



Report on the Future of the Union

Charlemagne Prize Academy 2024

75 Years of the Charlemagne Prize: Anniversary Edition

Efficiency by Design:

Europe's Path to Global Competitiveness, Sustainable Leadership, and Effective
Decision-Making



Der Internationale
Karlspreis zu Aachen
Für die Einheit Europas



Charlemagne Prize
ACADEMY

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Introduction: Resilient, Competitive, United: Charting Europe’s Path Forward

Prof. Dr Thomas Prefi, Chairman of the Charlemagne Prize Foundation

Europe’s ability to thrive in a rapidly changing world will depend on smart, strategic governance that maximises strength while minimising inefficiencies. As geopolitical tensions rise, economies transform, and the climate crisis intensifies, the European Union must refine its decision-making, enhance its competitiveness, and reinforce its resilience. This year’s Charlemagne Prize Academy Report, *Efficiency by Design: Europe’s Path to Global Competitiveness, Sustainable Leadership, and Effective Decision-Making*, addresses some of the most pressing challenges facing our continent today and in the future, – and, more importantly, offers concrete solutions to help Europe rise to the occasion.

The year 2024 was a pivotal one. With the European elections in June and the U.S. presidential elections in November, democracy itself was put to the test. While Europe avoided the feared seismic shift to the far right, the situation across the Atlantic reminded us just how fragile reason, facts, and democratic principles can be. Democracy cannot be taken for granted; it must be actively nurtured, defended, and reinforced. When it falters, the consequences are dire: leaders who prioritise self-interest over the collective good, who turn their backs on those in need, and who weaken crucial international partnerships.

For the EU, the question is clear: How should it respond to the challenges ahead? The answer is easy yet complex in its implementation: The EU must strengthen its own foundations, develop independent crisis management capabilities, and reduce its reliance on external powers. Now more than ever, unity is not just an aspiration; it is a necessity. We must ensure the EU remains competitive while embracing sustainability and combating climate change. Above all, we must safeguard our ability to act decisively and remain resilient in turbulent times to respond to a new US administration, ongoing conflicts close to European borders and the political, economic and social tensions fuelling on our continent and beyond.

Europe’s true strength lies in its people, its values, and its unwavering commitment to progress. At the heart of this progress is academic freedom – a driving force behind innovation, technological self-sufficiency, and global competitiveness - especially in a time when objective facts risk being diluted amid the flood of news and populist rhetoric. In this context, safeguarding Europe’s future also means defending its core principles against division and hatred. The 2024 International Charlemagne Prize, awarded to Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt and the Jewish people in Europe, stands as a powerful statement: The fight against antisemitism is, ultimately, a fight for the fundamental values that define and unite us.

The future of Europe will be defined by its ability to adapt, innovate, and lead in an increasingly complex world. The research conducted by this year’s Charlemagne Prize Academy Fellows highlights some of the most pressing challenges and opportunities shaping the continent’s trajectory. From fostering a strategic and sustainable foreign policy amid geopolitical tensions to ensuring Ukraine’s reconstruction remains free from corruption, these topics address critical aspects of Europe’s role on the global stage. The exploration of Europe’s competitiveness in the Metaverse underscores the need for technological leadership in the digital age, while advancing marine protection is essential to meeting the EU’s ambitious environmental goals. These research contributions not only reflect the key debates of today but also provide forward-looking insights that will help shape policies for a more resilient, competitive, and sustainable Europe.

We are also deeply grateful for the insights shared by so many distinguished personalities from politics, economics, and science. Their expertise has helped to contextualise Europe’s challenges and guide our Academy in its mission to foster meaningful dialogue, fresh perspectives, and actionable solutions.

Europe is at a defining moment. The challenges are huge, but so too is our potential. What we need now are vision, courage, and decisive action. This report is not just a reflection of where we stand, but a roadmap for where we must go. As a reflection of European integration and progress, the Charlemagne Prize celebrates its 75th anniversary in 2025. In this context, the following report aims to address Europe’s most pressing future challenges and place current approaches within the framework of their practical feasibility. It is our hope that the young ideas and solutions presented here will inspire leaders, policymakers, and citizens alike to build a stronger, more united Europe – one that not only withstands the storms of change but emerges stronger because of them.

**Europe is at a defining moment. The challenges are huge,
but so too is our potential.**

Editorial

Europe Must Make an Effort and Become Resilient

Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, President of the Conference of European Rabbis (CER),
Charlemagne Prize Laureate 2024



At first glance, 2024 was not a good year. Neither for Europe's Jews nor for the European Union as a whole.

Not since the end of World War II have Jews had to deal with such levels of unbridled hatred. They come from many fronts, but the main reason, of course, is the conflict in the Middle East.

On 7 October 2023 Hamas, a fanatic Islamist group that the EU and many countries around the world rightly consider a terrorist organisation, broke the cease-fire, butchered more than a 1000 Israelis, abducted 250 people to Gaza and started a war against Israel. In January 2025, this war was temporarily halted when a cease-fire agreement was signed, but it is not over yet.

Like the Shoah, the atrocities against civilians committed on 7 October 2023 will forever be part of the collective memory of the Jewish people. Not just in Israel, world-wide. Hamas has not managed to defeat Israel, on the contrary: Israel's military has weakened Hamas and killed most of its fighters. Despite the many enemies Israel had to deal with simultaneously in this war – Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, the Iranian regime – it once again proved to the world that it is resilient in the face of forces trying to annihilate it.

This defensive war came at a huge cost for civilians in Israel, in Gaza and in Lebanon. Many lost their life, countless others family members, their home, their livelihood. For Jews, who are but a tiny minority of less than 0.2 percent of the European population, that conflict was anything but far away.

This was not just because Israel has a special place in the hearts of many European Jews or because they have relatives there. It was also because 7 October 2023 and the ensuing war against

Hamas has unleashed a wave of Jew-hatred not seen in Europe over the past eight decades.

Again, Jews fear for their future here in Europe – for themselves, their children and their grandchildren. In many EU countries, they feel abandoned, left alone in dealing with the rising challenges posed by antisemitism and intolerance.

As I pointed out in my speech in Aachen in May 2024 accepting the Charlemagne Prize, the Jewish community cannot fight antisemitism alone, and it is not their job either. It is the task of their home countries and societies to defend against the enemies of European values! The reason is very simple: Antisemitism is not just a problem for the Jews. It is a problem for the societies in which it festers. And it is a seismograph of their condition.

To this end, it is important to recognise, name and combat Jew hatred in all its expressions – and there are many –, be it on the fringes and in the centre of society. Antisemitism comes in the guise of ethnic racism and continues to disguise itself. It calls itself 'anti-Zionism', 'criticism of Israel', 'boycott, divestment, sanctions' (BDS). It seeps into disciplines such as postcolonial studies. It dresses itself in a moral cloak - against imperialism, capitalism, globalisation. The lowest common denominator is the hatred of Jews and the hatred of Israel. While hatred of Israel is openly acknowledged, hatred of Jews is often denied, downplayed or disguised.

But the statistics produced by most European countries on the rise of hate crimes, in particular against Jews, speaks volumes. What is done by governments and civil society to counter it is often too little, too late. In some countries, Jewish institutions lack protection, communities are denied public funding to beef up their security.

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And it is a seismograph of their condition.

Efforts to identify and condemn the perpetrators of anti-Jewish hate crimes must be significantly intensified. If they are committed by aliens from third countries, more efforts should be undertaken to deport the perpetrators. With regard to social media, much more pressure must be brought to bear on operators to curb the epidemic of antisemitism.

Alas, the current debate on “free speech” is headed in the wrong direction. Free speech cannot and should not be defined as unlimited freedom to insult and harass others, or as a right to spew racist or antisemitic invective on the internet. This would mean denying freedoms to others that one claims for oneself.

Recent attempts by American tech entrepreneurs to meddle in European politics may not be as consequential and impactful as the Kremlin's efforts to undermine our European democracies, but they should trigger a determined response by the institutions of the European Union, the Council of Europe and other relevant organisations. The Rule of Law is the bedrock of European democracy. Without it, it will be difficult to make the European stronger and more competitive.

And low growth rates, high unemployment and the Russian aggression against Ukraine with all the consequences it has had have made clear that we need a strong European Union if we want to preserve our wealth and our open societies in the future.

It is therefore crucial that the European Union becomes more resilient. That does not mean that everything should be regulated and micromanaged by Brussels. On the contrary. But it means that we bolster cooperation, that we overcome national (and sovereignty) considerations in defence and security policy, and that we finally invest more in our military. After the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, nobody would have thought that barely 35 years later, we would again be embroiled in a Cold War with Russia.

It did not happen overnight, it happened gradually. The re-emergence of an aggressive, authoritarian Russia, coupled with other challenges such as China, the rise of radical Islam, etc. was not Europe's fault.

All of these problems pose challenges to Europe's way of life, to our business model. They also mean we cannot be complacent. We must redouble our efforts. We must find new allies, make new friends.

As a religious leader, I have always tried to do that. Inter-religious initiatives, of which there have been many over the past 20 years, have helped a great deal, in particular dialogue between Jewish and Muslim leaders. It was not always easy, and sometimes, on certain issues, we agreed to disagree. But we continued to meet with each other, again and again.

7 October and its fallout have put a strain on some of these relationships. Nonetheless, I am convinced that they can be rebuilt.

In an increasingly secular Europe religious communities might not have the importance they used to have. But they can still be facilitators, enablers, across borders. When politicians speak of “shared Jewish-Christian values”, they are onto something important. “European values” and “Jewish-Christian values” have many things in common. We tend to forget that; some are even ashamed of this fact.

Human rights, tolerance and mutual respect are cornerstones of European integration. Without them, the European Union would not have been possible to establish. All of these values have their roots in religious teachings. Therefore, to deny Europe's Jewish and Christian roots would be to deny our past. Yes, the European Union is a secular, it is an inclusive project.

But it would look very different would it not be based on the acceptance of religious and cultural diversity. “Europe without the Jews would not be Europe anymore” is a sentence I have heard from a number of EU leaders, including Ursula von der Leyen and Frans Timmermans. Yet so far, Europe has failed to stop the bleeding; Jews are leaving the continent in droves.

One thing is certain: Europe without Jews, without religious minorities, would be a different Europe. If it wants to preserve peace, if it really wants to become resilient and if it wants to preserve its prosperity, Europe must make more of an effort. What has been done so far may have been honourable, but it has not been successful.

I am aware that this is easier said than done. Current trends don’t make it easier either. Populists and extremists on the far-right and the far-left of the political spectrum want a different society. They want a return to the 19th century-style, ethnically homogenous nation-states. They want to literally force out members of religious and other minorities. However, religious freedoms, which are increasingly being questioned, are not “nice-to-haves”. They are “must-haves” if we want to maintain our European way of life.

Of course, the same rules must apply to everyone, and European values must be respected by all, newcomers and natives alike. Fighting extremism in all its forms is quintessential and we cannot afford to be tolerant with those who preach intolerance.

People and states who disrespect fundamental European values, who seek to undermine our institutions, cannot be our partners. Perhaps Europe is no longer capable of “exporting” its values, its way of life, to other continents. It is, however, still able to defend them back home.

To do so, Europe needs to embrace people of all faiths and backgrounds and make them part of the European Project. European leaders should forge a “Coalition of the Willing”. They should make a determined effort to strengthen the European Union and its institutions and make it more resilient against threats from outside and from the inside.

The fact that the Charlemagne Prize 2024 was given to Jewish communities in Europe was a welcome signal in that regard. It needs to be followed up with practical action.

Fighting extremism in all its forms is
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Editorial

Efficiency by Design

Sabine Verheyen MEP, First Vice-President of the European Parliament



When the bells of Aachen Cathedral traditionally ring for the Charlemagne Prize ceremony, a special magic surrounds the city.

It is a moment that connects the past, present, and future, making Aachen a beacon for the European idea. In this festive context, the Youth Charlemagne Prize is also awarded – a unique competition that amplifies the voices driving Europe forward.

Every year, I am once again impressed by the creativity and energy of the young people submitting their projects. The winners demonstrate: change does not begin in distant conference rooms, but where it directly touches people – in schools, communities or neighbourhoods.

What moves me most is how these young people bring Europe to life. I think of the multilingual online magazine to inform and inspire others to think critically. Or the team working for gender equality by connecting and supporting women worldwide. Equally impressive is the language app "AILEM" from Belgium, which reduces intercultural misunderstandings and helps young people overcome language barriers. Last year's winner, "Ukrainian Vibes – European Public Sphere," strikingly shows how a platform can build bridges between young people from Ukraine and the EU – a courageous step towards reconciliation and integration.

These projects are far more than good ideas. They are catalysts for real change. They combine innovation with empathy to address concrete societal challenges in a way that sets a powerful example.

Design plays a vital role in this transformation. Design is more than aesthetics. It is the art of merging form and function, solving problems creatively, and enabling innovation. Europe has a long tradition of paving new paths through smart design. From the grand cathedrals that connect heaven and earth to modern technologies like the European human-centred approach to Artificial Intelligence – European design has always built bridges.

Today, Europe is more than ever called upon to apply this design strength to the political and economic challenges of the 21st century. How do we design competitiveness that does not come at the cost of people and the environment? How do we create a political system that makes decisions that are both swift and far-sighted? These questions demand not only pragmatic answers but also a philosophy that sees design as a tool for translating values into practice.

These projects also demonstrate that "Efficiency by Design," the theme of this year's Charlemagne Prize Academy Report, is not just about technocratic efficiency. It is about designing a Europe that is both effective and humane. Building a European identity

Design is more than aesthetics. It is the art of merging form and function, solving problems creatively, and enabling innovation.

Building a European identity and bridging divides through lived solidarity are the central tenets of these initiatives – and they serve as an inspiration for us all.

and bridging divides through lived solidarity are the central tenets of these initiatives – and they serve as an inspiration for us all.

But while we encourage the youth to shape Europe's future, we must also protect them. The digital space offers tremendous opportunities, but also risks. Young people and democracy itself are threatened by disinformation and radicalized content. Thus, we urgently need to protect credible content. The European Media Freedom Act (EMFA), which I negotiated last year, is an important step in this direction. It strengthens the protection of trustful information on major platforms and prevents arbitrary censorship. Moreover, we must invest in digital education and media literacy, enabling critical questioning of online content.

Artificial Intelligence is also one of the greatest challenges of our time. It holds potential for progress but requires clear boundaries based on a European compass of values. Europe must remain the space where technology is shaped not only efficiently but also ethically.

This is exactly why programs like DiscoverEU and Erasmus+ are so close to my heart. They offer young people not just the opportunity to travel across Europe, but to experience it – in all its diversity and complexity. Time and again, I hear how life-changing these experiences can be. These encounters lay the foundation for a strong, united and sustainable Europe.

When I see the projects of the Youth Charlemagne Prize winners, I often think: this is the generation that will write Europe's next chapter. But the responsibility does not lie solely with them. It is up to all of us – politicians, teachers, parents – to support, encourage, listen to, and actively involve this young generation even more.

What I hope for is that we learn from their drive. That we not only admire their visions but work together with them to implement them. Europe is not a project that is designed once and then left to rest. It is a continuous process, and the young people show us that it is worth pursuing with conviction and passion. In this context, the EU Youth Check planned by the European Commission will become an important milestone. Additionally, Glen Micaleff will serve as the first Commissioner for Youth and Intergenerational Fairness.

Just as the grand Charlemagne Prize has repeatedly honoured people, who have made significant contributions to the European idea – from Jean Monnet to Volodymyr Zelensky – the European Youth also demonstrates: the bells of Aachen Cathedral ring for a generation that will be the bridge builders, architects, and designers of a united Europe.

Editorial

75 Years of the International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen. 75 Years of Defending the European Ideal

Dr Jürgen Linden, Chairman of the Charlemagne Prize Board of Directors



At a time when the European Union is under attack from both external and internal forces, it is essential that European citizens themselves stand up for the idea of cross-border cooperation, mutual understanding, and European ideals.

The International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen was founded as a civic initiative 75 years ago, effectively rising from the ruins of World War II. The experience of that war, of dictatorship, suffering, persecution, mass murder, and the Holocaust, as well as the reality of a border town suddenly facing closed barriers, has driven us ever since to strengthen the cooperation and unity of Europeans and to strive for a way of life that ensures peace, freedom, democracy, and prosperity for all.

The European ideal that emerged after 1945 has delivered countless benefits, including peace, prosperity, and a shared sense of community, offering many a sense of belonging beyond their nation-state.

The European vision championed by Charlemagne Prize laureates like Monnet, de Gasperi, Schuman, and Adenauer gave us hope and allowed us to dream of a stable future. The organisation and development of this community through leaders such as Segni, Veil, Karamanlis, Kohl, Delors, Havel, Merkel, Macron, and Juncker, and the power of the words of figures like Pope John Paul II, have united us despite occasional crises and disappointments. The European Union remains a community of values that must be protected and strengthened.

However, recent Charlemagne Prize awards to the Belarusian opposition, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy, and the Jewish people in Europe represented by their president, Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, highlight that wars, crises, and the erosion of democracy – as well as populism, hate, and antisemitism – seek to destabilise this community.

We have long since had to abandon the utopian notion that our vision of a peaceful European world could be achieved solely through diplomacy, dialogue, and economic cooperation.

Europe may have its flaws, but it remains the best model for our future.

We have had to learn: to the East stands an aggressor capable of every cruelty and atrocity, who disregards human and national rights, state sovereignty, and human life; who seeks destruction, targeting Ukraine – and thereby targeting us as well.

The aggressors from within are just as dangerous: populists, simplifiers, liars. Their tools are hate, disinformation, fear-mongering, and intolerance. They are nationalists, racists, antisemites – enemies of democracy and the European Union. They foster a dismantling of societal values, extending even into culture. Their goals include isolationism, protectionism, and opposition to globalisation and multilateralism. There is a growing trend towards autocracy – a trend we thought we had left behind in Europe.

Europe is in danger. Those who believe in Europe must also fight for it.

As citizens, we are committed to this cause. The prize ceremonies are meant to inspire, encourage, and, at times, critique. Above all, we aim to demonstrate that we support this European way

of life, this community of values. Europe may have its flaws, but it remains the best model for our future.

That is why, since 2008, we have also awarded the European Charlemagne Youth Prize alongside the traditional Karlspreis and are thrilled each year by the hundreds of applications from all 27 EU member states. These applications represent 5,000 to 8,000 young people collaborating across borders – culturally, socially, in education, in political discourse, for climate protection, and beyond.

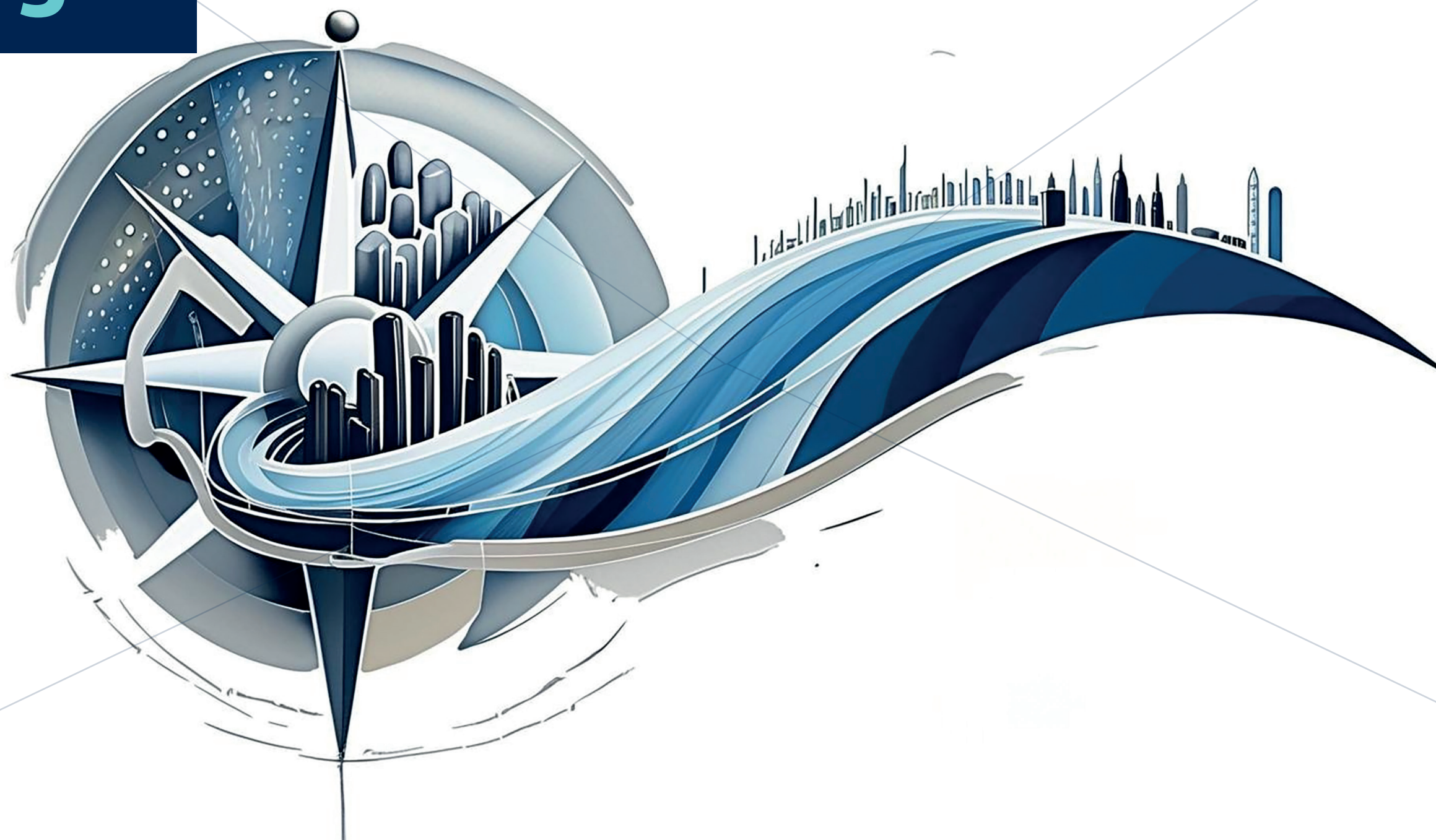
We are equally proud of the fellowships we award each year through our Charlemagne Prize Academy, which aims to make Europe future-proof.

These events involve young people who do not doubt, reject, or cower in fear, but who take their destiny into their own hands, shaping their future and naturally embracing European cooperation.

This is precisely what we need – across all generations.

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The following chapter reflects on the past five years of the Charlemagne Prize's 75-year history, focusing specifically on the outcomes of the Charlemagne Prize Academy, which was initiated in 2019. The research topics explored during this period have shaped and defined key issues for Europe — ranging from hope, over conviction, to pressing necessities. Over the past five years, more than 20 projects have been conducted, with four new research projects currently underway. As part of the Charlemagne Prize's anniversary celebrations, we now take a first look back, examining how the relevance of these findings has evolved, shifted, and, in some cases, even strengthened in light of recent developments.



The Legacy the Conference on the Future of Europe: The EU Since the Pandemic and the Outbreak of War



Prof Federico Fabbrini, Charlemagne Prize Fellow 2019/20

FEDERICO FABBRINI is Full Professor of European Law at Dublin City University and the Founding Director of the Brexit Institute and the Dublin European Law Institute. He previously held academic positions in the Netherlands and Denmark and has been among others Fellow in Law & Policy at Princeton University, and Fernand Braudel Fellow at the European University Institute. Federico is the author of 5 monographs in English with Oxford University Press, including "Brexit & the Future of the European Union" (2020) and "The EU Constitution in Time of War" (2025). He is the recipient of the first Charlemagne Prize Fellowship 2019/20, and in 2021 he was made a knight of the Order of the Star of Italy for his scientific achievements.

1. Introduction

The Conference on the Future of Europe is an innovative deliberative process which the EU institutions established to reflect on the future of the EU through a bottom-up engagement with the citizens. The Conference took off, with delays due to the Covid-19 pandemic, on 9 May 2021, and came to a close a year later, on 9 May 2022, when the war in Ukraine was already raging. The Conference has clearly identified the existing weaknesses of the EU, and unequivocally mapped a path to address them, including by recommending treaty changes in a number of areas.

Its follow-up, however, remains so far underwhelming: while a number of institutions and member states have openly called for amending the treaties, the reform process has stalled, and it remains to be seen if the prospect of enlargement may revive it.

This focus paper examines the Conference of the Future of Europe: it overviews its functioning (section 2), final outcome (section 3) and follow-up (section 4), conclusively considering its legacy (section 5).

2. Functioning

The Conference on the Future of Europe – originally envisaged by French President Emmanuel Macron in March 2019¹ as a way to relaunch the project of European integration in the aftermath of Brexit² – lasted a year, from 9 May 2021 to 9 May 2022³. This innovative process was organized as a citizen-focused, bottom-up exercise designed to gain input from citizens on the key questions facing the EU. While the Conference built on the examples of citizen assemblies convened at national and local level in some member states, it attempted to achieve something unprecedented, namely to create a forum for participatory democracy on a transnational scale. From this point of view, the Conference constituted a novel experiment for the EU, going beyond prior models of technocratic or deliberative constitutional change.

As I have explained elsewhere,⁴ the mission and governance structure of the Conference on the Future of Europe were outlined in a Joint Declaration, adopted in March 2021 by the three Presidents of the European Parliament (EP), Council and Commission, which agreed to act as co-guarantors of this initiative.⁵ With regard to its remit, the Joint Declaration struck a compromise and maintained a constructive ambiguity as it stated that the Conference could focus on 'what mattered to the citizens,'⁶ and reported a wide-ranging, non-exhaustive list of topics to be considered. In practice, however, also on the basis of the input received through a multilingual digital platform, the Conference came to address a broad set of topics, which were then clustered in 9 groups: namely, (1) climate change and the environment; (2) health; (3) a stronger economy, social justice and jobs; (4) EU in the world; (5) values and rights, rule of law, security; (6) digital transformation; (7) European democracy; (8) migration; and (9) education, culture, youth and sport.

In terms of organization, instead, the Conference unfolded through a multilayered structure, designed to channel and filter from the bottom up the output of the democratic deliberations. The Conference's core was represented by 4 European citizens'

panels of 200 participants each, selected randomly to reflect the socio-demographic reality of the EU. The European citizens' panels were thematically divided along 4 cross-cutting clusters – focusing on (I) a stronger economy, social justice, jobs; education, youth, culture and sport; digital transformation; (II) European democracy; values and rights, rule of law, security; (III) climate change, environment; health; (IV) EU in the world; migration. European citizens convened for 3 panel sessions, both in person and online, over a span of 6 months between September 21 and March 2022, and – also with the support of experts invited to speak as witnesses – deliberated on the topics at hand and advanced a number of orientations for future debate.

In addition to European citizens' panels, moreover, member states were encouraged to establish within the framework of the Conference also national citizens' panels, again designed to facilitate deliberation and exchange. Admittedly, the national commitment proved uneven, as only 6 member states – including 5 of the 6 founding members of the EU, and the 3 largest EU countries (Germany, France and Italy) – effectively hosted national citizens' assemblies, while the others limited themselves to organizing more traditional engagement and dissemination events. By far the most articulate national citizens' panel on the Future of Europe took place in France, the member state which had championed the whole initiative with President Macron. Here the authorities organized in Fall 2021 18 panels of randomly selected citizens, involving over 700 participants, which provided input (in the form of 101 aspirations and 1301 specific proposals) for a final *Conference Nationale de Synthèse*, hosted in Paris in October 2022, which drafted a final list of 14 priority recommendations.⁷

The input from the European citizens' panel – together with that resulting from analogous national process – were then reported to the Plenary of the Conference on the Future of Europe. This large, 449-members body – which included representatives from the EP, national parliaments, the Council, the Commission, as

1] French President Emmanuel Macron, *Lettre Pour Une Renaissance Européenne*, 4 March 2019.

2] Federico Fabbrini, *Brexit and the Future of the European Union: The Case for Constitutional Reforms* (OUP 2020).

3] See also Conference on the Future of Europe digital platform, available at <https://futureu.europa.eu/>

4] Federico Fabbrini, 'The Conference on the Future of Europe: Process and Prospects' (2021) 26 *European Law Journal* 401

5] Joint Declaration on the Conference on the Future of Europe, 10 March 2021, available at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/sed/doc/news/flash/>

6] Ibid.

7] Contribution citoyenne à la Conférence sur l'avenir de l'Europe, 29 November 2021.

The final outcome of the Conference on the Future of Europe explicitly addressed the main structural weaknesses of the EU and pointed to a roadmap for reforms.

well as representatives from the European and national citizens' panels, and delegates from the Committee of the Regions, the European Social and Economic Committee, civil society organizations and social partners – met for 7 times over 12 months. To facilitate its deliberation, the Plenary structured its work in 9 working groups – corresponding to the 9 topics addressed by the Conference. Representatives from the European citizens' panel were selected as chairs and spokespersons of the working groups, and with the support of the Common Secretariat (a technical body with staff from the Commission, EP and Council) they prepared elaborated proposals.

Ultimately, at its last meeting in April 2022, the Plenary of the Conference on the Future of Europe endorsed 49 proposals with a list of 326 detailed recommendations, which were submitted to the Executive Board.⁸ This body -- composed of 3 Commissioners, 3 MEPs from the main political groups and 3 representatives from the Council Presidency troika -- was tasked by the Joint Declaration to steer the work of the Conference, and to 'draw and publish the conclusions of the Conference Plenary.'⁹ The Executive Board accepted the input from the Plenary and in a final report published on 9 May 2022, it reaffirmed its commitment to follow-up on it. As it stated: 'The Conference has provided a clear direction in these areas and the three EU Institutions now need to examine how to follow up on the concerns, ambitions, and ideas expressed. The next step in this process is to come up with concrete EU action building on the outcome of the Conference,

contained in this final report. EU institutions will now therefore examine this report and its follow-up, each within the framework of their competences and in accordance with the Treaties.'¹⁰

3. Final outcome

The final outcome of the Conference on the Future of Europe explicitly addressed the main structural weaknesses of the EU and pointed to a roadmap for reforms. To begin with, from a substantive point of view, the Conference called for an expansion of EU powers, for instance in the field of health – inter alia by 'includ[ing] health and health care among the shared competencies between the EU and the EU member states by amending Article 4 TFEU'¹¹ – in the field of climate – including by 'increas[ing] EU's leadership and taking a stronger role and responsibility to promote ambitious climate action, a just transition and support the loss and damages'¹² – and in the digital space, among other by strengthening the capacity of Europol to combat cybercrime,¹³ and by establishing a common European digital identity.¹⁴

Moreover, the Conference also strongly pushed for a more prominent role of the EU in Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) – not only by reducing the EU dependency from foreign actors in energy,¹⁵ but also by expanding its capacity for action, and its ability to speak with one voice. In particular, the Conference called for the EU to play 'a leading role in building the world security order after the war in Ukraine building on the recently adopted EU strategic compass;¹⁶ to 'strengthen the

operational capabilities necessary to ensure the effectiveness of the mutual assistance clause of Art. 42.7 [TEU], providing adequate EU protection to any member state under attack by a third country;¹⁷ and to 'make greater use of its collective political and economic weight, speaking with one voice and acting in a unified way, without individual Member States dividing the Union through inappropriate bilateral responses.'¹⁸ At the same time, in the field of energy, the Conference explicitly called for 'pursuing common purchases of imported energy.'¹⁹

Similarly, the Conference acknowledged that important changes had to be implemented in the field of migration. In this domain, the proposals approved included the request to 'develop[] EU-wide measures to guarantee the safety and health of all migrants;²⁰ to 'increas[e] EU financial, logistical and operational support, also for local authorities, regional governments and civil society organizations, for the management of the first reception which would lead to a possible integration of refugees and regular migrant;²¹ and to 'adopt[] EU common rules concerning procedures for the examination of claims for international protection in Member States, applied uniformly to all asylum seekers.'²² In this context, the Conference also explicitly called to 'revisit[] the Dublin system in order to guarantee solidarity and fair sharing of responsibility including the redistribution of migrants among Member States.'²³

The Conference also made ambitious proposals in the field of finances, which effectively acknowledged the limitations resulting from the current EU fiscal arrangements. In this respect, the preface to the Conference's final input on 'A stronger economy, social justice and jobs' stated that: 'Outstanding transnational

challenges, such as inequalities, competitiveness, health, climate change, migration, digitalisation or fair taxation, call for proper European solutions'²⁴ and clarified that 'Some elements of this strategy can be found in already existing policies and can be achieved by making full use of the existing institutional framework at European and national level; others will require new policies and, in some cases, treaty changes.'²⁵ Concretely, the Conference proposed to 'take into account the example[] of Next Generation EU [...] by strengthening [the EU] own budget through new own resources,'²⁶ including by 'introducing a common corporate tax base'²⁷ and by 'giv[ing] further consideration to common borrowing at EU level.'²⁸

Otherwise, from an institutional viewpoint, the Conference explicitly tackled the governance shortcomings of the EU, calling for reforms of its decision-making processes to enhance Europe's democracy. In the field of CFSP specifically, the Conference called for 'issues that are currently decided by way of unanimity to be changed, normally to be decided by way of qualified majority'²⁹ – and it also asked to 'strengthen[] the role of the High Representative to ensure that the EU speaks with one voice.'³⁰ More generally, then, the Conference called to 'improve the EU's decision-making process in order to ensure the EU's capability to act,'³¹ proposing that 'all issues decided by way of unanimity should be decided by way of qualified majority', save for the admission of new member states and changes of the fundamental principles of the EU.³² In fact, the Conference also underlined that the EU should enhance its capacity to protect the rule of law and in this regard it stated that 'Any necessary legal avenues, including Treaty changes, should be considered to punish breaches of the rule of law.'³³

8] Conference on the Future of Europe, Draft Proposals, 27 April 2022.
9] Joint Declaration p 3.
10] Conference on the Future of Europe, Report on the Final Outcome, 9 May 2022, p 93 [hereinafter: Final Report].
11] Ibid., Proposal 8, recommendation 3.
12] Ibid., Proposal 3, recommendation 11.
13] Ibid., Proposal 33, recommendation 1.
14] Ibid., Proposal 35, recommendation 10.
15] Ibid., Proposal 3, recommendation 3, and Proposal 18.
16] Ibid., Proposal 23, recommendation 2.

17] Ibid., Proposal 23, recommendation 4.
18] Ibid., Proposal 24, recommendation 1.
19] Ibid., Proposal 18, recommendation 7.
20] Ibid., Proposal 43, recommendation 1.
21] Ibid., Proposal 43, recommendation 2.
22] Ibid., Proposal 44, recommendation 1.
23] Ibid., Proposal 44, recommendation 2.
24] Ibid., p 53.
25] Ibid.
26] Ibid., Proposal 16.
27] Ibid., recommendation 2.
28] Ibid., recommendation 5.
29] Ibid., Proposal 21, recommendation 1.
30] Ibid., recommendation 3.
31] Ibid., Proposal 39.
32] Ibid., recommendation 1.
33] Ibid., Proposal 25, recommendation 4.

The Conference therefore revitalized the debate about the future constitutional outlook of the EU, forcing member states and EU institutions to take a stand on the matter.

Also from an institutional viewpoint, the Conference proposed -- unsurprisingly, given its participatory outlook -- to periodically convene citizens' assemblies,³⁴ and to 'conceiv[e] an EU wide referendum, to be triggered by the European Parliament in exceptional cases on matters particularly important to all European citizens.'³⁵ Moreover, the Conference also echoed some widely known proposals, such as the creation of transnational lists for the election of the EP,³⁶ and either 'the direct election of the Commission President, or a lead candidate system' to select the head of the European Commission.³⁷ Crucially however, the Conference pleaded for 'reopening the discussion about the [EU] constitution'³⁸ on the understanding that 'A constitution may help to be more precise as well as involve citizens and agree on the rules of the decision-making process.'³⁹

4. Follow-up

The proposals of the Conference on the Future of Europe identified the sources of weaknesses of the current EU – including its limited substantive powers, and its byzantine governance structures – and advanced clear recommendations on how to address these. Undoubtedly, the application of the most relevant Conference recommendations requires changes to the EU Treaties,

as neither the expansion of the EU competences nor the revision of the EU decision-making processes can occur *à traité constant*. The Conference therefore revitalized the debate about the future constitutional outlook of the EU,⁴⁰ forcing member states and EU institutions to take a stand on the matter.⁴¹

On the one hand, in a speech delivered on the Conference's concluding event, on 9 May 2022, French President Macron explicitly endorsed 'the convening of a convention to revise the treaties' expressing himself in favour of a treaty amendment.⁴² This echoed the statement made a week earlier by then Italian Prime Minister Draghi in a speech at the EP, where he openly stated that: 'We not only need pragmatic federalism; we need a federalism based on ideals. If this means embarking on a path that leads to a revision of the Treaties, then this must be embraced with courage and with confidence.'⁴³ Moreover, six member states -- Belgium, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Spain -- indicated on 13 May 2022 their 'open[ness] to necessary treaty change',⁴⁴ a position also shared by Ireland⁴⁵ and by France, which in May 2022 – when holding the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU – quickly advanced debates to follow up on the Conference's results.⁴⁶

In fact, visions of the EU as a polity, which requires greater federalization, are politically and institutionally contested by competing visions of the EU as a market, or an autocracy, which push in very different directions.

Most importantly, the idea of following up to the Conference on the Future of Europe with treaty changes has been supported by the EP,⁴⁷ which on 9 June 2022 put forward a proposal calling for a Convention to revise the treaties,⁴⁸ with a specific proposal to amend Article 48(7) TFEU to enable the European Council to trigger the passerelle clauses by QMV,⁴⁹ rather than unanimity.⁵⁰ In fact, in a resolution approved in November 2023 the EP proposed a detailed list of amendments to the EU treaties, dealing both with substantive competences and institutional mechanisms of decision-making, and called for the convening of a convention under Article 48(3) TEU to examine them.⁵¹ Furthermore, in another resolution adopted in February 2024, the EP called for a deepening of EU integration in view of future enlargements,⁵² stating that 'widening and deepening the EU must go in parallel'⁵³ but clarifying that 'pre-enlargement reforms are needed to guarantee the efficient functioning of the enlarged EU and its capacity to absorb new members.'⁵⁴

While the European Commission as an institution has taken a wait-and-see approach on how to follow up to the Conference,⁵⁵ its President Ursula von der Leyen has more explicitly endorsed the idea of treaty reform. At the Conference's conclusion, the President spoke of 'using the full limits of what we can do

within the Treaties, or, yes, by changing the Treaties if need be.'⁵⁶ Moreover, in the guidelines she presented in July 2024 to EP for her re-election as President of the Commission, von der Leyen stated that '[w]hile reforms were necessary before, with enlargement they become indispensable. [...] I believe we need Treaty change.'⁵⁷ The European Council, instead, in its 23 June 2022 meeting, only remarked that 'The Conference has been a unique opportunity'⁵⁸ and stated that 'An effective follow-up [...] is to be ensured by the institutions [...] in accordance with the Treaties'⁵⁹

Nevertheless, the enthusiasm for constitutional change generated by the Conference in some quarters was met with equally resolute opposition in others. In particular, in a joint non-paper released on the very same day of the Conference's conclusion, in May 2022, 13 member states from Northern and Eastern Europe clearly indicated that they did 'not support unconsidered and premature attempts to launch a process towards Treaty change.'⁶⁰ In fact, visions of the EU as a polity, which requires greater federalization, are politically and institutionally contested by competing visions of the EU as a market, or an autocracy, which push in very different directions.⁶¹ For instance, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban – who has recently established a new EP far-right

34] Ibid., Proposal 36, recommendation 7.
35] Ibid., Proposal 38, recommendation 2.
36] Ibid., recommendation 3.
37] Ibid., recommendation 4.
38] Ibid., Proposal 39, recommendation 7.
39] Ibid.
40] See further on this Matej Avbelj, "Revitalisation of EU Constitutionalism" (2021) 46 *European Law Review* 1.
41] See further, Stefan Lehne, 'Does the EU Need Treaty Change?', Carnegie Europe, 16 June 2022 and Eric Maurice et al, 'Conférence sur l'avenir de l'Europe: la mise en oeuvre complexe de grandes ambitions', Fondation Robert Schuman, 20 June 2022.
42] French President Emmanuel Macron, speech, Strasbourg, 9 May 2022.
43] Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi, Speech at the European Parliament, 3 May 2022, official English translation available at <https://www.governo.it/en/articolo/prime-minister-mario-draghi-s-address-european-parliament/19748>
44] Non paper submitted by Germany, Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Spain on implementing the proposals of the Plenary of the 'Conference on the Future of Europe', 13 May 2022.
45] Irish Taoiseach Michael Martin, Speech at the European Parliament, 8 June 2022.
46] See Council of the EU, Note from the Presidency, 'Council methodology for the follow-up to the proposals of the Conference on the Future of Europe', 17 May 2022.

47] IEuropean Parliament resolution of 4 May 2022 on the follow-up to the conclusions of the Conference on the Future of Europe, P9_TA(2022)0141.
48] See European Parliament resolution of 9 June 2022 on the call for a Convention for the revision of the Treaties, P9_TA(2022)0244.
49] Ibid. para 6.
50] See supra section 3.3.
51] European Parliament resolution of 22 November 2023 on proposals of the European Parliament for the amendment of the Treaties, P9_TA(2023)0427.
52] European Parliament resolution of 29 February 2024 on deepening EU integration in view of future enlargement, P9_TA(2024)0120.
53] Ibid para K.
54] Ibid para U.
55] European Commission Communication, 'Conference on the Future of Europe: Putting Vision into Concrete Action', 17 June 2022, COM(2022)404 final.
56] Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen, speech, Strasbourg, 9 May 2022, SPEECH/22/2944.
57] European Commission President-elect Ursula von der Leyen, "Europe's Choice : Political Guidelines for the next European Commission 2024-2029", 18 July 2024, 30.
58] European Council, 23-24 June 2022, EUCO 24/22, para 25.
59] Ibid., para 26.
60] Government of Sweden, press release, 9 May 2022.
61] Fabbrini (n [Brexit book]).

parliamentary group named “Patriots for Europe” (now the 3rd largest fraction in the EP) – has supported the idea to change the treaties but to re-nationalize competences, and give more powers back to the member states, for instance exempting them from EU migration rules.⁶² As a result, the implementation of the Conference’s outcome has stalled: 2 years after the Conference’s end, its most ground-breaking proposals remain on hold, and the EP request to call a Convention to revise the Treaties has not even been considered by the Council.

Given the obstacles to amending the EU treaties,⁶³ several alternative options have recently moved at the center of debates on how to prepare for an enlarged EU. In particular, the use of *passerelle* clauses to change decision-making rules, notably in CFSP, has been increasingly considered.⁶⁴ *Passerelles* allow for a shift from unanimity voting to qualified majority voting (QMV) in the Council of the EU, *à traité constant*. Article 48(7) TEU foresees generally that when the EU treaties provide ‘for the Council to act by unanimity in a given area or case, the European Council may adopt a decision authorising the Council to act by a qualified majority in that area or in that case.’ Moreover, specific *passerelle* clauses are scattered across the treaties for specific policies.⁶⁵ Building on this, on 4 May 2023, 9 member states – Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Spain, and Slovenia: all but the latter from Western Europe – released a joint statement launching the group of friends of QMV in CFSP.⁶⁶ This was followed by a supportive resolution of the EP on 11 July 2023, which called for using *passerelle* at the earliest.⁶⁷

Yet, the strategy to leverage the *passerelle* clauses has its hurdles. On the one hand, triggering a *passerelle* would still require unanimity in the European Council, which is not a given, due to the

hold-out position of several member states. Furthermore, Article 48(7) TEU empowers a single national parliament to block the use of a *passerelle*, even if approved by heads of state and government in the European Council, within six months. Lastly, the same provision explicitly prohibits applying the *passerelle* ‘to decisions with military implications or those in the area of defence.’ On the other hand, there is no escaping that the *passerelle* can achieve only so much. The EU governance structure suffers a number of shortcomings, and enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of the EU requires adjustments which can only be addressed through proper treaty changes. For example, a greater role for the EP in fiscal and budgetary matters is a democratic need, especially after the establishment of the NGEU, but this can be achieved only through revisions of several treaty provisions.⁶⁸

Given these challenges, however, policy-makers have increasingly looked also at alternative options to advance European integration. In particular, a group of experts jointly appointed by the French and German Governments proposed in September 2023 a series of recommendations to reform and enlarge the EU for the 21st century.⁶⁹ Their report outlined six options for reforms, including the approval of a supplementary reform treaty between willing member states if there is deadlock on treaty change.⁷⁰ Indeed, there are precedents of groups of vanguard member states that have concluded separate inter-se intergovernmental agreements on the side of the EU,⁷¹ and differentiated integration has admittedly become a feature of the contemporary EU.⁷² Along this line, a proposal would be to adopt a Political Compact to advance integration overcoming the veto of hostile member states.⁷³ Otherwise, Article 49 TEU states that institutional adjustments to the EU and its functioning can also be achieved in the framework of new accession treaties: while this provision

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has traditionally been interpreted to refer only to the minimal changes to the institutions that necessarily result from the entry of a new EU member state, a more ambitious reading of it would be to tie enlargement and wider reforms into a single agreement.⁷⁴ Yet, this avenue would delay EU reforms until enlargement happens – and it remains to be seen if the accession of new member states, including Ukraine, to the EU is feasible at all.⁷⁵

5. Conclusion

The Conference on the Future of Europe has been an out-of-the box initiative to relaunch the project of European integration, after Brexit, beyond the Covid-19 pandemic and during the war in Ukraine. This innovative experiment in transnational partici-

patory democracy however has revealed a number of weaknesses – including in connection to the implementation of its results. While European citizens, operating from the bottom up, pleaded for a strengthening of the EU in a more federal and sovereign direction, the institutional follow-up to the Conference has been underwhelming, and the process of treaty change has stalled. The Conference, however, concluded its work at a dynamic time for the process of European integration, as the war in Ukraine revived the prospect of enlargement, and consequently the issue of constitutional change. If the EU can mobilize the political will to change the EU treaties, the recommendations of the Conference can serve as a blueprint for institutional reforms, as the EP and others have justly pointed out.

62] See Andras Sajó, *Ruling by Cheating* (CUP 2020).

63] See also Dermot Hodson & Imelda Maher, *The Transformation of EU Treaty Making* (CUP 2018).

64] See Ramses Wessel & Viktor Szép, “The implementation of Article 31 of the TEU and the use of qualified majority voting”, study requested by the European Parliament Constitutional Affairs Committee, November 2022.

65] See art 81(3) TFEU (measures concerning family law), art 153(2) TFEU (measures concerning employment and social security), art 192(2) TFEU (measures concerning environmental policy), art 312(2) TFEU (measures related to the MFF).

66] Joint Statement of the Foreign Ministries on the Launch of the Group of Friends on Qualified Majority Voting in EU Common Foreign and Security Policy, 4 May 2023.

67] European Parliament resolution of 11 July 2023 on the implementation of the *passerelle* clauses in the EU Treaties, P9_TA(2023)0269.

68] Federico Fabbrini, *EU Fiscal Capacity: Legal Integration after Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine* (OUP 2022) 141.

69] See Report of the Franco-German working group on EU institutional reform, “Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century”, Paris-Berlin, 19 September 2023.

70] Ibid p 35 ff.

71] See e.g. Treaty Establishing the European Stability Mechanism, 25 March 2011; and Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union, 2 March 2012.

72] See Frank Schimmelfenning & Thomas Winzen, *Ever Looser Union? Differentiated European Integration* (OUP 2020).

73] See further Federico Fabbrini, “Possible Avenues towards Further Political Integration: A Political Compact for a More Democratic and Effective Union”, study commissioned by the European Parliament Constitutional Affairs Committee, June 2020.

74] See also Bruno de Witte, “Constitutional Challenges of the Enlargement: Is Further Enlargement Feasible without Constitutional Change”, study commissioned by the European Parliament Constitutional Affairs Committee, March 2019, 4.

75] Sylvie Goulard, *L’Europe enfla si bien qu’elle creva : De 27 à 36 Etats ?* (Tallandier 2024).

The EU and the US after Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: A New Convergence on Strategic Autonomy?



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Introduction

The changing international context and the associated series of crises – from the euro zone to migration crisis to the Brexit process and finally the Russian aggression against Ukraine – have triggered a new wave of strategic reflection among EU institutions and member states. The dominant perception of 'existential crisis, within and beyond the European Union' and the related sense of urgency of being 'under threat' turned EU leaders into an increasingly defensive and inward-looking posture as evident from the 2016 EU Global Strategy (EEAS, 2016: 7). The imperative to provide protection to EU territory and

citizens have raised to the top of EU decision-makers' agenda, and with it, security and defence policy have become a priority once again after years of neglect. Ten years ago, former President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker revived the notion of an 'EU army' suggesting that Europe needs 'integrated defence capacities' to complement its soft power (Juncker, 2014: 11). This idea was picked up by the current President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen who pledged to turn the Commission into a 'geopolitical' actor and claimed that the EU needs to learn 'the language of power' (Deutsche Welle, 2019). Meanwhile, European countries continue to rely on NATO, and

even the 2016 EU Global Strategy, which advocated the goal of EU strategic autonomy, stated that 'NATO remains the primary framework' in matters of collective defence (EEAS, 2016: 20).

The EU's growing 'Machiavellian moment' (Van Middelaar, 2019) – the realization that Europe's security and sovereignty need to be actively defended – was not only confined to Brussels-based actors. In response to US President Donald Trump's initial refusal to uphold US security guarantees, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel declared that 'we, Europeans, must take our destiny into our own hands' (Chhor, 2017). Likewise, French President Emmanuel Macron built his electoral campaign in 2017 under the slogan 'Europe that protects'. The mounting sentiments about self-reliance, agency and hard power coalesced around the doctrine of strategic autonomy, with President of the European Council, Charles Michel, declaring in 2020 that strategic autonomy for Europe is 'the aim of our generation' and 'a credo that brings us together to define our destiny' (Council of the EU, 2020). Meanwhile, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine launched in February 2022 presented a new turn in the political debates about EU strategic autonomy, calling for further academic analysis and discussion.

The key finding of my research is that key European allies – France, Germany and Poland – have grown increasingly like-minded in their views and preferences on key dimensions of EU strategic autonomy. Moreover, the Russian aggression have created unprecedented unity among Europeans and triggered a boost in EU defence capabilities. However, the EU's 'geopolitical awakening' has unfolded at a moment when Washington has tried to regain lost grounds in global leadership, demonstrating the indispensable role of the US and NATO to European security and defence. This raises the question of the perceived room for, and nature of, EU strategic autonomy in a world order charac-

terized by great-power rivalry and confrontation, which will be addressed at the end of the chapter.

Strategic Autonomy and the External Threat Environment

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 have accelerated the tendency toward converging threat perceptions. The war against Ukraine has helped to close the gap on how Russia is viewed in Poland on the one hand, and in France and Germany on the other. According to a public opinion survey, 70 per cent of the German and 64 per cent of the French population now consider Russia as Europe's rival or adversary, which is close to how it is perceived also in Poland (Puglierin and Zerka, 2023). Germany's long-awaited National Security Strategy published in June 2023 acknowledges that Russia is 'the most significant threat to peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic area' (German Foreign Office, 2023: 22). If prior to February 2022 German policymakers debated whether Russian intentions are defensive or offensive, today there is little doubt that if Ukraine loses the war, Russia will persist with its imperial ambitions. Indeed, German authorities have revealed their intelligence findings which expect Russia to attack NATO countries within the next 10 years (Camut, 2024).

Similarly, French strategic planners note that Russia's war on Ukraine 'makes it necessary to anticipate confrontation with Moscow' (French Republic, 2022: 10). In a major about face, President Macron has recently admitted that Russia is an existential threat to France and the whole of Europe (Goury-Laffont, 2024). French legislators take it even further by arguing that 'if Russian aggression proves profitable for the aggressor, it would be a sort of "green light" to all attempts to destabilize the international order' (French Senate, 2023: 5). The revised assessment of the country's external environment by the French elites signals a shift in the deeply entrenched French strategic paradigm according

The radical change of how Russia is viewed in France and Germany, and the related convergence of threat perceptions across the EU, indicates a paradigm shift, or a third order change in Hall's words, on this parameter.

to which Russia had been an undeniable pillar of a European security order (Cadier, 2018).

Likewise, the emerging conviction among German leaders that European security can only be achieved against Russia and not with Russia, as previously preached, is widely perceived as *Zeitenwende* – a watershed moment that alters the country's long-standing foreign policy beliefs (Bunde, 2022). Trade and interdependence that drove Germany's Russian policy for decades have now been replaced with military deterrence and sanctions as new organizing principles. The radical change of how Russia is viewed in France and Germany, and the related convergence of threat perceptions across the EU, indicates a paradigm shift, or a third order change in Hall's words, on this parameter.

Strategic Autonomy and the Ends-Means Conundrum

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the EU's unified position on the Russian threat provided the CSDP with a spectacular boost (Casier, 2023). On 10-11 March 2022, French President Macron convened an informal summit of EU leaders to chart out a joint course of action following the war outbreak. It led to the Versailles Declaration, where EU member states committed to enhance the EU's capacity to act autonomously in the field of security and pledged to bolster EU defence capabili-

ties. A few weeks later, EU member states adopted the Strategic Compass which had to be rewritten to reflect 'a tectonic shift' in Europe's security environment. As the document put it (EEAS, 2022: 5), 'the war against Ukraine is making it more urgent to achieve a sea change in EU security and defence. [...] Today, no one denies that we need robust capabilities and the willingness to use them against the full spectrum of threats we face'. This rhetoric signals that the full-scale Russian aggression could lead to profound changes in EU security and defence instruments and objectives.

The EU's aspirational rhetoric has indeed followed up with a series of landmark measures. First, the EU has become an actual supplier of military assistance to Ukraine breaking up with a long-standing taboo of not supplying arms to countries at war. In doing so, the EU relies on the European Peace Facility (EPF), an off-budget instrument created in March 2021 to support defence capacity building of the EU's partners. By September 2024, the EU mobilised €43.5 billion in military aid to Ukraine, which includes the EPF assistance packages and EU member states' bilateral contributions (Dombrovskis, 2024). Germany has topped the list of leading providers of military assistance among EU members.

The transatlantic partnership has served the EU well in helping the Union to achieve its security goals, but it also presents a fundamental dilemma: the EU cannot claim the mantle of independent leadership and project the image of a serious global player, when at the same time it continues to outsource its security to the US, even when it comes to dealing with threats in Europe's immediate neighbourhood

Second, in October 2022, the EU decided to establish a CSDP military assistance mission (EUMAM) to train tens of thousands of Ukrainian military personnel on the territory of EU member states. Unlike the EU's previous efforts to build capacity of partner countries against irregular non-state forces, the EU is now committed to provide training against a conventional battle-hardened army of a nuclear armed adversary. The mission drew a record high number of participants – 24 member states and a number of third countries – which compelled High Representative Josep Borrell (Borrell, 2022) to suggest that EUMAM 'is pushing the boundaries of the European Union military cooperation [to] new levels'.

Third, the EU institutions have activated their efforts to strengthen European defence industrial capabilities. Following the analysis of defence investment gaps, the European Commission pushed forward new instruments to incentivise joint defence procurement (EDIRPA) and to stimulate defence industrial output (EDIP) among member states. In addition, the EU ramps up its industrial capacities to jointly procure and deliver ammunition for Ukraine. In all these decisions, the alignment of France, Germany and Poland was critical.

In conjunction with rising military spending, the steps taken by the EU and its member states to strengthen its defence capabilities and to develop respective financial, institutional and industrial instruments represent a great boost to the EU's ambition of strategic autonomy. By providing lethal military aid to Ukraine and by training Ukrainian armed forces through its military assistance mission, the EU provides the most tangible and direct contribution to the protection of Europe since the creation of CSDP. Reinforced by convergence among France, Germany and Poland, the EU undergoes a shift toward greater acceptance of the use of force and military power as a necessary policy instrument. This is significant, as it goes against the EU's foundational beliefs and principles that reject power politics and military capabilities as legitimate instruments of statecraft.

Strategic Autonomy and the Method of Dependence

The EU's perpetual modus operandi in security and defence policy is that it exercises its security interests under the umbrella of the US military deterrent. The transatlantic partnership has served the EU well in helping the Union to achieve its security goals, but it also presents a fundamental dilemma: the EU cannot claim the mantle of independent leadership and project the image of a serious global player, when at the same time it continues to outsource its security to the US, even when it comes to dealing with threats in Europe's immediate neighbourhood (Romanyshyn, 2021). Addressing the power asymmetry in the transatlantic partnership is a sensible response to the perceived hesitancy of Washington's commitment to its European allies, but it risks triggering a US withdrawal from Europe altogether – the very scenario most European leaders wish to avoid.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has put the ambition of EU strategic autonomy to a reality check and has clearly underlined Europe's dependence on the US security guarantees. First, the war has reinforced the centrality of US military power in Europe. Following the Russian invasion in February 2022, the Biden administration has rapidly increased American troops footprint in Europe from about 80,000 to more than 100,000 and has taken measures to fortify NATO's eastern flank with US military equipment (O'Hanlon, 2022). Second, the US has exercised the undisputed leadership in responding to Russia's military assault on Ukraine. Washington is a clear frontrunner in terms of providing military aid to Ukraine and has pulled its strings to institutionalize military support from other allies through the Ukraine Defence Contact Group ('Rammstein Group'). Europeans have tied themselves politically to the US, as evidenced in German Chancellor Scholz's request to allow supplies of 'Leopard' battle tanks to Ukraine only after Washington greenlighted deliveries of their own 'Abrams' tanks. The EU's dependence on the US has grown also in operational terms, as many member states rushed to replenish their emptied stocks of defence equipment with mostly American military gear (Bergmann and Besch,

2023). As a result of the increased dependence, Europeans today converge even more on a shared fear about the eventuality of the US disengagement from European security.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has also contributed to recalibration of EU-NATO relations with important consequences for EU strategic autonomy. According to the Alliance's new Strategic Concept, NATO is returning to its original mission of guaranteeing collective security of its members against Russia (NATO, 2022). The scale of Russia's conventional warfare leaves no one in doubt today about the foundational need for NATO, rather than the EU, to organize the continent's collective defence (Szewczyk, 2022). NATO's primacy was reiterated in the EU-NATO third Joint Declaration, which insisted that 'NATO remains the foundation of collective defence for its Allies and essential for Euro Atlantic security' (European Council, 2023). In this context, Finland's and Sweden's joint decision to abandon the non-aligned stance is very illustrative. As non-NATO EU members, Stockholm and Helsinki consistently used to put high premium on the EU's mutual assistance clause. Faced with an aggressive Russia at their doorstep, both Nordic states quickly opted for NATO's protective umbrella undersigned with US and UK security guarantees. Even French President Macron conceded the need to walk back his 2019 comments about the Alliance describing it as 'brain dead'. Admitting the complementarity between the two organisations, Macron (2023) has insisted that EU strategic autonomy is not meant 'to replace NATO', but instead to build 'a European pillar within NATO'. The latter is not set to curtail the EU's ambition as

a security and defence actor, but rather implies a greater degree of transatlantic cohesion with the EU growing into 'a muscled-up junior partner to the US and NATO' (Helwig, 2023: 65).

Conclusions

Drawing evidence from the analysis of the three components of strategic autonomy allows me to conclude that EU strategic autonomy as a dominant policy paradigm in security and defence has undergone important changes over the last decade, but these changes have so far failed to amount to a genuine paradigm shift in grand strategy. While the Russian aggression has created unprecedented unity among Europeans and triggered a boost in EU defence capabilities, the EU's 'geopolitical awakening' unfolded squarely in the context of the US and NATO maintaining their primacy and leadership in European security. Whether this outcome represents a return to a familiar status quo in the transatlantic partnership, wherein the US leads and Europe follows, is an open question that will likely be shaped by the outcome of the ongoing war in Ukraine, domestic politics in the US and the propensity of escalating competition with China (Martin and Sinkkonen, 2022). Regardless of what scenario will prevail in the future, one bottom line seems to become clear over the course of past years: there is no contradiction between Europe's ability to act and Europe's capacity to be a good ally, just like the EU and NATO both are necessary and complementary for the defence of Europe. The EU strategic autonomy therefore can be achieved through the long-term investment in the mutually beneficial transatlantic partnership.

While the Russian aggression has created unprecedented unity among Europeans and triggered a boost in EU defence capabilities, the EU's 'geopolitical awakening' unfolded squarely in the context of the US and NATO maintaining their primacy and leadership in European security.

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Interview: Reflections on the EU's Asylum Policy



Interview with Dr Marie Walter-Franke, Charlemagne Prize Fellow 2019/20

Marie Walter-Franke is Researcher at the Expert Council on Integration and Migration (SVR), with a focus on refugee naturalisation and integration processes. She was awarded her doctorate by Freie Universität Berlin in 2023 for her thesis on EU asylum governance. Marie Walter-Franke studied politics at Sciences Po Paris and the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), majoring in European studies and migration research. She has previously worked on the German Council on Foreign Relations' migration programme, for the Jacques Delors Centre, the European Commission and the International Labour Organization (ILO).

1. Five years ago, you raised the question of how the EU could counter political fragmentation through a clearer asylum policy while safeguarding fundamental human rights. Now, following last year's European elections and various national elections in member states, we face a greater threat from nationalist and isolationist movements than ever before. At the same time, countless lives are still being lost on the way to Europe, with additional conflicts and crises exacerbating the situation. What could or should European policymakers have done differently?

Thank you for inviting me to reflect on asylum and migration policy, five years after my fellowship with the Charlemagne Prize Academy. Much has happened since I began the project "Redeploying the EU's Asylum Policy" in 2019. What could or should European policymakers have done differently? If there were a straightforward answer, this would be well known. It is essential to recognize the tremendous challenges EU policymakers have faced over the last decade, many of which have migration dimensions or direct impacts on forced migration.

Unfortunately, while efforts at reforming the Common European Asylum Policy succeeded in 2024, they have not reversed the trend of fragmentation, nor improved respect for fundamental human rights or the rule of law in member states. The agreements reached were highly path-dependent, offering limited policy innovation and focusing on the lowest common denominator: border protection and reducing arrival numbers. This stems from the heterogeneity of member states' interests and priorities. The main challenge was not designing an effective asylum system that benefits both refugees and member states; it was reconciling conflicting priorities within a single framework.

The 2024 reforms intricately tied border management and return policies into an overly complex asylum system that essentially legitimized the status quo. For example, border procedures based on detention and exceptions to minimum standards during crises failed to foster solidarity within the EU. Moreover, these measures did not adequately address deficits in refugee protection or access to asylum.

The main challenge was not designing an effective asylum system that benefits both refugees and member states; it was reconciling conflicting priorities within a single framework.

Critics of the New Pact now argue that full implementation of the new rules is preferable to the previous lack of enforcement, even if flawed. Policymakers might have achieved more by prioritizing enforcement of the existing system as better outcomes of a broader sustainability agenda. Specifically, since 2019, efforts could have focused on building asylum management and reception capacity, investing in integration to address the EU's demographic deficit, and upholding the rule of law, including respect for the Charter of Fundamental Rights. How Europe treats forced migrants reflects the levels of resilience ... and of cohesion within host societies. Defensive asylum and migration policies reveal societal insecurity and the fragility of the rule of law. Despite being costly and ineffective, Europe continues down this path, driven by dual fears: fear of numbers and fear of the electorate.

2. In your research project, you focused on proposals to improve the structural design of EU asylum policy. Have any of the points you advocated for been reflected in the reforms introduced since then?

During my fellowship at the Charlemagne Prize Academy, I examined the securitized framing of asylum policy at the EU level and identified ways to reshape it to benefit the EU integration project, member states, European societies, and refugees while upholding fundamental rights. I pursued this approach because, as an academic, I noticed that migration research often decon-

structs and critiques EU policies without providing actionable alternatives beyond calls to respect human rights. I aimed to outline how this could be practically achieved.

At the time, the EU was grappling with stalled negotiations on the 2016 asylum package. My analysis considered how to restart productive policymaking. I traced how policy framing had evolved in the EU's history of asylum, migration, and border policy and found that concentrating agenda-setting, legislative drafting, budget management, and policy implementation within the Commission's Directorate-General for Home Affairs (DG HOME) perpetuated a securitized framing inherited from early intergovernmental integration. I proposed "redeploying" asylum policy elements across various Directorates-General (DGs), so that responsibilities like emergency management, socio-economic integration, and child protection would fall under corresponding DGs with different policy perspectives.

While some migration and asylum issues have since been mainstreamed across broader policy areas, such as those handled by the External Action Service (EEAS), DG INTPA (International Partnerships), and DG NEAR (European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations), these efforts remain limited to migration-related foreign policy. Domestically, asylum policymaking, implementation monitoring, and budgeting remain centralized in DG HOME, restricting the broader perspective I advocated.

3. *What do you consider the EU's most significant achievement in asylum policy in recent years, and what measures do you see as urgently necessary for the EU to move toward greater unity and effectiveness in this area?*

In my view, the reception of Ukrainian refugees stands as the most significant achievement in recent years. Despite widespread hostility toward migration in many member states, this success resulted from four key factors:

1. **Unified Foreign Policy:** The conflict was a war of aggression by Russia aimed at distancing Ukraine from the EU and the West. Allowing Ukrainian refugees into the EU countered this geopolitical threat.

2. **Visa-Free Travel:** A pre-existing agreement enabled member states to facilitate entry and allow Ukrainians to settle autonomously.

3. **2015/2016 Lessons:** Policymakers recognized the inadequacies of the existing asylum system to process the large-scale protection needs of Ukrainian refugees. The 2001 Temporary Protection Directive, still in force, enabled group-based protection.

4. **Societal Acceptance:** High public support for integrating Ukrainians limited electoral risks in the short term.

Unfortunately, the 2024 EU asylum reform failed to draw on lessons from this experience. Instead, policymakers treated the Ukrainian situation as exceptional, disregarding its potential as a blueprint for managing high numbers of arrivals pragmatically.

Looking ahead, urgent measures include determining what happens after temporary protection for Ukrainians and providing clear, unified pathways for their futures. Another critical area is preparing the asylum system to respond to regime changes, such as the transition in Syria, in ways that benefit the EU, refugees, and democratic developments in countries of origin. Maximizing agency and freedom of movement is key, as ample evidence on the benefits of circular migration shows.

4. *How would you assess the relevance of your research output today compared to 2020?*

The 2024 reform of the Common European Asylum System did not address the primary challenge of asymmetrical responsibility distribution. Instead, it entrenched costly, ineffective practices that undermine fundamental rights, such as border procedures, detention, and punitive measures. Currently, externalizing asylum processing to third countries dominates the conversation.

Attempts involving Albania and Rwanda have proven costly flops, whether they had a deterrent effect is unclear. Facing a lack of results, the EU will sooner or later need to develop a vision for humanitarian protection that is not merely reactive and defensive. This is where ideas like “redeployment” can become relevant. Forced migration is inherently multidimensional and should not be siloed as a single policy issue. Instead, it should be integrated into broader policy discussions on redistribution, education, housing, labor, and climate change. With the reform phase over, there is now an opportunity to focus on implementation, using a multidimensional approach.

5. *What are the major challenges you foresee in the coming years in the context of migration and asylum?*

The greatest challenge will be addressing decades of misguided policy narratives. Migration cannot be controlled; it can only be managed. When people flee for their lives or seek better prospects, attempts to stop them are unsustainable. The focus must shift to providing meaningful options for people on the move.

Relying on state violence does not sustainably shape migration. What it does is undermine the EU's core values of rule of law, fundamental rights, and human dignity. Violations of international, European and national asylum standards are already happening across the continent and taking a toll on the credibility of the rule of law in the EU. This is poison for liberal democracy. Refugees and migrants are always among the first to suffer when state institutions take an authoritarian turn. Europe's urgent need for labor migration could help shift these harmful narratives. Syria's potential stabilization offers an illustrative case. If the country transitions toward democracy and European countries continue making Syrians feel unwelcome, many may leave, deepening workforce gaps in essential sectors. Policymakers must embrace a forward-looking, humane approach to migration management that reflects Europe's values and long-term interests.

The greatest challenge will be addressing decades of misguided policy narratives. Migration cannot be controlled; it can only be managed.

Analysis of Framing Methods for Natural Resource Protection in Light of Recent Political Changes



Dr Max Jacobs, Charlemagne Prize Fellow 2021/22

Max Jacobs is a policy advisor at Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action, where he focuses on international cybersecurity cooperation in the energy sector. In this role, he leads multilateral initiatives with partners from the U.S., Israel, and Australia to develop strategies for protecting critical energy infrastructure against evolving cyber threats. During his Charlemagne Prize Fellowship, he was a Weatherhead Scholar at Harvard University.

Since my original analysis in 2022, there have been significant political developments in the United States and the European Union, which consequently shaped and developed the discourse about natural resource protection. In the U.S., notably the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), set economic incentives for investments into green technologies, and in the European Union the Green Deal Industrial Plan emphasized sustainable growth and environmental protection.

The found insights from the original study have largely held their ground but require now nuanced adjustments to reflect the evolving policy priorities, new geopolitical pressures, and last but not least public sentiment.

U.S. Political Changes and Framing of Natural Resources

The U.S. underwent a noticeable shift in climate and environmental policies with the implementation of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) in 2022. This legislative initiative, which represents the most significant climate-related investment in U.S. history, has brought natural resource framing into sharper focus. The framing recommendations from my original study remain relevant but manifest now in new ways:

1. Juxtaposing Financial Gains/Losses and Courses of Action:

The IRA explicitly incorporates the financial benefits of transitioning to renewable energy, offering incentives for solar, wind, and electric vehicle adoption. US Policymakers have therefore successfully framed the economic advantages of green energy

investments as outweighing the costs of inaction. This mirrors the first approach of the original study: presenting a clear financial comparison to create a compelling narrative. For instance, the Biden administration highlighted with the IRA job creation and long-term energy savings, in trying to appeal to voters' economic interests. Anyhow, in the recent presidential election the economic argument was won by President Trump with his conservative take on economic policies, arguing against furthering the green transition.

2. Ideological Valuing of Natural Resources: The ideological framing of environmental protection has also gained prominence in the U.S., particularly as the evolving climate crisis is increasingly tied to national security interests. Politicians have framed renewable energy as a pathway to energy independence, appealing to the deeply ingrained American value of autonomy. This builds on the second approach, effectively using context-specific values—like freedom and resilience—to strengthen support for conservation policies.

3. Evoking 'Loss Aversion': The fear of losing economic competitiveness to China and other nations has been used to evoke loss aversion in the context of natural resources and energy policies. The IRA has been marketed as a safeguard against losing the opportunity to dominate global renewable energy markets. This framing of environmental action as a necessary step to prevent economic loss aligns closely with the third recommendation of the original study.

European Union's Updated Working Program

The European Union's Green Deal Industrial Plan (2023) and its focus on achieving climate neutrality have brought further relevance to the original findings of the study. The EU has doubled down on strategies that align with the three framing approaches:

1. Financial Gains/Losses in Climate Action: The EU has leaned into economic comparisons by promoting the financial benefits of investing in renewable technologies versus the long-term costs of environmental degradation. For example, the Commission's promotion of the Net-Zero Industry Act emphasizes Europe's leadership in green technology manufacturing as a pathway to economic growth, paralleling the financial comparison approach outlined in the original study.

2. Ideological Valuing of Natural Resources: European policymakers continue to frame environmental policies in terms of shared European values, such as solidarity and sustainability. The Green Deal Industrial Plan explicitly ties climate action to maintaining a high quality of life and ensuring future prosperity, which aligns with the framing approach to leverage ideological values in framing natural resource conservation.

3. Loss Aversion in Depletion Accounting: The EU has further institutionalized natural capital accounting, with the updated SEEA Central Framework being adopted across member states. Loss aversion framing is increasingly used in reports detailing the economic risks of inaction on climate policies, as well as in public communications about biodiversity loss and resource depletion. By emphasizing the irreversible losses associated with inaction, the EU reinforces the loss aversion approach.

Changes in Public Discourse and Geopolitical Context

The past three years have also seen shifts in public sentiment and geopolitical context, that led to the adjustment of framing of natural resource protection:

1. Energy Security and Geopolitical Stability: The Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022) brought energy security to the forefront of European discourse, influencing how natural resource protection is framed. In both the EU and the U.S., environmental policies are now linked to reducing reliance on fossil fuel imports, a framing that combines economic and ideological elements to appeal to a wider audience.

2. Social Equity and Climate Justice: Both regions have seen growing attention to social equity in environmental policy. In the U.S., the IRA includes provisions for disadvantaged communities, framing natural resource protection as a pathway to environmental justice. Similarly, the EU has highlighted the social benefits of the Green Deal to ensure public buy-in, emphasizing fairness and shared responsibility. Where climate policy failed to deliver on this level a major backlash against these initiatives could be seen as with the German Heating Bill that requires costly investment into green heating systems.

New Challenges and Opportunities for Framing

Despite these advancements, new challenges have emerged:

1. Polarization in the U.S.: Political polarization continues to pose a significant barrier to effective framing beyond the own party audience. While financial comparisons resonate with business-oriented audiences, ideological framings often exacerbate divisions. This underscores the importance of tailoring framing strategies to specific audiences.

2. Economic Pressures in Europe: The EU faces mounting economic challenges, including inflation and energy price volatility, which complicate the framing of climate policies. Loss aversion approaches that highlight the economic risks of inaction may need to be emphasized further to maintain public and political support.

3. Global Competition: The intensifying race for green technology leadership, particularly with China, creates an opportunity

to frame natural resource protection as essential for economic competitiveness. A major example for this is the race for the Global Electric Vehicles Market. This argument appeals to both business and political stakeholders.

Conclusion

The original study’s findings remain robust and continue to inform effective political communication about natural resource protection. However, the evolving political landscape in the U.S. and EU has introduced new contexts that require adaptations to framing strategies. Policymakers must balance financial, ideological, and loss aversion framings to appeal to diverse audiences, mitigate polarization, and address the challenges of a rapidly changing world. The integration of these strategies remains essential for fostering public and political support for sustainable policies in both regions

Policymakers must balance financial, ideological, and loss aversion framings to appeal to diverse audiences, mitigate polarization, and address the challenges of a rapidly changing world.

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Leading in AI to Regulating AI?



Justinas Lingevičius, Charlemagne Prize Fellow 2020/21

Justinas Lingevičius is a PhD candidate in International Relations, specializing in the intersection of technology and security. His research explores AI norm formulation within the European Union. With a background in diplomacy, policy analysis, and editorial work, he has contributed to the British and Dutch embassies in Vilnius and served as a Fellow of the Charlemagne Prize Academy in 2020/21. In 2023, the Research Council of Lithuania recognized his outstanding doctoral achievements. Currently, he is a member of the Early Career Research Development Group at EISA and Researcher at Vilnius University.

At first glance, revisiting the recommendations related to the EU's ambiguous position towards military Artificial Intelligence (AI) from the 2022 Charlemagne Prize Academy Report seemed challenging - too little time has passed to assess meaningful change. This is particularly true regarding the European Union's (EU) AI policy, as the AI Act only came into force in August 2024 after complex negotiations. At that time, I introduced recommendations focused on a more coordinated EU's approach towards military AI, reassessment of the Cold-War terminology that does not fit AI-related dynamics, and more specific implementation of the human-centric approach tangible to concerns and responsibilities. Meanwhile, since 2022, the security landscape in the

EU has shifted dramatically, showcasing the EU's increased willingness to openly discuss defense and adopt strategic policy directions. However, military AI remains notably absent from these discussions and already taken decisions.

This is concerning, given the use of AI applications in the battlefield - most recently in Ukraine and Gaza. For example, the use of AI in Ukraine for intelligence, targeting, communications, and cyber defence highlights how AI's role in the battlefield is expanding beyond traditional civil-military divides. Similarly, Israel's use of AI systems like 'The Gospel' and 'Lavender' for data analysis and targeting raises further questions about de-

While there is a more open conversation about defence and enhanced European capabilities through the defence industry, discussions on military-related AI applications remain limited and even blurred.

cision-making processes and accountability⁷⁶. These examples suggest that military AI is already being deployed in ways that challenge existing frameworks and question to what extent proposed measures of AI governance can respond and address such practices.

More attention to defence

The EU has not yet specifically responded to the evolving use of AI on the battlefield. Despite discussions and negotiations, the AI Act has anchored the provision that the Regulation excludes AI systems for military, defence, or national security purposes, leaving these matters to Member States. On the other hand, expectations for broader attention to AI in the military - and beyond the AI Act - seem to be gaining traction following the announcement of the new portfolios of the 2024-2029 European Commission, which hinted at a more strategic approach to emerging technologies. However, their focus still leans heavily on industrial applications within the Commission's competence where the role of AI is fluid. For instance, the mission letter for the Executive Vice-President for Tech Sovereignty emphasizes boosting AI innovation and safety, introducing initiatives like AI Factories and the European AI Research Council⁷⁷. At the same time, the Mission letter for the Commissioner for Defence and

Space does not directly mention AI, staying within the scope of dual-use and civil-military potential⁷⁸. This creates a dual impression: while there is a more open conversation about defence and enhanced European capabilities through the defence industry, discussions on military-related AI applications remain limited and even blurred.

This brings us back to the familiar discussion about separate competencies, with military matters being the responsibility of Member States (as reiterated in the AI Act as well). Again, this logic no longer reflects the evolving reality. The initial tasks for incoming commissioners demonstrate that defence matters and considerations of technologies as strategically relevant are increasingly shifting beyond national jurisdictions. Also, they are built on already existing policies and instruments, such as the European Defence Fund and the European Defence Industry Programme, which signal a gradual move toward deeper EU integration in the defence sector. Moreover, the examples of AI applications and uses in Ukraine and Gaza highlight that boundaries between military and civilian are blurred and AI as general-use technology enables a broad spectrum of uses in different domains. Therefore, it raises further questions about the main arguments for maintaining the civil-military divide if this

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merger becomes more evident, especially as the EU's approach to AI already acknowledges its dual-use nature. In short, this is nothing more than the inconsistency of 'practice what you preach,' which does not exactly apply in this particular case.

Between globality and competition

To note, the expectations for the EU's more consistent and vocal position primarily stem from the role the EU has assumed itself to lead and shape international AI governance. For example, in her State of the Union Address in 2023, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen claimed that “we should join forces with our partners to ensure a global approach to understanding the impact of AI in our societies”⁷⁹. This self-declared responsibility brings a promise to set a forward-looking example which relies on the EU's promotion of fundamental rights and mitigation of risks which challenge them across the spectrum of AI uses. However, human centrism, translated into projection that technology serves people, mainly comes in relation to the safety of products and services inscribed in the AI Act. Thus, the EU's understanding of AI and its societal impact seems to be more focused on ‘military-free’ market relations, as if this could be distinct from the longstanding debates on meaningful human control and human dignity in the context of autonomous weapons systems.

This highlights another tendency: despite its emphasis on human centrism as something universal, the EU subtly reinforces the discourse of competition, particularly with its focus on introducing “the first-ever comprehensive legal framework worldwide”⁸⁰. Such a position reflects an ongoing embrace of evolving trends and hypes, positioning AI as a tool of power rather than addressing cross-border global challenges. Even the EU's pursuit of digital sovereignty, aiming to “set standards rather than follow those of others”⁸¹ fits within the ideas of control, territoriality, ownership and competition. In this case, indirect instrumentalization of AI as something of dual-use or ‘beyond the EU's competence’ may lead to a scenario where politically it remains a competence of Member States, but the ambitions of competition, driven by the

EU-level defence industrial programs and their participants, will significantly influence framing of military AI practices⁸². In other words, it might create a situation where the EU's politics 'has nothing to do with this,' but policy instruments will be (or already are) heavily involved in research, development, and deployment.

Debates for the future

Overall, despite increasing attention to defence, military AI remains outside the scope, raising the critical debate of what role emerging technologies will play in the EU's ambitions to create a European Defence Union. If the EU aims to maintain its normative power in the realm of emerging technologies, transnational engagement as a form of international advocacy could be an important step which still requires reducing its own uncertainties and inconsistencies⁸³. At the same time, the EU's human-centrism is brought up as a market-driven policy tool focused on its own citizens being 'outside of war'. The question, then, is whether we should continue discussing the EU's various stances - normative and/or strategic, civilian and/or military - or instead scrutinize these proposals reinstating inherent biases, boundaries, and self-limits.

Finally, these tensions suggest that the recommendations from 2022 are not only relevant but have become even more prominent than anticipated. Therefore, it remains to be seen how the EU will implement the AI Act and how its defence-related ambitions will evolve. Particularly, as the changing security environment makes military AI more relevant, it will be important to consider how the EU will respond if it does not proactively address the need for a policy framework that integrates military AI issues. To be clear, this reflection of the EU's ambiguity is not an invitation to militarize. Rather, it is a call to acknowledge that military AI becomes a shared responsibility and requires a comprehensive response not only from nation-states but also transnational organizations, which have the opportunity to advance the logic of competition.

If the EU aims to maintain its normative power in the realm of emerging technologies, transnational engagement as a form of international advocacy could be an important step which still requires reducing its own uncertainties and inconsistencies

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Accelerating Entrepreneurial Ideas in Europe



Sabine Kerssens, Charlemagne Prize Fellow 2023/24

Sabine Kerssens currently serves as strategist at TNO, a 4500+ people tech institute based in the Netherlands. She led a national ambition with 15+ corporate partners to enable technologies for space go to market, she drove several startup reports and strategies at Techleap.nl and was recognized as McKinsey Women Award finalist by her work to build a Corona Funding portal of €400M worth of bridging loans in 3 weeks instead of the expected 4 months. In Europe, she is a startup evaluator and mentor for Ukrainian and EU startups.

What do an Italian ex-prime minister, Jewish settlers and this Karlspreis fellow have in common? In 2022, when I wrote about startups, scaleups and how to bring deeptech innovations to the market: very little. Today's world looks a whole lot different, with startup activities connecting the three. I'm grateful to the Charlemagne Prize team as they asked me to reflect on this topic here. In 1949, the Charlemagne Prize Proclamation spoke of visionary men taking lead in the peaceful resolution of political conflicts. I'm grateful for this network as I have met many of the visionary women and men fighting for unity today. It continues to be the collective effort of individuals that sparks extraordinary outcomes.

However, in the words of Draghi: "the starting point is that Europe is facing a world undergoing dramatic change." Tim Fransen wrote that we're living in an era of calamities. What I

struggle with in these times, is exactly what the Charlemagne Prize founders aimed to reduce: the distance we create between one another when everyone's opinion seems to be different from yours nor likely to change. I have had the luxury of finding unity in entrepreneurship. I can't say it translates to every key topic in society yet, so I am grateful for many of the other prize winners and fellows who are developing pieces of that puzzle in their respective fields. I see them as entrepreneurs too: individuals from all over the world aiming to make a difference to the status quo. These conversations give me energy every day.

Draghi stated that it is not lack of ideas or lack of ambition holding us back, and I tend to agree. Over the past years, I have spoken with entrepreneurs in most fields, and I have joined TNO, a Dutch Tech institute, where more than 4500 employees work on technical innovation every day. It's inspiring to see the new

What I struggle with in these times, is exactly what the Charlemagne Prize founders aimed to reduce: the distance we create between one another when everyone's opinion seems to be different from yours nor likely to change.

solutions that people are developing in all sorts of fields. Direct air capture, accelerated drug development, next-gen batteries, semiconductors, or quantum chips are just some of the deeptech solutions coming by daily. A cleaner world, a healthier world, a safer world.

Sounds inspiring to you? Glad to hear it! We're going to need a lot more talent going forward. Ranging from engineers and software developers all the way to legal, marketing and sales. Creatives, builders, thinkers, and everyone else. Bringing a solution to market, and I've seen it from close up, takes a lot of people that dare to think differently. With the Utrecht University we've used a talent metric to find the ambition in Europe, it was interesting to put numbers to cultural norms and it's safe to say that there is still entrepreneurial potential going to waste. As Draghi finds the core problem in Europe is new companies with new technologies that are not rising in our economy.

This was one of the key assumptions in my Charlemagne work. With my colleagues at Techleap.nl we developed a deeptech journey, visualizing how entrepreneurs go through stages of ideation, startup and scaleup, with a big valley of death. Summarizing, an entrepreneur comes up with an idea, perhaps at a university or knowledge institute and goes through a valorisation and IP trajectory. Indeed a unique idea? Great! Time to start building. Or wait, is there actually a market for my product? Can I find people who'd like to purchase it? A step forward, a step back, building, iterating and slowly yet progressively developing towards your go-to-market, and then your next market, and an

internationalization, and finally, of course, world domination. Or is that just Musk? Anyways...

It takes a village to raise a startup, no entrepreneur has done it alone (though they might say they have). Prof. Erik Stam came up with regional Entrepreneurial Elements that enable new ideas to go to market. You can think of the available capital, talent or physical infrastructure, the dominating regulations, the knowledge position in a region and the networks that stimulate dissemination of ideas. Together with Erik, I've added the startup journey to its perspective, basically adding time as a variable. Valorisation doesn't only interest researchers, startups don't magically find customers from one day to the next and scaleups are sometimes hindered by other startup activities. That what enabled you early on in your journey, might hinder you later on. Similarly, I believe that regions which enable "the lucky few" can only thrive with a pay-it-forward mentality where experienced entrepreneurs empower a new generation.

In our research we indeed found differences between what "the best" startup ecosystem was at different moments of a founder's entrepreneurial journey. I wrote about the leading entrepreneurial regions in the world. Following key international rankings like Startup Genome that would result in countries such as the U.S., U.K., France, Germany, the Netherlands, Singapore, and Israel. I found that while Singapore offers great examples when it comes to valorisation, the U.S. is still dominating the later stage growth. And then finally Israel. Today, it comes to no one's surprise that nearly all metrics for Israeli high-tech sector are

During these uncertain times, one thing is clear: the funding of innovation and the development of dual-use technology globally will go hand-in-hand.

stagnating or declining – investments, the number of active investors, employment, wages, exits, etc. according to Rise Israel (2024). Until we reach “the day after”, I will refrain from trying to make sense of the local data and just think of and donate to Israeli and Palestinian victims, their families and everyone who was affected by these cruelties.

Globally, entrepreneurs in harsh environments or better ones are taking small steps, bridging deep valleys, and following their arrow towards a cleaner, fairer, or safer future. Sometimes a step towards one goal, might be a step in the wrong direction for another goal and I see the paralyzing effect this has. I recently met a startup employee that had left an ocean startup. While he had enabled ocean cleaning for years, he felt frustrated as he hadn't solved the inequality of those who create trash and those who must clean it. Meanwhile he had covered many flight miles for his work. Could he feel convinced that he made the world a little bit better now? I think there's value in solving a part of the puzzle. How much slack does that give you on other domains, though? How much slack do we give our politicians, our caretakers, or strangers? How much can you do good, and how much will you do bad, and when does it all add up to a positive impact?

This becomes even more tricky when we look at an industry that in my humble opinion is ready to pop: the global defence market. In light of the Russian-Ukrainian war Donald Trump's team has told European officials that the incoming US president will demand NATO member states increase defence spending to 5 per cent of GDP. During these uncertain times, one thing is clear: the funding of innovation and the development of dual-use technology globally will go hand-in-hand. This might be inspiring to some, as many of the technologies we use today originate from

DARPA: the internet, global positioning satellites, unmanned aerial vehicles. But it's just as worrisome to others, as dual use technologies also have a tendency of ending up in the hands of people with bad intentions.

According to Dealroom (2024) the global defence market is projected to reach \$2.6 trillion by 2030, with quantum computing and space tech playing key roles. Quantum promises breakthroughs in encryption and cybersecurity, while space technologies are essential for intelligence and surveillance. These innovations drive progress not only in defence but also in civilian sectors like telecommunications, energy, and healthcare. And don't underestimate those civilian sectors. “Defence applications can stabilize early growth, but it is the civil potential that ultimately drives valuation” (Maki.vc & Luminar Ventures, 2024).

I see it in my recent work too. Over the past year, I've been honoured to lead our national Space Communication ambition, which was presented at the SatCom Summit 2024 in Amsterdam. It's about fast, secure, and resilient communication in the future. That's interesting for you and me when you think about data traffic rapidly increasing. Who likes to see their Netflix screen buffering? But it's likely not annoying enough for launching customers to pay a premium for communication via space rather than their normal network.

In those scenarios, the societal and defence interest can play a role to minimize some of the development costs. In this example, as spoofing and jamming are daily threats to European communication, exemplified by the attempted hack of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (NSCS, 2024) or the recent undersea cable attacks in Europe and Northern Africa (Dutch

ministry of Defence, 2020), governments might be willing to pay that premium to stay safe. Knowing that their communication alternatives might not suffice in times of war. Today, in Ukraine, front-line troops say they are experiencing connection problems with Musk's vital Starlink internet service, while also reporting illegal usage despite US sanctions (CNN, 2024) and the future of quantum already leads to “harvest now and decrypt later” behaviour. Time to invest! However, the few times use or even only the backup that space communication would offer for our defence needs is peanuts compared to the money that could be made if all airplanes would purchase space communication for their travellers.

For this space communication ambition, I've spoken with European policy makers, entrepreneurs and CEO's and I am proud of the difference we can make when we start addressing innovation and defence policy simultaneously and with concrete examples in hand. While most of the results of our work have not materi-

alised or made public yet, society's position in communication via space or in times of the quantum computer is determined today. Yet, it might be that you'll only notice the decisions made now when you're stream 8G on your intercontinental flight in 2035. Who knows.

In this changing world our innovations (and their funding) might have different sources and reasons for existing, but most people are decent at heart and it's time to highlight that and accelerate their entrepreneurial ideas. I am proud of my work and that of fellow Charlemagne members, TNO'ers, Europeans, and global male and female Gyro Gearloose's to unify efforts of bringing disruptive innovations to the market for a sustainably cleaner, healthier, and better world.

The world changes when ordinary people come together with extraordinary purpose.

According to Dealroom (2024) the global defence market is projected to reach \$2.6 trillion by 2030, with quantum computing and space tech playing key roles.

Election Recap: Direction or Disruption?

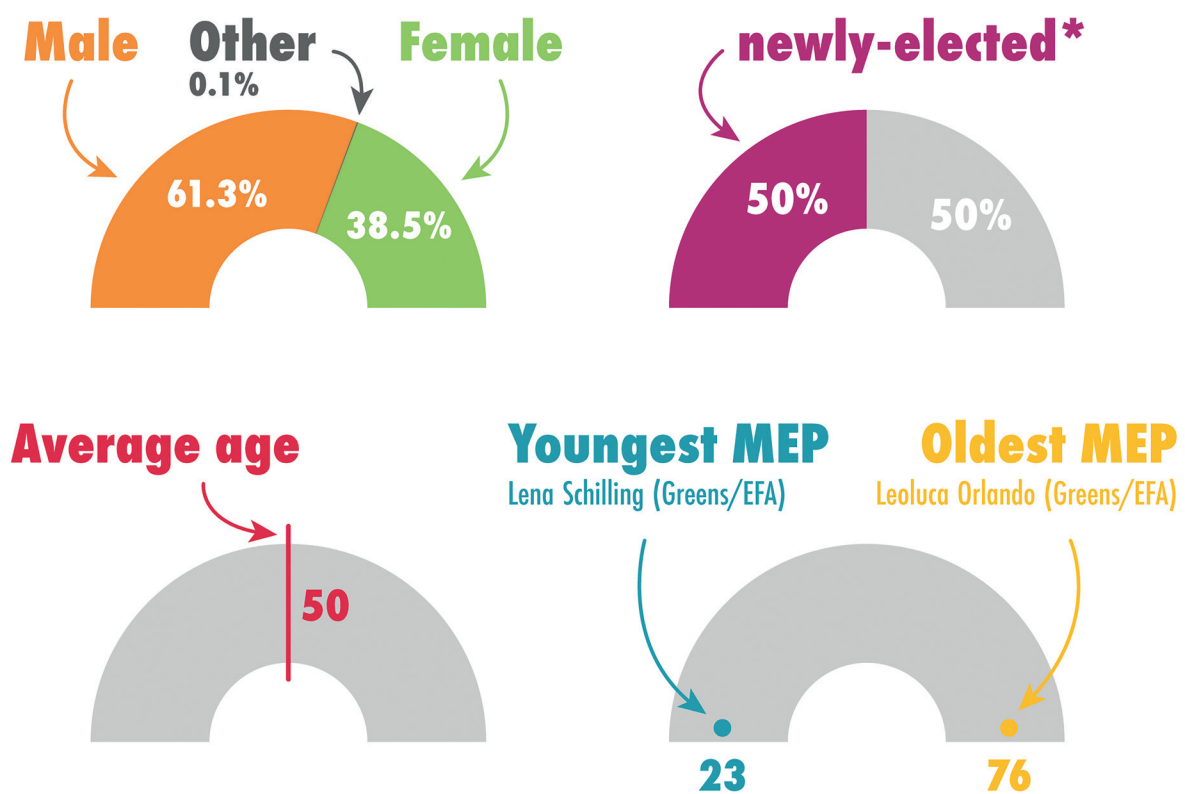
Often referred to as a "super election year," 2024 saw not only various national elections across Europe shaping European politics but also and majorly the European elections in the summer and the U.S. elections at the end of the year. Looking ahead, several parliamentary elections in 2025 will further influence the political atmosphere. While Europe is in turmoil, how can we counter the rising tide of populism?



Europe Magazine

10th European Parliament

How the Members of Parliament are made up, 2024 – 2029



*new MEPs that have never sat in the EP

Source: European Parliament

Europe Magazine (2nd European Winner of the European Charlemagne Youth Prize 2024)



EU Election Recap

The Rise of the Far Right and Its Implications for Politics in the European Union

Prof. Tarik Abou-Chadi, Professor of European Politics at the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Oxford



Tarik Abou-Chadi is Professor of European Politics at the University of Oxford and Professorial Fellow at Nuffield College. His research investigates the transformation of European party politics with a special focus on the rise of the far right and the crisis of European social democracy.

The far right in Europe has seen a strong increase in its support in the past years. Far right parties have become established political actors in nearly all national parliaments in Europe. In the European parliament election in 2024, the far right gained additional seats after a historically strong result in 2019. Far right parties have not only attracted more support at the polls, but they have also become important actors in European governments. In Italy and Hungary, far-right parties lead the government. They have been part of governing coalitions or at least supported these in, for example, Denmark, Sweden and Finland. In the United States, a far-right president and administration have begun dismantling US democracy.

Where the far right is in power, it has a significant impact not only on policies, but it at least attempts to reshape processes, principles, and institutions of liberal democracy. In addition, far right governments pose a threat to international collaboration and the institutions of a global liberal order. Their impact can be seen in weakening efforts to tackle climate change or in preventing support for Ukraine against the Russian invasion. In short, the far right in power poses a severe threat to liberal democracy and the international liberal order.

However, if we want to grasp the full impact of the far right on national and international politics, it is not enough to look at their direct impact when they are in power. Far-right parties exert significant influence on the behavior of other political actors. Far-right success cannot only be measured in votes and seats, but it is crucial to take into account how they shape discourses and strategies by other political parties.

As our own research shows, when far right parties become more successful, parties of the mainstream right and left start

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When people see political parties of the center increasingly frame immigration as a problem and when they see political actors increasingly proposing nationalist solution, they will adjust their own preferences and priorities in this direction.

becoming more nationalist especially in their positions on immigration (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020). The idea is that by shifting right on immigration they can win back the voters that they have previously lost to the far right. Many of these shifts do not only negatively affect immigrants and asylum seekers. Closing borders and undermining international regimes and institutions such as the Geneva Convention or the European Court of Human Rights these actions – not by the far right, but by parties of the democratic center – fundamentally weaken international collaboration.

Taking more nationalist positions, however, does not weaken the far right. Research has shown over and over again that when established parties move to the right on immigration, they do not win back voters from the far right (Krause, Cohen, and Abou-Chadi 2023). In contrast, accommodating the far right and collaborating with them, normalizes and legitimizes their rhetoric and positions (Daur 2025). Hence, these strategies have not reduced support for the far right. In contrast, they lead to a vicious cycle that ultimately empowers the far right and weakens national and international institutions of liberal democracy.

When parties of the center become more nationalist, this does not only affect perceptions of the far right, but it is also likely

to shift attitudes and priorities on issues such as immigration in the population. While the behavior of elite actors is of course not the only factor that shapes attitudes – personal experiences and grievances certainly matter – we know that political actors and the media are crucial in the formation and transformation of political preferences. When people see political parties of the center increasingly frame immigration as a problem and when they see political actors increasingly proposing nationalist solution, they will adjust their own preferences and priorities in this direction. Political parties, in turn, adjust their positions and emphasis to what they see as developments in opinion polls. Even more progressive parties shy away from internationalist positions as they increasingly fear the electoral consequences of such positions.

This vicious circle that we have seen play out in many European countries does not only ultimately strengthen the far right, but it also reduces public support for international integration and collaboration. When we think about how the success of the far right shapes politics in the European Union, we should thus not only think of their direct impact but also how their success indirectly affects what other parties do. If political parties do not manage to break the vicious circle, it will significantly erode the fundament of the European Union.

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EU Election Recap

National Waves, European Ripples: Populism's Impact on EU Politics

Catherine E. De Vries PhD, Chair in European Policies at Bocconi University



Catherine E. De Vries holds the Generali Endowed Chair in European Policies at Bocconi University, where she is also the President of Institute for European Policy Making. She provides regular commentary on European politics through her books and articles and through opinion pieces, in popular outlets such as the Financial Times, The Guardian, and Politico.

In the years ahead, European Union leaders need to decide long term strategy to tackle Europe's deep economic, fiscal, industrial and security challenges. The conventional view in Brussels' circles is that "Europe is forged in crisis" as the classical saying by Jean Monnet, one of the Union founding fathers, goes. Yet, the rise of populist right parties at both the European and member state level over the past years might seriously complicate the European Union's ability to reform.

Populist right parties, like the National Rally in France, Fidesz in Hungary, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands or the Alternative for Germany, are some of most Eurosceptic political

players in Europe. In recent years, these parties have moved from exit Euroscepticism, advocating for their country to leave the European Union, to reform Euroscepticism, moving the European Union to club of sovereign states. At first sight, this development might seem to help European Union's reform agenda as these parties are now engaging in Europe's politics. Upon a closer look, however, this development might actually make policy reforms harder to achieve.

For much of post-war period, European integration was accompanied by a so-called permissive consensus; that is to say political elites could pursue European integration with little regard to public opinion and domestic politics. The European public did not pay much attention to EU matters and domestic politics was characterised by a broad-based buy-in by political elites.

2005 proved a turning point. In that year, European integration experienced a major setback as two of the Union's founding members, France and the Netherlands rejected the Constitutional Treaty by referendum. Ever since then, we have witnessed a rise of public Euroscepticism, and of parties critiquing the European project.

For much of post-war period, European integration was accompanied by a so-called permissive consensus; that is to say political elites could pursue European integration with little regard to public opinion and domestic politics.

European negotiations have always been fraught with commitment problems and lowest common denominator solutions, but with the populist right's rise the path towards getting stuff done seems to have narrowed further.

The biggest touchstone of dissent can be found among populist right parties that long advocated leaving the Union. Something I coined exit Euroscepticism. The fierce opposition of populist right parties also changed the political calculus for mainstream parties. Populism's electoral threat was an important factor explaining why finding compromise during Eurozone and refugee crisis at the European level often proved to consist of action that was too little, too late.

2016 and Brexit put a brake on this development. Brexit became a kind of experiment for Eurosceptic parties on the European continent. Britain became a kind of guinea pig for other member states: a benchmark for success of possible exits by other member states. The implosion of the political Brexit project and the ensuing economic fallout led to more support for membership among citizens in EU-27. This was an important reason for turn of populist right parties from wanting to exit the Union to a greater emphasis on reforming it.

Another important turning point was 2017. In 2017, elections were held in Germany, France and the Netherlands among other countries. During these elections, populist right parties fared far worse than was expected based on polls. The defeat of Marine Le Pen in second round of presidential election was particularly striking. During a televised debate, Macron tore into Le Pen's plans for Euro exit, who was not able to argue her case convincingly, and he won debate.

In response to Brexit and 2017 election busts, populist right politicians, that previously supported Frexit, Nexit, Italexit, etc., toned down their exit Euroscepticism in favour of reform Euroscepticism. This can be seen as a silver lining of Brexit, giving the EU the ability to act. This is no doubt true but might not be the end of the story.

A position of wanting to reform the EU from inside might prove to be more difficult for functioning of the Union. Why? Populist right parties have now entered into the EU's institutional power

structure in many more ways than in the past. We have seen the most rightwing European Parliament after this year's election, a populist right vice president of Commission, but perhaps more importantly many populist right parties have entered national governments. How will they behave?

So far, we have seen two types of reform Eurosceptics: A conflict type and a cooperation type.

Hungarian prime minister Orbán as an example of conflict type: European solutions only work for him when he benefits financially and framing the European Union as enemy helps him at home. Italian minister Meloni is an example of cooperation type: playing a role in brokering European solutions helps her portray powerbroker image and signal that Italy matters.

The second Trump term might affect which of the types will become dominant. The conventional Monnet view would be: Trump's transactional approach will put screws on European countries so they will have incentive to reform. Otherwise they will suffer economically and security-wise which might upset voters.

Yet, what if Trump's transactionalism changes what populist right parties want to signal with actions in the EU? Recall that the move away from exit to reform Euroscepticism was largely strategic, so Trump's America First message might increase the ideological pull back to a nation first view. Many of populist right supporters liked Trump's first term, so could transactionalism be an attractive political signal for the populist right to send home even if cooperation might yield better outcomes?

Only time will tell. But what is clear that the negotiation space to land on common European positions with populist right parties that have a very transactional approach to the EU is limited. European negotiations have always been fraught with commitment problems and lowest common denominator solutions, but with the populist right's rise the path towards getting stuff done seems to have narrowed further.

US Election Recap

U.S. Soft Power in the Age of Trump: The Future of American Attraction

Priv.-Doz. Dr habil. Hendrik W. Ohnesorge, Managing Director of the Center for Global Studies and Research Associate at the Chair of International Relations at the University of Bonn



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On November 5, 2024, Donald Trump turned in one of the greatest comebacks in American political history. When he left the White House for Florida in January 2021, few would have bet much on his return. Voted out of office by the American people after one term and twice impeached, he might have spent his sunset years at Mar-a-Largo, lamenting his loss, holding court, and mounting guard over his legacy. Donald Trump, in this counterfactual scenario, might be seen today as an aberration, a mere slip-up in American and global politics.

A Strong Mandate and a New Normal

The 2024 election, however, spawned an altogether different scenario: Not only did Trump win the popular vote for the first time with about 77 million votes (to Harris' 75 million), he also racked up a total of 312 electoral votes (to Harris' 226), including wins in all seven swing states. What's more, the Senate (53 to 47) as well as the House of Representatives (220 to 215) are in Republican hands, giving them the much sought-after trifecta in American politics. Finally, the Supreme Court—not least due to Trump's three first-term picks—has a 6 to 3 conservative majority. In sum, Donald Trump and his Republican Party have received a commanding mandate for change, and Trumpism can hardly be seen as an aberration anymore—quite the contrary.

Little wonder, therefore, that Trump re-entered the Oval Office with a lot of confidence on January 20, 2025. The swirl of executive orders signed within the first few days turned much of his fiery campaign rhetoric into political action, and quickly. A watching world has been flabbergasted by the speed and the scope of change decreed from the Washington: from energy and the environment, to technology and artificial intelligence, to trade and national security, Donald Trump wasted no time. He opened up a vast field of policy changes that is far too wide to survey in any detail here. Actually—as he has done in the past—Trump used the paradox of plenty to his advantage: Whereas under more conventional circumstances, each one of his dozens of executive orders signed within the first few days would have caused much greater scrutiny and debate, in the case of the Trump administration one is hardly able to keep track as new policies are declared practically every day: from Greenland to Gaza, from Canada to Panama, from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to the World Health Organization (WHO), to United Nations organizations such as Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and the Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)—all bets are off in the age of Trump 2.0. Europe will have to take note and it will have to learn to deal with what is the new normal.

Soft Power in World Politics, and What Trump Has Done to It

Just a few weeks into the second Trump administration, this is neither the time nor the place to pass judgement on all of these issues. But one thing has already become abundantly clear: its profound effects on U.S. soft power.

Soft power, in short, is the ability to get what you want—in global politics just as in any other field of human interaction—based not on coercion or inducement, but on the forces of attraction

Europe will have to take note and it will have to learn to deal with what is the new normal.

and persuasion. Coined by my colleague Joseph S. Nye some thirty years ago, it traditionally rests on a country's culture, its values, and its policies. As I have argued elsewhere, a country's leading personalities, from the political and other arenas, also serve as important soft power brokers, for good or for ill. Today, soft power has become a fixture in the political dictionary and states of every shape and size vie for attraction on the global stage.

The United States, for much of his history, has profited profoundly from its soft power. In the perpetual struggle for power and influence that is world politics, its attraction has traditionally given the country a considerable advantage over its more ham-fisted competitors. With Trump's return to the White House, U.S. soft power has been affected in at least three different dimensions:

First, while soft power has been a staple in U.S. foreign policy for ages—admittedly, to a variable extent and with varying degrees of success—Trump may be the first postwar U.S. president who actually doesn't care for it. During his first administration, Trump has made his contempt for soft power clear: through his budget proposals, through his words, through his deeds. This is somewhat astonishing given his background in New York real estate and big business deals, where usually great store is set on public relations and its “boozing and schmoozing” of which the late Jimmy Buffett sang. Trump's outlook is very different: His way of making deals is to overwhelm competitors, to make

outrageous demands in order to throw you off balance, to threaten retaliation if you don't comply. In a classic example of how the personal effects the political, Trump has taken this long-honed style to the White House. While certainly successful at times, such an approach comes with a big soft power price tag.

Second, and a result of this, Trump's first term as well as the first couple of weeks of his second term haven't been kind to U.S. soft power in the eyes of country's traditional allies. Countless polls, surveys or statements by decision-makers from Brussels to Berlin, from Paris to London, from Ottawa to Canberra testify to this development. Apart from policy decisions, it is as much the style in which these decisions are made: If you make a method out of your unpredictability, if you pick fights even with your closest partners, if you try to bully your way through, you may still get what you want on occasion—especially if you are the biggest kid on the block—but you will certainly suffer in attraction and in fellowship in the long run.

Third, and perhaps most consequential among the tectonic shifts in U.S. soft power, the United States, for the first time, is now exporting a new face of it. Though often claimed otherwise, soft power is a non-normative concept on two counts: For one thing, it's not necessarily nicer to use soft power than it is to use hard power to get what you want. In fact, it may be even more deceptive than threats or payments. For another thing, it's not just the nice guys who use it. On the contrary, some of history's

While soft power needs time to take full effect, and changes occur on many different levels across its different resources, we can already detect some effects of the post-liberal face of U.S. soft power today: Argentina leaving the World Health Organization shortly after Trump pulled the United States out; Israel declaring its withdrawal from the United Nations Human Rights Council within days after Trump signed an executive order to the same effect; decision-makers around the globe styling themselves in Trump’s image.

most abhorrent figures or most devastating movements drew much of their potency from their attraction and appeal in the eyes of their acolytes.

What does that mean for the future of U.S. soft power? Henceforth it may be better to speak of U.S. soft powers (in the plural). There is still the traditional face of U.S. soft power: liberal in spirit and purpose, based on a commitment to partnerships and alliances, keen on tackling common challenges and providing global public goods. Joe Biden, born in 1942 and raised during the Cold War years, is a paragon of this variety of American influence, which found expression and was fostered by such landmark initiatives as the Berlin Airlift or the European Recovery Program, more commonly known as the Marshall Plan. It has been widely hailed in Europe and it has lastingly contributed to U.S. soft power. In fact, George C. Marshall won the 1953 Nobel Peace Prize as well as the 1959 Charlemagne Prize for it.

Today, the situation is much different. The United States now exudes and exports, for the first time, what could be called the post-liberal face of soft power: casting doubt as to the value of alliances and institutions which for decades have buttressed the liberal international order and secured U.S. primacy, openly suggesting to force others, even some of its closest partners,

to do its bidding, and unapologetically disregarding the very “opinions of mankind” on which the country was founded nigh on 250 years ago.

While soft power needs time to take full effect, and changes occur on many different levels across its different resources, we can already detect some effects of the post-liberal face of U.S. soft power today: Argentina leaving the World Health Organization shortly after Trump pulled the United States out; Israel declaring its withdrawal from the United Nations Human Rights Council within days after Trump signed an executive order to the same effect; decision-makers around the globe styling themselves in Trump’s image. Again, this is not the place to assess these decisions in and of themselves. As these examples indicate, however, what the United States and its political leadership do matters profoundly around the world—and others tend to follow suit.

Still Leading by Example

Where does all this leave us? In most cases, it’s way too early to judge. Besides, the United States still exudes massive soft power even in its traditional liberal face: Its commitment to democracy and freedom, its popular culture, its consumer goods, its institutions of higher education are all still the envy of the world. No other nation even comes close, however hard they may have

tried. In fact, the United States’ major competitors on the world stage—from China to Russia—have learned this the hard way.

However, Donald Trump’s bearing and policies, while in many cases innovative and in some cases potentially successful, matter profoundly when it comes to the nature of American attraction. On the one hand, the very concept of soft power appears to be alien to the Trump administration. Its slow and quiet process—often unpretentious, frequently unnoticed, and usually far removed from the glitz and glamor of fast-paced executive action—is diametrically opposed to the modus operandi of the Trump White House. On the other hand, where it does remain committed to and successful in the exercise of soft power, at least so far, is in its post-liberal guise. In sum, Trump seems to disregard or even despise the liberal face of soft power and actively foster its post-liberal counterpart—and other states already follow suit. The United States, in short, is still leading by example, as it has so long done, only the example is now a strikingly different one.

Everybody Needs Somebody Sometimes

To be sure, global politics is not a popularity contest. Sometimes you just can’t be loved and feared at the same time, and the discussion which of the two is preferable was already led by Machiavelli some 500 years ago. Also, soft power certainly is not the sole solution to all problems of a troubled world. In today’s age of real-time information flows and growing interdependence, however, soft power is as important as it has ever been. In a world that is beset with major challenges, to violent extremism and international terrorism—from revisionist states openly defying the liberal international order, to climate change, to pandemics, to migration—not even the United States of America can go it all alone. Even if you have swooping hard power at your disposal, you can’t always count on forcing your way through. And if you could, it wouldn’t necessarily be wise. Even the most powerful of nations needs a friend sometimes. abhorrent figures or most devastating movements drew much of their potency from their attraction and appeal in the eyes of their acolytes.

In a world that is beset with major challenges—from revisionist states openly defying the liberal international order, to climate change, to pandemics, to migration, to violent extremism and international terrorism—not even the United States of America can go it all alone.

Europe's Role in Conflict Resolution

Not only in the context of election campaigns but also within societies themselves, ongoing conflicts and Europe's positioning on them have become deeply polarizing. The fact that military battles are taking place just beyond Europe's borders is no longer new, but it has continuously pushed the situation further into focus. What should Europe's future role in conflict resolution look like, and how can it navigate the delicate balance that the ongoing conflict in the Middle East has imposed on the region and Europe since October 7, 2023?



Europe's Role in Conflict Resolution

Beyond the Abraham Accords: Strategic Opportunities and Challenges in Europe's Pursuit of a Peace Initiative in the Middle East



Yasmina Asrarguis, Charlemagne Prize Fellow 2024

Yasmina Asrarguis is currently a researcher on Middle East geopolitics at the Sorbonne-Nouvelle and a Visiting Scholar within the Near Eastern Studies Department of Princeton University. Her research focuses on the Abraham Accords and the geopolitical dynamics of Israeli-Arab normalization since 2020. Her most recent publications with the Foundation Jean-Jaurès include the book: "Israel-Palestine, Year Zero" in which she analyses the impact of war in Saudi Arabia and Morocco. Prior to this, she was a manager at Richard Attias & Associates New York, a practice focused on advising leaders on the content and orchestration of diplomatic meetings. Her previous professional experience also includes serving as part of the Diplomatic Unit of President Macron, the Executive Office of the UN Secretary-General and more recently the Cabinet of UNESCO's Director General joined in 2023. Her project was mentored by Professor Bernard Rougier.

Since 1948, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has had direct impact over Western democracies and Europe's stability and domestic politics. In the last fifty years, the concept of the so-called two-state solution became an all-encompassing mantra to bridge consensus despite irreconcilable doctrines and approaches to the Middle East Peace Process. Marginalized in comparison to America's negotiators and diplomats, the European Union and its capitals have witnessed the signature of historical peace processes without being able to engage in their content and implementation.

The Camp David Accords of 1979 which ended direct war between Egypt and Israel opened a new regional chapter of peace-making. Followed by the Oslo Accords of 1993 and the Jordan-Israel peace treaty of 1994 which recognized Israel's legitimate right to exist in the Middle East. Yet, those processes were radically interrupted by the assassination of several signatories of those very peace treaties, namely President Sadate of Egypt,

and Prime Minister Rabin of Israel. The camp of status quo and the axis of resistance supported by Iran then expanded their regional influence and the lethal price tag of peace-making with the Jewish state. However, this tendency was briefly challenged in 2020, when the Abraham Accords reshuffled the region's diplomatic landscape and onboarded the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco into the normalization block.

Regardless of the Abraham Accords and the willingness of Saudi Arabia to cooperate with Israel, the 'axis of resistance' has with Teheran's backup empowered its capacity to engage in warfare through movements such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis. As such the massacre of October 7, 2023, and the escalation of war in the Middle East have exacerbated regional violence and instability in Arab countries. As the region faces great internal divides between the pro-Palestinian public opinion and the pro-Abraham Accords block, Europe is just as much impacted by the political consequences of the Israel-Hamas conflict, which

As the region faces great internal divides between the pro-Palestinian public opinion and the pro-Abraham Accords block, Europe is just as much impacted by the political consequences of the Israel-Hamas conflict, which destroyed parts of Beirut in which France conserves a major influence and patron role.

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The volatility of Israel-Arab relations calls for a renewed European commitment and genuine peace diplomacy, based on grassroots peacebuilding and the implementation of democratic values. In the face of growing importation of the conflict and its narratives, this research advocates for a reinforced role of European diplomats at the negotiating table in the Middle East Peace.

The European Union's Engagement in Middle East Peace

The European Union has not been the most active actor and mediator in the Middle East conflict despite its involvement in the initial phase of the Oslo peace process signed on September 13, 1993. This process began as secret negotiations between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators in Oslo, Norway, to lay the groundwork for resolving conflict. The final Declaration of Principles was then signed in Washington by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, Yasser Arafat, Chairman of the PLO Executive Committee, and U.S. President Bill Clinton. While Europe hosted the secret preparatory talks, the final Accords resulting from these negotiations were concluded at the White House in 1993, depriving Europe of a historic family photo. Yet, despite this progress toward peace, the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 weakened the prospects of establishing a Palestinian state, and the situation has remained unchanged since the unsuccessful Camp David Summit in 2000.

Since the Second Intifada (2000–2005), the European Union (EU) has become a fervent supporter of the two-state solution despite its limited influence on the new Israeli and Palestinian leaderships. Once Hamas ousted the Palestinian Authority from Gaza in 2007, the EU has focused on civil society and

humanitarian action as an alternative to the political status quo. To pave the way for peaceful reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians, European leaders have directed their attention and resources toward pro-peace non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the political reinforcement of Mahmoud Abbas' bastion in Ramallah. Supporting non-partisan and moderate individuals on both sides has emerged as the most tangible strategy for laying the groundwork for the establishment of a two-state solution that includes Hamas and violent groups. This approach is rooted in the belief that the security, safety, and dignity of both parties can be guaranteed in the long term by having two sovereign nation states coexist side by side.

After October 7, 2023, the 27-nation bloc recognized that the unresolved conflict in the Middle East extends beyond Israel and Palestine, directly impacting Europe's stability and harmony. With a population of 44 million Muslims, European countries have witnessed numerous pro-Palestinian protests advocating for an "immediate ceasefire" and opposing the "punishment of the entire Palestinian population of Gaza for the actions of Hamas". Concurrently, supporters of Hamas in Europe have exploited the most recent conflict to recruit moderate leftist militants and a new generation of campus activists in the United States, France, Germany, or Spain, all wanting to free Palestine "from the river to the sea". This reality compelled EU leaders to view the Israel-Palestinian conflict as a domestic source of instability and division within their own societies, but also as a cause of divide within political parties as observed during the 2024 European Parliament election.

EU Diplomacy Mapping : The Day After October 7th

On October 10, 2023, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on the protection of civilians and the upholding of legal and humanitarian obligations in the ongoing Gaza crisis. During

Image 1

Voting Ended			10/27/2023	3:49:01 PM
Item 5 - A/ES-10/L.25				
Protection of civilians and upholding legal and humanitarian obligations				
<div><div></div><div>AFGHANISTAN</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>CAMEROON</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>FINLAND</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>KUWAIT</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>NEPAL</div></div>
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<div><div></div><div>AUSTRIA</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>COSTA RICA</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>GUATEMALA</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>MADAGASCAR</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>PAKISTAN</div></div>
<div><div></div><div>AZERBAIJAN</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>COTE D'IVOIRE</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>GUINEA</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>MALAWI</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>PALAU</div></div>
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<div><div></div><div>BOSNIA-HER...</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>ECUADOR</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>IRELAND</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>MONGOLIA</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>ROMANIA</div></div>
<div><div></div><div>BOTSWANA</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>EGYPT</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>ISRAEL</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>MONTENEGRO</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>RUSSIAN FED...</div></div>
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<div><div></div><div>BURKINA FASO</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>ESTONIA</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>KAZAKHSTAN</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>NAMIBIA</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>SAINT VINCE...</div></div>
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<div><div></div><div>CAMBODIA</div></div>	<div><div></div><div>FIJI</div></div>			<div><div></div><div>SAO TOME-P...</div></div>
<div><div></div><div>IN FAVOUR: 120</div></div>			<div><div></div><div>AGAINST: 14</div></div>	
			<div><div></div><div>ABSTENTION: 45</div></div>	

UNGA Gaza Resolution calling for immediate and sustained ‘humanitarian truce’ (10/27/2023).

this emergency session, the adoption of a non-binding Jordanian resolution created significant divisions within European countries. Certain member states criticized the resolution for lacking phrasing regarding the massacre of Israeli civilians and the imperative need for the release of all Israeli hostages held by Hamas and its associated groups.

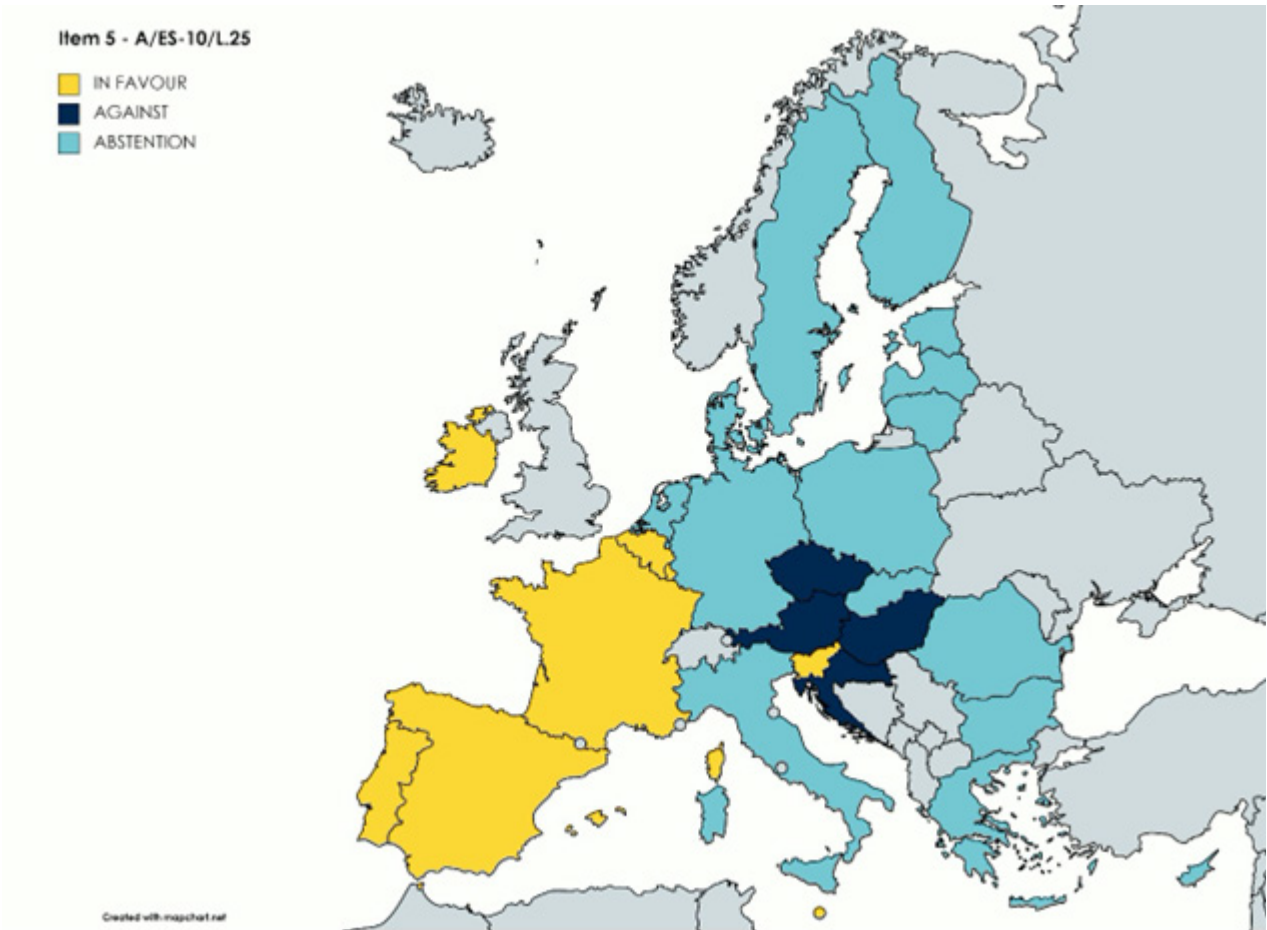
Publicly supported by Iran, this Jordanian-drafted resolution was voted on by a large majority of UN member states: 120 votes in favor, 14 against, and 45 abstentions. In Europe, eight countries voted in favor (Spain, Portugal, Malta, Belgium, Luxembourg, Ireland, Slovenia, and France), four voted against (Austria, Czechia, Croatia, and Hungary), and another fifteen abstained (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Sweden, and Slovakia). This vote took place a few days after the Security Council failed in four sessions to reach any type of agreement or consensus on the situation in the Middle East.

From a European perspective, the map below illustrates the significant division among European diplomacies, with a large minority preferring to remain neutral and abstain from voting on issues related to violence in Israel and Palestine. Visually, the prominent divide separating Western and Eastern Europe attests to the ideological frontiers prevailing within the European Union. Diplomatic positioning on Middle East Peace is not immune to factors such as national history, demography, and alliances with major powers. These structural elements mainly inherited from World War II have shaped EU member states' relationships with Israelis and Palestinians and influenced the countries' willingness to engage in or refrain from having a voice in times of both crisis and status quo.

Only few months after October 7th, the UN reported 1.5 million displaced Gazans and a casualty count exceeding 11,000, according to Martin Griffiths, Emergency Relief Coordinator and Humanitarian Affairs chief and as of November 30, 2023, an

European Union vote on the UN General Assembly Gaza resolution calling for immediate and sustained ‘humanitarian truce’

Graph 2



Yasmina Asrarguis

EU's voting on UNGA Gaza Resolution calling for immediate and sustained ‘humanitarian truce’ 10/27/2023.

estimated 115 living Israeli hostages were in captivity in Gaza. Assessing this deteriorated humanitarian situation in mid-December 2023, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a new resolution demanding an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza, as well as the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages (see map below).

On November 15, 2023, Natalie Boucly, Acting Deputy Commissioner-General for the UNRWA (UN agency responsible for assisting refugees), testified that all parts of Gaza were facing bombardment. She warned the UN General Assembly that

"UNRWA cannot reach people in need, including thousands still trapped in the north." At the end of January 2024, the left-wing Israeli paper *Haaretz* reported that 1,200 of UNRWA's employees in Gaza have direct links to Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad and that some staff were identified as perpetrators of the October 7, 2023 massacre. This information discredited the work of the UN Agency, and several countries joined Washington in suspending funding to the UNRWA, including Canada, Australia, Britain, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Finland, Estonia, Japan, Austria, France, and Romania.

EU’s Two-State Solution Agenda

While all 27 countries agree on the necessity of rekindling talks on a two-state solution, the EU's diplomatic strategy has not yet invested in relations with all proxies and regional powers. Consequently, it falls short in convincing stakeholders about the feasibility of an EU-led peace conference or the EU's participation in any regional peace summit. Hence, the current EU rejection of military solutions in the Middle East must be complemented by concrete engagement with Israeli and Arab leaders. An alternative approach involves mapping an under-the-radar second-track diplomatic process that includes influential leaders from Jerusalem and Ramallah. The EU bloc was first established as a French–German peace project; this history should boost Europe’s diplomatic credibility in organizing and welcoming diplomatic and peace conferences.

Statements made by the EU and European Leaders

A central part of our research consisted in analysing public discourses and governmental narratives in the aftermath of October 7th until mid-January 2024 and the intensification of war in Gaza.

1. Which European leaders addressed the conflict the most?

We analyzed a total of 1284 original publications on the social media platform X, posted by European leaders Charles Michel, Emmanuel Macron, Josep Borrell, Olaf Scholz, Roberta Metsola, and Ursula Von der Leyen between October 6, 2023 and January 24, 2024.

Almost a quarter (22%) of their original publications mentioned the armed conflict in Israel, starting with the Hamas attacks on October 7, 2023, either as the central topic of the publication or as one topic alongside others (mostly Ukraine).

We noticed considerable differences in the way European leaders addressed the topic on X, starting by how many publications they dedicated to the topic. None of the collected publications posted by Roberta Metsola mentioned the conflict. On the other hand, roughly a third (31%) of Josep Borrell’s publications mentioned the conflict or the warring parties, followed by Olaf Scholz (28%), Emmanuel Macron (26%), Ursula Von der Leyen (19%), and Charles Michel (14%). Josep Borrell also published the most tweets about the conflict in absolute numbers (96 during the observed period), accounting for a third of all relevant publications made by EU leaders. He is followed by Emmanuel Macron (71 publications), Olaf Scholz (50 publications), Ursula Von der Leyen (47 publications), and Charles Michel (24 publications). When combining all 288 publications mentioning Palestine, Gaza, or Israel explicitly, it appears that they dedicated most of their posts to the conflict in October (36%) and November (24%), followed by January (12%) and December (6%).

2. Which aspects of the conflict did they mention?

We then segmented the original publications into topics addressed by European leaders, based on a manual review of all filtered publications. Most of these topics are linked to objectives set by European leaders. For instance, the vast majority of their publications about humanitarian issues call for the respect of humanitarian law. When mentioning civilians, they ask for the protection of civilians, especially in Gaza. Publications mentioning the UN underline the leading role of the organization. Those mentioning “peace” formulate “a long-lasting peace” as the prime objective to be achieved. This also applies to “security”, which is mentioned as a goal to be achieved, both for Israel and Palestine. Finally, the topic “de-escalation” regroups all messages highlighting the EU’s attempts to stop the conflict from spreading in the region.

While all 27 countries agree on the necessity of rekindling talks on a two-state solution, the EU's diplomatic strategy has not yet invested in relations with all proxies and regional powers.

A smaller set of topics are related to views and priorities. Humanitarian implications of the conflict (human rights, humanitarian aid, humanitarian law, etc.) are the most frequently addressed topic. The protection of civilians comes in second, being mentioned both with regard to the Hamas attacks in early October 2023 and to the civilian casualties due to the Israeli offensive later on.

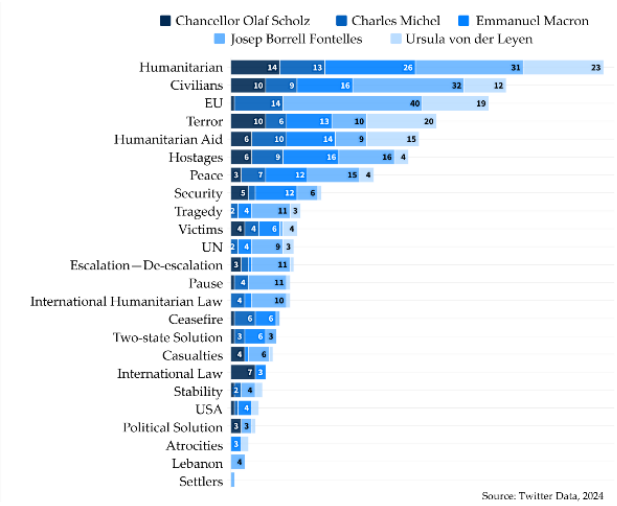
During our analysis, we also created a topic “EU”, which includes all publications mentioning the EU explicitly in one form or another. Most of these publications reiterate the EU’s position on the conflict and for which values and principles the EU stands. These commitments include respect for international and humanitarian law (IHL), international organizations (“UN”), and, at a later stage, the objective of achieving a political (“two-state”) solution.

Interestingly, the Israeli settlers and settlements were barely mentioned by the EU and European leaders. The same is also true about the displaced, mentioned only by Josep Borrell.

More explanations about the topics and semantic markers

We also included a series of semantic markers such as “hope”, “catastrophe”, “atrocities”, “long-term”, etc. They each regroup a series of terms expressing the same view on a topic. For instance, “catastrophe” and assimilated terms were used mainly to describe the humanitarian situation in Gaza. The chart below shows the number of original publications posted by the EU and European leaders mentioning each topic, exclusively or among others, between October 6, 2023, and January 24, 2024. One publication can mention several topics.

Graph 3



3. What are the most frequently addressed topics?

According to European leaders, there is a major humanitarian crisis unfolding in Gaza, with critical needs among the civilian population. This includes the needs for food, water, medicine, electricity, and other basic supplies. They also promote humanitarian aid provided by France, Germany, and the EU and are collectively calling for expanded humanitarian access to address the emergency situation. The humanitarian crisis is linked to calls for humanitarian ceasefires, pauses, and corridors to allow aid into Gaza.

Also, European leaders call for a distinction to be made between Hamas members and the civilian population in Gaza. Israel's right to self-defense is affirmed in these statements, but European leaders almost always remind that this must be exercised in accordance with international law.

Many of the EU leader publications state explicitly what the European Union stands for and its commitments on the international stage.

• The EU stands in solidarity with Israel and its right to self-defence against Hamas attacks within the limits of international and humanitarian law (IHL).

• The EU unequivocally condemns Hamas attacks against Israel as acts of terrorism and demands the immediate and unconditional release of Israeli hostages.

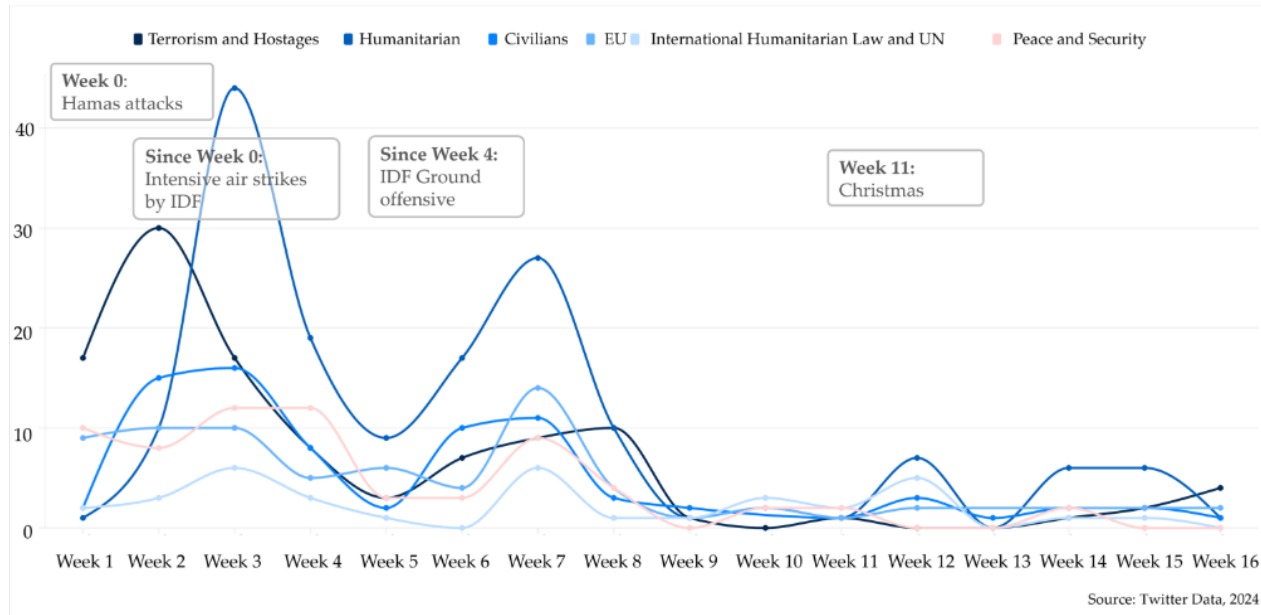
• The EU calls for an immediate cessation of violence and hostilities, for de-escalation, and for a sustainable political solution based on two independent states.

• The EU is committed to addressing urgent humanitarian needs and protecting civilians in Gaza, while pushing for pauses and corridors.

4. How have statements from leaders evolved over time?

In the first weeks following the attacks by Hamas, European leaders were eager to publicly condemn them and label them as terrorist attacks, while calling for the freeing of the Israeli hostages. Six weeks after the attacks, European leaders stopped mentioning terrorism explicitly, while still demanding the freeing of Israeli hostages. As soon as the Israeli army launched its military operation in Gaza, European leaders started calling for the protection of civilians and the establishment of humanitarian corridors. The chart below shows the evolution of the most mentioned topics only; the drop in the number of publications about Israel/Gaza as of December 2023 (week 8) is striking:

Graph 4



As the conflict evolved, EU leaders called for de-escalation and reiterated their commitment to the two-state solution, a political solution for long-term peace and stability in the region, while restating the EU’s commitment to international and humanitarian law as well as supporting the UN as the relevant institution. EU leaders have indeed consistently addressed the humanitarian crisis before all other aspects of the conflict. Calls for implementing the two-state solution gained traction six weeks after the start of hostilities, along with repeated demands for a (temporary) ceasefire and a political solution to the conflict.

Policy Recommendations for the European Union

Diplomatic engagement is central to any European peace initiative in the Middle East. As reflected during several high-profile EU visits and dialogs with both parties, the need for active, continued, and persistent diplomatic endeavors and engagement in the region is crucial for establishing solid trust and credibility as a mediator. European countries should maintain and enhance their diplomatic presence in the Middle East, positioning themselves as mediators where the US or other nations may not fully bridge gaps. It would be prudent for European diplomats to cultivate relationships that could unlock new opportunities for dialogue, including with Saudi Arabia and other influential regional players. Moreover, proactive diplomatic actions, such as state visits and peace conferences, could help sustain momentum.

After the Israel–Hamas war in Gaza, the European Union also has to work toward bettering living conditions as a central component in achieving long-term stability and economic development for the people of both Gaza, home to 1.8 million people, and the West Bank, home to 2.7 million Palestinians. In the long term, European policies should prioritize economic development, humanitarian aid, and institution building that would directly benefit the Palestinian population, which, demographically speaking, is young (median age 21 years old). This strategy could increase incentives for peace among Palestinians, potentially fostering an environment more conducive to peace building and deradicalization. Priority investments from European nations in post-war Gaza could target the rebuilding of strategic Palestinian infrastructure, including schools and hospitals.

Finally, the recognition of Israel as a sovereign state by Arab countries has been a longstanding issue since 1948. The Abraham Accords played a pivotal role in the transformation of diplomatic discourses, practices, partnerships, and society-level relations. Despite the Israel–Hamas war of 2023, the overall regional dynamic tends toward normalization as Saudi Arabia remains willing to work toward mutual recognition. This geopolitical reality can be accompanied by the European Union in a way that can be beneficial to all parties. Recognition within the confines of a two-state solution is not an end in itself but can be a means to advance peace and stability in the long run.

As reflected during several high-profile EU visits and dialogs with both parties, the need for active, continued, and persistent diplomatic endeavors and engagement in the region is crucial for establishing solid trust and credibility as a mediator.

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Europe's Role in Conflict Resolution

Great Power Politics: The “Old Normal” Forces Itself upon the Agenda of the EU

Prof. Dr Sven Biscop, Director of the Europe in the World Programme at the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations



Prof. Dr Sven Biscop lectures on grand strategy at Ghent University, and leads the Europe in the World programme at the Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations in Brussels. He is a member of the Royal Academy for Overseas Sciences of Belgium, and an Honorary Fellow of the European Security and Defence College. He has been honoured with the cross of Commander in the Order of the Crown of the Kingdom of Belgium and the Grand Decoration of Honour of the Republic of Austria.

A newly-elected President of the United States who lays claim to Canada, Greenland, Panama, and Gaza is far from normal. For Europeans, it is the last thing they expected from their powerful ally, supposed to be a bulwark of the international order. For Putin, on the other hand, it must provide some enjoyable relief from the carnage in Ukraine. Perhaps Trump's lack of inhibitions may help Europe understand that, seen in a historic light, such naked greed is only too “normal” behaviour for a great power.

Decline and Fall?

Three thousand years of international politics is a history of powers alternately competing and cooperating to obtain raw materials, trade, and influence. All too often, powers chose the path of rivalry and, ultimately, war to still their ambition.

That is the multipolar strategic environment so neatly encapsulated by Lord Palmerston in his famous dictum: “We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow” (1848).

It was ever thus, and still is, but Western Europeans can be excused (up to a point) for having forgotten. Eighty years of peace among them, from 1945 to 2025, is the truly great achievement of European integration – and an amazing exception in their history. Seventy-six years of the NATO alliance with the US, since 1949, is historically exceptional too. Unfortunately, it led many to think that the world around them had given up on power politics too, which of course it never did.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, now a candidate for EU membership, the fraying strategic consensus between EU Member States as their domestic politics become more polarised, and the erratic pronouncements of the US president should make us realise that neither our own unity nor our security from external threats is ever permanently acquired. This is not a new world order – this is the “old normal” that forces itself upon Europe's attention again.

Historically speaking, great powers rise and fall, and alliances come and go. That is not a call for fatalism, however. The decline

This is not a new world order – this is the “old normal” that forces itself upon Europe's attention again.

of the Roman Empire lasted longer than the entire life of many other polities; the EU and NATO too are not done just yet. And Europe does not have to decline, certainly not in absolute terms. This is a call to action, therefore.

European Strategy

First and foremost, Europe must finally decide who it is: a great power in its own right, a pole of the multipolar world, that defends its own interests. Europe's ambition cannot merely be to be the most loyal ally of the US. Only strong powers can conclude advantageous alliances, for they are allies worth having; weak players pay the price for their dependence and end up as protectorates. Trump ought to remember from his first term that it is much easier, indeed, to bully one's friends than to coerce one's rivals. A strong Europe will not be bullied into deals it does not want. Tough negotiations will secure an equitable alliance instead.

No great overhaul of strategy is required to achieve this; the EU and the Member States need only continue along the lines set out by the first von der Leyen Commission – but much further and faster. Five priorities stand out:

(1) Strengthening Europe's geoeconomic position by setting an ambitious industrial policy, investing in technology, and de-risking vis-à-vis other powers. Rules-based global trade between as open economies as possible remains a vital interest of the EU. World politics has taken a geoeconomic turn, however: states prioritise security and intervene in the economy, including against other states, to reduce threats to their sovereignty, if necessary by accepting a reduction in profit and prosperity. Therefore, the EU must adopt protective (but not protectionist) mechanisms that prevent other powers from exploiting its own openness: what the EU calls de-risking, as opposed to de-coupling. This is a fine balance, because it is a continuum: de-risking taken too far becomes de-coupling. The first aim of de-risking is to protect the EU's sovereignty and prosperity, for example by protecting critical infrastructure and strategic sectors, and by diversifying vital imports. Second, the EU must limit or avoid specific economic interactions that strengthen another state if that directly threatens the EU interest, such as the sale of weapons technology.

(2) Securing Europe's vulnerable geopolitical position by taking the lead in stabilising the “zone of responsibility” around it, from Ukraine, through the Caucasus, to the Middle East and North Africa. Geopolitics is an inherent part of strategy: the location of the natural resources that one imports, of one's export markets, one's partners and rivals, and the lines of communication that connect them, creates specific vulnerabilities as well as opportunities. Moreover, Russia has gone to war against Ukraine, and

China aggressively pushes against its neighbours in the South China Sea, to create geopolitical depth: to put distance between their perceived rivals and their own centres of gravity. The EU too needs geopolitical depth, but obviously will not revert to coercion to enlarge or to create a sphere of influence. But the EU does have what I call a “zone of responsibility”: a geographic area around the EU that must remain stable for the EU itself to enjoy stability. By implication, this is where the EU must draw a red line, making it clear that it will act against local or external powers, with military means if necessary, if they create instability that threatens vital EU interests. In this zone, the EU must take the lead to maintain or restore stability: it should not count on someone defending its interests for it.

(3) Combining geoeconomics and geopolitics and establish a positive presence in key third countries by investing in them via the Global Gateway. Its aim must be understood as preventing exclusive spheres of influence and maintaining instead a global “open door policy”: all states should remain free to interact with each other, rather than fall under the dominance of one of the powers. The Global Gateway will achieve that not by convincing states to abandon relations with other powers, but by enticing them to also work with the EU.

(4) Assuring the defence of Europe itself by building a complete European pillar in NATO and a strong defence industry in the EU. The EU should stop efforts that merely duplicate the NATO Defence Planning Process (NDPP) without actually influencing national defence planning, such as the Capability Development Plan. The better solution is to create a European layer within the NDPP, in between the national layer and NATO as a whole, that ensures that the forces of all European Allies (both EU and non-EU) combined constitute a complete force package, with its own enablers, that is capable of conventional deterrence and defence without requiring any US assets. Ideally, the NDPP would formally become the guidance for the European Defence Fund, ensuring that the EU instruments that do work focus on the force goals that Europeans states have set themselves (and not only on industrial objectives).

(5) Build coalitions with states, democratic or otherwise, that want to invest in universal multilateral institutions. In a multipolar world, embedding states in a dense network of multilateral ties serves to contain tensions and prevent natural competition from sliding into hostile rivalry. Multilateralism comes naturally to the EU, but it must play a much more proactive role. The dynamic format today is the BRICS; the West has continued to focus on the G7, whose legitimacy and effectiveness are doubted by many outside it. The BRICS is a self-coopted format too, so it is neither more nor less legitimate than the G7, and may not be much more effective. But it clearly is an attractive platform for

those who want to signal their dissatisfaction with the current set-up. The EU should be more creative and take the lead, both in the existing international organisations and in new, ad hoc coalitions, convening democracies and non-democracies that share an interest in concrete solutions for specific problems.

European Realpolitik

What this amounts to, is Realpolitik: the realisation, not that the end justifies the means, but that every end, no matter how lofty, requires means. What this European Realpolitik should bring us, is the freedom to make our own choices. In other words (yes, I dare say it): strategic autonomy.

In the economic and diplomatic realm Europe certainly has to be able to decide for itself, notably vis-à-vis China. Unfortunately, China's stance in recent years has eroded Europe's trust in the possibility of true cooperation, but neither should Europe meekly follow a US policy that it judges too confrontational.

In the field of defence, Europe ought to be able to continue to support Ukraine, and ensure its survival and entry into the EU, even if the US would scale down or end its support. Europe ought not to have to fear a Russia that re-builds its forces after an eventual arrangement to end the war. Its deterrence and defence ought to be stronger, in fact, by the inclusion of Ukraine.

Russia must be made to understand that any aggression in the Baltics, for example, would be met not only by a counterstrike there, but by an immediate offensive on the Ukrainian front as well.

Ultimately, a real European pillar in NATO, i.e. acquiring those military capabilities that until now only the US furnished, thus building a complete set of European forces, would provide at least some insurance against the worst-case scenario of the US abandoning NATO. The aim ought to be to keep NATO going, and maintain the defence planning process and the command structure, without the Americans.

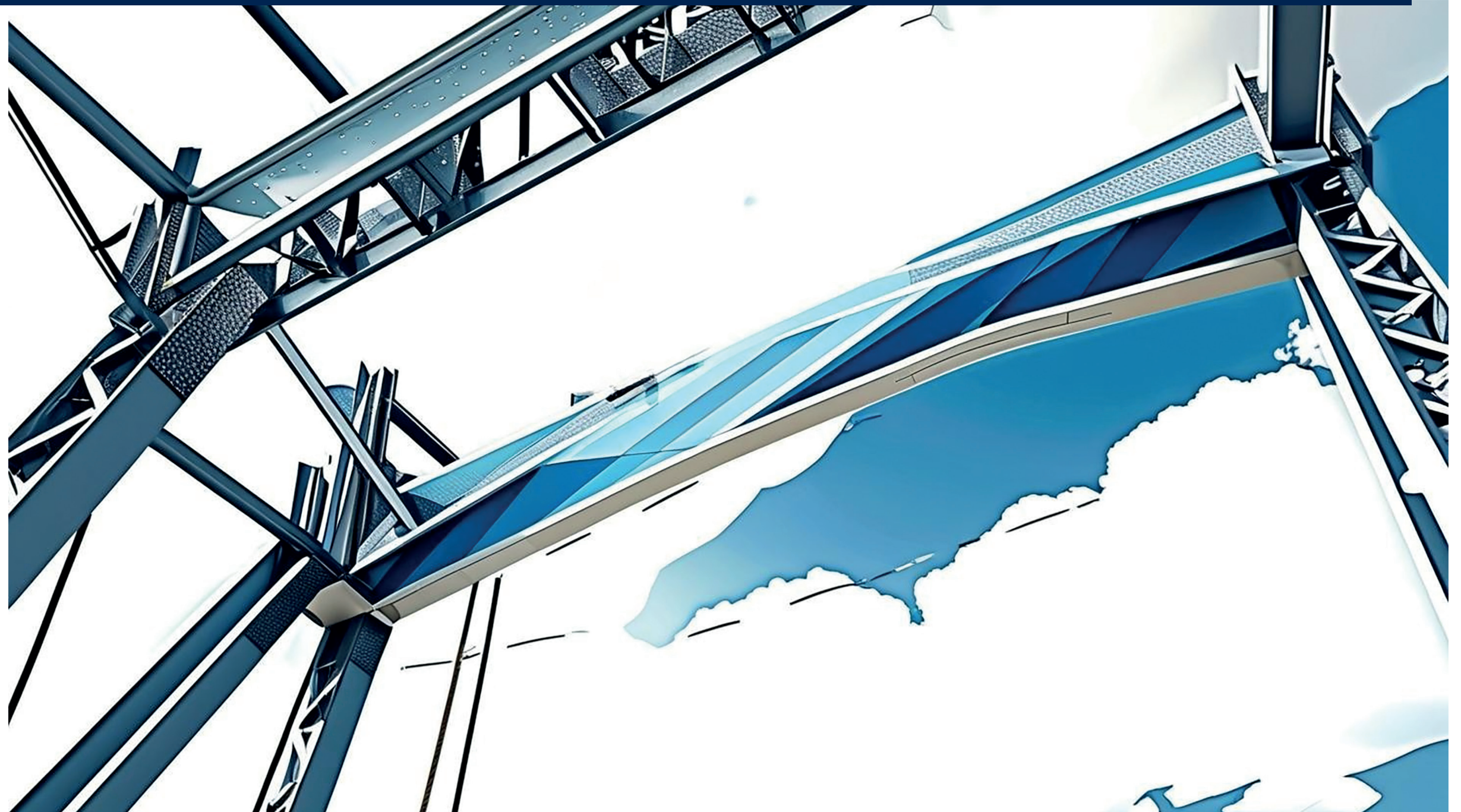
All of this may seem fantastical to some. But a large-scale war on the European continent, or a US President not ruling out the use of the military instrument to acquire EU-territory, were inconceivable as well. Perhaps the EU as a whole is too divided already to act decisively; but a coalition of European states, including indeed key non-EU members such as the United Kingdom, can definitely act, and assume a leadership role, in concert with the leaders of the EU institutions.

I am not advocating for Europe to go it alone; I am urging it to be strong enough to be a true ally to its friends, and a real force against its rivals.

Perhaps the EU as a whole is too divided already to act decisively; but a coalition of European states, including indeed key non-EU members such as the United Kingdom, can definitely act, and assume a leadership role, in concert with the leaders of the EU institutions.

Europe's Efficiency in Reconstruction Efforts

The reconstruction of Ukraine is not just a humanitarian and economic necessity but a strategic test for Europe's commitment to stability, democracy, and – potential for future enlargement. As the EU mobilizes resources to support Ukraine's recovery, it must navigate complex challenges, including the integration of local structures, ensuring transparency, and preventing corruption. This chapter examines how Europe can shape a sustainable and resilient reconstruction process that strengthens Ukraine's governance while reinforcing the EU's own geopolitical influence. By investing in Ukraine's recovery with a focus on good governance, economic modernization, and institutional alignment with EU standards, Europe may turn this crisis into an opportunity for deeper integration and long-term security on the continent.



Europe's Efficiency in Reconstruction Efforts

Reconstruction amidst War: Governing Recovery Planning in Ukraine



Miranda Loli, Charlemagne Prize Fellow 2024

Miranda Loli is a political scientist, specialising in international relations. Her research explores the role of international organisations; she has a keen interest in how local non-governmental actors make space for themselves in the international arena. She is currently a Max Weber Fellow at the Robert Schuman Centre at the European University Institute in Florence, where she is researching how recovery during a war is contested and negotiated in practice. Miranda completed her PhD in 2023 at the University of Darmstadt with a dissertation titled 'The Translocality of Anti-Corruption Practices: Encounters between the Local and the International in Kosovo and Ukraine', exploring the intersection between the global fight against corruption and security. Bridging political geography and IR, she introduces a framework to study interactions between different localities and how they affect global governance. Her research has been supported by grants from the European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST), the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the International Studies Association (ISA). Prior to her PhD, Miranda studied political science, peace and conflict studies, and sociology at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich and the University of Frankfurt. She has designed and taught several courses on the politics of expertise in global governance, international organisations, and the European Union. Her project was mentored by Prof. Dr Federica Bicchì.

Background

Under the banner of Ukraine Recovery, a variety of political, economic, and cultural actors are engaged in negotiating policy initiatives and recovery packages with the understanding that it is never too early to plan for the future. These actors situated both in Ukraine and international organizations recognize that in order to continue fighting, some recovery and rebuilding is necessary and that "people need to be able to go back and rebuild their houses."ⁱ In this report, I provide a concise overview of the relationship between the European Union and Ukraine prior to 2022, along with current initiatives aimed at fostering

multilateral recovery. These efforts must effectively balance immediate needs with long-term reconstruction goals. The establishment of the Ukraine Facility in Brussels in 2024, alongside the annual recovery conferences initiated in 2022, signifies a departure from the traditional notion of "post-conflict" rebuilding. Instead, it should emphasize a framework for recovery that acknowledges ongoing challenges during wartime. This evolving approach to planning and implementing recovery strategies is being actively explored and redefined within the context of this conflict, and I argue it is essential to connect these developments with the recovery conferences.

Instead of ignoring the existing legacy of the EU's involvement in Ukraine in the last twenty years – for instance through multiple CSDP missions –, the EU's current and future engagement in Ukraine should build on these existing experiences.

Since the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, the European Union has been playing a critical role in Ukraine's ongoing reconstruction planning as well as in currently implemented projects. However, the EU-Ukraine relationship extends far beyond this recent intensification of their ties. To fully understand and appreciate the dynamics at play, it is essential to briefly review the history of this relationship, identifying both the continuities and disruptions that have shaped it. This broader perspective is crucial for rethinking the politics of EU enlargement in light of Ukraine's evolving relationship with the EU.

The Orange Revolution (2004–2005) and Euromaidan (2014) represent key moments in Ukraine's political history but also important windows of opportunity in its relationship with the EU. The Orange Revolution, sparked by accusations of electoral fraud, led to massive protests and a new run-off election. Euromaidan was ignited by President Yanukovich's rejection of the EU Association Agreement, favoring ties with Russia, a move that was seen as a betrayal of public support for European integration. Yekelchyk (2015) contrasts the two uprisings: while the Orange Revolution was driven by opposition leaders, Euromaidan was fueled by civil society's distrust of politicians, with a strong focus on anti-corruption efforts. Both movements sought reforms particularly in terms of transparency, with the EU backing their calls for democracy and Russia opposing them. As EU-Ukraine relations evolved, anti-corruption became central to their engagement. The Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP) and the Association Agreement (AA) incorporated anti-corruption laws, leading to the establishment of key agencies such as National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine (NABU) and the High Anti-Corruption Court (HACC).

The EU's involvement in Ukraine has evolved from the ENP and Eastern Partnership (EaP) to the EU Border Assistance Mission

(EUBAM) and the European Union Advisory Mission (EUAM). These Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) missions, driven in part by the Orange and Euromaidan revolutions, reflect the EU's expanding role in Ukraine beyond the instruments of EU integration available in other countries. Since 2022, a third CSDP mission, the European Union Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM Ukraine), has focused on training the Ukrainian armed forces, further cementing the EU's role as a security actor.

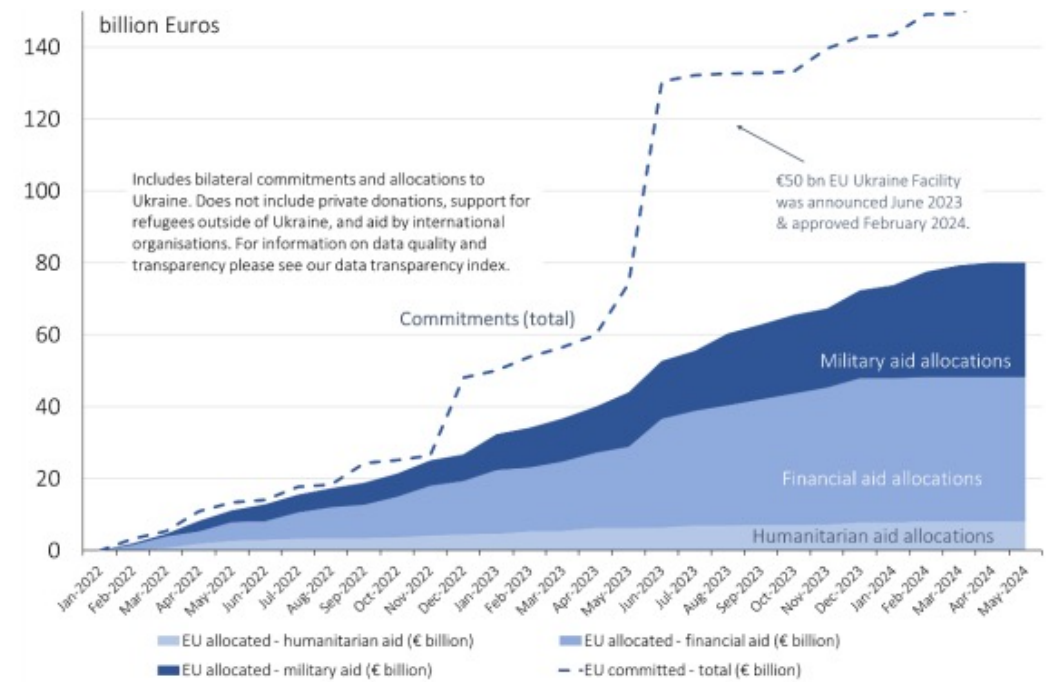
Instead of ignoring the existing legacy of the EU's involvement in Ukraine in the last twenty years – for instance through multiple CSDP missions –, the EU's current and future engagement in Ukraine should build on these existing experiences. This would of course require careful stock-taking on the EU's side.

Sustaining Multilateral Recovery Efforts: Balancing Urgency and Long-Term Reconstruction

According to the Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA3), by the end of 2023, Ukraine's estimated reconstruction and recovery needs soared to around EUR 453 billion, equating to approximately 2.8 times Ukraine's estimated nominal GDP. This figure does not include the damage done since 2024, underscoring the escalating crisis. The direct damage to buildings and infrastructure within the first two years of the war reached approximately EUR 138 billion. Yet, the broader recovery needs are more than three times higher, reflecting the costs of repairs, restoration, and rebuilding with a 'build back better' approach that is currently being pioneered.ⁱⁱⁱ

While long-term reconstruction is a decade-spanning endeavor, Ukraine faces immediate recovery needs. The magnitude of the destruction has led to a concerted international effort. In December 2022, G7 leaders established the Multi-Agency Donor Coordination Platform (commonly referred to as Ukraine Donor Platform) which includes Ukraine, the

Figure 1. EU aid over time committed vs. allocatedⁱ



Note: Allocations are defined as aid which has been delivered or specified for delivery. Data does not include private donations, support for refugees outside of Ukraine, and aid by international organizations. For information on data quality and transparency please see our data transparency index.

Source: Pietro Bompreszi, Ivan Kharitinov, and Christoph Trebesch, “Ukraine Support Tracker – Methodological Update & New Results on Aid ‘Allocation’ (June 2024),”.

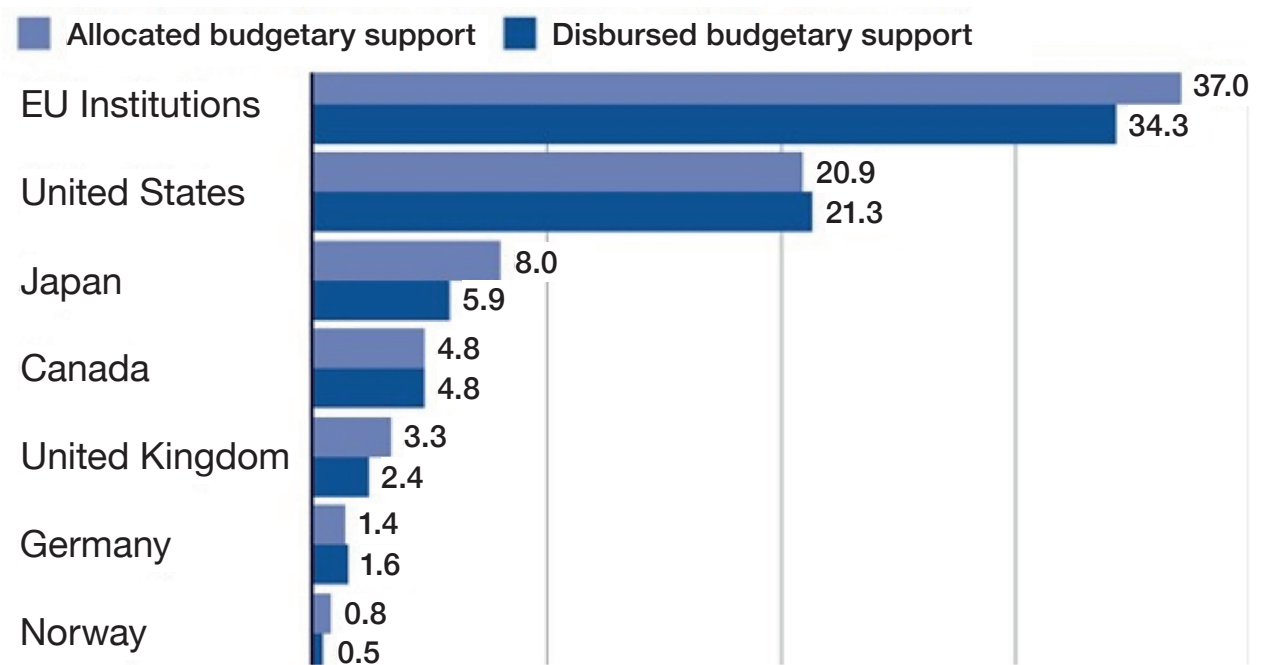
EU, G7 countries, and international financial institutions. This platform aims to streamline and maximize the impact of financial contributions for both immediate and long-term recovery. Governed by a Steering Committee co-chaired by senior officials from the US, EU, and Ukraine, the platform is supported by a Secretariat in Brussels and Kyiv. Since its launch in January 2023, the platform has primarily addressed Ukraine’s short-term recovery needs. Simultaneously, its aim is also to lay the groundwork for long-term reconstruction. Nevertheless, a steep gap remains between the allocated and the committed aid by the EU (see Figure 1). This gap is less significant when it comes to aid in the form of budgetary support (see figure below). While the different assistance mechanisms can appear fragmented, tracking support continues to be an important task and the Ukraine Support Tracker highlighted here can serve as a promising tool.

The Ukraine Facility established by the EU is a key component in this effort, allocating EUR 50 billion from the multiannual

financial framework for 2024–2027. This facility not only is part of planning reconstruction but also seeks to align reconstruction with Ukraine’s European integration efforts, contingent upon a wide area of reforms in governance and the rule of law.

The new Ukraine Facility launched in Brussels in 2024, and the yearly recovery conferences launched in 2022 illustrate a break with the prefix ‘post’ in post-conflict rebuilding and mark a shift in thinking of recovery ‘throughout’ war. New ways of planning and designing recovery are being experimented with and reinvented in this conflict. The Commission initially proposed the Ukraine Facility in June 2023 as a dedicated instrument to support Ukraine’s recovery and reconstruction efforts.^v This proposal was part of a broader package that included a revision of the EU’s multiannual financial framework for 2021–2027.^{vi} This approach was designed to provide more predictable and flexible support. By consolidating various EU support measures for Ukraine into a “single, coherent instrument,” a new space is created in Brussels bridging different actors from different EU institutions.

Figure 2. Government support to Ukraine: Committed vs. disbursed budget support, € billion. Commitments Jan. 24, 2022 to June 30, 2024ⁱ



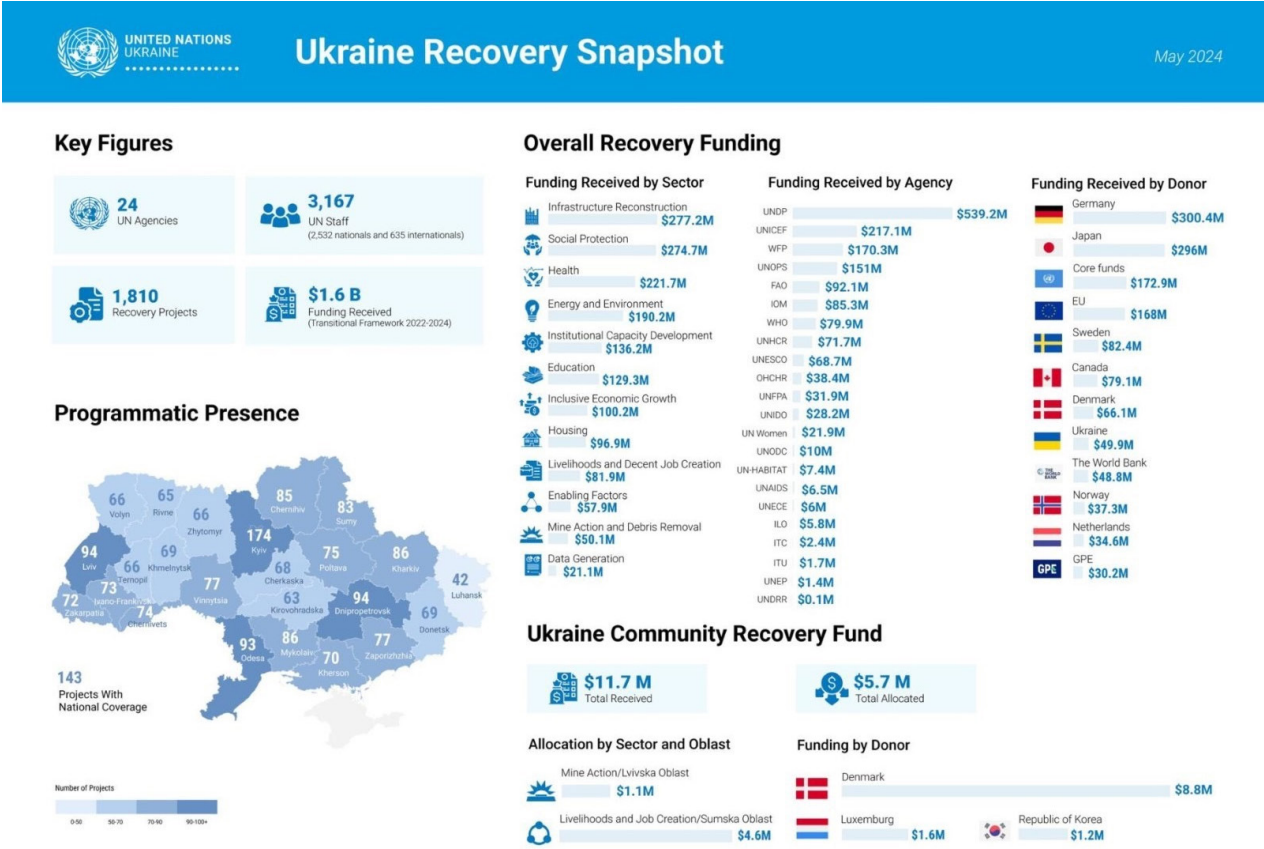
Source: Kiel Ukraine Support Tracker ifw-kiel.de/ukrainetracker (last accessed December 2024)

Both the Ukraine Facility as well as the EUMAM Mission are examples showing how the EU has had to quickly adapt to a transformed security landscape. As Bicchi et. al. (2024) point out, in their response to the Russian war on Ukraine, member states were able to draw on crisis diplomacy practices developed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Maurer and Wright 2020; Bicchi et al. 2024). For instance, the EU repurposed existing tools, such as modifying the European Peace Facility to supply both civilian and military aid to Ukraine (Fabriani 2023).

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that, in addition to the EU, the United Nations (UN) plays a significant role in reconstruction efforts (see Figure 3). This highlights the need for greater cooperation between the EU and the UN, instead of operating in isolated silos, especially in order to avoid creating additional burdens for the frontline actors on the ground. Recently, there have been clear indications of the EU’s ambition to strengthen its role in conflict prevention, with High Representative Josep Borrell signaling increased collaboration with the UN.^{viii}

Beyond the UN–EU collaboration, the overburdening of local actors during reconstruction efforts has become a key concern and has already prompted the proposal of alternative models. For instance, in contrast to the Ukraine Donor Platform mentioned above, another suggestion has been to establish an agency that integrates the rebuilding process with European integration. Economists Mylovanov and Roland (2022:43) suggest a Ukraine Reconstruction and European Integration Agency (UREIA). Their proposal reflects technocratic aspirations for streamlining the recovery process but also a much stronger “local ownership.” Such an agency, in their view, should have specific features distinguishing it from other similar rebuilding agencies, with operational autonomy being chief among them. The argument here is that by granting them operational autonomy, the Ukrainian counterparts could enable swift decision making and implementation and mitigate bureaucratic delays, but it would also represent a break with how recovery efforts have been enacted so far. Collaboration between a proposed UREIA and Ukrainian policymakers would foster trust, but discussions on veto rights

Figure 3. Ukraine recovery snapshotⁱ



Source: UN Press Release, May 2024 (last accessed October 2024)

pose important questions of conflict and contestation. In terms of expanding the scope of issues linked to recovery, alternatives such as this one suggest institutionally coupling integration and recovery. Whether such alternatives might find their space in discussion at future recovery conferences remains to be seen.

The Recovery Conferences and their four key dimensions

Lastly, the annual Ukraine Recovery Conferences (URCs) have played a vital and ongoing role as a key platform for sustaining recovery efforts. Starting in 2022 in Lugano, Switzerland, the URC has become an annual event for mobilizing international support. The URC2023 in London introduced initiatives like financial guarantees and political risk insurance for reconstruction efforts. The URC2024 in Berlin expanded the conference's focus to include business, social and human, local and regional, and EU dimensions. In all four dimensions, a much more inclusive approach is necessary to foster assessments and contributions from the people most affected on the ground.

Economic Dimension: Particularly important here were measures to facilitate and de-risk investments, including guarantees from G7 countries and the EU, political and risk insurance tools, commercial reinsurance projects, and state-sponsored investment support programs. A dedicated Business Advisory Council was launched to promote private sector engagement in Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction.^{ix}

Local and Regional Dimensions: These involve around 200 local and regional actors; the URC2024 acknowledged their crucial role in reconstruction. This particular dimension aimed at decentralizing efforts by launching a Coalition for Sustainable Municipalities, including a dedicated allocation under the EU's Ukraine Facility.

EU Dimension: While the EU accession process promotes reforms, this process needs to be developed with a keen eye toward the sustainable recovery of Ukraine's economy and institutions. The

URC2024 certainly emphasized the importance of continuous support for Ukraine's negotiation process and the reforms this process entails. Yet, the debate on reforms should also extend to reforms needed at the EU level. While the EU was able to adopt swift changes to its financing modalities, as visible in the Ukraine Facility, the discussion on how the integration process must also be changed still seems sluggish.

Human Dimension: The URC2024 placed the human dimension at the center of the discussion for the first time by focusing on the issue of mobilizing human capital for reconstruction and inclusiveness. Key topics included education, healthcare, social services, the role of the cultural sector, and the integration of veterans and internally displaced persons. Including gender objectives was a significant addition to the previous conferences.

In this vein, an incipient discussion about a Feminist Political Economy of Recovery is emerging.^x Recognizing the insufficient inclusion of women in recovery planning, the third Ukraine Recovery Conference in Berlin created the Alliance for a Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Recovery for Ukraine. This initiative aims to increase funding for gender equality projects, support women's participation in decision making, and deliver financial and technical assistance addressing women's specific needs.^{xi}

Individual solutions, such as retraining women for critical sectors like finance and cybersecurity, are recommended. However, these types of suggestions tend to benefit few women in powerful positions. If taken seriously, the gender-responsive agenda offers an opportunity for a much inclusive recovery. This would mean taking a sectoral view and also focusing on recovery projects in a sector where the majority of women work as opposed to "gender equity for the few."^{xii}

Beyond the gendered dimension where contestation is visible in the material analyzed so far, is the level of inclusion of civil society. There are already some important steps being taken in this regard; for instance, while the first recovery conference only had civil society as a side event and not as part of the main event, this changed at the recovery conference in Berlin in June 2024: "With regards to consulting with the civil society, I would very much encourage international partners to do that more, and the European Union and Member States. Because we are here on the ground, we follow the dynamics, and very closely, and we can help, you know, to define jointly and better the most urgent priorities."^{xiii}

In summary, through these different dimensions, the yearly Recovery Conferences not only serve as a space for forging relationships between EU and Ukraine economic, security, and diplomatic experts but also mark the passing of time since the beginning of the war and offer a space of reflection over the

ongoing rebuilding efforts. It convenes a diverse array of stakeholders, including governments, international organizations, businesses, municipalities, and civil society. The conferences adhere to the Lugano Principles and adopt a 'whole-of-society' approach to recovery. Each conference builds on the previous ones, with evolving themes and focus areas. For example, the URC2024 emphasized EU accession-related reforms and increased the involvement of local and regional actors. While this conference serves as a space for mobilizing resources, sharing expertise, and developing strategies for Ukraine's long-term reconstruction and development, it also serves a *sustaining* practice toward cultivating convergence between Ukrainian and EU communities of practice.

Recommendations

1. Enhance collaboration and coordination with global actors like the UN

For the EU to consider its role as a global actor with an increasing presence in conflict zones, deeper engagement with the practices and lessons learned from previous UN missions is essential. While the EU and the UN are distinct in their mandates, stronger collaboration can prevent redundancy and better support local actors on the ground.

2. Assess and adapt operational practices on the ground

Much of the EU's involvement in Ukraine's recovery has evolved through practical application rather than pre-designed frameworks. It is crucial to continuously reflect on and refine these practices to ensure they are effective and responsive to the complexities on the ground. Allowing for evaluation of EU practices from local counterparts could facilitate this process of improvement.

3. Prioritize co-creation and co-design with local actors

Rather than focusing on local ownership of projects designed elsewhere, the recovery process should emphasize co-creation and co-design with those directly impacted. Particularly in the inner workings of the Ukraine Facility, this approach could ensure that local actors are not just implementers but are actively involved in shaping the reconstruction processes to align with both local needs and European integration efforts.

Europe's Efficiency in Reconstruction Efforts

The German Platform for the Reconstruction of Ukraine – Working Together for Greater Efficiency, Effectiveness, and Transparency

Dr Ulrike Hopp-Nishanka, Head of Task Force Ukraine, German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development



Ulrike Hopp-Nishanka is heading the Task Force Ukraine at Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and is responsible for coordinating German-Ukrainian development cooperation as well as support for Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction efforts. Ulrike has 20 years' experience working on conflict transformation and peacebuilding as a practitioner, researcher and lecturer, most recently focusing on inclusive peacebuilding, recovery and reconstruction in the Middle East and North Africa region as well as Afghanistan.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has not only forced the Ukrainian state and its citizens to fight for survival, but also constitutes a significant attack on the rules-based international order. In response, the German government has provided swift and effective support to Ukraine, focusing on the triad of resilience, recovery, and reforms – i.e. strengthening the resilience of Ukrainian society through direct support measures, recovery and reconstruction of the country and support for reform processes as part of the EU accession process. This support is provided from government to government, but also involves a variety of non-governmental actors. Moreover, the support requires contributions from the private sector since public funds will not be sufficient to cover the needs.

Recovery and Reconstruction: A Call for Inclusivity and Cooperation

The Russian war against Ukraine has sparked unprecedented solidarity within German society: civil society organisations, entrepreneurs, academics, municipalities – both with and without existing partnerships with Ukrainian cities – and the Ukrainian diaspora have all expressed a deep commitment to supporting Ukraine in its recovery and reconstruction efforts.

Many of these stakeholders have approached the German Federal Government, offering their support and cooperation. While some are already engaged in Ukraine's recovery and reconstruction, others are eager to contribute. However, many of these actors remain unaware of each other due to geographical distances, limited networking resources, or a lack of access to multi-stakeholder collaboration.

To address these challenges and create synergies, the German Federal Government established the German Platform for the Reconstruction of Ukraine ("Plattform Wiederaufbau Ukraine") in March 2023. The Platform serves as a space for all those in Germany who wish to exchange ideas and work together on the reconstruction of Ukraine. It aims to foster new initiatives and synergies, strengthen networks, and improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency of recovery and reconstruction efforts.



**Plattform
Wiederaufbau
Ukraine**

The German Platform for the Reconstruction of Ukraine is all about knowledge sharing and networking.

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A Hub for Knowledge Sharing and Networking

To date, after two years of existence, the Platform has grown to over 1,900 participants from more than 850 organisations. The Platform brings together a diverse range of stakeholders who might not typically cross paths. They have decided to collaborate in four thematic groups and meet in several locations, offline and online. Since its establishment, it has built communities of interest across various sectors:

- **Building ties between different actors:** Large German companies, specialised civil society organisations, and one of Germany's most renowned university hospitals have participated in discussions on mental health, sharing lessons learned and best practices, and connecting with other experts in the field. In addition to organising a joint conference with the participation of the First Lady of Ukraine, Olena Zelenska, and Ukrainian and German health experts, a closely interwoven network has emerged.

- **Joint initiatives that individual actors cannot achieve alone:** Business angels, publicly funded research organisations, social-impact-driven civil society organisations, and foundations have used the Platform to meet and deepen their collaboration. For example, they organised an excursion for Ukrainian representatives from social enterprises, impact-driven businesses, social tech start-ups, and research institutions to Germany in December 2024, resulting in new partnerships between Ukrainian and German organisations.

- **New ideas and concepts:** Another concrete example is the meeting between an advisor to the mayor of Mykolaiv and a Berlin-based prosthetics manufacturer on one of the Platform's networking events in Berlin in July 2024, which led to plans to establish Mykolaiv as the regional centre for prosthetics and rehabilitation for southern Ukraine.

These examples illustrate how the Platform works: promoting trust, strengthening exchange, deepening networks, and introducing new ideas and initiatives. The Platform also makes it

possible to explore topics in greater depth and for stakeholders to work together on new concepts and innovations.

Inclusive and Diverse Approaches

The Platform follows the Lugano principles to strengthen an inclusive, sustainable and decentralised reconstruction process. In this context, the Platform organised several events and exchange formats at which representatives of minorities and vulnerable groups were able to present their needs, challenges and their role in the reconstruction of Ukraine. One event, for example, which was co-organised by the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma and Ukrainian minority groups, allowed participants to better understand how to integrate the perspectives of national minorities and Indigenous Peoples in reconstruction efforts. At another event, representatives from Ukrainian youth organisations shared accounts of the needs of children, teenagers, and young adults to ensure that their voices are heard as they will press ahead with Ukraine's reconstruction in the coming years.

A Network for All

The Platform's network allows all participants to increase the visibility of their initiatives and organisations, whether they are working on niche topics or broader issues like urban reconstruction and development. It also helps to amplify existing networks.

Moreover, the Platform facilitates interactions between governmental and non-governmental actors. For example, its online events before and after the Ukraine Recovery Conference (URC) 2024 allowed over 200 participants who were not able to attend the conference in person to engage with ministerial staff and gain first-hand information about the outcomes of the conference.

All events and network meetings have one thing in common: In order to be able to discuss the recovery of Ukraine, it is important to always have Ukrainian experts present who can best describe the situation on the ground as well as the needs, challenges and different options and opportunities. Who else could report better about the current and emerging roles of Ukrainian museums and their responsibility regarding the decolonisation of Ukraine, its culture and history from Russia and the former Soviet Union than Ukrainian museums themselves? And who is better placed to report on disinformation campaigns and strategies against them than Ukrainian experts on the subject matter and institutions working on journalism education and knowledge transfer?

To accommodate the diverse needs of its members, the Platform uses various methods for matchmaking, networking, and learning, including thematic working groups, peer-to-peer learning formats, and virtual expert exchanges. To reach as many of its

members as possible, all virtual meetings are recorded and made available through follow-up reports on the Platform's website www.ukraine-wiederaufbauen.de.

Looking Ahead

In March 2025, the German Platform for the Reconstruction of Ukraine celebrates its second anniversary. The exchange, learning and cooperation that has taken place during this time is impressive. The high number of participants and the positive feedback from platform stakeholders at the approximately 70 events that have taken place since the launch clearly show how great the interest in the reconstruction of Ukraine is and how much knowledge, expertise and ideas there are to share.

It is clear that the recovery and reconstruction of Ukraine are a task that requires the involvement of society as a whole, both within Ukraine and across European nations and the international community supporting the reconstruction. In 2025, the Platform will continue to focus on key issues like mental health and psychosocial support, culture, housing, and energy – but also overarching topics such as support with fundraising from public and private sector donors. Financing will become even more crucial in the coming years. State funds alone will not suffice to rebuild Ukraine. Mobilising resources from investors, philanthropists, large foundations, and companies will be key. Therefore, the role of the platform in connecting organisations with funding sources continues to be a priority for 2025.

It will remain essential to bring together a variety of voices and perspectives, including from the United Nations, the European Union, and, of course, from Ukraine itself, and to connect them with actors in Germany.

There has also been a growing interest from other European countries in adapting the concept of the German Platform to their national contexts. It would be great if this were to succeed. After all, Polish, Italian, or Czech municipalities, companies and civil society organisations are also making an important contribution to the recovery and reconstruction of Ukraine. So why not bring them together in a Polish, Italian or Czech platform?

Looking forward, the German Platform for the Reconstruction of Ukraine will continue to promote cooperation among key actors involved in Ukraine's reconstruction, be it in Germany, Europe or worldwide. By strengthening a strong network of actors and promoting continuous dialogue, the Platform makes an important contribution to well-connected and effective reconstruction efforts. At the same time, the Platform will facilitate the promotion of synergies and innovative solutions. The Platform has shown that a whole-of-society approach is key to successful reconstruction by leveraging all participants' strengths and resources to build a sustainable, resilient future for Ukraine.

Europe's Efficiency in Reconstruction Efforts

Rebuilding Ukraine on Ukrainian Terms

Daria Kaleniuk, Director and Co-Founder, Anticorruption Action Centre



Daria Kaleniuk is the co-founder and executive director of the Kyiv-based NGO Anti-Corruption Action Center, a powerful national organization that has shaped Ukraine's anti-corruption and judicial reforms. Daria is a member of the Young Global Leaders, Munich Young Leaders, and European Young Leaders (EYL40) networks. Since Russia's large-scale war launched against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, jointly with other civil society leaders from Ukraine, Daria co-founded the International Centre of Ukrainian Victory (ICUV).

While Russia's brutal invasion has marked its third anniversary and continues to devastate Ukraine, it may seem premature to discuss reconstruction. Indeed, any meaningful rebuilding effort cannot begin until the full-scale war ends and robust security guarantees are established. With peace conditions not yet negotiated and Russian aggression ongoing, Ukraine requires security first and foremost. Without strong security guarantees, any reconstruction investments would remain perpetually vulnerable.

Nevertheless, planning for a future reconstruction process—whenever it becomes possible—must begin now. With multiple statements signaling that the US will no longer prioritize European and Ukrainian security, Europe faces its worst nightmare becoming reality. There is no doubt that only a democratic, well-fortified, and well-armed Ukraine can guarantee lasting peace for Europe by deterring further Russian aggression. As Europe contemplates taking a greater role in supporting Ukraine with the potential reduction of US engagement, the European Union must address a profound challenge: how to provide substantial support while ensuring Ukrainian ownership of the rebuilding process and effectively addressing corruption risks. This balancing act requires nuanced understanding, careful planning, and genuine partnership.

To begin, we must correct a fundamental misperception of how Western partners often view Ukraine's anti-corruption efforts. Too frequently, these initiatives are portrayed as externally imposed conditions rather than domestically driven priorities. This framing undermines both the legitimacy of reforms and the agency of Ukrainians themselves.

The Euromaidan protests of 2013-2014 clearly demonstrated that Ukrainians see European integration not as an end in itself, but as a pathway to achieving necessary domestic reforms. Flying EU flags in Kyiv's central square was a powerful symbolic statement: Ukrainians were not waiting for external pressure to demand justice and accountability – they were actively choosing a European future because it aligned with their own vision for their country.

When we frame anti-corruption measures as Western impositions rather than Ukrainian priorities, we erase this history of domestic activism and civic engagement. The truth is that Ukrainian civil society has been at the forefront of anti-corruption efforts long before the full-scale invasion. Investigative journalists, advocacy organizations, and ordinary citizens have championed transparency and accountability because they understand that corruption threatens their own security and democratic aspirations.

It is also counterproductive to directly link corruption allegations to the EU membership prospects or other integration milestones. Such framing transforms anti-corruption work from a domestic good into a foreign relations checkbox. When corruption allegations are presented primarily as obstacles to European integration rather than as necessary steps toward better governance, it distorts incentives and undermines public trust in the process itself.

Ukraine's steadfast commitment to democratic principles, even under extreme duress and existential threat, has transformed the country into a symbolic and literal frontline defender of liberty.

The scale of Ukraine's reconstruction needs cannot be overstated. The World Bank and other international organizations have estimated that rebuilding the country will cost hundreds of billions of euros. With approximately 60% of Ukraine's national budget currently supported by Western allies, and this percentage likely to increase, the financial stakes could not be higher.

Corruption doesn't merely diminish effectiveness; it directly undermines the trust that enables continued support. For Ukraine, to steal from the budget today fundamentally undermines the trust of societies and voters in Ukraine's partner nations. This trust is the essential foundation that enables the continued flow of weapons and financial support. When corruption occurs in Ukraine's budget, it isn't just stealing from Ukrainians—it's stealing from the taxpayers of the EU and other allied countries who have committed to supporting Ukraine's defense and eventual recovery. The stakes couldn't be higher, as this support represents the lifeline that Ukraine depends on for its very survival during this existential conflict.

When considering the potential impact of corruption during reconstruction, the consequences would be catastrophic. If Ukraine successfully ends the war and begins receiving international reconstruction aid, this funding will naturally arrive in phases rather than as a single lump sum. Any evidence of misappropriation would immediately halt subsequent payments. International donors and their taxpayers will refuse to continue funding if their contributions are being stolen or misused. This creates a scenario where early corruption not only damages the initial projects but completely derails the entire reconstruction effort by cutting off the much larger future tranches of assistance that Ukraine will desperately need for rebuilding.

Given these stakes, how should the European Union approach its role in Ukraine's reconstruction? The primary principle must be supporting Ukrainian leadership while implementing robust anti-corruption safeguards that strengthen, rather than circumvent, domestic institutions.

Ukraine has demonstrated remarkable democratic resilience under extraordinary pressure. Through its valiant defense against Russian aggression, Ukraine has emerged as a leading champion of democratic values on the global stage. This shift occurred precisely when the United States stepped back from its traditional role as the primary defender of the democratic world order. Ukraine's steadfast commitment to democratic principles, even under extreme duress and existential threat, has transformed the country into a symbolic and literal frontline defender of liberty. This remarkable democratic resilience under fire deserves not just acknowledgement but profound respect from the international community, particularly as Ukraine continues to safeguard European security while pursuing its own democratic development.

The EU should approach reconstruction as a partnership with Ukrainian civil society, local governments, and national institutions – not as an outside intervention. This means creating mechanisms that prioritize Ukrainian decision-making while providing necessary oversight.

The structure of reconstruction funding must balance Ukrainian ownership with appropriate safeguards. While some degree of external oversight is necessary, the EU should resist approaches that bypass Ukrainian institutions entirely. Instead, funding mechanisms should strengthen domestic accountability systems through:

- Multi-stakeholder governance involving Ukrainian government representatives, civil society organizations, and international partners
- Graduated funding release tied to process benchmarks rather than punitive withholding
- Technical assistance that builds long-term capacity rather than creating parallel structures

The EU should build upon these existing systems rather than creating parallel structures. This approach would reinforce Ukrainian ownership while benefiting from mechanisms already tailored to the local context. Ukraine has developed several innovative transparency tools that should be incorporated into reconstruction efforts. The ProZorro procurement system, for instance, has dramatically improved public procurement transparency. The most recent legislative improvements further demonstrate Ukraine's commitment to transparency, as seen in the passage of draft law No. 11057, which opens up information on all construction cost estimates (prices of construction materials) and closes serious corruption loopholes in construction procurement projects.

Ukrainian civil society organizations have been at the forefront of anti-corruption efforts, often at great personal risk. The Anti-Corruption Action Centre and similar-minded organizations have successfully advocated for greater transparency and accountability in public spending. The EU should recognize

these organizations as essential partners in reconstruction, providing them with resources and access while respecting their independence. Civil society monitoring can complement official oversight, creating multiple layers of accountability. Those who expose corruption take significant personal and professional risks. The EU should support robust whistleblower protections within reconstruction programs and create positive incentives for reporting concerns.

A significant financial resource remains underutilized for Ukraine's future: the immobilized \$300 billion in Russian Central Bank assets. While approximately half of these assets held in Euroclear are generating some returns for Ukraine, the rest produce no benefits at all. Even the Euroclear-held assets are not being utilized to their full potential.

The principle to fund reconstruction and repayment to victims of Russian aggression should be based on the establishment of an institution like a Ukraine Development Bank — modeled after Germany's KfW under the Marshall Plan — that could consolidate these assets and maximize their impact. Such an institution could use the principal to fund Ukraine's reconstruction in the long term, while in the short term generating profits to support immediate security needs and strengthen Ukraine's defense capabilities.

The idea of returning these assets to Russia as part of a peace deal would be catastrophic. While \$300 billion exceeds two Russian annual war budgets for 2024, the Kremlin would

immediately reinvest these funds into bombs, tanks, and artillery rounds for the next phase of its wars of aggression. Instead, these resources should be put to work for peace. By implementing robust anti-corruption mechanisms from the outset in any institution handling these assets, Europe can ensure transparency and accountability. This would include a governance structure with multilateral representation and Ukrainian leadership selected through a competitive, transparent process.

Ukraine's successful reconstruction—when it eventually becomes possible—is not merely an economic or humanitarian imperative; it is a matter of European security. A rebuilt, prosperous, and transparent Ukraine integrated into European structures represents the best shield against future Russian aggression.

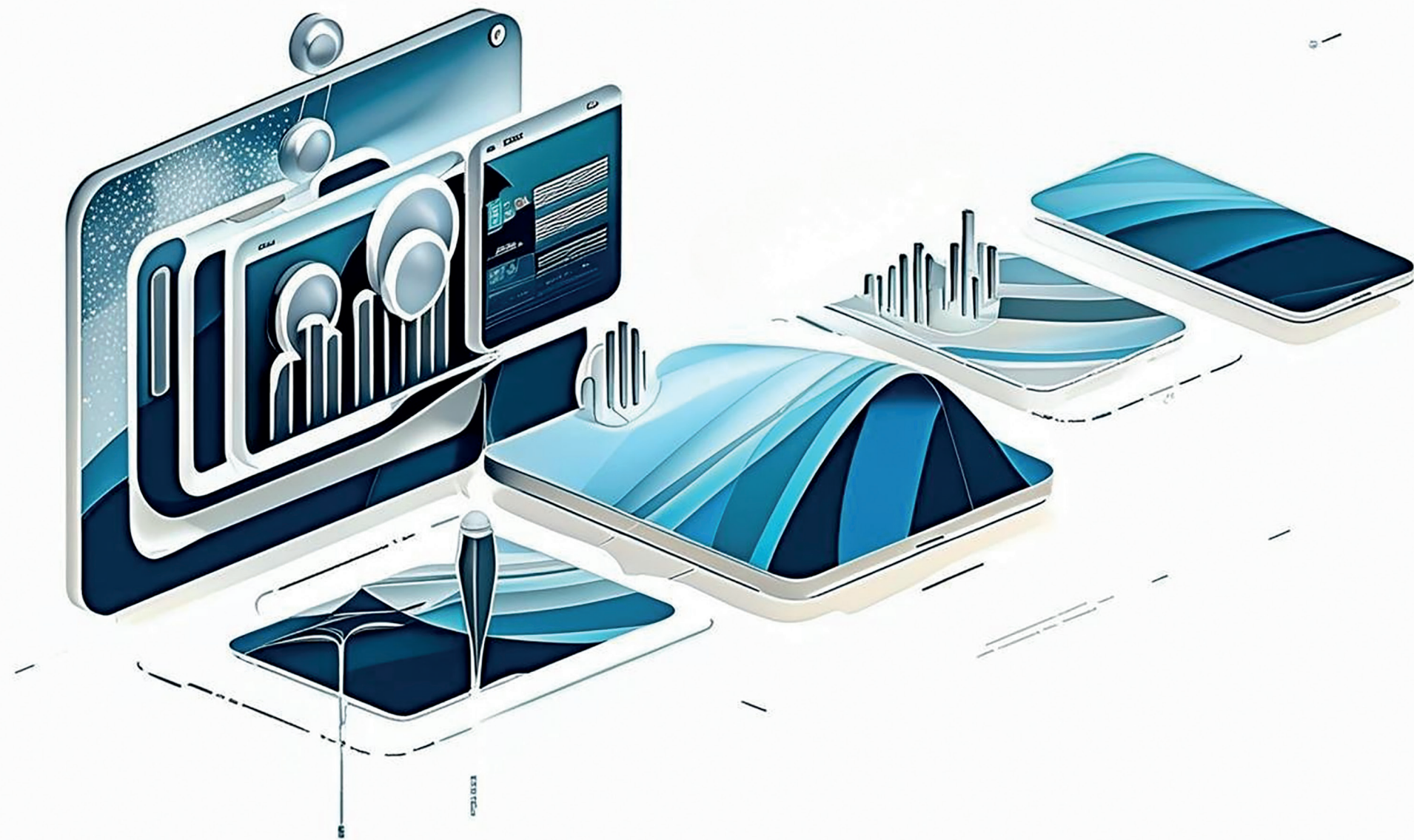
Ukraine has demonstrated extraordinary courage and resilience in defending not just its own sovereignty but European values and security. As Europe potentially steps into a greater leadership role, it must match this courage with wisdom, providing robust support while respecting the Ukrainian agency.

The path forward requires neither blind trust nor overbearing control, but a genuine partnership that recognizes corruption as a shared challenge requiring shared solutions. By supporting Ukrainian leadership while implementing appropriate safeguards, the European Union can help Ukraine build not just buildings and infrastructure, but the foundations for lasting democratic prosperity and security.

A significant financial resource remains underutilized for Ukraine's future: the immobilized \$300 billion in Russian Central Bank assets.

Europe's Competitiveness in the Global Metaverse Race

The development of the Metaverse is no longer a distant vision of science fiction but a rapidly unfolding reality with profound economic, technological, and societal implications. As global powers race to define the rules, infrastructures, and digital landscapes of this new frontier, Europe must assert its strategic position to ensure that its values—such as privacy, transparency, and digital sovereignty—are embedded in the foundations of the virtual world. This chapter explores how Europe can leave a clear footprint in the Metaverse, leveraging its regulatory expertise, innovation potential, and commitment to ethical tech governance. While the opportunities are vast, from economic growth to new forms of cultural and social interaction, the risks—ranging from monopolization and surveillance to cybersecurity threats—require proactive engagement. For Europe, the challenge is not only to participate in the Metaverse revolution but to shape it in a way that aligns with democratic principles and long-term competitiveness.



Europe's Competitiveness in the Global Metaverse Race

The Home of Collaboration - How Europe Can Win the Global Race to Innovation by Becoming the Place Where Ideas Come to Life Thanks to the the Creation of Consortia and Public-Private Collaboration



Elena Bascone, Charlemagne Prize Fellow 2024

Elena Bascone is a public policy professional, focusing on future economic and political challenges. Her research spans economic, security, and tech policy. Notably, her master's thesis in 2020 developed a model assessing the effectiveness of sanctions, applied to the Council of Europe-Russia dispute. She subsequently explored energy policy (Nord Stream 2 in 2021) and budget policy (EU Commission in 2022). Passionate about computer programming, she partially coded her Future Blog in 2022 and initiated her project, Res Publica, in 2018. In 2023, she delved into immersive technology, securing the Charlemagne Prize Fellowship for a year-long research project on European consortiums and collaboration in the metaverse. Ambassador (ret.) Wolfgang Ischinger, President of the Foundation Council of the Munich Security Conference Foundation, has mentored her project and she has been Visiting Fellow at the Center for European Policy Studies (CEPS) during her research year.

“Yet, it moves!”: Embracing innovation in Europe is not a matter of if, but of how

Galileo Galilei's phrase “Yet, it moves!” summarizes the **critical juncture** at which we find ourselves when it comes to innovation: the question is no longer **if** the visions proposed by today pioneers (e.g. making life multiplanetary or entering the metaverse) are feasible as this year's developments show that they are already becoming a reality. Instead, we should focus on **how** these ideas can be implemented sustainably, particularly for the people of Europe. To answer this question, the author created an original “Consortium model” and “collaboration function”: scholars have explored game theory and **Nash** equilibrium in innovation, but applying it to model collaboration between public and private sectors through a function like the one proposed remains a relatively novel, and possibly **groundbreaking**, approach. The author also suggests turning such a model into a **code** to create an inclusive online platform for Europeans to propose their ideas.

The research project argues that the focus in innovation should be on how to sustainably implement innovative ideas, rather than on who originated them (whether from a young computer programmer or a European bureaucrat). This approach is critical, as the technological revolution has already begun, and it requires diverse input to be managed effectively so that humans drive technology, rather than being driven by it. As the results suggest, the most effective way for a new idea to come to life is through a **collaborative effort**, as the plurality of supporters—spanning public institutions, private companies, and academia—maximizes the chances of success. This approach ensures that technology remains a tool for making people's ideas come true, rather than becoming an uncontrollable threat to human civilization.

For this reason, the author proposes that Europe, with its strong public institutions and close ties to the U.S., where major tech companies are based, could lead the global race in any innovation—from the metaverse to space exploration—if it can overcome fragmentation and **strengthen its transatlantic commercial relationships**. Before reviewing the solutions to embrace innovation in Europe provided by the author, and the reasoning that led to such advice, it is worth reviewing some major events of 2023/2024 that made it a year that inevitably pushed the human race forward.

2023/2024: The year that pushed humanity forward

The year 2023/2024 **forever changed the technological landscape** for two reasons. On the one hand, artificial intelligence (AI) became mainstream and new major companies presented their new extended reality (XR) devices. On the other hand, the space race saw major advancements, both in the public and private sectors: SpaceX moved closer to rapid rocket reuse and future missions on Mars with the successful booster catch by “Mechazilla”, while NASA made strides toward returning astronauts to the Moon with the Artemis program, setting the stage for future lunar exploration. The public and private also worked together: ESA, in partnership with SpaceX, launched new Galileo satellites, expanding Europe's global navigation system. The aviation industry also welcomed new commercial flights such as Comac C919 outside of the historical Airbus-Boeing duopoly.

Solutions: How the public and the private sector can embrace innovation in the next 5 years

Historically, Europe has overcome its internal fragmentation by creating industrial consortia. Consortia are a vital form of cooperation, and collaboration is the one thing that can make or break Europe's competitiveness globally. In the 1970s, Altiero Spinelli, European Commissioner for Industrial Affairs, pushed Europe forward in terms of collaboration and cohesion to make it compete worldwide. Spinelli improved cooperation specifically in the two sectors on which this research focuses, telecommunications and aerospace, providing the basis for what would become the European Space Agency (ESA), which was born out of an outstanding collaborative effort.

The legacy left by Spinelli, a European visionary, is not only one of collaboration but also one of continuous work toward this goal. This is why the objective for this work is to have a real impact in the next five years in Europe, meaning this new legislative cycle.

For this reason, the table below contains practical advice to European policymakers and the private sector, as this research found that a strong synergy between the two is essential to achieve a homogenous landscape in any industry in Europe and, as a consequence, to make Europe more competitive internationally.

Solutions for the public sector	Solutions for the private sector
<p>To-do list: To reinforce good governance and maximize collaboration:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Creating a new European educational scheme for entrepreneurs;2. Creating a new European platform to submit innovative ideas with a new feature (based on the “<i>collaboration function</i>” presented earlier) that assesses the likelihood of an idea to come to life.	<p>To-do list: To support a thriving entrepreneurial ecosystem and maximize collaboration:</p> <p>→ Creating international exchange schemes between incubators;</p> <p>→ Working together with European institutions ex ante to set standards for innovations (standards ≠ values).</p>

Note: This list indicates things the public sector can do with a clear reference to Europe, while for the private sector, the list can be applied to any business already in Europe or willing to invest here.

Introducing a third actor between the public and the private: The role of academia

It is worth noting that the table contains solutions for both the public and private sectors, as the model that was built for this research focuses solely on these two, but of course, there is a third actor that should be mentioned: academia. To neutrally assess the dynamics between the public and the private, this research was conducted in an academic setting at the Brussels-based think tank, the Center for European Policy Studies (CEPS)

By analysing how the public and the private sector can embrace innovation in Europe from a third point of view, meaning an academic one, the author was able to develop a **theoretical framework** that was both **detached and three-dimensional**. Indeed, the final objective of the author was to develop a *modus operandi* when it comes to embracing innovation in Europe that could be supported by multiple stake-holders as it is exactly the lack of shared approaches that creates fragmentation. By having the privilege to view things from an academic perspective, the author was able to put at the center the idea itself before thinking of how to implement it from a business and policy side. Consequently, the author’s main concern was how that specific idea

could come to life thanks to the tools provided by technological advancements in the private sector and enlightened policies in favour of such an idea.

Support from academia in tailoring adequate solutions: Roundtables as a collaborative moment

The CEPS also organized the event to present the second working paper titled *A Digital Renaissance in Europe*. This event saw the participation of Yu Yuan, former president of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) Standards Association, whose core mission is to advance technology for humanity. The event also produced a working paper **which was then published on CEPS’ website**.

Similarly, before the presentation of the first working paper at the **University of Padova**, a roundtable to discuss the results of the first working paper titled *From the Universe to the Metaverse* was organized by Prof. Elena Calandri.

The roundtables were a collaborative moment where experts exchanged ideas which were incorporated first in the working paper and, then, in the “Consortium model” and the “collabora-

tion function”, which are the two parts of which the theoretical framework is composed. The solutions proposed in the previous section have been developed in the final working paper, as a result of the theoretical analysis: *From the United States to Europe* (available on the **Charlemagne Prize Academy’s website**) is the third working paper, a **policy brief** where solutions are extensively explained.

Structure of the research: How an innovative idea can blossom

The structure of the work could be compared to the one of a **growing flower**, as each working paper builds on the findings of the previous one. The basis of the flower was the first two policy reports, which had the same underlying objective: to identify reasons for the public and private sectors to collaborate and the consequences of such a decision.

The **two reports published on the Academy’s website** were, in essence, **two sides of the same coin**. The first one targeted the private sector globally and was titled *From the universe to the metaverse: What the aerospace and aviation industry consortiums can teach to European (and global) XR businesses* (January 31, 2024), while the second targeted European policymakers and was titled *A digital Renaissance in Europe: Why new technologies are a historical opportunity for European leaders* (April 30, 2024).

The petals of the flower could be the final policy brief titled *From the United States to Europe: Collaboration is key for the metaverse to succeed* (July 31, 2024). The purpose of this adjunctive paper was to test the theoretical framework proposed in the policy reports and to give feasible solutions both to the public and the private sectors to improve collaboration (summarized in the table above). While the two **policy reports** were presented at events with roundtables to gain valuable input (at the University of Padua and in Brussels at the CEPS), the policy brief was presented in an online tech talk with the United States (published on the Karlspreis YouTube Channel), which served more for dissemination purposes as the theory had already been developed.

Results from the policy reports: Theoretical framework for the public and private

As each working paper builds on the findings of the previous one, the concrete solutions provided in the table and included in the last working paper are the result of a well-thought-out theoretical framework that originated from months of related literature research and expert input. Such a framework is composed of an original model, named the “**Consortium model**”, and an original function, named the “**Collaboration function**.” The model was first fully developed in the first working paper *From the universe to the metaverse* and so was the function. However, as the first working paper targets the private sector, the explanation of the model in the first working paper focuses solely on the side of the

private sector. In the second working paper, there is a detailed explanation of the model on the side of the public sector.

Theoretical framework part 1: European consortiums

When it comes to the technologies that are emerging right now, the concept of a consortium is relevant not just at a European level, but also on an international scale. The “Brussels effect” is evidence that the European Union is strong in exporting one main product: its regulations. This, however, could be seen as a disadvantage rather than an advantage in the age of innovation, where new technologies advance faster than policies. This is particularly true with a **second Trump mandate** where deregulation is more likely as well as possible **tariffs and sanctions**.

This is why it is important to look back at Europe’s history of creating partnerships via consortiums, to realize that Europe has always been the place for collaboration, rather than solely regulation. The reason why Europe is not yet recognized globally as the “home of collaboration” could be that consortiums are not always easy to create or internationally successful, although they could be Europe’s trump card to compete in a tech-centered world economy.

Consequently, this research chose to answer the following question: **When are EU consortiums successful and what conditions need to be present in the public and private sectors?** As its answer can shed light on **how Europe can embrace innovation** at best.

Sustainable leadership in business, one that is flexible and open to negotiation, and effective decision making at a European level are pivotal to creating an environment where bridges between the public and private sectors are built to overcome fragmentation. Thi question can be further developed in two different dilemmas, one for the public sector and one for the private:

1. To reinforce good governance when it comes to innovation, the key question is as follows: **Why should collaboration with private (including non-EU) companies be a priority in Europe for the next five years (2024–2029)?**
2. For the private sector globally, instead, the question is as follows: **Why invest in Europe?** (See the reasons for collaboration and the results of it in the model below.)

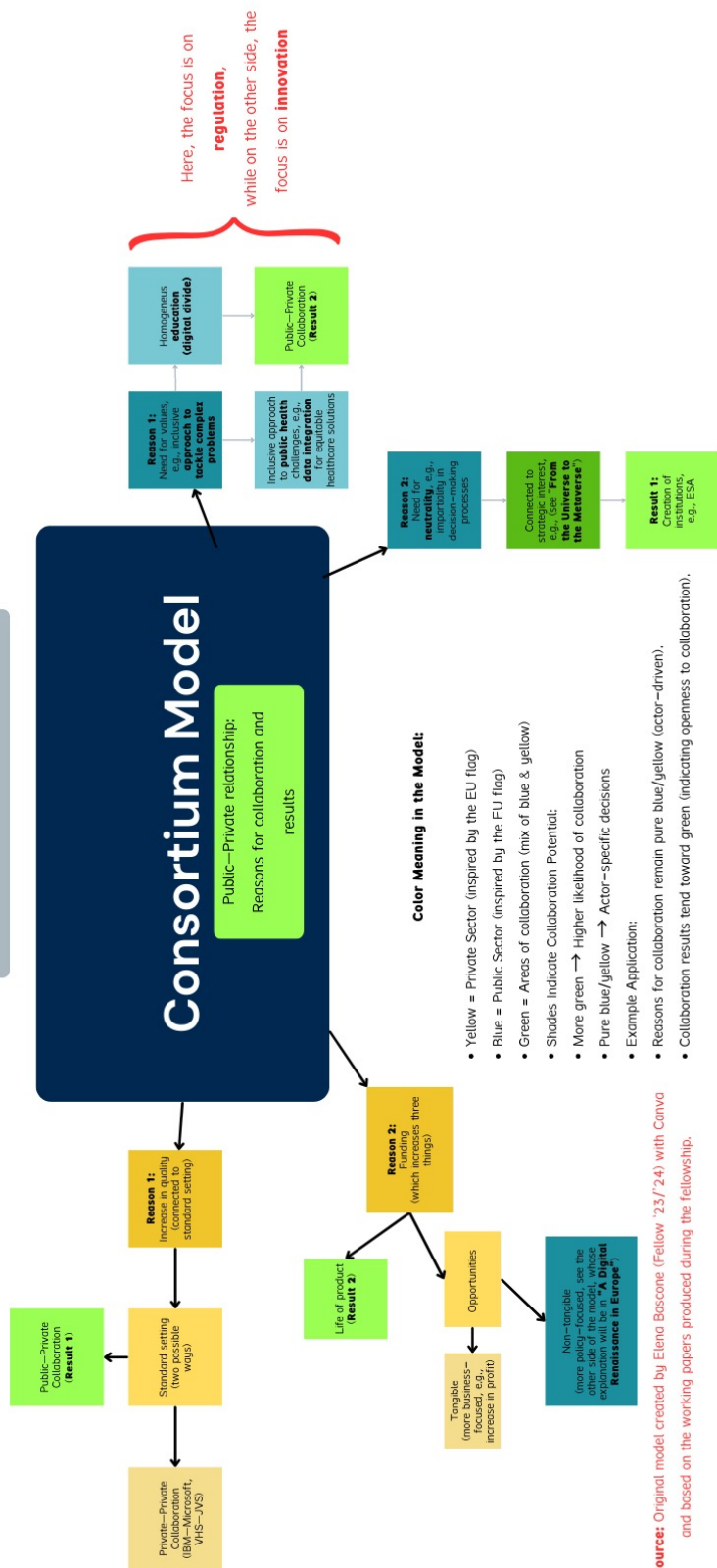
The answers have been summarized in the **model below created by the author** in the first two policy reports where one can find further information and resources. In the first report, *From the universe to the metaverse*, a detailed explanation regarding the left side of the model which covers the perspective of businesses. The second report, *A digital Renaissance in Europe*, includes an

The “Consortium model”

Public sector's reasons to collaborate and results of such collaboration

Key issue: Why should collaboration with private (including non-EU) companies be a priority in Europe for the next five years (2024–2029)?

The motor of the model is collaboration, which is represented by the function created by the author and named the “**Collaboration Function**”:
 $F(b, pc) = C$
 This function can be transformed into an inclusive online platform where people can propose ideas.



exhaustive explanation of how the author created the right side of the model, regarding the point of view of policy makers. Overall, in order to create the model, the author **consulted 70+ sources**, the majority of them published between 2021 and 2024. Such literature covered a **wide range of subjects**: economic policy (27%), technology (20%), history (20%), regulations and standards (14%)

aviation and aerospace (8%), social issues (7%).

Theoretical framework part 2: Public-private sector collaboration

The term **consortium in Latin means partnership**; hence, it indicates a collaborative effort among different actors whether they are public or private. This definition helps to simplify the research question by indicating that the motor behind the increase in EU consortiums is collaboration. As indicated in the model, there are two main reasons for the private sector worldwide to look at Europe (a place with a particularly developed public sector) as a **favorable place in which to invest**. The two main reasons are as follows:

- The value of **standardization** for long-lasting technology adoption worldwide

In the field of technological innovation, there is a “*difference between the added value of the technological invention and the added value of that invention's standardization.*” To put it simply, developing a ground-breaking technology is just part of the work that the private actor needs to perform to achieve global success. Another integral part of the work of tech businesses is standardization, whether that happens via a private-private partnership (e.g., IBM-Microsoft or VHS-JVS) or a public-private one. Standards are essential to achieve a long-lasting market product.

- More **equal access to funding** at a European level

According to the H2020 country profiles, Italy's net EU contributions amount to EUR 5.71 billion. The division of such contributions in Italy is EUR 1.36 billion to research organizations, EUR 1.9 billion to secondary education establishments, and EUR 2.11 billion in net contributions to private entities.² Favoring collaboration with the public sector in Europe means being in favor of a more homogeneous landscape in terms of funding allocations, as well as in terms of the capital market (see below).

For global business, looking at **Europe** can mean looking at a **place where investors can develop products that stand the test of time** if adequately supported by institutions, thanks to standardization and funding. On the other hand, the European public sector also has the following two relevant reasons for working together with international businesses:

- The need for values (especially in the health and education sectors)

The metaverse, like other innovations, became well known globally during the pandemic as the coronavirus crisis provided the impetus to use this new technology to improve the sectors that had been heavily affected, for example, to improve remote working and education, but also to improve the health sector. As indicated in the model, health and education are two sectors that are historically linked to government intervention, so where there is a need not only for standardization (which should come first) but also for value injection (which should come second and varies according to the place; e.g., in Europe, values differ from the U.S.).

- The need for neutrality, e.g. impartiality in decision-making process.

As indicated by **Enrico Letta** during the presentation of his high-level independent report at the Center for European Policy Studies (CEPS), the Fall of the Berlin Wall was a turning point for the development of the Single Market in Europe. After the end of the Cold War, there was an increased need to provide neutrality and cohesion compared to the need to preserve national interests.

These two points added to the fast growth of the tech sector during and after the pandemic and show that to create products that are long-lasting, the public sector should develop a macro approach to innovation and its governance. A good example in this sense could be the institution of the ESA, which was preceded by the institutions of smaller, more sectoral organisations.³

Public private-collaboration in practice: Creating consortia in different sectors

Consortia can be created within Europe and also internationally, there are several examples in this sense:

- Galileo and GPS Cooperation (Space) involves participants such as the European Space Agency (ESA), the European Union, NASA, and the U.S. Department of Defense. NASA and ESA also collaborate on several other programs (e.g., the Mars Science Laboratory with the Curiosity rover), exemplifying public-public collaboration.

Regarding public-private collaboration, SpaceX has launched ESA's satellites—including those from the Galileo constellation—into orbit, including in 2024, as mentioned in the introduction.

- Transatlantic Trade and Technology Council (Trade and Technology): participants include the European Commission, U.S. Government. This initiative was started in 2021.

• The International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor or ITE (Energy & Science): was officially launched in 1985 during the Cold War as an international initiative to promote research collaboration on nuclear fusion. The formal ITER Agreement was signed in 2006. Participants include the European Union, the U.S., China, Russia, Japan, South Korea, and India. Given Europe's recent **energy challenges**, international initiatives in the energy sector—especially those fostering cooperation between global powers—could play a key role in strengthening the EU's energy security and global influence.

This research focuses on the concept of consortium in general, by not necessarily confiding its scope to Europe but of course promoting the idea of consortia where Europe participates.

It is worth noting how visionary **Altiero Spinelli** was as he was able to identify the centrality of two industries that are now at the forefront of innovation and the telecommunications and aerospace sectors. Following his forward-looking ideas, this research aimed at **comparing** these two industries for the simple reason being that **these two industries are opposites**.

Sector 1: Metaverse, AI, and XR

To develop a holistic approach when it comes to tech innovation, European policymakers should first acknowledge that **2023/2024 was not only the year of the rise of AI but also the entrance into the market of extended reality (XR)** by major companies that are developing headsets. This fact is easily explained by the following data:

• In 2020, tech made up around half of the gross domestic product (GDP) of Europe's *"inner six."*⁴ In Germany, it accounted for 60% + of the GDP; in France and the Benelux area, it was around 50% + of the GDP, and in Italy, it covered 40% + of the GDP.

• Extended reality (XR) seems to be an up-and-coming field in the tech landscape. According to the 2023 Commission Strategy on Virtual Worlds, *"the market size is estimated to grow from €27 billion in 2022 to over €800 billion by 2030."*⁵ Together with other technologies, including AI (and also block-chain and 5G), XR reality is contributing to building a **digital universe** that we can define as a **"metaverse."** When developing a holistic approach to the metaverse,⁶ It is essential to avoid running the risk of regulating the software side of this digital world (which is composed of smart and faster codes also known as AI) in a way that is not coordinated with the regulation put in place for the hardware side (or XR).

In 2023/2024, Europe reached unprecedented goals when it comes to AI governance, with the first ever legally binding AI treaty⁷ and the opening of an AI Office. However, as previously

argued, the approach toward AI needs to be **holistic** and, for this reason, an AI Office should just be seen as the beginning of an interest of the institutions in tech innovation akin to what happened with the ESA. Nonetheless, the general approach that should be followed should always be a collaborative one as it is more effective. The second working paper, "A digital renaissance in Europe", does a good job of highlighting the differences in how the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Commission's voluntary Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech came into being. The latter, which was the result of a public-private collaborative effort, turned out to be more successful as companies chose voluntarily to comply with it.

Sector 2: Aerospace/Aviation

Historically, the aerospace sector has been tightly linked to the public sector as it is of high strategic interest. The tech sector, instead, grew in recent decades thanks to the rise of tech entrepreneurs and innovators in the private sector. **Both sectors, however, have not stayed "pure."** The aerospace sector has seen the entrance of private actors in recent years, for instance, SpaceX, while the tech sector is becoming subject to increased public regulation. These two lend themselves well to the application of the consortium model because they are the most extreme sectors that can be found in the public or private sector.

The fact that neither of these two industries, which are extreme cases, remained "pure industries" shows that there is a tendency in today's globalized economy to find a balance between the private and public sectors, and this is where collaboration is crucial.

It is also important to note that **Airbus** was one of the early and **most successful consortia** in Europe's history.

What moves the model? The collaboration function

Now that the model has been explained and built, it is important to look at what makes the model dynamic and that is collaboration. This is what **moves the public sector toward the private sector and vice versa**. Given that this model was developed from an academic perspective and academia is the environment where new ideas are born, the one key question here was as follows: When is an innovative idea, e.g., the metaverse or even a new model like this one, successful? Meaning, what makes the public and the private sectors converge to the center, toward collaboration.

To find the answer to this question, it is important to think of what motivates each actor:

- The public sector, specifically elected officials and politicians, is usually motivated by political consensus;
- The private sector is usually motivated by profit.

This can be included in the following function:

$$F(x,y) = Z$$

$$F(\text{profitability and political consensus}) = \text{Collaboration}$$

Collaboration needs to be **maximized to achieve the best implementation** possible of an innovative idea.

Simply put:

$$F(p, pc) = C$$

This function explains the model perfectly, which is in **3D** (which is why it has three colors) as it allows the businesses and policy makers to find a third point of contact outside their separate views. Looking at this on a Cartesian plane, one could say that the business and policy-maker perspectives are so divergent at times that they run on two different axes, with the businesses being driven by profit (on the X-axis) and the policy makers being driven by consensus (on the Y-axis). These two intersect on the Cartesian plane, but the intersection might not always be positive: on the plane, it can happen at a negative number, while in real life, the result of this intersection may be a negative consequence such as a sanction for the company. However, this interaction does not consider the third dimension mentioned before collaboration (Z-axis).

An adjunctive, winning solution: Creating an inclusive online platform based on the collaboration function

This function can also be translated into a **code** to create an online platform that can assess the likelihood of an idea being successful in a given place and time. The platform could be something similar to the ESA's Open Space Innovation Platform (OSIP) but with the following adjective features: a larger mandate (not just the space sector, though the ESA's platform is an outstanding example) and the possibility of receiving tailored education meaning a mentorship from an expert in the field to develop the idea in Europe. Moreover, the "collaboration function" can be the starting point of something that no other platform has offered so far, a tool that, if programmed correctly in the front-end and with adequate back-end data from the institutions and companies, **calculates the likelihood of that idea succeeding** at that moment in Europe.

Therefore, the function proposed in this paper can be turned into something real that can change how we see innovation in the EU, a code that can generate a score that signals the "likelihood of that idea to come to life" in Europe at that specific moment. If an idea receives a low score, it needs to be revised; if the score is high, it is eligible for mentoring. Another concrete consequence of the theories provided here is the advice given prior in the table. When it comes to the educational scheme for entrepreneurs in

Europe, in particular, an extra suggestion would be to include tech and big tech companies as ambassadors of such programs.

Results from the policy brief: To embrace innovation at best Europe needs to become the home of collaboration

According to Anu Bradford, the European Union has a good chance of becoming a **"digital empire."** Of course, as this summary of findings was written in September 2024, there is still uncertainty when it comes to who will be the next president of the United States. What is sure, however, is that European leaders will have to look at this person as a partner and a friend since Europe and America compete with each other in many ways when it comes to innovation.

Consequences for academia: A third dimension to Nash's equilibrium

John Nash was a great American mathematician who worked on game theory and founded the concept known as the Nash equilibrium. Such a concept has been applied in security (especially during the Cold War) and economics, but the research expanded a **third area of applicability**, relating to innovation, especially in an international context where the role of the individual is becoming more prominent. Nash's theories have been applied to innovation and also to public-private collaboration, however, the function created for the model is original and could create **new implications** for academics researching in this field.

The **"Collaboration function"** finds support in John Nah's mathematical theories and brings **new ideas** into it: as it was developed to move an original model, the **"Consortium model"**, this function can be **impactful** for scholars researching on political science and economics as well as mathematics.

The idea is the following: the two prisoners in the **"prisoner's dilemma"** are not two public actors, e.g., two superpowers or two companies, but rather public and private actors, e.g., an institution and a big tech CEO. Following Nash's reasoning, we have this outcome: if one prisoner is a representative of the private sector, and the other a representative of the public sector, **collaboration** is the most stable outcome and hence the **key out of prison**. This indicates the value a collaborative function holds from a mathematical point of view and that it can also be included in a specific type of mathematical reasoning, which is connected to **game theory**.

To summarize, collaboration is the key to embracing innovation positively, meaning in a mutually beneficial way for both the public and the private sectors. This is why when it comes not only to the metaverse, but also to any other innovative idea, the question should not be if that innovation will succeed, but

instead what the players (public and private) can do to maximize the chances of embracing it positively.

To this date, **there isn't something like this** function and the model connected to it: a widely recognized, specific Nash-like function that explicitly models collaboration between public and private sectors in the way that the author is proposing. This function could **revolutionize many sectors** like innovation (e.g., public-private partnerships for tech development), healthcare (e.g., collaborations between governments and pharma companies), and space exploration (e.g., ESA and SpaceX working together), by offering a new way to maximize collaboration for better outcomes.

Challenges: Access to capital and inclusion of young people

Given the lack of a “pure industry” nowadays, it is easy to understand that collaboration is the only solution based both on mathematics and political economy. If Europe can promote such an answer, rather than regulation, the “Brussels effect” will have a positive impact around the world with Europe attracting foreign investors and being seen as “the home of collaboration.”

If this is paired with an effective Capital Markets Union (CMU) and if the solutions proposed (e.g., the platform to submit ideas and the educational scheme for entrepreneurs) in the **Draghi** report⁸ are targeted specifically at young people, Europe will have a bright future. The theoretical framework provided, meaning the model and the function, can certainly be **applied to any sector**, not just the tech and aviation/aerospace ones as in this case.

The only challenge that might arise is the lack of inclusion of different parts of our society in proposing new ideas: often-times, policy-makers and businessmen tend to have **specific characteristics** relating to their gender, age, race and social status. However, this challenge can simply be overcome by creating the proposed platform which will not only help to test the model/function in real life scenarios, but it will also help in **democratizing the access to innovation**. Indeed, if anyone will be able to share their idea on a platform and receive a grade before looking for funding or supporters, proposing an idea will become much easier for a lot of people who felt powerless so far.

Looking ahead to the future, the key is to look at innovations and ask what steps can be taken to make that idea happen by working together and sharing different visions, values, and pasts. The covers of the working papers were chosen exactly with this in mind. The first is more futuristic; the second looks at Europe's past, and the third has two women, one from the future and the one from the past, finding the key out of the prison in the prisoner's dilemma.

Thinking of what each player at an international level, public or private, can do to make a new idea come to fruition, is the first step toward making any industry successful and collaborative and, if Europe will be the home of collaboration, consequently also **European-like**.

An example how a collaborative effort can help new ideas come to life

This research was a collaborative effort, thanks to the support of the Charlemagne Prize Academy and mentor Amb. Ischinger and many high-level personalities/organizations that come from different sectors and institutions both in Europe and in the United States. They were chosen to create a group of people that varied not only in terms of gender but also in terms of **age and experience**. They are as follows:

- Elena Calandri (Professor of History of History of European Integration, University of Padua) co-hosted a lecture on European Technological Cooperation as part of her course *International Relations after 1990* where the first working paper was presented.
- Luca del Monte (Head of Commercialization Department since 2022 and Head of Industrial Policy and SME Division between 2018 and 2022, ESA) contributed to the second working paper.
- CEPS (host institution) and Dr Yu Yuan (initiator and chairman of IEEE-ISTO Masa) co-hosted where the second working paper was presented.
- Federico Arangath Joseph (master's student focusing on mathematics and AI, ETH) contributed to the third working paper.
- Werner Pascha (Prof. em. for East Asian Economic Studies/ Japan and Korea University of Duisburg-Essen) contributed to the third working paper.
- DWorld VR (European tech company working with the public sector). The CEO and her team contributed to the third working paper.
- Irakli Beridze (Head of the Centre for Artificial Intelligence and Robotics, UNICRI) contributed to the third working paper.
- Joan O'Hara (Senior Vice President for Public Policy, XR Association) co-hosted the online tech policy chat where the third working paper was presented.

The support received from both the public and private sectors showed that team-work is the basis for an innovative, valid idea to come to life and not remain unseen or, even worse, disputed as it happened to **many Europeans before** (including Galilei).

If Europe can promote such an answer, rather than regulation, the “Brussels effect” will have a positive impact around the world with Europe attracting foreign investors and being seen as “the home of collaboration.”

Resisting the Digital Divide: How the “Metaverse” Is Endangering Democratic Society and How Science Fiction Can Counter It

Dr Isabella Hermann, Analyst and Speaker in the Field of Science Fiction, Stiftung Zukunft Berlin



Dr Isabella Hermann is a political scientist and science fiction analyst. Her work explores how fiction and narratives shape the development of future technologies, the societal challenges posed by technological progress, and, above all, how we can create positive futures in dystopian times. Since 2021, she has been a board member of Stiftung Zukunft Berlin.

Since Mark Zuckerberg renamed his company from Facebook to "Meta" in the fall of 2021 and began investing tens of billions of dollars into the technical development of the so-called "Metaverse," the term has been on everyone's lips. The Metaverse can be described as an expanded digital reality (XR) where virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), cyberspace, the internet, and the physical and psychological real world converge.

Zuckerberg refers to it as an "embodied internet," which becomes experiential like a three-dimensional space. On one hand, it is a social space where people can work, meet friends, play, learn, pursue leisure activities, and experience immersive new sensory impressions. Users can interact with each other using avatars. On the other hand, it is an economic space where people can shop using cryptocurrencies, purchase real estate, and make various investments, such as in the form of non-fungible tokens (NFTs)—unique digital assets. Technical gadgets for users, such as VR headsets or haptic suits, will play a role, along with technologies like artificial intelligence (AI), blockchain, the Internet

of Things (IoT), and 5G, as they enable, expand, and enhance usage scenarios in the Metaverse.

The Cyberpunk Narrative

The term "Metaverse" originates from science fiction: Zuckerberg borrowed it from the dystopian novel *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson, published in 1992. In the book, democratic structures have dissolved, corporations rule the world, and those who can afford it escape the bleak and brutal reality into the Metaverse. It is significant that Zuckerberg, a self-confessed science fiction fan, named his company and his vision after this concept. However, science fiction visions are less about predicting the future and more about commenting on the present. The question is not whether or which science fiction version will come true, but rather which narrative we want to follow in shaping current developments.

Snow Crash belongs to the science fiction subgenre of "Cyberpunk." "Cyber" represents all conceivable digital technologies, from artificial intelligence to virtual worlds (cyberspace) to brain-computer interfaces. "Punk" stands for criticism of the establishment. Cyberpunk's style was shaped by works like the film *Blade Runner* (1982) or William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* (1984), later popularized further by the *Ghost in the Shell* manga and animation and the *Matrix* franchise, culminating in the 2020 video game *Cyberpunk 2077*.

Cyberpunk is characterized by dark settings, often located in grimy megacities. The economic interests of the large technology companies dominate instead of politics oriented towards the

common good. The Cyberpunk narrative can be summarized as "high-tech, but low life." Despite advanced inventions and technology, life is precarious and depressing: data becomes addictive and enslaving, access is commercialized and centralized, and technology is used to oppress others. Societies are divided between rich and poor, powerless and powerful, unskilled and tech-savvy, unfree and free.

A Cyberpunk narrative aligns with the idea of centralized and commercialized Metaverses provided by a few corporations that monitor and track all platforms, apps, tools, transactions, and movements. The so-called "lock-in effect" makes it difficult for users to switch to other providers. Commercialization means business models rely on selling user data to advertisers or repurposing it for other profitable uses—practices already familiar from Facebook, Meta, and other corporations.

Thus, the access, functionality, and algorithms are designed to maximize data production by users. A core element is controlling and capturing users' attention, which becomes increasingly effective through growing immersion—the experience of the digital world as the real world. It's not just about producing more data but also about extracting new data from new emerging user experiences through advanced technological means. In such a world, people are no longer citizens but products. If the negative effects already seen on existing social media platforms—fake news, filter bubbles, hate speech, polarization, bias, surveillance, targeted ads—are carried into a new level of immersion in the Metaverse, an even deeper societal divide seems inevitable.

Solarpunk: A Counterproposal

Solarpunk attempts to offer a conscious counter-narrative. The name of this rather young, roughly a decade-old, science fiction-inspired movement combines "solar," representing all forms of sustainable energy, with "punk." Here, "punk" extends beyond Cyberpunk's system critique to propose an actual transformation of structures.

Solarpunk represents values of a sustainable, just, and positive future. Its bright visions of technology and inviting urban environments are based on strong senses of community and collaboration. The Solarpunk narrative can be summarized as "not either-or, but both-and." It suggests that we need both technical and social progress to forge a new understanding of the relationship between humanity, nature, and technology. In this vision, systems are decentralized and de-commercialized, access is interoperable, data is shared, and technology fosters liberation and empowerment. Energy generation is sustainable, efficient, and environmentally friendly.

How could a Metaverse be realized that combines technical progress and communal values? A Solarpunk narrative might begin with a European approach, including technical standards, interoperable platforms, and enabling regulation. Beyond large-scale political initiatives, however, which must now be spearheaded by various actors, all Metaverse providers and operators can work concretely toward a positive, democratic Metaverse.

Currently, numerous Metaverse applications already exist across various fields—from maintenance support for industrial machinery to collaborative work environments and educational services—that continue to evolve. The Metaverse offers all actors building or operating Metaverse platforms the chance to create spaces grounded in democratic values, participation, and inclusion. Providers can foster trust by making their goals transparent, defining responsibilities, and establishing participatory processes that amplify diverse voices.

For example, the Metaverse could offer significant opportunities for the active participation of people with physical and mental disabilities. In such sensitive areas, combining technical expertise with social competence and engaging with affected individuals is indispensable. These prerequisites allow for a sovereign approach to the Metaverse as a socio-technical system. Technology, whether in development or application, does not exist in isolation but is always embedded in the dynamic interplay between technology and social context.

The Future is Not Determined

While Cyberpunk tells stories of societal division, Solarpunk envisions optimistic futures where technology is used for the common good and strengthens social cohesion. These two science fiction genres do not depict real and mutually exclusive futures but narrative possibilities that can guide our convictions and actions.

It is crucial to recognize that the future is not predetermined. This means we can imagine and positively shape various futures. It also means the unexpected and unimaginable can occur. Meta, for example, has garnered attention for its stated goal of building a Metaverse but has also been mocked for its childlike avatars and virtual backdrops. Perhaps the Metaverse will emerge elsewhere and in entirely unforeseen ways, offering opportunities to reinvent democracy with new technologies and structures to make it fairer and more inclusive—but only if we tell new stories to guide this process.

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Metaverse – A Digital Coming of Age for the European Union?

Dr Leif Oppermann, Dr Dietmar Laß, Fraunhofer ICT Group



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the Fraunhofer ICT Group - in which 21 institutes from the field of information and communication technologies pool their technology and application expertise - he is responsible for strategic roadmapping, business development and governmental affairs. Since 2022, he is bundling the activities of the Fraunhofer-Gesellschaft on metaverse technologies and applications.



Dr Leif Oppermann is head of the Mixed and Augmented Reality Solutions group in the Collaboration Systems research department at Fraunhofer FIT and part of the roadmapping team for „Industrial Metaverse“ in the Fraunhofer

ICT group. He is researching into applications of mobile Mixed Reality, web-based collaboration and ubiquitous computing for intelligence augmentation using a user-oriented cooperative design approach. An alumni of the Mixed Reality Lab at the University of Nottingham, Dr Oppermann joined FIT in 2009 and led several national and international research projects. Most recently he led the German national project “5G Troisdorf IndustrieStadtspark” which produced a widely recognized Industrial Metaverse demonstrator and influenced the positions of Fraunhofer and the German industry umbrella organisation BDI on the topic. He is a member of Euro XR, DIN Metaverse/XR, GI VR/AR, co-author of their textbook "Virtual and Augmented Reality (VR/AR) - Foundations and Methods of Extended Realities (XR)", and Editorial Board Member of the Empathic Computing journal.

Fraunhofer Society, precisely Fraunhofer ICT Group, has been asked by the Charlemagne Prize Academy to write a short report on the Metaverse covering the following questions:

1. What is the industrial metaverse, and how does it differ from other types of metaverses?
2. How is the industry currently utilizing the metaverse, and what opportunities and risks does it present?

3. Can you provide an example of a consortium that is already leveraging the metaverse effectively?

4. How can we design and structure a distinctly European metaverse that aligns with European values and priorities?

Before touching on these points, it is important to provide some technical and historical context and define what we are talking about when we talk about the (Industrial) Metaverse, and also

about what is already out there in the wild. Otherwise, it is too easy to get lost in the ups and downs of the daily news, social media, and the hypecycle of new technologies – like sailors caught in shifting tides, struggling to keep their course amid the ever-changing waves. It is about intelligence of various sorts.

In order to explain how we mean that, we have to widen the discussion and take a more holistic view, as also suggest by Charlemagne Prize Fellow Elena Bascone in her working paper “A Digital Renaissance in Europe”^[1]. This is especially important due to Amara’s law which states: “*We tend to overestimate the effect of a technology in the short run and underestimate the effect in the long run*”.

From World Wide Web to the 2007 Metaverse

First, when talking about the future direction of the Internet and our societies’ use of digital technologies, it is often forgotten that the World Wide Web (WWW), arguably the most profound invention of the last decades, was thought up and implemented by an Englishman in Switzerland – Sir Tim Berners-Lee^[2]. He was inspired and enabled by developments that happened all around the world, but it was his invention of URL, HTTP and

HTML that connected brilliant solitary ideas and infrastructures and formed the WWW that we are still using today – albeit maybe a bit differently than originally conceived. Less than ten years after its invention, hundreds of millions of people were already “online” (which was still a single digit percentage of the global population) and we witnessed the first browser war between Netscape and Microsoft at the end of the Millenium, as well as the emergence of Google and Amazon.

At this point in time, the term “Metaverse” had already been around for some years, stemming from the 1992 cyberpunk novel Snow Crash by Neal Stephenson, which was obviously inspired by the technological developments of that time, namely the Internet, WWW, and early Virtual Reality (VR) experiences. Jaron Lanier, a former computer graphics, tools, and games developer at Atari, formed the first VR company VPL Research in 1984 after Atari had to mass layoff its staff in the wake of the 1983 Video Game Crash. Also an artist, Lanier was intrigued by the possibilities of immersive virtual worlds, the evolution of human-computer interaction, and what it would mean to society^[3]. VPL build a VR headset and was contracted by National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) to build the first data glove, which was available since 1986 (s. Figure 1).



Figure 1: VPL devices DataGlove, EyePhone (1989), and collaborative virtual environment (left), Meta horizon Workrooms collaborative virtual environment (2021, middle), Meta Quest 2 device with controllers (2020, right)

In Germany, pioneering media artists Monika Fleischmann and Wolfgang Strauss took the then very expensive headset and data glove to develop the first interactive VR installation “Home of the Brain”, amongst others, linking art and science through interactivity, and receiving the prestigious Prix Ars Electronica 1992^[4]. Fleischmann was also co-founder to Berlin-based ART+COM which produced a planet browser called “Terravision” that resembles and predates the later Keyhole and Google Earth planet browsers, a story that was handled in court and turned into the Netflix Series “The Billion Dollar Code”.

Ever since at least the first World Wide Web conference in 1994, there was the idea to combine the web of Bernes-Lee with VR. The then emerging standard VRML helped to stipulate various research and business developments, such as online virtual worlds like Blaxxun or Second Life, or the first European collaborative virtual environments workshop in Nottingham, UK^[5].

It was also around this time that hardware-accelerated 3D computer graphics became increasingly affordable and appealing for home use, driven by consoles such as the Sony PlayStation, as

well as PC graphics cards such as the 3dfx Voodoo and eventually the Nvidia GeForce series (still dominant today) gaining widespread popularity. This affordability led to many home-grown developments, such as the well-known game industry with its partially independent developers. It also helped to grow the less known demoscene of non-profit software developers and content creators which has been listed as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage by several European countries, such as Finland, The Netherlands, or Germany ^[6] since 2021, and which provides an influx of highly skilled workers for the industry. Software, and “the digital” has long been part of our culture, since at least the success of home computers in the early 1980s. In 1984, the German Federal Minister of Education (and later the last Federal Minister for Inter-German Relations up to reunification) Dr Dorothee Wilms outlined the task to integrate computers into schools and education ^[7]. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that not much had happened in that domain since then. The UK made a better effort for computer literacy ^[8] and arguably thus kick-started their gaming industry. Trying out things in a playful way is important and usually cheaper in software than doing it in physical reality.

The substantial 2007 “Metaverse Roadmap” featured, amongst other things, the aforementioned Second Life from 2003. It contained several definitions ^[9] and presented the following as a point of departure: “The convergence of 1) virtually enhanced physical reality and 2) physically persistent virtual space. It is a fusion of both, while allowing users to experience it as either”. In that year, the web had reached a billion users. The report asked:

“What happens when video games meet Web 2.0?
When virtual worlds meet geospatial maps of the planet?
When simulations get real and life and business go virtual?
When you use a virtual Earth to navigate the
physical Earth,
and your avatar becomes your online agent?
What happens is the metaverse.”

2007 was also the year Apple introduced their iPhone smart phone, which changed our style of personal communication, quickly followed by Google’s Android operating system in 2008. These operating systems and devices in conjunction with the App Store and Play Store marketplaces and wireless connectivity provided the basis for all kind of sensors to be worn on the human body, predominantly in smart watches, allowing users to measure their body, “quantify” themselves, and sending their data to cloud-based services.

Extended Reality (XR) devices like the Meta Quest provide for additional immersive 3D interaction capabilities, but also for

additional sensor data to be sent to cloud-based services where they might be analysed and used for other purposes than the ones intended by its users, which is usually covered by terms and conditions and a so-called, but questionable, “informed consent” ^[10].

Key Developments Towards Meta’s Metaverse

After the shake-ups of the **2000 Dotcom-crash**, businesses and non-profit organizations alike had to realign their strategies. Their response was an increase of user-generated content and enhanced interactivity between users on their platforms. This re-envisioned “**Web 2.0**” paved the way for Wikipedia (2001), Facebook (2004) and Twitter (2006). The platform capitalistic nature of social media ^[11], its data-driven marketing, and their effects, have been repeatedly discussed and documented since at last the Cambridge Analytica case about psychological profiling of Facebook users for modifying their voting behaviour in elections ^[12]. The 2019 documentary “The Great Hack” on this topic followed the legal journey of Prof. David Carroll on his quest to get access to the allegedly 5.000 data points collected on him via Facebook. He didn’t manage to get hold of his data during the production of the film, when the UK was still part of the European Union, but eventually got to see it later ^[13]. The Guardian wrote that the film concerned “*the biggest scandal of our time: the gigantic question mark over the legality of the Brexit vote*” ^[14].

After the **9/11 attacks in 2001**, intelligence agencies faced criticism for failing to detect and connect existing data points about terrorist activities. This spurred a number of legal (Patriot Act) and technological developments in the US. Advancing information technologies was seen crucial for homeland security, particularly in analyzing vast and complex data. To address this, The Department of Homeland security established the National Visualization and Analytics Center (NVAC) in 2004 to develop visual analytics for improved threat detection and response ^[15]. The term „Big Data“ started to gain traction around that time, amongst others. The term Metaverse has been on the radar of the National Security Agency (NSA) since at least 2008 for providing the „big picture“ as Second Life rose to mass use ^[16]. A multitude of other programs of similar intent have been started by NSA and the US Government. Some of which were described in the revelations of Edward Snowden, a former NSA-employee ^[17] and formed the big picture that the United State government was implementing global mass surveillance „*with the ability to pry into the private lives of every person on earth*“ ^[17]. Figure 2 depicts an old cartoon idea about technological surveillance that sadly became a reality at scale. If you think that “The Lives of Others” was just a nice movie about communist practices that have been discontinued since the Fall of the Berlin Wall and that do not apply to our lives today, then you are a digital naïve.



Figure 2: “Thoughts are free” (German song about freedom of thought – ed.) – “... you think” by Gerhard Seyfried. Once a leftist cartoon-fiction of the 1970s ^[18], now a digital reality at scale.

The **transatlantic dataflow** between Europe and the US to support Internet businesses has been enabled by treaties such as “Safe-Harbor” or “Privacy Shield”. Yet, different conceptions of data-protection and privacy in the aftermath of 9/11 and the 2013 revelations of Edward Snowden ^[17] showed a legal divide between Europe and the US. Subsequently, those treaties have been cancelled by the Court of Justice of the European Union when challenged in the historic “Schrems I” (2015) and “Schrems II” (2020) rulings which subsequently led to realignments of transatlantic data protection policies, also in light of the surveillance ambitions of the Chinese government ^[19].

Dark patterns are deceptive design techniques used in user interfaces to manipulate or trick users into making choices they might not otherwise make, often benefiting the company at the

user’s expense ^[20]. They are an integral part of current “**fremium**” (as in “for free”) designs in games and social media. This aspect of social media was covered in the 2020 documentary “The Social Dilemma” ^[21] on user profiling, microtargeting, and paying for an allegedly free service with attention as the currency. The film describes how **attention** gets marketed to advertising to insidiously influence our behaviour about products and political opinions alike. It prompted Facebook to release a statement about seven core points made by the film about: addiction, being the product, algorithms, data, polarization, elections and misinformation. A year later, the company Facebook was in its historic crisis. Facebook’s crisis was about allegedly **democracy defying tendencies** and Facebook repeatedly prioritizing profit over user safety and data privacy, as testified by Facebook-whistleblower Frances Haugen, e.g. before US Congress, UK Parliament, and

the European Parliament in October/November 2021 ^[22]. The film notably also featured interviews with aforementioned VR-pioneer Jaron Lanier, who stated:

If you run [the metaverse] on a business model that’s similar to the one that Facebook runs on, it’ll destroy humanity. I’m not saying that rhetorically. That is a literal and specific prediction that humanity could not survive that.

Lanier is recipient of the 2014 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade for this pioneering work in the digital world, and also recognizing the inherent risks ^[23], ^[24].

The 2007/2008 **global financial crisis** acted as a significant landscape pressure that revealed significant flaws in the global financial system, including excessive risk-taking by banks, lack of transparency, and the failure of regulatory bodies to prevent the collapse. This dominated the news at that time. The subsequent erosion of trust led to the development of Bitcoin and alternative cryptocurrencies and their underlying “Web3” technologies, such as Blockchain ^[25]. Meme coins like Doge, Hawk, Melania, and Trump are built on Web3 technologies and ride the hype wave. They rise and fall based on social media trends, and big holders can dump them anytime. Unironically, Elon Musk has been one of Dogecoin’s biggest hype machines and his posts about it blur the line between meme culture and real-world financial impact. It remains to be seen how much of a coincidence the naming of his newly proclaimed Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) is and how much impact will be generated by him in real life and social media as the owner of X, formerly Twitter, which the current US presidency want to see unregulated in Europe¹. At the eve of the German election of 2025, the incoming chancellor Friedrich Merz already signalled a seismic shift in transatlantic relations².

The term **Metaverse** has attracted increased attention since October 2021, when Mark Zuckerberg announced – amidst Facebook’s historic crisis – that his social media company Facebook Inc. would be renamed to Meta Platforms, Inc. (Meta for short), as this brand would better reflect what his company does. The accompanying media campaign was supported by investor and author Matthew Ball ^[26], who categorized his writings in eight layers: hardware – networking – compute - virtual platforms -

interchange tools & standards – payments – metaverse content, services and assets – user behaviours. From our own 2022 Metaverse(s) review and definition paper ^[27], he was the only author putting crypto- and blockchain technologies into the picture. Since Meta’s hailing for the Metaverse, the media buzz has been running all over 2022 and was only finally overtaken by the news about Artificial Intelligence (AI) in 2023, after OpenAI released ChatGPT in November 2022 and the US, Europe and China started for an AI-race regarding technical sovereignty and competitiveness relating to compute infrastructure, foundation models (incl. data and algorithms) and applications.

Summary

The rights to informational self-determination and data privacy are under massive pressure - not only from state intervention, but above all from the dominance of large tech companies and global surveillance structures ^[28]. Companies such as Google, Meta, Amazon and Microsoft dominate the internet and control central digital infrastructures. They collect huge amounts of personal data for personalized advertising, AI training and behavioural analysis. The problem is that these companies are subject to US law, where data protection is weaker than in the EU. The transfer of data to US authorities is currently facilitated by the Cloud Act. Even if EU laws such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) exist, effective control over personal data remains difficult. Meta is driving forward an even deeper form of data collection with its Metaverse:

- Capturing camera and environment data, movement profiles, emotions, eye-tracking and biometric data in virtual worlds.
- Forecast: If the metaverse catches on by this design, it could enable even more invasive data monitoring than today's web (compare Jaron Lanier's quote above).

With the start of Trump's second presidency, both Meta and X signalled a reduction in content moderation on their platforms - a move that potentially puts them at odds with the European Digital Services Act.

Edward Snowden's revelations in 2013 showed that secret services such as the NSA and British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) were and still are conducting almost seamless mass surveillance - with the support of European intelligence

services. The state is securing more and more surveillance options, often with the justification of countering terrorism, and preventing child-abuse ^[23]. New developments, such as AI-supported surveillance, facial recognition, chat control (e.g. the controversial EU regulation on preventive searches of private messages) are pushed with those arguments. It is important to question this route of surveillance and be more cautious about individual and collective rights in a free society. Counter-concepts to balance this big data “big watching” using wearable technology exist, such as “Veillance”, which is based on the principles of subject rights, auditability, and the right to record (for the people) ^[29]. A combination of the first two points and “great pain to make change happen” can be seen as the blue-print for the digital services provided in Estonia, which is considered a European leader in digital government³.

Citizen's privacy and their right to informational self-determination still formally exists ^[30] and is being protected by treaties like the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, the Convention for the Protection of Individuals with Regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data and the GDPR ^[31]. But this right is constantly undermined for decades since at least 9/11 by technology corporations that collect huge amounts of data, state surveillance that is hardly subject to democratic control, and new technologies that allow even deeper insights into people's behaviour.

We previously tried to define the term “Metaverse” after a literature review with seven rules or criteria ^[27] as follows:

1. A Metaverse is a combination of virtual worlds and augmented real worlds. They are not closed systems but linked with each other and with reality.
2. A Metaverse is a social medium in which people can interact, communicate, collaborate, but also trade and own property.
3. A Metaverse is persistent and long-lasting but can also include temporally limited sessions.
4. A Metaverse is an integrated system that entails and utilizes XR- and other technologies. This requires utilized components to be as open and interoperable as possible, ideally using open standards.

5. In addition to getting immersed in virtual worlds (VR) and augmented real worlds (AR/MR), capturing the state of the user and the real environment are key actions for Metaverse applications.

6. Metaverse-participation is multi-modal and can be accomplished with varying intensities and representations, such as embodiment through avatars. Participants can seamlessly change the form and intensity of their participation.

7. A Metaverse is tightly coupled with reality. Information, actions, and interactions can be exchanged between both worlds, real and digital, and can influence each other. Using digital twins allows for cooperative interactions with things in the real and virtual world.

The paper also provided some historical context and typical application scenarios: Marketing, The Metaverse of Meta, Industrial Metaverses, and Metaverses in education. A comparison of typical existing applications revealed that no implementation implemented all criteria, and no application implemented rules #6 & #7 at the time. Only Meta implemented rule #5, which also must be seen critical in light of the story so far.

The Metaverse for Policy Makers

Charlemagne Prize Fellow Elena Bascone, who is mentored by Amb. Wolfgang Ischinger⁴ uses the analogy of the old and new continent, with explorers like Christopher Columbus, and the renaissance, as well as collaboration in space technology to address the question why European policymakers should be interested in **new technologies** like the metaverse and AI, and how it would provide a historical opportunity to us Europeans, and the rest of the world. She closes her working paper ^[31] as follows: *“Thanks to the role of private actors, the universe is becoming more accessible to us. Similarly, the metaverse is a digital universe that Europeans need to explore. To do so, European leaders need to take the chance to support the new explorers, the tech enthusiasts, and start-uppers by giving them tools such as a long-term vision and the neutrality that only the public sector can give.”*

With all of the above in mind, we would now like to answer the initial four questions.

1] JD Vance says US could drop support for NATO if Europe tries to regulate Elon Musk's platforms | The Independent
2] <https://www.bbc.com/news/live/ckg82wwrwy6t?post=asset%3Ae9f54f45-a936-446c-82a3-c601b130b0ca#post>

3] <https://www.interaktive-technologien.de/service/zukunftskongress/programm/keynote-1-winter-is-coming>
4] Former State Secretary at the Federal Foreign Office, Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany in Washington, D.C. and London, and former head of the Munich Security Conference from 2008 - 2022.

Q1. What is the industrial metaverse, and how does it differ from other types of metaverses?

There is a general understanding that we don't have one metaverse, rather distinct types of metaverses depending on application. According to estimates, around 10,000 different metaverses are currently being developed by various companies in different sectors. There is a topology that differentiates between four broad metaverse types: consumer metaverse, enterprise metaverse, industrial metaverse and public metaverse^{[32], [33]} (resp. earlier bitkom^[34] or BDI^[35] publications). The term consumer metaverse (coined by Mark Zuckerberg) refers to applications from the private sector (such as gaming, entertainment and private social interaction), whereas the term public metaverse contains public sector applications (e.g. connected urban twins of cities, municipal infrastructures and institutions for better public services by the government). The term enterprise (or corporate) metaverse refers to applications that are used by companies in the field of HR, education and professional training, new work, collaboration across company sites etc.).

Finally, industrial metaverse refers to those areas of application that are aimed at use in the industrial sector across all vertical domains (e.g. energy, construction, production, healthcare etc.). It encompasses the entire product life cycle from R&D (e.g. design and engineering), manufacturing, maintenance, usage, through to recycling. The industrial metaverse is another evolutionary stage in the digital transformation of industry by further developing existing Industry 4.0 concepts (e.g. focussing on user interaction next to connecting factory assets). From all four metaverse types, the market potential in the field of industrial metaverse is considered to be highest.

At its core, any "metaverse" vision uses XR-technology, as currently pushed by Big Tech (Google, Microsoft, Meta, Apple) and others (HTC, Varjo, etc.). It also often uses cloud-based approaches which link in other jurisdictions which often does not satisfy corporate and legal needs in the EU.

So an "industrial metaverse" (also "enterprise metaverse") takes this into account and is not predominantly marketed as a consumer freemium product where its users would pay with their data and right. It provides for spatial and remote "3D" collaboration without falling for dark patterns prevalent in the consumer-domain (i.e. benefitting a third party). It provides for industrial application of new technologies while at the same time being cautious about the assets and intellectual properties of the companies to facilitate work.

Many people use the term metaverse to also integrate other new technologies, like sensors, blockchain, or AI. The German Federation of Industries (BDI) defined it in their publication

for the Hannover Messe Industrial Metaverse Summit as: *"The Industrial Metaverse marks an evolutionary development in the way industrial processes are designed and implemented. By integrating cutting-edge technologies such as digital twins, artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT) and augmented reality (VR/AR), the Industrial Metaverse promotes the fusion of digital and physical industrial processes. This integration optimises value chains end-to-end, increases efficiency, reduces costs and improves adaptability to market requirements. The relevance of the Industrial Metaverse extends across the entire German industrial sector. It enables the simulation of complex systems and processes in a controlled virtual environment, minimises risks and drives innovative developments. It also promotes collaboration and facilitates cross-border and interdisciplinary co-operation, which makes a decisive contribution to the development of new business models and solutions"*^[35].

It should be noted that the concept we refer to as 'metaverse' is also known under other terms such as 'spatial computing' or 'virtual worlds'. These terms reflect different facets and perspectives on the merging of physical and digital spaces and the interaction within them - with "spatial computing" having a stronger focus on sensor technology, IoT and computer vision, while virtual world (a term the EU prefers) highlights the immersiveness aspect. The next generation of virtual worlds envisioned by the EU are trustworthy, open and user-centric by design.

Q2. How is the industry currently utilizing the metaverse, and what opportunities and risks does it present?

When it comes to adoption, the majority of applications can be attributed to industrial metaverse. On one hand there are concrete platform offerings by tech companies, which are often domain tailored. On the other hand, industrial users benefit directly by increasing their operational **efficiency** in existing business activities and by increasing the effectiveness by implementing industrial metaverse applications. Effectiveness means developing new customer segments and business areas through innovation and new business models empowered by implementing the Industrial Metaverse concept. Metaverse applications can also increase effectiveness by offsetting skilled labour shortage. Efficiency increases through industrial metaverse implementation refers to **process** improvements in manufacturing, cost & time savings (e.g. faster material replenishment, reduction of downtimes, better work-life-balance, reduction of travel expenses, reducing energy consumption) quality increases due to a lower error & reject rate or flexibility enhancement due to volume/variant increase.

An overview of industrial metaverse application areas is given in^[36]. Low hanging fruits can be found in three fields: Remote maintenance & remote assistance, automated quality inspection (with cameras, digital twins, 5G and XR) and workforce

qualification for simple activities (e.g. machine operation and adjustment using mixed reality applications).

The metaverse was almost immediately picked up in world-wide marketing since October 2021. For many consumer brands and retailers, advertising and selling in virtual reality and games, or the use for onboarding employees seemed like the way to go^[27]. Although there was evidence of hyperbole in a lot of the communication, just like with terms such as "turbo", "laser" or "AI" at other times, we have seen the increased use of such technology for virtual conferences, esp. during the pandemic.

Industry leaders are preparing to embrace the innovation potential of the Industrial Metaverse. As of February 2025, Siemens is leading the European "Virtual Worlds" public private partnership to form a Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA). Their president Roland Busch previously stated that *"The Industrial Metaverse will be a place where we innovate at the speed of software. It will offer enormous potential to transform our economies and industries."*⁵

There is a big opportunity here to build this all in a free, open, and secure way, much like the initial design of the world wide web was based on simple and open standards, and didn't try to solve all problems at once. There is a need for a good design and some pragmatism.

The risks have been outlined throughout this paper. Snowden also stated that technology could actually increase privacy and asked in the verse of the song "Exit" by Jean-Michel Jarre: *"[...]: why are our private details that are transmitted online, why are private details that are stored on our personal devices, any different than the details and private records of our lives that are stored in our private journals?"*⁶

In addition to the security part of the discussion, there is also the risk of research not being transferred into practice, a.k.a. the research gap, and the risk of brain-drain. As argued previously, it seems to be a viable business model for German and European startups to be bought by American companies. The focus of

public-funded German computer science research of the early 2000s was on Human-Computer Interaction, AR/VR and related topics. But the resulting companies were bought by Autodesk, Apple and Meta, amongst others^[37, Sec. 3.35]. This is obviously not viable from a long-term European perspective and so some key questions for politics and industry arise:

- When should industry invest in the adoption of new technologies in Europe?
- How can politics facilitate this and make it more attractive?
- How to keep profits and taxes in Europe to pay for our infrastructure and society?
- How to grow an ecosystem that provides enough risk capital to grow companies with outstanding XR solutions in Europe?
- How to attract international staff for this innovation ecosystem, also from the US (not only in light of the current geopolitical situation)?
- How to keep the companies and their staff in Europe?

Q3. Can you provide an example of a consortium that is already leveraging the metaverse effectively?

The industrial metaverse is still mostly a vision of future collaboration and twin transformation possibilities in a merged physical and virtual environment. Several research prototypes exist, including our own from the "5G Troisdorf" project in North Rhine-Westphalia (s. Figure 3), which emphasized on remote collaboration with digital twins and avatars^[38]. It also brought up issues such as trust, control, and empathy in such new work settings^[39]. The project demo has been invited to the attention of over 100 experts, incl. the German Digital Minister Dr Volker Wissing at the fourth structured dialogue about immersive technologies. At this event, the Director-General of the Directorate-General for Communication Networks, Content and Technologies (DG CONNECT) also presented the Commission's initiative for "Web 4.0 and virtual worlds"⁷.

5] <https://www.siemens.com/global/en/company/digital-transformation/industrial-metaverse.html>

6] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNESMaFb5ZI&t=108s>

7] https://www.fit.fraunhofer.de/de/presse/23-08-16_5G-troisdorf-ist-vorzeigeprojekt-des-bundesministeriums-fuer-digitales-und-verkehr.html

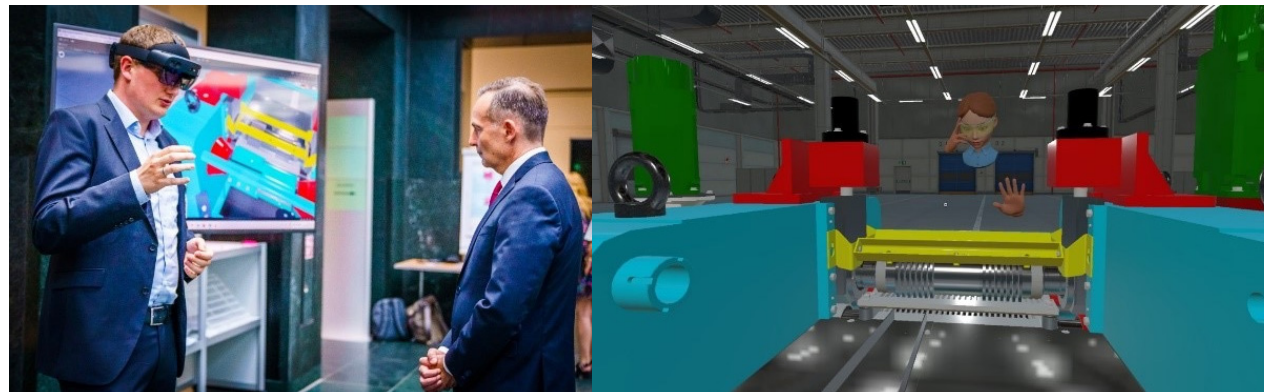


Figure 3: Industrial Metaverse remote maintenance application shown to Federal Minister of Digital Dr Volker Wissing at the fourth structured dialogue about immersive technologies (left), same scenario seen from inside VR (right)

Examples from other states like Lower Saxony (“VRECH”), Bavaria (“XR Hub Bavaria”), or Baden Wuerttemberg with “CyberLänd”^[36] show that there is interest and state-funded grass-roots initiative everywhere. There are usually some crowded funding-lines in the areas of human-technology interaction. On a higher political level, the Digital Committee in the German Bundestag addressed this question in a public hearing with experts on 14.12.2022 entitled: „Metaverse: Between great opportunities and hype“⁸. It was very lively and a remarkable discussion on several relevant future topics that covered a wide field. A big problem in that discussion was that the terms “Web 3.0”, “Metaverse” and “Web3” were happily mixed up. Above all, many critical opinions were expressed about Web3, crypto, and cybercrime. Comparatively little was said about Metaverse. While this might have been a bit of a missed opportunity, it didn’t present the problem. The problem was: Web3 and Metaverse are simply not the same thing. The terms are not even mutually dependent. So there obviously needs to be some more consensus on these terms to avoid future confusion when discussing new technologies (s. Figure 4).

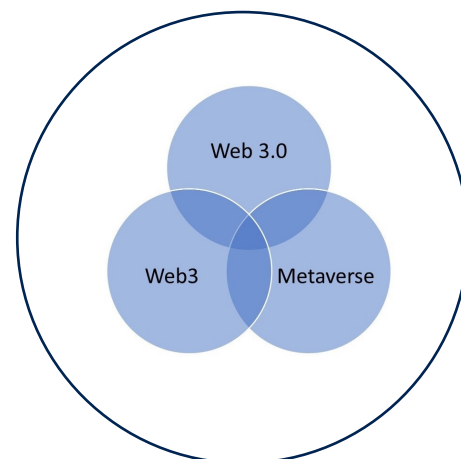


Figure 4: Web 3, Web 3.0 and Metaverse are not the same

The Office of Technology Assessment at the German Bundestag (TAB) released a comprehensive pre-study on the use of VR/AR in

2019^[40]. German bitkom association just released a comprehensive guideline in February 2025, covering several use-cases and also technology, maturity levels, and framework conditions^[33].

The Federal German Digital Ministry (BMDV) organized a series of structured dialogues on immersive technologies/Metaverse and the European Parliament emphasized the role of human-centricity (not surveillance) of future virtual worlds and how they should consistently apply existing EU laws in the areas of civil law, digital, liability and intellectual property.

Another consortium example is the Metaverse Standards Forum⁹. The Metaverse Standards Forum is no formal standardisation body. It does not create standards itself, but works with its members in working groups on professional and technical reports, recommendations, pilot projects, best practices and reference implementations. It is thus a place where several international standardisation organisations come together to coordinate with industry and accelerate the availability of Metaverse interoperability standards. Since interoperability is the foundation of the Metaverse, the Metaverse Standards Forum enables the collaboration between technology suppliers, builds bridges between applications and scales across disconnected silos. It was founded in June 2022 by the Khronos Group as a non-profit consortium for open standards in graphics, media and parallel processing. The other founding members include leading technology companies and organisations organisations such as Meta, Microsoft, NVIDIA, Epic Games, Google, Sony Interactive Entertainment, Huawei, Adobe, Autodesk and Alibaba. In addition, numerous other organisations including academic institutions and international standardisation organisations such as ISO, IEEE and W3C as well as the DIN German Institute for Standardisation.

A metaverse ecosystem across stakeholders (like industry, academia, government and society) will currently be built on a European level by the EC. Siemens is leading the European “Virtual Worlds” public private partnership to form a Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA) as a basis of forthcoming Horizon Europe programmatic calls. Fraunhofer is also founding member of this co-programmed European Partnership on Virtual Worlds

comprising the fields of Manufacturing & Logistics, Education & Training, Media & Arts and Healthcare.

Q4. How can we design and structure a distinctly European metaverse that aligns with European values and priorities?

The metaverse of the future according to the EU will be open and user-centred, secure and sustainable ‘by design’. Key areas include interoperable standards, automated linking with data spaces, digital enablement of the workforce, etc.

The European Parliament press release stated: “MEPs want the EU to assume a leading role in shaping virtual worlds that respect EU values and encourage full application of existing legal tools in this new context”¹⁰. So if we wanted to design future virtual worlds and Web 4.0 in a way that are true to European values, as rightfully demanded by MEPs, we would have to remember what those values are and support them. Here are a few ideas towards that:

- Be cautious about the business model of surveillance capitalism, esp. in light of the current geopolitical situation^{[11], [24]}.
- How about listening to the original Inventor of the WWW, Sir Tim Berners-Lee^[41]?
- Read up on the Austrian NGO noyb.eu, which is headed by Max Schrems^[19]
- We should not only rely on convenient international technologies and standards. We should use them as much as possible, but only to the point where we are paying with our collective rights or benefit other parties more than ourselves.
- We should also develop our own technologies and embrace open standards, maybe come up with our own (this made the WWW big initially). “Without standards, there can be no improvement.”^[42]
- How about data-minimized metaverse applications with Dataspaces or Solid instead of Web 3 or uploads to international cloud servers?

9] <https://metaverse-standards.org/>

10] <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20240112IPR16768/virtual-worlds-ensuring-eu-leadership-and-consistently-applying-existing-rules>

8] <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2022/kw50-pa-digitales-925124>

• The increased privacy is a particular strength of Europe. But the more mundane problem of finding, accessing, and working with data in the right format remains.

• It is not only about technology and data, but also about the people in such socio-technical systems.

• Europe has a particularly strong participatory design tradition of Scandinavian descent ^[43], which has also been advocated in the UK and Germany for a long time.

• People and practices must be at the center of IT research and development in a digitized world ^[44]. Multi-stakeholder designs with mock-ups and prototypes are appropriate tools to work on eye-level ^[45, pp. 3–14].

• Some countries devised Metaverse strategies (in Europe: Finland) ^[42].

• Most servers and all current super-computers run on Linux that once a Finn named Linus Torvalds came up with and turned into a world-wide phenomenon ^[46].

• Germany’s Computer Science Society (GI) devised its five Grand Challenges 2025, with one of them being “World Wide Metaverse”¹¹

Conclusion

The world is at cross-roads now through convenience and lazy use of new, digital technologies for several decades, and it is time for decision makers and politicians to acknowledge that. If we continue to just naïvely feed the cloud-servers of other nations with all our personal and business data, as well as loosing promising talents and companies, Europe will just be

a digital colony in a global world that can and will be exploited and dominated at will.

The purpose of the European Cultural Convention (ECC) of 1954 was “[...] to develop mutual understanding among the peoples of Europe and reciprocal appreciation of their cultural diversity, to safeguard European culture [...]”². Europeans must reconsider these uniting values which predates the Treaty of Rome (1957) by years, let alone the European Union (1993). It is noteworthy that the Russian Federation also signed the ECC in 1991.

It is high time to see the digital as an integral part of our culture and return to our roots of unity and intent. As laid out in this text, we have many great examples of digital explorers in Europe. But too often they don’t return from their trips and rather stay in the new world – to stay in the metaphoric picture used by Elena Bascone ^[1]. There really seems to be a historic chance now to further realign our transatlantic relationships. This is not only a matter of implementing specific new technologies. The view must be wider, more holistic. And Europeans must understand their data sovereignty more as community building effort which has a socio-technical aspect that we know particularly well to handle from our own history of designing future work systems in a human-centric participatory way ^[47] to be better prepared to balance the waves of “theory and application”, “humans and technologies” in the future, ensuring that the systems we create – whether for information, cooperation, or entertainment – remain manageable and meaningful for people ^[48]. This is especially crucial in an era where data sovereignty is not just about control over personal data, but about fostering a collective sense of ownership and responsibility over the data ecosystems we build. Only by following this path will we be able to ensure they align with democratic values, privacy, and equity for all citizens.

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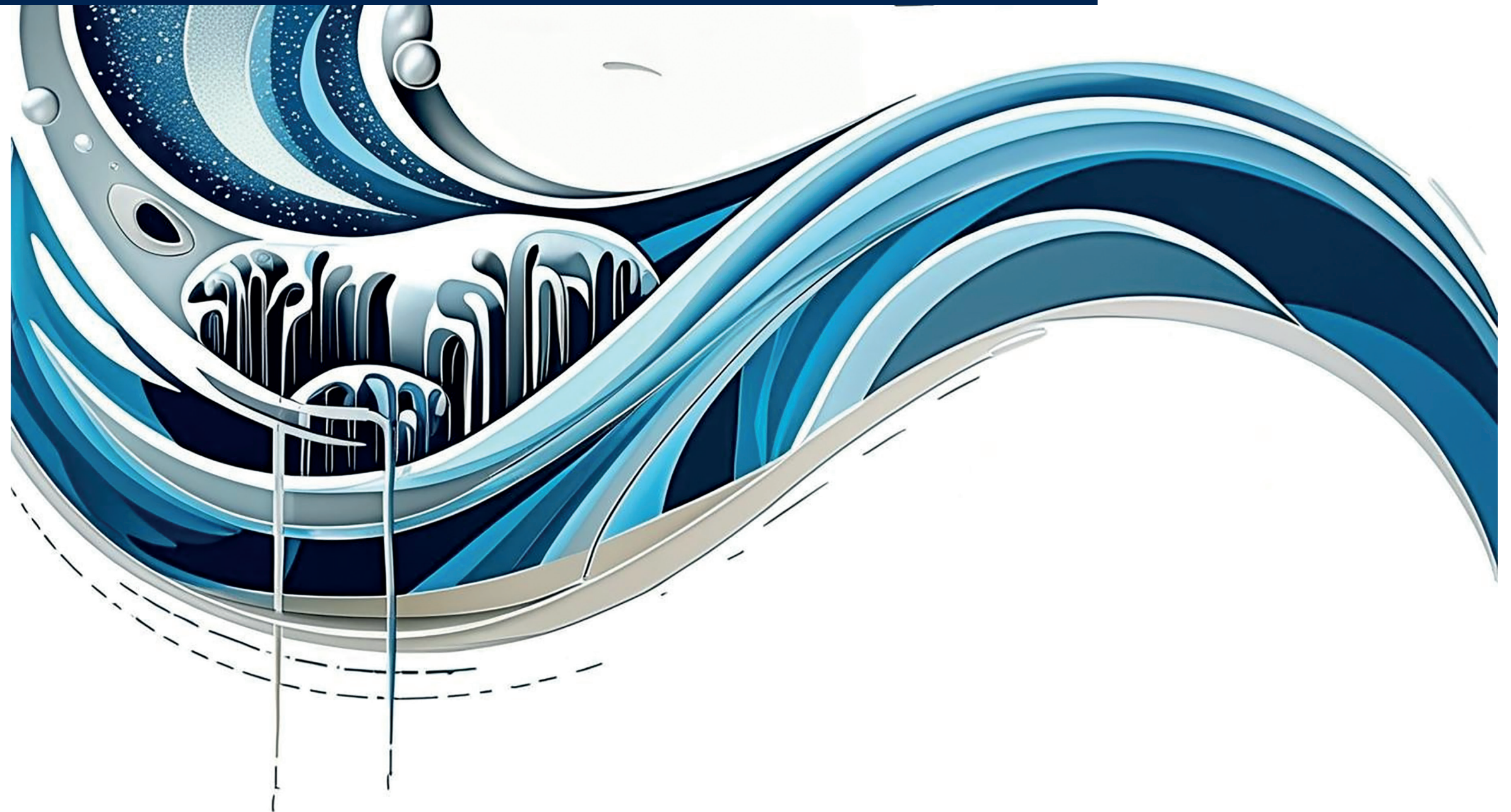
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Europe's Leadership in Achieving Environmental Goals

As climate change accelerates and ecosystems face unprecedented threats, Europe has positioned itself as a global leader in environmental policy. This chapter explores the EU's efforts to protect its marine environments, a crucial yet often overlooked aspect of its sustainability agenda. With the European Biodiversity Strategy setting ambitious targets—such as designating 30% of Europe's seas as protected areas—implementation and enforcement remain key challenges. How effectively can Europe balance economic interests with ecological responsibility?



Europe's Leadership in Achieving Environmental Goals

How Can the EU Reach Its Objective to Legally Protect 30% of European Seas by 2030?



Dr Verónica Relaño Écija, Charlemagne Prize Fellow 2024

Verónica Relaño Écija, holding a PhD in Oceans and Fisheries from the University of British Columbia and mentored by renowned fisheries expert Dr Daniel Pauly, is deeply committed to marine conservation. Her work focuses on connectivity and addressing socio-ecological challenges arising from the mismanagement of marine resources. Verónica's dedication extends beyond academia; she has volunteered for numerous organizations, been actively involved in climate change conferences, and has contributed as a consultant for the World Bank and as a teaching assistant at the University of British Columbia. As the founder and director of the UN Ocean Decade Project "SOS – Somos OceanoS (ocean stories for conservation)," Verónica spearheads initiatives to amplify local voices and foster equitable management in "paper Marine Protected Areas." Her dedication to this cause has been recognized through multiple awards at eco film festivals for her documentaries on Marine Protected Areas, as well as the prestigious Sumaila-Volvo Graduate Prize in Environmental Sustainability. Currently a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Santiago de Compostela, she investigates Ocean Equity and simultaneously serves as the Oceans Program Director at NGO Onewater. Her project was mentored by Dr. Vedran Nikolić at the Directorate General for Environment (DG-ENV) of the European Commission.

CURRENT STATE OF EUROPEAN SEAS

The oceans contain most of our planet's biodiversity^{1,2,3}, and their ecosystems are important for the sequestration of atmospheric carbon⁴, coastal protection⁵, economic development^{6,7}, human well-being^{8,9}, and cultural heritage.^{10,11} Nevertheless, together with climate change impacts^{12,13,14,15}, humans are applying or intensifying pressures that are endangering the resilience of marine and coastal ecosystems, such as rapid population growth and increasing urbanization, especially in coastal areas¹⁶, differ-

ent forms of pollution^{17,18,19}, recreational activities²⁰, industrial fisheries²¹, among others.^{22,23}

Today, biodiversity loss in Europe remains a critical issue, with 81% of habitats and 63% of species in poor or bad conservation status.²⁴ Agricultural land use has a particularly strong impact on invertebrates and plants, while vertebrates—especially fish—are more frequently threatened by overexploitation.²⁵ The former species are often directly hunted, caught, or fished, including

through incidental catch, which poses a significant threat to marine fish and other marine vertebrates.

Overfishing remains a significant challenge, with the EU's integrated fisheries management approach still struggling to recover fish stocks. Only 28% of assessed stocks are fished sustainably and are in good biological condition, with notable regional differences.²⁶ For example, fishing mortality in the North-East Atlantic and Baltic Seas increased from near-sustainable levels in the 1950s to more than double by the 1980s. This led to a decline in reproductive capacity that continued into the early 2000s, putting fish stocks at risk of becoming impaired²⁶—depleted to the point where they can no longer support healthy population levels needed for sustainable fisheries.

As of 2024, a study evaluating the protection levels of 4,858 Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) across the EU found that only 11.4% of EU waters were designated as MPAs, and a mere 0.2% were fully or highly protected.²⁷ This falls far short of the EU Biodiversity Strategy's goal of protecting 30% of marine areas by 2030, with at least 10% under strict protection. Additionally, the effectiveness of existing MPAs varies greatly, with many serving as "paper parks" due to weak enforcement and inadequate management. For instance, 86% of the total MPA area had low protection levels or was incompatible with conservation goals and furthermore, minimal protection was a common issue across EU member states, regions, and MPA features.²⁷

The degradation of EU marine environments directly affects nearly 4 million people whose livelihoods rely on ocean-related industries such as fisheries, aquaculture, coastal tourism, and maritime transport.²⁸ The blue economy, which also includes emerging sectors like ocean energy, blue biotechnology, and desalination, generated a turnover of approximately €624 billion—an increase of 21% compared to 2020.²⁸ Coastal tourism remains the largest sector, contributing 29% of the EU's blue economy gross value added (GVA) in 2021. Meanwhile, the marine living resources sector—which encompasses fisheries, aquaculture, and the processing and distribution of fish products—experienced a 24% growth since 2020, with gross profits reaching €9.7 billion in 2021.²⁸ However, it faces increasing risks from declining fish stocks, habitat destruction, and climate change-induced impacts such as ocean acidification and rising sea temperatures. Without urgent conservation efforts, the EU's blue economy and marine ecosystems risk further collapse, jeopardizing biodiversity, food security, and the ocean's role in climate mitigation.

The role of oceans for people, the economy, biodiversity and mitigating and adapting to climate change is increasingly recognized. Lasting solutions to climate change require greater attention to nature-based solutions, including healthy and re-

silient seas and oceans.^{29,30} These solutions are integral to the broader vision outlined in the **European Green Deal and the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030**, which seek to reinforce marine conservation, enhance ecosystem protection, and ensure sustainable management of natural resources.

EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL & EU BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY

The European Green Deal, launched by the European Union (EU) in 2019, is a strategic plan designed to tackle climate change and counteract environmental degradation. A third of the EUR 1.8 trillion allocated for the Next Generation EU Recovery Plan, along with the European Union's seven-year financial plan, is earmarked to fund the initiatives under the European Green Deal.³¹

This ambitious plan is the EU's pledge to evolve into a resilient and sustainable society, where economic advancement is achieved with mindful stewardship of resources. The Green Deal charts a course toward a 2050 horizon, aspiring for the EU to reach net-zero greenhouse gas emissions, decouple economic development from resource consumption, and reinforce its natural assets' vitality. It also prioritizes the protection of the health and well-being of its citizens against the adverse effects of environmental threats.³² Oceans play a pivotal role in carbon sequestration through blue carbon ecosystems (e.g., seagrass meadows and salt marshes)³³, support biodiversity through marine protected areas, and regulate climate by acting as heat and carbon sinks. These contributions make oceans and maritime areas indispensable as 'natural assets' covered by the Green Deal.

In anticipation of taking a leadership role at the 2022 Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (Figure 1), the European Commission proactively unveiled the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 in May 2020, which set the EU's ambition toward the global biodiversity framework and the stage for further specific initiatives.

Adopting the motto "*Bringing nature back into our lives*," the Biodiversity Strategy proposed global benchmarks for the conservation of biodiversity, in particular in protected areas. Moreover, it laid out the EU's commitments to mitigate the primary factors contributing to biodiversity depletion, backed by quantifiable goals designed to tackle these root causes directly. The central pillars of the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 are i) protecting nature; ii) restoring ecosystems; iii) enabling transformative change; and iv) EU action to support biodiversity globally.

The Biodiversity Strategy outlines actionable steps to achieve its goals; for example, regarding protected areas. The strategy aims for legal and effective protection of 30% of EU land and sea areas, with one-third or 10% of EU strictly protected. The Commission is set to pinpoint an array of measures, including

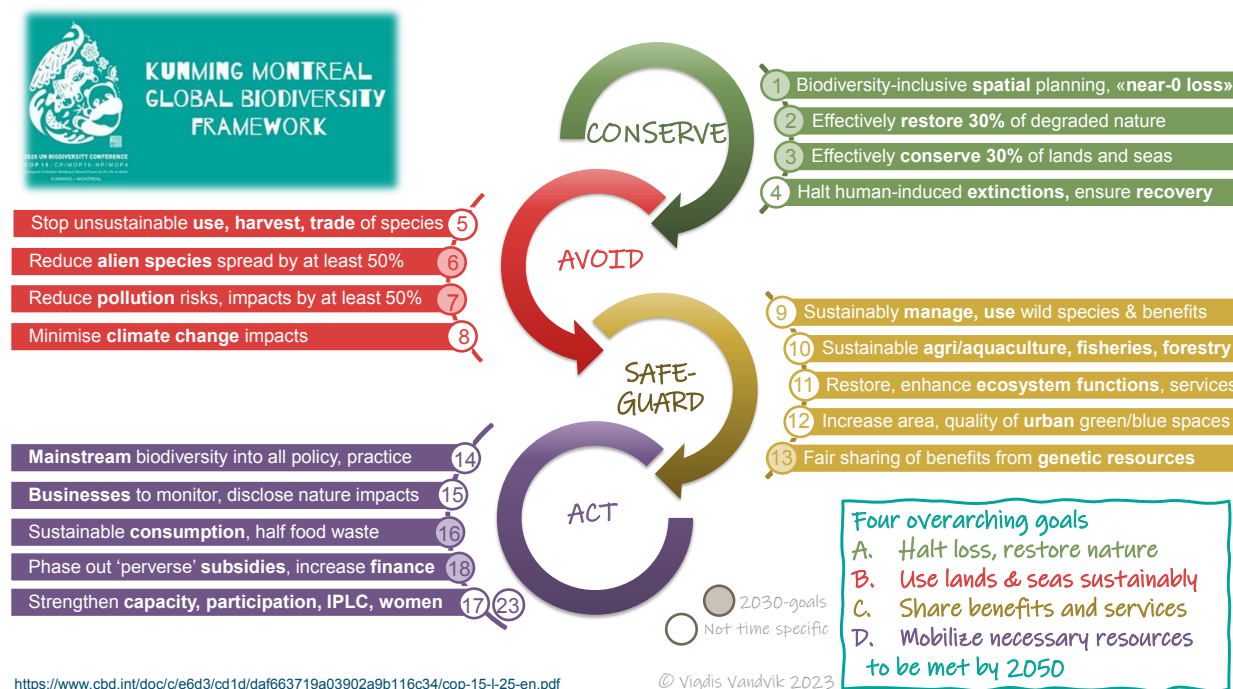


Figure 1. An overview of the main elements of the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and its overarching goals to be met by 2050. Source: Vigdis Vandvik.³⁴

new legislation necessary for Member States to rehabilitate and maintain ecosystems in a state of good ecological health, focusing notably on carbon-dense habitats.

There is an emphasis on enhancing cross-border cooperation among Member States to bolster the coherent network of protected areas and to enable large-scale restoration. Cooperation is the main goal of the ongoing so-called biogeographical process

initiated in 2011 by the European Commission, which is a series of seminars, meetings, and workshops to discuss the implementation of Biodiversity Strategy targets.

CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

Despite these efforts, the challenge remains in understanding how well – or poorly – the EU is progressing toward achieving national, European, and global conservation targets.³⁵ Mem-

However, as of September 2024, the European Commission has been unable to publish a comprehensive evaluation of the Member States' progress in meeting the Biodiversity Strategy targets.

The fact that, as of September 2024, only seven Member States had submitted their pledges for new protected areas underscores a gap between ambition and action.

ber States are required to submit pledges demonstrating how they will meet protected area and conservation status targets, which are then reviewed by the European Commission and the European Environment Agency (EEA). This process plays a critical role in aligning efforts with the aims of the Biodiversity Strategy 2030.

However, as of September 2024, the European Commission has been unable to publish a comprehensive evaluation of the Member States' progress in meeting the Biodiversity Strategy targets.

This is primarily due to most countries either not submitting their pledges or failing to publicly disclose their commitments and actions related to the Biodiversity Strategy's goals. This challenge, along with the reasons for missing submission deadlines, was investigated this year with support from the Karlspreis Academy and the Directorate General for the Environment (DG ENV).

Of the 27 Member States, only 7 have submitted their pledges for protected areas: Czechia, Denmark, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Spain, and Sweden.³⁶ Although not all of these pledges are entirely publicly available, the European Commission and the EEA hope for broader public access to them in the future. It is also important to highlight that other EU Member States have publicized their environmental commitments on a national level, indicating that the absence of a submitted pledge does not imply the absence of environmental objectives. This data presented on the reporting progress raises certain questions regarding the European Union's execution of the EU Green Deal, particularly concerning the targets and agreements proclaimed at the COP28 UN Climate Change Conference in Dubai. These include the ambitious objective of cutting net greenhouse gas emissions by a minimum of 55% by the year 2030, relative to 1990 levels, to position Europe as a pioneer climate-neutral continent by 2050.³⁷

MY PERSPECTIVE

The EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 represents a pivotal moment in the EU's environmental policy, particularly in addressing the urgent need for marine and coastal conservation. However, while the strategic goals are commendable, the current status of implementation reveals significant challenges that require immediate attention. The fact that, as of September 2024, only seven Member States had submitted their pledges for new protected areas underscores a gap between ambition and action. This raises significant concerns about the capacity of the EU to meet its own objectives, especially when dealing with voluntary commitments from Member States.

Governance, Accountability and Cooperation

In the current landscape, this lag in submissions highlights the critical need for stronger governance mechanisms to ensure compliance and transparency. Moving forward, it will be essential to streamline and potentially formalize reporting processes, providing clearer incentives for Member States to align their national efforts with EU-wide goals. If the EU is to truly emerge as a global leader in ocean conservation, it must reinforce its governance structures, enabling better coordination and accountability across borders, which will also be key for the recently adopted Nature Restoration Regulation to be fruitful.

Looking toward the future, the EU must strengthen cross-border cooperation, as emphasized in the biogeographical process.³⁸ Given that marine ecosystems do not adhere to national borders, collaborative governance models will play a crucial role in protecting transboundary marine areas and achieving large-scale ecosystem restoration. This will be crucial to preventing the establishment of MPAs that fail to meet their intended goals of conserving biodiversity and delivering socio-economic benefits—commonly referred to as "paper parks." Globally, around one out of four MPAs are potentially paper parks due to fishing occurring within their boundaries³⁹ (Figure 2).

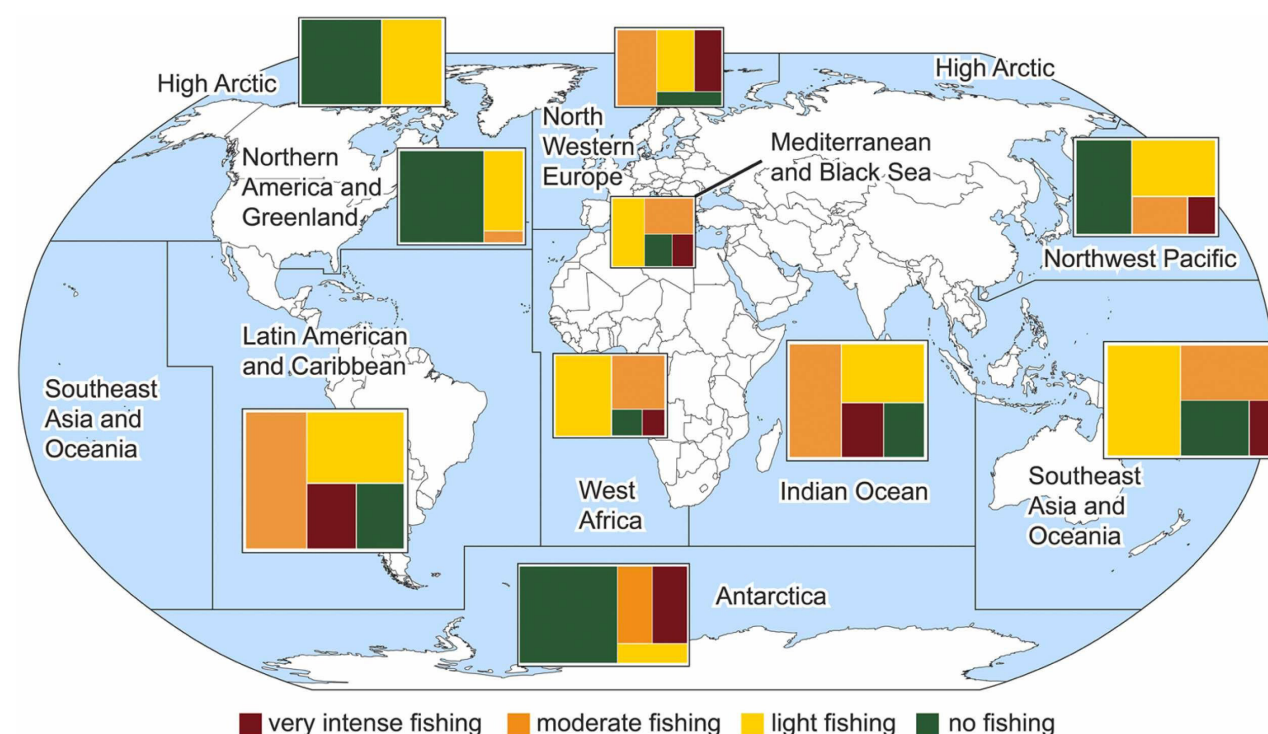


Figure 2. Global assessment of MPAs based on local stakeholders' perceptions of fishing intensity. In the Global South, 'no fishing' and 'very intense fishing' were rarely reported. In the Global North, 'moderate' and 'very intense' fishing varied between 0 and 38% and 0 and 21% of responses, respectively. Source: Relano and Pauly, 2023.³⁴

Innovative Financing for Marine Conservation

Additionally, innovative financing mechanisms, such as blue bonds ("debt instrument issued by governments, development banks, or others to raise funds from investors to finance marine and ocean-based projects that have positive environmental, economic, and climate benefits⁴²") or payments for ecosystem services ("voluntary transactions between service users and service providers that are conditional on agreed rules of natural resource management for generating offsite services⁴³") can more effectively reach their full potential if Member States equitably improve the design and implementation of these mechanisms within their economic systems.^{42,43} If carried out objectively, scientifically, and equitably, these mechanisms could provide Member States with some of the financial resources needed to fulfill their conservation commitments, particularly as political and economic pressures increase. Blue bonds and payments for ecosystem

services are financial instruments that can significantly expand the available financial means by innovating how conservation is financed, integrating economic incentives, and mobilizing a broader range of stakeholders. This shift transforms conservation from a cost center to a value-generating sector, making it more attractive to investors and ensuring its sustainability.

Balancing Conservation and Economic Activities

A crucial element of future developments must be the establishment of new forms of partnerships among governments, private stakeholders, and civil society. By engaging multiple sectors, the EU can foster a broader sense of ownership and responsibility for marine protection and restoration efforts. This is particularly important in addressing the tension between strict protection measures and economic activities, such as fisheries, tourism, and shipping. The socio-economic benefits of marine conservation

must be better communicated, demonstrating that protecting biodiversity does not mean sacrificing economic prosperity but instead ensuring long-term resilience for all stakeholders.

Outlook

As Europe continues to position itself as a global leader in climate action and environmental stewardship the focus on efficient decision making and strategic coordination is becoming even more critical. The recent progress at the COP28 UN Climate Change Conference ("negotiators from nearly 200 Parties came together in Dubai with a decision on the world's first 'global stocktake' to ratchet up climate action before the end of the decade – with the overarching aim to keep the global temperature limit of 1.5°C within reach⁴⁴") further emphasizes the interconnectedness of biodiversity conservation and climate change mitigation. Oceans,

as vital carbon sinks, must be at the forefront of global climate strategies, and Europe must lead by example in integrating marine conservation into its broader climate goals.

In conclusion, while significant political, social, administrative, and economic challenges remain, there is considerable opportunity for the EU to recalibrate this non-legally binding approach, ensuring that the ambitious targets of the Biodiversity Strategy are met and economic growth, adaptation to climate change, and biodiversity conservation are framed as complementary – not competing – targets. By enhancing cooperation, streamlining governance, and allowing flexibility in pledge content as well as engaging a wider range of stakeholders, the EU can strengthen its leadership in advancing cooperation, transparency, and global marine conservation.

As Europe continues to position itself as a global leader in sustainability, the focus on efficient decision making and strategic coordination is becoming even more critical.

SHORT
EXPLANATION OF THE
TOPIC'S RELEVANCE FOR EUROPE'S
FUTURE

Oceans cover more than 70% of the Earth's surface and contain the majority of the planet's biodiversity. Regarding the EU's coastal and maritime sectors, they contribute significantly to economic development and support jobs and livelihoods across industries like fisheries, shipping, and tourism.⁴⁵ Sustainable management of marine resources is therefore essential for long-term economic resilience,⁴⁶ especially in coastal communities that are particularly vulnerable to environmental degradation and climate impacts.⁴⁷ Consequently, the relevance of the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and its focus on marine conservation cannot be overstated when considering Europe's future. We should celebrate the EU policy context for marine conservation that also includes the EU Marine Action Plan adopted by the Commission on February 2023 ("restore marine ecosystems and promote sustainable fisheries by improving marine protection, reducing pollution, and enhancing the resilience of European seas against climate change and human pressures"⁴⁸), as well as the recently adopted Nature Restoration Law that came into effect on August 2024 ("aiming to restore degraded ecosystems across Europe by setting binding targets for the recovery of at least 20% of land and sea areas by 2030, achieving full restoration of all ecosystems in need by 2050"⁴⁹).

The EU's ambitious target to protect 30% of its seas, including 10% under strict protection, is essential for preserving these ecosystem services and maintaining biodiversity. However, the delay of Member States in submitting their pledges and commitments for protected areas jeopardizes not only biodiversity but also the broader environmental goals of the European Green Deal,

which allocates significant financial resources to addressing climate change and environmental degradation. Failing to protect coastal and marine areas has several concrete negative consequences that directly undermine the objectives of the European Green Deal. Overfishing, habitat destruction, and pollution can lead to the collapse of marine ecosystems. For instance, the degradation of blue carbon ecosystems like seagrass meadows results in the release of stored carbon back into the atmosphere, exacerbating climate change.²⁸ Additionally, the loss of biodiversity diminishes the resilience of marine ecosystems, making them less capable of adapting to changing environmental conditions and supporting economic activities such as fishing and tourism. These risks also have economic repercussions, as declining fish stocks and ecosystem degradation can lead to job losses and reduced livelihoods in coastal communities. By failing to act, Member States not only hinder progress toward achieving the Green Deal's climate and environmental targets but also increase the financial burden required to restore damaged ecosystems in the future.

As the EU positions itself as a global leader in environmental governance, the success of the Biodiversity Strategy will be critical for Europe's credibility on the international stage. The commitments made at the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework require Europe to not only meet its targets but also inspire similar actions worldwide. This leadership in marine conservation is central to maintaining Europe's reputation as a dependable global partner and a pioneer in sustainability.⁵⁰ Understanding what is behind the pledge delays and the lack of transparency of Member States' commitments highlights the need for more robust governance mechanisms and cooperation⁵¹ to ensure that the ambitious goals are met on time.

Europe's Leadership in Achieving Environmental Goals

Interview: “The first step is to change the narrative”

Christian Fischer, Director Onewater



Christian Fischer is an entrepreneur focused on water, climate, and sustainability with degrees in Economics, Biology, Marine Resources, and Water Science, Policy and Management. He consults with the Asian Development Bank and is the co-founder of Onewater, where he leads a global team in science communication and policy consulting. Their work—spanning investigative writing, web, film, and photography—translates complex environmental issues into accessible narratives and formats for all ages, shaping public discourse and policy.

The EU has committed to legally protecting 30% of its seas by 2030. In your view, how realistic is this target given the current political, economic, and environmental landscape? It's not realistic at all. The current political, economic, and environmental landscape makes it nearly impossible to achieve these targets. But here's the thing—if we only set realistic goals, we'll never push ourselves hard enough. The point of setting ambitious, even unrealistic targets, is to force the system to move faster and further than it otherwise would. If we end up at 22% or 25%, that's still a massive improvement compared to the status quo. We need to stretch these goals to drive momentum, even if we don't hit them completely. So, we'll surely fail to achieve 30% by 2030.

Onewater was born in mid-2020 as a "lockdown baby" out of the Master's program "Water Science, Policy, and Management" at the University of Oxford. Our goal was to create a space for learning and discussion about water. Starting as a humble WordPress blog, the initiative has grown into a dynamic community of over 300 volunteers and a dedicated team of employees. We believe that science, best-practices, and inspiring stories must be accessible to everyone in order to solve the global water, WASH and ocean crises. We blend art, science and web wizardry to create content, host events and deliver expert advice to build bridges between the public, academia, businesses, and policymakers. Like this, we tackle the root causes of systemic funding, regulation, and service gaps—namely, education and policy.

The point of setting ambitious, even unrealistic targets, is to force the system to move faster and further than it otherwise would.

We may even get there on paper, but surely not in practice. If we take Dr Relaño's and Dr Pauly's research on Paper Parks as a reference, it is reasonable to assume that some of this is simply lip service. They have shown that about a quarter of protected areas has no meaningful conservation impact in practice. However many square kilometers we will have protected on paper by 2030, we should subtract 25% to arrive at a more realistic estimate of what's really protected.

How can the EU ensure that marine protected areas (MPAs) are not just "paper parks" but are effectively managed and enforced?

That's a question for the respective management authorities.

I strongly believe that you cannot manage, let alone enforce, what you measure.

On that there's main issues. First, we don't even know which MPAs exactly are paper parks access to the data we do have is very complicated. For example, a couple of years ago, we tried to investigate an MPA, only to be blocked by the national ministry, which repeatedly refused to share catch data or put us in touch with the local management authority.

But if we're serious about protecting transboundary ecosystems and having a cohesive EU-wide marine policy, we need better data transparency and accountability. Why can't I see, in real-time, where vessels are fishing? Why can't I access data on how much was really caught? Why don't we know when the last patrol was sent out? Why is there no easily accessible regulation database for each MPA? Why do we still have to go through layers of administration to get basic information?

Much of this data would be readily available, e.g. through Global-Fishing Watch or ProtectedSeas. But much of it is still not easily accessible to the European public.

What are the biggest challenges that European countries face in implementing marine protected areas (MPAs) effectively? If you could advise EU policymakers on key actions to accelerate progress toward the 30% protection target, what would they be?

I think we're overcomplicating the whole debate. The key to effective MPAs is local ownership. The power to manage and protect these waters should shift to ownership by local administrations and fishers—people who have a direct stake in preserving them. Instead, we have a system that allows international fleets to fish in these waters. Imagine sitting in a village somewhere in the alps and suddenly a Spanish logging company clears out your forest because they received a license from the EU to do so – and they do this in the most destructive and unsustainable way possible.

After 2 months you're left with barren land. Absolutely ludicrous, but that's what is happening in our waters when we give out licenses and collectively fail to ban bottom trawling. But the activities are out of sight, the impacts are, and therefore the entire issue is out of people's minds. This is a European, a global problem, disproportionately affecting subsistence fishers everywhere. It even drives migration too, because international fleets empty distant waters, for example, off the coast of West Africa, putting local fish out of business.

From an economic point of view, this entire debate and the repercussions from it are out of proportion. Fisheries contribute what, maybe 0.5% to the EU's GDP? And yet, it's one of the most politicized industries. We'd all be better off if the EU strictly enforced Exclusive Economic Zones, banned bottom trawling, stopped issuing seemingly random fishing licenses, and subsidized local administrations to protect their waters instead of subsidizing industrial fishing fleets to exploit them. It's really that simple.

But it's the politicization of the issue and the romanticization of the noble fisher going out to catch fish like his forefathers did for

generations. We have to change the narrative here and stop the politicization, the romanticization and crack up the companies controlling the fleets, the market, and the MPs. We can all agree that we do not want our oceans to die. So current practices must not continue. It's a scary prospect and a leap of faith – but one that must be taken.

Economic transitions can be achieved, even if it means that entire sectors disappear. Being able to do that in a socially inclusive manner is a sign of collective responsibility and respect for each other and for our environment. We've seen this many times, for example, in some of the former coal-mining regions in Germany. Whole industries were shut down, yet economic redevelopment happened because governments put the right economic and social policies in place. You hear little about it, because it went relatively smoothly. Yet, one of the worst examples on the other hand would be Thatcher's rapid phase out of mining in Wales. You can still see the collateral damage that had throughout the UK decades later.

But ultimately, fisheries, especially industrial fisheries, must transform unless we want to lose entire species and ecosystems forever. The problem is that politicians are too afraid to touch the topic, because fishing quotas, livelihood, licenses, and subsidies are deeply political. Transitions are hard, but they can be socially inclusive with the right incentives and government support. It's a question of political will – economic or technical arguments are cheap excuses. So, the first step: change the narrative.

What can I do as an individual to protect our oceans?

Write to your MPs. Push for stronger policies. Support local efforts to protect marine areas. And perhaps most importantly, educate your children about ocean conservation.

Education takes decades to bear fruit, so the sooner you start, the better. If we want the next generation to care about the ocean, we must instill that awareness now. It won't happen overnight, but long-term change starts with education today.



RESPOND TO

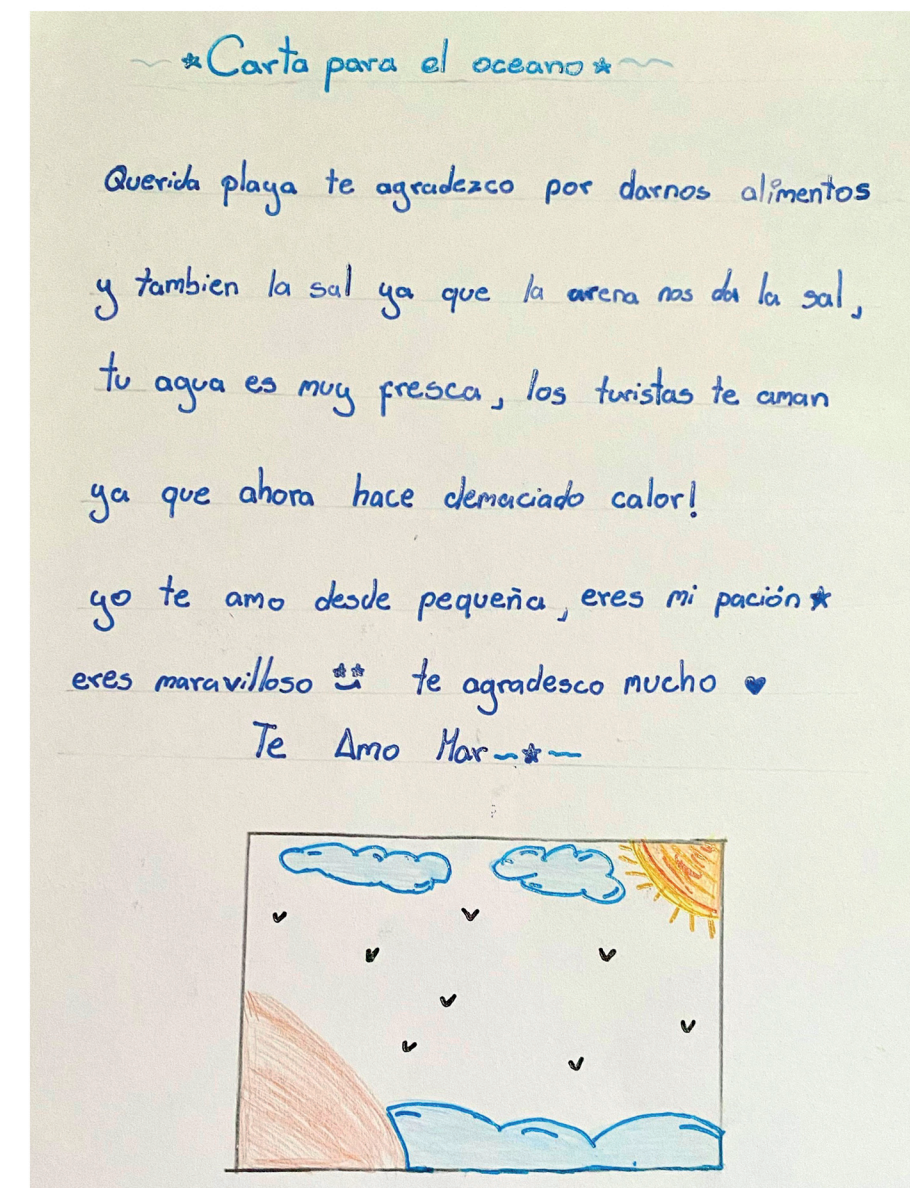
ISIS MARLIT

11 years

Galapagos



9



Letter to the Ocean

Dear beach, I thank you for providing us with food and also salt since the sand gives us salt, your water is very refreshing, tourists love you because it's too hot now! I've loved you since I was little, you're my passion, you're wonderful, thank you so much!

I love you, Sea



Building 30% Protection of European Seas by 2030 for Nature and People

Prof. Callum Roberts, Marine Conservation Biologist, Oceanographer, Science Communicator and Author



Callum Roberts is Professor of Marine Conservation at the University of Exeter in the UK and leads the Convex Seascape Survey, an international research programme to unlock the secrets of carbon storage on the world's continental shelves. He provided the first clear evidence that, as well as protecting wildlife, marine protected areas

can support surrounding fisheries, a win-win for environment and industry. His team provided the scientific underpinning for the world's first network of high seas marine protected areas covering over half a million square kilometres of the North Atlantic in 2010, and for the UN Convention on Biological Diversity nature protection target of 30% by 2030, adopted in 2022. He is author of *The Unnatural History of the Sea* (Island Press 2007), *Ocean of life: how our seas are changing* (Penguin 2013), and *Reef Life: An Underwater Memoir* (Profile Books 2019), and he was lead science advisor for the BBC series *Blue Planet II*.

European seas are not what they were. This fact was brought home to me with shocking clarity in 2010, when one of my students, Ruth Thurstan, brought me the results of an analysis of long-term trends in UK fish landings. I had asked her to dust off British Government fisheries reports from 1889, the first year catch statistics were collected, and extract all the data she could find to the present. I was not prepared for the result. A fishing fleet made up of wooden sailing boats landed five times more fish into England and Wales in 1889 than our sophisticated and powerful modern fleet did in 2010 (Thurstan et al. 2010). When she corrected for that power differential, the 19th century fleet landed 17 times more fish per unit of fishing power expended than the 2010 fleet did. A century of technological advance had not improved the fishery, it had all but destroyed it.

The seas of today are empty compared to those of the 19th century. Fish that featured heavily in early 19th century landings have dwindled or disappeared from catches, like giant skates and halibut, wolffish, conger eels, ling, turbot and oysters (Plumeridge and Roberts 2017). In the process of fishing, boats dragging

trawls and dredges stripped the seabed of life, smashing underwater habitats to pieces. Ruth Thurstan, now an academic at the University of Exeter, last year led a major study to piece together what seabed life looked like before these fisheries spread and intensified. She and a multinational team from across Europe estimated that at least 17,000 square kilometres of seabed were covered by oyster reefs (Thurstan et al. 2024). These habitats were built of shells and rose up to a metre above the bottom. They were home to hundreds of other species, making them rich feeding grounds for the abundant fish of the time.

Fishery managers are not, in my experience, very interested in the past. They want to know how many fish there are in the water today, so they can calculate how many we can take in the coming year. This blinkered view explains (but doesn't forgive) their missing the centuries long serial declines of one species after another as fisheries emptied European seas of their one-time wealth.

Of course, fishing is not the only problem for Europe's seas, which are subject to multiple stresses from pollution, offshore industry, coastal development and climate change. So it is fitting that, finally, we are making serious efforts to protect the sea. In 2010, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity set a target of

protecting 10% of the sea by 2020, which Europe comfortably achieved, reaching 12% coverage that year¹. In 2022, the same organisation set a bold new science-based target to protect at least 30% of the sea by 2030, or 30x30. While small and scattered marine protected areas (MPAs) provide local benefits, reviving the sea across large regions requires much more extensive protected area networks (O'Leary et al. 2017).

Only five years out from 2030, progress towards this target is mixed. Countries report their protected areas to the Protected Planet database of the UN Environment Program. Figure 1 shows MPA coverage for EU countries with coasts, plus the United Kingdom. Belgium, France, Germany, Netherlands and UK have sailed past 30% already, and a further three, Lithuania, Poland and Romania exceed 20%. But many countries have a very long way to go, with seven still in single figures and below the 2020 target.

If you are a glass is half full kind of person, you will take heart from these figures. Growth of protected areas is impressive in many places, and even laggards are beginning to make progress. But there is a second, and very important target that Europe has set itself: to give strict protection to 10% of its seas (EU Commission 2021). It is here that a network, in places impressive, becomes everywhere deeply inadequate.

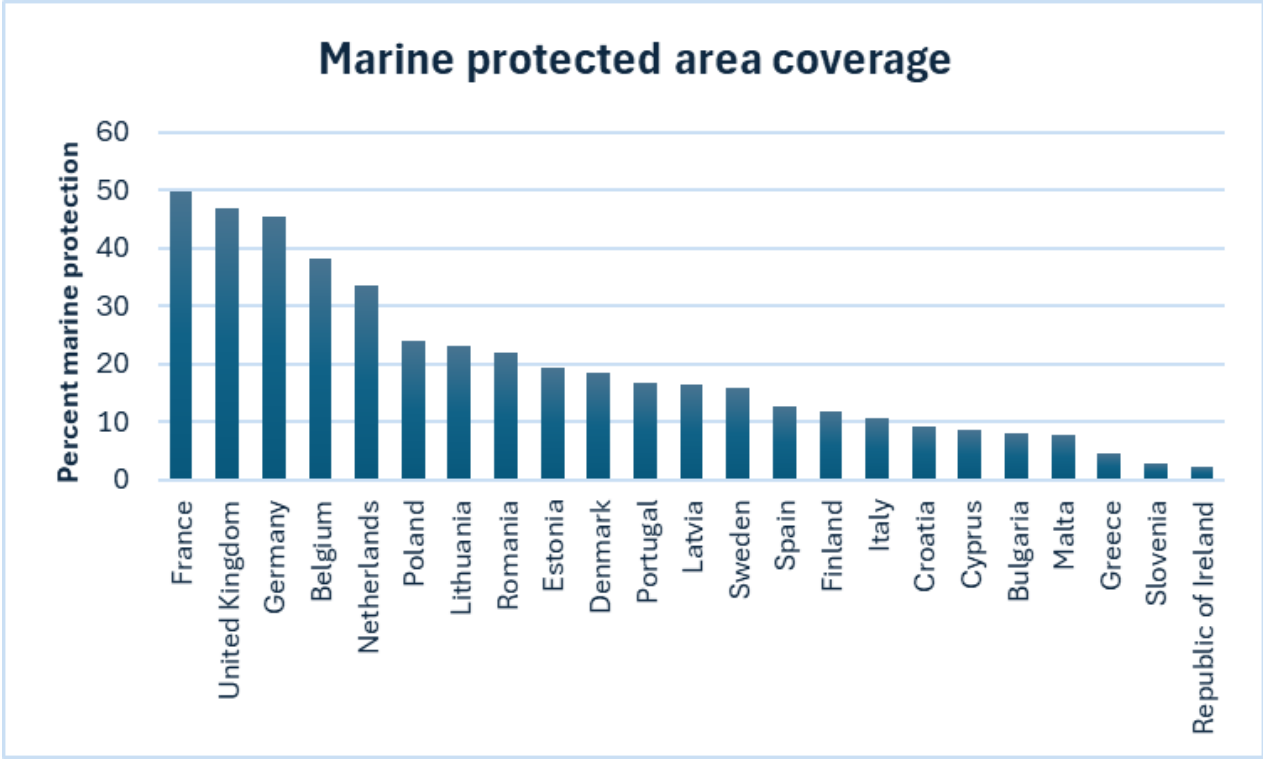


Figure 1: Percent coverage of marine protected areas in 2025. Source: Protected Planet.

A century of technological advance had not improved the fishery, it had all but destroyed it.

Protected area coverage is a poor metric of conservation effectiveness. If protected areas provide little in the way of protection their existence is irrelevant to wildlife and habitats. They are no more than paper parks. A few years ago, I joined an international group of scientists to analyse how much levels of protection matter to nature conservation outcomes. The answer is a lot. The benefits of protected areas for nature are tightly linked to the removal of exploitation, other damaging uses and sources of harm (Gorud-Colvert et al. 2021). We assigned five levels of protection to MPAs based on the uses permitted: not compatible with conservation, minimally protected, lightly protected, highly protected and fully protected. Good conservation outcomes – the recovery of nature and rebuilding of habitats – only really happen in highly and fully protected areas. These are what European legislators refer to as ‘strict’ protection.

This result is not surprising when you consider how marine protected areas work. If you stop killing fish and other wildlife, animals will live longer, grow larger and reproduce more, so their populations increase. Habitats that are not being dug up or pulverised by industrial fishing gears will begin rebuilding, a process than can start quickly but take many decades to complete.

The effects inside MPAs generate benefits that extend far outside their boundaries, improving the state of whole regions. The

abundant offspring of protected wildlife will drift and swim into unprotected sites and fishing grounds to replenish habitats, boost fish stocks and catches. Mobile species passing through MPAs gain protection while there, find better feeding conditions and less disturbed places to reproduce. Higher quality habitats and more prolific marine life deliver stronger flows of ecosystem goods and services to us, such as cleaner water, bigger fish catches, greater carbon sequestration and more secure carbon storage in seabed sediments. These nature benefits translate into improved resilience to rapid environmental change driven by greenhouse gas emissions, protecting ocean health and human wellbeing and livelihoods.

The simple fact is that most of the good things that we want and expect from marine protected areas depend closely on the degree of protection given. The inconvenient truth is that hardly any of our seas are protected enough to bring back marine life. A recent analysis examined coverage of highly and fully protected areas across European seas (Figure 2). Conservation progress is bad across the board according to this crucial metric. A paltry 0.2% of European waters is highly and fully protected (Aminian-Biquet et al. 2024). The big five European ocean conservation countries that have passed the 30% target, collectively mustered just 3249 km² of strict protection, about the size of the Brussels metropolitan area.

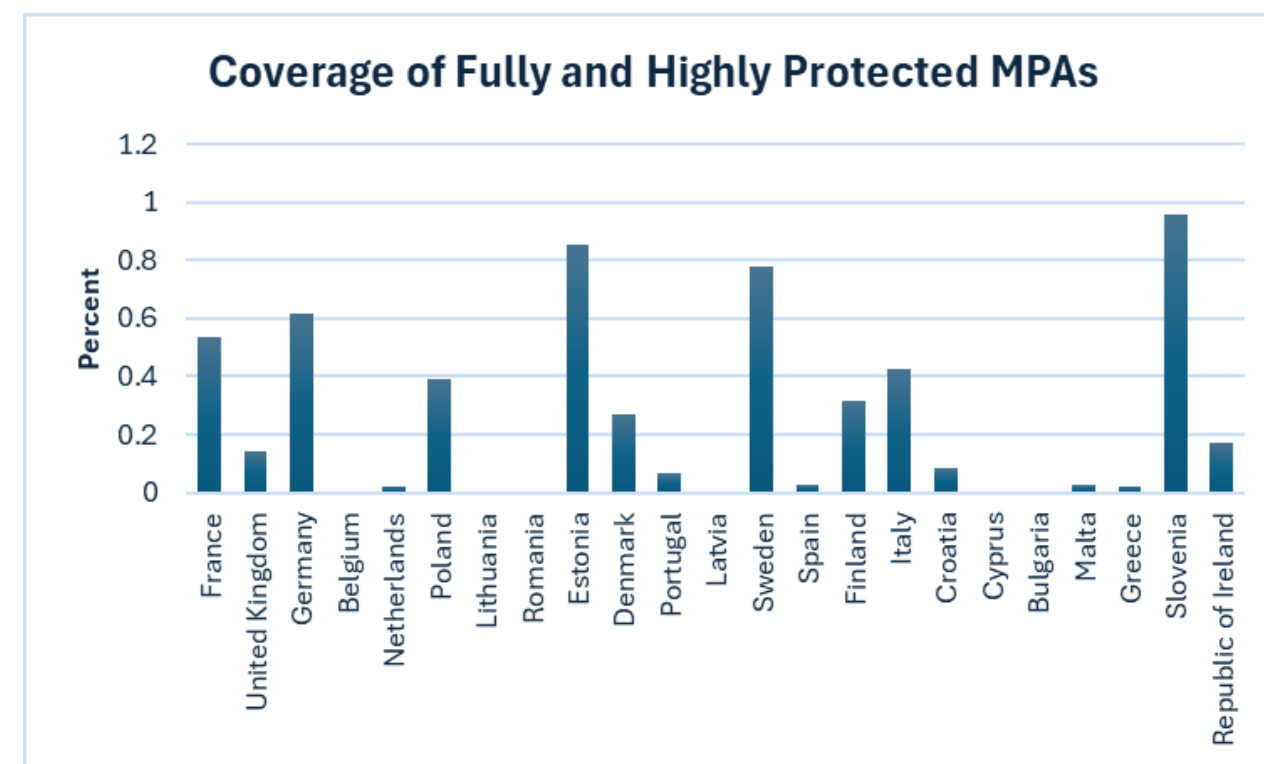


Figure 2: Coverage of Fully and Highly Protected MPAs. Source: Aminian-Biquet et al. 2024.

The illusion of protection is worse than its absence, because people believe that a problem has been solved when it hasn't.

If there is one thing that unites the countries of Europe, it is that their marine protected areas are universally inadequate. In fact, in its present state this network of protection, into which so much time, effort and money has been invested, is worse than useless. The illusion of protection is worse than its absence, because people believe that a problem has been solved when it hasn't.

How have we arrived at this unfortunate place? Historically, the fishing industry has been the most vocal opponent of protection, particularly those parts of the industry most vested in use of destructive fishing methods. Politicians dislike conflict and love to please all sides. In this case, the compromise has been to create MPAs to appease conservationists and tick off commitments to international treaties, while allowing people to carry on doing much the same things in 'protected' areas they did before. But compromise has led to the worst of possible worlds in which nobody benefits. Without nature recovery, the health of Europe's seas will carry on declining and its fisheries productivity will continue to stagnate. After all, fisheries need fish to catch, and that only happens when fish populations are adequately protected and their habitats are healthy.

How can we fix this? Fortunately, there is a way forward. There are points of light in this gloom, places where protected areas are reinvigorating the sea. Off the west coast of Scotland, for example, after a long campaign a local community demanded and won real protection for their sea (Stewart et al. 2020). Formerly barren seabed is coming alive again as a carpet of marine life has begun to reestablish, and fish and shellfish are reoccupying their old haunts. The community's overtures to the Scottish government were initially rebuffed because the bay they wanted to protect was "not worth protecting because there was nothing there". Eventually, however, having won the argument, this community has proven what government advisors failed to appreciate: by rebuilding marine life, protection has the power to make any place special again, even those with badly degraded habitats.

Europe's growing network of paper parks is pregnant with opportunity. Nature will take full advantage when sufficient protection is given to them. To make this happen we must work closely with communities and stakeholders, because decades of experience show the touchstone for success for any MPA is strong local support. People need to understand and feel that

nature protection is not the enemy of progress or prosperity but is the foundation which secures them. Everyone depends on nature for life and wellbeing, even city dwellers who never visit coast or countryside.

For most of human history, we have taken nature's benefits for granted and accepted them for free. But today's world is a different place, and we must invest properly in nature protection

to guarantee the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of today's generations and those to come. The world is on course for an uncertain future as the climate changes. Rebuilding nature now will help it cope and adapt as conditions change. With a dense and highly protected network of MPAs, the benefits will extend to all of European seas, not just the areas protected. The missing ingredient is courageous political leadership.

People need to understand and feel that nature protection is not the enemy of progress or prosperity but is the foundation which secures them. Everyone depends on nature for life and wellbeing, even city dwellers who never visit coast or countryside.

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Europe's Leadership in Achieving Environmental Goals

The Importance of the UN Ocean Decade for Europe: Aligning Global and Regional Marine Conservation Goals by 2030

Dr-Ing. Steffen Knodt, Chairman of the German UN Ocean Decade Committee



Dr-Ing. Steffen Knodt is the Chairman of the Board from the German UN Ocean Decade Committee (ODK) and a Board Member of Voice of the Seas, a non-profit community based in Aachen. He is also Member of the Africa-Europe Strategy Group on Ocean Governance by the Africa Europe Foundation. Dr Knodt completed his doctorate in engineering at the RWTH Aachen University and serves beside his industrial positions in the Board of the German Association for Marine Technology (GMT).

The ocean is vital for climate regulation, biodiversity, and key industries. However, climate change, overfishing, and pollution threaten its stability. Scientific advancements have improved our understanding of the ocean. However, vast areas of the ocean remain unexplored, and critical conservation gaps persist. Many people lack ocean awareness and fail to recognize that healthy seas are essential for sustaining life on our planet.

The United Nations Ocean Decade (2021–2030) presents a strategic opportunity to close these gaps, aligning global scientific innovation with Europe's ambitious marine protection and sustainability goals. This movement was launched at a high-level event in Berlin in 2021 under the motto “Creating the Ocean We Want”. For Europe, the Ocean Decade offers not just a global framework, but a chance to lead by example. The European Union (EU) has set ambitious goals to safeguard marine biodiversity, including the target of legally protecting 30% of European seas

by 2030. This article explores how the Ocean Decade's objectives and Europe's marine conservation goals are interconnected and how a science-driven, collaborative approach can pave the way for a sustainable ocean.

The United Nations Ocean Decade: A Global Framework for Action

The Ocean Decade is a global initiative to transform ocean science and support the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Facilitated by the UNESCO the Ocean Decade bridges research and policy, ensuring scientific discoveries lead to real-world sustainability solutions.

As a science-driven initiative, the Ocean Decade is fostering transformative solutions for marine sustainability. It integrates research, innovation, and data-driven strategies to combat pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate challenges. Innovations like ocean monitoring, predictive modelling, and AI-driven surveillance will enhance climate adaptation, nature-based solutions, and sustainable resource management. Open access to ocean data and stronger global cooperation will enhance decision-making and governance.

Equally vital is ocean literacy, ensuring scientific insights shape public awareness and policy. This includes empowering youth, indigenous communities, and coastal populations to participate in ocean governance. By bridging research, innovation, and policy, the Ocean Decade is catalysing a new era of ocean stewardship, securing the health of marine ecosystems for future generations. The Barcelona Statement from the 2024 UN Ocean

Decade Conference highlights the urgency of this mission. It calls for stronger cooperation between governments, industries, and research institutions to accelerate science-driven marine governance. The Barcelona Statement is a crucial roadmap that identifies the priority areas of action for the Ocean Decade in the coming years.

Europe's Marine and Environmental Conservation Goals for 2030

Europe stands at the forefront of global environmental efforts, committed to protecting the planet's ecosystems and achieving climate neutrality by 2050. The EU has crafted ambitious frameworks to safeguard its seas, reflecting a visionary approach to marine conservation. These policies are not just commitments on paper - they are key to achieving the 30% protection target by 2030. Those frameworks are also in synch with the ambitious G7 Ocean Deal that was signed under the presidency of Germany in 2022 with strong synergies to the G20 initiatives.

The European Green Deal aims for climate neutrality by 2050, placing marine ecosystems at its core. The EU Biodiversity Strategy targets 30% sea protection by 2030, supported by the emerging European Oceans Pact. Expected to be finalized in the coming years, the European Oceans Pact initiative aims to protect ocean health, promote sustainable industries, and strengthen governance. Complementing these efforts, the Mission Starfish 2030 is the European flagship program to enable the restoration of the entire water cycle with ambitious goals to fill knowledge gaps and to regenerate the marine ecosystems.

These initiatives emphasize the relevance of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) and their effective management in strengthening Europe's marine ecosystems. The HELCOM framework for the Baltic Sea offers a strong foundation in alignment with the Ocean Decade. Similarly, the Wadden Sea as a UNESCO World Heritage site serves as a prime example of successful transnational cooperation in marine conservation. To achieve its conservation targets, Europe must move beyond policy commitments and

focus on effective, science-driven implementation - a key goal of the Ocean Decade. Last not least it also seeks to strengthen the society-ocean connection, empowering people across all sectors to make informed decisions for ocean health.

Role of the Ocean Decade for reaching the 30% Marine Protection Goal

To combat biodiversity loss, the 2022 Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework set a goal to protect 30% of the planet by 2030 ('30x30'). The BBNJ Agreement (Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction), adopted in 2023, is a landmark treaty ensuring that marine life in the high seas - areas beyond any single nation's control - receives stronger protection from overfishing, pollution, and habitat destruction. Europe's Biodiversity Strategy aligns with the global '30x30' goal for the European seas. The success of Europe's 30% marine protection target for 2030 largely depends on science-driven implementation, not just policy declarations.

The Barcelona Statement stresses the urgent need for stronger enforcement of marine protected areas. Currently, 12% of EU seas are designated as MPAs, but only 8% are effectively managed. Weak enforcement and fragmented governance often reduce MPAs to paper designations rather than real conservation zones. Addressing these challenges is essential to achieving meaningful marine protection. One example of effective marine conservation comes from Portugal's nature reserve at the Berlengas archipelago. By fostering cooperation between local fishermen, scientists, and policymakers, the reserve has not only restored biodiversity but also sustained local livelihoods. The Ocean Decade also seeks to strengthen the society-ocean connection, empowering people across all sectors to make informed decisions for ocean health.

This model shows that MPAs can work - when backed by strong governance, enforcement, and community engagement. Through cutting-edge technologies and global cooperation, the Ocean Decade is helping Europe turn its marine conservation targets

To achieve its conservation targets, Europe must move beyond policy commitments and focus on effective, science-driven implementation - a key goal of the Ocean Decade.

into reality. To truly safeguard its seas, Europe must move beyond symbolic designations and ensure MPAs receive adequate funding, scientific support, and cross-border enforcement. By applying Ocean Decade innovations, Europe can turn marine conservation policies into action. While the Blue Economy drives economic growth, its success depends on integrating sustainable marine conservation strategies.

Collective Action on Sustainable Blue Economy and Sustainable Development

The EU Blue Economy generated €523 billion in 2020 and is expected to grow significantly by 2030, driven by investments in offshore wind, wave energy, sustainable aquaculture and blue biotechnology. The North Sea is becoming a model for integrating renewable energy (offshore wind farms) with marine conservation, demonstrating how economic expansion and biodiversity protection can go hand in hand. Blue Invest is the related EU platform that aims to accelerate ocean-based technologies and solutions to unlock innovation and related investment opportunities. The Ocean Decade allows Europe to lead in sustainable ocean governance while advancing the blue economy. The EU's Sustainable Blue Economy Strategy encourages businesses to invest in marine restoration and conservation-linked finance. In addition, expanding blue carbon markets and integrating them into the EU Emissions Trading System (ETS) could unlock new financing for marine conservation.

While scientific and policy frameworks are advancing, geopolitical tensions in key regions - such as the Baltic Sea and the Arctic Ocean - pose significant hurdles. Overcoming these challenges requires Europe to champion binding international agreements. The Ocean Decade promotes collaboration between governments, research institutions, and industries. By integrating scientific research into policies, public-private partnerships can turn commitments into real solutions. Additionally, supporting local governance initiatives will empower coastal communities to take an active role in marine conservation, reinforcing the Ocean Decade's vision of inclusive and science-driven ocean stewardship. Effective collective action has the potential to drive change on

all levels. The International Platform for Ocean Sustainability (IPOS) is an emerging body of relevance for the EU. IPOS is aiming to support states and accelerate the implementation of their commitments for the sustainable management of the ocean.

Ocean Governance is shaping the upcoming Decades on international Collaboration

The UN Pact for the Future, co-facilitated in 2024 by Germany and Namibia, underscores the urgent need for stronger global action on sustainable development, climate change, and ocean governance. The Pact integrates ocean protection into broader environmental and economic frameworks, reinforcing the commitments of the Ocean Decade. By fostering multilevel cooperation - from local projects like Berlengas to high-level international agreements - Europe can strengthen its leadership in marine governance. Effective implementation, supported by initiatives like IPOS, will be key to achieving lasting impact.

As the Ocean Decade nears its midpoint, attention must shift toward ensuring long-term continuity. The G20's Ocean20 (O20) initiative, launched under Indonesia's 2022 presidency, is emerging as a potential successor framework for the Ocean Decade. With South Africa hosting the 2025 G20 Summit, Post-2030 frameworks like Oceans20 could sustain the Ocean Decade's momentum, reinforcing marine conservation beyond current targets. The EU should proactively shape this agenda to align with its biodiversity strategy and economic ambitions.

2025 will be a turning point for global ocean governance, shaping marine policies for decades to come. In addition to the G20's focus on O20, the 3rd UN Ocean Conference (UNOC3) in Nice will provide a high-level platform for advancing international cooperation. The UNOC3 strongly resonates with the vision of the French President Emmanuel Macron, the 2018 Charlemagne Prize Laureate, who emphasized in Aachen / Aix-la-Chapelle with his speech Europe's responsibility to lead with unity, ambition, and multilateral commitment. This imperative is echoed by the ambitious SOS Ocean Manifesto, issued in Paris ahead of the UN-

2025 will be a turning point for global ocean governance, shaping marine policies for decades to come.

Increased investment in marine research, the expansion of blue finance mechanisms, and stronger regulatory frameworks will be crucial in ensuring long-term success. By embracing market-based conservation tools, Europe can scale ocean protection efforts while unlocking new economic opportunities.

OC3. This manifesto from civil society is calling on world leaders for action and to recognize the ocean as a global common good, adopt binding protection targets and ensure equitable access to marine resources.

The EU must leverage both summits to reinforce its leadership in sustainable marine management, pushing for stronger commitments on marine biodiversity, blue economy innovation, and ocean finance as part of the post-2030 agenda. For policymakers and businesses, the upcoming European Oceans Pact is more than just a policy document - it is a pivotal roadmap for ensuring Europe's seas remain both economically productive and ecologically healthy for this century and beyond.

City-Partnership between Aachen and Cape Town anchored on Sustainable Development

UN Secretary-General António Guterres, the 2019 Charlemagne Prize laureate, has consistently called for international cooperation in ocean protection. His speech in Aachen underscored a critical truth: environmental challenges, including the protection of the oceans, cannot be solved by any one nation alone - climate change and biodiversity loss require collective global action beyond national boundaries. Despite international commitments, fragmented governance and political resistance hinder progress. Countries with competing economic interests often stall ambitious policies. Strengthening multilateral diplomacy and trade-linked conservation incentives will be key to overcoming these obstacles. One of the Charlemagne Prize Fellowships 2024 covered the EU's objective to protect 30% of European seas by 2030.

Guterres' vision aligns with the Decade's call for unity and Aachen's leadership in sustainable water management. Since 2000 the Local Agenda 21 partnership between Aachen and Cape Town reflects the power of city-level cooperation in tackling the sustainable development goals with the capacity of the local

people. Within this mindset, the Burgher's Walk conservation project is an outstanding initiative in Cape Town to protect the iconic but endangered African Penguin. Like Aachen and Cape Town as the city and cape of water, water connects all of us!

Conclusion: The Ocean we need for the Future we want!

For Europe to fully leverage the Ocean Decade, stronger commitments from policymakers, businesses, and research institutions are essential. Increased investment in marine research, the expansion of blue finance mechanisms, and stronger regulatory frameworks will be crucial in ensuring long-term success. By embracing market-based conservation tools, Europe can scale ocean protection efforts while unlocking new economic opportunities.

The shift beyond the Ocean Decade has begun. The Barcelona Statement calls for urgent action to accelerate blue finance, enhance governance, and strengthen cross-border enforcement. The UN Ocean Conference and G20's O20 offer key opportunities for Europe to lead in marine conservation. Europe must move beyond ambition to action, using its leadership to implement enforceable ocean policies and sustainable economic frameworks. Investments in marine restoration, innovative financing, and public-private partnerships will be crucial. Europe has the opportunity and responsibility to drive a future where the ocean remains both ecologically resilient and economically vibrant.

As Guterres emphasized in his Aachen speech, the global challenges are too vast to tackle alone. But together, with determination, innovation, and unity, we can safeguard and restore the oceans for future generations. The Ocean Decade is not just a vision - it is a call to action. Together, we must turn knowledge into action - restoring our oceans through science, policy, and innovation. The time is now: "The Science we need for the Ocean we want. The Ocean we need for the Future we want. "

Insights



Insights

Karlspreis 2024

- **Dr Robert Habeck**

*Vice Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany (2021–2025)
Federal Minister for the Environment and Climate Protection*

“European Judaism is not something for which tolerance should be demanded—it is the very foundation of tolerance. Pluralism and mutual understanding do not stem from a silent agreement among those who are identical, but rather from a shared awareness of differences and distinctions.”



“We must continuously strive to engage in dialogue—to seek new perspectives through the other’s **differences**, to make unfamiliarity the very foundation of our pursuit of understanding.

We must recognize **differences as essential to what unites us—unity in diversity**. Engaging in conversation is not merely an option; it is a **political and social obligation**.”

- **Edi Rama**

Prime Minister of the Republic of Albania

“Only a form of tolerance that never abandons dialogue between faiths can protect the most important good beyond our particular disagreements: Confidence in a shared humanity.”



- **Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt**

President of the Conference of European Rabbis (CER)

Acceptance Speech to Award of the International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen to Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt and the Jewish communities in Europe on 9 May 2024 in the Coronation Hall of Aachen City Hall

“Anti-Semitism is not the problem of the Jews. It is the problem of the societies in which it prevails. It is a seismograph of their condition. Extremism on the right and left, and especially radical political Islam, threaten more than just Jewish Europe. They threaten the security, freedom and indeed the future of Europe as a whole. We freedom-loving democrats must finally be able to defend ourselves - both internally and externally.”



Insights

Spotlight: Fighting Antisemitism in Europe

The Diplomatic String Quartet performed works by Jewish composers at a solemn event preceding the award ceremony on 6 May 2024 in the in the High Cathedral of Aachen:

- **Kurt Weill (1900–1950):** *Youkali*
- **Ernest Bloch (1880–1959):** *Prelude*
- **Fritz Kreisler (1875–1962):** *String Quartet in A Minor: Fantasia*
- **Henriette Bosmans (1895–1952):** *Allegro molto moderato*
- **Leone Sinigaglia (1868–1944):** *Hora Mystica*
- **Szymon Laks (1901–1983):** *String Quartet No. 3: III. Vivace non troppo*
- **Erwin Schulhoff (1894–1942):** *5 Pieces for String Quartet – No. 5, Alla tarantella*



The Diplomatic String Quartet was founded in 2016 on the occasion of the Synagogue Concerts as part of the International Days of Jewish Music in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. The quartet performs works by Jewish composers. It consists of Matthias Hummel (1st violin), Waltraut Elvers (viola), Gabriella Strümpel (cello), and the Federal Government Commissioner for Jewish Life in Germany and the Fight against Antisemitism, Dr Felix Klein (2nd violin).

Christian Wulff

Former President of the Federal Republic of Germany

"Composed in exile, Kurt Weill's 'Youkali' expresses the longing for an island of **peace, love, and a life free from worries**—a utopian dream. Yet, in many ways, the European Union **brings this vision to life**.

However, our Union thrives only through **compromise, reconciliation, and balance**. With 27 member states, each with its own interests and history, unity is not automatic. The more **radical nationalist forces** grow, the more **Europe itself is called into question**. We must communicate this better—and it requires **clarity in debate and unwavering conviction!**"



"Each generation has a central task. My grandparents' generation was responsible for **rebuilding Europe**. My generation's task was **European reunification**. The **young generation** must now ensure internal cohesion and the survival of **Europe as a whole**."

Events ahead of the award ceremony:

"There can never be too few stages to stand up against antisemitism and all forms of xenophobia." – **Igor Levit**, Pianist

"The fight against antisemitism is not primarily a task of the youth; they are just as much victims of antisemitism as we all are. If an attack on Jews is also an attack on liberal democracy, then liberal democracy, with all its components, is called upon to stand against antisemitism at every opportunity." – **Cem Özdemir**, Federal Minister of Food and Agriculture of Germany



"We must advocate for what we believe in. I have come to advocate for democracy and humanity. And I ask, where is the large but mostly silent majority, and why does it not speak out loudly against those who spread hate? I regret for those who only know hate; such people should not hold political power."

Michel Friedman, Author



"Anyone who wants to protect Jewish life must primarily focus on the Jews of today, rather than only combating the antisemitism of the past." -

Dr Felix Klein, Federal Commissioner for Jewish Life in Germany and the Fight against Antisemitism

"What one can learn from Jews, for example, is the ability to engage in dialogue and the interest in debate - the necessity of allowing a position that I may disagree with and integrating it into my life." **Mirna Funk**, Author



Karlspreis Europa Forum

‘Setting the Course for Europe’

Aachen, 8 May 2024

Voices
of former
Charlemagne
Prize
Laureates:



Pat Cox, *Former President of the European Parliament, Charlemagne Prize Laureate 2004:*

"The European Parliament, the European Commission, and the European Council must dedicate far more time to strategic and defense matters. Not to prepare for war - Europe is not a war alliance - but to ensure its ability to uphold and sustain peace."

Veronica Tsepikalo, *Representative of the Belarussian Opposition, Charlemagne Prize Laureate 2022*

"Always remember, time pleads against us—especially when we speak of authoritarian regimes or people in dire conditions. When help is needed, decisions must be made as quickly as possible."



Dr Jean-Claude Trichet, *Former President of the European Central Bank, Charlemagne Prize Laureate 2011*

"When good political decisions are made, citizens cannot help but notice their positive impact. And while much remains to be done, our long-term goal is clear: to move toward a full political confederation, whereas - at the same time - we are witnessing a growing movement of radical criticism toward our existing societies."

Dr Dalia Grybauskaitė, *Former President of the Republic Lithuania, Charlemagne Prize Laureate 2013*

"When challenges are visibly dangerous and explicitly terrible, we often reject them psychologically - it's human nature to believe they won't affect us. But in the decades ahead, geopolitical tensions near and within Europe - we can observe this already in the Middle East or Ukraine - will undoubtedly shape our future. New geopolitical alliances are emerging, and they will affect us all."

Voices
of the
Forum:



Margaritis Schinas, *Vice-President of the European Commission:*

"Never before in the history of the European Union have we faced so many historic and existential threats. And never before have we taken such crucial decisions to confront these challenges."

Prof Dr Ursula Gather, *Chairwoman of the Board of Trustees, Alfried Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach Foundation:*

"Economic strength and competitiveness are the preconditions for well-being and prosperity in Europe. Prosperity also strengthens peace. Peaceful coexistence and progress in it further empower us to cope with crises."

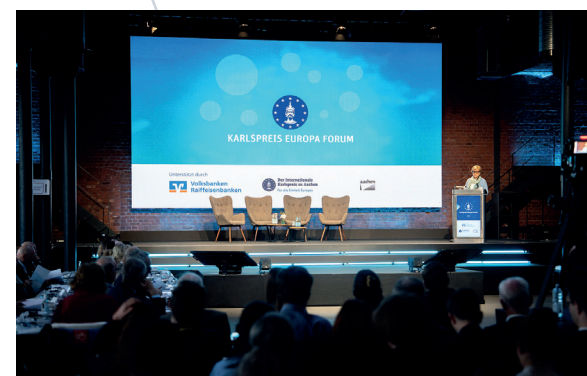


Daniel Quinten, *President of the EACB, Member of the Board of the National Association of German Co-operative Banks:*

"The European Union has always excelled at generating innovative ideas. However, we still struggle when it comes to translating these ideas into action."

Véronique Willems, *Secretary General, SMEunited:*

"We must ensure that the reality of business is fully acknowledged. The European institutions need to collaborate more closely with small enterprises across Europe."



Insights

Freedom of Research: A European Summit – Science in Times of Uncertainty Aachen, 5 November 2024

About the Summit

Our Annual Summit 2025 – which traditionally marks both the conclusion of one research year and the beginning of the next – has been organised in collaboration with new partners: the Knowledge Hub and the Käte Hamburger Kolleg: Cultures of Research (c:o/re) of RWTH Aachen University. In addition to presenting and discussing the research findings of our fellows, the event placed a strong focus on the topic of "academic freedom in Europe." This cooperation and thematic emphasis serve as the starting point for a joint event series in the years to come.



European Dialogue: Freedom of Research and the Future of Europe in Times of Uncertainty
Conference Report by Jana Hambitzer, Käte Hamburger Kolleg: Cultures of Research (c:o/re)



During a day-long symposium, part of the Freedom of Research: A European Summit – Science in Times of Uncertainty, speakers and panelists explored various aspects of freedom of research and the future of Europe in the context of ongoing global crises and conflicts.

"We should not think that freedom is self-evident. Freedom is at danger in every moment, and it is fragile". With these cautioning words, Prof. Dr Thomas Prefi, Chairman of the Charlemagne Prize Foundation, welcomed the participants of the symposium on freedom of research, which took place at the forum M in the city center of Aachen on November 5, 2024.

As part of the *Freedom of Research: A European Summit – Research in Times of Uncertainty*, the Foundation of the International Charlemagne Prize of Aachen, the Knowledge Hub and the Käte Hamburger Kolleg: Cultures of Research (c:o/re) of RWTH Aachen University jointly provided an interdisciplinary platform to discuss the crucial role of freedom in scientific, social and political contexts concerning the future of Europe with researchers, policymakers, business representatives and the public.

The aim was to critically explore different forms and practices of implementing freedom of research in line with European principles and in support of democratic governance and societal benefits. The thematic focus of the symposium was on dealing with the numerous complex crises of our time – from military conflicts to right-wing populism – as well as addressing challenges associated with new technologies such as AI and the metaverse.



Humanity and Collaboration in the Age of Emerging Technologies

The strategic importance of freedom in fostering innovation and maintaining democratic values in a globally competitive landscape was emphasized by Wibke Reincke, Senior Director and Head of Public Policy at Novo Nordisk, and Dr Jakob Greiner, Vice President of European Affairs at Deutsche Telekom AG. From an industry perspective, both speakers underscored the need for open societies that invest in innovation to ensure the continuity and growth of democratic principles.



The emergence of the metaverse and other cutting-edge technologies were discussed by Jennifer Baker, Reporter and EU Tech Influencer 2019, Elena Bascone, Charlemagne Prize Fellow 2023/24, Nadina Iacob, Digital Economy Consultant at the World Bank, and Rebekka Weiß, LL.M., Head of Regulatory Policy, Senior Manager Government Affairs, Microsoft Germany. The panelists pointed out the essential role of human-centered approaches and international collaboration in addressing the ethical and societal challenges associated with new technologies, and in shaping the metaverse according to European ideals.

The inherent tension between technological progress and the preservation of research freedom was highlighted by Prof. Dr Gabriele Gramelsberger, Director of the Käte Hamburger Kolleg: Cultures of Research (c:o/re), who raised the question of how AI is changing research. Prof. Dr Holger Hoos, Alexander von Humboldt Professor in AI and Executive Director of the AI Center at RWTH Aachen University, stated that publicly funded academic institutions must remain free from any influence of money and market pressure

to foster cutting-edge research motivated solely by intellectual curiosity. Prof. Dr Benjamin Paaßen, Junior Professor for Knowledge Representation and Machine Learning at Bielefeld University, further argued that AI in research and education should only be used as a tool to complement human capabilities, rather than replace them.

Conflicts over Academic Freedom and the Role of Universities

The de facto implementation of academic freedom worldwide was presented by Dr Lars Lott from the research project Academic Freedom Index at the Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nuremberg. In a 50-year comparison, from 1973 to 2023, he illustrated a significant improvement of academic freedom in countries worldwide. However, looking from an individual perspective, the opposite is true: almost half of the world's population lives in countries where academic freedom is severely restricted due to the rise of populist and authoritarian regimes.

Dr Dominik Brenner from the Central European University in Vienna reported firsthand on the forced relocation of the Central European University (CEU) from Budapest to Vienna and noted that such restrictions of academic freedom are an integral part of illiberal policies. Dr Ece Cihan Ertem from the University of Vienna provided another example of increasing authoritarianism in academic institutions by discussing the suppression of academic freedom at Turkey's Bogazici University by the government. Prof. Dr Carsten Reinhardt from Bielefeld University warned of the modern efforts in our societies to restrict academic freedom through fake news or alternative facts. From a historical perspective, these are fundamental attacks destroying the basis of truth-finding, referring to similar developments during the Nazi regime in Germany.

Another pressing issue, the precariousness of academic employment in Germany, was highlighted by Dr Kristin Eichhorn from the University of Stuttgart and co-founder of the #IchBinHanna initiative, protesting against academic labor reforms that disadvantage early and mid-career researchers. She pointed out that the majority of faculty work on fixed-term contracts, which significantly restricts researchers' ability to exercise their fundamental right to academic freedom due to tendencies to suppress both structural and intellectual criticism.

How to deal with these challenges? Prof. Dr Stefan Böschen, Director of the Käte Hamburger Kolleg: Cultures of Research (c:o/re), stressed that political assumptions and politically motivated conflicts can make academic discourse more difficult. However, it is important to foster dialogue once a common basis for discussion has been established. Frank Albrecht from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation advocated for greater efforts in science diplomacy and the vital role of academic institutions in international relations. Miranda Loli from the Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies, the European University Institute in Florence, and Charlemagne Prize Fellow 2023/24, emphasized the need for universities to act as reflexive communities that engage critically with the processes that shape academic freedom while recognizing their potential as informal diplomatic actors.

Research as a Basis for European Conflict Resolution

The intersection of academic freedom and conflict resolution was explored in a discussion between Dr Sven Koopmans, EU Special Representative for the Middle East Peace Process, and Drs René van der Linden, former President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and Dutch diplomat, moderated by Dr Mayssoun Zein Al Din, Managing Director of the North Rhine-Westphalian Academy for International Politics in Bonn. They argued that research is essential for understanding and resolving global conflicts and emphasized the role of the EU as a key player in international peace efforts. The two discussed the challenges of assessing conflicts from a European perspective, particularly the differing opinions of member states, and highlighted the EU's economic power as a crucial factor in international peace efforts. Dr Koopmans emphasized the importance of an optimistic outlook, stating: "Let's work on the basis – that there is a peace that we may one day achieve. It maybe sounds very difficult [...], but you know: Defeat is not a strategy for success."

The symposium underlined the critical importance of protecting freedom in research, science, and diplomacy. The discussions made clear that academic freedom is neither given nor a permanent state; rather, it requires continuous vigilance and proactive efforts to preserve. The collective message from the symposium reinforced that science in times of uncertainty can be managed through regulation and governance for innovation, a strong European and international academic community, and independent universities as safe places to ensure the future of a democratic, secure and progressive Europe.

Focus: Times of the Metaverse



Dr Jakob Grainer, *Vice President European Affairs at Deutsche Telekom*

"We aspire to be at the forefront of digitization, providing the foundation for any AI revolution – whether in industry, the metaverse, or other areas where Europe aims to innovate. A strong digital infrastructure is essential; it must run smoothly, not sputter. Yet right now, it's stuttering. That's why it's so valuable to see so many experts from research and industry coming together today to discuss the vital theme of freedom of research."

Rebekka Weiss LL.M., *Head of Regulatory Policy, Senior Manager Government Affairs, Microsoft Germany*

"The Metaverse is no longer a distant sci-fi fantasy – it's here, now, transforming how we interact and innovate."



Prof. Dr Holger Hoos, *RWTH Aachen University*

"I think it is very important that in AI research, where developments are happening rapidly, top-tier research can take place in academic institutions – free from financial or market pressures and basically purely guided by intellectual curiosity."

Nadina Iacob, *Digital Economy Consultant at World Bank and former Charlemagne Prize Fellow*

"Digital innovation knows no borders – bringing immense opportunities but also risks. That's why international cooperation is critical, especially when setting global standards for data sharing and security."



Focus: Times of Crisis



Drs. René van der Linden, *Former President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and Former Diplomat:*

"As the U.S. elections unfold today, one of my greatest concerns is the overwhelming influence of money in politics—pushing values further and further down the priority list."

Wiebke Reincke, *Senior Director and Head of Public Policy, Novo Nordisk:*

"In times of uncertainty, science is more than just a discipline—it is a steadfast commitment to humanity."



Frank Albrecht, *Alexander von Humboldt Foundation:*

"International academic cooperation is filled with challenges – but if we are serious about progress, we must be willing to engage, even with difficult partners."

Dr Sven Koopmans, *European External Action Service:*

"Research is essential in conflict resolution, as it provides the foundation for understanding what is truly happening while also offering best practices for resolving conflicts effectively."



Dr Kristin Eichhorn, *Co-initiator of the academic policy movement #IchBinHanna?*

"Academic careers are increasingly defined by precarious employment conditions. What we truly need is a more sustainable system—one that enables scholars to build both a career and a family."



Spotlight: Freedom of Research

Dominik Brenner is a political economist and visiting faculty at the Departments of Political Science, International Relations, and Public Policy at Central European University (CEU) in Vienna. He defended his Ph.D. in Political Economy at CEU and held visiting research positions at Sciences Po Paris and the European University Institute in Florence (Italy). His research interests revolve around European financial integration, legislative predictability, political oversight, and good governance mechanisms.



Why is freedom of research an important value and right in and for Europe and how can we better safeguard it?

The rise of illiberalism has penetrated all aspects of political life. What started as national peculiarities has by now turned into a global challenge. Illiberalism in power is an attempt at dismantling the core of the liberal order with its belief in *rule of law* based on impartiality and the principles of an open society in favor of *rule by law* based on patrimonialism and the delegitimization of any non-illiberal actor. Freedom of research is a core pillar of this liberal democratic order and while universities should be impartial, this impartiality needs to be embedded within liberal democratic boundaries. It is this grounding in the values we hold dear in and for Europe that leads forces outside the liberal democratic spectrum to perceive academic freedom as a threat to their illiberal worldview. It is therefore no coincidence that illiberal regimes target academic freedom early on. In times of democratic backsliding, academic freedom becomes a fragile construct that needs to be safeguarded by raising public awareness and strengthening the legal protection of researchers and administrative staff to research, teach, collaborate, and publish without political interference.

How do the legal reforms and public disinformation campaigns you observed during the forced relocation of the Central European University from Budapest (Hungary) to Vienna (Austria) illustrate broader strategies used by illiberal regimes to suppress academic freedom, and what implications do these strategies have for the autonomy of universities in Europe and beyond?

Hungary became a pilot study for understanding the tactics of illiberal regimes against academic freedom. Illiberal regimes tend to rely heavily on targeted budget cuts, the removal of budgetary autonomy, forced dismissals and replacements, legislative changes with little parliamentary deliberation, and a general attempt at delegitimizing liberal ideas. These core illiberal tools were used in Hungary both against CEU and public higher education institutions in order to streamline higher education along illiberal lines. In the case of public institutions, streamlining occurred via budgetary measures, dismissals, and replacements, while CEU, as a private institution, was targeted via legislative modification and public disinformation campaigns which ultimately led to CEU's forced relocation from Budapest to Vienna. The Hungarian experience highlights the difficulties of universities, whether public or private, to defend their autonomy individually under the rise of national illiberal regimes. Yet, the strength of universities, and a first line of defense, lies in their European and global network structures. Building and fostering cross-country university alliances based on strong collaborative ties and extensive programmatic integration offers researchers, students, and administrators a chance to learn and co-create safeguards against the rising threat of illiberalism.

Dr Ece Cihan Ertem is a researcher in the area of sociology of education. She has been a postdoctoral researcher and a lecturer at the University of Vienna since 2020. Her research areas revolve around international and comparative education in the general framework of politics and education. Her research priorities are comparative approaches within the framework of global political tendencies such as neoliberalism and its impacts on privatization and commodification of education; academic freedom and education in contemporary authoritarian regimes; educational institutions with a regional focus on Turkey and the Middle East; education and migration, academic migrants in Europe vis a vis diversity and inclusion.



Why is freedom of research an important value and right in and for Europe and how can we better safeguard it?

Freedom of research is essential for intellectual and social progress. It empowers scholars to explore, question, and develop ideas without fear of reprisal. This openness to critical thinking fosters scientific discoveries, cultural understanding, and responsive policy-making, all of which enrich societies. However, particularly in the 2020s, we witness a sharp global decline in academic freedom. Alarming incidents have occurred recently, including professors being dragged on the ground and forcefully silenced for advocating peace, university campuses facing police raids, peaceful student protests being met with violence, and academic conferences being cancelled. The widespread surge in violence and control over protests, often disguised as democratic governance, has become a pressing issue in Europe, carrying profound implications for human rights, democratic institutions, global stability, and environmental sustainability.

Academic solidarity and autonomy are the key phrases to safeguard freedom of research. The collective commitment of scholars, researchers, and educational institutions uphold and protect integrity, autonomy, and their intellectual environment. It involves fostering a cohesive community that transcends disciplinary and national boundaries to eliminate self-censorship and nurture creative thought. By forming robust networks of research, academics can resist external pressures that threaten the open exchange of ideas and support each other. This solidarity empowers scholars to challenge constraints on academic freedom without fear of isolation, ensuring that intellectual discourse remains vigorous and unencumbered. To achieve these conditions, ministries, policymakers, and universities must create transparent and efficient funding mechanisms, and safe campus environments having venues for communication and discussion.

What is the situation regarding academic freedom in Turkey as an EU accession candidate?

As an EU accession candidate, Turkey has frequently come under scrutiny regarding its academic environment. Particularly after the failed coup and the following state of emergency in 2016, arbitrary and restricting interventions on the academic autonomy of Turkish universities even extending to the dismissals of professors who express dissenting opinions became evident. These measures raised concerns about institutional autonomy and the broader climate for free academic inquiry in Turkey. However, as a sharp reply to these interventions, there occurred exemplary cases of academic resistance and solidarity such as the academic protests of Bogazici University by a collaborative effort of the faculty, students, and alumni going on for more than 1500 days. While Turkey goes back and forth between authoritarian governance and the pursuit of democratic values of Turkish society, the ongoing struggle for academic freedom and autonomy will remain essential in determining the future of democracy in the country.

Dr Lars Lott is a postdoctoral researcher at Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nuremberg. He is also a research associate at the Varieties of Democracy Institute in Gothenburg, Sweden. His research interests include authoritarian regimes, democratization and autocratization, the political economy of inequalities, and academic freedom. He has published his work in Perspectives on Politics, Democratization, Higher Education, Swiss Political Science Review, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, European Policy Review and Contemporary Politics, among others.



Why is freedom of research an important value and right in and for Europe and how can we better safeguard it?

Freedom of research is a necessary requirement for research, since research is highly uncertain and greatly benefits from the scientists' creative freedom. Research without this basic freedom is likely to be less innovative and society cannot profit from scientific progress in the same way as in free societies. For better safeguarding freedom of research, we need to know how well this freedom is protected. The Academic Freedom Index is one important measurement instrument to assess this basic freedom.

What is the Academic Freedom Index, how does it reflect recent trends in academic freedom across Europe, and what specific factors have contributed to its stagnation or decline in this region over the past two decades?

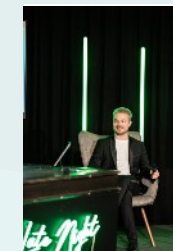
The Academic Freedom Index assesses de facto levels of academic freedom and offers a unique, peer-reviewed approach to understanding and evaluating academic freedom worldwide. It rests on assessments by more than 2300 country experts worldwide, standardized questionnaires, and a well-established statistical model. Our data indicate that academic freedom globally is under threat. One of the key findings is that today's proportion of the world's population who lack access to academic freedom is comparable to the situation 50 years ago, in 1973. From a country perspective, we see that academic freedom stagnated in the 2000s and has declined over the last fifteen years, although at a more moderate pace. An important explanation concerning this finding is the crisis of democracy, in Europe and elsewhere. We clearly observe that autocratization goes hand in hand with declines in academic freedom.

FREEDOM Late Night

Exploring the Many Dimensions of Freedom



On a thought-provoking evening, the **FREEDOM Late Night** brought together leading voices from politics, science, culture, and sports to engage in **insightful discussions, artistic performances, and interactive debates**, offering diverse perspectives on what freedom truly means in today's world.



From philosophical reflections to pressing political challenges, the event tackled critical questions:

- Do we genuinely value our freedom?
- How resilient is democracy in the face of rising right-wing movements?
- What role do science and research play in securing freedom and prosperity?
- How does artificial intelligence impact artistic freedom?
- Can technology help create more freedom in sports?

The event featured an exciting **lineup**, which brought expertise from various disciplines:

- **Marina Weisband**, politician and publicist, reflected on the fragility of democracy in turbulent times.
- **Dr Ulf Buermeyer**, former judge and political commentator, examined the legal foundations of freedom.
- **Andreas Beck**, former professional soccer player, and **Johannes Riegger**, head analyst at the football club Borussia Mönchengladbach, discussed innovation and fairness in sports.
- **Sven Bliedung von der Heide**, CEO of Volucap GmbH, explored the intersection of **AI** and **artistic freedom**.
- **Professor Verena Nitsch** and **Professor Stefan Bösch** provided insights into the role of **science and engineering** in shaping a freer society.
- **Luise Befort**, actress, and **Jana Forkel**, screenwriter, reflected on **freedom in storytelling and creative expression**.

A Fusion of Art & Discussion



Beyond the thought-provoking panels, the night was enriched by **music, dance, and artistic performances**, including choreographer **Maureen Reeor** and her ensemble "Maureen Reeor & Company," as well as visual artist **Lukas Moll**. The unique blend of entertainment and discourse made the FREEDOM Late Night an **immersive experience**, reminding us that freedom is not only a political concept but a deeply personal and cultural one.

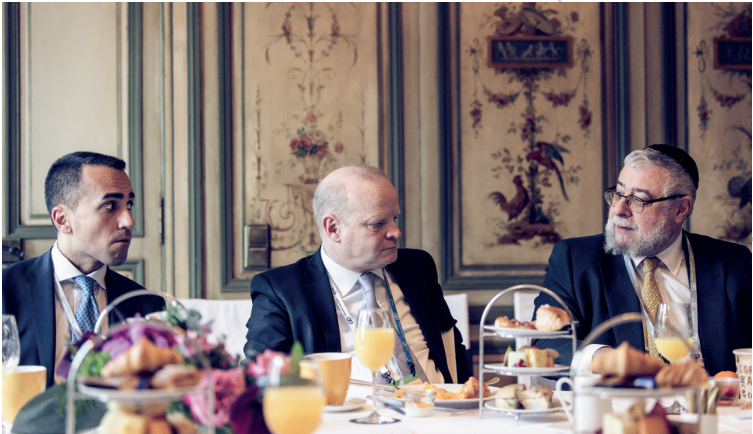


As the **conversation continues**, this event serves as a reminder: freedom must be understood, protected, and actively shaped—through knowledge, debate, and expression.

Research Year 2023/24

Munich Security Conference 2024

Breakfast Discussion: ‘Echoes of Peace: A New Role for Europe Towards Stability in the Middle East’ with Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmid and Luigi Di Maio, European Union Special Representative for the Gulf region



Workshop: “Building Ukraine’s Future” with Miranda Loli
4. November 2024



Tech Policy Chat: “From the US to Europe: The future of immersive tech” with Joan O’Hara & Elena Bascone



Vernissage & Exhibition: “European Archive of Voices” with Curator Maximilian Goedecke



A team of 50 young international interviewers has interviewed people from across Europe born in the first half of the 20th century in their mother tongue about their experiences, fears and hopes. This diverse collection of memoirs includes activists, artists, lawyers, politicians, scientists, writers, and many more. Through these varied biographies, the project aims to highlight the rich, complex, and polarized histories of Europe and the generation that rebuilt it after 1945.

Young photographer Maximilian Gödecke, focusing on reportage and portrait photography, travels through European countries, capturing personal portraits of the witnesses to history featured in the “European Archive of Voices.” Through his lens, he captures not only their faces but also the spirit of a “last generation.” The project won the European Charlemagne Youth Prize in 2020.

The morning after: post-election scenarios for EU-US relations
6 November 2024



In response to the uncertainties regarding the future of EU-US ties, Studio Europa Maastricht and Maastricht University, in collaboration with the Charlemagne Prize Foundation, have hosted a public program “The Morning After” right after the elections, where they brought together researchers, students, and local residents to watch and analyse the US election results in real time.

This event aimed to foster dialogue on the future of transatlantic relations, offering a platform for discussing how Europe can navigate its strategic interests while managing a complex relationship with the US.

Berlin Conference: A Cultural Perspective on Europe's Future
8 November 2024



On November 7-8, 2024, the **Berlin Conference**, hosted by the Stiftung Zukunft Berlin and the civil society initiative A Soul for Europe (ASfE) in collaboration with the European Festivals Association (EFA) and the Evangelische Akademie zu Berlin (EAzB), brought together policymakers, artists, and cultural leaders at the Allianz Forum in the heart of Berlin, to explore the role of **culture in Europe's future**. Marking **20 years since the first conference**, discussions addressed the impact of the EU and U.S. elections and the ongoing challenge of European **unity and democracy**.

With the **2004 EU enlargement's anniversary** as a backdrop, participants emphasized that **enlargement is not just political but a cultural process**, requiring deeper engagement with civil society. The conference reaffirmed the urgency of **collaborative action** to strengthen Europe's democratic and cultural foundation.

The International Campus of Excellence:



The International Campus of Excellence is an unparalleled global circle of visionaries that fosters the relentless quest of knowledge, science, innovation, and business diplomacy. ICCEXCELLENCE brings together two generations of luminaries alongside exceptional young leaders to discuss cutting edge issues in a “Safe Space” environment.
ICOEXCELLENCE by numbers:
50 Nobel Laureates, 12 Former Heads of State, 9 Astronauts, 6 Michelin Star Chefs, and 1200 Industry & Civic Society Executives

On **7 November, 2024**, the Mohammed VI Polytechnic University (UM6P) hosted the second edition of the **"International Campus of Excellence Africa"** on its Benguerir campus under the theme **"Empowering Advanced Glocal Thinkers"**

The conference highlighted the role of transformational leadership at the intersection of academic research, policy design, and industry in a "glocal" context - combining global and local perspectives.

The program continues the legacy of the **"International Campus of Excellence"** initiative, which has been supported since 2005 by distinguished luminaries: 50 Nobel Prize laureates, 12 former heads of state and government, 9 astronauts, 6 Michelin-starred chefs, and 1,200 industry leaders from 52 countries.

The 2024 edition also featured one of the world's leading thinkers, Professor Richard J. Roberts, the Nobel Laureate in Medicine. In a lecture titled **"Shaping a New Generation of Advanced Thinkers,"** he shared his insights on the path to prestigious achievements. **"There is no magic formula for winning a Nobel Prize. You just need to be curious, follow your passion, and not fear failure. In the end, great things will always come to fruition,"** he stated.

This program aims to bring together young talents and world luminaries in a stimulating environment, fostering the exchange of innovative ideas. Renowned international institutions such as the Royal European Academy of Doctors and the Charlemagne Prize Academy are permanent contributors at the International Campus of Excellence Initiative.



Outlook



Outlook

Outlook for 2025

Christine Dietrich & Karina Blommen, Charlemagne Prize Foundation

As we reflect on the year 2024 and simultaneously look ahead to 2025, the themes conveyed by the Charlemagne Prize through its events and the Academy have been shaped by a fascinating interplay of tradition and progress, a renewed focus on values, and innovation. For the first time, we had four female Fellows working on groundbreaking topics that we consider particularly relevant for Europe's future. This is not only a noteworthy milestone in the research world but also significant in the context of the geopolitical and societal shifts we are currently facing.

In 2025, the Charlemagne Prize will honour Dr Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, who has been recognised by *Forbes Magazine* as the “most powerful woman in the world” in 2024. The awarding of the Karlspreis acknowledges not only an exemplary course of her leadership but also reinforces a narrative that underscores the importance of standing up for Europe's achievements – its unity, its institutions, its core values, its innovative spirit. She is being honoured for her unwavering commitment to European unity in times of crisis, coordinating a common EU response to the COVID-19 pandemic, leading the Union's firm stance against Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, and driving the ambitious climate agenda through the European Green Deal. At the same time, the award serves as a mandate for her to continue tackling the EU's future challenges by strengthening Europe's role as a global actor, promoting peace, democracy, and partnerships, and ensuring the EU remains competitive while upholding its promise of economic and social well-being for its citizens.

We would like to continue this common thread with our Academy, examining the challenges of our time from a scientific perspective. By addressing the theme “**Innovating and Future-Proofing Europe: Reimagining and Shaping Transformative Spaces**” in the 2024/25 research year, we understand Europe as a space of democratic institutions, a hub of enlargement and integration, and an economic area. At the same time, we see it as a platform

for dialogue and exchange, as well as a place where rural and urban spaces are designed in line with sustainable, modern, and future-oriented standards.

While last year's research and the current report have already examined Europe's role in the reconstruction of Ukraine and the potential foundations for the EU's enlargement to the east, the new research year will focus on a comparative study exploring exceptional models of EU integration, and particularly those that actively involve citizens.

We will also revisit the theme of the digital society, though this time shifting the focus away from the concept of a European metaverse and towards the intersection of economic factors and automation. Specifically, we aim to look at the impact of taxation in this field and its relevance for Europe's innovative strength and global competitiveness.

Europe as well aspires to take the lead in sustainability. Accordingly, we aim to critically assess the EU's mission to establish 100 climate-neutral cities by 2030. At the same time, European agricultural and nature protection policy will take center stage on our agenda, with the goal to develop strategies that reconcile the interests of European farmers, whose voices have been increasingly heard through protests in recent years, with the EU's environmental and conservation objectives in a balanced and pragmatic way.

All this – and much more – marks a very special year: the 75th anniversary of the Charlemagne Prize. This milestone is not just a time for reflection but also an opportunity for renewal. We are embracing modern and innovative initiatives, driven in part by a significant new development: the Charlemagne Prize will now be endowed with 1 million Euros, supporting grassroots projects across Europe, suggested by the laureate, that promote and strengthen the European idea. We are planning a range of projects and initiatives to ensure that our mission remains ac-

cessible and engaging for a wider audience. Our aim is to create meaningful, content-rich events - not only within the framework of our award ceremony and its public side programme, but also as part of our anniversary celebrations. These will include spotlight events within and beyond the EU borders, exhibitions, and dynamic opportunities for cultural exchange, the Charlemagne Youth Prize (which has seen a record-breaking 635 applications from across Europe this year), our publications, and our growing network of partnerships.

If the past few months have taught us one thing, it is that partnerships cannot be taken for granted. Europe must constantly evolve by strengthening its constitution, nurturing its alliances, and engaging both internally and externally. Above all, preparation is crucial. This preparation should take the form of well-developed strategies, ideas, and solutions, ready for implementation when the need arises.

This is what we are working on.

Outlook

The New Fellows of the Research Year 2024/25



Irene Perez Beltran explores ways to enhance dialogue with farmers to facilitate the effective implementation of the EU's Nature Restoration Law.

Irene Perez Beltran holds a degree in International Relations from King's College London and recently graduated with a Master's in Environmental Policy from Sciences Po Paris. She has prior research experience in international biodiversity governance, the science-policy interface for agrifood systems modeling, and food insecurity. She currently works as a consultant for the UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme. Through her research question, "How can emerging spaces of dialogue with farmers facilitate the implementation of the EU Nature Restoration Law?", Irene will engage directly with farmers in Spain and France, linking grassroots-level initiatives with EU agriculture and biodiversity policy.

Research Question: How can emerging spaces of dialogue with farmers facilitate the implementation of the EU Nature Restoration Law?

Mentor: Violeta Cabello Villarejo, Researcher at Basque Center of Climate Change



Dr Ali Abdelshafy examines strategies and measures to help the EU transform 100 cities into climate-neutral urban areas by 2030.

Ali Abdelshafy is the head of the research group 'Climate-neutral Industries' at the Chair of Operations Management at RWTH Aachen University. He is also a visiting fellow at the Oxford Institute for Energy Studies (OIES) and a Theodore von Kármán Fellow. He completed his PhD at RWTH Aachen University with a dissertation on climate-neutral and circular industrial systems. Ali has an interdisciplinary background, holding a Master's degree in Management of Resources and Environment and a BSc in Engineering. He has also worked on several energy transition and decarbonisation projects in both the industrial sector and academia. His main research areas include climate-neutral systems, energy-intensive industries, sustainable supply chains, energy transition, and structural changes. During his Charlemagne Prize Academy Fellowship, Ali will investigate the EU mission of achieving 100 climate-neutral cities by 2030. The research study will evaluate the effectiveness of different enablers and assess their impacts on city systems in order to derive a wide range of blueprints that are suitable for various urban contexts across the EU. He will also explore the delicate balance between sustainability and prosperity, along with the key factors that influence this relationship, to optimise both and accomplish the mission efficiently.

Research Question: How can the EU achieve 100 climate-neutral cities by 2030?

Mentor: Prof. Dr Grit Walther, Professor Operations Management, RWTH Aachen University



Sophia Beiter analyzes various EU integration models to explore pathways toward a more citizen-focused, expanded, and reformed European Union.

Sophia Beiter is a Research Associate at the think tank Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM) in Vienna. She works on topics related to EU enlargement, democracy, and citizen participation in the EU and was responsible for the EU project 'Towards Democratic and Inclusive Europe: EP Elections and Active Citizen Participation and Contribution' (EUact2). She has published work on transnational lists and the Spitzenkandidaten process in EU elections, as well as on the topic of Schengen. Previously, she studied and worked at the Institute for Slavic Studies at the University of Vienna. In 2024/25, Sophia will be a Fellow of the Charlemagne Prize Academy. In her project, "A Comparative Approach to Different Models of EU Integration: How to Achieve a Citizen-Based and Reformed EU Enlargement Strategy?", she aims to develop a new, more effective, and citizen-oriented enlargement policy. This strategy will be both realistic and beneficial for accession candidates and EU members, incorporating the perspectives of citizens. By doing so, the project will not only contribute to a comprehensive proposal for EU reform but also promote public awareness of the importance of EU enlargement.

Research Question: A comparative approach to different models of EU integration: How to achieve a citizen-based and reformed EU enlargement strategy?

Mentor: Sebastian Schäffer, Director at the Institute for the Danube Region and Central Europe (IDM)



Dr Toon van Overbeke focuses on harmonizing tax systems to support inclusive automation and economic fairness in Europe.

Toon Van Overbeke is an assistant professor at Maastricht University in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, where he specialises in the intersection of European studies and the political economy of digital and climate transitions. He completed his BA and MA in history at KU Leuven and earned his MSc and PhD in Political Economy from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), where he remains a visiting fellow. Toon's dissertation studied why market societies use innovative technologies, such as automation, so differently and how these developments influence trust and political attitudes among European citizens. During his PhD, he was a visiting scholar at KU Leuven and the Vrije Universiteit Brussel in Belgium

Research Question: Effective taxation and digitalisation in Europe: How have changes in the taxation of capital and labour affected digitalisation in the European economy?

Mentor: Dr Bob Hancké, Visiting Senior Fellow at the LSE European Institute

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- **The Bosch Alumni Network**, which provides a platform for sustainable engagement with our fellows beyond the funding period.
- **The City of Aachen**, for its enduring partnership and commitment to supporting the Academy’s initiatives.

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About the Charlemagne Prize Academy

Founded in 2019, the **Charlemagne Prize Academy** fosters young talent across Europe by supporting innovative research on the continent’s future challenges. Each year, selected fellows receive funding to develop evidence-based solutions for pressing European issues.

The Academy pursues three core objectives:

1. Supporting young scholars in researching Europe’s key challenges and developing solutions.
2. Shaping the public agenda by identifying relevant topics for European discourse.
3. Facilitating dialogue between policymakers, academia, business and youth to address future challenges collaboratively.

Operations

The Academy was initiated by **Dr Jürgen Linden**, **Chairman of the Charlemagne Prize Board of Directors**, and **Prof. Dr Thomas Prefi**, **Chairman of the Charlemagne Prize Foundation**. It aims to bridge academic research and policymaking, fostering forward-thinking solutions for Europe’s future. The Academy is led by **Christine Dietrich**, with editorial contributions to this report from **Karina Blommen** and **Fabio Marras**, and graphic design by **Dagmar Setzen**.

Disclaimer

This report presents the research findings of **independent Charlemagne Prize Fellows** over a one-year period, alongside contributions from partners and experts, including statements

that have been collected during the year. It aims to highlight Europe’s key challenges and potential solutions but solely reflects the perspectives of the respective authors. The content is based on developments between **October 2023 and March 2025** and is intended to foster public discourse rather than endorse specific analyses.

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As Europe enters a decisive era marked by shifting global power dynamics, prolonged geopolitical tensions, and increasing internal and external pressures, the question of how Europe can assert itself as a resilient, competitive, and sustainable force on the world stage has never been more urgent.

This report aims to offer a comprehensive analysis of priorities of the past five years, assessing its evolving challenges in the face of new realities. From leadership in sustainability aspirations and technological competitiveness to institutional effectiveness, the report traces the EU's efforts to balance visionary ambition with operational efficiency.

The changing nature of conflict, persistent instability in the EU's immediate neighbourhood, and the global competition for influence demand a more coherent, timely, and values-driven European response. The report highlights Europe's role in supporting its partners, navigating alliances and dependencies, and strengthening democratic resilience through smarter governance structures.

The notion of "efficiency by design" becomes central: designing processes, institutions, and frameworks that are adaptive, transparent, and fit for global challenges.

Complementing this strategic outlook are selected insights from the past research year alongside expert statements, offering evidence-based perspectives and policy reflections that help situate Europe's ambitions.



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