



European View

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Overcoming the geography of discontent: New perspectives and innovative solutions

European View
2024, Vol. 23(2) 137–138

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DOI: 10.1177/17816858241299295

journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



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The EU is a continental project forged from the ashes of war, and it has long sought to transcend its historical divisions and foster a sense of shared identity. However, persistent regional disparities remain a significant challenge to this endeavour. These disparities, often manifested in economic inequalities, social tensions and political polarisation, could undermine the very fabric of the Union.

This ‘geography of discontent’ is rooted in a complex interplay of factors, including economic inequality, social isolation and a perceived disregard for the concerns of marginalised communities. Despite the EU’s significant strides in creating a single market and promoting economic convergence, the legacy of its past, coupled with contemporary global challenges and rapid technological development, continues to shape its regional dynamics.

Over the past 25 years our societies have undergone profound changes. One of the most pressing concerns is the persistent economic divide between the core and the periphery of the EU. While a significant number of people have experienced increased prosperity, an equally significant or perhaps even larger number have faced declining standards of living. This economic insecurity has led to widespread anxiety and fear for the future.

The advent of the Internet and social media has further exacerbated these societal and socio-economic changes. While these platforms provide unprecedented access to information, they can also amplify feelings of inequality and discontent. For individuals facing economic hardship or personal challenges, social media can become a powerful instrument for expressing anger and frustration.

In particular, people in rural areas often feel disconnected from the political mainstream, believing that their concerns are overlooked or dismissed. This feeling of being

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overlooked or abandoned has driven many towards extremist parties that promise to address their grievances. Meanwhile, cities, while benefiting from economic opportunities and educational resources, are grappling with overcrowding and a lack of affordable housing. These challenges have contributed to the political alienation of young people and exacerbated social tensions.

To address these challenges, a multifaceted approach and an especially ambitious plan are required.

First, we need to invest in infrastructure and public services in peripheral regions and rural areas. This includes improving transportation, health care, education and broadband Internet access. The EU's cohesion and regional funds can play a crucial role in supporting these initiatives.

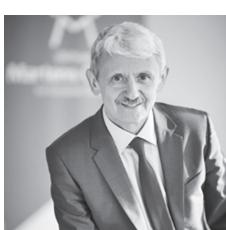
Second, the EU must tailor its policies to the specific needs of rural areas. This involves finding a balance between affordable food, high environmental standards and decent incomes for farmers. Promoting sustainable agricultural practices and supporting innovation can help achieve these goals.

Third, it is essential to rethink policies that have alienated rural communities, such as the ban on combustion engines and the Nature Restoration Law. These measures must be implemented in a way that addresses the practical concerns of rural residents.

Fourth, changing perceptions is as important as implementing policies. It is possible to build a more positive narrative by portraying farmers not as the problem but as key actors in the green transition and in fighting climate change. Additionally, understanding the unique challenges faced by rural communities, such as limited access to transportation, is essential for developing effective policies.

Fifth, the very concept of 'work' must be redefined to reflect the changing nature of our societies. Remote working, for example, can help revitalise peripheral regions. By promoting flexible working arrangements and supporting entrepreneurship, we can create new opportunities for people living outside urban centres.

Addressing the geography of discontent requires a comprehensive and innovative approach. By investing in infrastructure, supporting rural communities and rethinking our approach to work and policymaking, we can create a more equitable and inclusive Europe for all.



Author biography

Mikuláš Dzurinda is President of the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies and a former Prime Minister of Slovakia (1998–2006). He has also held the positions of Minister of Transport and Minister for Foreign Affairs.



The ‘structural pessimism’ of the EU periphery: Measures to establish a new revitalisation paradigm

European View

2024, Vol. 23(2) 139–148

© The Author(s) 2024

DOI: 10.1177/17816858241274925

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Abstract

Throughout the EU's history, developed regions have consistently drawn young people, with the phenomenon of 'escaping from the province' being a significant driver of youth migration. As peripheral regions become increasingly depopulated, the 'ring of desert' effect that appears in these areas also starts to impact developed regions (because depopulated areas are more vulnerable to illegal migration, the loss of social capital in the periphery results in the reduced competitiveness of the entire EU, social and political tensions increase, etc.). Instead of increasing solidarity, the opposite is happening. For example, Croatia has subsidised Germany by investing €18 billion in the education of its emigrated citizens. In the future, however, peripheral areas might become more attractive places to live due to an increase in threats such as pandemics, climate change, pollution and terrorism. Remote work could lead to a resurgence in the population of the EU's peripheries, provided there is access to broadband Internet, public transportation, mobile healthcare services and distance education in rural areas.

Keywords

Periphery, Remote work, Youth migration, Corruption

Introduction

Current migration trends and the population distribution in the EU are exacerbating existing inequalities between Eastern and Western Europe and widening the economic

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gap between developed and poorer regions. Internal EU migration patterns, primarily involving young, educated and skilled workers, along with their families, show people moving from the periphery to the centre. This trend is creating a ‘geography of discontent’ (a social phenomenon where a significant portion of the population living in certain territories feels aggrieved or dissatisfied) in the sending countries, further encouraging emigration. The population decline is severe in the Baltic states, and even more so in Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania. Notably, depopulation in South-Eastern Europe (SEE) is driven mainly by massive emigration rather than natural decline, with 65% attributed to this factor (Jurić 2021). Policies that attract young workers to the EU’s centre, combined with corruption and weak institutions in the countries of origin, are significant drivers of contemporary migration from the EU periphery. Additionally, countries such as Spain and France are witnessing an outflow of people from rural areas due to inadequate infrastructure and services, poor job quality and declining incomes. To address these issues, all EU member states and institutions should work to mitigate the adverse effects of freedom of movement and unfavourable demographic trends. Cooperation between sending and receiving countries and regions is essential (Jurić 2024, 14).

The centre–periphery dichotomy

The basic theoretical framework used in this article is Immanuel Wallerstein’s (1974) dichotomous centre–periphery model and dependency theory. The theory focuses on the global system rather than individual nation states as the primary unit of analysis. Wallerstein claims that developed nuclei penetrate peripheral countries financially and technologically, creating an unbalanced economic structure within peripheral societies and between them and central countries. The central countries extract resources (in the past raw materials, now labour) from peripheral regions, often at low cost. Simultaneously, unequal exchange exacerbates economic disparities. Peripheral economies become dependent on core countries for investment, technology and markets, while central regions receive better infrastructure (roads, ports, communication networks), enhancing their economic growth. Central nations exert political control over peripheral regions through institutions. At the same time, cultural imperialism can erode local traditions and identity. All this, in turn, leads to the limitation of self-sustaining growth in the periphery. When peripheries take on the characteristics of corruption in addition to having a lack of resources, their position becomes even weaker in terms of retaining their population, especially the youth.

Commenting on Wallerstein’s thesis, Mesić (2014, 158) claims that less-developed societies have become involved in globalisation processes under unfavourable conditions, and in this way have become even more exposed to the ruthless laws of the global market. In the short term, therefore, even if these societies make some economic progress, they will pay the price—among other things, in terms of an increase in pressure on the population to emigrate.

Human and natural resources have always been the main treasures of the periphery, treasures which the centre needed above all else, and today, due to the demographic crisis

in Europe, this covetous desire of the centre is straining the relationship between the two even more. People from the provinces are thus often treated as a ‘raw material’ of development in neoliberal doctrine. As a result, the EU is becoming the scene of a struggle for resources—human resources (Jurić 2021).

Eurostat’s analysis of NUTS-3 regions¹ (2021) shows that almost all provinces in SEE have experienced a demographic decline in the last two years. Depopulation of the periphery is a growing global issue and presents a major challenge for the EU. In 2011, 40% of rural areas in Europe faced depopulation, with Eastern Europe (EE) and SEE being the most affected regions. Currently, rural regions account for 28% of the Union’s population (but this figure is expected to decline), while accounting for 44% of its territory (European Parliament 2021).

Several factors explain the increasing trend of rural depopulation. First, the long-term shift of economies away from agriculture and traditional extraction industries, coupled with the recent globalisation of manufacturing, has led to the polarisation of economic development (Hennessy 2024). This has caused urban areas to grow while rural regions have declined. Second, the modernisation of agriculture in developed economies, through larger economies of scale, mechanisation and automation, has reduced the number of jobs in agriculture and related industries. Combined, these demographic trends have created a vicious circle of decreased demand for, and consequently supply of, essential services in rural areas, resulting in poor connectivity, inadequate infrastructure and limited access to public services. These factors collectively have made rural areas less attractive for living and working, prompting selective job-related migration from rural to urban areas, especially among younger and more educated workers. This has led to ongoing depopulation, divestment and a negative natural population balance in rural areas (ESPON 2020).

Characteristics of the periphery

According to Giddens (1990), the functioning of social institutions must be considered one of the critical indicators of the modernisation process. When it comes to the countries of EE and especially of SEE, modernisation can be understood as Europeanisation, and this process has been considerably delayed and is only half-finished (Jurić 2021, 314).

The main hallmarks of the EE and SEE peripheries are stagnation and the inability to create new opportunities for young people. The feeling of injustice in such environments is further strengthened by the presence of corruption and clientelism. In such environments, corruption is felt and seen at every step because, without acquaintances and connections, be they political or kinship, one cannot access many resources. Opportunities are distributed according to criteria that have nothing to do with ability or education. Because of these trends, structural pessimism has prevailed in EE and SEE and injustice has become an integral part of the new identity of the societies in transition (Jurić 2021, 315).

According to Lay (1998), peripheries are areas of low social density, resulting in a relatively low level of total social energy, which means that significant and rapid changes cannot take place on the periphery. The quantity and frequency of development initiatives are relatively small, and the impetus for change encounters serious organisational obstacles. The problem with local elites in EE and SEE is that they are usually too few to encourage development or are insufficiently competent to carry out a more ambitious plan. Thus, the provinces often fall into a state of anomie, a rupture of social ties, which empirically manifests itself as apathy, resignation, and the absence of social action and gathering in general. The idea that the periphery has been abandoned and forgotten by the centre is especially noticeable, and this further hinders those with local social energy who could do something. It is known from the sociological literature (Rogić 2000) that without measures to combat this sense of apathy, these characteristics become more deeply embedded in peripheral areas, further exacerbating the problem. Moreover, because of emigration, these areas are on the path to social oblivion.

In modern societies, people expect constant progress on a personal and social level, and stagnation is the most significant source of dissatisfaction. Today, many generations in SEE do not feel that there has been any progress in their lives. This ‘structural pessimism’ (Babić 2020) is the backdrop to numerous pathological processes in the EU periphery. Images of houses without facades, and rural settlements with poor street lighting and no social infrastructure depict life in the provinces.

Thus, in addition to corruption, an important push factor for emigration is the idea of ‘escaping from the province’. As a result of emigration, large parts of the SEE region are becoming even more peripheral in the cultural and economic sense (and similar is happening in other parts of the EU too, especially in EE). As much as three-quarters of the territory of SEE forms a periphery that is dying out biologically, economically and culturally. Namely, 90% of all administrative regions are recording a higher number of deaths than live births, so there is virtually no natural increase in their populations (OECD 2019). For example, in Croatia, the depopulation rate in rural settlements is twice as high as the Croatian average.

During the past 35 years, nearly 10 million people are estimated to have left SEE (mainly young people and primarily from the peripheral parts)—about 22% of the population in the early 1990s (Jurić 2021, 150).

Free movement of workers within the EU and its negative consequences

The right to freedom of movement is one of the most positive achievements of European integration. It has created several benefits for the EU: allowing redistribution from areas with high unemployment to areas with a demand for workers, contributing to stronger European integration and promoting intercultural dialogue. However, it has also had many negative effects on less-developed regions (i.e. the periphery). Namely, freedom of

movement disrupts these regions' production and tax bases and increases the disparities between the more and less developed regions of the EU, a result which is in complete opposition to the aims of EU cohesion policy.

It is also important to note here that the narrative on how 'everyone' in the EU moves should be reconsidered. Alcidi and Gros (2019) examined the factors driving growth in intra-EU labour mobility and showed that just under 4% of EU citizens of working age (20–64) now reside in a member state which is not that of their citizenship, ranging from 1% of German nationals living and working abroad to 14% of Croatian and 20% of Romanian nationals—thus indicating a strong movement from the periphery to the centre of the EU (and an upward trend in this movement).

The European Committee of the Regions warns that the phenomenon of brain drain poses a risk to the long-term sustainability of the European project if the social and economic imbalances between the sending and receiving regions remain unaddressed (European Committee of the Regions 2018, 1). To achieve a balance between two essential principles of the EU, free movement of labour and economic and social convergence between regions, citizens and workers must be able to move freely, but only because they want to and not because they are pushed from their regions by poverty and scarce economic opportunities.

Apart from economic factors, which always stand out, the next element that explains migration from the periphery to the EU's centre is related to the quality of institutions and the political climate (Jurić 2017). Emigrants move from countries with weak institutions to those with stronger institutions. According to Atoyan et al. (2016), the quality of institutions is a critical factor for skilled migrants, while unskilled ones are more attracted to the social benefits and the salaries they will receive in the country to which they move. Alcidi and Gros (2019) suggest that inefficient public spending and difficulties in providing quality public services, that is, the results of weak institutions, increase the likelihood of emigration. Therefore, differences in structural factors and the stability of institutions will be more critical in the future than net wages for individuals when making the decision to emigrate (the more educated people are, the higher their expectations from institutions).

It appears that the main motives for emigration among the emigrants from SEE are thus not economic (Jurić 2017). There is an apparent link between a lack of political ethics, weak institutions and emigration. The immorality of political elites, legal insecurity, nepotism and corruption are at the top of the list of reasons to emigrate. A particularly worrying finding is that not only are citizens emigrating because of corruption, but due to their emigration, corruption is increasing (Jurić 2021). A study by the author (Jurić 2023) demonstrated this in the case of Croatia. Namely, by emigrating, some of the critics of the country are removed, allowing the established corrupt networks to operate unhindered. Conversely, those who have strengthened their status due to clientelism and corruption do not emigrate.

Unlike in previous waves of emigration, the individuals in the most recent wave are highly educated, employed and married. The dominant feature of this wave is the emigration of complete families. There is no doubt that this brain drain will seriously affect the social capital of EE and SEE in the future—in the last eight years, the number of students and pupils has fallen by 10% in SEE (Jurić and Hadžić 2022).

How to revitalise the periphery?

While providing the incentive for the population to stay is, on the one hand, an internal task for individual EU member states, on the other hand, it is also the task of the EU through its proclaimed solidarity and cohesion policy. It only seems fair that the member states that benefit from freedom of movement share the burden with those who bear that burden, and therefore there is an obligation to act at the European level (Goldner Lang and Lang 2019). Without this solidarity, instead of being a process of convergence, emigration from poorer to richer member states could be seen as richer EU countries being subsidised by poorer ones.

Measures at the EU level that are indirectly linked to reducing the negative consequences of workers' movements are the Cohesion Fund and the European Regional Development Fund (which focuses on economic and social cohesion by promoting the development of poorer regions). However, Goldner Lang and Lang (2019) have shown that the amounts available are insufficient to create substantial convergence.

In fact, the opposite process is actually at work. Croatia, for example, has subsidised Germany through its investment of €18 billion in the education of its emigrated citizens (Jurić 2021). Namely, for every adult citizen who leaves the country, Croatia loses the benefit of between €50,000 and €150,000 of education (depending on whether the worker is skilled or highly skilled).

There are seven actions that should be taken to revitalise the periphery, and these are outlined below.

The first would be to provide compensation to the peripheries by having EU-financed centres of excellence for deficit occupations, for example for training nurses in SEE, with the condition that they work in their home country for five years after graduation. The second option here would be to classify areas facing serious and permanent demographic challenges to ensure greater allocations of funding from cohesion policy. Special support should be provided to NUTS-3 areas with a population density of less than 12.5 inhabitants per square kilometre or with an average annual population decline of more than 1% (Jurić 2024).

Second, intergenerational solidarity is essential for creating more resilient EU societies. In the context of revitalising the periphery, it is crucial to devise models that connect young and old. The decreasing number of children in families is reducing the traditional

circle of care for the elderly, which in more traditional areas of EE and SEE has often compensated for the lack of infrastructure. Therefore, we propose the introduction of vouchers with a value of €300 per month, tied to each elderly person. These individuals could give these vouchers to those who assist them with basic needs such as shopping, transportation and similar activities, allowing them to stay in their own homes, rather than move to a retirement home. For young people, providing such assistance could be recognised as an alternative to civil/military service or as extra credit at high school or university (Jurić 2024).

Third, combating corruption and clientelism as factors driving emigration is a key measure to retain young people in the country, as well as to encourage the return of emigrants. To this end, SEE countries should launch websites where the results of all public tenders are transparently listed, including who applied and who won the tender. Transparency has proven to be the best weapon against corruption and clientelism.

The fundamental way to integrate the periphery into wider EU society is through the process of cultural and social exchange. If people from the periphery do not travel to the centres, and those from the centres to the peripheries, there is no social integration. Therefore, the fourth action is to improve (or subsidise) the transport infrastructure, for instance by connecting the periphery with the cities via fast trains or the reconstruction of bus routes within and between provinces and cities.

Fifth, tax relief should be provided to those establishing businesses in the periphery, as well as for all citizens living in such areas.

The sixth action relates to the author's main thesis, that the disparities between EU regions and the revitalisation of the EU periphery can be improved most quickly by remote work. The key idea is to allow relocation for workers who want to move to the periphery and work remotely (with the obligation to come into the office once every two weeks). Initially, this option could be offered in the public sector. The effect that this measure would have (among others) is to send a message to families who are thinking about leaving the periphery that trends are changing. The great advantage of this approach is that this demographic measure, unlike others, does not require the investment of large financial resources. There are two main societal advantages of remote work (working from home). First, it would slow down the brain drain from the periphery of the EU, as well as within individual member states. Second, remote work would reduce the need for young people to live in large urban centres to increase their chances of career advancement (it would also reduce CO₂ emissions and relieve traffic congestion, and may enable the return of some emigrants from the West). This measure would require the introduction of broadband Internet throughout the EU. It would also be necessary to introduce mobile health teams (as there is a lack of adequate health care in many provinces) and to provide distance education opportunities. Furthermore, this measure could also introduce the

idea of the decentralisation of state institutions, which in SEE are predominantly located in the capitals.

Seventh and finally, it is therefore necessary to establish an office at the EU level that will coordinate the work of all relevant state bodies for the revitalisation of the peripheries and the implementation of the demographic policies of EU member states (Jurić 2024).

Conclusion and recommendations

Although a gloomy picture of the EU periphery is presented, in the next decade, due to the increasing tensions caused by the constant growth of material production and other threats such as pandemics and terrorism (and even war), the periphery could appear an attractive place to live. Furthermore, increasing numbers of people are appreciating the peaceful and humane rhythm of life, clean air, nature and traditional ways that exist in rural areas.

If for no other reason than because populated areas are one of the main guarantors of the security of external borders, the EU should be keen to avoid peripheral areas becoming depopulated. If the EU wants a strong external border, it should pay much more attention to the depopulation of its periphery and to migration from the periphery to the centre of the EU.

Regarding measures for the revitalisation of the periphery, it would of course be easy to repeat the key political idea that has been rehashed for the last three decades in SEE and EE: ‘we will open factories’. Instead of a wish list, we highlight a number of recommendations that have withstood scientific criticism:

- provide opportunities for remote work: this could repopulate and revitalise rural areas, reduce brain drain and encourage people (the diaspora) to return;
- improve infrastructure: broadband Internet, public transportation, mobile health-care teams and distance education;
- introduce a classification system for areas with serious and persistent demographic challenges to enable the increased allocation of funds from cohesion policies; and
- combat corruption and clientelism as push factors for emigration (through transparency).

Note

1. The Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS) classification is a hierarchical system used to divide the economic territory of the EU for statistical purposes. It has three levels: NUTS 1, NUTS 2 and NUTS 3. NUTS-3 regions are the smallest units in this classification and are designed for specific diagnoses and detailed regional analyses. These regions typically have populations of between 150,000 and 800,000 inhabitants.

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The future of work: A centre-right perspective

European View

2024, Vol. 23(2) 149–155

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DOI: 10.1177/17816858241274919

journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



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Abstract

'The end of work'—the vision of large-scale unemployment due to technological progress—has been discussed since the 1970s. But only now can economic growth be imagined as decoupled from the supply of labour. 'Work' as a defining category and organisational principle of modern industrial societies seems to be disappearing, with massive impacts not only on value creation and distribution, but also on social cohesion and human self-esteem. This article proposes a renewed and comprehensive understanding of work which goes beyond the view of work as purely a factor of production, to prepare European societies for the next phase of economic modernisation and societal change.

Keywords

Work, Social security, Life expectancy, Demography, Value creation

Introduction

One recurrent topic in modern post–Second World War economics and sociology is 'the end of work' (Rifkin 1995). The prospect of (at least temporary) large-scale unemployment has loomed over the heads of the working classes since the Industrial Revolution—and even before then. However, only since the 1970s has technological progress made it possible to imagine economic growth as decoupled from the supply of labour. 'Work' as a defining category and organisational principle of modern industrial societies seems to be disappearing, with massive impacts, and not only on value creation and distribution.

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Much of the discussion is still centred around a narrow perspective of work as a factor of production, determined by market forces. However, limiting the concept of work ignores its *multidimensionality* for individuals and societies alike. Any single-dimensional approach does not reflect the challenges for future societies and prevents the development of innovative forms of work. It also ignores Europe's religious and philosophical thinking on work, with its rich discourse including anthropological and social perspectives (Grimstein et al. 2015; Assländer and Wagner 2017). Therefore, groundbreaking transformations in technology, economy and demography, as well as the long-term declining share of value creation related to labour income (Kheng et al. 2023), require a *renewed perspective on work*.

The literature and political debates on this subject show a wide range of positions on how to transform and rethink traditional concepts of work. But those outlooks are often also quite pessimistic. In contrast to those voices, this article pleads for a more *optimistic view of the future of work* from a centre-right perspective. To bring about such a shift in the general view of future developments in this area, however, our current understanding of work, its institutional framework, and its role in our economic and political processes must change.

The following article taps into several dimensions of work, going beyond a purely economic perspective. We limit our consideration to Europe as the situation in developing countries calls for a different approach.

Between surplus and scarcity

Market economy systems, including the 'social market economy' model as embedded in the European treaties (art. 3(3) of the Treaty on European Union), have consistently faced adaptation crises which have economically and politically challenged their foundations and legitimacy. Mismatches between supply and demand are the result of cyclical, frictional or structural developments leading to significant disparities in the resilience of labour markets and the ability of these markets to adapt to those shocks.¹ Many national and regional markets in Europe are far from efficient due to limited mobility, skill mismatches, cultural perceptions (e.g. attitudes towards employing women), legal restrictions, and high entry barriers for youth and disadvantaged groups. Huge regional disparities will therefore persist in Europe in the coming years despite dedicated programmes to mitigate these by the EU and its member states.² These imbalances will fuel massive intra-Union migration from the periphery to the economic hearts of Europe, aggravating the problem of Europe's growth remaining below its potential (Smit et al. 2020).

The outlook for European economies in terms of labour supply is rather gloomy. There is an estimated gap in the European workforce of 43 million by 2050 (Kenny and Yang 2021). Tapping into the internal potential, such as women's participation, extending working hours or upgrading skills, can be only one part of the solution—and these options face many institutional and cultural barriers. Migration from

outside the Union is often seen as an obvious solution. But the last 20 years can hardly be seen as a success story. Unlike other countries, such as Canada and Australia, Europe has never succeeded in a targeted, demand-oriented labour migration policy. Over the last few years only 20% of residence permits have been provided for work (European Commission 2024). Structural differences between EU citizens in their employment—for example, significantly high rates of low-skilled work—clearly show the limitation of solving structural demand problems by migration. That does not mean that more efforts should not be made to facilitate integration for migrants, as well as for other disadvantaged groups.

However, as migration is not a magic wand that can fix the labour shortage, a few other options remain. The most relevant factor is technological change, driven by advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning and robotics. However, the capacity for technology to substitute for human labour is limited, in particular in sectors such as personal services, which are rapidly growing in our ageing societies. As a result, changes in the relative prices for human labour might speed up substitution, but providing the necessary labour force will also become increasingly difficult.

Changing work attitudes? From the Baby Boomers to Generation Z

A significant variable in labour supply is the attitude towards work, which results in a significant gap between potential and actual labour supply. This topic is heatedly debated in relation to shifting values across generations. In particular, Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) has attracted attention and criticism for being less willing to put work above other personal objectives (Saleh 2023). Whether these complaints are based only on the critics' individual impressions is difficult to judge. There are also good reasons to believe that there is less difference between the generations than is often stated (Brower 2022). Looking at this phenomenon on a macroeconomic level is only one part of the challenge. The more significant challenges involve adapting to a new understanding of leadership as being more respectful of workers and their needs. Many organisations have not yet implemented this approach and therefore have not been able to tap into the full potential of their workforce.

Changing family patterns and redefined roles for women will greatly influence the availability of (currently) unpaid work, which is still mostly provided by women. If these unpaid services are ‘marketised’, the question of how they will be funded immediately arises, drawing attention to how untenable the current system is as it expects this work for free. These processes of societal modernisation are hardly reversible. Therefore, societies will have to allocate much more in new forms of compensation: for example, in state-sponsored retirement schemes for those who contribute to ‘common goods’, such as bringing up children, engaging in non-profit activities or taking care of elderly people.

The institutional framework

European labour markets are largely regulated and far from reaching any macroeconomic equilibrium (Benjamin et al. 2021). The reality of country-specific ‘work regimes’ heavily influences not only the functioning of market processes but also how work is embedded into the broader social and cultural context (Tamesberger and Foissner 2017). Institutional settings, which have co-evolved over decades alongside the expansion of welfare systems, contribute in many ways to rigid labour regimes that will prevent efficient adaptation to the massive changes the European labour market is facing and will have to adjust to. In particular, Southern European labour markets are characterised by high entrance barriers for young people, resulting in a massive brain drain towards Northern Europe and perpetuating the existence of zones of low productivity.

Contrary to common wisdom, there is not necessarily a negative correlation between a strong labour protection regime and economic performance, as the German example has shown over many decades. Cooperative systems can facilitate the necessary adaptation to new demands while maintaining a high level of acceptance among employees. In many other cases, however, the insider/outsider phenomenon is extremely persistent, for example, by keeping young people or migrants out of fair competition in labour markets through legal or extra-legal measures.³

On the European level, we are far from living up to the promises of a single market. Intra-Union labour mobility is low, involving only around 4% of the EU27 labour force and with significant regional differences (Fries-Tersch et al. 2021, 13; Monastiriotis and Sakkas 2021). Administrative hurdles, non-recognition of foreign certificates and a still-low cultural acceptance of foreign employees make it hard to speak of a truly European labour market. These challenges are multiplied in the context of global labour migration. While in overall numbers Europe is the destination for approximately 25% of global labour migration, it performs less well in attracting highly qualified migrants.

One major consequence of these imperfections is illegal employment, which accounts for 15%–20% of overall employment in the EU on average (European Migration Network 2017, 15). This is partly the result of illegal migration both within and from outside the Union. If we leave aside the negative consequences for national revenues, labour standards and fair competition, illegal employment also points to structural weaknesses in the existing regulatory systems. In many cases, it keeps productivity low and delays structural adjustments as, for example, no targeted measures for qualifications can be designed. Instead of integration, it is plausible to expect a further division of labour markets in the coming years in Europe between zones of high productivity and a low-performing periphery.

Towards a comprehensive understanding of work

Given the fundamental changes in the concept of work—both in its material basis and in our perception—any discussion has to reflect also on its (ambiguous) role in human self-realisation and its societal value. The discourse on this topic can be traced back to

antiquity, to philosophical and religious debates in the Graeco-Roman and Judeo-Christian world, which then became secularised from the eighteenth century on (Cholbi 2023). Due to the terrible conditions of early industrialisation, work became the central concept of the influential Marxist theory of ‘alienation’. However, Marxists were not the only ones who called for a more comprehensive understanding of work.⁴ The Christian social teaching, as developed since the nineteenth century, provides an even more elaborated strain of reflection on human work—because it is rooted in a much more comprehensive anthropology (for an overview, see Zimmer 2013). In the early twenty-first century, with traditional forms of employment becoming more fragmented and fluid, assigning value to work solely through market processes has become increasingly inadequate.

As mentioned above, reducing work to its economic function neither reflects the changing demands of modern societies nor the expectations of younger generations. Given that work is an inherent quality of human beings, the doomsday story of the ‘end of work’ should concern us less than other developments. The real challenge lies in the need to extend the idea of work, ‘throwing off’ the narrow understanding it has acquired since industrialisation.⁵ More than any other region, Europe can tap into diverse social traditions, relatively high levels of qualifications and established political mechanisms to become the testing ground for new, economically feasible and socially acceptable forms of work.

Conclusion

It is no exaggeration to say that we are on the brink of a new era of work. As in the early nineteenth century, technological and societal development has put us on an accelerating track that runs increasingly in contradiction to existing institutional and cultural settings. Even if the debate on the ‘new social question’ (Rosanvallon 2021) can be traced back to the 1970s, centre-right and Christian Democratic movements have not really engaged in the debate on the future of work in recent years. A strong belief in market processes and the lack of a vision of a future society might have contributed to this conceptual weakness. However, as the rise of populist forces shows, questions of societal justice and cohesion threaten the legitimacy of Western democratic systems. The European welfare state models were a reaction to the grievances of the first wave of industrialisation but also inherited many of its characteristics, such as large-scale bureaucratic apparatuses and rather paternalistic approaches. Modern concepts of work lie across the old lines of labour conflicts, state–market dualism and one-size-fits-all top-down interventions. The rethinking of work as an integral part of human nature from a conservative and Christian Democratic perspective can provide a starting point for a better understanding and to design new and appropriate institutions, giving work back its value and the appreciation it deserves.

Notes

1. The labour market elasticity, for instance, is higher in the US than in many European regions. See Beyer and Smets 2015.
2. The so-called active labour market policies; see European Commission 2017.
3. Syndicalistic trade union systems or public-service-dominated regimes are more likely to protect the incumbent employees.

4. However, Marx never elaborated his ideas on human work into a comprehensive Marxist anthropology, as he focused too much on work as a production factor and its role in capitalist reproduction processes.
5. The major challenge lies in assigning value to work in market-based societies. The fierce debate on the incentives of a basic income shows how difficult any widened concept of work is in reality.

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The farmers' revolt in the Netherlands: Causes and consequences

European View

2024, Vol. 23(2) 156–166

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DOI: 10.1177/17816858241288396

journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



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Abstract

The Netherlands is blessed with abundant water, flat countryside and an openness to trade. This has helped to propel the agricultural sector to be one of the most productive in the world. Dutch farmers are savvy, well-educated and work within strict environmental regulations. What explains, then, the farmers' revolt that started in 2019? It almost brought the country to its knees, led to the largest post-war electoral shift and started an international movement of farmers. How could such a ubiquitous chemical element, nitrogen, have such a significant effect on farmers, Dutch politics and eventually the biodiversity directive of the European Commission? The revolt led to the strong presence of farmers' issues in parliament and a new dynamic in the debate about social change in the countryside, agricultural interests and nature protection. This article gives an overview of the events that led up to the farmers' revolt, its connection with earlier movements and its longer-term ramifications.

Keywords

Farmers' revolt, Populism, Party politics, Dutch politics, Status quo bias, European Parliament, Common Agricultural Policy, Natura 2000

Introduction: The unfolding of the events of the revolt

On 29 May 2019 the highest general administrative court in the Netherlands (Raad van State) ruled that the existing permitting procedure for nitrogen-emitting activities was at odds with the EU directive on the matter (Raad van State 2019). Existing permits had to

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be re-evaluated. Thousands of construction sites were effectively temporarily shut down by the uncertainty of obtaining planning permission. In response to the ruling, a report commissioned by the government and published on 25 September concluded that a radical change was necessary. *Not Everything Is Possible* was the title of the report (Advisory Board on Nitrogen Problems 2019). The report itself was not hostile to farmers, but laid out the problems of nitrogen emissions in the agricultural sector, the desire to build more houses and the requirements of protecting natural habitats.

The perception of a farmer-hostile attitude was fuelled by a statement by a Member of Parliament from the social-liberal Democrats 66 (D66), on 9 September, that the livestock of Dutch farmers should be reduced by 50%. The statement was perceived as an affront to all farmers in the Netherlands and gave rise to the idea that farmers were the victims of a political elite that had no concern for their livelihoods.

On 1 October 2019 farmers in the Netherlands took their tractors to The Hague to protest against the perceived threat to farming. Around 2,200 tractors were involved and the convoy caused the longest morning traffic jam in Dutch history. After this first demonstration, more followed. A complete timeline (in Dutch) can be found on the Levend Landschap (2024) website.

The initial demonstration was followed by other forms of protest that took place over a period of several months. Early on, there was some violence, such as the ramming of the door of the provincial parliament in Groningen on 14 October (*NOS Nieuws* 2019). Later, protests were mostly confined to blockades and the bullying of politicians. They had an intimidating effect, but little actual violence was committed.

At the height of the protests, solidarity with farmers was shown through the display of the inverted national flag almost everywhere: on highways, farmland and along city roads. During that period, one might have been forgiven for being confused about the proper ordering of the colours (it is red on top). Another sign of protest was the display of a farmer's red handkerchief. These were seen attached to houses as well as to trucks and cars to show support for the farmers' protests.

Throughout the whole period, from October 2019 to July 2022, public support for farmers remained consistently high. Polling in July 2022 put support for the farmers' actions somewhere between 39% and 60% (respondents answered that they supported the farmers 'a lot' or 'fully', Ipsos 2022).

After the protests began in 2019, a series of new judicial opinions, model updates (for measuring nitrogen deposition), government reports and solutions followed at speed. At the same time, farmers started organising further. This led to the creation of the Farmer-Citizen Movement (BoerBurgerBeweging, BBB) in 2019 and its entry into parliament after the 2021 general election.

In the 2021 elections for the House of Representatives (Tweede Kamer), one seat went to the BBB. This gave the party leader, Caroline van der Plas, increased visibility

and credibility as the spokesperson for farmers' interests. Her tone of voice and folksy image contributed to the subsequent increase in the popularity of the BBB.

The inability of the government to end the confrontation and resolve the nitrogen problem in a satisfactory way led to more widespread support for the farmers. As a result, the BBB won a landslide victory in the 2022 provincial elections: it became the largest party in every one of the 12 provinces and subsequently the largest party in the Senate (which is elected by the provincial delegates), holding 16 seats out of 75 (Kiesraad 2023).

The election outcomes show that support for the BBB was not limited to the countryside or to areas with many farmers. In Amsterdam, 5% of the vote went to the BBB. In the province in which Amsterdam is located, North Holland, the BBB became the largest party, with 14% of the votes. The prime minister's party, the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie, VVD) took second place, with 13% of the vote (AlleCijfers.nl 2024).

In 2023 the BBB gained 7 seats in the House of Representatives, an increase of 6 seats (out of a total of 150). In the 2024 European elections it won 2 seats in the European Parliament (out of the 31 allotted to the Netherlands, equal to 5.4% of the Dutch vote). The BBB was subsequently admitted to the European People's Party Group in the Parliament (Vasques and de La Baume 2024).

Populism and agrarian revolts

As Brett (2018) notes in his review, these contemporary protests build on a long tradition of dissent in the countryside. In the Netherlands, the BBB is actually the third farmers' party that has managed to get into parliament. In 1918 the Peasants' League (Plattelandersbond) was elected (changing its name in 1933), and the Farmers' Party (Boerenpartij) was elected in 1963 (see Vossen (2015) for the rise and fall of these two parties). The BBB is thus the latest incarnation of the Dutch farmers' party.

In the post-war period, farmer Hendrik Koekoek (known as 'Boer Koekoek') was the leader of the Farmers' Party, holding a seat in parliament between 1963 and 1981 (Tunderman et al. 2022). The Farmers' Party had been elected to parliament because of a revolt earlier in 1963 in which thousands of farmers had visited Hollandscheveld to protest against attempts to evict three farmers from their home.

It is often the case in the Netherlands that protests catalyse new movements or political parties. This was how the first political party, the Anti-Revolutionary Party (Anti-Revolutionaire Partij), was formed in 1879. It merged with others to become the Christian Democratic Appeal (Christen-Democratisch Appèl, CDA) in 1980. The founding of the Anti-Revolutionary Party came after unexpectedly large support for a petition to the king regarding the financing of religious schools. This support had shown that people could be organised to achieve a common purpose. In this way, popular unrest around one issue morphed into the forming of a broader political party (Janse 2019). This also happened

with the protests against nuclear armament, which led to the creation of the Pacifist Socialist Party (Pacifistisch Socialistische Partij). And it happened again in 2019 with the formation of the BBB.

Intentionality

At several points during the farmers' revolt, there were opportunities for the government to strike a deal with farmers' organisations in a peaceful way. One would expect this to be the case in the Netherlands, the land of 'polder culture' and love of compromise (Graaf 2023). There was a willingness to spend money, several stakeholders were willing to talk and it was in the best interests of the ruling coalition to solve the problem quickly. However, ultimately no deal was struck, which was the result of several small but symbolic events that eroded the trust of the farmers.

One such event was the aforementioned statement by one Member of Parliament that the number of livestock in the Netherlands should be reduced by 50%. Tjeerd de Groot was a member of D66, one of the senior partners in the third Rutte cabinet (2017–21). Because D66 was a coalition partner, the words had impact and they catalysed the farmers to start up their tractors and travel to The Hague.

Another such event—at a later stage of the revolt—was the publication of a report that contained a map of the areas where farming would have to be reduced. The report aimed to solve the crisis and give farmers a fair deal. The map was intended as a 'starting point', a visual aid for further negotiations (Van de Hulsbeek 2022). But the mere existence of the map, made without consulting the farmers, supported the farmers' belief that their interests were not being considered.

These two examples bore a striking resemblance to the problem-solving approach of the government in two other areas: the allowances scandal and the compensation for earthquake victims. In both these cases, the initial empathetic words of the government were deemed to contain empty promises. The BBB used these two cases in their campaign to emphasise the low level of trust in the government. According to the party, the government was taking a top-down approach that focused on solving a *political* problem instead of a real problem, and this reinforced the distrust in it among ordinary citizens.

What people perceived was intent. With that I mean the human sensitivity to perceived intent, regardless of the actual actions. C. S. Lewis described this as the reality of a moral law: if someone on the subway attempts to make us fall, we get angry. The anger is there, even if the attempt fails. Contrast this with an accidental run-in that leads to a fall. Here, there is an actual accident (we fall), but because there is no bad intent, we are much less angry. Thus, Lewis concludes, intent matters (Lewis 1952).

What farmers observed was a government that did not seem to have the best of intentions towards farmers. And even when the government announced different policies, the suspicion of bad intent remained. Once someone's real intention has been seen, thoughts of it are not easily erased by subsequent actions that try to suggest otherwise. Intentionality

is accepted as an empathetic part of how politics is consumed by voters. Intention, image matters. Once the image of a detached or uncaring government is formed, it is near to impossible to dispel.

This is exemplified by a similar situation in Germany, where the announcement of the abolition of fuel subsidies for farmers led to widespread anger. The cancellation of this policy did not completely take away the impression that the government wanted to make life more difficult for farmers. The intent had already been shown.

In the Netherlands, as in other countries, it turns out that farmers and rural communities are sensitive to the message that their way of life or existence is not deemed important. Political messages that suggest the ‘need to reduce cattle’ or to ‘downsize farming’ are immediately framed as being hostile to the community.

Contributing factors

In Europe, the Natura 2000 network is a conservation tool for biodiversity. It consists of sites that the member states have designated themselves, under the Birds and Habitats Directives (European Commission n.d.(c)), as being vital to protecting biodiversity. Over time, the Netherlands has designated a total of 162 areas as protected. Currently, 118 of these are deemed to be vulnerable to nitrogen depositions (Arcgis.com n.d.).

To deal with the need for industrial and agrarian development, in 2015 the government decided to set up a special Plan Aanpak Stikstof (Plan to deal with nitrogen, PAS) (*Bij12* 2023). The plan entailed an ‘offsetting’ approach, whereby nitrogen emissions in one area could be offset by lower emissions in another area. In this way, the total level of nitrogen emissions in the Netherlands could be managed, without affecting individual Natura 2000 areas.

From the outset, it was clear that this approach could not fulfil the Natura 2000 obligations properly: each designated area had to have sufficient safeguards in place for protection; one was not simply permitted to reduce nitrogen levels in one place at the expense of another. Legal scholars had warned the government as early as 2015 that its approach of ‘netting out’ nitrogen emissions would not pass muster in terms of providing effective protection for conservation areas. The protection of these areas could in no way be compensated for with measures elsewhere. Such is the nature of Natura 2000: it protects what needs protecting. It is the limited and targeted approach of the network that makes it so effective (Trochet and Schmeller 2013). Member states are free to pursue whatever approach they want, except in these areas (which they themselves have selected). Against the backdrop of earlier agrarian revolts and the strict regulations of Natura 2000, one might ask why the government behaved as it did.

Without claiming to have a sufficient explanation, let me offer a possible mechanism: the status quo bias. The status quo bias is the human tendency to avoid short-term, small losses. In political terms, ‘losses’ can be anything from a public relations setback to a

financial deficit, a tax increase or a negative development that affects voters. The bias is rooted in reference-dependent framing, where every situation or situational change is coded against an existing reference point. Kahneman and Tversky (1979) found empirical evidence for the theory and developed it to assess decision-making in risky circumstances. And ‘risky’ certainly describes the circumstances of political life (Alesina and Passarelli 2019; Osmundsen and Petersen 2020).

In the run-up to the farmers’ revolt, it was thus the status quo bias that led politicians to avoid taking measures such as imposing stricter regulations on nitrogen emissions or building permissions. Such measures could have been taken, and may have avoided bigger problems later on, but taking such actions in 2015 would have been painful. It would have led to direct problems with farmers who wanted to expand their activities. Also, in 2015 the economy was still recovering from the fallout of the 2008 financial crisis, and therefore growth-limiting measures would not have been popular. The PAS gave politicians a way out, by appearing to protect nature as well as allowing for the growth of farmers’ activities. So, while the gains from EU subsidies for conservation and agriculture were received with much enthusiasm and organisational effort (Bouwma 2018), the costs in terms of the effort required to meet the standards necessary for nature conservation were happily postponed to be dealt with in the future.

The need for conservation efforts was also blurred by status quo thinking. The current conditions of the nature areas were seen as the natural reference point, including the existing practices of natural management (Ferranti et al. 2010). Many local governments viewed the Natura 2000 designation as confirmation of the beauty of a natural area in the status quo, instead of as a challenge to improve its conditions so that the habitats of species would be conserved.

Of course, one cannot claim to have insight into the exact decision-making mindset at the time. But the lure of immediate gains set against vague and uncertain future costs may well have been too great for politicians to resist.

Longer-term ramifications

Whether the BBB will become a durable political party remains to be seen. On the one hand, it taps into a wider dissatisfaction with the four consecutive governments led by the liberal VVD helmed by Mark Rutte. In criticising the ruling coalition, the BBB campaigned on more than just farmers’ interests, including the housing crisis, the allowances scandal and the enormous delay in earthquake settlements for those in Groningen province.

There are, however, some evident weaknesses of the BBB as a political party. It does not have its own distinguishing programme apart from ensuring representation of farmers’ interests. In other political areas, it appears to have quite ad hoc policies. In terms of key personnel and provincial programmes, it borrows heavily from the CDA. Many of its politicians were formerly active with the CDA. Given the recent European elections, in which the CDA received around 10% of the vote (compared to just 5% for the BBB), the BBB

no longer seems to be a direct competitor for the CDA (European Parliament 2024).¹ However, in the populist political landscape it has to compete with Geert Wilders' more outspoken and xenophobic Freedom Party (Partij van de Vrijheid, PVV).

On the other hand, it is quite possible that the BBB will develop into a more mature political party. Such a transformation will depend on its board; the party-building talents of the popular leader, Caroline van der Plas; and also on outside forces. If the other parties are not able to regain the trust of farmers, the BBB is here to stay.

There are three areas where the BBB and the farmers' movement in general have had an impact on broader societal patterns. First, the BBB has had a lasting effect on political decisions. It is part of the ruling coalition in 10 of the 12 provinces, where it will shape policy for years to come. It is still the largest party in the Senate and has obtained two seats in the European Parliament. And as of July 2024, it has been instrumental in forming a right-wing populist government in the Netherlands. The BBB was the most vocal party with regard to wanting to form a government with the PVV, which was not a preferred coalition partner for the other parties, that is, the liberals (i.e. the VVD and the New Social Contract (Nieuw Sociaal Contract)—another spin-off from the CDA).

Second, the BBB has pioneered large-scale agrarian protests, which have ensured the farmers' cause has received attention and the party has gained influence. The blockade of the highways by farmers was a logical element of the protests. The blockades were not necessarily intentional, but the result of tractors clogging up the highway. In the old days, farmers would protest with pitchforks and torches; now they use their heavy machinery to make their point. It was partly because of the traffic jams caused by the tractors that Extinction Rebellion was inspired to carry out its own blockades. In 2022 it started to regularly block the A12 at the point where it enters The Hague, the seat of parliament and the government. Later it began to blockade the ring road around Amsterdam, the A10, at the site of the former headquarters of ING (a landmark building).

Third, the movement has laid bare the tension between two societal aims. On the one hand, there is a strong desire to keep the countryside alive. Although urbanisation continues to rise throughout the world, the lure of the countryside will never be far away in the public consciousness. On the other hand, global problems such as climate change require an efficient ecology for the production of food.

The future of rural areas

Much has been written about the benefits of urbanisation (see, for example, Glaeser 2011). Cities thrive because of the network effect—the benefit of people sharing ideas and pooling resources for creative businesses and services. The flipside of urbanisation is that in many areas people feel like they are being left behind. In the US, this is happening in what is known as the 'Rust Belt'. In Europe, this process takes place at both a European level and a national level. On the European level, it is the countries in the east, and particularly their rural areas, that have seen populations shrink (Krastev and Holmes

2019). This is part of the reason for the populist backlash that began around 2000, which has seen progressive values targeted. Applebaum (2020) documents how the embrace of free markets, European integration and an urban lifestyle suddenly seem to have gone into reverse in the early twenty-first century.

On the national level, the emptying out of the countryside is a concern in the minds of both urban and rural citizens. The case of the Netherlands, with the high support shown for farmers in the big cities, bears this out.

Farming remains one of the most complex areas of EU policymaking. That this is the case is one of the tragic aspects of the EU. Farming, and the work of a farmer, is a way of life. The rise of farming in 10,000 BC (i.e. the start of the Neolithic era) is even considered the defining moment in the development of civilisation (Brown et al. 2009). The development of farming has made the rise of cities possible.

The voting patterns of city dwellers, which indicate their support for the BBB, show that the inhabitants of cities are aware of the importance of agriculture in the continued rise of urban development.

Biodiversity policies

The development of biodiversity policies at the EU level, such as the Nature Restoration Law (European Commission, n.d. (a)), has been influenced by the farmers' revolt. The development of regulations has been much affected by the sentiment of farmers that strict rules on nature restoration cannot coexist with the current style of farming (Canas 2024). The economic position of many farmers is still far from sustainable, and new ways of addressing how to support their livelihoods while protecting biodiversity need to be developed.

Climate change policies

The farmers' revolt had nothing to do with climate-change policies or carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions because these are both still underdeveloped themes in agricultural policies, at both the national and the European level. The effects of the Common Agricultural Policy on CO_2 emissions have not been measured, and this will remain the case for the foreseeable future (European Court of Auditors 2021). CO_2 emissions from agriculture are not included in the EU's Emissions Trading System. Instead, member states have submitted national plans for limiting emissions, using instruments other than pricing (European Commission n.d.(b)).

The events of the Dutch farmers' revolt over the period 2019–23 are instructive, highlighting how high-level policies on the reduction of emissions play out in political decision-making and the consciousness of farmers and non-farmers alike. The development of policies to address agricultural CO_2 emissions should take heed of this episode.

Conclusion

The farmers' uprising and subsequent formation of a political party, the BBB, fits into historical patterns whereby concerned citizens have raised their voices to confront their rulers. The revolt succeeded in capturing the public's attention and garnering political support for farmers, and has resulted in the formation of an influential political party. It has been an example for other farmers' uprisings, such as those in Germany.

On an abstract level, we can understand such movements as a natural, almost predictable, response to policies that are rooted in the status quo bias that is inherent in political strategy. When the Natura 2000 programme was implemented, the EU funding to protect natural areas was quickly claimed. The expenses of and effort required by such designations were underestimated or left to future governments to address. Farmers continued to expand their farms and livestock, despite it being clear that there was a natural limit to such expansions. What resulted was an unsustainable situation that would come to a head sooner or later.

The failure of consecutive governments to understand these natural limits and the reality of nature conservation reminds us of the words of the late Richard Feynman: 'For a successful technology, reality must take precedence over public relations, for Nature cannot be fooled' (Feynman and Leighton 2001, 237).² Further back, Galileo, in his letter to the Grand Duchess Christina of Tuscany in 1615, noted: 'demonstrated conclusions about *natural* and celestial phenomena cannot be changed with the same ease as opinions about what is or is not legitimate in a contract, in a rental, or in commerce' (Galileo 1615, author's emphasis). The reality of the natural world, be it a nature reserve, agriculture or a combination of both, needs to be confronted with the same sincerity and truth-seeking attitude with which Galileo examined the motions of the planets and the sun.

Notes

1. CDA, 9.45%; BBB, 5.41%; PVV, 17%.
2. This was Feynman's own conclusion about the Challenger Space Shuttle disaster.

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The policy challenge of balancing sustainability and food security

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Abstract

This article considers EU and global developments that have affected the availability and affordability of food in the EU and explores the implications for farmers and consumers. Recent and imminent policy changes that may further affect food security, farm incomes and the future of rural areas are also reviewed. The key message is that all policy choices present a trade-off, and this is particularly evident when the sometimes competing goals of food security and sustainability are considered. Strengthening the consumer focus of agriculture and food policy in the EU may offer some solutions, whether that is by nudging changes in dietary patterns or targeting economic support to those at risk of food insecurity. Furthermore, a greater policy focus on innovation and technology adoption is also required to enable farmers to adopt practices that preserve productivity while also protecting the environment.

Keywords

Agriculture, Food security, Sustainability, Policy, Regulation

Introduction

Food security was at the heart of the foundation of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) in 1962. The early decades of the CAP can be characterised as the *productivist era*, when the emphasis was on increasing food production supported by an array of price support policies and a period of oversupply and product surpluses ensued in the 1980s and 1990s (Hennessy and Kinsella 2013). More recent iterations of CAP reform have focused less on production and more on environmental protection in the first instance and more latterly on the broader concept of sustainability. The European

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Commission's presentation of the European Green Deal Plan, and the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies in 2020 brought an additional layer of complexity and multifunctionality to the CAP. Consequently, the post-2020 reform had a firm 'green orientation' with a strong emphasis on the results and performance of environmental protection programmes. In recent decades, through a period of high agricultural productivity and stable world trade, the issue of food security became less central to the objectives of the CAP. More recently, however, global developments including Covid, geopolitical unrest and extreme weather events have reminded us that food shortages and affordability issues are a real threat, not just in the context of the developing world but also within the EU. Ensuring food security for the world's growing population while also addressing sustainability challenges such as minimising negative environmental impact, ensuring a fair standard of living for farmers and protecting rural communities and economies will be a major challenge for policy-makers in the years ahead.

This article considers recent EU and global developments that have affected the availability and affordability of food and the reaction of consumers and governments to these events. It also explores recent and imminent policy changes in the EU and examines the limited evidence available on the potential impact of these policies on the cost of producing food and its implications for food affordability. The key message is that all policy choices present a trade-off, and this is very evident when we examine the multiple, and sometimes competing, objectives of the CAP. While the need to tackle climate change and other forms of environmental degradation is irrefutable, there will be implications for rural areas, farm incomes, food prices and food security, issues which must also remain central to policy design.

Food security

Food security, defined by the World Bank (2024) as 'all people, at all times, having physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life', is emerging as a concern not just in developing countries but also across developed economies, including the EU, as a greater number of individuals become at risk of food poverty. In the 2020–2 period, almost 8% of the EU27 population suffered from moderate or severe food insecurity (FAOSTAT 2023), indicating the presence of inequalities in food access and food security across member states. Delivering safe, nutritious and environmentally friendly food to consumers at an affordable price will be a key challenge for EU policymakers in the years ahead.

Geopolitical unrest was a major contributor to the spike in food prices experienced in the EU in the 2022–3 period. The invasion of Ukraine by Russia led to an almost 60% increase in energy prices and a quadrupling of fertiliser prices, affecting food production costs in Europe (*Eurostat* 2024a). This increase in production costs drove food price inflation. Figure 1 presents data from the Eurostat Food Price Monitoring Tool showing the significant price inflation in all food items from mid-2022 to a peak in February 2023 before a gradual reduction thereafter. As the data make clear, the prices of milk, cheese and eggs were particularly inflated.

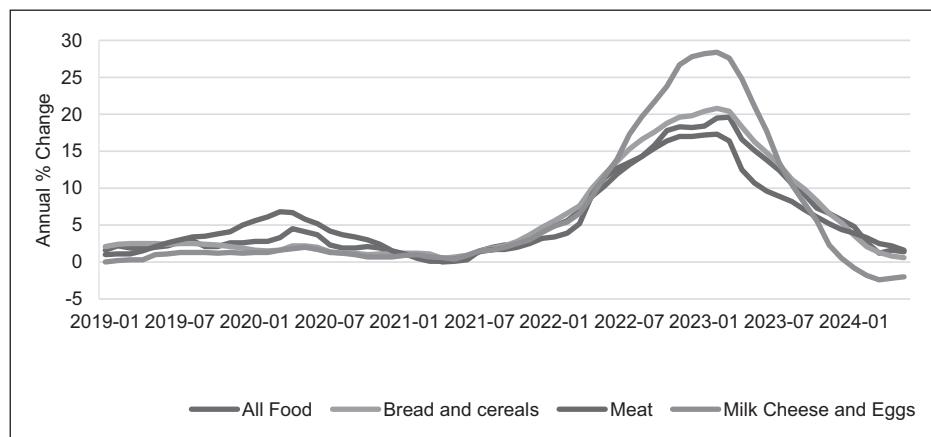


Figure 1. Monthly annual rate of change in prices for the EU27: all food; bread and cereals; meat; milk, cheese and eggs.

Source: Data extracted from Eurostat 2024b.

Note: In the figures along the x-axis, '01' and '07' stand for the months of January and July of the year indicated, when the prices were recorded.

As commodity prices began to fall in late 2022, the sluggish transmission of price reductions across food supply chains through to the final consumer became a major issue of public and political discourse in 2023, with some commentators attributing the delayed response to complex supply chains while others speculated that some industry agents were engaged in ‘price gouging’. Such was the concern regarding high food prices that some governments in the EU, such as Croatia and Hungary, intervened in food markets by using legislation to limit food price increases, while governments in France and Ireland issued stark warnings to food industry executives regarding high prices. Furthermore, in 2024 the Consumers’ Association in Netherlands accused a number of food manufacturers of engaging in ‘cheapflation’, the practice of replacing the most expensive ingredients in food products with cheaper and lower-quality inputs while keeping the consumer price the same or increasing it (Walker 2024).

As food production costs and consumer prices increased, food exports from the EU did not decline. Figure 2 shows that EU self-sufficiency in key agricultural products was no worse in 2022 than the previous five-year average, despite the geopolitical unrest and inflated input prices. This suggests that the food security crisis experienced in the EU in the 2022–3 period was one of affordability rather than availability. As Figure 2 shows, the EU suffers from a deficit in oilseeds and, indeed, protein crops more generally. Further data show that the oilseed deficit increased by 16 percentage points and the protein crop deficit by 11 percentage points in the last decade (European Commission 2024). Much of the oilseed imported to the EU is used for animal feed, which raises doubts about the true self-sufficiency status of the dairy and meat sectors and the protein security of the EU more generally.

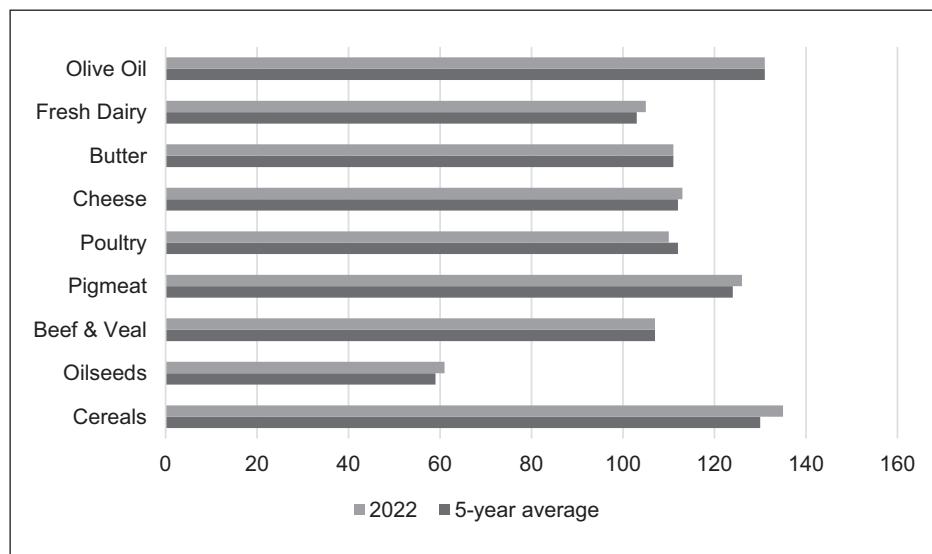


Figure 2. EU self-sufficiency for selected agricultural products (%).

Source: Data from European Commission 2024.

The prolonged war in Ukraine and other geopolitical events continue to impact commodity markets and food supply chains while political unrest in the Red Sea area is causing supply chain disruption. It is estimated that 12%–15% of global trade transits through the Red Sea, and it is a major channel for transporting agricultural fertilisers, grains and oil from the Persian Gulf to Europe and North Africa. Houthi rebel attacks in the Red Sea area in 2024 have prompted the re-routing of ships around Africa's Cape of Good Hope, leading to a 30% increase in transit times, further affecting food availability and affordability (JP Morgan 2024).

Climate change and climatic events have also contributed to recent food security scares as more frequent extreme weather events disrupt food supply chains. For example, the late frost in the Mediterranean in 2023, combined with the increased cost of powering greenhouses in the Netherlands, led to a shortage of fruit and salad vegetables across western Europe. Due to global warming, the regions of the world that are fertile and can feasibly produce food are shrinking. Sadly, these are the regions projected to have the greatest population growth, further hindering their ability to feed their citizens.

In a developing country context, geopolitical unrest and the affordability of food are matters of life and death. Despite significant progress in tackling hunger in recent years, the World Food Programme (2024) estimates that global food insecurity is now higher than pre-pandemic levels, with an increase of 160 million people facing acute levels of food insecurity compared to early 2020.

The analysis of the EU data confirms that self-sufficiency in key agricultural products did not decline in 2022, and thus, food security concerns in Europe stemmed from price and affordability issues rather than availability. As the proportion of disposable income that is spent on food has decreased across all developed economies, consumers have become accustomed to paying low prices for food. The public and political reaction to this price spike has shown us that consumers and governments will resist food price increases. This will continue to challenge farmers, food businesses and policymakers: how can we develop a food system that can produce a plentiful supply of safe, nutritious and affordable food with low to zero environmental impact and still support the livelihoods of our farmers and ensure the prosperity of our rural areas?

Policy background

Sustainability and, more particularly, environmental issues have featured strongly in recent reforms of the CAP and developments in corporate reporting. A brief overview of these policy developments is presented here, while the ensuing section considers the implications for food security.

The Paris Agreement, signed in 2015, is the most ambitious global climate agreement adopted to date, as well as the first legally binding one. The targets set in this agreement are implemented at the European level through the European Green Deal, with the specific goals of achieving climate neutrality by 2050 and a net reduction of greenhouse gas emissions by 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels (European Council 2024a). These targets are applied to the food and agricultural sector through the Farm to Fork Strategy, whose goal is to ‘make food systems fair, healthy and environmentally friendly’ (European Council 2024b). The policy vector related to the Farm to Fork Strategy, which has several overlaps with the EU Biodiversity Strategy, is the CAP. Three of the main elements of the Farm to Fork Strategy are the organic action plan, which aims to boost organic production to reach 25% of the EU’s agricultural land use by 2030, the aim to reduce the overall use and risk of chemical pesticides by 50% by 2030, and the aim to reduce the use of fertilisers by at least 20% by 2030.

While the Farm to Fork Strategy was broadly welcomed as the action required to move to a more sustainable food system, its implementation has been contentious and only partially successful. For example, the Commission put forward a proposal on the sustainable use of pesticides in 2022, but Parliament rejected it, and subsequently, the Commission announced its withdrawal in 2024. Legislation on nutrient thresholds (announced for 2022) has not yet been put forward, while a plan to introduce health-focused labels on food packaging was also postponed indefinitely following opposition led by Italy. Originally adopted in 1991 and further developed in relation to the European Green Deal and Farm to Fork Strategy, the Nitrates Directive, aimed at reducing water pollution stemming from nitrates used in the agricultural sector, was still not fully implemented in Ireland, Denmark and the Flanders region in Belgium in 2024. *Euronews* (2024) estimates that of the 31 initiatives proposed as part of the

Farm to Fork Strategy, at least 15 of them have yet to be initiated. Some of the opposition or hesitancy regarding its implementation was likely prompted by concerns around food security given that the Ukraine invasion and consequent food price spikes followed the strategy's launch. Criticism was fuelled by the lack of an accompanying impact analysis and by the subsequent publication of an impact analysis conducted by the US Department of Agriculture, as discussed below, which suggested significant implications for food prices.

In addition to and associated with the Farm to Fork policy, there have been a number of EU legislative and regulatory changes in 2023–4 which will impact businesses operating in the EU food system. Greater reporting obligations will require food companies to gather, verify and report more information on their own activities and those of other companies in their supply chains over the next number of years. These regulatory developments will likely lead to an increased cost of doing business and require greater investment in data systems, technology and potentially artificial intelligence.

Under the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive, companies are required to provide a range of information in compliance with the European Sustainability Reporting Standards. This will include information on (1) environmental matters (for example, climate impacts of business activities, resource and waste management, and biodiversity), (2) social matters (for example, equal opportunities, gender equality and equal pay, working conditions and human rights matters); and (3) governance matters (for example, business ethics and culture, anti-bribery and corruption measures, internal controls and risk management systems). The Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive focuses on conducting due diligence on actual and potential human rights and environmental impacts in respect of (1) the in-scope company itself, (2) its subsidiaries and (3) its direct and indirect business partners throughout its chain of activities. The other key obligation being introduced by the Due Diligence Directive is that in-scope companies adopt and put into effect a climate transition plan which aims to ensure, through best efforts, the compatibility of the business model and the strategy of the company to achieve the transition to a sustainable economy and the limiting of global warming to 1.5°C. The Deforestation Free Regulation imposes a due diligence obligation on in-scope companies—that is, those that place or make available on the EU market or export the following commodities and derivative products: palm oil, cattle, soy, coffee, cocoa, timber and rubber as well as derived products such as beef, furniture or chocolate.

The Green Claims Directive (GCD) and Green Transition Directive are intended to tackle, more specifically, unsubstantiated and misleading environmental claims and labelling. The Green Transition Directive is already in force at the EU level and awaiting transposition by EU member states by 27 March 2026. The GCD is following swiftly behind it, to be voted on by the European Parliament in Q3 2024. Once introduced, the directives will impact all sectors, primarily at the business-to-consumer level, with exemptions provided under the GCD for 'micro-enterprises'.

With consumer demand for more sustainable products and practices increasing, a study commissioned by the European Commission, although for non-food products only, found that significant proportions of environmental claims made by businesses were either vague, misleading, unfounded or entirely unsubstantiated (European Commission 2014). The same study also noted that ‘green labels’ used within the EU had varying levels of robustness regarding transparency and supervision. The GCD is intended to work in tandem with other initiatives to drive capital flows towards more sustainable activities by ensuring that stakeholders can assess commercial environmental claims in an objective manner. The GCD introduces minimum requirements to substantiate claims. Scientific evidence will be required to support environmental claims, and highlighting only positive environmental impacts is prohibited. In particular, the GCD targets explicit environmental claims made by businesses to consumers about the environmental impacts, aspects or performance of a product or the trader itself. This includes a proposed ban on the use of terms such as ‘eco’ and ‘green’ and climate-related terms such as ‘climate neutral’, ‘carbon neutral’ and ‘biodegradable’ without evidence to support the legitimacy of such claims.

The strong emphasis on the sustainability aspect of agricultural policy and corporate reporting, while welcomed from a public good perspective, has also led to concerns about potential increased costs of doing business and impacts on production and productivity levels. Furthermore, it is uncertain who will incur these costs—farmers, food businesses, retailers or consumers—and there are concerns about power, control and value sharing along the supply chain. To date, evidence of the impact of these policy changes and proposals, either *ex ante* or *ex post*, is limited. The following section reviews some *ex ante* policy impact studies on the potential impact on food security.

Implications for food security

A number of studies have examined the potential impacts of the Farm to Fork Strategy, such as Barreiro-Hurle et al. (2021), Beckman et al. (2020) and Bremmer et al. (2021). These are usefully reviewed by Wesseler (2022). One of the first and most controversial impact assessments published was Beckman et al. (2020), a study conducted for the US Department of Agriculture. It estimated that the adoption of the 2020 Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies, with the associated decreases in pesticide, fertiliser, microbial and land usage, would lead to a decrease in EU food production of 12%, decreasing global food security by 20 million people and increasing global food prices by 9% by 2030, thus reducing food availability and affordability. Similarly, Barreiro-Hurle et al. (2021) found that the implementation of those two strategies, combined with the 2014–20 CAP format, could lead to a reduction in total crop supply of between 12% and 16% and a reduction in livestock product supply of between 10% and 17% by 2030. Meat exports would be reduced, which would have consequences on the global food supply. Furthermore, reduced exports of livestock commodities from the EU could lead to importing countries looking to compensate for the losses in supply with products from regions with production processes less

constrained by environmental standards, leading to potential spillover effects in terms of emissions and environmental damage. Barreiro-Hurle et al. (2021) estimated that the implementation of the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies would lead to an increase in the EU's dependence on oilseed, arable field crops and vegetable imports if the CAP structure were not revised.

Wesseler (2022) has reviewed five studies that have conducted impact assessments of the Farm to Fork Strategy. The summary conclusion is that the strategy reduces agricultural production within the EU and induces an increase in food prices. This is expected to further fuel consumer price inflation within the EU and beyond and result in a decline in welfare within the EU. Wesseler also notes that the decline in agricultural output within the EU may result in leakage effects in regions outside the EU—that is, an increase in production in regions with less environmentally friendly practices. Wesseler does highlight that the studies reviewed do not assume any significant technological developments; it is possible that technological developments could negate some of the productivity losses over time. Finally, Wesseler notes that the studies reviewed do not quantify the potential environmental and health benefits and whether these outweigh the economic costs of implementing the strategy.

There has been relatively little research published to date on the potential impact of developments in sustainability reporting for firms and the cost of doing business related to it. One exception is an *ex ante* cost–benefit assessment published in 2022 by the Centre for European Policy Studies (2022). They found that the costs associated with reporting, collection and verification of information and external assurance would outweigh the benefits in the short term, at least until sustainability improvements were realised and rewarded in the market. The report also considers the sectoral impact and concludes that sectors with more complex value chains are more likely to expect significant competitive disadvantages. Agriculture is specifically identified in this regard, with the difficulty and potential costs of collecting information about biodiversity, for example, from numerous farm holdings.

Discussion

Whether referring to the Farm to Fork Strategy or the Sustainability Reporting Directives, the analysis suggests that the policy developments will result in an increased cost of production and/or reduce productivity and output. The question of who bears the cost of sustainability is a challenging one. If the farmers' productivity declines or their costs of production increase due to limits on fertiliser use, for example, or the food companies' operational costs increase due to data collection, are those increases transmitted across the supply chain to the final consumer in the form of higher food prices or are they absorbed at source? Our recent experience of heightened food prices suggests that both governments and consumers will resist price hikes. This presents a real challenge for farmers, who rightly wonder who will pay for more sustainable production practices and what the implications will be for food security and food prices.

So what is the optimal balance between tackling sustainability issues and curbing food price inflation? Matthews (2023) argues against abandoning our sustainable policy ambitions for fear of higher food prices. He argues that food insecurity in Europe arises due to the inability to access food because of low incomes rather than due to the unavailability of food, and that it follows that providing targeted support to low-income families is a more appropriate response than aiming to limit food prices more generally. While this approach presents some solutions within the EU, it does not address the potential impact of a contracting agricultural output in the EU on global food security. For it is widely acknowledged that the impact of European policies on food security is regional but also global, given the role of the EU as an exporter and, indeed, importer of several key agricultural commodities.

Other analysis suggests that tackling dietary patterns may offer some solutions. A recent study by Schiavo et al. (2023) considered the impact of a deep agro-ecological transition in the EU by 2050, involving a phase-out of synthetic fertilisers, pesticides and antibiotics on the supply side and a shift towards more plant-based food regimes with a reduction of food waste on the demand side. The study found that when accompanied by a shift to more plant-based diets in the EU, an agro-ecological transition in the EU would not be detrimental to global food security and that without increasing its cropland areas, the EU could maintain the same level of exported calories as in a business-as-usual scenario while reducing its import needs. This suggests that dietary changes within the EU could help address regional and global food security issues.

In conclusion, then, it seems that strengthening the consumer focus of agriculture and food policy in Europe may offer some solutions, whether that is by nudging changes in dietary patterns or targeting economic support to those at risk of food insecurity. A number of policy impact analyses, as reviewed by Wesseler (see above), also point to the need to focus policy on innovation and technology change. Investment in the development of alternatives to synthetic fertilisers and plant protection products could boost sustainable productivity growth. More support for the development of green technologies and important targeted support for their implementation by farmers should be a key part of the policy response to the challenge of developing sustainable food systems.

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How to lose friends and alienate people: The social and political consequences of Europe's housing crisis

European View

2024, Vol. 23(2) 178–186

© The Author(s) 2024

DOI: 10.1177/17816858241274918

journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



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Abstract

This article identifies the shortage of affordable, secure housing as a key driver of political alienation, particularly among young people. The social consequences of this trend for this group include, but are not limited to, delayed independent living and family formation, declining mental health and diminishing belief in their ability to match the living standards of their parents. Increasingly vulnerable and insecure, many young people now link the issue of housing with inward migration. Left unresolved, this issue will further polarise (and radicalise) the political choices of younger generations in the years ahead. In response, this article proposes three immediate actions. First, a dramatic expansion of construction for all types of housing where excess demand exists. Second, the use of public money to ensure that housing options exist for people of all ages, social classes and income levels. Public money should not be utilised for schemes which ultimately inflate house prices further. Third, to tackle widening intergenerational inequalities, existing housing wealth must be taxed fairly.

Keywords

Housing, Politics, Migration, Young voters, Intergenerational inequality, Mental health, Affordable housing

Introduction

What do we mean when we talk about a ‘housing crisis’? Put simply, it refers to a lack of affordable housing to buy or rent. And this is increasingly an issue in the developed world, not just in Europe. By 2025, 1.6 billion people are expected to be affected by the

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global housing shortage (Treveno and Nielsen 2021). In the US, estimates put the shortage of affordable housing units at over four million and rising (Barnes 2023). The situation is so critical that President Biden launched a specific Housing Action Plan in May 2022 with the sole objective of producing ‘legislative and administrative actions that will help close America’s housing supply shortfall in 5 years’ (The White House 2022).

Even in Japan—where demographic decline is well advanced—property prices in major cities are soaring, forcing young people and families out of these areas (Katsumura and Swift 2023). Housing prices have generally risen faster than income in most developed countries over the last 10 years (IMF 2022). Australia has experienced increasing housing inequality following decades of undersupply, particularly in or near employment centres (Ong Viforj 2024).

These global trends are also evident in Europe. As noted recently by the European Economic and Social Committee (2024), ‘the availability, accessibility and sustainability of decent housing are increasingly important concerns for EU citizens . . . Many households are confronted with excessive housing costs, with housing being their main consumer expenditure item and an excessive burden, to the detriment of other basic needs’.

In various ways, housing issues are evident in every EU member state. Poland exhibits the highest level of property overcrowding despite rapid economic growth and rising wages (van Sante 2024).¹ In Portugal foreign investment is partially responsible for an acute housing shortage in cities such as Lisbon (Almeida and Goyeneche 2023). Italy—despite overall housing prices being lower in 2023 than in 2010—is exhibiting dramatic property price inflation in key urban centres such as Milan. This situation is partially attributable to tax schemes designed to attract high-income workers (Borrelli 2024).

This article is structured as follows. Part one identifies some social consequences for young people of the shortage in affordable housing options. Part two sketches how these housing issues are linked to wider political shifts, including the increasing alienation of younger voters and their noticeable move to the political extremes. Part three offers a range of actions designed to improve the supply and affordability of housing for young people. Part four gives a brief conclusion.

The lack of housing is feeding social alienation

The social impacts of housing inequalities have become more apparent over the past two decades. The unsustainable rise of housing prices up to 2009 resulted in many negative social consequences becoming evident during the subsequent economic crises. Surveys undertaken in Britain in 2016 highlighted that 22% of 18-to-44-year-olds without children admitted delaying starting a family because of a lack of affordable housing (*Shelter UK* 2016).

Unfortunately, in the following years the situation has worsened further. A decade of artificially low credit, the continued privatisation of social housing sectors in many member states (and Britain), slow and inconsistent planning laws, inconsistent construction

activity, net inward migration and a surge in construction-related inflation have all combined to degrade access to affordable and secure housing for many citizens.

Notable social consequences of this crisis include, but are far from limited to, the following:

1. Delayed independent living and family formation. Housing is essential for the health and well-being of society and individual self-worth. It is also critical for economic growth as a lack of housing restricts labour mobility, making it more difficult for businesses and organisations to attract and retain staff at all levels. The negative economic consequences cannot be overstated. In Ireland 62% of companies recently surveyed said the housing crisis had impacted their ability to attract or retain staff, while 30% said they had to provide accommodation support (Malone 2024). This is also an issue which affects all of society. For example, university students in countries as diverse as Ireland, Germany, the Netherlands, Canada and Belgium are all feeling the knock-on consequences in the form of higher rents, increased competition for available places and low standards (see e.g. Whittle 2023). This, in turn, has a detrimental effect on the university experience for many students. Young people are the most affected by the scarcity of affordable places to live. This has resulted in an increasing number of ‘boomerang’ young adults who are already in the workforce but have been forced back into living with their family due to unaffordable housing costs (Taylor et al. 2022). Recent research highlights that the age at which 50% of people begin to live outside their parental home increased to 28 years in the decade leading up to 2019 (Dubois and Nivakoski 2023). In Italy and Spain the average age of young adults leaving their parents’ home is now 30 years old (van Sante 2024). This delay in independent living is having a knock-on effect on family formation. And although declining family sizes and fertility levels are linked to a whole host of broader socio-economic indicators, clearly the delay in living independently is contributing to falling rates of family formation and smaller family sizes. In this context, housing (or the lack of it) is an important element of younger adults’ wider anxieties about the future (Dunne 2023).
2. Declining mental health and resilience. Worries relating to housing insecurity and affordability can also play a key role in exacerbating many mental health conditions. A bidirectional relationship between housing and mental health exists—mental health issues can make it more difficult to cope with housing problems, while housing-related insecurities can amplify mental health challenges (Caliyurt 2022). This dynamic is consistent across both homeowners and renters. It indicates that the worries associated with gaining a secure, affordable place to live have significant long-term social impacts. Suboptimal living arrangements (e.g. adults living with parents) can have an impact on levels of resilience to other socio-economic challenges. These problems are more acute among young adults. As researchers have found, a lack of secure housing ‘can affect your very sense of self, and even warp your view of the future’ (Salleh and Qadar 2024).

3. Diminishing belief in social mobility and future affluence. Perhaps the most serious social impact of the housing crisis on young people is their increasing pessimism that their situation will improve in the future. In particular, many young people increasingly feel that despite following the social norms of previous generations—education, job, home ownership—they will never be able to match the affluence and financial security of their parents. Indeed, inherited wealth (or gifts from parents or grandparents) is becoming a much more important factor in determining whether young people can afford a place to live (Smail 2022). This in turn is fuelling greater inequality between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’. Indeed, it is also becoming clearer that ‘family background continues to be an important influence on prospects for social mobility, and there is some evidence that this aspect is becoming increasingly significant’ (Eurofound 2017).

The lack of housing is feeding the political extremes

Unsurprisingly the social impacts of the housing crisis on young people are having a clear political impact. On a macro level, dissatisfaction with more established political parties is linked to clear policy failures by current and past governments (e.g. scarcity of affordable housing and rising rents). Increasingly, young voters are also associating increased inward migration with their housing challenges. By focusing on the narrative of there being too much migration, more extreme parties have been successful in directly linking young people’s dissatisfaction over housing with migration.

The Netherlands provides an interesting case study of this significant shift. Data modelled from the last general election held in November 2023 show that among voters aged between 18 and 35 years old, support for Geert Wilders’ Freedom Party (Partij voor de Vrijheid) ran significantly ahead of their overall result. In addition, support for traditional centre-right parties (e.g. Christian Democratic Appeal/Christen-Democratisch Appèl) was substantially below their already low overall result (NOS 2023). The success of Wilders’ ‘housing/migration’ strategy was neatly summed up by a young voter who argued, ‘I’m really not racist, but when it comes to my own country, I think I should get priority access to a house’ (Cokelaere and Hartog 2024). This young man’s comments are driven by his acknowledgement that houses where he grew up now cost millions of euros.

Another factor in younger voters’ move to the extremes is their antipathy for existing mainstream political parties. Housing plays an important role in this trend. And while originally it was progressive liberal and green parties who most benefited from the influx of younger people when they came of voting age, polls are showing that far-right parties are becoming increasingly popular choices for adults from their late teens to their late thirties (Chazan 2024). In this context, far-right parties are disproportionately attractive to young men frustrated by the perceived cosy cartel of mainstream political groups probably best exemplified by the current Grand Coalition in Berlin (Chazan 2024).

While housing is certainly not the only factor contributing to younger voters' drift to far-right parties, it is a key element which is evident across almost all EU member states. In countries as diverse as Portugal, Belgium and Finland, extreme right-wing parties are the most popular voting choice for men under the age of 35 (Cokelaere 2024). Similarly, in France 36% of all voters under the age of 24 back Marine Le Pen's National Rally (Rassemblement National) (Chazan 2024).

A key source of young voters' dissatisfaction is their belief in their diminishing prospects for the future. And central to this declining outlook is the belief that they will never be able to afford housing in an area where they wish to live. Coupled with this issue is the understanding that existing taxation and social security systems remain structured in favour of the older generations with no reasonable expectation of reform.

For example, Italy has experienced a multigenerational trend (from the 1970s to the early 2010s) of housing prices and associated debt rising considerably faster than income (Bitetti and Morganti 2017). This sense of alienation is compounded by a social security system focused almost exclusively on the needs of older generations—over 77% of public social spending in Italy benefits people over the age of 65. Conversely, just 3% of total expenditure ends up with families and children (Bitetti and Morganti 2017).

Overall, in Europe, up to two-thirds of respondents to surveys think that their children will be worse off financially than their parents (Siegmann and Schafer 2017). This view is intensified by a feeling that the economy is now much more unfair than in previous generations. This fundamental worry is then amplified by more populist political parties and their fear-based campaigns on issues such as immigration and social change.

Three ways to tackle Europe's housing crisis

1. *Build, build, build.* Put simply, in many EU states the delivery of new housing must be increased significantly to meet demand. This relates to all elements of the residential property market—homes to buy, homes to rent, social housing, affordable housing, supported housing for older people, student housing and everything in between. This is a particularly acute issue in key urban centres, where the vast majority of employment and educational opportunities exist. In terms of future housing needs, it should be noted that the impacts of smaller household sizes (and more single-person households) will more than compensate for declining demographics, particularly in urban areas underpinned by strong employment prospects. In this context, public policy must facilitate the expansion of the housing stock through a timely and fair planning process, availability of suitably zoned (or rezoned) land, clear rules for the reuse and repurposing of existing buildings, and investing in training to ensure an adequate supply of labour across all aspects of the housing spectrum (from architects to bricklayers).
2. *Put public money and social housing at the heart of the social market economic model.* A common trope peddled by populist parties is that unexpectedly strong

inward migration has caused housing shortages. This is simply untrue. Rather, as the cases of Ireland and the Netherlands illustrate, it has been the multi-decade failure of poorly thought-out national housing policy which has resulted in the current shortages (AFP 2023). Central to this failure has been the abdication of public responsibility for building affordable social housing. In countries such as Ireland the model of sourcing public housing from the private sector has proven unsuccessful and unsustainably expensive. Despite Ireland spending approximately €8 billion on housing support in 2024—through a raft of measures designed to encourage the private sector to deliver housing units—it still faces rising housing prices and a shortfall of nearly 60,000 social housing homes (Taylor and Bowers 2024). Remarkably Ireland will pay nearly €700 million directly to private landlords to house social housing tenants in 2024. It is a broken system.

Rather, local government should be empowered to better meet the social and affordable housing needs in their areas. This should be combined with the elimination of well-meaning but ineffective existing support schemes for encouraging home ownership. These schemes achieve nothing more than pushing up housing prices further, thereby widening existing intergenerational divisions.

3. *Ensure taxation equality across generations.* Generational equality requires taxation equality, and property represents—by far—the largest element of household wealth in Europe. It is also concentrated in the older generations, who also benefit disproportionately from the existing structure of social security systems. Across the EU27 taxes on labour account for 50% of total tax revenue, and this is a cost borne by the working population, including young people and working families. However, recurrent taxes on property accounted for just 2.5% of tax income in 2022 (*European Commission 2024*). If policymakers are serious about confronting the generational wealth gap, they will need to confront the basic inequalities at the heart of Europe’s current taxation models. This step poses a significant challenge, particularly for centre-right political parties, which draw substantial support from property owners. However, such is the scale of the social and political challenges outlined in this paper that the greater taxation of existing wealth—primarily housing—will be essential to ensuring increased social mobility, fewer taxes on income for working families and more sustainable social security models in the decades to come.

Conclusion

This article identifies the shortage of affordable, secure housing as a key driver of political alienation, particularly among young people. Left unresolved, this issue will further polarise (and radicalise) the political choices of younger generations in the years ahead. In response, this article proposes three immediate actions linked to increasing housing supply, spending public money more effectively and tackling intergenerational inequalities.

The key challenge now is to develop the political will necessary to give young people opportunities in the future.

Note

1. Rates of overcrowding are determined by identifying the percentage of people residing in a house with an insufficient number of rooms.

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The forgotten NATO enlargement dove in the Kremlin

European View

2024, Vol. 23(2) 187–193

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DOI: 10.1177/17816858241269094

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Abstract

Has Vladimir Putin always stood against NATO's eastward enlargement? Detractors claim that Moscow has invariably objected to the transatlantic organisation moving towards its borders. This article challenges the prevailing orthodoxy by demonstrating that at the turn of the century, the Russian head of state was quite comfortable with NATO 'setting up shop' in Eastern Europe. Drawing upon declassified US diplomatic cables and other historical sources, the presented material speaks to selective forgetfulness on the part of the Russian leadership. The first years of 'Putinism' were not marked by assertions that NATO's eastward expansion complicated relations with the West. On the contrary, his public remarks suggested that Russia was not opposed to this process. Simply put, Putin's own words at that time refute his present-day arguments and display of grievances.

Keywords

Vladimir Putin, Russia, NATO enlargement, The Baltics, America, Moscow's selective forgetfulness

Introduction

March 2024 marked the twentieth anniversary of NATO's 2004 eastward enlargement, when several countries joined NATO at once. A substantial body of scholarly and policy commentary has been produced on the topic of NATO expansion and the geopolitical

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consequences that it brought about. Detractors have framed it as a calamitous error that jeopardised future cooperation with Moscow, while the pro-enlargement camp insists that the incorporation of Eastern Europe was a far-sighted crowning achievement. Two decades later, the topic continues to spark a fierce debate. Despite the seeming wealth of various accounts, one historical aspect has fallen by the wayside, namely that in the early years of his authority Russian leader Vladimir Putin was quite comfortable with the significant redrawing of the European strategic map. He accepted not only the inclusion of less-contested member countries such as Slovakia and Slovenia, but also the three Baltic countries. Today the prevailing orthodoxy holds that Russian leadership has always stood against NATO absorbing the nations on its borders. This article challenges that notion, drawing upon declassified US diplomatic cables as well as historical open-source materials. Going against the grain of conventional wisdom, it serves as a reminder that the man in the Kremlin was fine with NATO's 2004 'big bang' expansion. Indeed, he told us so in his own words.

Moscow's selective forgetfulness

Today, in grievance-filled rhetoric, Russian leader Vladimir Putin repeatedly insists that the addition of Eastern Europe to NATO was a mistake of enormous proportions. Just before Moscow pulled the trigger on its full-scale attack against Ukraine in February 2022, the Kremlin demanded that NATO withdraw its forces from the eastern part of Europe and retreat to where it had stood in 1997 (Meyer and Arkhipov 2021). In this context, NATO sceptics have charged that Moscow has invariably voiced its opposition to the enlargement project, and therefore the blame for broken relations between the West and Russia lies squarely on the former (Mearsheimer 2014; Menon and Ruger 2020). A closer inspection of the historical record, however, reveals a selective forgetfulness on the part of the Russian leadership. If anything, at the turn of the century, Vladimir Putin was a NATO enlargement dove, not a hawk. The first years of 'Putinism' were not marked by assertions that NATO's presence on Russia's doorstep complicated relations with the West. On the contrary, his public remarks, corroborated by the Western officials who engaged him diplomatically, confirm that Putin's reaction at the time was fairly muted and measured. Despite its current posture and non-stop accusations, Moscow in the early 2000s did not attempt to actively derail the process of bringing Eastern Europe under the US defensive umbrella.

To be clear, since the early 1990s, Russian leaders of various ideological stripes had opposed NATO's move eastwards. The idea was a constant irritant to Russian leadership (Marten 2017). Nowhere was this opposition more pronounced than in the case of the three Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which for decades had lived under Moscow's imposed direct military rule. Indeed, Russian policymakers bluntly conveyed to Western interlocutors that the Baltics represented a red line to them and that they could never accept their integration into Western military structures (US Department of State 1996). The leading Russian newspaper at the time, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, quoting Russian military staff, asserted that if NATO demonstrated its willingness to take on the Baltic states, the Russian armed forces would seek a direct military intervention to derail their membership aspirations (*Baltic News Service* 1995). There is no denying

that for the better part of the 1990s, Russian authorities vehemently objected to Baltic NATO membership (Banka 2019). Simply put, Moscow conveyed that Baltic NATO aspirations would not be realised. Describing the general atmosphere of those times, Latvian Foreign Minister Valdis Birkavs noted in 1997, ‘NATO says the door is open, but the Russian dog is sitting in the entrance barking at us not to go in’ (Asmus 2002, 233).

A dove, not a hawk

However, by the turn of the century and the arrival of Vladimir Putin on the political scene, Moscow’s criticism vis-à-vis NATO enlargement had visibly ‘softened’, a fact often untold by NATO expansion sceptics. To the surprise of many, in March 2000, already in his role as Yeltsin’s appointed acting president of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin openly stated that he had trouble imagining ‘NATO as an enemy’ (Hoffman 2000). He later doubled down on this assessment by declaring that from Moscow’s vantage point, the transatlantic alliance was no longer a hostile organisation (Baker 2001). Just 10 days before the September 11 terrorist attacks, Putin visited Helsinki and granted an interview to a Finnish daily newspaper. During the discussion, he was asked to comment on the prospects of Baltic NATO membership. While arguing that a better solution would be to anchor these nations in some kind of common European security architecture, Putin nonetheless noted that Moscow was well on its way to developing constructive relations with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which would benefit everyone (US Department of State 2001). In Putin’s eyes the threats of the time were international terrorism, the drug trade and organised crime, challenges that they could all fight together. Indeed, at the time the Kremlin went to great lengths to convey that NATO was no longer a threat to Russia (Terriff et al. 2002, 716).

US officials who interacted directly with Vladimir Putin likewise took notice of his tempered reaction to NATO moving eastward. Deputy Secretary Strobe Talbott, one of the key NATO enlargement architects on the US side, in conversation with the Finnish foreign minister, opined that this particular Russian leader did not come across as being ‘as anxious on the question of Baltic membership in NATO as his predecessors have been’ (US Department of State 2000a). He brought up a similar point in conversations with the Lithuanian foreign minister: ‘In the past, Russian opposition to NATO was paranoid, based on the fear that NATO was anti-Russia. Putin’s mindset is different’, Talbott said, sharing his measure of the man in the Kremlin (US Department of State 2000b).

The 9/11 terrorist attacks further softened Putin’s tone. The US and Russia utilised the crisis moment to redefine their relations around a common threat. In November 2001 Putin was interviewed by US-based National Public Radio. One of the questions from a listener was this: ‘Do you oppose the admission of the three Baltic republics into NATO?’ In a long-winded explanation, Putin suggested that this was not an issue that could be addressed with a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ (Putin 2001). He proceeded to argue that twenty-first-century threats were different and that therefore NATO enlargement made little sense to him. Nevertheless, he added that Russia could not ‘forbid people to make certain choices if they want to increase the security of their nations in a particular way’ (Putin

2001, 14:07). A year later, while discussing Estonia, Putin once again veered off of the traditional anti-NATO enlargement script and suggested that Tallinn's prospects of joining the alliance would not harm Russia's bilateral relations with the Baltic nation (Warren 2002). Other Russian leaders likewise sought to mirror Putin's softened policy line. 'The question of enlargement is not our business. It is NATO's business', Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov told international media (Mannion 2002).

Recalling interactions with Putin in the 2000s, NATO Secretary General George Robertson later underscored the point: 'In all the meetings and conversations I had with him, he never complained about NATO enlargement, not once' (Braw 2022). Prominent US national security figures such as Central Intelligence Agency Director George Tenet, US Ambassador to Moscow Alexander Vershbow and Bush's national security adviser Condoleezza Rice all observed that Russian reactions to NATO's official invitation to the Baltics at the time were 'low-key' (Tenet 2003; Vershbow 2019; Ash 2023, 113). During the 2003 US Senate hearings on NATO enlargement, Indiana's Senator Richard Lugar submitted that Russian opposition to Baltic integration into Euro-Atlantic security structures had eased and that Russians had recognised that the enlargement process was not directed against them (US, Committee on Foreign Relations 2003). As a confidence-building measure, in 2003 Russia sent its naval forces to conduct joint military drills in the Baltic Sea, where they trained side by side with NATO member countries (Banka and Bussmann 2023, 11). For years to come, the Russian navy would take part in BALTOPS, these annual naval military drills.

At the end of March 2004, seven new members, including the Baltic republics, formally joined the NATO ranks. On 29 March 2004 Belgium's F-16 air force jets symbolically 'touched down' in Lithuania to assume the alliance's air policing mission. A few days later, a smiling Vladimir Putin stood by the side of German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and proclaimed that Moscow's relations with the transatlantic alliance were developing in a positive direction. 'As to NATO enlargement, we have no concerns regarding the security of the Russian Federation', he publicly assured listeners (Thumann 2022). The same positive NATO–Russia 'spirit' continued over the next several years. At NATO's annual summit in 2006, the key object of discussion among the gathered government officials was not some issue related to strategic planning but whether to invite Vladimir Putin to French President Jacques Chirac's birthday party, which he celebrated in Latvia (Goulliaud and Bouilhet 2006; Dempsey 2006). While in the end Putin did not take part in the NATO summit in Riga, the fact that this possibility was seriously raised and discussed perfectly captures the ease with which NATO engaged Russia at the time. As noted by Stephen Sestanovich, professor of political science at Columbia University, in his early years Putin constantly telegraphed that he was fine with NATO enlargement and that it posed no threat to Russia (Sestanovich 2024).

Conclusion

The material presented in this article disproves the notion that Vladimir Putin has always stood staunchly against NATO's eastward enlargement. Those who uncritically repeat

Moscow's current claims that Russia never accepted NATO expansion to the east ought to square those claims with the Russian leader's declaratory statements during the early 2000s. Putin's own words at that time contradict his present-day arguments. According to long-time Russia scholar Angela Stent, the Russian government has sought to 'retroactively' complain about NATO enlargement, though at the time Moscow was quite accepting of it (Stent 2017). Indeed, closer scrutiny of this issue reveals that only after his infamous 2007 Munich speech did Putin begin to backtrack on NATO enlargement and selectively instrumentalise bits and pieces of the historical record to fit his own crafted political narrative. As argued by Robert Person and Michael McFaul (2022), when it comes to NATO enlargement, many have overlooked 'the fact that in the thirty years that have elapsed since the end of the Cold War, Moscow's rejection of NATO expansion has veered in different directions at different times'. Contrary to the message actively peddled by the Russian authorities today, it is important to record the fact that Moscow at the time accepted without protest NATO's expansion to the east.

Since NATO's enlargement in 2004, another myth has grown around this historical event. Russian leadership, as well as some voices in the West, have attempted to 'dress up' the enlargement in clothes of American imperialism. Such a narrative implies that Washington imposed its will on Eastern Europe and pulled these countries into the transatlantic alliance against the wishes of their citizens. In the telling of the former British ambassador to Moscow, Rodric Braithwaite, it was the 'relentless US pressure' that expanded NATO borders to 'within spitting distance of Russia and Ukraine' (Braithwaite 2022). This interpretation, however, is ahistorical. No one was dragged against their will. As US historian Robert Kagan submits, 'The impetus for NATO enlargement was not the US. Washington did not run around to Poland and Hungary and say would you like to join NATO' (Kagan 2019). On the contrary, it was the Eastern Europeans' fondest desire to join Western security structures. They were the ones pressing for the opening up of the transatlantic alliance, 'banging on its door' insistently. As NATO celebrates two landmark events—20 years since NATO's eastward enlargement in 2004 and the seventy-fifth anniversary of NATO's establishment—it is crucial to set the historical record straight and not allow Russia to bend history to its own liking and political expediency.

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Balancing economic efficiency and national security: Industrial policy at the nexus of geopolitics and globalisation

European View

2024, Vol. 23(2) 194–202

© The Author(s) 2024

DOI: 10.1177/17816858241291642

journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



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Abstract

This article examines the resurgence of industrial policy in the EU, with a particular focus on its evolving rationale in the context of geopolitical fragmentation and economic security concerns. It explores how recent global events, including the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, have intensified debates about government intervention in the economy and led to a renewed focus on strategic autonomy. The paper analyses the key EU industrial policy initiatives and their implications, particularly in sectors such as energy, defence and critical technologies. Special attention is given to the challenges and opportunities presented by Ukraine's reconstruction, including potential adaptations to EU state aid rules. The article concludes by proposing principles for effective industrial policy design and implementation, emphasising the importance of maintaining single-market integrity, ensuring transparency and accountability, and balancing interventions with sound macroeconomic policies.

Keywords

Industrial policy, State aid, Strategic autonomy, Reconstruction of Ukraine

Introduction

Industrial policy has experienced a strong resurgence in recent years, following a period of disfavour in the 1980s and 1990s. This earlier decline was due to criticism of failed initiatives and the predominant ideology of market liberalisation. More recent literature

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(Rodrik 2008; Mazzucato et al. 2015; Juhász et al. 2023) has highlighted both the broader scope and the generally positive impact of industrial policies while underlining the importance of implementation practicalities for the efficacy of such policies.

Industrial policy refers to government efforts to shape the economy through targeted measures on specific domestic industries, firms or economic sectors to achieve certain economic or strategic objectives (McDonald et al. 2024, 1). Although governments, particularly in developed countries, have traditionally used industrial policy interventions in pursuit of growth (Rodrik 2010), they increasingly use subsidies, fiscal incentives and other industrial policy instruments not just to improve the competitiveness of industry but to overcome modern challenges, such as climate change, impediments to technological progress and geopolitical fragmentation.

Due to the rise of industrial policy interventions, a number of researchers at the IMF (Evenett et al. 2024) introduced the New Industrial Policy Observatory dataset to document emergent patterns of policy intervention during 2023. The dataset counted more than 2,600 industrial policy measures across the world, with around half introduced by the US, China and the EU. These measures cover about one-fifth of world trade.

One of the important features of the new industrial policy is the evolving rationale for government intervention. Historically, industrial policy measures have been associated with the industrialisation or structural transformation of certain sectors, addressing competitiveness issues. More recently, however, the rationale has expanded to include the green and digital transitions, resilience of supply chains, job creation and national security. Evenett et al. (2024, 7) find that just over a third of the measures surveyed in 2023 address strategic competitiveness concerns, while climate change and supply chain resilience account for the rationale of 28% and 15% of the measures, respectively. Notably, national security and geopolitical tensions have been the motivation behind around 20% of the measures, and military and civilian dual-use sectors have been targeted in 26% of the cases.

Within the EU specifically, several major initiatives have reflected the industrial policy renaissance. In March 2020 the European Commission presented *A New Industrial Strategy for Europe*, aimed at supporting Europe's industry in the green and digital transitions and strengthening Europe's competitiveness and strategic autonomy (European Commission 2020). In the wake of the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Commission updated the strategy with a focus on the resilience of the EU single market, the EU's dependencies in key strategic areas, and support for small and medium-sized enterprises and start-ups (European Commission 2021).

A flurry of industrial policy acts have been adopted since 2022, following the invasion of the Russian Federation into Ukraine and the need to ensure energy and economic security and the resilience of supply chains, but also in response to active industrial policy interventions elsewhere. Notable measures include the 2023 European Chips Act, aimed at mobilising investment into the semiconductor ecosystem; the Net Zero Industry Act and Critical Raw Materials Act, which aim to boost the EU's production capabilities for

strategic clean technologies and the raw materials required to produce them; and the Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform to provide financial support for clean technologies and defence manufacturing capacities. More interventions have been announced for the future, such as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, which will impose a levy on products imported from countries with less stringent climate legislation from 2026.

Geopolitical fragmentation and economic security

A number of factors have contributed to the renewed interest in industrial policy, especially within the EU. One key driver has been the conviction that market forces alone may be inadequate to address issues like climate change, digitalisation and building resilient supply chains for critical goods after the Covid-19 pandemic. As highlighted by Mazzucato and Rodrik (2023), strategic government coordination is needed to provide directionality, incentivise research and investment, and catalyse structural transformations in areas of systemic importance.

Geopolitical tensions have significantly intensified debates about government intervention in the economy, leading to a renewed focus on strategic autonomy and efforts to mitigate risks associated with excessive foreign dependency. An impetus has been the challenge posed by China's state-capitalist economic model and its strategic use of subsidies and other non-market forces to gain competitive advantages in key high-tech sectors such as renewables, semiconductors and artificial intelligence. This has sparked concerns about the loss of technological leadership and productive capabilities in Europe and other advanced economies. In fact, Evenett et al. (2024) find that measures set out in industrial policy are correlated with past measures by other governments in the same sector, and warn about the negative effect of tit-for-tat interventions.

The invasion of the Russian Federation into Ukraine has significantly impacted EU industrial policy, triggering a range of strategic shifts. One of the first and key focus areas was to enhance energy security by reducing the dependency on Russian fossil fuels and accelerating the transition to renewables. In May 2022 the EU introduced the REPowerEU Plan, mobilising around €300 billion in investments and reforms to enhance energy security, followed by a number of Green Deal tools, such as the Net Zero Industry Act mentioned above. The war has also led to increased efforts in research and innovation, particularly in energy-efficient technologies, and prompted a reassessment of trade relationships. Additionally, the EU has had to address economic challenges such as inflation and energy price volatility while also considering measures to ensure food security.

Importantly, in March 2024 the European Commission presented its first-ever European Defence Industrial Strategy (European Commission 2024), alongside a legislative proposal for a European Defence Industry Programme, to support competitiveness and industrial readiness in the EU. The €1.5 billion investment mobilised by the Defence Industry Programme will not only finance increased production capacities in the defence industries,

but also address issues related to the security of defence supply chains and industrialisation of research products, and encourage defence cooperation between member states.

However, estimated financing needs far exceed the current budget. The strategy therefore calls for a review of the European Investment Bank's lending policy to include defence projects. As a result, defence industry policy measures are expected to expand significantly.

Beyond energy and defence, geopolitical fragmentation has spurred EU industrial policy initiatives across numerous sectors. These initiatives include efforts to achieve digital sovereignty, secure critical raw materials, boost semiconductor production, strengthen pharmaceutical supply chains, advance the space industry, promote smart manufacturing and lead in biotechnology—all aimed at reducing strategic dependencies and enhancing the EU's competitive position in key industries.

The future of industrial policy in the context of the reconstruction of Ukraine

Ukraine and its partners have already started the strategic planning for reconstruction, viewed as an element of wartime resilience (Greene et al. 2024). This reconstruction presents significant challenges and considerations for EU industrial policy. The massive scale of Ukraine's reconstruction needs will likely test the limits of the EU budget and state aid rules (Milakovsky and Vlasiuk 2024). The EU will need to consider how to allow for substantial financial support without undermining its competition principles. This complex issue intertwines economic, geopolitical and regulatory aspects, requiring a careful balancing act from EU policymakers as well as effective coordination with multiple stakeholders.

The amount of financing needed for the reconstruction of Ukraine is staggering. The third joint Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment, undertaken jointly by the World Bank, the Government of Ukraine, the European Commission and the United Nations and supported by other partners, estimated that as of 31 December 2023, the total cost of reconstruction and recovery in Ukraine is \$486 billion over the next decade (World Bank Group 2024, 14).

Reconstruction presents an opportunity to integrate Ukraine into EU supply chains, potentially enhancing the Union's strategic autonomy. Moreover, rebuilding Ukraine's energy infrastructure offers a chance to accelerate the transition to renewable energy, aligning with EU climate goals, as well as to integrate it into the European energy network. As Ukraine is a candidate for EU membership, the alignment of reconstruction efforts with EU standards and regulations could further strengthen the Union in areas such as research and innovation, defence and dual-use technologies, energy efficiency, environmental protection and digital infrastructure.

However, this must be balanced against existing EU industrial strategies and the interests of current member states. Moreover, the reconstruction process will

inevitably be influenced by broader geopolitical factors, including relations with Russia and strategic partnerships. EU industrial policy and state aid decisions will need to account for these complex dynamics. Traditional restrictions on government support may need to be reassessed to accommodate the extraordinary circumstances.

The Anti-Monopoly Committee of Ukraine has noted that Ukraine's Recovery Plan includes state aid measures, yet current EU legislation lacks specific guidelines for state aid to compensate for war-related damages. The Committee argues that special approaches to state aid should be developed for Ukraine. These could include new conditions for admissibility (and subsequently, exemptions), such as

- the direction of state aid to a clearly defined goal of solving social and economic problems related to the military aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine;
- clear justification by the provider of the need for state intervention;
- proportionality of state aid, that is, limiting the amount of state aid to the minimum necessary to achieve the stated goal; and
- transparency of state aid; in particular, information about it should be publicly available (Anti-Monopoly Committee of Ukraine 2023).

One of the measures identified as important for the economic recovery and reconstruction of Ukraine is regulation on local content in public procurement, which would allow Ukrainian manufacturers to recover from war-caused market failures, such as CAPEX expenditures on repairs or relocating production, power cuts, blockaded ports, and mobilised or displaced workers (Milakovsky and Vlasiuk 2024, 15). Ukraine may also require an exception or transition period on the application of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism. Ukraine's metallurgy industry association, GMK Center, estimates that the Adjustment Mechanism's tariffs could lead Ukraine's iron and steel sector to lose \$1.4 billion in export revenue, leading to a 25%–35% decrease in output (GMK Center 2024, 21).

Including Ukraine in the European Defence Industrial Strategy, on the other hand, could help Ukraine benefit from the EU's industrial policy and contribute to the country's economic growth (Milakovsky and Vlasiuk 2024). Ukraine will be included in joint procurement initiatives, and its defence companies will receive support for capacity building and collaboration with European counterparts. The strategy also proposes a dedicated budget to bolster Ukraine's defence industry, potentially funded by frozen Russian assets, subject to EU Council approval.

The EU's industrial policies related to the reconstruction of Ukraine will play an important role for both the country's recovery and the Union's own economic security. Developing a clear legal and regulatory framework for reconstruction aid that aligns with EU state aid rules while providing necessary flexibility will be essential. This may require temporary derogations or new legal instruments.

Managing the trade-offs: a balancing act

The EU's policy shift reflects a global trend of resurgent industrial strategies, prompted not only by market failures but increasingly by strategic competition and national security concerns. Geopolitical tensions are set to remain a primary driver of EU industrial policy, shaping priorities in energy security, digital sovereignty and access to critical raw materials. These tensions, coupled with supply chain vulnerabilities, will likely intensify interventionist approaches.

The EU faces significant challenges in navigating this new landscape: balancing strategic interventions with fair competition principles, reconciling divergent national interests in an increasingly fractured global order, securing adequate funding for large-scale initiatives, and developing flexible governance mechanisms to address rapidly evolving technological and geopolitical realities. This geopolitically driven industrial policy raises complex questions about optimal design, democratic accountability and the changing role of the state in economic development.

Therefore, it is important for the research and debate on industrial policy to focus less on whether interventions and measures should be introduced and more on how they should be designed and implemented. Although the literature on the effectiveness of industrial policy does not give clear-cut answers on optimal design (Rodrik 2019), some key principles and criteria resulting from existing analysis are presented in what follows.

Maintain unity and cohesion to strengthen the Union and the single market.

Preserving the integrity of the EU single market is paramount when crafting and executing industrial policy interventions. The single market, a cornerstone of European integration, provides economies of scale; enhances competition; and facilitates the free movement of goods, services, capital and labour across member states (Czermińska 2016). As the EU pursues more active industrial policies in response to geopolitical challenges, it must carefully balance national and Union-wide interests to avoid fragmentation of this unified economic space.

This requires effective coordination with member states as well as between the different policies and portfolios of the EU. Although the combination of competition and cohesion policies has limited the dependency of Central and Eastern European members on large foreign players, disconnected from domestic production and innovation systems, the effective utilisation of these policies depends on domestic state capacities (Medve-Balint and Scepanovic 2020). Consequently, a more active industrial policy, without active inclusion measures, may leave some states or regions behind.

The European Council on Foreign Relations proposed a number of measures to improve coordination between portfolios and to implement a more proactive economic security policy, including creating the position of vice-president of geoconomics for the

Commission, who can serve as a single access point for member states, allies and the private sector (Gehrke and Medunic 2024).

Ensure transparency and accountability mechanisms.

These principles ensure that policy measures are subject to public scrutiny, guaranteeing the accountability of bureaucrats and fostering trust and legitimacy in government interventions (Rodrik 2008). Transparent processes allow for informed debate among stakeholders, including businesses, civil society and the general public, potentially leading to more robust and widely accepted policies. Accountability mechanisms, such as regular reporting, independent evaluations and clear performance metrics, are essential for assessing the effectiveness of industrial policy measures and enabling timely adjustments. They also serve as safeguards against the potential misuse of public resources or regulatory capture by vested interests. Preventing rent-seeking is particularly important in the context of the reconstruction of Ukraine, supporting the country's rule of law and anti-corruption reforms.

For the EU, transparency and accountability take on added importance due to the multi-level governance structure and the need to balance national and Union-wide interests. Moreover, in an era of heightened geopolitical tensions and strategic competition, transparent and accountable industrial policies can demonstrate the EU's commitment to fair practices and rules-based governance, potentially reducing international frictions and setting a positive example for global economic cooperation.

Ensure continuous learning and adaptation in an evolving context.

Learning and adaptation are vital in industrial policy design and implementation (Mazzucato et al. 2015; Rodrik 2008). As economic and geopolitical landscapes rapidly evolve, policymakers must remain agile. Continuous learning enables the identification of successful strategies and less-effective approaches, allowing for real-time policy adjustments. Regular evaluation of outcomes and stakeholder feedback can inform iterative improvements. Learning from international experiences while contextualising to local conditions provides valuable insights. The ability to experiment, analyse results and scale successful initiatives while phasing out ineffective ones is key to maximising policy impact. This approach builds institutional knowledge and capacity, creating more refined, flexible and effective industrial policies over time.

Combine new investment with responsible monetary and fiscal policies.

Past experience shows that effective industrial policy requires a holistic approach that integrates targeted investments with sound macro-level economic management and responsible monetary and fiscal policies (Cimoli et al. 2009; Kapstein 1984). While direct investments in strategic sectors are often the most visible aspect of industrial policy, their success is heavily dependent on the broader economic environment. Appropriate macro-level policies create a stable foundation for industrial growth, enhancing the

effectiveness of targeted interventions. Responsible monetary policy, maintaining price stability and managing inflation, provides a predictable environment for long-term industrial planning and investment. Prudent fiscal policy ensures sustainable public finances, enabling consistent support for industrial initiatives without jeopardising economic stability.

Moreover, well-coordinated fiscal measures can complement industrial policy goals through targeted tax incentives, public procurement and infrastructure development. The interplay between these policy domains is crucial: for instance, overly expansionary monetary or fiscal policies could undermine industrial competitiveness through currency appreciation or crowding out private investment. Conversely, excessively tight policies might stifle growth and innovation. Therefore, policymakers must carefully calibrate the mix of industrial investments, macroeconomic management, and monetary and fiscal policies to create a synergistic effect. This balanced approach not only enhances the efficacy of industrial policy but also contributes to overall economic resilience, which is particularly important in navigating the complexities of global economic integration and geopolitical uncertainties.

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The Beowulf Group: Taking the lead to defend Europe

European View

2024, Vol. 23(2) 203–211

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DOI: 10.1177/17816858241288389

journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



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Abstract

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has exposed divisions in European strategic culture and threat perception. The search for a lowest-common-denominator response to the threat has hampered the European reply to the Russian aggression, often forcing the EU to move at the speed of its slowest member, whether in supplying ammunition and equipment to Ukraine or setting up the defence industry needed to accelerate such a supply in the future. Notwithstanding the importance of keeping a broad coalition together, this article argues that it is now time to create a vanguard of like-minded European nations, led by France, Poland and, though not an EU member, the UK, but open to other states, which can force the creation of a new strategic culture able to meet the Russian threat. This 'Beowulf Group', named after the Danish hero from the Anglo-Saxon epic who stood up to the marauding monster Grendel, could establish a Strategic College for Europe, a joint Elite European Reserve Legion and a strategic communications centre, to move European policy in a more active direction.

Keywords

Defence, European defence, Reserve forces, Strategic culture, Russian aggression, Defence policy, Defence doctrine

Introduction

The spring of 2024 showed how dependent on the US European security has become. While US aid was stalled in Congress by House Speaker Michael Johnson at the behest of Donald Trump, Ukrainian units were forced to retreat in the face of a Russian offensive because they had to ration ammunition. From the point at which

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the aid was approved, Ukrainian troops have been able to regain the initiative and recapture lost territory.

Supply appears to be what Clausewitz would have called the ‘centre of gravity’ of this campaign: the hinge upon which the campaign turns. But supply is itself an outcome of decisions made to provide support and to build the industry needed to produce it: these decisions emerge from a country’s strategic culture. Efforts are under way to improve European supply, including as outlined in the Joint Communication on Defence Industrial Strategy (European Commission 2024); through the expected upgrade of the Directorate General Defence Industry and Space, which is to be led by a full EU commissioner; and through the passing of the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP) (European Parliament and Council 2023).

Despite these steps, Europe’s defence is still heavily dependent on American industry, American supply, and American research and development. As I showed in *Freedom Must Be Better Armed Than Tyranny* (Walshe 2023), the European states most concerned about Russian aggression—the Nordic countries, the Baltic states and Poland, in particular—are heavily dependent on American equipment. This reliance was an understandable hedge. In an ironic echo of Cold War worries about whether the US would risk nuclear war to defend Western European against a Soviet attack, Central and Eastern European countries worry that France, Germany and Italy would not risk their own survival to protect Eastern Europe from aggression from Putin’s Russia. The behaviour of the French, German and Italian leaders following Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008, and the initial attack on Ukraine in 2014, did little to disabuse them of this concern. The Minsk accords that, had they been implemented, would have left Ukraine dysfunctional and under permanent Russian influence, further reinforced this fear. (The UK, for reasons that are still unclear, was absent from efforts to support Ukraine after the Maidan). Opting for dependence on the US rather than Western Europe was a rational response to the conditions of the time, but these have changed markedly since Trump first took office and would change more radically still, should he be re-elected.

Precisely because Soviet domination suppressed Eastern European economies between 1945 and 1989, Europe’s major industrial economies lacked ancestral memories of Russian imperialism. Yet, since Putin’s ascent to power in Russia in 1999, a number of these European states, most obviously Germany and Italy, and also previously France, have maintained ambiguous relations with Russia. France only cancelled its sale of the amphibious landing ship *Mistral* when Russia occupied Crimea, and Germany continued to build Nordstream 2 until the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

France’s initial response to the war exposed traditional Quai d’Orsay thinking, betraying the idea that France could position itself as a mediator between Russia and the ‘Anglo-Saxons’. Macron insisted that Putin not be ‘humiliated’ (Sabbagh 2022) and French lobbying held up the unfortunately misnamed ‘ASAP’ EU artillery shell acquisition act, as Paris argued that it was more important for the ammunition to be made in Europe than for it to get to the battlefield on time. There has, however, been an evolution

of the French position. French rhetoric, at least, began to change with Macron's speech at the Globsec summit in Slovakia in 2022 (Macron 2022), and France has dispatched Caesar Howitzers, AMX-13 light tanks and the SCALP (also known by its British name, Storm Shadow), and has even hinted that Mirage aircraft might be on their way as part of Western attempts to equip Ukraine's air force (Calcutt 2024). However, the 2024 legislative elections lead to a national assembly that has struggled to produce a stable majority. Though the French president has control over foreign policy and defence, the majority in the national assembly controls the budget.

Yet even this change of policy, accompanied by similar changes of policy in Germany and Italy, indicates the limits to the adjustments that the large states of Western Europe have made to their security posture. Unlike the Nordics, the Netherlands, Poland, Czechia and, evidently, the Baltic states, the actions of the Big Four (France, Germany, Italy and the UK) reveal that they have classified Russian aggression against Ukraine as an important, but ultimately second-order, threat. Rhetoric aside, Paris, Berlin, Rome and London have not switched to a war footing.

Still, it is possible to discern an important difference in attitude towards the threat posed by Russia, and this has affected the policy to organise supply—that is, decisions about whether to build up the defence industries needed and arrange the defence industrial strategy required. If supply is needed to win wars, the correct strategic culture is needed to make the political decisions that allow the supply to be created.

Threat perception and strategic culture

It is not surprising that threat perception among policy elites owes a lot to geography and history. Policy elites in the Baltic states and Finland, countries that have borders with Russia, see Moscow as a direct threat, whereas those in Ireland and Portugal, for example, do not.¹ Other countries, such as the UK, see Russia as a threat to its national security, interests and the global order, but would not consider it a territorial threat. How this threat is mediated into policy, however, can vary significantly.

In the UK and Poland, where memories of the failure of appeasement in the 1930s define national historical narratives to a great extent, the immediate instinct is to work out how to confront the threat. In Germany and Italy, by contrast, the default stance had been to avoid confrontation by establishing relationships of mutual commercial dependence. Berlin and Rome did not see this as a matter of buying Russia off, but of creating a situation of mutual benefit, the collapse of which would incur significant costs. Whether support for this stance was due to the significant personal benefit it brought to important German and Italian politicians is outside the scope of this article. However, it reflects the understandable reluctance of those countries' elites to allow the emotions associated with militarism to influence foreign policy as it did during their fascist dictatorships in the first half of the twentieth century. The question of whether it is wiser to confront an opponent or make a deal with them is fundamentally one of strategic culture, and this takes considerable time to change.

It might be argued that Finland engaged in precisely such a shift in relatively short order when it applied to join NATO just three months after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, but this is to misunderstand the Finnish position. Helsinki was prevented from joining the West by Soviet power, and as soon as the USSR's power weakened, it made efforts to integrate itself with the West, joining the EU in 1994. The difference between its stance and that of Austria is striking. Austria, also forced to be neutral (as part of the agreement to withdraw Soviet troops in 1955), opted to cultivate a deep economic relationship with Russia, particularly after the Soviet collapse. Whereas Helsinki sees the relationship with Russia as similar to that with a hostile former colonial power, Austria, benefiting at least from much greater physical distance from Russian territory, views it as a business relationship between independent, and substantively equal, sovereign states. (Nor is this as fanciful as it might appear—though Russia obviously has far more people and territory than Austria, the alpine state's economy is around 25% of Russia's GDP).² Helsinki's current stance, is not, therefore, determined by its Cold War-era neutrality. Finland understands that being part of a Western alliance allows it to confront Russian aggression.

The distinction is thus not one between confrontation and appeasement, but between whether the relationship with Russia is best seen as a zero-sum game, or one in which constructive economic cooperation can create mutually beneficial outcomes. Or to put it another way: is Russia best understood as an enemy or as a trading partner motivated by rational self-interest?

Appeasement may be the only alternative available to a weaker power confronted by a hostile neighbour, even if it involves the transfer of resources to one's enemy. However, appeasers at least know that the target of their appeasement is hostile. Though it can be a mistake (whether throwing a piece of meat at a crocodile helps you depends on whether it distracts the beast long enough for you to get away, or causes it to conclude that if it follows you it will be fed another steak), appeasement at least recognises the threat for what it is.

In his speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Putin described the accession to NATO of the independent countries of Central and Eastern Europe as 'a serious provocation' and the West of 'trying to impose new dividing lines and walls on us' (Putin 2007). This was followed by his invasion of Georgia in 2008. After these events, anyone thinking that Putin's Russia was interested in a transactional relationship of mutual benefit with the West had willingly suspended disbelief.

Yet despite the full-scale war, that suspension of disbelief remains. The delay in producing ammunition and supplying aircraft, and even the baffling refusal to move on from the line that Ukraine will be supported 'for as long as it takes', rather than 'until it restores its internationally recognised borders', betray this failure to face reality. Last year, vital time was lost supplying main battle tanks, contributing to the failure of Ukraine's 2023 counter-offensive, and leaving Ukraine vulnerable to a spring 2024 attack on its critical infrastructure. The US only imposed secondary financial sanctions

in June 2024, after Russia had spent two years importing sanctioned components through Central Asia. Rather than Western nations transferring the Russian assets frozen by the West to Ukraine, though they constitute only a small portion of the reparations Russia will eventually have to pay for the destruction it has caused, consensus has only been achieved on transferring the interest earned on those assets (around \$50 billion).

This is the effect of an informal Western alliance that has to move at the speed of its slowest member. This practice is also formally reflected in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, where decisions have to be made with unanimity and are frequently blocked by Orbán's Hungary, allowing other member states to protect their interests in Russia while escaping the diplomatic opprobrium that would attach to their vetoing anti-Russian measures. Appropriate though the search for unity may be in peacetime, it is not enough when we are at war.

Beyond the lowest common denominator

While it is understandable that there is an advantage to securing the broadest possible coalition of support for Ukraine, if this is the only way they are to be helped, it comes at a considerable cost. Timing is everything in war: bringing concentrated force to bear upon the enemy can destroy their forces and take resources away from them so they cannot use them against you again. It is an area of human activity where concentrating the firepower of a hundred tanks in one place achieves effects that attacking with 10 tanks for 10 days does not. In conventional war, marshalling resources to concentrate them on particular parts of the enemy's fighting power has non-linear effects: attacking with a certain level of force can achieve a breakthrough, but doing so with three-quarters of that force does not achieve three-quarters of that breakthrough.

This is very different from the economic thinking that dominates the assessment of most public policy. In most areas, policy outcomes are, roughly, linear. Education is typical: if you train twice as many teachers and build twice as many classrooms, one can cut class sizes by half; but if one trains only a quarter as many more teachers and builds a quarter as many classrooms, one can only cut class sizes by a quarter.

In war, outcomes are not as predictable: small gains now can translate into disproportionate advantage later. Moreover, war is adversarial: the enemy can apply the concentration of force to you, if they are able to concentrate it first, which means that speed matters.

Thus, at the same time as constructing broad institutional coalitions, there is significant advantage in building a core group of countries with the strategic culture to act quickly, and prepared for a single threat on which it can focus. This group should serve as a rallying point for all Europeans, but be led by the major states that understand the Russian threat and have the strategic tradition that understands confrontation is necessary. It would complement other initiatives, such as the UK-initiated Joint Expeditionary Force or the French-led European Intervention Initiative. Based on the model of the

Weimar Triangle, it should address the broad security policy community including, but not limited to, national defence establishments. It should be anchored by France, Poland and, though it is outside the EU, the UK. Like-minded smaller states, including the Nordic countries, Czechia, Romania and the Netherlands, should also be invited to join. Its explicit mission should be to support Ukrainian victory and Russian defeat, not for as long as it takes, but as soon as possible.

Notwithstanding the absolutely unequivocal support given to Ukraine by Italian Prime Minister Georgia Meloni and German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, the Italian and German strategic cultures have yet to evolve sufficiently. Italian Defence Minister Guido Crosetto called for a ceasefire—which would lock in Russia's territorial gains—in May 2024 (Ostiller 2024), while German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's strong *Zeitenwende* speech (Scholz 2022) has been followed by years of foot-dragging when it has come to the actual supply of weapons. At the time of writing, Scholz continues to refuse to send Taurus missiles to Ukraine. At this point, including Berlin and Rome in this initiative would merely recreate existing arrangements and prevent a vanguard of countries from advancing further in support of Kyiv. It should be noted that, unfortunately, this limits the scope of this new arrangement, and in particular makes it unsuitable for joint procurement. Just as there can be no reasonable operational defence of Europe without the UK, it would be difficult to improve defence production without the German and Italian defence industries (in the event that the Starmer government in the UK is unable to come to a defence agreement with the EU that includes procurement, the Organisation for Joint Armament Cooperation (OCCAR) could be used to make progress in this regard (Walshe 2022)). And should German or Italian strategic culture evolve further, they would of course be welcome to take part.

Confronting Grendel

In the Anglo-Saxon epic, Beowulf is the hero who confronts and kills Grendel, the monster that has been terrorising the lands of Danish King Hrothgar. Beowulf understands that there is no sense in continuing to appease the monster, nor hope of organising a better deal with it. In modern, and decidedly less Anglo-Saxon terms, we might say he brought the right strategic culture back to Hrothgar's kingdom and freed his people from Grendel's terror.

Obviously a modern strategic culture consists of far more than a single hero willing to fight a dragon and his mother, and involves more than just purely military elements. As well as conventional defence, it needs political leadership to integrate the military, diplomatic and other security policies of the state; to equip countries to see threats clearly; and to develop the means to resist them. As discussed above, the absence of Italy and Germany would make this initiative unsuitable for defence industrial production, and probably also for the related question of technology transfer. Developing a single envelope within which technology could be shared between European allies—an equivalent of the US International Traffic In Arms Regulations—would benefit greatly from Italian and German involvement. But as in procurement, the sharing of this technological

know-how might also be somewhat separable from the situations in which the equipment based on it would be deployed. The Beowulf Group's agenda could, however, have the following elements:

1. Regular, high-level summits, modelled on those of the Weimar Triangle, intended to help members' security establishments align on policy priorities and to communicate the existence of this new vanguard of nations.
2. A Strategic College for Europe, modelled on, for instance, the National Defence University in the US but with a broader remit, to include diplomatic and security services; elements of the police; gendarmeries, where they exist; and institutions in charge of domestic resilience. Unlike the European Security and Defence College, the UK, though outside the EU, would be a full member.
3. A European Elite Reserve (EER) Legion constituted of forces from the member states, who would train together at UK, French and Polish sites. The aim here would be to create elite reserves, on the model of the UK's Honourable Artillery Company, rather than mass reserves on the basis of conscription (which might of course also have its place in appropriate circumstances), in the land, air and naval service branches. Modern warfare requires highly expert personnel able to operate advanced equipment, and EER Legion reservists would be able to bring skills learned in civilian life into high-tech areas of war-fighting. Led by the UK, France and Poland, these reserve forces would be under NATO command, open to other nationals of EU or NATO member states (as, for instance, the British Army is open to Irish and Commonwealth nationals), and would serve in an integrated fashion. The EER Legion should also consider how to liaise with national elite reserve forces, including those in the US and Japan, and, eventually, with the Ukrainian forces.
4. A strategic communications centre could be established to support the aim of the Beowulf Group to operate more nimbly and aggressively than initiatives such as the European External Action Service's East Stratcom unit. It should not be prevented from engaging in counter-disinformation activity originating from within EU member states.

Conclusion

The cadence of war is ill-suited to the peacetime European practice of taking decisions deliberately in order to build the largest possible coalition for them. This has caused significant problems for the supply of aid to Ukraine, which has often come too late to make the difference it would have made earlier. Since European policy elites have different perceptions of the Russian threat, and different strategic cultures, broad-based attempts to deal with Russia's invasion have managed to stave off Russian victory. They have not, however, been large or nimble enough to give Ukraine the support it needs in time or to equip European defences to face future Russian aggression, particularly should Trump be re-elected and Europeans be forced to defend their continent either on their own or with limited US support.

Yet a solid group of countries determined to move faster has emerged; this includes large EU members such as Poland and now France, non-EU member the UK, as well as Czechia, the Nordic countries and the Baltic states. This grouping would be a good starting point from which to form a vanguard of European countries that accurately perceive the Russian threat and possess the strategic culture to act. Neither Germany nor Italy have made the requisite changes to their strategic culture to fit into such a group, and therefore this group should not take on defence production, industrial strategy, or technology transfer and pooling. It would be, nonetheless, in a position to lead the European debate and practice in a number of areas, including by establishing a Strategic College for Europe, a joint EER Legion and a strategic communications centre, as well as building awareness of this new bloc through regular high-visibility summits. In the spirit of the Northern European mythical hero who slayed the monster terrorising Denmark, I propose it should be called the Beowulf Group.

Notes

1. Public opinion is a different matter. Large portions of the Irish (72%) and Portuguese public (85%) see Russia as a threat (see Eurobarometer 2023), but this has not translated into significant increases in defence spending, or, in Ireland's case, an application to join NATO. Instead there have been incremental changes in policy.
2. Austria's GDP is \$520 billion; Russia's is \$2 trillion, see IMF 2024.

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Bridging the Atlantic: The case of EU-US parliamentary diplomacy

European View
2024, Vol. 23(2) 212–218
© The Author(s) 2024
DOI: 10.1177/17816858241288388
journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



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Abstract

With the rise of non-executive forms of diplomacy, political scientists have increasingly focused on the role of parliaments as diplomatic actors. This article aims to deepen the study of European parliamentary diplomacy through an extensive case study of transatlantic parliamentary diplomacy (TPD) between the European Parliament and the US Congress during the Obama and Trump administrations (2009–21). It is hypothesised that the decrease in EU–US political alignment under the Trump administration resulted in a corresponding decrease in both the salience and positivity of TPD. Counter-intuitively, the data shows that the decrease in political alignment correlated with a higher quantity of TPD. However, a content analysis of the joint reports of the Transatlantic Legislators' Dialogue indicates that the attitude of this TPD is found to have become increasingly negative.

Keywords

Parliamentary diplomacy, Transatlantic relations, European Parliament, US Congress

Introduction

With US presidential elections in November 2024, there has been much talk about how the electoral outcome could impact the transatlantic relationship between the EU and the US. One of the ways to deal with political uncertainty at the executive level is to invest in other channels of cooperation. With this in mind, within the EU–US relationship, the legislative partnership between the European Parliament (EP) and the US Congress is an increasingly strong force for fostering transatlantic cooperation.¹

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Parliamentary diplomacy is a relatively under-developed field in international relations and diplomacy literature. The academic literature has only recently become more coherent and robust with the publication of two seminal works by Jaćić and Stavridis (2016; 2017). In 2016, these authors co-edited a special issue of *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* that was dedicated solely to parliamentary diplomacy; this was followed by the publication of their *Parliamentary Diplomacy in European and Global Governance* in 2017. Both works develop the concept of parliamentary diplomacy by presenting a consistent theoretical framework, as well as testing the concept through a range of case studies.

When defining the relationship between executive and parliamentary diplomacy in the European case, Zamfir (2019, 6) argues that the EP's involvement in EU foreign affairs complements existing executive structures. Notably, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) have more flexibility than diplomats to address sensitive issues—they are able to speak more freely on human rights violations, enhance electoral processes abroad and facilitate negotiations on complex issues such as climate change (Zamfir 2019, 6).

The EP and the US Congress—arguably the two most important parliamentary bodies in the northern hemisphere—have had a long-standing diplomatic relationship since their first informal meetings in 1953. What sets EU–US parliamentary diplomacy apart from most other transnational parliamentary efforts is the level of institutionalisation (Lazarou 2020, 63). In addition to ad hoc parliamentary visits, the regular meetings between both parliaments that have taken place since 1972 have been formalised in the Transatlantic Legislators' Dialogue (TLD) since the 1995 New Transatlantic Agenda. The TLD comprises two interparliamentary meetings per year, supplemented by video conferences and direct interactions between legislators. The TLD is co-chaired by both parliamentary bodies.

On the European side, the TLD co-chair is concurrently the chair of the Delegation for Relations with the US. The Delegation meets approximately nine times per year and was the largest delegation within the ninth EP. On the US side, the TLD co-chair is appointed by the Speaker of the House. Compared to the EP, the US Congress has a less formalised approach to the TLD. Nevertheless, a bipartisan European Union Caucus exists, and further institutionalisation of the TLD with a US–EU interparliamentary group has been proposed in the House of Representatives (US Congress 2022).

Finally, the establishment of the European Parliament Liaison Office in Washington, DC (EPLO-DC) in 2010 has further facilitated interactions between MEPs and Members of Congress. The main tasks of the EP's liaison offices are promoting the importance of the Parliament, engaging with citizens and stakeholders, corresponding with the media and supporting MEPs (European Parliament 2022). EPLO-DC was the first liaison office to be established outside of the EU, indicating the importance of the parliamentary relationship with the US.

To test the resilience of transatlantic parliamentary diplomacy (TPD), this article examines the impact of political alignment on European parliamentary diplomacy towards the US. The study comparatively examines the EP's diplomatic efforts from the 111th to the 116th session of Congress, corresponding to the Obama (2009–17) and Trump (2017–21) administrations.

Transatlantic parliamentary diplomacy in times of turmoil

Data from the 2022 Gallup Report *Rating World Leaders*, presented in Figure 1, show that European public opinion underwent a dramatic shift from the Obama administration to the Trump administration. Europeans' approval rating of the US leadership went from 44% in 2016 to 25% in the year after the change of administration, while disapproval surged from 36% to 56% (Gallup 2022, 10).

From these numbers, the conclusion can be drawn that political alignment between the EU and the US was significantly higher during both Obama administrations than it was during the Trump administration. Through a quantitative analysis of EP interactions with the US Congress during these two presidencies, presented in Figure 2, it can be shown how the shift in political alignment on the executive level affected the levels of European Parliamentary diplomacy.

While EU-US political alignment was lower under the Trump presidency and the Republican majority in Congress, 2017 marked a record year for EU-US parliamentary engagements, driven largely by an increase in committee and delegation visits. The following year, also marked by Republican control of Congress, saw a decrease in TPD,

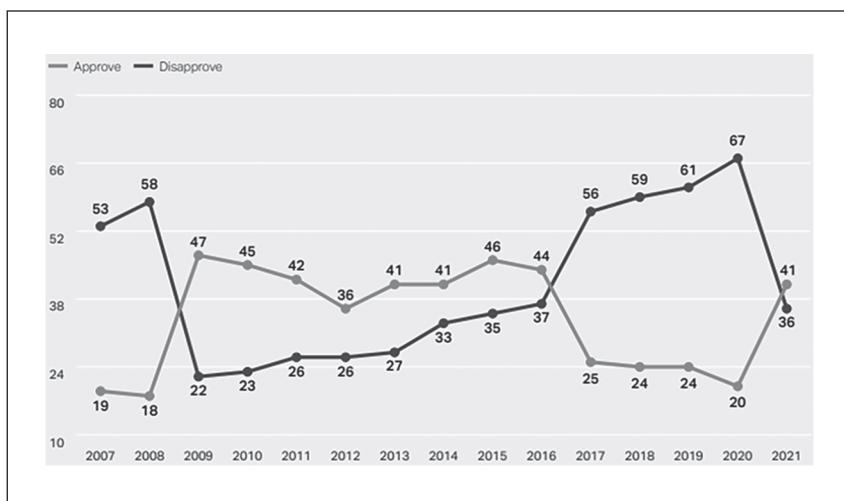


Figure 1. Approval of US leadership in Europe. Median ratings (%).

Source: Gallup 2022, 10. Used by permission.

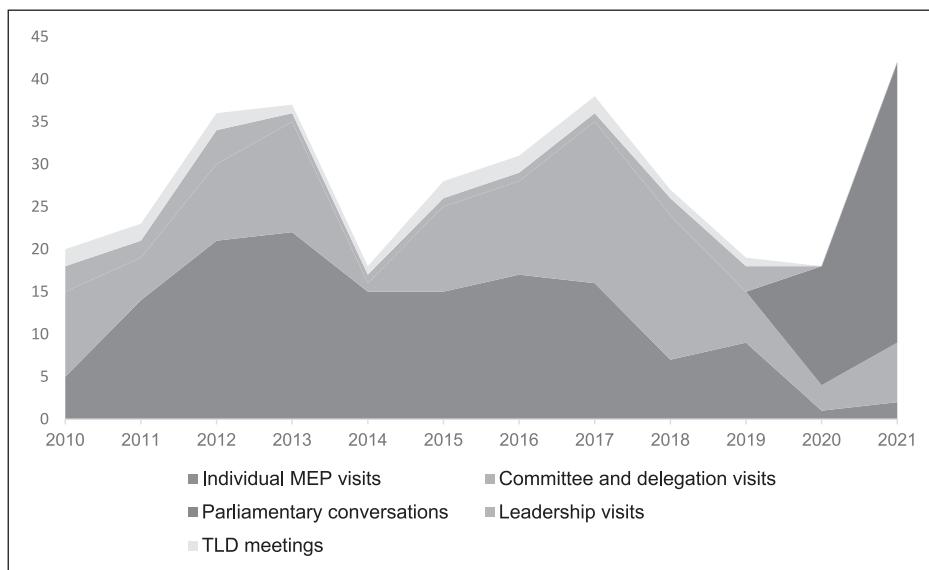


Figure 2. European Parliamentary interactions with US Congress (2010–21)²

Source: Data provided by EPLO-DC in personal correspondence, reproduced with permission.

due to a reduction in the number of individual MEP visits; however, overall there was a similar volume of interactions as in the Obama years.

In 2019, despite a slight increase, individual MEP visits remained at a low level. The next year, though plagued by the Covid-19 pandemic, saw similar numbers to 2019 due to the introduction of virtual parliamentary conversations. Despite Democratic control of the House in 2019 and 2020, the downward trend that had started with the arrival of the Trump administration continued. However, the committee travel prohibition (2019, see footnote 3) and Covid-19 pandemic (2020) make it particularly hard to draw strong conclusions about the reasons for this. The first year of the Biden administration, with Democratic control of Congress, showed the highest salience in TPD, driven by a high number of parliamentary conversations.

A sentiment analysis of all the available joint statements made after TLD meetings during the Obama and Trump administrations was carried out, and Figure 3 shows the share of positive and negative Dialogue outcomes per Congress.³ The results show a positive correlation between political alignment and attitude, thereby indicating lower levels of positivity under the Trump presidency (115th and 116th Congresses) than the Obama presidency (111th to 114th Congresses). The 111th Congress, during which the Democrats also controlled Congress, shows the highest level of positive sentiment. During the 112th session of Congress, with the House flipping to the Republicans, positive sentiment declined, but remained high. The 113th Congress saw a significant drop, to a positivity rate of 42.8%, making it an anomaly during Obama's presidency. During the

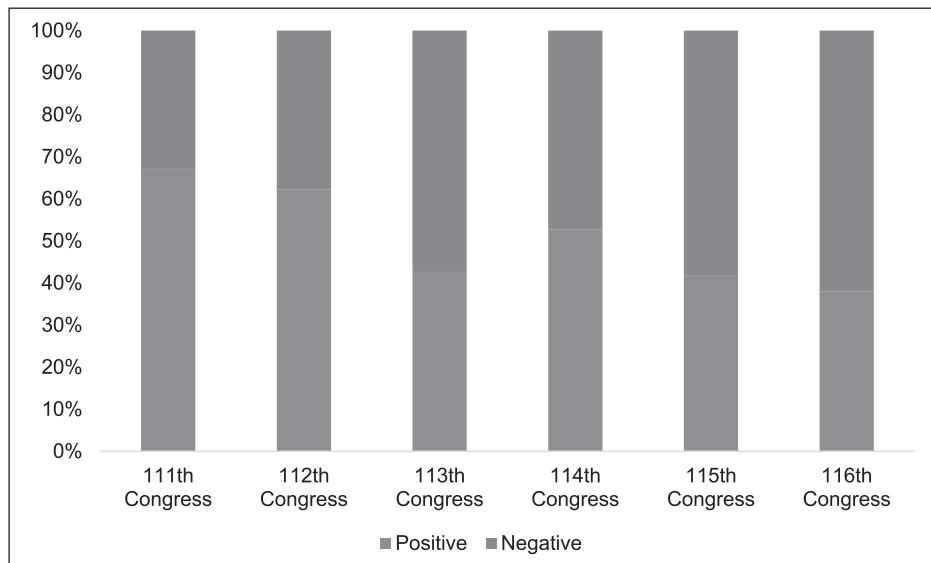


Figure 3. Sentiment analysis of TLD meetings, 2009–19.

Source: Data from authors' own analysis based on TLD joint statements.

114th Congress, when Republicans gained a Senate majority in addition to their pre-existing control of the House of Representatives, positive sentiment increased to 52.8%. During the two Congressional terms under the Trump administration, it then decreased to 41.73% (115th Congress) and 38.02% (116th Congress).

When EU-US political alignment was at its highest, during the Democrats' absolute control of the 111th Congress, positivity was at its highest level as well. Conversely, the sessions of Congress with the lowest levels of alignment (115th and 116th) showed the lowest levels of positive attitude. The positive correlation between political alignment and positive attitude is thus confirmed in both the Trump and Obama administrations. In both sessions of Congress in which the ruling party held both executive power and control of Congress (111th and 115th), positive attitudes were the highest in the respective presidential administrations, suggesting that, to some degree, full political control is linked with positive sentiment, regardless of political alignment.

The future of transatlantic parliamentary diplomacy

The findings of this article show that even during times of reduced political alignment, parliamentary diplomacy can flourish. More importantly perhaps, it shows that regardless of executive political alignment, legislative channels of diplomacy can function and develop independently. However, given the strict institutional independence of the EP and the US Congress from their executive counterparts, the same may

not be true of parliamentary diplomacy in other national contexts where there is a strong linkage between parliament and government.

The increase in the quantity of European parliamentary diplomacy towards the US Congress during the period of lower political alignment suggests that legislative channels of communication can function as a diplomatic bridge at times when it may be most needed. At the same time, the analysis of the TLD meeting reports shows that levels of political alignment positively correlate with the attitudes of lawmakers. The success of EU-US parliamentary diplomacy during the period of reduced political alignment on an executive level could serve as a model to offset the insufficiencies of traditional forms of diplomacy.

TPD has evolved and will continue to do so. Amidst internal and external challenges, the parliamentary relationship between the EU and the US has proven to be resilient and innovative, with the introduction of virtual parliamentary conversations during the Covid-19 pandemic paying testament to this. Despite it being a time of global crisis, the number of interactions between legislators from the EU and the US reached record levels. For this trend to continue, much will depend on the efforts of the leadership of the EP and the US Congress to further institutionalise TPD. The idea of forming a robust transatlantic parliamentary assembly, for example, could definitively change the way we understand international relations. Academics as well as policymakers should play close attention to the development of parliamentary diplomacy, and there is hardly a better case to study than the EU-US ‘parliamentary bridge’ across the Atlantic.

Notes

1. This article is an updated and shortened version of Vandeputte 2022.
2. The 2010 meeting numbers start in May 2010, immediately after the inauguration of EPLO-DC. The sharp decreases in committee and delegation visits in 2014 and 2019 are linked to the EP Bureau rule that prohibits committee members from travelling from 1 April to 30 September in EP election years (EP Bureau 2000). In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic made any in-person visits impossible between April and December 2020. Due to the pandemic, virtual parliamentary conversations were launched, which enabled transatlantic interlocutors to connect through video calls, thereby opening a new forum for TPD. Visits from US legislators to the EU, including for TLD meetings, have been excluded from the graph.
3. There is no joint statement available for the TLD meeting of December 2018, as the four TLD meetings were cancelled due to preparations for the funeral of George H. W. Bush.

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The theory of democratic integration

European View

2024, Vol. 23(2) 219–225

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DOI: 10.1177/17816858241288395

journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



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Abstract

The outcome of the 2024 European Parliament elections highlights the need for the EU to underpin its functioning as a European democracy with a proper political theory. This article introduces the theory of democratic integration as a political philosophy of the EU. It aims to provide the EU with a philosophical foundation by analysing its evolution as a deviation from the Westphalian system of international relations and its doctrine of absolute sovereignty. The article finds that the EU is succeeding in creating a new democratic home for its citizens and its member states. In times of increasing support for parties which promote national sovereignty as the recipe for the future and which consequently call for the dismantling of the European Parliament and the deconstruction of EU democracy, the theory will empower the Union to defend its constitutional achievements and prevent it from backsliding into an undemocratic organisation of illiberal states.

Keywords

Democratic theory, Transnational democracy, Westphalian system of international relations, Constitutional backsliding, Global governance

Introduction: the essence of the EU

The essence of the EU is that both its member states and the Union are democracies. Article 2 of the 2007 Lisbon Treaty codifies the values of the EU, notably human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The member states have committed themselves to guaranteeing respect for these values, while the EU and its institutions are bound to do so as well. So, the member states can be characterised as national democracies, while the EU works as a transnational democracy.

The transnational democracy of the EU differs from the national democracies of its member states in many respects. The most salient distinction is that the EU is not a

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state and, in its present form, does not want to be a state either. Rather, the Union is composed of citizens and member states. However, as the signatories to the Lisbon Treaty were required to meet stringent demands regarding democracy and the rule of law, they wanted the organisation on which they conferred competences in ever wider fields to be democratic too. This goal has been realised through the institutional set-up of the EU by virtue of which the citizens are represented in the European Parliament, while the member states have their say in the European Council. The daily running of the Union is entrusted to the Commission, and the Court of Justice ensures that in the interpretation and application of the treaties the law is observed. To bolster its system of governance, the polity has established institutions such as the European Central Bank, as well as its own foreign service, the European External Action Service.

Ideological prejudices

The construction of the present-day EU is not only unprecedented: it used to be unimaginable too. While the founding fathers were prudent enough to formulate the aim of the European experiment in the preamble to the 1957 Treaty of Rome in terms of ‘laying the foundations for an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe’, post-war theorists and politicians immediately engaged in a fundamental debate about the end goal or *finalité politique* of the then Communities. Should the experiment of sharing the exercise of sovereignty result in the creation of a federal state or was the old continent destined to transform itself into an association of states? According to the traditional Westphalian template, other options were not available for the emerging polity.

Later generations may wonder why it took the theorists and politicians of the early EU almost 80 (!) years to realise that their polity had abandoned the Westphalian paradigm from the start and that each subsequent step on the road to ever closer union had moved the Union further away from that outdated ideology. The long-standing debate about the so-called democratic deficit of the polity may serve to illustrate the counterproductivity of the conceptual struggle between the federalists and the intergovernmentalists. On the assumption that the EU ought to be a European state analogous to the United States of America, radical federalists argue that ‘the original sin’ of the Union is that it started as an initiative of its member states and that this sin is epitomised by its current democratic deficit (Alemanno 2018). Their opponents, the intergovernmentalists or sovereigntists, posit that there is too much democracy at the EU level, that European democracy creates a democratic deficit at the level of the member states and that the constituent states should ‘take back control’ by dismantling the present system of EU governance (Bellamy 2020). Thus, according to the influential theorists of the first quarter of the twenty-first century, the EU continues to be faced with the perennial dilemma of being either a federal state or a confederal association of states.

Addressing the democratic deficit

Although what would become the EU was initiated in the post-war period with a revolutionary break from the prevailing paradigm by introducing the concept of the pooling of

sovereignty and has further abandoned the Westphalian system since, the two leading schools of thought in the study of European integration persisted in studying the object of their investigation through the lens of that outdated template. As a result of their mutually shared prejudices, they were unable to observe and acknowledge that the Union and its precursors were creating a new kind of polity based on the shared exercise of sovereignty. As an astute observer remarked as early as 1964, the question was not whether the polity would become a state or an association of states, but how the exercise of the sovereignty conferred on the Communities could be democratically controlled (Kapteijn 1964). This question acquired instant urgency when the, by then, nine member states of the European Communities presented themselves in 1973 to the outer world as a union of democratic states. Thus, while the proponents of the two competing schools of thought based on Westphalian principles indulged in their ideological battle, the member states were actually crafting their own path towards a democratic destination.

Fifty years on, the time has come to realise that the intention to create an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe and the practice of pooling sovereignty were both clear indications that scholars should have abandoned the traditional template. As the member states emphasised the democratic character of their common endeavour, scholars should have replaced the Westphalian paradigm of states and diplomats in the study of the EU with the constitutional perspective of democracy and the rule of law. Substituting an obsolete paradigm for a contemporary one would have enabled them to observe that the member states were determined to establish an ever closer union by addressing and overcoming the democratic deficit in their Union.

Building the European house

After the publication of the 1973 Declaration on European Identity, the quintessential question was raised of whether an ever closer union of distinct democratic peoples can be democratically legitimate (Nicolaïdis 2012). While theorists from the two opposing schools insisted that the answer had to be negative, the stakeholders in the process of European integration proved the opposite in practice. They started to democratise the emerging polity by providing it with a directly elected Parliament. In 1979 the citizens of the member states were invited to choose national representatives for their country in the European Parliament. Although the powers of the new representative body were initially rather limited, its members took the initiative to present a blueprint for a more complete and substantially more democratic European Union in 1984.¹ The member states were encouraged to take further imaginative steps on the road to a democratic Union by Commission President Jacques Delors, who launched his Europe 1992 vision shortly after his appointment in 1985 (Delors 1985). The conceptual novelty of the Treaty of Maastricht, by virtue of which the EU was founded in 1992, was the introduction of citizenship of the Union. EU citizenship was not meant to replace national citizenship but rather to enable the citizens of the member states to function as citizens of the Union too. At present, dual citizenship constitutes the core of the EU's system of dual democracy. For this to happen, however, the Union first had to upgrade the status of its citizens through the proclamation, in 2000, of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU. In addition, the introduction of the values of the Union by virtue of the

1997 Treaty of Amsterdam contributed to the desired transformation of the EU from a more or less traditional association of states to a transnational polity of states and citizens. Despite the rejection of the poorly named Constitution for Europe by the electorates of France and the Netherlands in 2005, the construction of the EU as a dual democracy was corroborated by the 2007 Treaty of Lisbon. In its subsequent case law, the European Court of Justice clarified the meaning and scope of EU citizenship, while also establishing the autonomous character of the Union's democracy. As the EU has addressed its democratic deficit in this manner, the European house, which generations of committed politicians have built over the decades, can be identified as a democratic Union of democratic states. In terms of global governance, the unprecedented character of the EU as an organisation of states and citizens with democratic aspirations of its own can be accounted for by describing it by the new term, 'a democratic international organisation'.

The theory of democratic integration

The main reason why traditional theorists are unable to devise a political philosophy of the EU is that they fail to account for the EU's practice of shared sovereignty and its correlated system of dual democracy. Consequently, they are also incapable of realising that the practice of sharing the exercise of sovereignty is only feasible between democratic states. In short, they overlook the principles and values on which the EU is founded.

In contrast, the theory of democratic integration which will be outlined hereunder takes as its starting point the treaties of the Union. Article 1 of the Treaty on European Union proclaims that the participating states establish amongst themselves a European Union, on which they confer competences to attain common objectives. The opening article testifies that the European states have learned the hard way that absolute power destroys absolutely and that they have voluntarily reined in their absolute sovereignty. It is then underlined in Article 4, paragraph 2 of the Treaty that the Union has to respect the member states' national identities and essential state functions; the member states also put beyond doubt that they do not wish to give up their entire sovereignty in favour of an overarching European state. So, then, it is clear that the states did not and do not intend to cross the Rubicon towards a federal state, but rather wish to underline that they remain the masters of the treaties.

From the outset, the initiators of the process of European integration realised that, as the states of Europe were capable of destroying each other, they had to invent a new approach to govern the old continent. Their foundational mission was to rebuild Europe from the ruins of war, in both the material and the spiritual senses of the word. The founding states broke the eternal circle of war by replacing the Westphalian concepts of mistrust and suspicion in international relations with confidence and mutual trust. On the condition that the participating states function as representative democracies, they introduced the concept of democratic integration. In this approach, the relations between the member states are no longer a zero-sum game, in which the gains of one participant imply a loss for the other(s). Instead, the process of democratic integration is based on mutual trust between these states and on the ensuing willingness to pool sovereignty. As a corresponding political philosophy, the theory of democratic integration holds that, if

two or more democratic states agree to share the exercise of sovereignty in ever wider fields with a view to attaining common goals, their organisation has to be democratic too.

A democratic union of democratic states

Determined to lay the foundations for an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe, the participating states opened themselves up to each other and developed their own version of bottom-up federalism in practice. As each of the participating states had to be a constitutional democracy, the process of cooperation was conducted along the lines of democratic diplomacy. The participants' own constitutions prevented them from sacrificing democratic principles for the sake of integration.² Consequently, the member states had to ensure that the citizens of their constituencies gave their consent to major steps forward in the integration process through parliamentary ratification or referendums. By identifying the common values of the member states and subsequently applying them to their emerging polity, the stakeholders in the process of European integration succeeded in transforming the erstwhile union of democratic states into 'a union of democratic states which also constitutes a democracy of its own' (Hoeksma 2023, 42)

This observation can be substantiated from the theoretical perspective with the academic conclusion that a democratic union of democratic states constitutes a new model of democracy. The aim of the construction is to ensure that the exercise of sovereignty is democratically controlled at all levels. National parliaments will hold the governments of their own countries to account, while the European Parliament is tasked with controlling the Commission. By reinforcing each other, the parliaments of the polity ensure its democratic functioning at all levels. Since the Lisbon Treaty constructed the first-ever specimen of this new form of organisation, the EU in its current form is certainly not perfect. At the same time, it must be realised that the potential of the drive towards ever closer union is far from exhausted. The Union has the capacity to develop further in this direction. Bearing in mind that each treaty marks a new stage in the process, the theory of democratic integration puts beyond doubt the idea that, for the EU to function as a transnational polity of states and citizens, it has to take the form of a democratic union of democratic states.

The challenge of an undemocratic organisation of illiberal states

An unforeseen effect of the academic failure to underpin the EU's experimental system of governance with a sound political philosophy is that the Union has proved unable to defend itself against allegations that it has become some kind of 'super state'. In academic circles, the EU has been depicted as a contemporary 'Golem of Prague', the monster which destroyed its creators, or as a neo-medieval empire (Weiler 2012; Zielonka 2006). Brexiteers even accused the EU of being the reincarnation of the worst tyranny in European history while their leader Boris Johnson loathed it as 'the Fourth Reich' (Mason 2016).

The fall of the pound after Brexit and the decline in the rule of law illustrate that the pooling of sovereignty is not about undermining the member states, but rather about strengthening them. Separately, the countries of Europe are unable to address transnational problems or face global economic and military challenges. While the original impetus for pooling sovereignty was to prevent the renewed outbreak of war, the member states realised during the process that they also needed a concept for the creation of an internal market and, later on, for a European democracy. Despite the absence of a blueprint for their endeavour, they learned by doing and constructed a democratic system of governance geared to meet the needs of both its citizens and its member states.

After Brexit, like-minded Eurosceptic politicians in other member states quickly realised the consequences of the British defection. Proponents of Frexit and Nexit changed their tune, proclaiming instead that they intend to change the EU from within. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán invented the idea of ‘illiberal democracy’ and argues that ‘Brussels’ should refrain from meddling in the internal affairs of its sovereign member states. Indeed, the 2024 European Parliament elections saw considerable gains for those parties that wish to reform the EU and/or dismantle European democracy. The aim of the newly formed ‘Patriots for Europe’ group is to transform the EU into an undemocratic organisation of illiberal states.

Conclusion

The chain of events in the run-up to the formation of the second von der Leyen Commission warrants the conclusion that the EU has entered a new stage in its long and winding road towards ever closer union. The aim is no longer to form either a federal state or a confederal association of states but to consolidate and strengthen the constitutional achievements of the EU as a democratic union of democratic states.

The European Parliament has already acknowledged the need to defend the EU against ‘the enemy from within’ (Wind 2024) by forming a pro-constitutional coalition to prevent illiberal politicians from taking up influential positions in the European Parliament. The next step for this spontaneous coalition is to combine increased respect for the rule of law with the upcoming enlargement of the Union. Moreover, the Parliament should devise a strategy for obtaining a greater role in the defence of the EU’s values in the next Treaty on European Union.

While the Commission will be required to use increased skill to deal with the unprecedented attack from within, the member states must also come to terms with the political reality that they can no longer regard the gatherings of the European Council and the Council of the EU as meetings of an association of states. As EU institutions, they are bound by the values of the Union. Like the European Parliament, they should have taken a stance in the defence of EU values instead of entrusting the Presidency of the Council to its main internal foe. They should have realised that a democratic union of democratic states cannot be led by a disloyal autocrat. In view of Orbán’s dangerous abuse of his position of trust, they should cease to enable him by ending his presidency prematurely.

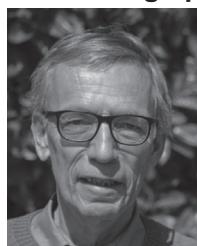
Notes

1. In the Draft Treaty Establishing the European Union, adopted on 14 February 1984, known as the Spinelli draft.
2. As highlighted by the Solange jurisprudence of the German Constitutional Court (Germany, Federal Constitutional Court 1986).

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Author biography



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The 2024 EU elections and cybersecurity: A retrospective and lessons learned

European View

2024, Vol. 23(2) 226–234

© The Author(s) 2024

DOI: 10.1177/17816858241288397

journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



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Abstract

This article analyses the cybersecurity threats to elections and draws out the lessons learned from the EU (Parliament) elections of June 2024, putting forward recommendations for further improvement. The objective of the analysis is thus manifold. First, it summarises the cyber threats pertinent to elections—those capable of influencing or distorting the election process and outcome. Second, it discusses the measures adopted in preparation for the 2024 EU elections and provides an analysis of how the election campaigns and actual elections across the 27 member states developed. Third, it offers recommendations for improving the cyber resilience of future elections. The analysis will cover both strictly cyber-specific threats and broader hybrid threats.

Keywords

Cybersecurity, Cyber resilience, EU institutions, Cyber threats, Elections, Artificial intelligence

Introduction

In June 2024 EU nationals across all 27 member states voted to appoint 720 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) to represent them for the period 2024–9. This was a critical vote, setting the tone of Europe’s democratic voice in a decade of growing insecurity, both in the conventional sense and in terms of cybersecurity. While the trustworthiness and integrity of elections are crucial, their confidentiality, probity and authenticity are continually being challenged. Information security measures need to be put in place

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to preserve genuine, uninterrupted, authentic and free public debate. Such measures are also needed to preserve the availability of public communication channels, to vet the authenticity of online identities and to guarantee the privacy of communications.

The trustworthiness of election results is crucial, especially if votes are cast online. Election systems therefore need to be resilient. Investing in cybersecurity—from awareness campaigns for political leaders and polling station staff to strengthening the security of systems, networks, devices and identities—must be a top priority for political parties.

The cyber threats relevant to the election process

Cybersecurity, defined as the security of information and communications technology (ICT) systems and networks, has been getting progressively more attention in recent years due to massive and continual cyber incidents. Cybersecurity was an integral part of the debate surrounding the security of the 2019 EU elections and has become even more relevant since, with the increased digitalisation of voting systems, including votes being cast online, not to mention the evolving threat landscape.

Cyber threats, if not addressed, could significantly impact registration systems. Hackers could tamper with voter data, block authorities' servers/websites at critical moments, hack campaign websites and social media accounts, spread disinformation and—while no such case has yet been reported—theoretically tamper with the software for online voting in order to affect electoral results. Malicious accounts often spread manipulative and untruthful content through social media networks. The potential consequences are grave, underscoring the urgency of our collective efforts to provide assurance of elections' cybersecurity.

In the report *Predictions for Cybersecurity Threats in 2024* (CYEN 2024b), we identified the top five threats that would dominate the year of the EU elections. Three of the five were strictly related to the elections: disinformation campaigns, abuse of artificial intelligence (AI) and data breaches. These predictions have sadly become a reality, as EU Cybersecurity Agency (ENISA) Executive Director Juhan Lepassaar has evidenced (Gatopoulos 2024). Lepassaar notes the worrying increase in the number of hacktivist attacks aimed at disrupting European infrastructure, which doubled from the fourth quarter of 2023 to the first quarter of 2024 (Gatopoulos 2024). This represented a solid capacity-building exercise for the hacktivists, just in time for the EU elections. On disinformation, in a recent case demonstrating how easy it is to spread fake news, British comedian Joe Lycett highlighted how fact-checking did not seem to be prioritised at many British news outlets, including *BBC News*, *Sky News* and the *Independent*, when he announced that several items of 'news' reported by these outlets were actually fake and had been made up by him (Badshah 2024). His campaign was not related to the elections, but is a major red flag that demonstrates how easy it is to plant untruthful information, how quickly it can go viral and, as a consequence, how it can be considered believable just because it comes from a 'reliable' source.

More data comes from ENISA, which identified disinformation as the second most prominent threat and AI abuse as the tenth most prominent threat in its *Cybersecurity Threats for 2030* report (Mattioli et al. 2023). The 2024 EU AI Act classifies ‘. . . AI systems intended to be used to influence the outcome of an election or referendum or the voting behaviour of natural persons in the exercise of their vote in elections or referenda . . . as high-risk AI systems’ (European Parliament and Council 2024, para. 62). Such systems must assess and reduce risks, maintain use logs, be transparent and accurate, and ensure human oversight. When it comes into effect on 2 August 2026, the AI Act will effectively ban AI systems that manipulate people’s decisions or exploit their vulnerabilities, or that evaluate or classify people based on their social behaviour or personal traits, all potential actions that are very relevant in the context of elections. Indeed, in terms of cybersecurity, the AI Act specifically focuses on the importance of securing high-risk AI systems and banning the unacceptable use of such systems, including those that impact people’s decisions (CYEN 2024a). AI-enabled threats, such as deep fakes, could be used to impersonate political figures with manipulative intent, with their impact multiplied by bot accounts used to facilitate the spread of fake content.

Identity theft from political leaders is also a cause for concern, as the use of weak passwords for social media accounts can lead to easy access and impersonation. This enables malicious actors to spread ‘fake’ messages from political leaders’ real accounts, reaching a large audience and gaining significant attention.

Distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks, which take down websites or services and are often politically motivated, are on the rise in the EU. Cloudflare (Tomé 2024) reports that 53.42 million threats per day to government websites in the EU are being mitigated in 2024, with 68% of those being DDoS threats. There were no significant attacks on European election-related organisations just before the elections, but the two-day DDoS attack on Dutch politics-related websites on 5 and 6 June should be noted, as well as attacks on the websites of EU member state governments—Bulgaria on 6 June, France on 11 and 23 May and 9 June, Sweden on 29 April and 18 May and Denmark on 7 May.

A critical concern is that cyber-attacks such as those involving ransomware, malware, phishing or DDoS do not have to be sophisticated to cause damage and interfere with the election process or results. The lack of cyber awareness and hygiene among political party personnel, campaign organisers, suppliers and European institutional personnel has become a significant threat.

Was the EU prepared for cybersecure elections?

European institutions’ cybersecurity prior to the 2024 EU elections was not adequate to the level of threat; this was the conclusion of the 2022 European Court of Auditors’ *Special Report on the Cybersecurity of the EU Institutions, Bodies and Agencies*. The report noted that the level of cybersecurity maturity varied between bodies—they did not always adopt good practices, nor did they have sufficient support (European Court of

Auditors 2022). More recently, it was reported that an internal European Parliament review showed that its cybersecurity ‘has not yet met industry standards’ and is ‘not fully in line with the threat level’ posed by state-sponsored hackers and other threat groups, despite state-sponsored attacks on the Parliament having become more frequent and more sophisticated (Roussi 2023).

Indeed, in November 2022 the European Parliament’s external website was hit by an allegedly Russian DDoS attack (Van Sant and Goujard 2022). And in February 2024 the phones of MEPs and their staff in the Subcommittee on Security and Defence were infiltrated by intrusive surveillance software (European Parliament 2024). The European Parliament also suffered a massive breach of the sensitive personal data of its staff, including that of MEPs’ assistants, which exposed private information including home addresses, bank details and criminal records (Tar 2024). This is of particular concern as the information could be used for further attacks, such as blackmail or identity theft, after the 2024 elections.

Meanwhile, attacks were reported in a number of member states in the run up to the elections. The websites of the Dutch Party for Freedom (Partij voor de Vrijheid) and the Christian Democratic Appeal (Christen-Democratisch Appèl) were briefly unavailable on polling day (Schickler 2024), while the Belgian media channels *DH*, *La Libre Belgique* and *LN24 News* were also targeted by cyber-attacks (Carantonis 2024). Individual political figures and candidates suffered cyber-attacks too, most notably European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who saw her campaign website attacked by bots (Ahmatović 2024).

Securing the 2024 European elections: the EU measures

While much has been done to mandate a high common level of cybersecurity for the EU institutions (European Parliament and Council 2023) and, with the implementation of the NIS2 Directive (European Parliament and Council 2022), for the important and essential entities operating in the critical infrastructure sectors, very little was done in the run up to the 2024 EU elections to ensure their security.

ENISA did update its Elections Compendium in 2024, underscoring the crucial need for collaboration and information sharing between all interested parties (ENISA 2024). These actions include identifying the risks and the ways to manage threats and crises, providing training, and implementing the necessary technical and organisational measures to secure the elections (ENISA 2024). In a high-level meeting in Italy in May 2024, Věra Jourová, then European Commissioner for Values and Transparency, reiterated that the exchange of information between European countries was extremely important to combat fake news and propaganda. She also noted the role of AI and the need to create synergies between emerging AI systems and traditional media (ACN 2024).

On the social media side, the European Commission published guidelines on how to ‘mitigate systemic risks online that may impact the integrity of elections’ under the

Digital Services Act (European Commission 2024). These included implementing election-specific risk-mitigation measures tailored to each individual electoral period and local context; adopting specific mitigation measures linked to generative AI; and executing other measures, including preparing an incident response mechanism for electoral periods (European Commission 2024). In line with these guidelines, TikTok announced the measures it had taken, which included launching a dedicated in-app Election Centre for every EU country; removing over 2,600 pieces of content for violating the platform's civic and election-integrity policies and over 43,000 pieces of content for violating the platform's misinformation policies; and taking down over 96% of violative misinformation content before it was reported, and over 80% before it had received a single view in this period (TikTok 2024).

The above steps, however, came late in the election process and focused on the EU's security and cyber resilience. The cyber resilience of and support for the political parties in the individual member states varied, but all needed to adopt security measures to better protect their networks, systems and—ultimately—the trustworthiness of the EU election process.

Securing the 2024 European elections: the member states' measures

At the member state level, some good examples of proactive campaigns need to be mentioned. Polish Prime Minister Tusk announced that a special non-partisan commission had been tasked with investigating Russian and Belarusian influence in Poland (*Euronews* 2024). Belgium also appointed experts to track online disinformation (*Euronews* 2024). Director General of the Italian National Cybersecurity Agency Bruno Frattasi announced that the agency was working closely with the Ministry of the Interior, which presides over the voting system. He mentioned the importance of the preventative measures that the agency was taking to protect the systems and networks that could be attacked by malicious actors aiming to disrupt the voting process (AGI 2024). Germany's Federal Office for Information Security, whilst acknowledging cyber espionage, disinformation and, more concretely, hack-and-leak and DDoS attacks as threats to the elections, also stated that there was no clear evidence of any attempts to use cyber-attacks to influence the election process (Germany, Federal Office for Information Security 2024). Aligned with the German view was former UK National Cyber Security Centre chief Ciaran Martin's plea to keep calm and not let the 'hysteria' take over, pointing out that we confuse 'activity and intent with impact, and what might be technically possible with what is realistically achievable' (Martin 2024). He also highlighted that often in cases of system or network failures, it is not down to foreign interference but simply to a 'failure of state infrastructure' (Martin 2024), an important point to note if we are considering the forest and not the individual trees.

Nonetheless, the most notable efforts to secure elections have been observed outside the EU. In the US, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency has produced an Election Security Toolkit. It has also established a formal Multi-State Information

Sharing and Analysis Center and an Elections Infrastructure Information Sharing and Analysis Center, which provide no-cost services to secure the US election infrastructure (US, CISA 2024). These will be of critical importance in the upcoming November presidential elections.

Cybersecurity in the 2024 EU elections: an analysis

At the time of publication, a few months after the elections, there has been no comprehensive report on the cybersecurity of the 2024 EU elections. Aside from the incidents noted above, there have been no reports of major disruptions, data breaches, or bot or ransomware attacks in relation to the election process. Despite the intensiveness of the disinformation attacks, we have not, at the time of writing, seen any claims that they had a major impact on Europeans' views or the election results. This could mean that campaigns did manage to prioritise security measures over budgetary concerns, which are very often used as an excuse for not adopting the necessary measures.

However, a post-event analysis is needed to pinpoint the soft spots during the EU election process—to highlight where campaign staff could have done better and summarise the lessons learned, so that the same, or similar, mistakes are avoided next time. We need to acknowledge that despite measures being put in place, cybersecurity vulnerabilities will continue to be exploited during the rest of the elections expected in 2024 and beyond. Political parties should not lower their guard once the election process is over.

Furthermore, implementing fully and in a timely manner the Regulation on a high common level of cybersecurity for the EU institutions (European Parliament and Council 2023) and the NIS2 Directive (European Parliament and Council 2022) for national governments' ICT service providers is critical to ensure an adequate level of cyber protection for the EU in the future.

Finally, it is important to differentiate between attempts to interfere with the elections and the actual impact the different types of attacks have actually had and will have. Taking proactive measures is always important, but providing a genuine and clear picture of the threat landscape, without overestimating it, is even more important. Acknowledging that foreign states have tried and will try in the future to interfere with our elections is an important message for national governments to deliver, but only alongside a solution for every threat. More data-backed analysis and decisions are needed.

Conclusion

The security of the election process and the trustworthiness of election results are the foundations of democracy, and ensuring them requires a collaborative effort and harmonised ambition—be it in the context of the EU elections, member states' national elections or non-EU states' elections. While the cybersecurity threat landscape is evolving

and many of the cyber threats the EU is facing could have an impact on elections, this post-event analysis of the 2024 EU elections has shown that despite the low level of attention paid to cybersecurity in the preparations for the polls, there were no major incidents reported during the elections. Nonetheless, efforts need to continue in the EU and beyond to avoid cyber-attacks having a significant impact on election processes around the world. We would encourage government organisations to publish their own analyses and lessons learned in view of the large number of resources that are available, as evidence-based communication on the cybersecurity measures taken and their impact on elections would contribute to greater public trust in the decision-making process.

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The case for a circular Blue Card for young non-EU professionals

European View
2024, Vol. 23(2) 235–242
© The Author(s) 2024
DOI: 10.1177/17816858241288383
journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



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Abstract

Due to the challenging demographics in Europe, a new approach to labour migration to the EU is necessary. Such an approach should be more targeted and thus entail a more proactive and integrated stance. Whilst some moves in this direction have been made in recent years, more are required. This article charts one possible route to a more proactive and integrated policy by proposing the creation of European university campuses outside of Europe to act as hubs of academic, cultural, linguistic and labour exchange, similar to the American system. This approach would not only address the current labour force challenges but would also hold the potential to significantly enhance academic and cultural exchange. Many of the required elements are already in place: numerous bilateral universities, for example, already exist, such as the German Jordanian University, as do various European research and cultural institutes. Such campuses, combined with a new circular Blue Card for young non-EU professionals, would have benefits for both the member states and the selected partner countries. The article concludes by proposing the implementation of concrete test cases in the European neighbourhood.

Keywords

Labour migration, Circular migration, Cultural and academic diplomacy, Foreign policy, European Neighbourhood Policy

Introduction

As the labour force ages throughout the EU, a certain level of labour migration from outside the Union is necessary. Labour migration policy needs to take into account both the fact that labour migrants who do not return contribute to permanent brain drain for their countries of origin and that these migrants also age (de Beer 2024). Labour

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migration should therefore be selective and as targeted and circular as possible. Examples from the past and present throughout Europe can help inspire new models and approaches for the member states. For example, it is important to remember that a hard border between many southern European countries and their neighbours across the Mediterranean was not the historical norm. Seasonal migration for regular or irregular work was common. For instance, Italy and Spain only introduced travel visas for citizens of Algeria, Morocco, Senegal, Tunisia and Turkey in 1990 and 1991 respectively as part of a move to align their regulations with ‘European community norms’ (Czaika et al. 2018, 597). The rise in labour migration restrictions since has often resulted in side effects such as rising illegal migration, reduced return migration and increased use of the family reunification migration channel (Zimmermann 2014, 9). Another more recent example is the visa facilitation agreement for Ukrainians in 2017, which led to massive circular migration between Ukraine on the one hand, and Poland, Czechia and Italy, among others, on the other (EU Monitor 2017; Eurostat 2021).

This article charts an alternative pathway, that of introducing a simplified and circular Blue Card for young non-EU graduates with the necessary (language) skills from selected universities and university colleges outside of Europe. There are already numerous well-established institutions and concepts in place, especially in the fields of cultural and academic diplomacy, that could support such a move (Ang et al. 2015, 364–9; Goff 2013). Think, for example, of the Goethe Institute, with its numerous centres worldwide offering local German language courses, which play a vital role in academic and cultural exchange. Many EU member states have similar institutes, though often on a more limited scale (EUNIC 2024). Other hybrid forms of cultural and academic institutes exist, such as the Netherlands–Flemish Institute in Cairo, a hub for research and cultural and academic exchange that offers Dutch language classes and exams. Exchange initiatives such as the German Academic Exchange Service and the French Eiffel scholarships are other examples of existing avenues for academic diplomacy. To take it one step further would be to establish a direct and physical academic presence abroad, such as the French–Armenian University in Yerevan, established by bilateral treaty in 2000, which awards degrees that are valid in both France and Armenia. This is one of many examples of ‘bilateral’ universities or international campuses.

The need for more active European academic and cultural diplomacy

Academic diplomacy can go by many names, such as knowledge diplomacy, science diplomacy and so on. Essentially, these names all refer to the same idea, that is, ‘the process of building and strengthening relations between and among countries through international higher education, research and innovation’ (Knight 2022, 161). At present, academic diplomacy is quite well established in the foreign policy of certain EU member states and of the EU itself (European External Action Service 2022). There is intensive intra-European cooperation between various academic and research actors, which takes many different forms including university alliances, such as the Coimbra group, and European-wide networks in nearly all domains. Institutions such as the

Franco-Germany University, the European University Institute in Fiesole near Florence and the College of Europe are further examples. These strong networks are most visible in terms of exchange programmes, such as Erasmus+, and other tangible connections, such as the issuing of dual degrees, staff exchanges and so on. Participants often return to their home countries or move to new ones with new skills and a deeper appreciation for diverse cultures and ideas, thereby enhancing their employability in the competitive international job market.

Outside of Europe, however, the picture is different (Van Langenhove 2017, 10–18). Whilst there is a lot of academic cooperation via, for example, the Horizon Europe programme, and the EU actively pursues science diplomacy outside of Europe (Moedas 2016), the field is still more fragmented than inside the EU. As mentioned, some member states have taken active steps to establish ‘bilateral’ universities abroad, such as the aforementioned French–Armenian University, the German University in Cairo and the German Jordanian University. These universities are often closely connected to a European university. Sometimes, the European universities themselves have established subsidiaries abroad, such as the Sorbonne in Abu Dhabi, or they participate in international campuses, such as UGent at the Incheon Global Campus in South Korea. These are all laudable efforts, and they harness the power of education to enhance mutual understanding, foster innovation and build lasting international relationships.¹ If these efforts were better integrated with a more coordinated labour migration policy, it could also result in the attraction to Europe of educated migrants with the necessary (language) skills and European-recognised degrees, alongside the strengthening of the local academic landscape.

One such pathway could be through the creation of a ‘European University (College)’ system in selected partner countries, similar to the system used by American universities, for example, in Egypt, Lebanon and Kyrgyzstan. The participating local universities in these countries have solid partnerships with American universities, often receiving funding from the US, and there is an active exchange of academic staff. In terms of set-up, the arrangements are often based on a bilateral treaty. Many other American universities have branches or campuses worldwide (Long 2020).² These universities act as spaces for academic and cultural exchange (for example, via exchange semesters) and award degrees that are recognised in both the local country and the US. The EU does already have a similar set-up: the China–EU Law School in Beijing (CESL) (Wieczorek & Wang 2023, 105). CESL was founded based on an agreement between the EU and the government of the People’s Republic of China and comprises a Sino-European consortium of 13 European universities, 2 Chinese universities and the Chinese National Prosecutors College (CESL 2024; University of Hamburg 2018).

By opening up opportunities for cooperation with other member states through the existing European universities abroad, as well as by setting up institutions similar to CESL in close cooperation with local governments and existing universities, an approach similar to the American one could be achieved. Such a model would present a great opportunity for the EU, as it would foster significant academic and student exchanges.

Graduates' degrees would also no longer have to undergo a lengthy recognition process, and the graduates themselves would already be more familiar with the EU in a general sense due to, for example, their experiences in student and academic exchange programmes. The focus of these new institutions should, of course, be on the fields in which there are severe shortages of labour in Europe, for example science, technology, engineering, maths, nursing, information technology and so on, and they should, as such, offer both academic and professionally orientated programmes. In this way the institutions would ensure that skill provision is matched with European labour market needs.

As knowledge of the local language is essential for many jobs in the European labour market, such a system should also incorporate lessons for various European languages into the programmes or offer them as an optional extra, taking into account the exact context, cooperation agreement, and existing presence of European cultural and research institutions in the selected countries. Similarly, such European universities could also play an important role in assessing and recognising local degrees and certificates. In cooperation with local partners, they could also provide non-academic specialist training and certification outside of their regular programmes, especially for those sectors in which there is an evident labour shortage in Europe.

In short, these European universities abroad should become the key hubs for academic, cultural, linguistic and labour exchange with the EU. They should also act as a stepping stone for labour migration to the EU, for example, by granting graduates the right to temporarily legally migrate to the EU to work for a certain number of years via a special, time-limited, and thus circular, Blue Card system for persons under 30 (see below). As not all graduates would migrate to Europe, and as those that do would return to their home country with new and different skills, this would amount to a brain gain for both Europe and the countries of origin. Furthermore, those returning would do so with new connections and could therefore act as drivers of foreign direct investment and closer economic cooperation in their home countries, leading to better and deeper ties between Europe and the countries of origin (Dhian Ho et al. 2021, 54–5). The campuses could also actively work with local and European companies to create the proper framework for a thriving start-up and spin-off scene.

A specific circular Blue Card for young non-EU professionals

Labour markets in the EU remain a mostly national affair, which leads to various approaches to how they are organised and overseen. Certain European labour market policies, such as the recently revised European Blue Card, have proven largely ineffective due to the various different qualification requirements imposed by the member states (Peers 2021; Eurostat 2023).³ This fragmentation is also present in the field of circular migration.

Circular migration is an important and recurring discussion topic for the European Commission and international organisations (Vankova 2020, 1). There is not, however, one definition and understanding of circular migration in Europe (UNECE 2016, 3–8).

The general understanding of circular migration is that it entails repetitive, recurrent and temporary cross-border movement for short or long periods of residence in a country of destination and then a return to the country of origin (Vankova 2020, 6). So far there has not been a common approach to circular labour migration within the EU, with some exceptions, such as the circular migration initiatives implemented under the Mobility Partnerships with the Eastern Partnership countries and the Seasonal Workers Directive, which was expressly introduced to promote temporary and circular migration (Vankova 2020, 242; Passalacqua 2022, 692). Some national measures, such as the Polish simplified *Oświadczenie* (Declaration on entrusting work to a foreigner) procedure for nationals from certain countries, have however created large flows of circular migration (for example, with Ukraine). Some countries are running or have run similar (small) pilot projects, such as Belgium, which has a scheme set up in Morocco that provides information and communication technology training and circular migration permits (Enabel 2021).

The aforementioned European Blue Card could act as the inspiration for the creation of a new circular migration pathway for young non-EU professionals. A more coordinated and targeted effort to promote circular migration could help ease European labour shortages and support development in the countries of origin (Rahim et al. 2022; Zimmermann 2014, 2–3). One approach could be the establishment of a specific circular Blue Card (hereafter CBC) for young non-EU professionals—for example, for those under 30—with the necessary skills and degrees to fill certain bottleneck vacancies. The graduates of the aforementioned European universities abroad would of course be ideally placed to participate in such a programme, but it should not be exclusively available to those coming from these institutions.⁴ A somewhat similar programme exists in the UK, and the Netherlands already has a lower salary threshold for those under 30 applying for a European Blue Card (UK Government 2024; The Netherlands, Immigration and Naturalisation Service 2024).

As with the regular Blue Card, there should be a European-wide framework, with member states being able to specify details regarding the use of CBCs for their territory and set out certain extra requirements if desired. For example, each member state could decide to issue a limited number of CBCs, dependent on their population and labour shortages. Member states could also demand extra requirements, such as basic knowledge of the official language(s), hence the importance of integrating a language aspect into the aforementioned European university abroad system. Ideally, CBC holders would also fall under a specific tax and social security system, which would align with national standards so as not to undercut the local labour market and thereby ensure a stable social security system. All other national laws, including those on labour rights and minimum wage, would be applicable.

The crucial difference from many other programmes and the standard Blue Card, would be that the CBC would entail a mandatory return policy after allowing the holder to work in an EU member state for a specified amount of time (for example, four years).⁵ However, a programme should be established to help those returning to their countries of origin to develop further via, for example, an ‘alumni’ scheme. The alumni of this programme should also be able to obtain short-term Schengen visas more easily when

returning to Europe on business or for other visits. After a certain period (for example, five years), they should be able to apply for a single permit again if so desired.

Of course, such a move would require the implementation of an EU-wide minimum standard via a Directive and a comprehensive framework designed with the selected partner countries, but it would fit perfectly as part of the recent Skills and Talent Mobility package (European Commission 2023).

Conclusion

By establishing a new circular migration channel, the CBC, alongside the Seasonal Workers Directive, a more circular labour migration pattern to Europe might be within reach. The empirical data analysis carried out in multiple studies suggests that flexible policies that allow for increased circulation of migrants instead of more restrictions actually lower the number of long-stay migrants (Massey and Pren 2012, 4–5; Constant et al. 2012, 15–19; Zimmermann 2014, 9; Vankova 2020, 243). This finding should help drive the rollout of a targeted circular migration policy. The foundations for such a policy are already there. By expanding and cooperating more closely with the established European universities abroad, some pilot projects could be set up. These would preferably take place in European Neighbourhood Policy countries. For example, the EU and certain member states or regions could negotiate with the German University in Cairo and other relevant German and Egyptian authorities to enable their participation in the university and deploy a pilot circular migration project. Likewise, the EU could look to co-finance and coordinate the establishment of a European university in Serbia, Tunisia or Armenia in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy and/or accession talks. The recent move of the College of Europe to establish a campus in Tirana, Albania, shows that such initiatives are possible and are already happening. However, the link between academic diplomacy and (circular) labour migration must come to the foreground.

Authors' Note

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author alone and do not reflect the views or positions of any entities to which the author is related by employment or other means.

Notes

1. Of course the term ‘European’ is already used in the name of various private universities in numerous countries, often without there being any formal agreement with a European university.
2. Although one must note that the quality of education highly depends on multiple factors—some ‘American’ universities are purely set up for profit and the term ‘American’ is used as a type of branding, similar to that of ‘Swiss’ watches. For more on this, see Long 2018.
3. It is too early to assess the impact of the recent changes to the Directive.
4. Of course, other options such as the regular single permit procedure would remain open to the graduates and nationals of these countries.
5. In this way, it would somewhat resemble the existing ‘working holiday’ programmes offered by Australia and New Zealand.

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The ties that bind think tanks and parties in EU member states

European View

2024, Vol. 23(2) 243–253

© The Author(s) 2024

DOI: 10.1177/17816858241288386

journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



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Abstract

Think tanks linked to political parties, known as political party think tanks (PPTTs), exist in various EU member states and play particular roles in their respective political systems. This article provides the first comprehensive overview of these PPTTs, focusing on their party affiliation. Based on data collected from PPTT websites and exploratory contacts with PPTTs, we categorise the EU member states into two groups: those with PPTTs in *sensu stricto*, that is, where the PPTTs have recognised party affiliations, and those where the PPTTs have hidden party-political affiliations. Understanding PPTTs is essential for comprehending their roles at both the national and the EU level.

Keywords

Political parties, Think tanks, Political party think tanks, European political foundations, Party affiliations, EU member states

Introduction

Political party think tanks (PPTTs) play a crucial role in modern democracies (Vande Walle and de Lange 2024). At the level of the EU, PPTTs exist as European political foundations (EPFs), which are networks of national foundations and think tanks (Gagatek and Van Hecke 2014, 96). Although going by different labels in different

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countries (e.g. ‘scientific institutes’ in the Netherlands, ‘party study centres’ in Belgium, ‘political academies’ in Austria and ‘political foundations’ in Germany), these institutions all fall under the category of PPTTs.

While the EPFs have been compared with each other (Gagatек and Van Hecke 2014) and there have been several case studies on national PPTTs in EU member states,¹ an overview of the PPTTs on the European continent, including in the regions beyond Western Europe (e.g. Day 2000), is still lacking.

The literature on political parties is extensive and provides valuable insights and empirical data that underpin the study of party organisations (see, e.g. Poguntke et al. 2016). However, similar comprehensive studies for the affiliated PPTTs are lacking. Thus, a crucial first step for comparative research is to map the existing PPTTs. Descriptive research is essential for understanding phenomena that are not yet well documented, making it intrinsically valuable to the study of PPTTs.

The aim of this article is therefore to provide an answer to the descriptive question of what the PPTT landscape in Europe looks like and what characterises these organisations. We will look at the defining feature that distinguishes PPTTs from other think tanks: party affiliation (Miragliotta 2021, 241; Pattyn et al. 2017a, 258; Weaver and McGann 2006, 7). Based on exploratory contacts with PPTTs and an analysis of the EPF members’ websites in 2022, we present two groups of PPTTs in EU member states: those with recognised party affiliations and those with hidden party affiliations.

What defines PPTTs?

To study PPTTs in Europe, a crucial first step is to define what constitutes a PPTT and how it differs from other entities, particularly think tanks. The scholarly discourse on defining think tanks underscores the inherent complexity of this task (Kelstrup 2021, 33). When defining PPTTs, the focus is on delineating their distinguishing features vis-à-vis think tanks.

PPTTs exhibit functional similarities to think tanks insofar as they fulfil essential roles within the political process, such as analysing societal issues and formulating policy recommendations (Mendizabal 2021, 26). However, their defining characteristic lies in their exclusive and formal alignment with a specific political party (Miragliotta 2021, 241; Pattyn et al. 2017a, 258; Weaver and McGann 2006, 7). The defining characteristic of PPTTs is thus their party affiliation.

This leads to two types of party-affiliated think tanks (Figure 1): PPTTs in *sensu stricto*, and hidden party-affiliated think tanks. The first category consists of think tanks with a recognised and exclusive alignment with a specific political party. This alignment is often evident through organisational, legal and financial ties, and can either be regulated or merely acknowledged. While regulated PPTTs receive direct government

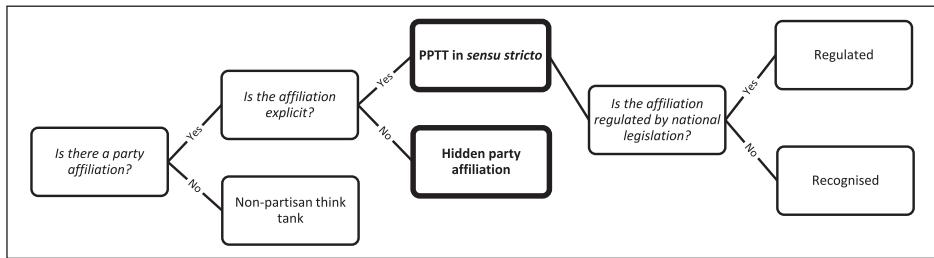


Figure 1. Types of party affiliations.

Source: Authors' own depiction.

funding, those that are simply recognised owe their existence to the party, and their funding depends on the party's support (Miragliotta 2021, 241; Pattyn et al. 2017a, 258).

The second type of PPTT, comprising those that have a hidden affiliation, is less clearly defined. These organisations exist separately from any party and describe themselves as non-partisan. However, they maintain ties to political parties by having party-affiliated members on their boards of directors or being founded by key party figures. Despite their formal independence, they share ideological affinities and informal links with political parties (Miragliotta 2018, 234). This contrasts starkly with the position of non-partisan think tanks, which maintain no formal or informal connections with political parties and explicitly advocate political neutrality (Abelson 2009, 9).

Studying the party affiliations of think tanks

The analysis of the party affiliations of PPTTs required three stages of investigation. In the first stage, we identified PPTTs across the EU member states by compiling a list of the members of the EPFs. Just as national parties are represented in the European parties and groups, national PPTTs are represented in the EPFs, which serve as networks (Gagatек and Van Hecke 2014, 96). Therefore, to identify these often overlooked national PPTTs, we analysed the members of the EPFs. However, not all members of EPFs are PPTTs, and not all PPTTs are EPF members.

In the second stage, we made exploratory contact with 37 party-affiliated organisations by reaching out to 138 EPF members via email, receiving responses from 27% of them. We sought information on their party affiliations and perceptions of party affiliation. Additionally, we enquired about their funding mechanisms, asking for their sources of funding and the estimated share provided by each source (i.e. direct government subsidy, private donations, member contributions, political party funding and indirect government subsidy via political party).

In the third stage, we expanded and cross-checked the information obtained during our exploratory contacts by conducting a content analysis of the official websites of the

PPTTs, which is presented in the analysis section of this article. This analysis focused on categorising the PPTTs based on their party affiliation. Specifically, we analysed whether the PPTT explicitly acknowledges a party affiliation. If it does, we labelled the organisation a ‘PPTT in *sensu stricto*’. If they did not acknowledge an affiliation or claimed to be non-partisan or independent, we checked for party representation on their board of directors. If such representation was found, we labelled the organisation a ‘hidden party-affiliated think tank’.

Descriptive analysis

The purpose of this description is not to provide an exhaustive overview of all party-affiliated think tanks, but to offer an overview of the types of party affiliations and the countries in which PPTTs exist. It serves as an introductory tool for understanding the under-studied subject of PPTTs in EU member states. We categorise the EU member states according to the type of party affiliation found among their PPTTs (Table 1). This categorisation is not exclusive, as a country can have both think tanks that acknowledge party affiliations and those that hide their party affiliation.

Table 1. EU member states by category.

| PPTTs in <i>sensu stricto</i> | PPTTs with hidden party affiliations |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Austria • Belgium • Croatia • Cyprus • Czechia • Denmark • Estonia • Germany • Hungary • France • Greece • Ireland • Latvia • Luxembourg • Malta • the Netherlands • Poland • Romania • Slovakia • Spain • Sweden | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bulgaria • Czechia • Greece • Italy • Ireland • Latvia • Luxembourg • Portugal • Slovenia |



Figure 2. EU member states with PPTTs in *sensu stricto*.

Source: Authors' own map created with MapChart.

PPTTs in *sensu stricto*

PPTTs in *sensu stricto* are think tanks with a recognised and exclusive alignment to a specific political party. This alignment is often evident through organisational, legal and financial ties and can either be regulated or merely acknowledged. Regulated PPTTs (e.g. those in Austria and Germany) receive direct government funding, whereas purely recognised PPTTs (e.g. those in Poland) owe their existence to the party, often relying on the party's support for funding (see Figure 2).

A clear example of a member state where PPTTs in *sensu stricto* are present is Austria. In Austria, PPTTs are closely affiliated with their respective parties and receive direct government funding based on the electoral success of the affiliated party. Austrian PPTTs include the Karl Renner Institute, affiliated to the Social Democratic Party of Austria (Sozialdemokratische Partei Österreichs); the Green Educational Workshop (Die Grüne Bildungswerkstatt), affiliated to the Greens; NEOS Lab, affiliated to the New Austria and Liberal Forum (Das Neue Österreich und Liberales Forum); the Political Academy

of the Austrian People's Party (Österreichische Volkspartei), affiliated to the conservative party of the same name; and the Liberal Educational Institute (Freiheitliches Bildungsinstitut), affiliated to the Freedom Party of Austria (Freiheitliche Partei Österreich), which is not a member of an EPF. This type of regulated PPTT is also known to be present in Germany, Hungary, Finland and the Netherlands.

Another example from Western Europe is provided by the German party foundations. These are among the most well-known and well-developed PPTTs. For example, the Christian Democratic Konrad Adenauer Foundation, linked to the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands), employs over 600 staff members in Germany and more than 1,000 people across 100 international offices. The Friedrich Ebert Foundation, linked to the Social Democratic Party of Germany (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands) and founded in 1925, and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the liberal Friedrich Naumann Foundation (linked to the Free Democratic Party (Freie Demokratische Partei)), both established in the late 1950s, all focus on civic education and international development. Other notable German foundations include the Desiderius Erasmus Foundation, linked to the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland); the Hanns Seidel Foundation, linked to the Christian Social Union (Christlich-Soziale Union); the Heinrich Böll Foundation, linked to Alliance 90/The Greens (Bündnis 90/Die Grünen); and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, linked to The Left (Die Linke).

When there is no national regulatory framework providing direct funding for PPTTs, their funding often depends on the willingness of the party to fund them. Alternatively, they can receive funding from various sources, including corporate donations or from limited public funds for specific activities. A clear example of an EU member state with PPTTs funded in this way is Poland. In Poland, the parties are responsible for establishing PPTTs and often decide on their activities and funding. Generally, these PPTTs focus on research, policy analyses and political education. As noted by a respondent to our enquiries from a Polish PPTT, 'The lack of a law on political foundations severely hinders the activities of PPTTs, as only the party can [provide] support'. An example of such a PPTT is the Social Democratic Ignacy Daszyński Centre, which explicitly aligns with the Social Democratic New Left (Nowa Lewica).

Other EU member states also have PPTTs in *sensu stricto*. In Western and Northern Europe, Belgium's Emile Vandervelde Institute is linked to the Walloon Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste) and Luxembourg's Green Foundation (Gréng Stëftung) is affiliated with the Greens. In the Netherlands, all PPTTs are explicitly affiliated to one specific political party and receive direct funding based on the parliamentary seat allocation of the parent party. The Social Democratic Wiardi Beckman Foundation, connected to the Labour Party (Partij van de Arbeid), is a Dutch example. Finnish PPTTs also acknowledge their affiliation with a political party and receive direct government funding from the Ministry of Education and Culture based on the election results of that party. Examples of Finnish PPTTs include the Kalevi Sorsa Foundation which is closely linked to the Social Democratic Party of Finland (Suomen sosialidemokraattinen puolue), while

Thought Workshop Toivo (Ajatuspaja Toivo) aligns with the National Coalition Party (Kansallinen Kokoomus). In France, the Jean-Jaurès Foundation acknowledges its affiliation with the Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste), which is represented on the board, and organises the socialist archives. In Ireland, the Collins Institute is a Family of the Irish (Fine Gael) initiative supported by the party. In Denmark, the Danish Liberal Democracy Programme formally connects with the Left (Venstre), and in Sweden, the Jarl Hjalmarson Foundation explicitly aligns with the Moderate Party (Moderata samlingspartiet). Estonia's Academy of Liberalism is strongly affiliated with the Reform Party (Eesti Reformierakond), while Latvia's Forum for Latvia's Future supports its parent party, For the Development of Latvia (Latvijas Attīstībai).

In Central, Eastern and Southern Europe,² Czechia's Masaryk's Democratic Academy (Masarykova Demokraticka Akademie) maintains a strong connection with the Czech Social Democratic Party (Česká strana sociálně demokratická), while in Slovakia, the Anton Tunega Foundation serves as the official think tank of the Christian Democratic Movement (Kresťanskodemokratické Hnutie). Hungarian PPTTs are closely tied to their parent parties, which receive budget subsidies for their foundations if they have parliamentary representation. For example, the Barankovics István Foundation is fully integrated with the Christian Democratic People's Party (Keresztyén demokrata Néppárt) and the Táncsics Mihály Foundation develops the policy thinking of the Hungarian Socialist Party (Magyar Szocialista Párt). Other notable PPTTs with strong party connections include the Foundation for Civil Hungary (Polgári Magyarországról Alapítvány), associated with Fidesz, and the Oikopolis Foundation, associated with the Greens (LMP—Magyarország Zöld Pártja). In Romania, the Institute of Popular Studies (Institutul de Studii Populare) strengthens the political identity of the National Liberal Party (Partidul National Liberal). Croatia's Foundation of the Croatian Statehood (Zaklada hrvatskog državnog zavjeta) acknowledges its affiliation with the Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica). Greece's Nicos Poulantzas Institute is linked to Syriza, while Cyprus's conservative Glafkos Clerides Institute was established by the Democratic Rally (Dimokratikós Sinagermós). In Malta, the Ceratonia Foundation is affiliated with the green Democratic Alternative (Alternattiva Demokratika). In Spain, the Concord and Freedom Foundation (Fundación Concordia y Libertad) openly acknowledges its affiliation with the Christian Democratic People's Party (Partido Popular).

PPTTs with hidden party affiliations³

Some EU member states do not have PPTTs in *sensu stricto*, but do have think tanks that have less explicit connections to political parties. These organisations may lean towards a particular political ideology, and their boards often include former or current representatives of political parties. These think tanks do not have explicit party ties but possess political ideologies that align with broader political thought groups. Although they do not make their connections explicit, they have implicit links via party representation on their boards (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. EU member states with hidden party-affiliated think tanks.

Source: Authors' own map created with MapChart.

A clear example of an EU member state that has hidden party-affiliated think tanks is Portugal. In Portugal, think tanks are not explicit about their party affiliations but do have party representation on their boards. For example, the Amaro da Costa Institute describes itself as independent, yet a People's Party (Partido Popular) representative is a member of its board. The institute focuses on research, political thought, public policy, education and public debate. Other examples include the ResPublica Foundation, which has a representative of the Socialist Party (Partido Socialista) on its board, and the Francisco Sá Carneiro Institute, the board of which includes members of the Social Democratic Party (Partido Social Democrata).

In Western and Northern Europe, Luxembourg's Robert Kriebs Foundation includes board members from the Luxembourg Socialist Workers' Party (Lëtzebuerger Sozialistesche Arbechterpartei), but does not explicitly acknowledge its affiliation with the party. In Ireland, the Think-Tank for Action on Social Change, while asserting its independence, includes members of the Irish Labour Party on its board. In Latvia, the website of the Freedom and Solidarity Foundation (Brīvības un solidaritātes fonds) does

not make an explicit party reference but has Social Democrats represented on its board of directors. In Slovenia, the Jože Pučnik Institute includes board members from the Slovenian Democratic Party (Slovenska demokratska stranka).

In Central, Eastern and Southern Europe, Bulgaria's Institute for Social Integration (Institutāt za socialna integracija) does not explicitly emphasise its link to a specific party, but the Bulgarian Socialist Party (Balgarska sotsialisticheska partiya) is represented on its board. In Czechia, the Institute for Politics and Society (Institut pro politiku a společnost) asserts its independence while having an affiliation with Yes (ANO) through its board. In Greece, the Konstantinos Karamanlis Institute for Democracy includes members of New Democracy (Nέα Dimokratίa) on its board without acknowledging a direct affiliation. An example from Italy, a country with a wide variety of political foundations (see Allegri et al. 2018 for an overview), is the Gramsci Foundation, which has a board member from the centre-left Democratic Party (Partito Democratico).

Conclusion

This article provides an initial overview of the various party-affiliated think tanks in the EU member states. We classified the members of the EPFs into two categories, based on their type of affiliation with a political party, as it is this affiliation that differentiates the PPTTs from other think tanks. An analysis then allowed us to categorise the member states in terms of the types of PPTTs present therein. The first category includes EU member states that have PPTTs in *sensu stricto*; either regulated funding is provided to these PPTTs direct from the government or there is a clear recognition of party affiliation, even if a regulatory framework is lacking. The second category comprises EU member states where the think tanks claim to be non-partisan and independent but have party representation on their boards. Furthermore, the research uncovers substantial differences in the establishment and regulation of PPTTs across the EU member states.

This article lays the foundational groundwork for understanding the distribution and characteristics of PPTTs across the EU member states. This foundational analysis is crucial for further research and policy discussions regarding the influence and operation of PPTTs within European political systems. We have lifted the veil on the often-mysterious PPTTs and emphasised the diversity of these political actors. It can now be seen how difficult it must be for EPFs to have such a variety of members or partner organisations across all the EU member states and to actively engage with all of them as members of the same political family.

Funding

Funding for this research was provided by Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (Grant Number: 11J2423N). Ethics approval for this research was obtained from the University of Leuven Social and Societal Ethics Committee, application number G-2020-2595-R2.

Notes

1. See Mohr (2010) for Germany, Pattyn et al. (2017b) for Belgium and Lounasmeri (2020) for Finland.
2. For many of these organisations, little information is available in the academic literature and in some cases the websites do not work, are non-existent or display little organisational information.
3. It is important to keep in mind that this article focuses on EPF members. Therefore, examples such as New Land (Terra Nova), linked with the Socialist Party (Parti Socialiste) in France, or the Alternative Foundation (Fundación Alternativas), linked with the Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español) in Spain, are not included in the analysis because they are not EPF members. However, they do display hidden party affiliations through board memberships.

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The rise of the childless cat ladies

European View

2024, Vol. 23(2) 254–256

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DOI: 10.1177/17816858241292436

journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



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Following the presidential debate between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris on 10 September 2024, pop megastar Taylor Swift announced on her Instagram page that she would be voting for Harris come the election on 5 November. She posted a photo of herself holding her cat Benjamin Button (who had previously shared the cover of *Time* with her when she was named its Person of the Year). She added a multi-paragraph caption explaining her decision, signing it, ‘Taylor Swift—Childless Cat Lady’.

In so doing, Swift implicitly called out comments made by Trump’s running mate J. D. Vance back in 2021, when he lamented that the future of the US was in the hands of Democratic politicians with no kids (and thus no personal stake in the country’s future). Vance mentioned Harris and Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez in particular and used the expression ‘childless cat ladies’. Many women took to social media to rightfully make the case that their societal value is not derived from their decision whether to have kids.

But far from singling out just another subgroup in the culture war, ‘Childless Cat Ladies’ is now a widespread, observable social phenomenon—although it is neither gendered nor strictly feline. ‘Childless Pet Parents’ might be a more accurate description, albeit far less catchy. Whatever its name, at its core are pet owners, often young, who have replaced the children their grandparents were having at their age with cats and dogs—and crucially, doting on them in the same manner.

I know this because, as the owner/parent of two female cocker spaniels, I frequently refer to them in conversation with my partner as ‘the girls’. One sees something of the

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general trend in the man who takes his dog along whenever he leaves home for more than a couple hours (I plead guilty) or the woman who creates a social media profile for her cat and writes all the captions as if Kitty were typing them herself (I pride myself on not being guilty of this one). The latter is definitely more humanising than the other, but they share the same underlying intent.

The numbers speak for themselves: Americans spent \$136.8 billion on their pets in 2022, a 51% increase on 2018 (Inspire Veterinary Partners, Inc. 2024). In part this is due to pet owners wanting only the very best for their ‘fur babies’ (a term added to the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2015). But it is also because modern capitalism has caught on and been all too keen to provide pet-related products and services that might once have made more sense had they been geared towards one’s children. Out with the video baby monitor; in with the self-cleaning, wi-fi connected litter box that delivers updates about your cat’s bowel movements directly to your phone. (I’m not joking; look it up.) For many people in the workforce, getting good optical and dental coverage for your kids through your employer’s health insurance plan is no longer a major objective; today over half of pet-owning Americans rank the availability of pet insurance as one of the top benefits that would influence their decision to take a new job (MetLife 2021).

This phenomenon is not limited to the West. It is well known that for decades China enforced a one-child policy, before making a sharp U-turn in recent years and now permitting couples to have up to three children. But for 2024 it is projected that the number of urban pets will surpass the number of toddlers (Lewis et al. 2024). And by 2030 the nation will have twice as many pets as it will children under the age of four.

Regardless of where we look, the underlying causes will be familiar to most: stagnating wages, significant student debt and low rates of home ownership among young people. All these factors have combined to create a climate of economic uncertainty which hardly fosters the desire to start a family, a costly endeavour. In addition, a pervasive sense of impending doom linked to climate change has unfortunately overtaken the worldview of many young people, so that potential parents think either that the world will not be around long enough for their kids to enjoy it or that Earth’s limited resources are becoming so scarce that we should avoid consuming them further by, as it were, adding more consumers.

Ultimately, today’s Childless Pet Parents are young adults navigating a world that has little in common with the one their parents were born into. In many ways having pets is motivated by the same basic human drive to provide care in return for love that has underpinned human relations for millennia, but adapted somewhat to fit modern circumstances. Barring any major shifts, one can only conclude that fur babies and their parents won’t be just a fad. For many it’s the new normal.

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The 7Ds for Sustainability – Defence Extended

European View
2024, Vol. 23(2) 257–258

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DOI: 10.1177/17816858241292424

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Daniel Fiott, Alessandro Marrone,
Christian Mölling, Paola Tessari,
Adérito Vicente and Klaus Welle**

The European Defence Union, a 70-year-old idea that has never been realised, can finally be built if Europeans close the existing defence capability gaps between themselves and the US. This publication proposes the creation of a fully capable European Defence Union through a structured, step-by-step process of strengthening essential building blocks ('defence pyramid'). It aims to prepare the Union to respond to growing security threats and instability in its neighbourhood, in complementarity with NATO.

This approach systematically addresses weaknesses through ten specific components. Having recognised the need for a European Defence Union, the next stage requires the EU to take essential action: reducing waste through Europe-wide military procurement and building the European defence market, ensuring efficient cross-border logistics activities and improving existing military mobility projects. Third, the study suggests that the Union should increase its investment in defence innovation and become competitive in dual-use research and technologies through a European DARPA (Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency). Fourthly, a European civil protection service should be set up to provide protection on a European scale. Fifth, the development of the European Defence Union should be completed and made fully operational by filling the strategic capability gaps, developing a military model, initiating a reform of the EU's current military missions and crisis management operations, and carrying out an institutional reform. Finally, the issue of a common European nuclear deterrent is addressed.

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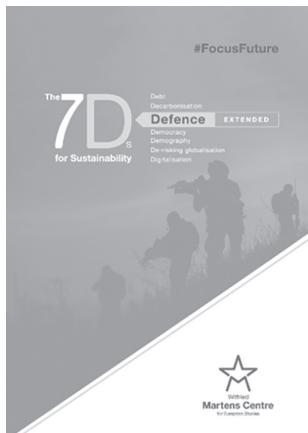
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Keeping the European Momentum: A Pan-European Study on EU Enlargement and Deepening

European View
2024, Vol. 23(2) 259–260

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DOI: 10.1177/17816858241299945

journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



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The EU is at a crossroads, both in terms of its internal constitutional reform and the integration of new member states. Hence, deepening and enlargement are inseparably linked together. In the context of the 2024 European elections and the constitution of a new European Commission under Ursula von der Leyen, the Martens Centre commissioned Brussels-based IPSOS to conduct a data-driven survey across all 27 EU member states.

To better understand EU citizens' attitudes and their views towards the enlargement and deepening of the EU, the research project inquired different socio-demographic groups and countries and looked closely at several dimensions: the conceptions of 'Europe'; the potential accession of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and the Western Balkan countries; the various models of integration; and changes within the European Treaties.

The study reveals that although there is optimism about the future of Europe, significant dissatisfaction exists, with 41% of citizens discontent with the EU's current functioning. Support for further enlargement, particularly to include Ukraine and the Western Balkans, varies widely, with Central and Eastern European nations showing more enthusiasm than Western counterparts, where Euroscepticism is more prominent.

A key finding is the division of opinions regarding the future of Europe, with some advocating for a stronger, more integrated Union, while others favour maintaining or reducing the Union's competencies. Socioeconomic factors such as age, education and political values significantly shape these perspectives. There is widespread concern about the economic, political and security implications of expanding the EU, particularly

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regarding the management of migration and economic disparities between member and candidate nations.

The paper also notes the decline in support for enlargement since 2004, linked to fears of economic imbalances and the failure to manage migration effectively. Citizens remain cautious about future enlargement rounds, particularly regarding their impact on the current member states. The Copenhagen criteria, particularly in terms of democratic stability and rule of law, are viewed as non-negotiable prerequisites for any future accession.

Finally, the study emphasizes the need for EU institutions and political parties to improve communication strategies to better align with citizens' concerns and highlight the tangible benefits of enlargement. Tailored approaches for different citizen groups are suggested to ensure broader support for both enlargement and deeper integration.

Author biography



Peter Hefele has been the Policy Director at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies since 2022. He completed his Ph.D. in economics and economic history in 1997 at the Catholic University Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (Germany). Between 2006 and 2021 he worked with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, mostly in and on the Asia-Pacific region. His main fields of expertise are economic policy, international relations and energy/climate policy.



Interparty Relations in the European Parliament 1952–2024: Between Cooperative and Adversarial Politics

European View
2024, Vol. 23(2) 261–262

© The Author(s) 2024

DOI: 10.1177/17816858241297792

journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



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This paper examines trends in relations between party groups in the European Parliament since its inception, with a particular focus on the European People's Party (EPP) and its prospective options for forging coalitions in the coming tenth legislative term. First, it traces the evolution of the two faces of intra-parliamentary relations in the European Parliament since its early days: cooperative and adversarial politics. Cooperation between the 'core' groups of the Socialists, Liberals and Christian Democrats has been the dominant guiding principle. The historical analysis explains why the European Parliament follows a different logic than most national parliaments and illustrates how this cooperation has played out.

The continued existence and relevance of the parliamentary core is demonstrated next. Despite a decline in the Socialists and Democrats (S&D) and EPP groups' seat shares, the core has persisted and remained relevant. The analysis of data obtained by calculating two indices, the institutional relevance index and a newly developed political relevance index, demonstrates that, even if the core has shrunk, it has maintained a dominant role in the European Parliament.

The prospects for the core groups in the tenth term are then considered. Although the EPP would be well-placed to look for new partners and alliances on its own terms, the analysis suggests that embarking on such a course would be fraught with difficulty. The analysis of intra-group cohesion and intergroup agreement data found in the literature

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highlights the considerable difficulties that The EPP would encounter in pursuing anything more than sporadic cooperation on selected issues with other groups. Even without the S&D group, the EPP's need to rely on Renew makes durable coalitions with groups such as the European Conservatives and Reformists or Identity and Democracy unlikely because of Renew's low levels of agreement with these groups.

It is likely that the European Parliament's incoming term will witness a continuity in intergroup relations. Therefore, the advantages of more conflictual relations between the core groups are limited, and cooperation can be expected to prevail.

Author biographies

Luciano Bardi (Ph.D., Johns Hopkins University) is a part-time professor at the Alcide De Gasperi Research Centre of the European University Institute. He is also president of the Observatory on Political Parties and Representation at the University of Pisa.



Jacopo Cellini (Ph.D., Scuola Normale Superiore and KU Leuven) is a research fellow at the Alcide De Gasperi Research Centre of the European University Institute and a visiting professor at the University of Tor Vergata, Rome.



A Better Deal for Climate and European Competitiveness: Policy Proposals for the European Centre–Right

European View

2024, Vol. 23(2) 263–264

© The Author(s) 2024

DOI: 10.1177/17816858241299944

journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



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Environmental degradation is a fact. The prevailing scientific consensus is that humankind is directly responsible for most of the rising carbon dioxide emissions in the atmosphere and their related negative effects. Within the EU political mainstream, these findings have positively resonated in policy and resulted in the most ambitious climate agenda globally. Most European citizens also recognise the threats of climate change and the need for our society to adapt and move in a more sustainable direction.

Decarbonisation is one of the most important political challenges of this century. The goals that have been set for European carbon neutrality by 2050 are laudable but presuppose the mobilisation of huge financial and material resources, as well as fundamental changes in the economic, industrial, transport, agricultural and energy sectors of European states. Climate spending already dominates the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework and the post-Covid recovery fund, with hundreds of billions of euros earmarked for the transition. The European Green Deal has a direct bearing on the economic performance of member states and private enterprises, while also becoming ever more present in the lives and pockets of European citizens.

Importantly, the clean energy transition has a direct impact on the EU's competitiveness and geopolitical clout. Consider the complexity of implementing such a transformative effort in concert with the rest of the international actors, which have all the incentives to free-ride on the efforts of others or delay the transition away from fossil fuels as long as possible.

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The decarbonisation destination is set, but the policy routes are many and uncertain. Regrettably, the EU is in a completely different financial and geopolitical position compared to 2019, when the European Green Deal was announced. We already see clear signals that the current framework is neither generating ‘green growth’ nor putting the continent on a fast track towards carbon neutrality. If the EU is serious about its decarbonisation pledges, it needs to rethink its approach.

This paper has two main objectives. First, it briefly addresses the main shortcomings of the Green Deal—the economic costs of the transition and the effect on European energy security and resource scarcity. It also looks into the overly optimistic projections for the renewable energy rollout and the huge investment gap in decarbonisation. More importantly, it puts forward a number of policy recommendations for European policy-makers in the new legislative period. Achieving carbon neutrality should remain the long-term goal, but the policy arsenal has to be improved. The European centre-right needs to be actively involved in leading this strategy by crafting a blueprint that is both realistic and achievable and that is shaped by its own vision and political values.

Author biography



Dimitar Lilkov is a Senior Research Officer at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies focusing on energy and climate, as well as digital policy. Specific fields of expertise cover the European Energy Union, energy security and decarbonisation policies. On the digital front, the respective research topics include novel European regulation in the online domain, privacy, disinformation, as well as technological competition with the People’s Republic of China. He is the host of the Martens Centre’s Brussels Bytes podcast on technology and EU policy.



September 2024



Explaining the Rise of the Radical Right in Europe

European View

2024, Vol. 23(2) 265

© The Author(s) 2024

DOI: 10.1177/17816858241292434

journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



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Over the past few decades, the radical right has been the most researched political family in Europe. Consequently, a significant amount of literature has been produced that explores the conceptual, theoretical and empirical dimensions underlying the rise of these political parties. This review article aims to assess the current trends, debates and level of understanding in the academic literature by examining three key questions. What are radical-right parties? How can their electoral successes be explained? What are the consequences of their rise for national and European politics? Although terminology and definitions may differ, radical-right ideology consistently includes authoritarianism, nationalism and opposition to liberal democracy. While their economic positions may be quite diverse, they find common ground on issues such as immigration and tradition. Explanations for the rise of the radical right focus on what attracts voters (demand-side explanations) and on how the parties themselves creatively use the political opportunity structures to gain influence (supply-side explanations). Relations between the radical right and the mainstream parties, as well as the strategies used to counter competitors, have substantial effects on the nature of party competition.

Author biography



Wojciech Gagatек is a Professor at the Department of Political Methodology in the Faculty of Political Sciences and International Studies at the University of Warsaw. His research interests focus on the political system of the EU (with a particular interest in the European Parliament), democracy and political representation in the EU, comparative political parties, European comparative politics and social sciences methodology.

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Enhancing Election Integrity by Strengthening EU Defences Against Disinformation

European View

2024, Vol. 23(2) 266–267

© The Author(s) 2024

DOI: 10.1177/17816858241292435

journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



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Digital platforms play a pivotal role in the dissemination of disinformation: their vast reach and engagement-driven algorithms are leveraged to spread misleading content. This makes the digital platform an extremely powerful media tool, able to have a huge impact on socio-economic and political relationships, including elections, and on the questioning of fundamental principles, such as democracy. Digital platforms have already been used several times to manipulate elections. Such platforms operate with significantly less regulation than traditional media, which have historically been subject to stricter oversight to ensure the accuracy and reliability of information. This disparity in regulatory standards underscores the importance of developing and implementing more robust regulatory frameworks for digital platforms in order to mitigate the spread of disinformation and protect the integrity of public discourse. Rigorous regulation of online media and Internet platforms is needed, as well as the continual raising of public awareness of disinformation.

This policy brief has three main objectives: (1) to analyse the existing components of the EU's strategy to combat disinformation, particularly the Digital Services Act, which provides the legal framework for digital services, and the Code of Practice on Disinformation; (2) to identify the key limitations and challenges of the current regulations; and (3) to develop policy recommendations and measures to overcome these limitations and address the threat of disinformation in upcoming elections. The brief emphasises the urgency of implementing the developed policy recommendations and measures before upcoming elections and the need for a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach to safeguard the integrity of democratic processes, prevent the spread of disinformation, and ensure fair and transparent elections across the EU.

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The image shows the front cover of a policy brief. At the top left is the logo for 'Volwest Martens Centre for European Studies'. The title 'Enhancing Election Integrity by Strengthening EU Defences Against Disinformation' is centered at the top. Below the title is the author's name, 'Alexander Romanishyn'. A small icon of a document with the word 'Summary' and the date 'June 2024' is located on the left. The main body of the document is visible below the title, containing several paragraphs of text and some bullet points.

Summary June 2024

Digital platforms play a pivotal role in the dissemination of disinformation; their vast reach and programming-driven algorithms are leveraged to spread misleading content. This makes them a significant threat to democratic processes, which can have a huge impact on socio-economic and political resilience, including elections, and on the questioning of fundamental principles, such as democracy. Digital platforms are also considered to be a major threat to the integrity of elections. As digital platforms operate with significantly less regulation than traditional media, which have historically been subject to stricter oversight to ensure the accuracy and reliability of information. This policy brief aims to analyse the current situation and propose the process of developing a more effective and more robust regulatory framework for digital platforms in order to enhance the security of democratic processes and protect the integrity of public discourse. High-level standards of minimum requirements for disinformation are needed, as well as the continued raising of public awareness of disinformation.

This policy brief has three main objectives: (1) to analyse the existing frameworks of the EU's digital governance, particularly the Digital Services Act, which provides the legal framework for digital platforms and the Code of Practice on Disinformation; (2) to identify the key limitations and challenges of the current regulation and propose recommendations for how to improve these frameworks to better manage these limitations and address the threat of disinformation in the light of the upcoming elections. The brief emphasises the urgency of implementing the developed policy recommendations and the need for a multi-stakeholder approach. It calls for a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach to safeguard the integrity of democratic processes, prevent the spread of disinformation, and ensure fair and transparent elections across the EU.

Keywords: Disinformation – Digital platforms – Digital Services Act – Election integrity

Alexander Romanishyn is a policymaker and economist, having served as Deputy Minister of Economy of Ukraine. His expertise in public policy, corporate finance, digital transformation and resilience has been instrumental in shaping economic, innovation and digital strategies, as well as in the recovery efforts of Ukraine. In the private sector, Alexander has led numerous successful merger and acquisition transactions in the Central and Eastern European region with EY, Midland Group UK and Volwest Group. Additionally, he has contributed to research and publications in digital, technology, disinformation, innovation and related fields. Romanishyn holds a Master's degree in Finance and a Bachelor's degree in Economics and Business from the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy and is a dedicated mentor in the European innovation ecosystem.



Fortifying Economic Security: The EU's Response to China's Risk

European View
2024, Vol. 23(2) 268
© The Author(s) 2024
DOI: 10.1177/17816858241299934
journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



**Jakub Janda, Marcin Jerzewski,
Zuzana Košková and David Toman**

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This paper delves into the European Union's approach to safeguarding its economic security in relation to its principal trade partner, the People's Republic of China.

Structured into four sections, the analysis begins by examining challenges and risks possessed by the PRC and offers an overview of positions on de-risking from China and interests of various stakeholders. The second chapter provides an overview of the current and future economic security instruments of the EU and selected EU member states. To broaden the horizon of existing policy frameworks, third chapter lists some of the lessons in de-risking policies from like-minded democracies Japan, the United States, and Taiwan. Finally, the paper concludes by presenting concrete policy recommendations for EU institutions, intended to fortify the economic resilience of the bloc.

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**Fortifying
Economic
Security:**

The EU's Response
to China's risk



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Reconnecting the British to Europe: Strategic Imperatives and Inconvenient Truths

European View

2024, Vol. 23(2) 269

© The Author(s) 2024

DOI: 10.1177/17816858241297810

journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



Dirk Hazell

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The goals of overcoming Putin, stanching populism and reinforcing Europe's relevance for successor generations demand Europe's most innovative and strategic statecraft since the late 1940s. This should include inviting the British people into plans for Europe's future: with war in Europe having been inflicted by Putin, this is not transactional cherry-picking, but must instead be seen by Europe's political leadership as a strategic imperative. The recent bilateral concord between France and the UK is a positive precedent.

This paper illustrates three priority areas where greater UK–EU cooperation could take place: in environmental policy, in forming a European capital market and in defence. In addition, four further elements of civil society are viewed as being essential to tangibly reconnect the British with the heart of Europe on a practical level. These are reciprocal youth mobility (including British membership of Erasmus+), the re-engagement of civic interest groups, the UK rejoicing Creative Europe, and the reinvigoration of town and city twinning initiatives.

In the aftermath of the recent elections, a unique opportunity now exists for the UK and the EU to work together for their common benefit. Strengthening the European identity through public policies will empower more of Europe's citizens to share more of life's experiences, grounded in a mutual commitment to democracy and the rule of law.

Author biography



Dirk Hazell leads the UK branch of the European People's Party and chairs the Federal Union, founded in 1938 and active in building European unity. A barrister and graduate of the University of Cambridge, he wrote what became the British government's 1980s' template for advancing Europe's single market and later led the euro-capital market through the first wave of EU legislation in preparation for a single capital market.

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