



SPECIAL ISSUE: RESHAPING EUROPE IN AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY

VOLUME 22 ISSUE 4 December 2025

QUARTERLY ELECTRONIC NEWSLETTER

ISSN (online): 2421-8111

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**CYPRUS CENTER FOR EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
University of Nicosia**

1993-2025 THIRTY-TWO YEARS OF POLICY FORMULATION AND ANALYSIS

RESHAPING EUROPE IN AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY



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This Special Issue entitled “RESHAPING EUROPE IN AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY” has been prompted by the Cypriot Pre-Presidency Conference that was held on October 30–31, 2025 at the University of Nicosia and was co-organized by the Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs (CCEIA), the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) and the Department of Politics and Governance of the University of Nicosia. The conference, which brought together high-level participants in Nicosia to discuss the priorities of the Cypriot Presidency of the EU Council as well as the pressing challenges facing the Union, was supported by the EU, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Cyprus, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), and the Cyprus Forum.

This conference convened at a pivotal moment for Europe and the international community. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the ongoing war have not only brought immense human suffering but have also been testing the foundations of the international order. At the same time, developments in Gaza and the broader Middle East have generated deep concerns about future prospects in this extremely volatile region.

The dynamics in the relations between the United States, the EU and Russia remain central to global affairs. We think that with pragmatism challenges can be addressed effectively and in ways that European security and prosperity are enhanced.

Holding this Conference in Cyprus was particularly meaningful. Cyprus remains the only Member State of the EU with 37% of its territory under Turkish occupation since 1974. Yet, developments related to Cyprus have not always received the attention they deserve. It is regrettable that negotiations for addressing the problem have often focused primarily on the bicultural dimension of the problem, neglecting its broader European and international aspects, including the continued occupation and the challenges of hybrid threats. Certainly, this issue cannot be ignored. And the politics and practices of double standards cannot continue.

The conference was structured around a set of thematic panels that explored key issues on the European agenda. In his Keynote Address Deputy Minister Nicholas Ioannides outlined the main priorities of the upcoming Cypriot Presidency of the Council of the EU, placing particular emphasis on security, migration and the need to reinforce European cohesion. He stressed that Cyprus, situated at the front line of developments in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean, can serve as a reliable partner.

The first plenary session focused on TEPSA's recommendations for the Trio Presidency of Poland, Denmark and Cyprus, highlighting that the Presidency is not merely a procedural rotation but an opportunity to generate tangible added value. The discussion underscored the importance of clear political priorities and effective coordination at a time marked by multiple and interrelated challenges. The second session examined whether the EU can act as a global power, with speakers noting the constraints imposed by structural and institutional limitations and stressing the need for greater strategic autonomy and more effective collective decision-making. This was followed by a session on European security, where concerns were raised about double standards in the Union's external actions, particularly the contrast between its firm stance toward Russia and its tolerance of Turkey's actions; an asymmetry seen as undermining credibility and cohesion.

The debate then turned to enlargement, drawing attention to the geopolitical significance of maintaining the credibility of the European process for the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. At the same time, it should be noted that the potential challenges of a new enlargement round as well as the possible negative side effects were not addressed comprehensively.

A subsequent session on democracy and the role of European citizens highlighted growing worry about the rise of far-right parties and the widening gap between citizens and political institutions, with speakers emphasizing the need to rebuild trust and enhance engagement. The focus then moved to the socioeconomic paradigm of the Union, where speakers stressed the urgency of strengthening social cohesion, promoting innovation and confronting demographic challenges, arguing that Europe must better integrate economic policy, demographic sustainability and technological development.

The final session addressed energy policy, the green transition and the Union's global relevance. It was argued that success in this domain depends on targeted investment, adequate infrastructure and practical solidarity among member states and that the transition must be implemented in a way that avoids negative social and economic repercussions.

At the same time, we cannot overlook the economic realities that shape the daily lives of the citizens of the EU and particularly the younger generations. Across Europe, including Cyprus, young people continue to face significant socioeconomic constraints. The EU should reconcile its socioeconomic paradigm with its declared objectives so that the trust and the commitment to the European project are enhanced. This is particularly important given that despite its problems, most people in the world today would prefer to live in the EU.

The discussions throughout the Conference revealed a broader atmosphere of concern about the future of the EU. A recurring theme was the tension between the aspirations of the Union and the limits imposed by its institutional design and available resources. The EU now operates in a strategic environment for which it was not originally created and is expected to deliver more than ever before. Several speakers stressed that the Union was built to promote cooperation and legal order rather than traditional power projection. These foundations remain valuable, yet they are strained by geopolitical pressure, strategic competition and rapid global change. It was also noted that progress requires clear priorities, realistic planning and consistent implementation, so that the EU can meet the demands of the present while safeguarding the legitimacy of the European project.

PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES AHEAD OF CYPRUS PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EU IN 2026*



*Nicholas A. Ioannides
Deputy Minister of Migration and International Protection*

Dear Mr Cloos, (Secretary General, TEPSA)
Professor Theophanous, (Professor and President, Cyprus Center for European and International Affairs)
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am distinctly honoured to join you today, here in Nicosia, for this important and timely conference, just two months before Cyprus assumes the Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

First allow me to extend heartfelt thanks to the TEPSA network for the initiative and for the invitation. This is a pertinent opportunity for an open exchange on the prospects and challenges ahead of the Cyprus Presidency – a milestone ahead of us. And above all, it is an opportunity to hear your views and expectations.

We are truly appreciative for TEPSA's work over the years. Your long-standing commitment to research and policy analysis that supports better governance and stronger European cooperation is invaluable. Particularly at this moment in time, when the European Union faces complex and evolving challenges.

I have read your recommendations for our incoming Presidency with great interest. They touch upon an array of key issues that will indeed be at the heart of our Presidency: Migration, strengthening the Union's resilience, as well as its role and engagement with this region, promoting competitiveness, and ensuring a well-balanced and strategic multiannual financial framework, that leaves no Member State or citizen behind.

* Keynote Address at the TEPSA Cypriot Pre-Presidency Conference "Reshaping Europe in an Age of Uncertainty", October 30-31, 2025.

These insights are both timely and relevant, and I can assure you they will feed into our ongoing reflection and preparations for the months ahead.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

For six months, Cyprus will be the voice of the 27 member states of the Union, representing them and negotiating on their behalf, with the responsibility to help shape a stronger, safer, more strategic Union. An Autonomous Union.

As we embark on this assignment, we are preparing methodically, intensively and with determination to deliver on an ambitious and results-oriented Presidency.

In a complex geopolitical landscape, predictable only in its unpredictability, we have a responsibility to reset. Repower and restrengthen the Union. The Russian aggression against Ukraine has put at the forefront the urgent need for a more autonomous Union on all fronts – from security and defence, to competitiveness, and trade.

Unequivocal, steadfast support to Ukraine will continue during our Presidency. On all fronts. It is a litmus test for the EU, for Europe. And it is about our security architecture.

The effort is to achieve greater strategic autonomy, while navigating the challenges of balancing competing interests and security threats.

And so, this is a moment of responsibility.

But above all, it is a moment of great opportunity.

And Cyprus will seize it, determined to bring results that address the challenges we face. That our citizens face. We will assume it as the Union's last member state under occupation, and, at the same time, as a country that is outward-looking, with a strong, resilient economy.

We are also taking over the Presidency as a country that is an integral part of the Middle East. A reliable, stable, predictable partner, in its immediate region and beyond. A bridge.

Cyprus has fully embraced its geography as an indispensable component, and asset in its foreign policy. From fulfilling our moral obligation to the region and delivering the Amalthea maritime corridor for the provision of aid to alleviate the tragic humanitarian situation, to acting as an evacuation hub during conflicts in Sudan and the Middle East.

Our proximity to this region brings acute awareness of the stakes. We know all too well that European security is inextricably linked to its Southern Neighborhood. Due to shared challenges like terrorism, migration and regional instability.

During the Cyprus Presidency we will therefore set as a priority the importance of the EU engaging more. Investing more in this region. Not only due to proximity, and our excellent relations, but also because this is a region of vital geostrategic importance for Europe.

Our Presidency will offer not only political will, but also regional access, and practical tools, interconnectivity, humanitarian facilitation, and diplomatic capital. Stemming from our longstanding historical ties with countries of the region, and the cooperation mechanisms we have built with them.

The Cyprus Presidency will coincide with the implementation of the Pact for the Mediterranean. A new strategy to strengthen relations with Southern Mediterranean partners, focusing on shared challenges and mutual interests. Launched on the 16th of October 2025, the Pact aims to create a connected, prosperous, and secure "Common Mediterranean Space" through concrete initiatives in areas like clean energy, digital innovation, economic growth, migration management, and security.

We recently had the pleasure of welcoming Commissioner Dubravka Šuica to Cyprus for the second time, to whom we reiterated our readiness and willingness to contribute actively to the implementation of the Pact. In this respect, we welcome the inclusion of the establishment of a Regional Aerial Firefighting Hub in Cyprus among the projects of the new Pact. And we stand ready to play a part in the Pact's implementation by promoting such projects with regional focus, as tangible examples of the Pact in action.

At the same time, we intend to host a high-level meeting in Cyprus during our Presidency, bringing together the EU27, EU institutions, and leaders from the Southern Neighbourhood, for a frank and ambitious dialogue on shared challenges and strategic interests.

The first-ever EU–Gulf Cooperation Council Summit, held last year (October 2024), marked a significant milestone in the growing political ties and deepening cooperation between our two blocs. Cooperation that is essential for addressing both regional and global challenges. Building on the outcomes of that Summit, we will work to further strengthen and expand the EU's engagement with the Gulf region, and look forward to the second EU-GCC Summit in Saudi Arabia in 2026.

The situation in the region is evolving rapidly. President Trump's plan has offered a renewed hope for a lasting peace in the Middle East. We have warmly welcomed the US President's leadership, and supported his plan, sharing the vision for regional peace, stability and prosperity. Our President participated in the historic ceremony in Sharm El-Sheikh, reaffirming Cyprus' key role in the region. The agreement on the initial phase presents a promising opportunity for the region as a whole and unlocks great potential. But challenges still remain.

The EU is uniquely positioned to play a pivotal role in this sensitive situation and contribute to the comprehensive plan aimed at stabilising the region. To go from being a payer to a strategic player.

Cyprus, as the closest EU Member State to Gaza and a trusted partner of the United States, Israel, and Arab countries, has put together a six-point proposal offering practical, security-anchored, and humanitarian/ post-conflict recovery contributions to support the implementation of President Trump's 20-Point Gaza Peace Plan. The proposal was presented by President Christodoulides at the October European Council last week. Its role aspires to complement regional and international efforts and help the EU elevate from donor status to strategically operational engagement.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Turning to the EU's eastern borders, we underline that Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine is not just a regional issue. It's a European one.

Cyprus, itself still experiencing the consequences of foreign aggression and illegal occupation, stands in full solidarity with Ukraine. Our historical experience strengthens our resolve to support Ukraine in its struggle to defend its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the principles of international law.

Over the course of our Presidency, we will ensure continued and unwavering political, economic, military, energy, financial and humanitarian support for Ukraine, for as long as it takes, and within the broader objectives of promoting peace, security, stability, good governance and prosperity in the eastern neighbourhood.

Cyprus will make enlargement a key priority of its Presidency, promoting it as a geostrategic investment that expands the EU's space of security and stability. Our Presidency will strive to advance the enlargement agenda, actively supporting the candidate countries on their path to accession, affirming that the enlargement process continues to be merit-based and depends on the objective progress made by each of the partners.

We stand ready to support Ukraine and Moldova in their European path, in a pragmatic and principled manner.

The enlargement of the EU towards the Western Balkans is a geopolitical necessity and a promise of peace, stability and prosperity. Cyprus will continue to drive the enlargement agenda forward and to actively support the Western Balkans on their path to accession, including during its Presidency.

We support strengthening our relationship with the UK, a like-minded partner, especially in the current geopolitical context. During the EU-UK Summit in May, the EU and UK leaders welcomed a renewed agenda for EU-UK cooperation, which covers commitments across various areas. We intend to build on this momentum and promote deeper bilateral cooperation between the EU and the UK.

Same goes for our vital strategic ally, the US. We support a strong and comprehensive EU- US partnership.

Our security environment continues to evolve rapidly, and the European Union is facing an increasingly complex and hostile security environment in the eastern and south eastern periphery. We are among the constant advocates of decisively enhancing EU Strategic Autonomy. For us, the EU's Strategic Autonomy is the capacity of the EU to reinforce its strategic footprint in the global arena, and assume a more active and operational role in global affairs.

We intend to continue the focus on strengthening European common defence readiness and security during our upcoming Presidency, by promoting defence innovation, developing the EU's defence industry production capacity, and advancing the integration of the EU defence market.

Cyprus will also work to advance maritime security by supporting the implementation of the EU Maritime Security Strategy. The focus will be on protecting critical sea routes and boosting situational awareness.

In parallel, the Presidency will enhance EU crisis preparedness and humanitarian response. Drawing on Cyprus' experience, it will promote best practices and support faster, more coordinated EU action in response to natural and humanitarian crises.

The pandemic and subsequent unprecedented energy crisis demonstrated the need to take decisive action to safeguard and boost Europe's competitiveness and resilience.

Strengthening EU competitiveness and economic prosperity will be at the core of our Presidency's goals. We will work towards addressing fragmentation via single market integration, regulatory simplification and capital investment deepening.

Reducing administrative burden and rationalising reporting requirements, which undermine investment capacity and business innovation, especially for SMEs, will substantially contribute to strengthening the EU competitiveness.

The new Multiannual Financial Framework must reflect the strategic vision and priorities of the EU for a stronger, strategically autonomous and more competitive Union. In this respect, we will work closely with the European Parliament, the Commission and all Member States, to shape a balanced framework.

It is crucial for the EU to ensure that the new MFF effectively delivers on the emerging priorities, particularly in the areas of competitiveness, defence and security while safeguarding Treaty-based policies. It is also important that its architecture will enable the next MFF to respond quickly and effectively to unforeseen crises, including natural disasters or evolving geopolitical tensions, while also accommodating future enlargements.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Cyprus will prioritise a coordinated and effective approach to migration and border management during its Presidency. We view migration as a shared European responsibility. One that demands coherence, solidarity, and collective effort. In this context, we consider the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum to be an indispensable step forward. A framework that would allow us to balance its many dimensions and move closer to a truly common and comprehensive European approach.

The Pact did not emerge overnight. It is the result of a long and demanding journey. We've come a long way to reach this point, and our task now is to walk the final stretch together, by bridging the remaining differences among Member States and ensuring the Pact's orderly, timely, and effective implementation.

Supporting full implementation of the Pact by June 2026, Cyprus will emphasise solidarity, partnerships with third countries, and improved return procedures through return hubs and voluntary return programmes. It is also worth mentioning that an Informal Ministerial Conference on the Pact will be hosted in Cyprus to mark the start of its implementation.

Allow me a few more remarks on the Pact: At its core, the Pact rests on the timeless principles of international and European law. Yet, we must be able to respond to realities before us. This requires tools that are firm but fair, proportionate yet humane. In this spirit, it is clarified that the concept of “Return Hubs” does not imply the outsourcing of asylum procedures to third countries. Rather, it concerns only those individuals who no longer have a legal right to remain within the Union.

Furthermore, the Pact places particular emphasis on voluntary returns, an approach that Cyprus fully supports, as evinced by the successful operation of its Assisted Voluntary Return programme. At the same time, it is clear that when an individual no longer has a legal right to remain in EU territory, the Union must also be equipped with alternative, lawful measures to address such cases.

In Cyprus, this balanced approach is reflected in our own practice. Mechanisms have been established to facilitate voluntary returns, and indeed, over the last months, around 4,000 Syrians have chosen to return voluntarily. This is not a development unique to Cyprus, but part of a broader regional trend, as documented in UNHCR’s reports, showing that many Syrians are opting to return home from a number of countries across the region.

Looking ahead, Cyprus fully shares the view that legislative progress must advance with determination, but never at the expense of legality, quality, or the fundamental values that define our Union. We must also recognise that Europe continues to face intense migratory pressures that test our asylum systems and infrastructure.

Finally, whereas narratives related to the “instrumentalisation” of migration must be approached with caution and balance, Cyprus underlines that such phenomena are driven by the actions of certain state and non-state actors. Tackling criminal smuggling networks decisively, and within the bounds of law remains indispensable to a balanced, humane, and effective European migration policy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We remain committed to taking forward the EU’s sustainability agenda during our Presidency, focusing on water resilience.

Europe has recognised the need to ensure water security and be prepared for water-related disasters. That is why the European Commission has recently developed a water resilience strategy to help the EU improve the way we manage water.

We note with keen interest the recommendation of the TEPSA network for a “*Water Pact for the Mediterranean*” bringing together riparian and coastal states to share data, coordinate basin management and finance desalination technologies.

We recognize that the challenges of desertification, drought, and water scarcity require a coordinated European response, and thus we need to ensure that these issues receive the attention they deserve.

And as a final point, promoting affordable housing as a fundamental social right and a cornerstone of social cohesion in Europe, will remain central to our efforts to deliver more for our citizen, during our term. Cyprus welcomes the European Affordable Housing Plan and remains committed to take this work forward during its Presidency. To this end, we will host an Informal Ministerial Meeting on Housing.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As the inherited agenda currently stands, the Cyprus Presidency is expected to negotiate approximately 330 legislative files. Around 50% of these will be new legislative proposals.

Our Presidency calendar includes a total of 52 formal high-level meetings, to take place in Brussels, Luxembourg, and Cameroon, 26 informal high-level meetings to be hosted in Cyprus.

In total, 258 informal meetings are planned to take place across Cyprus.

A logistical challenge that we have worked on methodically as a Government, with a clear direction from President Christodoulides: That this is a national mission, and a top priority. An opportunity to enhance our role as a reliable and constructive member state.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

During our Presidency we intend to advance the European agenda in a tangible, results-oriented manner, delivering real benefits to European citizens. In a challenging global context, we undertake this responsibility in a spirit of sincere cooperation. Determined to decisively drive the European priorities forward, deeply committed to the European project, to EU values, and to international and EU law.

We count on your support, ideas and collaboration as we gear up for our Presidency.

Thank you.

RESHAPING EUROPE IN AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY: HOW CAN THE EU ADAPT WITHOUT LOSING ITS DNA?



*Jim Cloos
Secretary-General, TEPSA*

The Cyprus Presidency of the Council of the Union comes at a grim time. The challenges abound, as we discussed during the TEPSA Pre-Presidency Conference in Nicosia on 30 and 31 October 2025. This is a time when all EU institutions and the Member States must actively work together. The article below is a scene-setter presenting the global picture.

Introduction: The Challenges of Our Time

We live in an age of uncertainty. The old paradigms that once governed international relations (multilateralism, open trade, and rules-based cooperation) are crumbling. Raw power politics is replacing diplomacy, and liberal democracies are under siege from polarisation and extremism. For the European Union (EU), these shifts pose an existential threat. The EU's very DNA, its commitment to rules, values, and peaceful cooperation, is being called into question. At the same time, Europe faces ever more complex internal policy challenges: restoring competitiveness, navigating global technological disruption, implementing the Green Deal, managing migration, strengthening security and defence. It must do so while its own system of democracy and governance is under siege.

The Three Pillars of Reshaping Europe

To navigate this era of uncertainty, the EU must embrace three fundamental prerequisites: a new frame of mind, a voluntarist method, and better governance.

1. A New Frame of Mind: Realism, Balance, and Self-Awareness

Understanding the World as It Is

Europe must confront the world as it is, not as it dreams it to be. The assumptions that shaped EU policymaking since the 1990s, with America as a reliable protector, China as a benign partner, globalisation as a rising tide,

are no longer valid. Understanding this reality requires clarity about Europe's place in today's geopolitical chessboard.

Multilateral institutions are weakening, and geopolitical competition is intensifying. The rules-based order is no longer a given; power politics now dominates. Europe must recognise this shift and adapt its strategies accordingly.

Europe's Place on the Global Chessboard

Central to this adaptation is Europe's relationship with the United States, which in turn has a major impact on Europe's approach to China, the Middle East, and beyond. The EU must strike a balance: maintaining transatlantic ties while asserting its own strategic interests and autonomy. Europe must emancipate from an America that so aggressively promotes 'America first.'

Balancing Interests and Values

A new mindset also means a better balance between interests and values. Europe should not abandon its principles, but it must stop believing that preaching or sanction threats alone can reshape other societies. Africa is drifting away partly because it resents moralising. China will not adopt European governance models under pressure. Europe should defend its values positively—through example, partnership, and influence, while developing a dose of Realpolitik. If Europeans fail to defend their interests, they will lose both influence and values.

2. A Voluntarist Method: Learning from Crises and Strengthening Resilience

From Crisis to Opportunity

Since 2008, the EU has transformed not through treaty changes, but through crisis management. The financial crisis, the migration crisis, Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine crisis have all forced the EU to adapt. Each challenge has led to deeper integration, driven by the European Council. This resilience is commendable, but it has been reactive and improvisational.

Systematic Analysis and Strategic Planning

The EU must shift from improvisation to careful planning and foresight. This requires a systematic and rigorous analysis of Europe's weaknesses and strengths:

Weaknesses: Why is the Single Market incomplete, particularly in services? Why is Europe losing the digital race? Why does it suffer from labor productivity gaps? How did it become so dependent on Russian energy and Chinese medicines? Why is it powerless in the Middle East?

Strengths: Europe still remains a regulatory power. The "Brussels effect" influences global standards even though it is weakening. Europe's market is

indispensable to China, and its research programs attract outside partners. Its social model and democratic values, despite criticism, remain a beacon. The EU is a trading superpower, a regulatory superpower, and a social model admired around the world. These assets can and must be leveraged more effectively. The EU must stop pursuing a policy of renunciation vis-à-vis Trump's pressures and Chinese assertiveness.

Roadmaps for the Future

Based on this analysis, the EU should develop clear roadmaps for its major policies. Regulation, for instance, is essential, but it must be smart, agile, and innovation-friendly. Shielding the Green Deal against diluted by economic pressures and political resistance is essential; but at the same time the EU needs simplifying regulation, ensuring faire burden-sharing, and leveraging private finance. In the digital area, regulating is necessary but not enough. Europe must create more of its own infrastructure and software. In view of the Russian threat and the attitude of the Trump administration Europe needs its own defence industry and a redefinition of its defence policy. The enlargement file has a geopolitical and an existential angle (effect on the internal functioning of the EU). Finding the right balance is key.

3. Better Governance: Unity, Efficiency, and Accountability

The final prerequisite is better governance. The EU must improve its working methods, strengthen coordination between the EU and national levels, and "federalise" policies where necessary, particularly in defence, economic security, and strategic investment. Externally, it needs a more coherent representation. The question "who speaks for Europe?" cannot remain unresolved. Presence in multilateral institutions should shift from a quantitative logic (counting seats) to a qualitative one (delivering influence).

Overcoming Fragmentation

The EU's greatest strength, its diversity, can also be its greatest weakness. Decision-making is complicated. Reconciling diversity and effectiveness requests a sound multi-level governance approach creating trust between the various players.

Financing the Future

The EU's ambitions require unprecedented investment. The next Multiannual Financial Framework (2028-2034) must reflect this reality. Creative financing, including new autonomous revenue sources and strategic public-private partnerships, will be essential. So is a fully completed Capital Markets Union.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

The EU stands at a crossroads. It can either cling to the past and risk irrelevance or embrace change while preserving its core values. Strategic autonomy is not about turning inward; it is about empowering Europe to act.

This requires:

1. A realistic worldview: balancing ideals with interests.
2. A proactive method: learning from crises and planning systematically.
3. Better governance: uniting member states, streamlining decision-making, and financing the future.

The stakes could not be higher. If Europe fails to adapt, it risks losing its influence, its prosperity, and its identity. But if it succeeds, it can emerge stronger, more resilient, and more united than ever before.

The choice is ours. The time to act is now.

MY CHRISTIAN DEMOCRATIC PERSPECTIVE OF EUROPE



*Constantinos Petrides
Former Minister of Finance*

When I was a student, Cyprus was still struggling to join the European Union. For us, Europe meant hope, peace, dignity, opportunity, and freedom through cooperation. I later studied the EU academically, served as one of the first Cypriot officials in the European Commission, and eventually sat as a minister in the Councils of Ecofin, Eurogroup, and Justice and Home Affairs.

I remain a believer in the European project. But belief demands honesty.

The European Union was not born from bureaucracy. Its Christian-democratic founders—Schuman, Adenauer, De Gasperi—emerged from the ruins of totalitarianism with a clear vision: free markets, human dignity, individual responsibility, and solidarity. They believed that economic freedom, interdependence, and limited government were the surest foundations of lasting peace. That was Europe's original socioeconomic paradigm.

Somewhere along the way, we drifted.

In the name of integration, Europe moved steadily from coordination to centralisation—and finally to over-centralisation. More than 100,000 legislative acts now govern almost every aspect of daily life. Some of these rules have become symbols of excess, from the curvature of bananas to technical minutiae of product design. What began as coordination has evolved into intrusion.

Power has migrated from national democracies to distant institutions, often beyond meaningful democratic accountability. While some transfers made sense—trade, competition, certain cross-border standards—many others did not. The principle of subsidiarity, that decisions should be taken as close as possible to the citizen, has been hollowed out. Citizens feel it. They feel remote from decisions that shape their lives. And when accountability disappears, populism appears.

The same reflex that over-centralises governance also hampers Europe's economy.

Europe never managed to catch up with the US and other parts of the world are emerging more competitive. Over regulation is one answer. From digital finance to artificial intelligence and biotechnology, Europe's response to novelty is often immediate restriction rather than strategic encouragement.

The result is predictable. Investment migrates and slows. Europe increasingly imports technologies it could have pioneered itself, we are even subsidising China with public green transition programs. One saying captures the diagnosis with accuracy: the United States innovates, China copies, and Europe regulates.

Subsidies proliferate, yet too few scale-ups survive. Capital markets remain fragmented. The single market for services, digital activity, and finance is still unfinished. Instead, fiscal tools absorb billions while structural barriers persist.

Environmental ambition has layered further strain on competitiveness. Noble in intention, the Green transition risks becoming economically self-defeating when pursued without global alignment or proportionality. Households and businesses are expected to carry staggering costs in a world where competitors follow no comparable path.

Then there is the social imbalance. Europe gradually confused protection with dependency. Welfare systems meant to empower too often trap citizens in permanent reliance. But the problem goes deeper: the EU is progressively intervening in the very heart of national social protection systems—labour law, collective agreements, minimum wages, and core welfare. At the same time, advocating increased taxes and in times even tax harmonisation to subsidise deficits, something that would be catastrophic for countries like Cyprus. Many issues should remain the responsibility of national democracies, not distant Brussels directives.

At the same time, in the name of pluralism, openness, and diversity—values that are noble in themselves—Europe has too often adopted policies that weaken identity and social cohesion. Instead of strengthening integration, these choices have sometimes produced fragmentation, cultural insecurity, and parallel societies. This vacuum of confidence has been exploited skilfully by populist movements, who promise protection where institutions appear hesitant to defend common norms. Once again, it is not Europe's values that citizens reject—but Europe's inability to protect them.

Europe's migration policy lost public credibility—and did so in a profoundly unfair way. Southern European states were left structurally exposed, leading to a two speed Europe. The Dublin system was never meaningfully endorsed by the peoples most affected by it, particularly in the South. Citizens never voted to shoulder a disproportionate burden. Good intentions replaced sound

governance. Entry became easy; return became almost impossible. As a minister responsible for migration, I witnessed how legal complexity served smugglers better than the law-abiding. The consequences are now visible in social cohesion, public safety, housing, and education. Political extremism flourishes because they feel institutions no longer protect them fairly.

Security, in fact, sits at the heart of the social contract. As Maslow taught, safety follows immediately after survival. Yet Europe has devoted enormous regulatory energy to product labels and technical standards while neglecting the first duty of any political order: protecting people, borders, and property. Defence, deterrence, and internal security became afterthoughts.

Europe's crisis is therefore not merely economic, institutional, or social. It is existential.

We have lost balance—and with it, a sense of purpose.

The answer to today's question, from my Christian-democratic perspective, is not found in more slogans, centralisation, or technocratic paternalism. Europe does not need to be reinvented. It needs to remember why it was built.

RESHAPING EUROPEAN ENERGY IN AN AGE OF GLOBAL UNCERTAINTY



*Charles Ellinas
Councilor
Atlantic Council*

Introduction

Europe is striving to progress its Green Deal, but it is facing significant headwinds. Lacklustre economic growth, high energy prices, excessive regulation and declining industrial competitiveness have thrown its energy transition, affordability and security into sharp focus. Balancing short-term economic growth and stability with long-term sustainability presents a complex puzzle for policymakers and Europe is struggling to find the right balance.

President Trump's trade policies, the EU-US trade deal and tariffs are hurting European industry, as is Trump's energy strategy that is centred around US energy dominance.

Lack of cohesion within the EU and its regulation-driven system are in danger of leaving Europe sidelined at a time when US and China are resetting global trade rules and their growing rivalry is ushering in an age of global uncertainty. Europe must sort out its internal divisions and reshape its economy, but also energy -implement Draghi- if it is to remain relevant at the world stage.

Europe turns to US LNG

The US strategy for the EU and the wider region is to stop all dependence on Russian gas and energy, and replace it by US LNG and energy.

Europe agreed in October to phase-out all Russian pipeline gas and LNG imports, with a full ban to take effect by the end of 2027.

In addition, in July, the EU committed to importing up to \$750 billion worth of US energy products, primarily LNG, by 2028. This commitment was part of a larger trade and tariffs agreement between EU and US, intended to boost energy security by replacing Russian energy imports.

But given the fraught EU-US political relationship, this brings with it the risk of getting rid of one energy dependency and creating another.

Challenges

Even though the share of renewables in EU's power generation now exceeds 50%, Europe is experiencing some harsh reality checks:

- Electricity prices are too high – wholesale electricity prices in the EU are 2-3 times higher than in 2020 and 2-3 times higher than in the US and China (Figure 1)
- Its electricity grid infrastructure has become a bottleneck to further expansion, requiring €1.4trillion new investments by 2040 to bring it to the required level
- The economics of capital-intensive offshore wind are becoming challenging, with project cancellations in Denmark, the UK and the Netherlands
- Climate change is causing a change to Europe's climatic conditions, with long periods of low wind speeds, reduced sunshine and drought, that are becoming more frequent, requiring gas and coal to step back in

The combination of reduced wind speeds, less sunshine, and drought conditions poses a significant challenge to European energy systems and water resources.

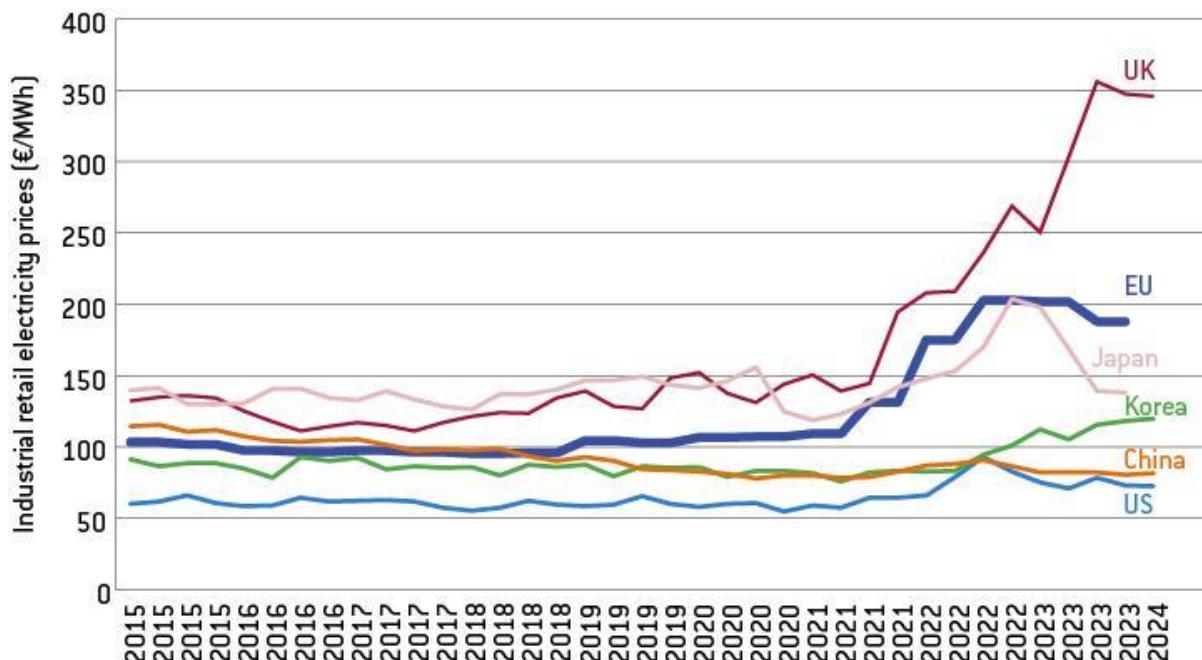


Figure 1: Europe pays more for electricity than its main competitors (Source: Bruegel)

These will only increase with time. European electricity demand is expected to increase by more than 30% by 2030 due to electric vehicles, data-centers and AI and increasing cooling and heating, as global weather becomes more extreme due to climate change.

The massive blackout in Spain and Portugal in April brought home how insecure our energy systems have become, raising questions about the resilience of Europe's grid infrastructure. The IEA has pointed-out that "systemic challenges will emerge from balancing increasingly renewable-dominated grids during extended low-generation periods."

The blackout has shown that Europe needs more interconnection, more electricity storage, grid upgrading and more sophisticated technology to manage the network and strengthen its resilience. It also needs a balanced energy mix, including baseload power, to manage the intermittency of expanding renewable sources like wind and solar, ensuring a stable and reliable power supply.

And above all, it needs an electricity market design that will bring its stubbornly high energy prices down, improve industrial competitiveness and ease the unbearable burden on households.

EU energy security

These challenges have in turn brought the focus back to the security of energy supplies and energy independence. These have become more important than ever and are seen as critical to national security.

Voter anger due to high energy prices has been increasing, bringing with it short-termism and a swing to the far-right.

The transition to a decarbonized global economy is behind schedule and possibly losing momentum. It is not that it will not happen – but it is unlikely that it will happen by 2050.

This is also happening to Europe, where transition to a low-carbon economy is losing momentum as prohibitively high electricity prices continue to undermine both household adoption of clean technologies and industrial competitiveness.

These problems were becoming increasingly challenging even before President Trump's second term. He has simply made it more difficult. With tariffs impacting costs, including cost of materials, if they stay there will inevitably be fallout on energy transition, as supply chains that depend heavily on global trade are being disrupted.

Coupled with these developments, Europe is facing economic challenges and inevitably investment in clean energy and energy infrastructure is now competing with the need to invest in defense that has become top priority.

In reality the world is moving into an age of 'energy-addition', where rising energy demand is being met by a combination of low-carbon energy and natural gas. This will require greater investment in new energy systems, especially in electricity grids and energy storage.

If grid and storage limitations are not addressed with a degree of urgency, the expansion in renewables and electricity may be delayed, "stuck-in-limbo." Also, the curtailment of increasing amounts of renewable electricity because of the inability of outdated systems to accept them will increase.

Europe must prioritise competitiveness and energy resilience

The EU is being increasingly sidelined at international fora, eclipsed by the US and China. At the global climate summit COP30 in Brazil, it came up against its own lack of cohesion and weakness in confronting the new geopolitical realities without the US on its side. It was expected to take more responsibility, but could not muster it against the strong resolve of China, India, Saudi Arabia and Russia. In effect, the Europeans (EU+UK) were sidelined. As pointed out at COP30, if the EU wants to be an energy and climate leader, it needs to sort out its internal divisions.

In a world where the US and China battle it out, fracturing of the global economy in the process, unless Europe can stand its ground the likelihood is that everybody will do worse in absolute terms.

Already concerns about Europe's industrial decline have intensified thanks to very high energy prices, the onset of Trump's tariffs and cheaper Chinese goods reaching the EU market. As things stand, Europe remains uncompetitive, has little to offer, and is gradually being squeezed-out, with little faith that a recovery is coming anytime soon.

If this is to change, Europe must step-down from being regulation-driven and prioritise lower prices, especially in energy, the economy and competitiveness. It must become energy-resilient. At present this is lacking, to our detriment.

RETHINKING EUROPE IN AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY: FROM CLUB TO COMMONS*



Erik Jones

Director of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies of the European University Institute and Nonresident Scholar at Carnegie Europe

If water started disappearing from the European continent, glaciers melted, rivers ran dry, rain stopped falling, you would think Europeans would come together to do something about it. They would look closely and compare notes about the sources and uses of water. They would study why the supply was running down and they would find ways to restrict demand to match. This would not be an easy task. It was not an easy task for the communities of the ancient world that lived between the Tigris and the Euphrates either. Humankind has learned to adapt to these sorts of challenges through bitter experience. Europeans might fail to pull together, and Europe might be overtaken by the desert. But they would try very hard to find a solution before they let that happen, and they would work with whomever is necessary to ensure their success.

Most people living anywhere can understand that kind of solidarity. When water is disappearing, the alternative is collective action, war, or drought. Few would embrace either war or drought as the first-best choice, particularly if they are uncertain about why the water is disappearing and if they realize that conflict is likely to delay or prevent finding a real solution to the problem. Most would focus on ensuring collective action – however difficult it is technically, in terms of sacrifice and self-discipline, or in terms of dealing with unfamiliar people – is a success. When faced with dangerous uncertainty, pulling together makes sense.

'Europe' is the framework or context for Europeans to pull together. The threats they face are not 'thirst', at least not yet. They are more intangible if no less important. They connect to things like prosperity, stability, or security rather than elemental factors like water, air, or soil. Those threats are existential, nonetheless. Europe – as we know it – cannot survive without prosperity, it cannot tolerate excessive volatility, and it must have security in

* This short essay is based on his most recent book with Veronica Anghel, *From Club to Commons: Enlargement, Reform and Sustainability in European Integration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025). That book is open access and so [free to download](#).

order to exist. We may speak about Europe as a kind of club that is nice to have in secure, stable, prosperous times where a rules-based international system and a powerful ally in the United States provides for a high degree of predictability in terms of what the future will bring. But Europe means something altogether different when power replaces rules to make a more anarchical international system and when the United States cannot be trusted.

In periods where the future is uncertain, Europe is more than just a single market, to borrow from Enrico Letta. It is the essential framework to bring Europeans together to push back against uncertainty and reclaim their future. Within that framework, Europeans will need to work together to understand what is putting their prosperity at risk and how they can share resources – intellectual, financial, material, institutional – to address the problem. They will also need to decide who to bring into this collaboration and how to cooperate or cut ties with those who remain outside. ‘Enlargement’ is a necessary part of the conversation because the boundaries of Europe connect to the solution as well as the problem.

In a similar way, European ‘competitiveness’ is not some abstract economic concept associated with market dynamics. Competitiveness – to borrow from Mario Draghi – is about how Europeans take charge of their own destiny in the face of international power politics. It is about taking control over European intellectual, financial, material, and institutional assets and focusing them on European the promotion of interests. Exercising such control is no easy task. It depends on Europeans’ ability to accept compromises and exercise self-discipline. When the international system no longer abides by rules, then Europeans must reinforce those rules that shape their interaction with one-another and that ensure they are able collectively to exercise discretion. Here too, the boundaries of Europe are important because those who are allowed into the community must be capable of meeting its requirements.

That combination of necessity and capability is what makes ‘Europeans’ within this arrangement. If Europe is to succeed in pushing back against uncertainty, then it must include those groups necessary to ensure prosperity, stability, and security. And those groups – or the members of those groups – must be able to work together to ensure that Europe is ‘resilient’ in two senses of the term. Europe must be flexible in adapting to new threats, and yet Europeans must not lose sight of those values and interests that make it possible for them to identify with one-another and to internalise that sense of collective solidarity. This kind of Europe necessarily has a sense of ‘strategic awareness’, to borrow from Sauli Niinistö, just as those Europeans necessarily recognise their own role as individuals in contributing to their common success.

This understanding of Europe is not familiar to people who have studied European integration or politics. For too long, we have taken the rules-based-international system and the transatlantic alliance for granted. Those were the certainties that allowed us to imagine Europe as something ‘nice to have’ and not something necessary. But this understanding of Europe will be familiar to anyone who has faced or imagined a world defined by existential threats and fundamental uncertainty. It is time for Europeans to embrace a more fundamental perspective on their common project. Europe is necessary for Europeans to exist.

FROM UNCERTAINTY TO RENEWAL: EUROPE'S GREEN TRANSITION AND CYPRUS' ROLE



*Alexia Sakadaki
Cyprus Green Party's Director*

Europe stands once again at a decisive turning point. The last few years have brought overlapping crises that have shaken the sense of stability and direction we had come to take for granted. War on the continent, the climate emergency, and deepening social inequalities have shown how vulnerable our systems are, but also how vital it is to reshape them. In this context, energy has become much more than a question of supply and demand. It has become a mirror of Europe's values — of sovereignty, solidarity, and sustainability — and a test of whether we can turn shared challenges into collective progress.

For decades, Europe's growth relied on fossil fuels imported from elsewhere, a dependence that now reveals itself as both environmentally and geopolitically unsustainable. The recent energy crisis reminded us that a system built on dependency is fragile, especially when it exposes citizens to price shocks and uncertainty. At the same time, the urgency of the climate crisis leaves no space for hesitation. The transition to clean energy is not a distant vision but a present necessity, and the way we carry it out will determine whether Europe emerges stronger or more divided.

The European Union's commitment to climate neutrality by 2050 remains one of the boldest collective decisions ever made, but ambition alone is not enough. Progress across member states remains uneven, and the implementation of policies such as the Green Deal and REPowerEU depends heavily on national determination. The real challenge is not technological innovation, which already exists in abundance, but political coherence and courage. Citizens must be able to see and feel that this transition improves their daily lives — through lower energy costs, cleaner air, quality jobs, and stronger communities. Only then will the green transformation become a project truly owned by the people.

For Cyprus, these issues are particularly tangible. As an island, we face high energy dependency, limited interconnections, and exposure to external shocks. Yet at the same time, we are blessed with some of the richest solar potential in Europe and a strategic position that can turn us into a small but

meaningful player in the region's renewable future. The green transition, for Cyprus, is not only about decarbonisation; it is about building resilience and independence. Investing in solar energy, energy storage, and local innovation could reduce costs, strengthen energy security, and create new opportunities for young scientists and entrepreneurs. Our universities and research centres are already developing expertise in green technologies and environmental adaptation — areas that could place Cyprus at the heart of a sustainable Mediterranean.

This transition also opens the door for new forms of cooperation. Instead of competing for fossil resources, the countries of our region can collaborate on renewable energy, research, and circular economy projects. Cyprus can act as a meeting point where European know-how, Mediterranean experience, and innovation converge. Partnerships on water management, sustainable tourism, and energy-efficient construction could transform not only our economy but also our sense of purpose. A smaller country can lead by example if it demonstrates how the green shift can go hand in hand with social justice and community participation.

But the transition must be fair if it is to be successful. Every policy decision must consider the people most affected by change — workers in sectors that will phase out, families struggling with rising costs, and communities that risk being left behind. Climate justice cannot be separated from social justice. We need retraining programmes, accessible financing for energy renovation, and mechanisms that allow citizens to become active participants in the energy system. When people can produce their own renewable energy, share it within their communities, and see tangible benefits, the idea of a “green transition” becomes real.

Transparency, accountability, and trust are equally crucial. Policies must be implemented consistently and shielded from vested interests that slow down progress. Governance is what will make or break this transformation. Europe needs leadership that is both visionary and grounded, capable of combining long-term planning with immediate social protection. Cyprus, in preparing for its upcoming Presidency of the Council of the European Union, has an opportunity to contribute meaningfully to this discussion — by bringing forward the perspective of smaller member states and by promoting the principles of solidarity, citizen participation, and sustainable innovation.

Reshaping Europe in an age of uncertainty requires political imagination and moral clarity. The green transition is not only an environmental obligation but also a democratic one. It is about ensuring that the benefits of change reach every citizen and every region, about redefining progress in terms of well-being and equality rather than consumption and growth alone. If we manage this transformation with fairness and courage, it can become Europe's unifying story — a story of renewal born out of crisis, of cooperation

overcoming competition, of hope replacing fear. For Cyprus and for Europe, this is the moment to act, to lead, and to prove that even in uncertain times, it is still possible to build a future that is just, sustainable, and shared by all.

TIME FOR A STRONGER EUROPE (?)*



Lucia Mokrá

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Migration policy has been presented to varying degrees on the EU agenda since Maastricht Treaty on the European Union (EU). Throughout the time, it faced various challenges, including the scope of legislative regulation, digitization, closer cooperation between member states, and extensive protection of the external Schengen border. The adopted legislation was shattered, reflecting areas that needed to be addressed at that time.

The influx of refugees and migrants to Europe reached staggering new levels in 2015, finding the EU fragile and not able to effectively respond to almost a million refugees and migrants¹, by implementing the necessary processes to provide international protection, and adjusting the national policies related to such issues as housing, education, family, and social protection.

Since that time, the EU has been coordinating the migration policy more structurally, and one of the landmark legislative peaks was the adoption of the EU's pact on migration and asylum², to address the procedures, making the system both efficient and reflecting the responsibility and solidarity.

Although the EU step-by-step achieved a consensus on the comprehensive legal framework, this particularly left behind the public perception on the topic, which varies across the Member States and has a substantial impact on the policy's effective implementation. This short contribution outlines the aspect of public perception playing a crucial role in the effective implementation of migration policies.

* This paper reflects the views of the author, drawing on prior research and experience in the areas of expertise and data collected within the project APVV-22-0526: The Economic and Fiscal Effects of Migration in Slovakia: An Integrated Modeling Approach.

¹ UNHCR (2015): 2015: The year of Europe's refugee crisis. Online:

<https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2015-year-europes-refugee-crisis>

² Council of the EU (2024): Timeline - EU migration and asylum policy. Online:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-migration-policy/migration-timeline/>

How much regulation is enough regulation?

The EU's pact on migration and asylum aimed at strengthening the security of the EU. In 2024 and 2025 several Member States introduced restrictive measures to protect both internal and external borders³, as well as to manage the migration flows. These, together with the European Council conclusions⁴, additionally contribute to the increasingly restrictive and stronger "Fortress Europe". It was also followed by the draft Regulation establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the Union⁵, criticised publicly due largely to perpetuate the overall rhetoric and narrative on return policies⁶, which are not aligned with the public perception on the legality of stay of migrants and refugees in the Member States, as the research in some MS reveal public support in policies that offer irregular migrants paths to legal status.⁷

However, the "migration" coin has two sides. On the one hand, it is about establishing a working regulatory framework, ensuring safeguards, and fulfilling obligations to both EU security and international obligations under non-refoulement; on the other hand, it is strongly linked to public perception and securitisation. The public perception has been playing an important role in the resilient environment in Member States and is more of the obstacle to the effective implementation on the national level.

³ See e.g. Germany introduced new border controls, despite being within the Schengen area; Poland adopted new policy aimed at countering the politicization of migrants by Russia; France, Italy-Albania agreed to use facilities built in Albanian territory under the Meloni-Rama Protocol, signed in November 2023. See more online:

<https://openmigration.org/en/analyses/out-of-the-european-council-comes-an-even-stronger-fortress-europe/>

⁴ European Council Conclusions, October 17, 2024. Online:

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/10/17/european-council-conclusions-17-october-2024/>

Openmigration (2024): Out of the European Council comes an even stronger Fortress Europe. Online:

<https://openmigration.org/en/analyses/out-of-the-european-council-comes-an-even-stronger-fortress-europe/>

⁵ European Commission (2025): Proposal for a REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL establishing a common system for the return of third-country nationals staying illegally in the Union, and repealing Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and the Council, Council Directive 2001/40/EC and Council Decision 2004/191/EC, COM/2025/101 final. Online:

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52025PC0101>

⁶ European Council on Refugees and Exiles (2025): European Parliament Draft Report on Return Regulation. Online:

<https://ecre.org/european-parliament-draft-report-on-return-regulation/>

⁷ GSCHWIND, Lutz, RUHS, Martin, AHLEN, Anton, PALME, Joakim, Public preferences for policies vis-à-vis irregular migrants in Europe: the roles of policy design and context, Protecting Irregular Migrants in Europe (PRIME), Research Paper, 2025, [Migration Policy Centre] - <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/78254>

Public perception as an enabling factor

As migration has an impact on political, economic, and societal landscapes across the EU, public understanding and engagement are essential to fostering the credibility, legitimacy, and resilience of the process, similarly as for the other EU policy in enlargement.⁸ Public acceptability cannot be taken for granted: it depends on citizens' perceiving the EU policies as fair, transparent, and beneficial.⁹

One of the latest studies in 8 EU Member States confirmed that there is a substantial gap in factual knowledge about the EU migration and asylum system, as well as public awareness of the asylum system appears to be moderate.¹⁰ The same report shows that "the public discussion around migration in Europe is shaped by simplified and biased narratives, which are often used to serve political purposes. These narratives can be misleading and create a distorted view of reality, influencing public perception and policy decisions."¹¹

Another research on public attitudes toward return migration in five European countries confirms that trust is one of the key factors in accepting refugees fleeing war and understanding of the inclusion policies to relieve pressure on social systems.¹²

This research and these findings provide data relevant to more comprehensive and field-related implementation. However, it has to be underlined that particularly awareness raising and interventions based on data are relevant in Member States, which used to be resistant in addressing the EU coordinated approach to migration.¹³ The lack of data and a structural approach backfire on EU with the securitisation of migration and even

⁸ Bosse, G. (2025): Citizens Missing: Why Participation in EU Enlargement Matters Now More Than Ever, *European Democracy Hub*; Schwarzer, D. (2024): Growing Pains: EU Enlargement Must Not Endanger the Rule of Law and Capacity to Act, *Bertelsmann Stiftung*; Tallberg, J. / Zürn, M. (2019): The Legitimacy and Legitimation of International Organisations: Introduction and Framework, *Review of International Organisations*, 14, p.581-606.

⁹ Habermas, J. (2012): The Crisis of the European Union in the Light of a Constitutionalisation of International Law, *European Journal of International Law*, 23 (2), pp. 335-348

¹⁰ Blasco, A., Cabeza Martinez, B., Icardi, R., Krawczyk, M. and Seiger, F., Public perceptions of fairness in the European migration and asylum system, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2025,

<https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/1271462> , JRC141980.

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² Saleh, L. (2025). Public Attitudes towards Return Migration: Analysis of five EU member states (v1.). GAPs: De-centring the Study of Migrant Returns and Readmission Policies in Europe and Beyond. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15766714>

¹³ See examples of Czechia, Hungary and Poland sued by the European Commission for non-compliance with their legal obligations on relocation, online:

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/lv/ip_17_5002; CJ EU (2017): Joined Cases C-643/15 and C-647/15, *Judgement of 6 September 2017*

misusing this policy in the disinformation and populism campaigns across the Member States.¹⁴

Way forward

As highlighted by the example of adopting migration policies and strategic frameworks under political pressure during the crisis, the “policy becomes unresponsive to public mood and instead reacts sharply to concerns and, partly, to migration pressures. At the same time, mood moves in the same direction as policy, indicating reinforcement rather than counterbalance. These results suggest that under crisis conditions, migration policy may become directly exposed to politicisation, and the public thermostat ceases to operate.”¹⁵

The lack of reflecting the need for structural communication, awareness raising, and data-driven policies, both at the EU and Member States’ level, contribute to the gaps in the effective migration policies on national level, and to the legal uncertainty, as the legal framework is rather ex-post reflecting the different situations than allowing the more pro-active approach, considering the policy and measures acceptance by the public.

The migration policies should consider public perception of migration across all EU Member States, to be addressed explicitly in legislative and policy documents to the extent it deserves from the perspective of effective implementation and sustainability.

¹⁴ See more in: Seiger, F., Kajander, N., Neidhardt, A.-H., Scharfbillig, M., Dražanová, L. et al., Navigating migration narratives - Research insights and strategies for effective communication, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2025, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/7999210>, JRC142039.

¹⁵ Carammia, M., & Iacus, S. M. (2026). Migration mood and policy responsiveness: a structural analysis of public opinion, policy, and migration flows in Italy (1990–2020). *Journal of European Public Policy*, 33(1), 74–104.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2025.2584564>

DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING IN THE EU AND THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY



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In the article that follows I argue that I am both pessimistic about the future of liberal democracy and critical of the functioning of democracy at the state and the EU level. I start by placing the discussion in context.

Political scientists usually categorize democratic regimes into two types: full and flawed democracies. At the apex of contemporary regime types stand the full democracies (roughly 8% of the world's population). In this group of countries we can find Canada, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and a number of states in Northern and Western Europe. These systems hold competitive elections, protect civil liberties, and usually deliver transparent, efficient public administration. Nonetheless, even in these countries the democratic idea exceeds democratic practice. Gaps persist in the quality of political representation, the transparency of decision-making, and the equality of citizens, to name but a few. When living standards stagnate or public services falter, the contrast between promise and performance sparks protest, drives anti-establishment voting, and pushes governments to demonstrate that they remain responsive and accountable.

A much larger group, roughly twice the size of the full-democracy club but with approximately 40% of the world's population, falls into the category of flawed democracies. They meet the procedural minimums, such as regular elections, some protection of individual and civil rights, but struggle with media pressures, weak legislatures, underdeveloped political cultures, and low levels of participation. Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, Poland, France, Italy, Brazil, Argentina, India, and the Philippines illustrate the diversity of experiences inside this category. Citizens can change leaders at the ballot box, yet often sense that real power lies elsewhere or that everyday governance is unclear and unreliable. Here is where the overall debate about democratic backsliding enters the frame.

Democratic backsliding: patterns, indicators, cases

Researchers who track regime quality and performance, such as the Economist Intelligence Unit, find two converging trends. First, the net growth in the number of democracies has stalled. Second, in many existing democracies and the EU, scores for civil liberties and political culture have slipped. Symptoms include greater reliance on technocrats and expert bodies at the expense of popular input, the rise of unelected agencies with broad authority, and major policy choices negotiated behind closed doors, often in supranational venues. Parties appear detached from their electorates, while harassment of journalists and restrictions on freedom of expression become more frequent. The result is a thinner version of democracy that preserves elections but weakens accountability and voice.

This is described as the democratic backsliding. It refers to a gradual and systematic erosion of democratic rules and practices. This process often involves the weakening of institutions that ensure transparency, accountability, and the protection of rights, typically through legal or procedural changes introduced by elected leaders rather than violent overthrows and coups. Courts are manipulated or sidelined, media outlets face pressure or capture, civil-society groups are restricted, and legislatures lose their oversight role, so that formal elections continue but the playing field is biased in favor of incumbents and citizens enjoy fewer real checks on executive power.

Across Europe the sharpest decline in liberal-democratic standards has occurred in a handful of states where governing parties have remained in office for long stretches and used their dominance to reshape institutions. Hungary under Fidesz and Poland under Law and Justice weakened constitutional courts, politicised judicial councils, and concentrated media ownership while keeping regular elections intact, producing what many scholars call competitive authoritarianism. Turkey, a Council of Europe member, moved even farther after the 2016 coup attempt, enhancing the executive branch against parliamentary authority and oversight and jailing thousands of judges, journalists, and opposition figures. In the Western Balkans, Serbia's political system heavily relies on patronage networks and media capture, while Bosnia and Herzegovina has seen ruling elites stall anti-corruption reforms and criminalise some forms of dissent.

Established democracies have shown warning signs as well, from Greece's spyware scandal and press-freedom concerns to the United Kingdom's contentious limits on protest and rhetoric against "activist" courts.

Across cases, several common drivers help explain patterns of democratic backsliding. Governments frequently attempt to reduce judicial or parliamentary checks in the name of efficiency or national security, thereby weakening institutional oversight. At the same time, the soft capture of public

and private media through such means as ownership changes, advertising pressure, or regulatory penalties, narrows the space for independent scrutiny. This trend is reinforced by majoritarian rhetoric that frames civil-society criticism as foreign interference or as an assault on national sovereignty, delegitimizing dissent and watchdog activity. Finally, increasingly polarized information environments undermine trust in impartial oversight and make it easier for incumbents to push through rapid legal changes with limited accountability, reinforcing the overall trajectory of democratic erosion.

The debate over democracy's future

In 1989 Francis Fukuyama portrayed the collapse of communism as the *End of History*, meaning the ideological triumph of liberal democracy. Two decades later Robert Kagan spoke of the *Return of History*, arguing that international rivalries and regime competition had re-emerged. The years since have confirmed that view: democratic governments confront social fragmentation, unequal economic outcomes, voter alienation, and fierce disputes over the balance between individual rights and majority rule. Yet the most corrosive problem is the decline of trust. Surveys throughout the EU reveal that many citizens still value the idea of democracy but have grown skeptical about the way it is practiced, believing that officeholders and connected interests set the agenda while ordinary people are sidelined.

Into this climate steps populism, a style of politics that claims to speak for “the people” against a self-serving elite. Viktor Orbán, Donald Trump, Narendra Modi, Jair Bolsonaro, and Javier Milei each build support by promising to bypass ineffective institutions, punish unresponsive officials, and give voice to those who feel ignored. Populism can energize participation and expose genuine failures of governance, yet it also risks further eroding checks and balances if leaders treat independent courts, legislatures, and media as obstacles to the popular will. This brings us to the question about the levels and quality of democracy in the EU system.

Is the EU democratic? Can it be the remedy to this discussion?

The short answer is I am not so sure. And I am constantly inclined to think that is not. Measured against the criteria we use to detect democratic backsliding -transparency, equal representation, and effective popular control- the EU still falls short in important ways. Much lawmaking takes place in opaque “trilogues” among the Commission, Council, and Parliament, while the powerful European Council decides strategic questions behind closed doors. Independent but unelected institutions such as the European Central Bank and a growing array of regulatory agencies make decisions that shape everything from monetary policy to digital markets with limited direct scrutiny by voters, citizens, parties. Turnout for European elections remains lower

than for most national contests, illustrating the distance many citizens feel from Brussels.

In a nutshell, the EU is partly democratic: it embeds elections, rule-of-law guarantees, and multiple checks, yet it still delegates major authority to bodies that voters cannot easily sanction.

To conclude, democratic backsliding is less a sudden collapse than a gradual thinning of norms, participation, and accountability. The tension between democratic ideals and lived reality runs through full and flawed democracies alike, feeding resentment and encouraging leaders who pledge to break existing constraints. Whether today's reversal deepens or is ultimately reversed in favor of a renewed wave will depend on the capacity of democratic societies to rebuild trust, strengthen inclusive institutions, and deliver effective policy without surrendering the core principle that governments derive their legitimacy from the consent of the governed.

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ISSN (online) 2421-8111

