Council gave the green light for this enlargement at the Copenhagen summit. Clear conditions were set that candidate countries had to meet by 2004. These so-called Copenhagen criteria have since applied to later enlargements as well, such as those involving Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, and Croatia in 2013.

But the European Union itself also had to prepare for enlargement. In 2002, the Treaty of Nice was adopted, followed by the Treaty of Lisbon in 2007. These treaties introduced several important institutional reforms. In the future, each member state would be entitled to one Commissioner, and decision-making by unanimity would become less frequent. For decisions taken by qualified majority voting, support would be required from 55 per cent of the member states, that is, today 15 of the 27 member states, representing at least 65 per cent of the EU population. The European Parliament gained full co-decision powers. Brussels became



the permanent meeting place for European summits, and in 2009 a permanent President of the European Council was created. The first to hold the post was Herman Van Rompuy. Finally, in 2012, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union also became legally binding.

Furthermore, qualified majority voting was introduced for policy areas related to the internal market, but also for a wide range of fields such as environmental policy, consumer protection, transport, energy, agriculture and fisheries, social and employment policy, research and innovation, trade policy, migration and asylum, and communications policy. The unanimity rule was kept for all matters relating to taxation, as well as for foreign and security policy, the accession of new member states, and amendments to the treaties.



From a prosperity project to a protection project

Until then, the European Union had been primarily concerned with its own construction: how could cooperation between member states be deepened, and how could the internal market be further developed? The era of hyperglobalisation had begun, with far-reaching liberalisation of global trade, the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the accession of economic powerhouse countries such as China into it. Europe was an economic giant, and that seemed sufficient. That it was at the same time a political dwarf and a military weakling was hardly seen as a problem. The Soviet Union had just collapsed, the threat from the East appeared to have disappeared, and there was the security guarantee of NATO. What was there to worry about?

The question of what the European Union's geopolitical role should be was hardly ever raised. Formally, there was a Common Foreign and Security Policy and a High Representative, intended as a kind of European foreign minister, but it was never a real priority. As described before, the Kosovo War in the late 1990s confronted European leaders for the first time with their own impotence. Otto von Bismarck once said that diplomacy without arms is like music without notes. During the Kosovo War, that remark became painfully tangible. The European treaties were amended, and provisions on European defence were introduced, but in practice it remained largely a matter of words and cautious minute steps.

However, the situation is fundamentally different today. As Mario Draghi has said, we long believed that our economic weight, with 450 million consumers, would naturally translate into geopolitical power. That illusion is now gone. The European project has entered a new phase. What began as a peace project grew into a prosperity project, and must now become, above all, a project of protection. Europe must once again provide its citizens with a sense of stability and control in a world that has become faster-moving, more brutal, and more uncertain, doing so not only through economic means, but also through credible guarantees of security and defence.

China is flooding global markets with heavily subsidised products, thereby pushing European companies out of the competition. The World Trade Organization, which was meant to prevent such practices, has for the most part been rendered obsolete. The United States threatens to withdraw from the WTO and is increasingly resorting to trade wars and tariffs, while no longer providing Europe with automatic security guarantees. Russia is waging war on Europe's borders and has painfully exposed how vulnerable Europe's dependence on its cheap gas has been. Accordingly, many Europeans increasingly feel caught in a tightening grip of economic, geopolitical, and social pressures, as the EU is no longer always able to provide the stability it once did.



Still, I am far from defeatist. I am convinced that the European Union, under the stewardship of strong centrist parties, can once again offer its citizens a sense of stability, control, and confidence in the future. Europe must protect our security and our prosperity and, whatever extremists may claim, the nation-state can no longer do so on its own. Only a strong and renewed European Union can. But, to do so, it must formulate precise answers to five clearly defined challenges.

In short, Europe must first guarantee our security by making real progress towards a defence system that truly safeguards Europe. Second, it must protect our prosperity by preparing the social market economy of the future. Third, we must once again articulate and shape our identity ourselves, rather than leaving it to political radicals who seek to exploit this identity crisis to dismantle the EU. This can help reconnect “web people” and “wall people”. Fourth, the task is to ensure a more decisive European governance, so that the Union does not become paralysed in the aforementioned areas. And finally, the EU must take the lead in forging a new coalition of reasonable, like-minded democracies around the world, based on shared values.

The fall of the Berlin Wall marked the end of the Cold War. According to Francis Fukuyama, history would from then on move in only one direction: that of free democracies and liberal market economies. The sense of threat disappeared, and we began to dismantle our security architecture. That period, however, proved to be short-lived. Vladimir Putin had already changed course twenty years ago, but it was only with the war in Ukraine that it fully became clear that peace and security could no longer be taken for granted.

Moreover, the United States will no longer take on the guarantee of peace and security in Europe. Questions about the future of NATO and the strength of Article 5 force the European Union to confront uncomfortable realities about its own security dependence. Vladimir Putin is counting on American disengagement in the event of a potential conflict and Donald Trump has himself repeatedly signalled as much. If we want to guarantee European peace and security, we will have to organise it ourselves. The threat on the eastern flank of the Union is as real as can be.

In the European treaties, it is stated that when a member state is the target of armed aggression on its territory, the other member states are obliged to provide assistance and support by any and all necessary means. On paper, this commitment is even stronger than the famous Article 5 of the NATO Treaty. However, in practice it is much weaker because the European Union does not have its own military structure to implement it.

For the first time in many years, the foundations of a credible European defence are beginning to take shape. There is the SAFE investment programme of €150 billion as part of the broader ReArm Europe plan of €800 billion. In addition, instruments such as the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP),



the European Defence Fund (EDF), and the European Peace Facility (EPF) aim to establish a European approach to defence. The European Central Bank will also help facilitate defence investments. There is a European Defence Agency, to which €130 billion is expected to be allocated in the new multiannual budget for 2028–2034. There are also ambitious plans to strengthen military mobility. And, for the first time, there is a Commissioner for Defence, as well as a parliamentary Committee on Defence (SEDE).

All of this is necessary, but not sufficient. Given the threat from Russia and the stance of the United States, the EU is obliged to make additional financial efforts in the field of defence. Protecting the security of citizens is the most fundamental responsibility of politics. But responsibilities should be exercised at the level where they can be fulfilled most effectively. If we take subsidiarity seriously, then defence belongs at the European level.

The European Defence Community already exists in the treaties. It is time to give it real substance, for three reasons. First, for reasons of efficiency. If all European defence efforts are added together, they exceed Russia's military capabilities. But in practice, they remain fragmented across 27 member states. If we continue in this fashion, it is impossible to build credible deterrence vis-à-vis Russia.

The NATO architecture allows for a European response, even if the United States were to stay on the sidelines. This is laid down in the 2002 Berlin Plus agreements, which govern cooperation between the EU and NATO. Under the principle of the right of first refusal, the United States can decide not to take part in an operation, while still allowing the European Union to use NATO assets, planning capabilities, and command structures for its own military operations.

However, this architecture is still no longer sufficient today. Moreover, it is unclear whether, in a moment of crisis, the European Union could depend on the communications systems, command structures, and intelligence capabilities that underpin NATO, much of which remains in American hands. What if Donald Trump decides that Europe ought not use it? This is not a theoretical question: he has already explicitly made a similar threat in relation to Ukraine. And should he seriously consider carrying out his threat to take Greenland, Trump would of course prevent European countries from using the NATO backbone, amongst other egregious attacks.

Therefore, Europe must invest in its strategic autonomy, within NATO. Not separate, but separable. Various studies estimate the cost of achieving strategic autonomy in defence at around €500 billion. That may sound impressive, but spread over ten years it amounts to roughly €50 billion per year. Relative to total European defence spending, this is entirely feasible. It represents 12% of what European member states currently spend on defence. If every member state were to move towards the new 3.5% benchmark imposed by



NATO, it would account for only 7% of the combined national defence budgets. Let us therefore Europeanise this dimension of defence as well, so that Europe can jointly develop the strategic capabilities for which it still depends heavily on the United States.

Second, we can ask our citizens to make major financial sacrifices only when we also enhance spending more efficiently. Most member states currently invest around 2 per cent of their GDP in defence, with NATO edging towards 3.5 per cent. After all, it is taxpayers' money we are talking about. Yet each member state still organises and procures its defence largely on its own. This not only results in a fragmented landscape of incompatible weapons systems but also wastes resources through efficiency losses estimated at up to 20 per cent. This loss is roughly equivalent to three-quarters of the European budget, or to France's current defence budget. With the resources we have today, we could therefore achieve far more. Or, by working together, we could moderate future increases in defence spending. All this, of course, requires a European approach. A European army may seem distant, but this was within reach both after the Second World War and after the Kosovo War. First, with the Pleven Plan in 1950; later, with the Saint-Malo Declaration of 1998. In both cases, a war on the European continent led to the recognition that a stronger and more militarily autonomous Europe was necessary to preserve peace. The current war in Ukraine is once again such a moment. We should finally take advantage of it.

Unfortunately, the current structures do not provide sufficient flexibility to turn political will into action. Anyone who believes that a credible European defence can be built entirely through unanimity within the existing EU structures underestimates geopolitical urgency. Europe must therefore consider a different model, namely, a defence treaty along the lines of the Schengen Agreement. A coalition of willing countries could move more rapidly towards integration in areas such as the defence industry, joint procurement, command structures, and strategic capabilities. Member states that do not wish to participate would remain outside. At the same time, countries outside the European Union that are strategically essential, such as the United Kingdom or Norway, should be able to join in an active capacity as well.

However, the rearmament of European states amid growing support for nationalist and far-right political forces creates a potentially dangerous combination. History reminds us that an armed Europe divided by competing nationalisms is the recipe for the destruction of Europe. The eighty years of peace that Western and much of Central Europe have enjoyed since 1945 are historically exceptional, not inevitable. Peace between European nations cannot be taken for granted. This is especially true when political movements seek to weaken European integration, excuse or downplay Vladimir Putin's actions, and advocate a return to a Europe of fully sovereign nation-states pursuing their interests independently of one another. Thus, only by organising defence at the European level can we limit that risk. According to polls, 81 per cent of Europeans support this.



As a clear example of “horseshoe politics”, currently in the European Parliament, there is a striking alliance between the far left and the far right: the far left opposes higher defence spending out of a naïve pacifist instinct, while the far right does so because it regards defence as an exclusively national competence. The responsibility to act rests, above all, with the political centre, for if it fails to lead, others far less reasonable will fill the vacuum. European citizens have a right to expect protection, security, and strategic foresight from their leaders.

Nor can procedural obstacles serve as an excuse for inaction. Article 20 of the Treaty already permits enhanced cooperation among a coalition of willing member states. Should that prove insufficient, those countries determined to move forward could conclude a separate treaty, just as they did with the Schengen Agreement. Schengen itself was not embraced by every member state from the beginning; it expanded gradually as its benefits became evident. A European defence union could and should follow the same path.



Protect our prosperity

After the Second World War, new Christian democratic parties emerged in Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Germany, France, Italy, and Austria. They achieved electoral success and took the lead in rebuilding their countries and fostering cooperation among them. This reconstruction was both literal and figurative. Literal, by rebuilding homes and infrastructure that had been destroyed. Figurative, by renewing the organisational structure of the states.

Between the capitalist, purely market-driven United States and the emerging communism of the Soviet Union and China, Christian democrats sought a third way, namely, the social market economy. It is worth mentioning, however, that after the fall of communism, China developed a new economic model: a centralised, state-led form of capitalism. Nevertheless, Europe remained committed to its third way.

At the core of the European model lies the free market, tempered by social corrections to ensure that economic growth drives social progress. Moreover, society is not organised solely around the state and the market, but also assigns a central role to civil society. Civil society is active in key sectors such as education, healthcare, and poverty relief, and receives financial support for these activities. Therefore, employers and employees are also involved in the decision-making process of socioeconomic policy. This is not a recent historical phenomenon, however, but an old and now-established European ethos. The social mission of addressing social needs in a structural way dates to the Habsburg policies of Maria Theresa. Otto von Bismarck built on this foundation and is regarded as the founding father of the modern welfare state. He introduced compulsory social insurance for workers, financed through contributions from employers and employees, to cover healthcare costs, workplace accidents, and pensions. It was the Christian democratic and socialist movements that ensured these ideas gained broad acceptance in society and ultimately shaped our socioeconomic model. In each country, this model took on its own specific form. In Germany, for example, the CDU introduced the *Mitbestimmung* and the *Aufsichtsrat*, that is, employee co-determination and representation on companies' supervisory boards. In the Netherlands, it is known as the "polder model", based on consultation between government, employers, and employees. A well-known example is the Wassenaar Agreement, concluded by Prime Minister Ruud Lubbers in 1982 to get the Netherlands back on track after the oil crisis. Wage restraint and reduced working hours formed the basis for the Dutch Miracle of the 1980s and 1990s.

Specifically, in a social-market economy, labour relations are not merely individual relationships between employee and employer. Collective bargaining plays a central role in establishing minimum wages and adequate working conditions.



After the Second World War, Belgium did not adopt the Anglo-Saxon Beveridge model, under which healthcare and other welfare services are financed directly through general taxation. Instead, it developed a welfare state rooted in the principle of subsidiarity, combining social contributions from employers and employees with a prominent role for intermediary institutions and civil society. The result was a model based on consultation, partnership, and shared responsibility: between employers and employees, between doctors and health insurance funds, and between public authorities and social organisations. In education, too, Belgium rejected a simple choice between state provision and private provision, opting instead for publicly financed freedom of education. This system allows citizens to choose among competing providers and institutions, encouraging quality through choice. To use the economists' expression, individuals can 'vote with their feet', rewarding those who offer the best services and outcomes.

The organisation of the market differs significantly between the German/Habsburg model and the French model. The French system, both politically and economically, is highly concentrated around the state. This was the case under the French kings and emperors and remains so to this day. State capitalism is highly developed there, with large companies under state control. These are companies that do indeed pursue profit and operate independently, but whose ownership and control lie with the government. This is how the French state directs and regulates crucial sectors of its economy.

These different approaches also lead to dissimilar political expectations. In a country where the president is elected directly, the state maintains a strong grip on the economy, which can lead to the emergence of a form of civil religion in which the state takes the shape of a jealous god, raising citizens' expectations to be particularly high. In systems based on negotiation, coalition-building, participation, and shared responsibility, those expectations tend to be lower, and there is a greater awareness that progress is only possible through dialogue, consultation, and personal responsibility.

An important difference between the European social market economy and American laissez-faire capitalism lies in their attitude towards monopolies. In Europe, fair competition is central. The creation of monopolies may generate capital, but it also leads to a concentration of power that ultimately undermines the free market itself. When European Council President António Costa said, after the informal summit in Alden Biesen, that greater consolidation was needed in sectors such as telecommunications, he immediately linked this to the social contract.

The Rhineland model of the social market economy is typically European and has become an economic and social success story. But it is under pressure. Without sufficient economic growth, this model cannot be secured for the future. The Draghi report points the way forward in this regard. History shows that strengthening the internal market leads to higher growth, and the Single Market, with the strong economic



boost it fostered, serves as a case in point.

After Hungary, Belgium derives the greatest economic benefit from the European internal market. Belgium's Federal Planning Bureau estimated this at 4.4 per cent of GDP for Belgium, 3.1 per cent for the Netherlands, 2.1 per cent for Germany, and 1.7 per cent for France. Moreover, Flanders ranks among the five most open economies in the world, with two-thirds of Flemish exports going to European Union countries. The EU therefore makes a substantial contribution to the prosperity and purchasing power of Belgians, as it does for other European citizens. Thanks to the internal market, Europe has gained an estimated 8 to 9 million additional jobs. And as both logic and history dictate, further completing this market will only generate additional growth.

International trade, another traditional driver of prosperity, is increasingly under strain. The era of ever-deeper globalisation has given way to one of economic competition and strategic rivalry. During his first term, Donald Trump launched a tariff war and helped cripple the World Trade Organization's dispute-settlement system. Joe Biden largely maintained those measures and supplemented them with the Inflation Reduction Act, a major programme of state-backed industrial policy. Meanwhile, China is attempting to capture market share by exporting heavily subsidised goods, creating significant challenges for European producers. Europe is therefore compelled to adopt a two-track approach that is inherently in tension with itself: deepening trade ties with reliable partners while strengthening its capacity to protect its own industries and strategic sectors.

Against such a quandary, "to protect without protectionism" must be the guiding principle. This requires both an offensive and a defensive approach. Offensively, it means, above all, that we must become self-sufficient in our energy supply while maintaining our decarbonisation ambitions. After all, these also relate to strategic autonomy and will, in the long run, lead to cheaper energy. But this must be achieved without deindustrialisation. If production leaves Europe and we subsequently import those goods, we weaken both our economy and do no good to the environment.

We therefore need a sensible green policy, not a wishful approach that will lead to little else than European self-harm. Austrian Chancellor Christian Stocker put it sharply at the EPP Congress in 2025 in Valencia: "The left doesn't see the problems, the right doesn't see the solutions." The political centre must opt for workable solutions. Requiring airports to use green kerosene without addressing long-haul flights that are rerouted outside Europe is an example of an unwise green policy. The same applies when energy-intensive companies halt or relocate investments due to overly strict European rules, only to export their products back into the EU afterwards. In such cases, we miss the point. If dogmatic policies lead to a reduction in CO₂ emissions in Europe, but an increase globally due to delocalisation, this is economically, socially, and ecologically counterproductive and therefore not sensible green policy.



However, we must also be willing to protect our economy and, where necessary, defend our markets more effectively. This includes the anti-coercion instrument, which can be used as a deterrent against attempts by third countries to exert economic pressure to influence policy choices. In this way, the EU could decide to exclude Chinese companies from public procurement or restrict American streaming services' access to the European market. The introduction of a carbon border adjustment mechanism also fits within this logic. At the same time, it is time to strengthen traditional instruments such as anti-dumping measures, so that we can shield our markets more quickly and easily when needed. We must also act against parcels flooding our market that fail to comply with European safety, health, and sustainability standards. Clear limits must be set in this regard. The same applies to agricultural products, which must meet the standards we impose on our own farmers. This should be linked to a much stronger customs policy that strictly controls both agricultural products and the billions of parcels from China. Otherwise, the credibility of our own policy will be undermined.



Protect the European identity

The Greeks and Romans furnished Europe with its institutional foundations: democracy, citizenship, and the rule of law. Christianity, in turn, provided much of its cultural and moral foundation. Yet, in an age of secularisation and growing individualism, Christianity is often portrayed as a relic of the past—an obstacle to progress rather than one of its principal enablers. This narrative is hardly new. Similar arguments were advanced during the nineteenth-century school struggles, when religion was increasingly presented as incompatible with modernity. What is frequently overlooked, however, is Christianity's profound contribution to the development of European civilisation. The medieval universities emerged from Christian institutions; the intellectual traditions that nurtured both the Renaissance and the Enlightenment developed within a broadly Christian cultural framework; and the Christian conception of the individual, endowed with inherent dignity and moral worth, played a significant role in the emergence of European humanism and anthropocentrism. These contributions are too often ignored in contemporary debates.

Christianity has left an indelible mark on Europe's culture, values, art, architecture, literature, and collective identity. Yet there are those who would prefer to sever Europe entirely from this heritage, sometimes to the point where even cultural symbols such as nativity scenes become subjects of controversy. Such an approach misunderstands the role Christianity has played in European society. Christianity is not merely a matter of belief; it is also a matter of belonging. It provides not only faith, but also a shared cultural vocabulary and a sense of community. That sense of belonging fulfils a fundamental human need. Democracies can establish procedures, rights, and norms, but they cannot by themselves generate the deeper values and bonds that hold societies together. A healthy society requires both norms and values. In Europe, many of those values—human dignity, solidarity, forgiveness, charity, and the moral equality of all persons—have been shaped, to a significant extent, by the Christian tradition.

In addition, several valuable political principles have their origins in the Church's social teaching. Pope Leo XIII advocated for class reconciliation rather than class struggle, and for social reforms aimed at improving working conditions, purchasing power, and social protection, without a revolution that would make entrepreneurship impossible, place the economy entirely under state control, or disregard property rights. The principle of subsidiarity also stems from such social teaching, a principle which remains highly relevant today for the European Union's ambitions. That is, the bridge between “wall people” and “web people” is not built by Europeanising every problem, but by addressing issues at the level closest to citizens and seeking European solutions only where they are genuinely necessary.

Christian roots are often invoked by people and groups who have long since ceased to practise their faith regularly. Opinions may differ on the cost and artistic choices behind the Brussels nativity scene displayed



at the end of 2025, in which Joseph and Mary were depicted without faces. Yet the public controversy and political reactions it provoked revealed, above all, that Europe's Christian heritage matters to far more people than is often assumed. This attachment is not confined to older generations. It can also be found among younger Europeans, including those of migrant background, such as Fouad Gandoul and Youssef Kobo, who have spoken publicly about the importance of Europe's Christian cultural foundations. At the same time, the controversy demonstrated how easily such sentiments can be instrumentalised and transformed into narratives of civilisational conflict.

Acknowledging the Christian component of our culture does not mean that we must act as followers of the Church. Politics is more than a vision of a strong state, as in socialism, or of safeguarding the market, as in liberalism. Politics is about having a vision of a community, a community that is more than the sum of its individuals. Thus, overarching, shared loyalties matter and deserve recognition. Europe is therefore not merely an economic space, but a place where people can and must feel at home. Or, in the spirit of Adam Smith: "it is pleasing to trade, barter and exchange, but a society only truly flourishes when it shows humanity, justice, generosity, and a sense of community." Europe is not only a space, but also a place, as Herman Van Rompuy said: a place where people can feel at home and where multiple, layered loyalties have room to exist. Or, to paraphrase the former CSU leader Franz Josef Strauß: "Flanders is my home, Belgium my country, and Europe my future."

If we want to defend ourselves against authoritarian leaders, we must accordingly offer an answer to the growing individualism and sense of rootlessness. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt already warned that repressive political systems rely on the loneliness of individuals who seek to escape their isolation and therefore merge into an anonymous mass. Nobel Prize in Literature laureate Elias Canetti issued a similar warning in his masterwork *Crowds and Power*: "the loneliness of the individual and atomisation lead to blind obedience to the mass."

Alongside the democracy of the Greeks, the law of the Romans, and our Christian culture, our European way of life is also shaped by two administrative traditions. One tradition is inspired by the French Revolution and the freedom-oriented thinking that emerged from it. The other has its origins in the Habsburg tradition. Anyone who seeks to understand Europe must keep this distinction clearly in mind. The rule-of-law structure of the European Union is strongly influenced by the French Revolution, in which sovereignty lies with the people. We elect a European Parliament; that Parliament approves the Commission and elects its President, and it has co-decision powers in European legislation. In addition, fundamental European rights are enshrined in a Charter.

After the French Revolution, France ultimately reverted to a strong executive power concentrated in an



elected president. In Europe, that executive power is more hybrid and divided between the Commission and the European Council. In that sense, the EU displays more Habsburg characteristics. That tradition relies less on change through strict majorities and more on consultation, consensus and stability. Better to be everyone somewhat dissatisfied but at peace than in internal conflict. Better to achieve political stability through economic cooperation than to engage in constant struggle. Better a cultural nation that acknowledges its Christian roots than a form of state nationalism that introduces a civil religion and presents itself as a jealous god. Donald Trump shows how quickly a political leader can then emerge as the voice of that god.

The Habsburg tradition also stands for strong institutions that place the prosperity and welfare of citizens at the centre. The European Rhineland model, with its social market economy, finds its origins there. Moreover, this tradition showed considerable respect for cultural diversity, which remains an important asset and defining feature of the EU today.

The economic importance of democratic institutions has been convincingly demonstrated by Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson, who were awarded the 2024 Nobel Prize in Economics for their work. Strong institutions, such as an independent judiciary and inclusive political systems, encourage investment, attract innovation, increase productivity, and promote economic growth. Conversely, the weakening of such democratic institutions negatively affects economic growth.

It is precisely these institutions that are coming under pressure from populist politicians. They advance a discourse aimed at weakening them, portraying them as responsible for the social and economic decline of “wall people.” In reality, it is often populist policies that contribute to economic decline. As the group of Nobel Prize-winning economists concluded: “Populist leaders are bad for the economy.”

In his book *Fascism and Populism*, the Italian author Antonio Scurati writes: “Parliament is the place where the slow, long art of democracy is formed, the temple of its fragile beauty. But if I am the people and the people are me, then parliament becomes a waste of time: a corrupt, pathological, inadequate place of thieves and class privileges, the centre of a useless, chronic gang.” This warning should be kept in mind when criticism of parliamentary democracy turns into proposals undermining it.

The greatest threat to the European Union’s cohesion comes not from abroad, but from within. What I describe as the emerging phenomenon of Trumpism—a toxic blend of authoritarian nationalism and populism—is increasingly finding fertile ground in Europe, often with encouragement from external actors. It threatens to erode the foundations of our democracies and undermine the European way of life by exploiting and deepening new social, cultural, and political divides.



This publication therefore seeks to make the case for rediscovering, acknowledging, and cherishing the Christian roots of European identity. These roots constitute a shared inheritance that transcends contemporary divisions and connects Europeans across social and cultural boundaries: the “web people” and the “wall people”, the “anywheres” and the “somewheres”. Preserving and renewing this common foundation is, in my view, one of the enduring responsibilities of centrist politics.

Defending the European way of life requires more than protecting institutions; it requires strengthening the sense of belonging that sustains them. Many Europeans feel at home in Europe, yet not always in the European Union itself. Bridging that gap is one of the defining challenges of our time. The Union must therefore become more effective, more responsive, and more democratic, so that it once again reflects the aspirations of its citizens and commands their trust.



Make European governance more decisive for the future

The people and the elite are an age-old antagonism that, according to political scientist Daniele Caramani, has now been reborn into a new fault line between the radical right, which promotes a populist nationalism, and a technocratic elite (which promotes universal liberalism). Furthermore, utopian ideas like “the United States of Europe” further alienate “wall people” from the European cause, also widening the gap with the “web people”, of course.

However, the EU should not aim to become the United States of Europe to begin with. The American presidency is a tempered form of kingship. Or, to put it even more forcefully in the words of the American sociologist Robert Bellah: “The president is the high priest of the American civil religion.” Europe has no need for that. Its historical path has been different, and its future will be different as well. Yet if we are to safeguard the prosperity and security of European citizens—which should remain the European Union’s foremost responsibility—we must strengthen the Union. To do so, however, Europe must also undertake meaningful reforms from within.

For instance, we can opt for a smaller and more effective European Commission. In the past, large countries had two commissioners, while smaller countries only had one. With successive enlargements, this changed to one commissioner per member state. Now it is time to take the next step, especially with a new round of enlargement on the horizon. The Commission must safeguard the supranational nature of the European Union, just as the European Council serves as a counterweight to an intergovernmental reflex. With a new enlargement on the horizon and the ambition to make the Commission more efficient, Article 17(5) of the Treaty should be applied. This means the Commission may consist of only two-thirds of the member states. Eighteen commissioners would suffice, without need for treaties to change.

We could agree on a system under which the larger countries, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and Poland, would each have one commissioner. The smaller countries could, within existing cooperation frameworks, jointly provide one commissioner, with the position rotating among the countries involved. Thus, the Benelux could have one commissioner. The Visegrád countries, Hungary, Slovakia, and Czechia, excluding Poland, could likewise have another. The same would apply to the Nordic countries Denmark, Finland, and Sweden; the Baltic states Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania; Romania and Bulgaria together; the Habsburg trio of Austria, Slovenia, and Croatia; the Mediterranean countries Greece, Cyprus, and Malta; and the Atlantic countries Portugal and Ireland. Such an approach would only strengthen and formalise regional forms of cooperation, many of which already exist.

Article 20 of the Treaty also provides for closer cooperation within the Union. This provision was used at



the end of 2025 to establish enhanced cooperation for financing Ukraine through a European loan, thereby avoiding the confiscation of frozen Russian assets held at Euroclear. To overcome opposition from Hungary, Czechia, and Slovakia, a “coalition of the willing” was formed. This approach could equally be applied in the future to both economic and defence matters. Indeed, such a Europe already exists. Poland, Czechia, Denmark, Hungary, Romania, and Sweden are outside the eurozone. Cyprus and Ireland are not part of the Schengen area. Austria, Cyprus, Ireland, and Malta are not members of NATO. A multi-speed Europe is therefore not a future prospect but a present reality. The Benelux provides a useful example of this.

Within such enhanced forms of cooperation, new decision-making procedures could be implemented. For defence and foreign policy, for example, the unanimity requirement could be abolished. Recent years have also exposed the hybrid nature of Europe’s external representation. Estonia’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Kaja Kallas, formally serves as the EU’s chief diplomat, yet she has remained largely absent from the geopolitical spotlight. Key negotiations involving Ukraine, the United States, and the European Union were not led by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, but instead by German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, French President Emmanuel Macron, and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk. Meanwhile, the President of the European Council, António Costa, has been almost as invisible as the High Representative, despite reportedly playing an important role behind the scenes as a consensus-builder and dealmaker.

It is therefore logical to anchor foreign policy more clearly with the President of the Commission, thereby ending the current fragmentation. Or why not finally implement Manfred Weber’s proposal to merge the presidencies of the Commission and the European Council? Henry Kissinger is said to have once asked: “Whom do I call if I want to call Europe?” Such institutional simplification would finally provide an answer to this notorious query.

One relatively quick step that could make the EU more effective, despite the stance of several member states that regularly block this, is to make better use of the existing possibilities in the Treaties to speed up decision-making in foreign policy, but without requiring any treaty change. Today, the unanimity rule still applies in the common foreign and security policy in many cases, allowing a single member state to block a decision. However, the Treaties already allow for a shift to qualified majority voting in certain cases, as for example when the European Council first unanimously defines a strategic direction, after which implementation can be decided by majority vote. Alternatively, the passerelle clauses could be used to agree that in a few areas, decisions will in future be taken by qualified majority. We must use the shortcuts and solutions we already have to address the problems we have created for ourselves.

In this way, we could, for example, agree that sanctions against individuals or regimes that violate human rights, such as Russia or Belarus, would in future be adopted by qualified majority. We would then also be



able to approve EU positions in international organisations, such as the UN General Assembly, as well as diplomatic statements and responses to international crises, much more quickly, as a single member state could not block the whole endeavour. The veto right, after all, has led to the reasonable criticism that the EU responds too slowly and too hesitantly to international conflicts, such as those in Syria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Congo, Gaza, or Iran. Using these passerelle clauses could make the EU more agile in the short term and endow it with greater geopolitical influence.

At the same time, important safeguards for member states ought to remain in place. A country can make use of an “emergency brake” when vital national interests are at stake, after which consensus is sought again, or the matter is referred back to the European Council. Instruments such as constructive abstention, whereby a member state does not block a decision but is not required to commit itself to it, make it possible to move forward without forcing other countries, even as a coalition, to act against their core interests. The essence of these proposals is therefore not to erode national sovereignty, but to prevent the EU from becoming paralysed in a world where speed and unity are decisive for geopolitical weight.



New Coalition of the Willing

As the United States shows decreasing commitment to a multilateral world order, the possibility and need for a different leader is emerging. Like the EU, countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Norway, Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and South Korea also share, for the most part, the same world view: international legal rules take precedence over the law of the strongest; economic trade is based on mutual agreements rather than erratic power politics; and democratic governments constrained by the rule of law form the backbone of stable societies. Thus, the aforementioned countries believe in cooperation so as to prevent international relations from sliding into chaos.

As a case in point, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney said in his 2026 Davos speech that “intermediate powers like Canada, are not powerless. They have the capacity to build a new order that encompasses our values, such as respect for human rights, sustainable development, solidarity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the various states.”

With this in mind, the European Union must be quick to take the lead and forge an alliance with the aforementioned democracies. This alliance could be termed the D9: Democracy 9. Within this framework, the D9 countries could not only enter into agreements but also draw up an economic equivalent to NATO’s Article 5. This would entail an alliance in which economic coercion against one member would automatically trigger a joint and proportionate response from all D9 members.

Moreover, even less like-minded countries today are seeking closer ties with such forms of cooperation. Regional organisations such as ASEAN look to the European Union as an inspiring example of how supranational cooperation can promote peace, stability, and prosperity. From that perspective, they are also seeking closer engagement with the EU so as to strengthen cooperation and trade. The future is not something to be endured but to be shaped. Europe must therefore replace passivity with an offensive strategy that actively helps define the emerging world order. The fact that Donald Trump reduces the world to three spheres of influence, namely, a Chinese, a Russian, and an American one, thereby leaving Africa to be little more than a source of raw materials, does not mean that Europe should accept this framework. This is not a call for escalation, but for assertiveness. Europe must remain open to trade and cooperation, yet without naivety. For decades, we assumed that economic coercion would come primarily from the East. The past year has demonstrated that it can just as easily come from across the Atlantic.



Give the “wall people” a renewed sense of agency and help them regain their grip on the future.

A sense of alienation among the citizenry is widespread. The financial crisis of 2008 strongly reinforced this feeling and proved extremely disruptive. The old dividing lines have faded, giving way to a new divide between the “web people” and the “wall people”. The migration crisis of 2015, the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and the ensuing energy crisis have only deepened this divide. At the same time, social media have become powerful megaphones for both the radical right and the radical left, while Big Tech has proven more than willing to profit from this growing polarisation.

But there is something deeper at play. Growing individualisation has weakened the communities that once gave people a sense of belonging, placing the individual increasingly at the centre while hollowing out values such as solidarity, responsibility, and mutual respect. At the same time, it has fuelled a rise in both physical and mental loneliness. Loneliness is not merely a matter of being alone. Five people can sit around the same table, each absorbed in a smartphone, yet remain profoundly disconnected. The conversations that once bound communities together are no longer taking place, replaced by digital echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs rather than foster genuine dialogue. Alongside this social fragmentation comes growing socioeconomic insecurity. Many Europeans are increasingly uncertain about the future of their jobs, their prosperity, their pensions, and even their security. Together, these developments have left many with the feeling that they have lost control over the forces shaping their lives.

The common thread seems to be that Europe, and by extension its member states, have lost control. In this evolving world of mutual global dependencies, this perception contains a grain of truth. Our economic value chains are more spread than ever across the world and are therefore quite exposed to the external shocks over which we have no control. In times of stability, this complexity has delivered economic efficiency and social prosperity. In more challenging times, however, such as those we are experiencing today, it can also generate uncertainty and unease. The complexity of modern governance is often difficult to grasp, leading many citizens to disengage from politics altogether. Populists are quick to exploit this by offering deceptively simple solutions to inherently complex problems—solutions that are often unrealistic or even counterproductive. Rather than addressing the underlying causes of public concern, they thrive on discontent, deepen social divisions, and deliberately fuel polarisation.

This uncertainty can only be removed by a stronger, more united Europe, particularly on crucial issues, while keeping restraint on secondary matters. Europe must regain genuine control in strategic domains such as security, energy, and industry. Control cannot be measured by the number of regulations it produces or the thousands of pages of legislation it adopts each year. Too often, this creates little more than the illusion of



control. In doing so, Europe not only keeps itself locked in a grapple but also draws its citizens into it. The European Union should not seek to do everything, but rather focus on those tasks where it can make the greatest difference. By concentrating on its core responsibilities and delivering tangible results, Europe can loosen this grapple and restore its citizens' sense of grip over their future.

As shown before, the political and economic agenda of the radical right leads to lower economic growth, higher inflation, and rising public debt. The “wall people” are often the first to bear these costs. Yet the appeal of populism remains strong. The challenge, therefore, is one of translation: to connect responsible European policies with the everyday concerns of those who stand to benefit most from them. Accordingly, the Draghi report is not primarily about increasing the competitiveness of our companies, but about keeping our social model affordable and thereby securing a “Rhineland 2.0”, while in doing so also strengthening our community. Likewise, we do not guarantee our security by continuing to claim that defence is solely a matter of national sovereignty, because the best, most efficient, and cheapest way to achieve it is through a common European defence.

The central challenge for both Europe and the political centre is to restore a sense of grip to the “wall people”. This starts with acknowledging, rather than ridiculing, their concerns. Those concerns are real: growing socioeconomic insecurity, migration that many perceive as no longer being under control, declining feelings of safety, and energy bills that place increasing pressure on household budgets. If the political centre fails to address these anxieties, others will continue to exploit them. In other words, acknowledging and naming these problems is not a concession to extremism, but a prerequisite for countering it. The EU must show that it acts and provides answers to the challenges confronting ordinary people. By cutting back stifling regulations that unnecessarily burden citizens and businesses, by regaining control over migration where integration fails and pressure on public services and public space increases, by ensuring affordable and reliable energy so that households and businesses can thrive, and by pursuing an ambitious climate policy out of strategic necessity while managing its pace and costs in a way that everyone can keep up and that safeguards Europe's industrial base. At the same time, the EU must focus on economic growth because this is the only way our social model will remain affordable in the years to come. If we are willing both to acknowledge problems and to solve them, we can restore a sense of perspective and grip. Conversely, those who deny or dismiss these concerns risk leaving people trapped in a grapple, making them ever more susceptible to the false promises of the political extremes.

Another important political challenge is managing expectations: striking the right balance between setting clear, ambitious goals and avoiding promises that inevitably lead to disappointment. Political leaders must inspire confidence without raising expectations they cannot realistically fulfil. Accordingly, politics is always confronted with the following dilemma: “Going to the moon” versus “underpromising and overdelivering.”



On the one hand, people need a dream, a vision, or a narrative that carries them forward, something worth living for, committing to, and making them feel part of a larger whole. This can be termed the “going to the moon” strategy. President J.F. Kennedy addressed 40,000 students at Rice University in September 1962 with the words: “We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard; because that goal will serve to organise and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one we intend to win, and the others too.” In this manner, Kennedy invoked a dream, which was realised just seven years later. When concrete, tangible results follow, the strategy is successful. But when dreams sold to the people are not followed by concrete action, trust quickly erodes.

Unsurprisingly, it is often the “wall people” who disengage first, especially when they are confronted with high energy bills, increasingly unaffordable housing, a growing sense of insecurity in their neighbourhoods, longer waiting times for healthcare, stagnant purchasing power, and the feeling that their concerns are routinely dismissed as irrelevant or inappropriate. In such circumstances, grand narratives about the benefits of a stronger Europe lose their persuasive power. If people are losing their jobs to globalisation, feel less secure, or see their standard of living decline, appeals to distant ambitions — a “going to the moon” strategy — will fail to resonate. Citizens must first be given confidence that Europe can improve the realities of their everyday lives.

The issue, of course, is that Europe often communicates from this “going to the moon” mindset. Climate neutrality by 2050, making Europe cancer-free, providing all European households with high-speed internet by 2030, lifting at least 15 million Europeans out of poverty by 2030, renovating 35 million buildings, and so on. But if people do not see these ambitions translated into tangible improvements in their everyday lives, they disengage, and the gap between citizens and the political establishment widens rather than narrows. Without visible progress in their own lives, people inevitably lose faith in the broader narrative.

The other strategy is “underpromising and overdelivering.” Be clear about what you promise, but only promise what you can deliver; then the result can only exceed expectations. The economic impact of crises often proves less severe than initially feared. The resilience of societies and economies is frequently greater than the bleakest predictions suggest. The 2022 energy crisis is a case in point. During the summer, many warned of energy rationing, widespread industrial shutdowns, and households left without heating. Governments deliberately managed expectations, cautioning that a difficult winter lay ahead. Yet, thanks to rapid gas storage, energy savings, and alternative supply routes, a systemic crisis was avoided. The winter was harsh, but manageable. The same applied during the Coronavirus crisis. A quick return to the “old normal” was never promised; instead delivering on temporary and targeted support. The EU played a key role in this through the establishment of NextGenerationEU, the recovery fund for member states, and



joint debt issuance, which represented a pragmatic choice to stabilise the economy. The labour market ultimately recovered faster than feared, and a deep, prolonged recession was avoided. That is the strength of “underpromise and overdeliver”, namely, no grandstanding, but policies that perform better than predicted.

As another case in point, such an approach should also be applied to the current policy on electric driving. Europe does not need to introduce a general ban on new internal combustion engine cars by 2035. What is needed instead is massive investment in the electricity grid, affordable electric vehicles, social leasing schemes, the greening of company cars, a dense charging infrastructure, and targeted innovation support. If these enabling conditions are met, the transition will follow naturally. Without grandstanding, without symbolic politics, and without leaving the “wall people” behind. Over time, the benefits will become tangible, and the “wall people” will come to see themselves as part of the European story. Encouragingly, recent initiatives suggest that the European Commission is beginning to move away from a predominantly “going to the moon” approach and is placing greater emphasis on delivering concrete, tangible results.

The same applies to industry. Of course, we need a long-term perspective. But does this have to take the form of unrealistic and extremely costly targets, such as for green hydrogen, whose feasibility was already highly uncertain at the time of their launch? A better approach is to design the framework conditions for this transition in a technologically neutral way: establish a stable regulatory framework, support innovation, ensure a workable emissions trading system (ETS), invest in grids and energy infrastructure, diversify gas supply routes, and apply clear and achievable definitions of what constitutes a “green investment.” With sufficient flexibility, pragmatism, and openness, and without ideological taboos, industry itself will accelerate the greening process.

In short, the European Union must communicate with honesty and clarity. It should not make promises that are unlikely to be fulfilled, nor present major challenges for businesses and citizens as if they were effortless opportunities. Credibility is built not through optimistic rhetoric, but through candour about the challenges ahead and confidence in Europe’s ability to overcome them.



Europe can once again provide a sense of grip

I remain firmly convinced that the European Union can once again give its citizens a sense of grip. We need not resign ourselves to repeated episodes of strategic vulnerability, such as the trade conflict with Trump. But this will require Europe to act decisively.

At the same time, we should not lose sight of the fact that Europe remains one of the best places in the world to live. Yet a striking paradox surrounds the European Union: many citizens value the quality of life it provides while remaining deeply critical of the Union itself. This persistent sense of declinism (i.e., the belief that Europe is in irreversible decline despite its enduring strengths) appears to be a distinctly European phenomenon. Ultimately, Europe has long been haunted by narratives of decline. During the First World War, Oswald Spengler wrote *The Decline of the West*, convinced that European civilisation had entered its final phase. At the outbreak of the Second World War, Stefan Zweig looked back with melancholy in *The World of Yesterday* on a Europe that had seemingly been lost forever — much as many today nostalgically recall the prosperity that preceded the global financial crisis. In *The Continent Without Qualities*, Peter Sloterdijk rejects both the naïve optimism of uncritical Europhiles and the fatalism of those who believe the European Union is destined to collapse. Instead, he argues for a Europe that consciously embraces its history and draws on its values as a source of inspiration and confidence for the future.

As for the war in Ukraine, it may well be that Russia is more trapped in a grapple than the European Union. Putin did not launch the invasion because he had suddenly come to believe that Ukraine belonged to a pan-Russian empire; he had espoused that view for many years. Rather, he acted because he believed there would be little effective resistance: that NATO was “brain-dead”, that the United States would not decisively intervene, and, above all, that the European Union would prove incapable of mounting a united and sustained response. Those assumptions have largely been proven wrong. What was expected to be a swift campaign culminating in the capture of Kyiv within days has instead become a costly war of attrition. After four years of fighting, with estimates ranging from 280,000 to more than 500,000 Russian military deaths and well over a million casualties, Russia has made only limited territorial gains beyond parts of the Donbas. This is despite extensive military support from North Korea, Iran, and, to a lesser extent, China.

This is primarily due to the efforts of extraordinarily courageous Ukrainians. This would nevertheless have never been possible without European support. Such support now amounts to more than €200 billion, with a further €90 billion foreseen for 2026 and 2027. This is almost twice as much as the assistance received by all of Europe under the Marshall Plan after the Second World War. Moreover, Russian assets remain frozen and therefore inaccessible. Simply put, Putin had not anticipated this level of determination. Nor had he foreseen that his war would lead to Finland and Sweden joining NATO, and that Europe would so significantly step up its defence efforts.



In the United States, it increasingly appears that Donald Trump has trapped not Europe, but his own country in a grapple. His economic policies have not led to lower inflation; on the contrary, import tariffs have mainly resulted in higher prices in shops, as well as chaos and uncertainty. Industrial employment has also declined. While economic growth in the EU may be lower than in the United States, so too are debt and inflation. Moreover, the benefits of economic growth are more strongly redistributed in Europe than in the United States. Trump's deportation policies, meanwhile, created labour shortages in key sectors, driving up labour costs and thereby adding further inflationary pressure. On top of this comes a foreign policy so erratic that he has alienated almost all Western allies, with perhaps Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán as the only exceptions. Even if, in the short term, Trump's approach projects an image of decisiveness, it will weaken the United States in the long term, both in its international standing and in its credibility. Trump is the myth of the strong leader, as Oxford professor Archie Brown put it in his book under the same name.

When Trump turns his attention to Europe, it is precisely because of the European Union's economic weight. The European Union exports more goods to the United States than it imports, even if Trump has repeatedly portrayed that trade imbalance as evidence of an unfair relationship. More broadly, he has often been critical of the European Union, in which 27 member states act collectively, thereby increasing their bargaining power. This helps explain his preference for dealing with European states bilaterally and his broader divide-and-rule approach, which has at times included expressions of support for nationalist and far-right political movements in Europe.

It is also clear that the European project remains highly attractive to countries that are not part of it. Around a dozen countries are currently knocking on our door to join. This stands in stark contrast to developments elsewhere. Donald Trump uses expansionist rhetoric towards Canada, Greenland, Venezuela, Colombia, and Cuba. Vladimir Putin is waging war to incorporate Ukraine into his vision of a greater Russian empire. China is escalating tensions with Taiwan and, in line with the One China policy, considers the island an integral part of its territory. In contrast stands the European Union, which does not threaten or coerce candidate countries, but asks them to implement reforms and meet the Copenhagen Criteria. The contrast could hardly be greater. And if one were to ask the British today what they think of Brexit, the answer might well be very different from what it was in 2016. Recent YouGov polling suggests that 56 per cent of Britons now see Brexit as a mistake.

For its own citizens too, the European Union remains remarkably attractive. It is a vast economic market of 450 million consumers and a powerful labour market of highly educated workers. Living standards and quality of life are among the highest in the world, and healthcare is of the highest quality. The average European lives four years longer than the average American. That says something about life on both sides



of the Atlantic. One in five of the world's top universities is in the EU. Europe is also the most egalitarian continent, where the gap between rich and poor remains relatively limited. Consumers benefit from strong protections, and Europe is generally a safe place to live: of the thirty most peaceful countries in the world, eighteen are EU member states. European citizens also hold substantial savings that can still be mobilised. According to Eurobarometer, trust in the EU is high, and the number of people who see the Union as an advantage continues to grow. At the same time, concrete steps are being taken towards a stronger Europe. Joint European borrowing was still taboo only a few years ago, but that taboo has now been broken: first with loans for the European recovery fund after the coronavirus crisis, and again at the end of 2025 to continue supporting Ukraine. What once seemed politically impossible, enhanced cooperation, has now become reality.

If we succeed in strengthening Europe, we can once again put the United States in a position where it has to choose Europe, rather than passively absorbing whatever comes out of the White House. The Republican Party itself is deeply divided. One wing is preoccupied with a culture war, while the other is primarily concerned with restoring America's economic strength. In the long run, these two agendas are difficult to reconcile. If Trump were to move beyond his culture war against Europe, the European Union could once again become America's closest ally in addressing the strategic challenge posed by China.

If we succeed in strengthening Europe, we can once again position ourselves in relation to the United States, where we can choose whether to agree with them or not, rather than passively accepting whatever comes out of the White House. The Republican Party itself is deeply divided. One wing is preoccupied with a culture war, while the other is primarily concerned with restoring America's economic strength. In the long run, these two agendas are difficult to reconcile. If Trump were to move beyond his culture war against Europe, the European Union could once again become America's closest ally in addressing the strategic challenge posed by China.

After all, the greatest threat to the United States is not Europe but China, an expansionist power economically, politically, and geopolitically. Jürgen Habermas rightly stated at a colloquium on Western democracies in Munich (November 2025) that China seeks to replace the liberal global trade order with a Sino-centric world order. A worldview in which China sees itself as the central and leading country, to which other states must align themselves to varying degrees. Towards this end, China dumps subsidised products onto Western markets so as to disrupt them, creating strategic dependencies through the Belt and Road Initiative, the New Silk Road, building alliances with BRICS countries, and establishing so-called "special economic zones" worldwide exclusively for Chinese companies, which, thereafter, such zones serve to offload subsidised overproduction elsewhere. Accordingly, China views trade not merely as an economic instrument, but as a means of acquiring power, security, and geopolitical influence. It invests strategically in ports and critical



infrastructure, including in Europe, thereby expanding its geostrategic leverage. Europe and the United States have every reason to form a strong alliance in addressing the challenge posed by China. Such a partnership would strengthen both American prosperity and Western security. But Europe must first be strong enough to present the United States with that choice. If we fail to do so, both sides of the Atlantic will ultimately pay the price.



Final Thought

At the beginning of 2026, I had a conversation with Vitali Klitschko, the well-known mayor of Kyiv and former world heavyweight boxing champion. The man is over two metres tall. During our conversation, he showed me his enormous hands. “With each of these fingers I have hurt my opponents, but only by turning them into a fist have I been able to knock out more than forty opponents,” he said. “That is what we must do now. Ukraine on its own is just a finger; together with Europe, we make a fist.” The image has stuck with me.

Only if Europe uses its five fingers to form a fist can it regain its place in the world and once again protect its people. The military finger: building a genuine European defence capacity, and eventually a European army. The economic finger: making our Rhineland model fit for the future. The cultural finger: actively projecting a confident European identity. The governance finger: making Europe more decisive through internal reform. And the international finger: seeking new partners while deepening cooperation with like-minded allies.

In this way, Europe, under the leadership of a courageous political centre, can once again provide its citizens with a sense of grip and win back the trust of the “wall people”. I believe this is within our reach. But it requires courage: the courage to stop ignoring the cracks in both the internal and external walls of the European Union and to begin repairing them. To break down the internal walls that divide us, while strengthening the external walls that protect us. The problem is not that we do not know what needs to be done. The plans have been on the table for years. What has been lacking is the political courage to act and to make difficult choices. That moment has now arrived. Pressure is mounting simultaneously from the West, the East, and from within. More than ever, the responsibility rests with the political centre and establishment parties. We must lead a revolution of common sense: to show leadership, make the necessary choices, and free Europeans from this grapple by restoring direction, security, confidence, and a renewed sense of grip over our shared future.



About the author

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