

— STUDIA EUROPEJSKIE —

# STUDIES IN EUROPEAN AFFAIRS

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**THE EU AND CONTEMPORARY GLOBALISM**

**EUROPE IN THE US–CHINA GEOECONOMIC RIVALRY**

**20 YEARS OF POLAND IN THE EU – EXPERT ASSESSMENT**

**THE EU’S NORMATIVE CREDIBILITY IN WARTIME**

**PREPARING THE EU FOR UKRAINE’S ACCESSION WITHOUT  
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**UKRAINE’S TRADE POLICY DURING THE WAR**

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**ROMANIA’S DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE EU  
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**AI SYSTEMS UNDER NEW UN, COUNCIL OF EUROPE,  
AND EU REGULATIONS**



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# ARTICLES





*Alojzy Z. Nowak*\*

## **The European Union in the Face of Contemporary Globalism**

### **Abstract**

The economic challenges generated by current geopolitical threats are projected to intensify in the coming decades. Over the next twenty years, global competition for political and economic influence is expected to reach its highest level of intensity since the Cold War. An increasing number of multinational corporations are pursuing their own forms of strategic autonomy, reflecting a broader fragmentation of the global economy. A wide range of economic and political actors are engaged in a struggle to advance their respective ideologies, objectives, and interests. As former NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg once remarked, “freedom is more important than free trade” and “protecting our values is more important than profit”. This shift in perspective is largely shaped by Russia’s ongoing aggression against Ukraine, which has raised profound concerns regarding the stability of the international security and cooperation system founded on the Charter of the United Nations. At the same time, the global experience of and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic continue to exert a lasting influence on the strategic decisions of nation-states and international organisations alike.

Against this background, the purpose of this article is to analyse the European Union’s position within the evolving framework of contemporary globalisation and to assess the principal economic, political, and geopolitical challenges shaping its future. The study aims to evaluate the EU’s capacity

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to sustain competitiveness, internal cohesion, and strategic autonomy amid accelerating global transformations, drawing particularly on the findings of the Draghi Report as a conceptual framework for potential policy responses. Accordingly, the European Union is presented as both an actor and an object of modern globalism – confronted with the dual imperative of defending its foundational values while adapting its institutions and policies to the demands of an increasingly volatile international order.

**Keywords:** Globalisation, European Union, Report, Draghi, Sovereignty, Nation State

## **Introduction**

In examining the current phase of the global economic order, largely shaped by the dynamics of globalisation, it is essential to consider the enduring role of sovereignty and the relevance of the nation-state. Until recently, the developmental models of many countries were grounded in the principles of the Washington Consensus, which arose not only from academic theory but also from the practical experiences of market transformation. The principal megatrends defining the contemporary world economy – deregulation, liberalisation, privatisation, and integration – reflect the influence of this paradigm. However, as Nobel Laureate Paul Krugman once observed, the global financial crisis of 2008–2010, remarkable both in its scale and systemic impact, represented a critical juncture in the reassessment of the fundamental assumptions underpinning that consensus. Some of the theoretical assumptions underpinning economic doctrines premised on the belief in the self-correcting nature of the free market have proven untenable (Krugman, 2009). Moreover, in the absence of adequate regulatory oversight, the system began to generate various distortions, with adverse effects both for the economy and for ordinary citizens. The financialisation of the global economy – largely a consequence of insufficiently regulated financial markets – has contributed to a growing scepticism towards economic models operating without appropriate regulatory and supervisory involvement of the state and its institutions. Criticism of the contemporary model of globalisation, still fundamentally rooted in neoliberal principles, should also extend to its broader consequences. In the context of global economic competition, the resurgence of ideologically motivated foreign policies, military influence, cyber aggression, and deliberately constructed imperial narratives has emerged as a major phenomenon, ostensibly aimed at protecting and reinforcing national interests. Russia and China exemplify states invoking such conceptions of national interest, while

Donald Trump's political approach – characterised by radicalism and an assertive strategy of regulating international trade primarily through tariff policies – likewise reflects this trend.

Against this intellectual and geopolitical backdrop, the purpose of this article is to analyse the European Union's position within the evolving landscape of contemporary globalisation and to assess the key economic, political, and strategic challenges shaping its present and future trajectory. The study seeks to examine how the EU, as both a regional and global actor, can sustain competitiveness, safeguard internal cohesion, and maintain its strategic autonomy within an increasingly fragmented and uncertain international order. Furthermore, the analysis draws on the findings of the Draghi Report as a primary reference point for evaluating potential systemic and policy responses to the Union's growing structural challenges. By combining economic and political perspectives, this article contributes to the wider academic debate on the redefinition of the European model of integration within the context of post-neoliberal globalism.

## **1. Key Tendencies in Global Markets and Their Impacts**

Existing trends in global markets, which have significantly constrained the capacity of nation states to mitigate adverse developments within these markets, may contribute to a further escalation of conflicts between states, regions, or even continents. According to Professor Sander's research, digital markets exhibit pronounced network effects that, in the absence of sufficient competitive pressure, lead to exceptionally high and above-normal profits. Companies identified by Professor Sander as "superstars" may also play a decisive role in reducing labour's share of value added. These "superstar" firms tend to pursue, and are likely to continue pursuing, higher profit margins while contributing less labour input to overall value added. In other words, the growing dominance of superstar companies in national value-added structures shifts income distribution from labour towards capital. For the purpose of this discussion, the crucial question concerns the extent to which the sources of the populist surge – including within advanced economies – can be causally linked to economic shocks whose origins or transmission mechanisms stem from the current model of globalisation, which is frequently perceived and experienced through the lens of instability and economic uncertainty affecting hundreds of millions of people worldwide (Sander, 2018, pp. 85–86).

Barry Eichengreen (2018) argues that "populism is often triggered by a combination of economic insecurity, perceived threats to national

identity, and what is seen as an unresponsive political system. However, it can be tempered through economic and political reforms aimed at addressing the concerns of the disaffected.” Such reforms – and, not infrequently, pseudo-reforms – frequently assume anti-elitist, authoritarian, or nativist (anti-immigration) features. In this context, both left-wing populism, characterised primarily by anti-elitist sentiments, and right-wing populism, which tends to attribute social and economic difficulties to “outsiders”, find their respective expressions. Eichengreen further observes that “the cultural backlash against globalisation, traditional politics and institutions, as well as against immigration and the advancing automation of production, manifests itself as discontent and anxiety rooted in economic insecurity” (Eichengreen, 2018).

In discussions on the recent wave of populism, two principal intellectual camps can be distinguished, each advancing distinct interpretations of its origins and underlying causes. The first focuses primarily on the growing economic insecurity generated by globalisation, particularly in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, while the second places greater emphasis on cultural reaction and contestation. In this regard, it is worth noting the extent to which the previously dominant developmental paradigm in economics is undergoing transformation. A telling illustration of this shift is the 2019 Nobel Prize in Economics, awarded by the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences to Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo, and Michael Kremer for their experimental approach to combating global poverty. Their research within the field of development economics seeks to explain the varying rates of economic growth among countries, the differences in productivity across societies, and divergent patterns of income inequality. According to the laureates, financial assistance provided by institutions such as the World Bank should be directed towards addressing specific challenges faced by developing and emerging economies, with interventions carefully adapted to the cultural, social, and legal contexts of recipient countries. This increasingly critical stance towards contemporary globalism and its outcomes is therefore not coincidental. The divide between the beneficiaries and the excluded within globalisation continues to widen, exacerbating inequalities and challenging the fundamental values upon which modern societies, particularly in Europe, are built.

Nonetheless, it is important not to adopt an exclusively critical stance when evaluating the developmental principles underpinning modern globalism. In many countries, foreign direct investment has played a significant role in enhancing employment and labour productivity, streamlining production processes, and enriching production input

through the infusion of capital and expertise, thereby facilitating, to a certain extent, the modernisation of national economies. Access to and participation in global knowledge and technology networks have, in several emerging economies, led to marked improvements in living standards and a modest reduction in poverty. Furthermore, the rapid economic development of many countries has already begun to reshape – and continues to reshape – the global balance of power, contributing to the emergence of a multipolar, or at least tripolar, world order. Although in nominal terms, expressed in US dollars, the European Union and the United States continue to hold an advantage over China, from the perspective of purchasing power parity, the emergence of a tripolar world has become an established reality.

## **2. The Dynamics of Globalisation: Aspirations and Disillusionments**

Yet the issues brought to light by globalisation are not only broad in scope but also address core concerns, including (Nowak, 2020, p. 18):

- the role of the state in the economy and the model of twenty-first-century society;
- the values and objectives that underpin societies as communities.

These fundamental values are, in turn, grounded in the choice of solutions concerning, among others:

- the notion of justice (and the extent of social stratification);
- value systems, lifestyles, approaches to ethnic minorities;
- the sovereignty of individuals, nations, and states, as well as the right to determine their own destiny and model of development, or to freely choose their form of political system.

An important element of awareness is also involved. Within the ongoing process of global competition and its consequences, a range of questions and dilemmas have emerged concerning both the model and the limits of modernisation. Its trajectory has, at the very least, created opportunities for:

- an increase in the prosperity of individuals and nations;
- the strengthening of the prestige and status of the state, local communities, families and gender groups;
- the enrichment of spiritual and intellectual values.

However, it is evident that these opportunities have been, and continue to be, interpreted in diverse ways, owing to the profound economic and cultural heterogeneity of nations, as well as the distinct historical experiences of individual states. Consequently, the expansion – and at

times the imposition – of value systems and attitudes characteristic of the Western world, such as excessive consumerism, an uncritical belief in the benevolent effects of the market, and an emphasis on human rights and individual freedoms, has provoked both criticism and, in some cases, outright rejection of the modernisation model typical of major global market actors, including the United States, European countries, and certain Asian nations.

There is no doubt that, outside the mainstream or in partial opposition to the dominant modernisation model, several distinct actors have positioned themselves (Nowak, 2020, pp. 19–20).

- **The Islamic world** has accepted the limited benefits of participation in the global economy while clearly affirming its cultural and ideological distinctiveness. The accumulation of substantial financial capital, mainly derived from oil and gas exports, has strengthened its influence within real global economic processes. However, this region has at times also functioned as a potential source of regional economic and political destabilisation.
- **The Global South**, particularly the underdeveloped countries of Africa, has remained largely excluded from the benefits and opportunities associated with globalisation. The twenty-first century has, however, witnessed the rise of emerging markets and states aspiring to developed-economy status, as their combined share in global GDP (nominal, USD) increased from 25% to 41.3% in 2024. When measured by purchasing power parity (PPP), their aggregate share amounts to approximately 60.7%, distributed among Asia (35.3%), Eastern Europe (7.8%), the Middle East and Central Asia (7.2%), Latin America (7.2%), and Sub-Saharan Africa (3.2%) (International Monetary Fund, 2025). In 2024, these countries accounted for roughly 46% of global goods exports, representing 22% of total global trade, with the value of world goods exports reaching USD 24.4 trillion (UN Trade and Development, 2025). Much of this expansion in the global economy is attributable to countries such as China, India, Vietnam, the Republic of South Africa, and several Central European states, including Poland. Nevertheless, according to the *World Bank Global Economic Prospects* report (World Bank, 2025), low-income economies are no longer converging with high-income ones. The observed slowdown in global trade and foreign direct investment inflows can be attributed to several interrelated factors:
  - rising public debt levels and the escalating costs of debt servicing;
  - the adverse effects of climate change, manifested in the growing frequency of conflicts, droughts, and floods;

- limited progress in domestic reforms, alongside declining investment and productivity.

As a result, income convergence – understood as the process of narrowing income disparities between high-income and low-income countries – is slowing down.

- **The world of Chinese civilisation.** The specific case of mainland China, along with several other Asian countries shaped by Chinese cultural heritage, illustrates a unique trajectory within globalisation. While these countries have emerged as some of its principal beneficiaries, they simultaneously – particularly in the case of China – pursue a distinct developmental path. This represents a form of economically successful modernisation that draws not primarily on models derived from highly developed Western economies, but rather on indigenous cultural foundations, notably those rooted in Confucian philosophy.

The economic achievements of China, though presently subject to legitimate criticism, have prompted numerous economists and political analysts to a significant – and not merely speculative – conclusion: through the examples of the Asian Tigers and China, the world is witnessing the gradual decline of Western civilisation’s dominance and the waning of the previously prevailing phase of globalisation. Nobel laureate in economics Joseph E. Stiglitz (2009) goes even further, contending that the global financial crisis of the first decade of the twenty-first century – largely triggered by the collapse of confidence in the resilience and ethical foundations of the American economy – inflicted greater damage on the core values of Western civilisation and its economic model than any other system. A less radical interpretation of this thesis is frequently voiced and supported by academic circles outside the United States.

Nobel Prize-winning economist Professor Paul Krugman cautions that a shock comparable to the 2008 collapse of Lehman Brothers could still occur. In his view, “under current conditions, companies are ceasing to invest; uncertainty is so great that numerous firms are suspending their development plans, which threatens an economic downturn” (Krugman, 2025). Although this statement constitutes a warning rather than a forecast from a distinguished economist, it warrants serious consideration. It appears that a financial crisis would most likely materialise in the event of a collapse of confidence in US government bonds – a scenario that cannot be entirely ruled out.

### **3. What Does the Future Hold for Western Civilisation?**

However, it appears that the weakening of the position and influence of Western civilisation is not solely the result of the turbulences and distortions in the global economy observed during the 2008 crisis in the United States, but rather stems from the broader dynamics of open borders in global trade and the growing prominence of the Chinese economy. China has been a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) since 11<sup>th</sup> December 2001. The gradual erosion of Western civilisation's influence and significance thus seems to be driven by a range of other, albeit equally important, factors.

**3.1. The competitiveness of the major Western economies is diminishing** (Nowak, 2020, pp. 19–20). Gradually, the balance is shifting in favour of Asian countries. Although the American economy and several eurozone Member States continue to demonstrate considerable innovative capacity and adaptability to market change, their advantage in these areas is steadily eroding. A crucial challenge in the coming years concerns the extent and nature of the utilisation of artificial intelligence to enhance the innovative potential of Western economies.

**3.2. The traditional ethos of the consumer society** – founded upon three pillars: intensive labour; a high savings rate; and sustained capital accumulation – appears to be undergoing gradual erosion. This very ethos once underpinned the rise of highly developed capitalist states, characterised by elevated levels of prosperity and comprehensive social welfare systems. However, despite high living standards, the prevailing model of the global economy in many affluent countries has contributed to widening income inequality and the fragmentation of the middle class. It has also weakened the role of the state in promoting the benefits of sustainable development and ensuring its inclusive character.

**3.3. The work ethic is no longer regarded as an absolute priority.** Among the factors exerting a destructive influence on this phenomenon is the growing belief that the relationship between additional effort and its corresponding financial reward has become increasingly tenuous. The distortions of financial markets – combined with the processes of financialisation and the failures of risk management within the American banking sector during the 2008–2010+ crisis – have profoundly undermined public confidence in ethical and moral norms (Nowak, 2020, p. 21). However, the problem extends beyond these factors alone.

There is a mounting conviction that earnings derived from employment can no longer be meaningfully compared with profits generated through stock market operations or speculative activity. The crisis affecting many affluent nations is also reflected in the fact that numerous individuals who once belonged to the middle class have lost the sense of self-worth formerly derived from their work (Duflo, Banerjee, 2022, p. 473).

**3.4. At the same time, a profound crisis of governmental authority is becoming increasingly evident.** It has long been widely and justifiably accepted that liberal democracy, the rule of law, and civil society constitute the most effective safeguards against the threat of political instability. In practice, these values have served as fundamental pillars underpinning the stability of democratic systems. However, both the financial crisis of the first decade of the twenty-first century and the COVID-19 pandemic exposed deeply demoralising instances of the helplessness of political authorities, and at times even their complicity in the deteriorating condition of state institutions, particularly those responsible for safeguarding public welfare. This loss of confidence manifested itself in widespread public protests, which questioned the legitimacy of state authorities and, in some cases, even the foundational principles of the rule of law. Many developed Western countries have struggled to address the social challenges arising from successive waves of migration. In numerous cases, migration-related issues have acted as catalysts for the radicalisation and polarisation of attitudes within Western societies, contributing to the rise of anti-establishment and populist movements. Even the United States has exhibited clear signs of this problem. Donald Trump's migration policy during his first presidential term (2017–2021) provoked considerable controversy and was widely condemned by human rights organisations, the judiciary, the media, as well as segments of American society and the international community. It represented a departure from the United States' long-standing humanitarian tradition, while his disproportionate response to the global refugee crisis attracted particularly severe criticism from liberal circles.

**3.5. The phenomenon of cyberterrorism is expanding on a large scale.** Its principal instigators and sponsors are, at present, predominantly authoritarian states whose primary objective is to destabilise the political and economic systems of countries belonging to Western civilisation. States engaging in cyberterrorist activity exploit advances in information technology to manipulate public perception and inflict political and economic damage, particularly by targeting

technological infrastructure that is vital to the functioning of modern societies. At the same time, the informational sovereignty of states is increasingly eroding in favour of global social media platforms, which exert growing influence over the formation of public opinion and the dissemination of information.

#### **4. Systemic Solutions to Socio-Economic Challenges**

The coronavirus pandemic compelled governments to reconsider the existing foundations of socio-economic policy. In this context, even the heads of certain central banks have expressed support for a more assertive use of fiscal instruments to protect social welfare and stimulate sustainable economic growth. President of the European Central Bank Christine Lagarde began her tenure by calling for the implementation of pro-development fiscal measures within government economic policies. She argued that eurozone countries should place greater emphasis on strengthening their internal markets, investing in the public sector, and addressing social inequalities through inclusive policies in order to meet the challenges of the global economy. Lagarde further advocated for the reinforcement of the European internal market through the completion of the digital single market, the capital markets union, and the single market for services, which she described as the “building blocks of Europe’s economy of the future”. She also underscored the need to finalise the economic and monetary union (European Central Bank, n.d.).

An increased regulatory and stimulative role of national governments in the economy – considered a necessary response to mitigating adverse processes in the global market and addressing crises such as wars or pandemics – does not signify a preference for authoritarian restrictions on integration and global trade, nor an attempt to replace market competitiveness with explicit or implicit policies of protectionism and economic nationalism. Despite its shortcomings, economic integration and the unrestricted movement of technology, capital, and labour remain among the most powerful developmental drivers at the levels of states, regions, and the global community. As Nowak (2020, p. 40) observes, “a bureaucratised, all-powerful state is just as unacceptable as a completely free market”. The aim, therefore, is not an omnipotent state but an effective one, in which the government, legitimised through democratic elections, can pursue an autonomous industrial and structural policy. However, in the case of many states – particularly Member States of the European Union – such policies cannot be regarded as entirely sovereign, as they are constrained by the regulatory framework of the EU’s Single Market,

the convergence criteria of the eurozone, and the operational directives of the European Central Bank (Nowak, 2013, p. 46).

Joseph E. Stiglitz (2004, p. 108), while highly critical of market distortions, nonetheless observes – referring to the fundamental principles of welfare economics – that “although market failure may justify government intervention, this does not imply that every governmental action aimed at preventing market failure is desirable. In evaluating any public programme, one must consider not only its objectives but also the manner in which it is implemented.”

If, therefore, a given state is well organised and efficient, providing vision and a “dynamic drive” to the economy (Mazzucato, 2016, p. 11) through the market-based, institutional framework of capital support, then, by means of government regulation at the central level, it can combine and integrate a productive and competitive market system with an entrepreneurial state, thereby facilitating structural and institutional transformation in both the private economy and the public sector. This perspective is widely shared across most European countries, particularly those belonging to the European Union.

## **5. The European Union and Its Principal Obligations**

European Union countries, like most established democracies worldwide, must confront dominant trends in an increasingly post-global economic and social landscape. These represent the key global challenges that have become increasingly evident in the third decade of the twenty-first century. Accordingly, the European Union must address a series of contemporary interrelated issues:

### **1. The war in Ukraine and European security:**

- The conflict with Russia necessitates continued military, economic, and humanitarian support for Ukraine.
- The transformation of the EU’s defence policy – strengthening the European Security and Defence Policy (PESCO), enhancing cooperation with NATO, and increasing defence expenditure.
- Confronting hybrid threats such as disinformation and cyberattacks, alongside the need to build resilience in critical infrastructure.

### **2. The state of the economy and inflation:**

- Until recently, persistently high interest rates, inflation, and uncertainties arising from the ongoing war have adversely affected investment decisions and consumer confidence.
- The most pressing economic challenges are linked to maintaining competitiveness relative to the United States and China.

- The lack of a renewed industrial and structural policy in the EU, alongside insufficient protection of its economic interests – even when operating within market-based principles and international agreements.
- 3. Energy transition and the Green Deal:**
- The implementation of the *Fit for 55* package – a set of European Union regulations designed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared with 1990 levels, as part of the effort to achieve climate neutrality by 2050. The package represents a fundamental element of the European Green Deal. However, the implementation of the European Green Deal occurs alongside increasing cost pressures on European businesses and growing social discontent.
  - A departure from Russian energy resources – the necessity to diversify supplies and invest in renewable energy, while maintaining an appropriate balance between climate neutrality and industrial competitiveness
- 4. Digitalisation and technological sovereignty:**
- The need to develop domestic technological competencies in artificial intelligence, semiconductors, and cloud computing.
  - The adoption of global regulatory frameworks for artificial intelligence (e.g., the *AI Act*), digital platforms, and data protection.
  - Strategic competition with the United States and China, primarily regarding their dominance in the sphere of innovation.
  - Building European strategic autonomy in technology, defence, raw materials, and supply chains.
- 5. Geopolitical rivalry and strategic autonomy:**
- Growing tensions and rivalry among the United States, China, and Russia compel the EU to redefine its political role within the emerging balance of global power.
  - The need to strengthen ties with Africa, Latin America, and Asia.
- 6. Migration pressure and internal cohesion:**
- An increasing influx of migrants from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, alongside significant numbers of refugees from Ukraine.
  - Persistent difficulties in developing a common migration and asylum policy, reflected in disputes between frontline states and those in Central and Northern Europe.
  - The rise of nationalism, xenophobia, and populist movements, contributing to internal tensions.

## **7. Enlargement of the European Union:**

- Candidate countries include Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and Western Balkan States.
- The need for institutional and budgetary reforms to ensure the EU is capable of admitting new members.
- Ongoing dilemmas concerning deepening versus widening enlargement, different speeds of integration, and the concept of a “multi-speed Europe”.

## **8. Social discontent and the crisis of democracy**

- Growing social inequalities, and declining trust in political elites and EU institutions.
- The increasing influence of populist and Eurosceptic parties.
- The need to combating disinformation and to defend democratic values and the rule of law within Member States.

Not only Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and the conflict in the Middle East, but also the instability affecting numerous regions worldwide – particularly in Africa – have made security a key priority on the agenda of the twenty-seven European Union Member States today. From a functional perspective, the European Union acts as the executor of responsibilities defined within the domains traditionally referred to as “the three pillars”. Each pillar fulfils distinct functions, addressing the collective needs of the Member States at a level that surpasses the capacity of any individual state acting independently. These core functions include acting as: a stabiliser of peace and guarantor of international security; a guardian of the fundamental values and principles underpinning contemporary democracy; a moderator of internal economic, social, and political relations; and a coordinator of the common external economic policy, as well as of key areas of foreign policy. It should be noted, however, that the European Union is neither a traditional international organisation, nor a federation, nor, least of all, a state. Defining the precise nature of the European Union has long proven problematic. As early as 1983, William Wallace captured this complexity by observing that it is “something less than a federation, and yet more than a regime” (Wallace, 1983).

The European Union today necessitates a redefinition of the concept of security, which, while still primarily military in nature, also encompasses health, climate, food and technological dimensions. This broader understanding explains why the priorities of European societal activity identified earlier in this study extend well beyond traditional defence considerations. The scope of this transformation extends from broadly understood military reform to climate change and the formulation of a new industrial policy, which in essence entails a redefined model of

reindustrialisation, as well as an effort to achieve technological sovereignty by developing indigenous technological competencies in areas such as artificial intelligence, semiconductors, and cloud computing. In addition to the impact of migration on the economy and public sentiment, the European Union must also redefine its role within the emerging global distribution of power. At stake is the extent to which it can build strategic autonomy in the areas of technology, defence, raw materials and supply chains. Furthermore, institutional and budgetary reforms are essential to ensure that the EU can operate effectively without experiencing major crises, while also remaining capable of accommodating the accession of new Member States.

## **6. Important Messages from the Draghi Report**

Given the dilemmas currently confronting the European Union – now comprising twenty-seven Member States, which in itself constitutes a significant political and negotiating challenge to its effective functioning – this difficulty arises at a time of intense global economic competition and deliberate attempts to destabilise international trade. These conditions compel the EU to prioritise the enhancement of its competitiveness. In this context, particular significance should be attributed to a September 2024 report prepared by former President of the European Central Bank Mario Draghi. Commissioned by the European Commission, *The Future of European Competitiveness* spans approximately four hundred pages and examines virtually all sectors of the EU economy, offering detailed recommendations for improving their performance. Draghi warns against the “slow agony” of the EU economy. The report’s key findings address the following issues.

**6.1. A call to close the widening investment gap between the European Union and the United States and China, particularly in the area of new technologies.** The EU requires additional investment of nearly €800 billion per year to reach the levels achieved during the 1960s and 1970s, representing approximately 5% of the Union’s GDP. According to Draghi, the current period of relatively low real interest rates provides a unique opportunity to expand public investment. Furthermore, there is a need for a new financial framework to support joint EU projects.

**6.2. Lack of innovation and productivity.** The report highlights insufficient investment and expenditure on research and development. It is no coincidence that Europe currently lacks world-leading technological

enterprises. To enhance innovation, the report recommends strengthening the role of industry, reducing energy costs, and further deepening the Single Market. The role of innovation is of fundamental importance to the Member States of the European Union, given their relatively high labour costs and limited access to natural resources. Moreover, Draghi emphasises that regulatory requirements for the technology sector within the European Union are among the most stringent globally. The report indicates that key measures to enhance innovation include improving access to data, promoting greater openness and standardisation, and harnessing the potential of major European multinational enterprises. The liberalisation of the services market also remains a critical issue, given its pivotal role in the EU economy. According to the latest Eurostat data, services accounted for 73.7% of total gross value added (GVA) and employed the vast majority of the workforce in EU countries (Eurostat, 2025). Table 1 below presents estimated data from Eurostat, expressed in percentage points, illustrating changes in the share of services in GVA added between 2005 and 2024:

**Table 1. Changes in the Share of Services in Total Gross Value Added Between 2005 and 2024 (in percentage points)**

2005	about 67%
2010	about 71%
2015	about 72%
2020	73%
2024	73.7%

**Source:** the author's own compilation based on Eurostat data (estimates).

Lifting numerous national restrictions on services and regulated professions would stimulate competition within the Union's internal market, thereby benefiting the EU economy as a whole. At the same time, the Draghi Report emphasises the importance of close cooperation with the United States in establishing the legal and economic frameworks necessary to foster innovation and enhance the Union's global competitiveness.

**6.3. Decarbonisation in the context of European economic competitiveness.** The report underscores the need to accelerate decarbonisation while safeguarding the competitiveness of the European economy. For certain Member States, such as Poland, this entails intensifying investment in renewable energy sources and undertaking the costly modernisation of the energy sector. At the same time, nuclear energy is experiencing a renewed resurgence across Europe.

#### **6.4. Population in the European Union – a forgotten issue?**

**Table 2. European Population Data as at 1st January 2024**

Indicator	Value
Total Population	449.3 million
Percentage of People aged 65 and over	21.6%
Median Age	44.7 years

Source: Eurostat, 2024.

The most populous Member States were Germany, France, and Italy, which together accounted for almost 47% of the EU population. In 2024, a population decline was recorded in Poland (–132,800 people), while the most significant increases were observed in Spain (+525,100), Germany (+330,000), and France (+229,000). The EU’s population decreased between 2020 and 2021 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by an increase from 447.6 million (as at 1<sup>st</sup> January 2023) to 449.3 million (as at 1<sup>st</sup> January 2024). In 2024, the natural population change remained negative (approximately –1.3 million people); however, a positive migration balance (+2.3 million) led to an overall increase of 1.1 million inhabitants in the European Union.

#### **6.5. The relationship between demography and the labour market.**

Draghi highlights the declining population and the shrinking labour force across the European Union. One of the key associated challenges is the reduction in the number of people of working age – those who contribute most directly to national development and economic growth. Consequently, he advocates for increasing the participation of older people and women in the labour market, as well as fostering a more welcoming environment for immigrants. It can be anticipated that, without extensive automation processes, a markedly smaller working-age population would struggle to sustain current levels of economic output. As a result, European Union countries are experimenting with various approaches to address the demographic crisis. Some have implemented programmes and policies aimed at increasing the total fertility rate or encouraging immigration. However, practical experience suggests that these measures may generate a range of long-term challenges. Populist groups, often with anti-democratic agendas, frequently frame immigration policy as a means of accruing political capital while questioning the existing EU acquis.

**6.6. Joint financing of European projects.** Draghi advocates a substantial increase in joint investment at the EU level. Critics note

that the European Union faces challenges in implementing a coherent policy in this area due to its constitutional structure. Numerous domains fall outside the competence of the Union's institutions, leaving the EU with limited effective mechanisms to pursue a coordinated policy in this regard.

**6.7. International and defence affairs.** The report underscores that the European Union's influence in international affairs is closely tied to its capacity to maintain robust relations with the United States and NATO, alongside its openness to sustained diplomatic engagement. Draghi notes that the absence of a European military force is not explicitly evaluated. On one hand, critics argue that the EU cannot attain superpower status without a credible military capability. On the other hand, proponents of economic integration and pacifist groups contend that full harmonisation of military strategy and policy is neither necessary nor sufficient for the Union's global influence. This position, combined with Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine and Donald Trump's transactional approach to the collective defence of the West, has evidently shifted the balance among EU elites in favour of pursuing military autonomy. This commitment implies that NATO member states should, and are expected to, allocate five per cent of their GDP annually to essential defence needs and security-related expenditures, with this policy framework extending through to 2035. Furthermore, Russia is explicitly identified in the final declaration as a long-term threat to Euro-Atlantic security.

It is worth recalling that as early as 1952, just one year after the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community at France's initiative, the six founding states signed a treaty establishing the European Defence Community, which envisaged the creation of a joint army under the supervision of a treaty-based authority explicitly designed for this purpose. Proponents of a single European state argued that enhanced military cooperation, combined with economic integration, would provide an opportunity to establish the European Political Community. Ultimately, France's rejection of the Treaty establishing the European Defence Community in 1954 cast doubt on the prospects for further political and defence integration. France renewed its interest in the idea of the European Political Community in 2022, notably in the context of President Macron's tenure. As the French president once stated, "Faced with this new geopolitical context, we very clearly need to find a way to think about our Europe, its unity, and its stability, without weakening the closeness built inside our European Union." The intention behind Macron's initiative was to establish a platform for political coordination

among the EU and other European countries. In addition to the 27 EU Member States, the following countries were invited to the first meeting of the European Political Community: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Iceland, Kosovo, Liechtenstein, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland, Turkey, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom.

Macron's initiative also encompassed a reform plan for the European Union and, in essence, aimed primarily at deepening and harmonising economic integration within the Union. It included specific proposals concerning, *inter alia*, the euro area (the establishment of a common budgetary framework and the appointment of a finance minister), a common asylum and migration policy (the harmonisation of asylum procedures and the strengthening of the European Border and Coast Guard), as well as defence policy (the creation of rapid reaction forces and the development of a common strategic doctrine).

Due to persistent disagreements among the Member States, the concept of the aforementioned “multi-speed Europe” – envisaging the emergence of a vanguard of countries willing to pursue deeper integration – failed to materialise. It did not gain broad acceptance and appears even less likely today than at the time of its initial presentation. The group of countries commonly referred to as the “Hanseatic League” (comprising Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Ireland, Sweden, and the Baltic States) opposed the establishment of a euro area budget. These states fear that such a mechanism would entail a permanent system of financial transfers to the highly indebted countries of Southern Europe – a concern partially shared by Germany.

With regard to the harmonisation of asylum procedures – an area in which the number of countries favouring significant restrictions on mass influx has been steadily increasing – implementation has proven difficult, as it requires unanimity among Member States. Even the proposal to strengthen the European Border and Coast Guard Agency has provoked concerns. Some countries, such as Hungary and Slovakia, fear a loss of control over their national borders. Others, including Spain, the Baltic States, and Poland, in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, have advocated substantially greater EU funding to support their border protection services and to introduce effective safeguards against the unlawful instrumentalisation of migration orchestrated and executed by the aggressive regimes in Russia and Belarus. In this context, a significant development is the adoption of the Pact on Migration and Asylum by the European Union, which introduces new EU legislation on migration and establishes a common asylum system at the European Union level. The

provisions of the Pact, adopted in May 2024, are scheduled to take effect between June and July 2026. Strengthening international cooperation in migration management, combating irregular migration, facilitating legal migration, and supporting the integration of migrants into host societies represent a significant shift in the European Union's asylum and migration policy. Poland, akin to Hungary, Slovakia, and Austria, voted against the EU Migration Pact in the Council of the European Union; however, these four countries will nonetheless be required to transpose the Pact into their national legislation. Therefore, the Pact has been adopted. Poland argued that the principle of solidarity in addressing the migration crisis should take into account the fact that, immediately after the outbreak of Russia's war against Ukraine, the country opened its borders to over two million Ukrainians in 2022. At present, the majority of them benefit from temporary protection, which grants them legal residence in Poland as well as access to healthcare and social benefits. Moreover, Poland has extended their legal temporary residence until March 2026.

**6.8. The New Common Security Policy of the European Union becomes another test of strengthened communalisation**, as well as the development of a unified energy policy. The existing Common Security and Defence Policy constitutes an integral component of the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the European Union. Its objective is to ensure the Union's operational capacity, encompassing both civilian and military instruments, to carry out missions aimed at peacekeeping, conflict prevention, and the strengthening of international security beyond the territories of the Member States, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the accompanying geopolitical shifts – including the growing influence of China – necessitate not only the continuation of military, economic, and humanitarian support for Ukraine but also, as previously noted, a profound transformation of the EU's defence policy. This transformation involves strengthening the coordinating role of the Common Security and Defence Policy, fostering even closer cooperation with NATO and, in particular, with the United States. Increasing defence expenditure across EU Member States is essential to reshape societal attitudes towards challenges such as hybrid threats, disinformation and cyberattacks, as well as to enhance the resilience of critical infrastructure. It represents a response to President Putin's imperial ambitions. Moreover, a militarily strengthened European Union enables it to engage with China from a position of far greater strategic confidence. As *The Wall Street Journal* observes, "China is conducting espionage activities on an unprecedented scale. Western spy agencies are

overwhelmed by their magnitude, while Western governments struggle to respond, being too commercially entangled with the Middle Kingdom” (Colchester, Michaels, 2025). Without a common European approach towards China, the strategic economic interests of the West as a whole risk becoming its casualty.

## **7. Artificial Intelligence – a New Cold War in Technology?**

Artificial intelligence constitutes a cornerstone of the future economic, military, and technological power of both the United States and China. Investment in AI enables these countries to preserve their global pre-eminence in an increasingly dynamic international environment. Artificial intelligence drives the development of new sectors within the American and Chinese economies, thereby enhancing productivity and strengthening the global competitiveness of their enterprises. In the United States, Silicon Valley, together with leading academic institutions such as MIT and Stanford University, continues to attract substantial investment and top-tier talent from around the world, reinforcing the country’s technological ecosystem. Europe, by contrast, lags significantly behind in this area – partly through its own shortcomings. Furthermore, the United States already occupies a leading position in setting global standards for regulation and ethics. It seeks to play a decisive role in shaping international frameworks governing the ethical, privacy, and security dimensions of artificial intelligence, with the objective of preventing misuse and safeguarding the interests of democratic societies, including those in Europe.

European Union Member States recognise that the necessity of developing artificial intelligence is no longer a matter of debate. However, they continue to deliberate on how to establish appropriate legal and ethical boundaries for its application. For many circles in Europe, this dilemma has taken on a philosophical dimension – whether AI represents a unique gift from the gods or, conversely, an unholy invention.

In April 2021, the European Commission proposed the first EU legislative framework for artificial intelligence, classifying AI systems – applicable across various sectors – according to the level of risk they pose to users. The framework introduced a graduated approach to regulation, taking into account different levels of risk, each entailing corresponding responsibilities. On 12<sup>th</sup> May 2024, the *Artificial Intelligence Act* was published in the *Official Journal of the European Union*. It is formally known as Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13<sup>th</sup> June 2024, laying down harmonised rules on artificial

intelligence and amending existing regulations. EU policymakers emphasise that this is the first legal act in the world to comprehensively regulate the use of artificial intelligence in its broadest sense. The *AI Act* establishes the legislative framework for the development, deployment, and use of artificial intelligence within the European Union. The provisions contained in the regulation cover several key areas of practical AI application, including transport, healthcare, education, and the labour market, as well as the use of AI by public sector institutions such as the police and the judiciary.

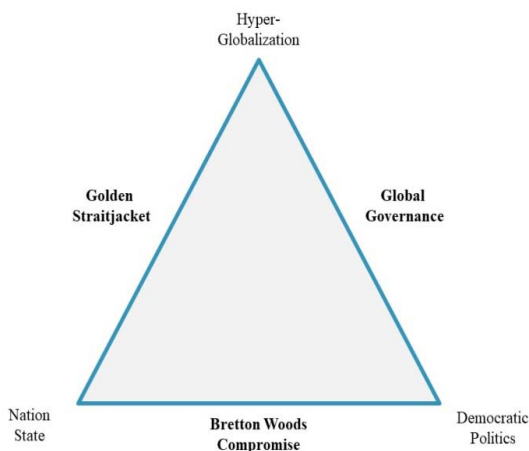
The EU Regulation on artificial intelligence aims to ensure the safe, responsible, and ethical use of AI technologies, with full respect for citizens' rights, while simultaneously promoting the development and implementation of AI-driven technological innovations. According to the new legislation, AI systems must comply with specific norms and standards within the European market, thereby guaranteeing a high level of protection for citizens' and consumers' rights and strengthening public confidence in new technologies. However, assessments of the European Union's policy on artificial intelligence vary, particularly among the business community in Europe. Several prevailing opinions and key concerns can be identified. The regulatory clarity and predictability of the EU's policy in this area are generally viewed positively. Entrepreneurs appreciate that the EU, as the first jurisdiction worldwide, has adopted comprehensive provisions on AI, which may provide European companies with an advantage in terms of trust and ethical credibility. The legal framework enhances the reliability of AI products, particularly in sectors such as healthcare, transport, and finance. EU entrepreneurs also view positively the funds and support programmes including Horizon Europe, Digital Europe, and the European Innovation Council, designed to assist small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Many European companies hope that EU standards will become a global benchmark, similar to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Nevertheless, the business community has voiced intense criticism and concern regarding the excessively stringent nature of the regulations, which may hinder European innovation. Companies, particularly start-ups and small- and medium-sized enterprises, criticise the complexity and cost of implementing the *AI Act*, especially in the case of high-risk AI applications, such as those used in employment, education, and healthcare. Moreover, the regulations make insufficient reference to competitiveness in relation to the United States and China. Both countries have adopted a more liberal approach, allowing for faster testing and deployment of new technologies. European entrepreneurs

therefore express concern that the EU may become a victim of its own overregulation. Certain business groups also highlight a lack of clarity concerning the technical interpretation of the adopted provisions.

BusinessEurope (2025), the largest employers' organisation in the European Union, supports such regulation but emphasises the need for flexibility and proportionality, particularly for SMEs. Business organisations are calling for more precise definitions of risk and liability. Similarly, DigitalEurope – an organisation representing the digital sector, including companies such as Google, Microsoft, and Siemens – advocates the removal of excessive regulatory burdens. Technology firms such as SAP, Siemens, and Bosch have likewise stressed the need for clear technical guidelines to determine whether their systems fall under the regulation's strict requirements. The European business community thus acknowledges the EU's ambition to promote trustworthy and ethical artificial intelligence, while simultaneously expressing concern that excessive regulation may slow innovation and ultimately undermine Europe's global competitiveness. According to a McKinsey & Company study from 2024, only 23% of European companies believe that the EU supports them more effectively in implementing AI than the United States or China (mckinsey.com, 2024). As at 2025, with 27 Member States, the European Union is fully aware that the development of AI entails numerous legal, economic, political, and organisational challenges.

There is also a growing European awareness of the paradox of globalisation, encapsulated in the so-called "Rodrik trilemma" (Rodrik, 2011), which describes the inherent conflict between democracy, unrestricted global economic integration, and national sovereignty in social and economic policy. Dani Rodrik argues that the simultaneous coexistence of all three policy objectives at the level of the nation-state is impossible. At best, only two of these objectives can be pursued concurrently – an issue that, to date, has not been sufficiently acknowledged within the discourse on globalisation. Rodrik maintains that the current model of hyper-globalisation is sustainable only under one of two conditions: either through the establishment of some form of global government (global federalism), or through the abandonment of democracy in favour of technocratic governance, in which national policies are aligned with the demands of global markets rather than with the expectations of citizens. Since the author regards the first scenario as unrealistic and the second as morally unacceptable, he concludes that the only viable path forward lies in abandoning hyper-globalisation in favour of a system modelled on the Bretton Woods framework.

### Diagram 1. The Bretton Woods Compromise



Source: Diagram based on Rodrik, 2011, p. 201.

According to Rodrik, such a system would enable sovereign, democratic states to reap the benefits of global markets within the boundaries defined by internationally agreed rules. Nonetheless, a return to the Bretton Woods system appears largely unrealistic in the current global context. These reflections, however, at the very least draw attention to a profoundly contested issue: the role of the nation-state, with its inherent strengths and limitations. As Nowak (2020, p. 54) observes, “The claim that, from an economic standpoint, the nation-state has become an increasingly powerless anachronism appears highly questionable. However, this assessment does not in any way preclude a critical analysis of how sovereignty is exercised and practised by many nation-states.” At times, the contemporary world order indeed resembles the anarchic “war of all against all” described by Hobbes in *Leviathan*, which referred to the English Civil Wars of the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, if European states – with their long-standing rivalries and divergent interests – have succeeded in building a peaceful, supranational union, it may not be an exaggeration to suggest that the European Union, despite its numerous flaws and persistent challenges (including those associated with the construction of a monetary union), remains a historically, geographically, politically, and socially unique experiment that is still in progress. It constitutes a project that, in many respects, is unprecedented on a global scale and continues to evolve in response to both internal and external dynamics (Nowak, 2020, p. 32). The fact that, from the very beginning,

the three largest European countries – France, Germany, and Italy – followed later by twenty-four other European nations, have been able to unite and transfer certain aspects of their sovereignty to centralised EU institutions – the European Commission, the Council, the European Parliament, and the European Court of Justice – so that these institutions might act in the common interest of all Europeans and render war (at least among democratic European states) unthinkable, stands as living proof that such a supranational order of states is not only possible but also enduring, even in the face of conflicting national interests. In the wake of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, the European Union, albeit belatedly, has ultimately demonstrated its commitment to the values that bind it together, such as European security and opposition to an aggressive, imperial Russia that violates the borders of sovereign European states. This example illustrates even more clearly that a deep model of cooperation between nation-states and supranational structures is not only theoretically conceivable but also practically viable. This remains the case even though the arrangement is far from perfect and continues to attract criticism from both advocates of further European federalisation and defenders of full national sovereignty.

In an increasingly multipolar and uncertain world – where the established model of the global economy is being both challenged and criticised, and where aggressive political strategies and geostrategic shifts are beginning to outweigh traditional economic principles – the European Union endures. It continues, albeit at varying speeds, to draw lessons from the various crises it has encountered, if not from all of them. Despite mounting internal and external challenges, the EU currently enjoys a relatively high level of public support, as reflected in the most recent Eurobarometer data<sup>1</sup>: “72% of EU citizens believe their country benefits from EU membership. Moreover, 63% of Europeans hold a positive view of the EU – a notable increase compared to the end of 2023, when the figure stood at around 58%. The highest levels of support are found in the Nordic countries, Ireland, the Netherlands and Portugal. By contrast, the lowest levels of trust in the EU are recorded in Greece, the Czech Republic and Hungary, although even in these countries, support does not fall below 45%. Interestingly, in the 18–30 age group, support for the EU exceeds 75%. Respondents in this demographic especially value the Union’s actions on climate policy, equality, and digital transformation. At the same time, they are more sceptical of the so-called “Brussels elites” and express a strong demand for institutional reform” (Eurobarometer, 2025).

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<sup>1</sup> A Eurobarometer survey (2025) conducted between 26<sup>th</sup> March and 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2025 in the 27 EU Member States, with the participation of 26,368 respondents.

Europe's fundamental problem lies in the fact that it competes with the United States and China – two powers whose decision-making centres are clearly defined, albeit of vastly different provenance; democratic in the case of the United States, and authoritarian in that of China. Both, however, are characterised by efficiency and general effectiveness. Mario Draghi therefore emphasises the necessity of introducing institutional reforms and substantially increasing investment, enabling Europe to compete effectively with these global powers. Moreover, he recommends avoiding excessive imitation of American financial practices and instead focusing on sound economic reforms within individual Member States. Draghi also highlights the need to develop common European industrial strategies, strengthen innovation, and simplify regulations.

There is a growing perception in Europe that capital will increasingly seek opportunities to finance at least part of the EU's economic needs outside the United States. According to *Euronews* (2025), citing the Bank of America – Fund Manager Survey, a study conducted by analysts Andreas Bruckner and Sebastian Raedler revealed the largest rotation of funds from US to European equities since records began in 1999. At present, 39% of fund managers are overweight in European equities, compared with 12% in the previous month – representing the highest level since mid-2021. At the same time, 23% of net investors report being underexposed to US equities, up from 17% in February. This constitutes a 40-point shift in US equity allocations within a single month, the largest ever recorded.

As many as 69% of managers and investment fund representatives in the United States believe that capital will increasingly seek opportunities outside the USA and Asia. At present, 39% hold an overweight position in European equities (up from 12%), while 23% are underweight in US equities. This represents the largest shift of funds from the United States to European equities since records began in 1999. Andrea Orcel, CEO of UniCredit, highlights that a “phenomenal opportunity” has emerged for Europe. However, he stresses that the continent must implement key reforms – most notably the Capital Markets Union and increased investment in infrastructure – in order to sustain the current trend of capital inflows.

In view of the above data, the guidelines contained in the Draghi Report on EU competitiveness are not only valid and legitimate but also necessary. Yet only the most ardent optimists are convinced that Draghi's warnings against the “slow agony” of the EU economy will suffice to provoke genuine reflection and action. The radical plan he proposes requires, above all, a convergent position among the Member States, as the investment gap – amounting to approximately 5% of the EU's GDP – must be somehow financed. On 17<sup>th</sup> September 2024, for the

purposes of the report's guidelines, Draghi asked researchers from the International Monetary Fund and the European Commission to examine – independently of each other – whether these investments could be financed by private capital without destabilising the European economy and under the assumption of full success. The simulations aimed primarily to determine whether private capital participation (around 80%) could be sustained within such a large-scale investment programme as envisaged in his plan (*commission.europa*, 2024). Unfortunately, the simulation results, i.e., figures or performance indicators for private capital – are yet to be published. The scope of the simulations focused on framework conditions such as market integration, securitisation, and the harmonisation of clearing systems, rather than detailed economic outcomes.

Jean Tirole, recipient of the 2014 Nobel Prize in Economics, and Thomas Piketty, writing in *Le Monde* (14<sup>th</sup> September 2024), described the Draghi Report as a significant opportunity for the European Union and a step in the right direction – one that merits public debate and requires good faith from political leaders. Günther Wolff, a German economist specialising in EU economic policy, macroeconomics, and public finance, and, until June 2022, the director of Bruegel – one of Europe's most influential economic policy think tanks – referred to the report as an important “point of reference”, while simultaneously calling for urgently needed reforms within the European Union, despite the persistent challenge of national self-interest.

TS Lombard, a respected UK–US macroeconomic research and market analysis company, argues that 80% of investment must come from private sources and that reforms to Solvency II represent a crucial step towards achieving this. ING Bank's think tank summarised Draghi's proposals as “excellent ideas, yet very difficult to implement due to diverging national interests”, while acknowledging their potential to stimulate meaningful change (*think.ing.com*, 2025). Camille Souffron of the Rousseau Institute described the report as “ambiguous”, warning of internal contradictions, particularly the emphasis on competitiveness that may come at the expense of environmental and social priorities (Souffron, 2024).

## **Conclusions**

The Draghi Report constitutes both a diagnosis and a strategic appeal at a critical juncture for the European Union, which finds itself confronted with a multidimensional set of structural and geopolitical challenges. Its analytical depth and prescriptive orientation transcend the realm of economic policy and extend into the broader question of Europe's

capacity for renewal in an era defined by intensified global competition, geopolitical fragmentation, and technological disruption. The document issues an unequivocal warning: without a paradigmatic reorientation of its development model – one that places coordinated investment, innovation, and institutional efficiency at the forefront – the European Union risks a gradual erosion of its global relevance and internal cohesion.

The challenges delineated in this analysis are inherently systemic, cutting across economic, political, social, and security domains. The war in Ukraine has underscored the precariousness of the European security order and the strategic costs of dependency, while the imperative of an accelerated energy transition imposes unprecedented financial and technological demands on Member States. At the same time, persistent inflationary pressures, demographic contraction, migration dynamics, and the resurgence of populist sentiment have exposed the fragility of Europe's social fabric. Within this complex constellation, the call to restore competitiveness must be understood as an integrative endeavour – linking economic productivity with social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and democratic legitimacy.

The paradoxes inherent in the European integration process are also becoming increasingly visible. While the Union aspires to achieve strategic autonomy in critical sectors – ranging from energy and defence to digital and technological innovation – it remains institutionally constrained by the asymmetry between supranational ambition and the enduring primacy of national sovereignty. The conceptual framework proposed by Dani Rodrik, which posits the incompatibility of deep economic integration, democratic governance, and full sovereignty, remains particularly instructive in this regard. The European project continues to oscillate within this trilemma, seeking to preserve democratic accountability while simultaneously ensuring efficiency in decision-making and resilience in the face of global shocks. Resolving this structural tension requires not only institutional reform but also the cultivation of a renewed consensus on the normative foundations of the European socio-economic model – one that reaffirms the interdependence of market efficiency, social justice, and strategic self-determination.

In the technological and digital spheres, Europe confronts a qualitatively new dimension of global rivalry. The emerging bipolar configuration between the United States and China in the domain of artificial intelligence and advanced technologies has transformed innovation into a principal instrument of geopolitical power. For the European Union, this necessitates a dual response: the strengthening of its regulatory capacity and the creation of endogenous innovation

ecosystems capable of generating and retaining technological value. Such an endeavour requires sustained investment in education, research, and human capital, together with a cultural and institutional environment that encourages entrepreneurship and calculated risk-taking. In the absence of such transformation, Europe risks perpetuating its status as a “regulatory power”, whose normative influence remains unmatched by its economic and technological weight.

Ultimately, the European Union’s future trajectory will depend on its ability to reconcile competitiveness with cohesion, and ambition with solidarity. The Draghi Report provides an analytically rigorous and strategically urgent framework, yet its implementation will depend on political agency and collective will. The Union’s capacity to translate analytical insight into coordinated policy action will determine whether it can overcome the inertia of fragmented national interests. In an international system increasingly marked by uncertainty, protectionism, and the reassertion of state power, the European Union must redefine its global vocation. This entails a deliberate reaffirmation of the principles that have historically underpinned its legitimacy – unity in diversity, prosperity through cooperation, and peace through shared responsibility – while adapting them to the structural realities of twenty-first-century globalism. Only through such reconfiguration can the European project preserve its relevance as a distinctive and constructive pole within the evolving world order.

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*Tomasz Grzegorz Grosse\**

## **The Geoeconomics of US–China Rivalry and Its Implications for Europe**

### **Abstract**

The aim of this article is to analyse the geoeconomic rivalry between the USA and China. Firstly, the geoeconomic strategy of China, which has been implemented since the late 1970s, is presented. Then, the author answers the following questions: what was Washington’s response to Beijing’s actions; was there a difference in the geoeconomic approach of the US Republican and Democratic administrations towards China; what was Beijing’s reaction to the US policy during the rule of both administrations? The article puts forward the following research hypotheses. First, China introduced the geoeconomic paradigm into its policy on a large scale, thereby challenging the USA. Second, although Washington has possessed geoeconomic instruments since the 1970s, it was not until the presidency of Donald Trump that it was forced to respond to the Chinese challenge on a much larger scale than it had done before. Third, the Joe Biden administration continued and even strengthened American geoeconomics towards China. Fourth, Beijing has tried to respond to US sanctions each time, while simultaneously adapting its own geoeconomic strategy to the situation of the deepening conflict with the US. Finally, the article presents theoretical conclusions drawn from the analysis, along with the implications of the US–China rivalry for the European Union. The research methodology is based on an analysis of primary sources and scientific literature.

**Keywords:** Geoeconomics, Donald Trump, Joe Biden, US-China Trade War, European Union

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## **Introduction**

In 1990, at the end of the Cold War between two hostile entities that were the Eastern and the Western blocs, Edward N. Luttwak wrote a famous essay introducing the concept of geoeconomics (Luttwak, 1990, pp. 17–23). In an era defined by weapons of mass destruction and in circumstances in which “a Soviet–Western war becomes ever more implausible”, methods of economic rivalry began to replace military confrontation (Luttwak, 1990, p. 17). The logic of rivalry between the great powers did not disappear, but increasingly adopted the methodology of economic rivalry (Luttwak, 1990, p. 17). The instruments of such conflict were therefore economic tools, such as “the more or less disguised restriction of imports, the more or less concealed subsidisation of exports, the funding of competitive technology projects, the support of selected forms of education, the provision of competitive infrastructures, and more” (Luttwak, 1990, p. 21).

In the context of the prolonged war in Ukraine (beginning in 2014), as well as the increasingly tense situation surrounding Taiwan, fears have arisen that a return to military confrontation between nuclear powers is possible. Nevertheless, as Luttwak predicted, the post-Cold War period has become a stage for geoeconomic rivalry between powers. Luttwak’s concept is, therefore, the main theoretical basis of the author’s study.

The aim of this article is to analyse the geoeconomic rivalry between the United States of America (hereinafter: US) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC), i.e., an economic rivalry that has strategic geopolitical significance. First, China’s geoeconomic strategy, which has been implemented since the late 1970s, is described. The article then examines Washington’s response to Beijing’s actions, focusing in particular on two American administrations, those of President Donald Trump (2017–2021) and Joe Biden (2021–2024). A further research question is whether there was a difference in the geoeconomic approach of the two administrations towards China. Trump’s policy at the beginning of his second term as US President in 2025 is also outlined. Finally, Beijing’s reaction to US policy during the administration of both presidents is considered.

In this article, the author puts forth the following research hypotheses. First, China incorporated a geoeconomic paradigm into its policy on a large scale, thereby challenging the US, and beginning to undermine the primacy of this superpower on a global scale. Second, although Washington had possessed the geoeconomic instruments described by Luttwak since the 1970s, it was only during the Trump presidency that it was forced to respond to the Chinese challenge on a much larger

scale than before. Third, the Biden administration continued and even strengthened US geoeconomic measures towards China. Fourth, Beijing sought to respond to US sanctions each time, while simultaneously adapting its own geoeconomic strategy to the deepening conflict with the US. Finally, theoretical conclusions resulting from the author's analysis are presented, along with the implications of the US–China rivalry for the European Union. The research methodology is based on the analysis of primary sources and scientific literature.

### **Beijing's Geoeconomics**

The economy is one of the fundamental potentials of a state in the international arena, and economic policy instruments, on the one hand, serve to develop this potential, while on the other, they are used in external relations as a means of political influence (Grosse, 2020). The basic determinant of potential in geopolitical and economic terms is wealth, i.e., the long-term capacity to accumulate capital. This is expressed primarily by the size of an entity's financial resources, including, *inter alia*, those resulting from the competitiveness of the domestic economy, favourable foreign trade, and a high quality of the financial sector (Subramanian, 2011a). This applies in particular to the PRC, which, thanks to its accumulated financial resources – \$3.2 trillion in 2025 (Trading Economics, 2025) with external debt of \$2.4 trillion at the end of 2024 (State Administration of Foreign Exchange, 2025) – has increasingly become the centre of the new geopolitical order on a regional and global scale (Arrighi, 2007). Therefore, China constitutes the most significant challenge to the waning primacy of the US. In 2025, the United States recorded a debt of \$36.22 trillion (Fiscal Data, 2025) with foreign exchange reserves of only \$35.2 billion (CEIC, 2025). Other economic resources of geopolitical importance include access to raw materials, population potential – including its level of education – technological advancement, and the innovative capabilities of domestic companies. In the latter case, this has a direct impact on the international competitiveness and productivity of the local economy, and, in terms of security, on the technological advantages of the armed forces.

The aim of geoeconomics – understood as a strategy of public authorities – is to increase benefits in international exchange, including the creation of systemic and durable solutions that provide long-term opportunities for capital accumulation. Therefore, the aim is to shape international institutions and regulations and build resistance (or autonomy) to any pressure from external entities (Subramanian, 2011b; Walter, Sen, 2009, p. 101; Grosse, 2009). Geoeconomics aims to create

asymmetric economic relations in the era of globalisation, not only to maximise one's own benefits, but also to transform interdependence relations to more hierarchical ones, striving to gradually subordinate external actors. The potential of a national economy and economic policy instruments are therefore important as regards improving the geopolitical position of a given country, both regionally and globally, while weakening competitors.

China's overarching geopolitical goal is to build a Sino-centric order, initially in the region and subsequently on a global scale (Woon, 2018, pp. 67, 76; Allison, 2018, pp. 107–132). This is about changing the international order that was created after World War II, which, in the opinion of local elites, was dominated by the USA and Japan (Holslag, 2016, p. 178). The goal is, therefore, for Beijing to gain a dominant position in the region, diminish American influence, and force Tokyo into a dependent relationship with China. According to Chinese scholars, the previous Western order was dysfunctional, not only because it brought about crises that were detrimental for everyone, but also because it was characterised by the pronounced self-interest of the largest powers, primarily the USA (Zhao, 2005).

A key element in the transformation of the international order was the gradual introduction of the Chinese institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which partly complemented and partly challenged the Western institutions established under the Bretton Woods system. Another element of the Chinese system was the pursuit of creating international rules that would align with the interests of the PRC, and would bind weaker states (Yu, 2017, pp. 357, 361–362). The primary instruments for achieving all these goals were economic tools, in accordance with the assumption that an industrial power should first be built in order to subsequently become a geopolitical power (Holslag, 2016, p. 176).

Chinese geoeconomics is characterised by a gradual, total, flexible, and asymmetric approach (Hsiung, 2010, pp. 27–49; Grosse, 2014). This entails China introducing changes gradually, often through the use of pilot instruments. Simultaneously, it implements strategic goals in a holistic manner, using multiple economic and political instruments across various sectors, which are additionally supported by a range of domestic and foreign public policies. China utilises both legal methods as well as measures inconsistent with international law, striving to effectively achieve assumed strategic goals at a given stage of the country's development. This reflects the country's high degree of flexibility in adapting to internal and external conditions. Moreover, China's policy is

to generate asymmetric benefits for the country, preferably at the expense of its biggest geopolitical rivals.

The reconstruction of China's historical power has largely been based on the economy, and the Chinese are considered to be particularly adept at applying the principles of geoeconomics on a global scale (Blackwill, Harris, 2016, p. 11). Since the 1980s, the Chinese economy has grown by an average of 10% per year (Allison, 2018, pp. 3–25), slowing only in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Wildau, Feng, 2019, p. 1). The basic instrument of geoeconomics is a strong state that controls development using both foreign and domestic policies. The geoeconomic model of the PRC is based on ownership control over the economy, the moderation of market competition, and the protection and support for strategic industrial sectors. The state tries to balance so-called “top-down” strategic direction with “bottom-up” mechanisms of social activity, including those that are a result of the decentralisation of governance. Within the discussed model, the state closely supervises financial markets and regulates the flow of capital. It uses the exchange rate policy to stimulate exports and pursues an active industrial policy linked to innovation, science, and education policy. The main goal of domestic policy is endogenous development based on building lasting competitive advantages for local enterprises. In external policy – since the very beginning of China's transformation – the goal has not merely been integration into regional and global economic exchange, but rather to build systemic solutions that generate long-term, asymmetric benefits in the economic and political spheres.

The starting point of the Chinese strategy was the communist economy of shortages, which lagged behind not only the Western powers in every respect, but also its closest neighbours, the so-called “Asian Tigers”. At the threshold of the economic transformation initiated by Deng Xiaoping in the 1970s, the international position of the PRC was exceptionally weak. The People's Republic of China had to integrate into globalisation, i.e., the international geoeconomic order, which was largely controlled by the West, especially by the American elites. However, China's leaders wanted not merely to catch up with the highly developed West, but ultimately surpass it. This forced the formulation of a geoeconomic strategy aimed at capital accumulation, even at the expense of more powerful rivals. The strategy was gradual, employing methods tailored to the current level of development and the competitive strength of the Chinese economy.

At the initial stage, China's advantages were mainly cheap labour and low production costs, and, over time, the increasingly attractive Chinese trade area. The asymmetry of its geoeconomic strategy was based on the accelerated absorption of Western technologies and management

methods, achieved partly as a result of forced transfer of knowledge by Western investors in exchange for access to the Chinese market. Another method of their acquisition was industrial espionage. Subsequently, Western technological expertise was increasingly acquired thanks to Chinese investments made in the EU and the USA. At the next stage, China implemented a strategy aimed at gaining an oligopolistic position in the field of raw materials, devices, and components, as well as control of supply chains and production processes. The aim was to make Western rivals dependent on China in almost every sphere of the economy, most recently in the area of climate transformation. Ultimately, China began creating its own technologies and standards, designed to increasingly ensure geoeconomic dominance at the highest levels of technical advancement (Zúñiga et al., 2024).

The People's Republic of China skilfully utilised the regional cooperation system, as well as the American-led order in the global economy. A key source of technology was, to a large extent, the opening of the Chinese economy to cooperation with Taiwanese companies (and, to a lesser extent, with American and Japanese firms) (Tung, Wan, 2013). The aforementioned cooperation enriched Chinese companies with the necessary experience in the management of processes of rapid adaptation of production to market needs and technological innovations (in accordance with the time-to-market principles). The tendency of American corporations to outsource subcontracting activities to East Asia (firstly to Japan, and subsequently to Taiwan and China) was exploited. As a result, Chinese entrepreneurs not only adapted to the liberal rules of the global economy, but were gradually able to exploit them to secure advantages within the regional and global exchange system. For example, acquiring technology from foreign competitors became a common practice (Sevastopulo, Bond, 2018, p. 1). It should be emphasised again that the dynamic development of the Chinese economy took place within the framework of the American-led order, yet it increasingly undermined the United States' position and altered the balance of power in the world.

An innovative instrument of Chinese geoeconomics are overseas special economic zones (Bräutigam, Xiaoyang, 2012). They were initiated in the 1990s, but since 2006 they have been implemented as part of a government program envisioning the creation of fifty such zones in different parts of the world. The discussed instrument was of particular importance in regions of strategic significance, i.e., East and Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa. These zones have been financially and diplomatically supported by the Chinese state and supervised by its Ministry of Commerce, with state authorities not only granting approval for the creation of each zone, but

also ensuring its economic viability. Consequently, the shareholders of each project were enterprises from selected industries, most often state-owned. Decentralised implementation was achieved through the participation of provincial authorities, which also coordinated investments made by local companies.

The construction of overseas special economic zones was fully consistent with the *Go Global* strategy adopted in 2000. These zones can be described as the economic equivalent of Chinese aircraft carriers, serving explicitly geoeconomic purposes. At the same time, they played a systemic role in supporting the expansion and entrenchment of Chinese foreign investments, shaping asymmetric economic relations and striving for the dominance of Chinese entities within cooperation networks involving local partners.

Another example of geographical actions are two far-reaching initiatives of President Xi from 2013, both referring to the Silk Road that has existed since ancient times – namely, the *Silk Road Economic Belt* and the *21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road*. Collectively known as the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI), they are designed to advance the economic and geopolitical expansion of the PRC (Yeh, 2016, p. 276). This land route aims to extend Chinese influence across Central Asia and the Middle East to Central and Eastern Europe, while a maritime route connects North Asia, through East, Southeast, and South Asia to East Africa and the Mediterranean Sea (Sidaway, Woon, 2017, p. 594). This maritime route is gradually being expanded, among others, to Latin America (Mander, 2019, p. 4). Both initiatives extend far beyond the region closest to China and combine infrastructure investments (transport lines, ports, etc.) with the promotion of economic and political goals, including military ones – some installations and agreements concluded with partners are to serve military purposes (Kwieciński, 2013). Among China's economic aspirations, particular attention should be paid to the expansion of Chinese exports to new markets, including the provision of infrastructure-related services by Chinese enterprises. This strategy also addresses the problem of excess production capacity in many industries (e.g., the production of steel, cement, and industrial goods) (Huotari, Heep, 2016, p. 159). Another goal is to establish transport routes for the delivery of raw materials to the PRC, thereby addressing the dilemma related to raw-material security for the country's economy. These permanent communication corridors are intended to consolidate long-term economic relations with partners, and, ultimately, render them dependent on supplies of Chinese products and capital. This dependency is partly related to loans granted for the investments in question by Chinese and international institutions –

including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank<sup>1</sup> (Yu, 2017, p. 359) – as well as through long-term leases or Chinese ownership of the constructed installations (Yu, 2017, p. 361; Mundy, Hille, 2019, p. 7).

The aim of the PRC is to implement initiatives that guarantee lasting and dynamic economic development (Wong, 2013, p. 286; Góralczyk, 2012, pp. 105–128; Wróbel, 2013, pp. 64–69; Boniface, 2013, p. 439). As a result, China surpassed the USA in 2014 and, according to the World Bank, became the largest economy in the world (measured according to purchasing power parity) (Giles, 2014, p. 1). The basis of this so-called “Chinese economic miracle” was its export policy. Exports served as the basic source of capital accumulation, which could then be used for the most beneficial external investments from a geoeconomic point of view, especially those aimed at acquiring technology. The success of China’s policy is evidenced by its long-term export surplus and the fact that, in 2009, China became the world’s largest exporter (Berger, Martin, 2013, p. 66), a position it has maintained for many years. Research indicates that the aforementioned surplus is concentrated mainly in sectors supported or protected by state authorities (Xing, 2012), proving the fundamental importance of public policy in the modernisation of the PRC’s economy.

Exchange rate policy played a significant role in stimulating exports. According to the US Treasury, the yuan (RMB) was undervalued by 5 to 10% against the dollar in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, despite the fact that, since the partial liberalisation of this exchange rate in 2010, the yuan has appreciated by about 12% against the US currency (Report to Congress..., 2019, pp. 3–4). The higher the value added of domestic production, the more important the exchange rate is for export competitiveness (Thorbecke, 2013). Therefore, China continued its policy of currency interventions to protect the RMB from strengthening too quickly. Meanwhile, with the momentum of the *Go Global* policy, the outflow of capital from China increased, which facilitated the policy of weakening the exchange rate.

An important instrument of China’s long-term approach to promoting exports was its industrial policy (Hsueh, 2011; Ferchen, 2013; Berger, Martin, 2013, p. 64). This policy established the overall conditions for endogenous development and actively managed the processes aimed at improving the competitiveness of the domestic economy. Its goal was, among others, to promote approximately 120 so-called “Chinese champions” on global markets (Shambaugh, 2013, pp. 177, 188). This was

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<sup>1</sup> In addition, investments regarding the new Silk Roads are financed by the Silk Road Fund, the New Development Bank (the bank of the BRICS organisation), and, in some cases, even the World Bank.

achieved through flexible regulation of individual sectors and industries, i.e., ensuring that they were adjusted to the conditions occurring at a given time, and top-down control of development processes. The state gradually enhanced the framework for market competition, although they were strongly diversified depending on the sector. In some cases, competition was deliberately limited to only a few entities (in order to build industrial champions) or confined only to state-owned enterprises (State-Owned Enterprises..., 2018) and Chinese companies, both state-owned and private. In this way, ownership also served as an instrument of power over a specific sector of the economy, thereby increasing the state's control over development processes.

For China's industrial policy, so-called "strategic sectors" are of key importance. Their definition is broad, and encompasses not only activities related to national security, but also those concerning economic security; for this reason, it applies, among others, to the energy and financial sectors. In addition, Beijing considers all industries that develop the technological base for the national economy to be strategic, demonstrating how much importance it attaches to the development of innovation and modern technologies. Strategic status is also conferred on industries in which domestic companies are clearly less competitive than foreign corporations.

In relation to strategic industries, the state provides stronger support for their restructuring and for the development of research and innovation. Market competition, as well as private ownership, are more tightly restricted. For example, the government allows only state-owned companies to operate on a given market and limits the entry of new entities. Moreover, access to the market for foreign investors is subject to more intensive control, while foreign investment is not permitted to involve ownership of public infrastructure or municipal services.

The acquisition of new technologies is of fundamental importance in Beijing's policy, as it leads to obtaining lasting advantages over competitors on a global scale. The innovative economy has replaced the previous model of the Chinese economy based on cheap labour. One of the methods of obtaining technology was the previously discussed policy towards foreign direct investment, which served as a source of technology transfer. Therefore, the aforementioned investments had a huge impact on increasing the share of modern technologies in the value of Chinese exports, especially in the 1990s. However, the innovations obtained via this method were largely imitative, consisting of transferring previously invented foreign solutions to China (Yueh, 2013, pp. 154, 162, 167). Subsequently, the Chinese authorities actively encouraged the largest

Western corporations to establish research and development centres in China. At the beginning of the new century, investments of this type grew dynamically, from about 600 centres established in 2004 to over 1,200 in 2010 (Hannas et al., 2013, pp. 57–68). This process was associated with the transfer of intellectual property rights to local partners and the registration of patents in China. However, in the initial stage, these activities merely adapted existing technologies to the conditions of the local market, which was still an imitation of foreign innovations. Later, foreign research centres appeared more and more often, dealing with and engaged in the creation of the latest technologies. They took advantage of, among other things, increasingly better local conditions for such activities, particularly the growing supply of highly educated engineering staff.

Another way to obtain technology is to establish scientific cooperation with leading scientific centres in the world and promote scientific exchange. The state also seeks to attract representatives of the Chinese diaspora back to the country, especially those educated at renowned foreign universities (Saxenian, 2007; Nankervis, 2013). In 2005 alone, 35,000 scientists returned to China. They were offered comfortable working conditions in exchange for sharing their acquired knowledge and experience with domestic companies, scientists, and students. Many of the scientists returning to China established their own companies specialising in research and development. An additional means of obtaining technology involves external investment by Chinese companies or funds (including the China Investment Corporation). Many such investments have been made in Europe, and the Eurozone crisis created opportunities for cheap takeovers of companies possessing resources of strategic importance to China (Hanemann, Rosen, 2012, pp. 32–39; Clegg, Voss, 2012, pp. 21–29).

Finally, another method of obtaining technology is intellectual property theft, often carried out via the Internet and with the participation of state secret services (Paszewski, 2013, pp. 81–84). Such activities have been organised and supported by the Chinese state for many years on a large scale. As a result, a huge transfer of wealth from the most developed countries to China has occurred, which, according to scientists, poses a threat to the US in the form of a permanent loss of competitive advantages (Hannas et al., 2013, pp. 216–217).

China is also seeking to create potential for the development of domestic technological innovation. The government's goal is not only to quickly close the technological gap between the Chinese economy and its biggest rivals in the world, but to surpass them (and their companies). Creating domestic innovation is the basis of China's endogenous development strategy (Grosse, 2007, chap. 3). Consequently, the PRC has

become a global leader in certain areas of innovation (Zhang, 2024, p. 3) and is likely to equal or even surpass the US and other Western powers (Atkinson, 2024; Baldwin, 2024).

An important complement to China's innovation and industrial policy is its science and higher education policy. Investments in education, including the training of highly qualified personnel for the party apparatus, was one of the goals of reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping (Vogel, 2011, p. 702). It was also the basis for economic growth and the development of innovation (Li et al., 2011, p. 327). Since 1999, the number of students in China has increased by about 30% each year. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China produced more PhDs in engineering sciences than in the USA, while Chinese students constituted the largest group of PhD candidates at renowned American universities; about 25% of all students in exact sciences, including mathematics, engineering, and technology (Hille, Waters, 2018, p. 7). The authorities placed particular emphasis on raising the level of the ten leading Chinese universities.

China's geoeconomic advantages over the US and its allies became increasingly visible. This was linked to the more assertive stance of the PRC in international relations after President Xi Jinping took power in 2013. Under his leadership, not only did China begin to expand its armed forces (including the navy), but also undertook several important geoeconomic projects of strategic importance (including the aforementioned *One Belt One Road* initiative and the expansion of the islands in the South China Sea). Military modernisation was based on modern technologies that were largely the result of the rapid development of Chinese innovation and industry, but also the result of large-scale technological theft (Holslag, 2016, p. 178).

Xi's policy diverged from Deng Xiaoping's earlier maxim of "keeping a low profile" in international politics (Yu, 2017, p. 356). Chairman Xi also implemented internal reforms within the Communist Party, rebuilding its authority in society (including through a multi-year, anti-corruption campaign), and strengthening Chinese nationalism and historical policy (i.e., returning to Confucianism) (French, 2017), which are the basis for social cohesion and legitimacy of communist rule. A key element of his strategy was his economic development policy, increasingly based on modern technologies and expansion into new markets (Allison, 2018, pp. 107–132). This policy was expressed in the *Made in China 2025* strategy initiated in 2015. Its aim was to transform China into a major economic power by 2049, the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. All this must have caused concern among the American elites.

## **Washington's Response**

The hegemony (or primacy) of the United States after World War II was based on its economic power, the role of the US dollar as the principal international currency, the Bretton Woods institutions (the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank), and, finally, the norms of the international economic order on a global scale, known collectively as the Washington Consensus. The liberal norms of the geoeconomic regime created by the United States (so-called “globalisation”) favoured the expansion of American capital and trade, as the country possessed the greatest financial and technological potential, and was therefore the most competitive actor in the post-war global economy.

The geoeconomic supremacy of the USA was seriously challenged only in the 21st century by communist China. Within the liberal geoeconomic order created by America, a powerful rival emerged, which not only caught up with the USA and its allies but used the principles of the American regime to systematically eliminate Washington's economic and geopolitical advantages. For many years, Beijing's accumulation of capital was based on a trade surplus with North America and Western Europe, facilitated by the processes of deindustrialisation on both continents, as well as the West's growing dependence on raw materials, components, and equipment supplied by Chinese companies. In addition, the US appeared to be losing its technological advantage in many industries (Poon, 2025, p. 145). This had significant geopolitical consequences, as the US was losing its military superiority to the China.

This situation inevitably led to a kind of geoeconomic “revolution” in the USA. Its guiding principle was President Donald Trump's “America First” slogan. He fundamentally redefined American policy. During the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump promised to reduce the United States' trade deficit with the People's Republic of China, which, in 2017, amounted to 375 billion dollars. At that time, the presidential candidate argued that China's financial surplus in trade with the USA was eliminating American industry and jobs, and, moreover, enabling the accumulation of capital, which was then used by the Chinese to purchase American companies with the most advanced technologies or other market advantages. Trump also accused the Chinese of pursuing unfair trade practices, undervaluing the exchange rate, subsidising exports, and stealing intellectual property, resulting in losses exceeding 200 billion dollars in total. Moreover, he criticised Beijing for limiting access to the Chinese market for American corporations.

Trump intended primarily to reduce the trade deficit by imposing sanctions on goods imported from China. In doing so, he started a trade

war with the People’s Republic of China that lasted for years, and was continued by his successor in the White House. Joe Biden even justified the continuation of his predecessor’s geoeconomic approach with the same words and arguments that Donald Trump had previously used (Skonieczny, Sherel, 2024). Biden proved to be far more effective than the previous president in encouraging allies, including the European Union, to adopt similar protective measures against Beijing to those of the United States (Freudlsperger, Meunier, 2024). He referred more often than Trump to the rulings of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in disputes with the PRC, while simultaneously challenging the verdicts when they were unfavourable to the American side. This was the case, for example, in December 2022, when a WTO panel ruled that sanctions imposed on steel and aluminium imported to the United States were inconsistent with international law and should therefore be withdrawn.

President Trump has been reducing the excessive trade deficit mainly through the introduction of punitive tariffs. He launched this policy in January 2018 by imposing tariffs on solar panels and washing machines. Shortly thereafter, he announced tariff increases on imported steel and aluminium. These actions were aimed at all exporters from around the world. Then he began to directly attack Chinese exports. In March 2018, he imposed sanctions under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974 on over 1,300 products, including aircraft parts, batteries, solar panels, television panels, medical devices, satellites, and various types of weapons. Initially, the volume of exports covered by punitive tariffs amounted to around \$50 billion, but in subsequent years it reached a total of over \$550 billion. The tariff rates imposed on Chinese goods also increased. In addition to the Trade Act, the US administration also invoked other legal acts, including the International Emergency Economic Powers Act of 1977. Trump’s “revolution” was therefore based on legal instruments developed more than 40 years earlier.

As previously mentioned, the Republicans’ tariff policy was continued by President Biden, who not only maintained the previous administration’s tariffs, but even increased them, including on Chinese solar panels, car batteries, steel, aluminium, and medical devices. He even imposed a 100% tariff on Chinese-made electric cars. The US authorities’ policy was full of exceptions, designed not to excessively harm to the domestic economy. Nevertheless, the scope of these tariffs was several times greater than that of the retaliatory measures adopted by the Chinese side. As a result, the US trade deficit with the PRC was decreasing, although by a margin far smaller than Washington had anticipated. In 2017, the deficit amounted to \$375.2 billion, and by 2024 it had decreased to \$294.4 billion (The Office..., 2025).

Another important instrument of American geoeconomics was the imposition of restrictions on American exports to China. This was especially true for products or services that could supply the country with the latest technologies, enabling economic growth and enhances international competitiveness. In addition, export restrictions had geopolitical consequences, especially when they limited the technical advancement of armaments production. The control of American exports applied primarily to American companies, but was conducted on a global scale, i.e., also beyond the territory of the USA and in relation to any entities trading in American devices or technologies. Penalties for non-compliance with these restrictions could therefore be imposed not only on American entities, but also on foreign ones, which are referred to as “extraterritorial” sanctions.

An example of a strategy to limit the export of advanced technologies is the semiconductor sector. This primarily concerns a ban on the export of the most advanced chips as well as the equipment for their production (including extrusion devices), a ban on the provision of services in the field of their design, the sale of software and hardware for the development of such capabilities by the Chinese side, and, finally, the obligation of all manufacturers and service providers, including those from outside the US, to comply with these restrictions under penalty of financial sanctions or exclusion from access to the American market (Uznańska, 2024, p. 2). For example, the US administration forced Dutch corporations to limit the export of lithographic devices to the PRC for the production of the most advanced processors, first in 2019, and subsequently on a larger scale in 2023. The strategy was accompanied by a number of sanctions imposed directly on numerous Chinese corporations, and was later extended to other areas of advanced technology, most notably the artificial intelligence sector.

Another important instrument of American geoeconomics was the creation of the *Entity List* (2025), a register of sanctioned foreign enterprises. This list was essentially created on the basis of the *Export Administration Regulations* (2025), which had been used intensively against Beijing since 2018. The Trump and Biden teams were very keen to use the *Entity List* on various occasions to compete with the PRC. By 2024, over 700 Chinese companies had been included on the aforementioned list, over 200 of which were added as a result of actions taken by the Democratic administration. The register restricted the ability of Chinese companies to operate freely on the American market, for instance by preventing their participation in public tenders or selling devices or software to the public authorities. In some cases, Chinese corporations were completely deprived of access to

the US market. Sanctions could also include hindering cooperation with American companies in the fields of, *inter alia*, investments, the sale of devices or services, and joint research and development programs. In other words, these were sanctions blocking export and import opportunities for Chinese corporations.

For example, in 2018, President Trump blocked the ability of some Chinese technology companies, including Huawei and ZTE, from using their equipment or services in the federal administration. In 2019, both companies were added to the *Entity List*, thereby prohibiting any form of cooperation with those companies by American entrepreneurs or investors. The Biden administration has expanded the scale of sanctions imposed on Chinese technology, telecommunications, IT, and defence-sector companies. For example, in 2021, China Telecom was barred from providing telecommunications services in the United States. In August 2023, President Biden introduced a number of other restrictions on investment in the Chinese technology sector, including semiconductors, microelectronics, developing quantum technologies, and artificial intelligence (Freeman, 2024). In 2024, extraterritorial export restrictions were introduced in the field of quantum computers, super-modern semiconductors, and GAAFET technology (Gate-All-Around Field-Effect Transistors) (Freeman, 2024). The aim was to limit the pace of technological development of the PRC's civilian and military industry in segments considered by the American authorities to be particularly important in the strategic geoeconomic rivalry between the two great powers.

In 2024, the Countering CCP Drones Act excluded some Chinese drone companies from federal tenders. In the same year, the *Biosecure Act* barred companies involved in biotechnology services or production from federal procurement. Similar restrictions affected companies specialising in climate transformation. Washington imposed high tariffs on devices, components, and raw materials imported from China, while limiting the access of some Chinese companies to the American market. An example of such measures was the *Decoupling From Foreign Adversarial Battery Dependence Act* (2024), which introduced a ban on the purchase of devices from six Chinese corporations by federal institutions. In the same year, tariffs on car batteries, electric cars, a number of critical minerals and metals, and solar panels imported to the US were significantly increased. The aim was to reduce American dependence on Chinese manufacturers in the climate transformation sector, as well as to limit the accumulation of capital by the PRC. Later, during his second term, President Trump departed from the previous US climate policy, aiming not only to weaken

the scale of imports of components and raw materials from the China, but also to improve the price competitiveness of the American economy.

Other restrictions imposed by the US authorities concerned Beijing's devaluation of the yuan in order to increase the competitiveness of Chinese exports. In 2019, the US Department of the Treasury designated China as a currency manipulator and excluded Chinese entities from participating in tenders organised by the US government. Measures were also taken to counteract the theft of technology by the Chinese side, the most important manifestation of which was the Biden administration's *Protect America's Innovation and Economic Security from CCP Act* (2024). Steps were also taken to protect strategic infrastructure and American agricultural land from foreign investors from countries regarded as geopolitical rivals. The *Protecting American Agriculture from Foreign Adversaries Act* (2024) particularly restricted the freedom of action of Chinese investors.

Finally, an important aspect of Washington's policy was the sphere of geoculture, or security understood in the broad sense of culture (Grosse, 2023). The aforementioned actions include reducing public funding for universities opening Confucius Institutes, i.e., institutions sponsored by the PRC, as well as limiting the activity of Tik Tok in the US. Based on the *Strategic Competition Act* (2021), close monitoring of academic and scientific cooperation between Chinese and American educational institutions began.

Another category of pressure exerted on China was political sanctions. They resulted, for example, from accusations of human rights violations in the Chinese province of Xinjiang or the repression of political protesters in Hong Kong. The sanctions most often targeted people holding positions within the administration, although some restrictions also applied to Chinese companies or other areas of economic activity. For example, a ban was introduced on the import of goods from companies using forced labour in Xinjiang. In January 2021, the import of cotton and tomatoes from this province was suspended. Sanctions imposed on Chinese pharmaceutical companies contributing to the drug trade or the fentanyl epidemic in the US were of a similar nature.

Much more serious were the restrictions aimed at individuals and companies contributing to the strengthening of the military potential of Russian forces during their aggression against Ukraine. The most common method was to include Chinese corporations helping Moscow on the *Entity List* covered by such restrictions. Sanctions were also aimed at Chinese companies supporting Iran's nuclear or missile programs. A number of other sanctions targeting the arms sector in the PRC,

including individual corporations producing for military needs, should also be included in a similar category.

An important instrument of American geoeconomics was to cut off the Chinese economy from American capital, although some of the sanctions had an extraterritorial dimension, and were thus aimed at limiting the inflow of capital from non-American investors as well. One such measure was a ban introduced by Donald Trump in 2020 on the purchase of bonds or other forms of investment in Chinese corporations recognised by the US Department of Defence as “a support base for the armed forces of communist China” (DoD, 2020). The Biden administration later extended these investment restrictions (Biden bans..., 2023). Another example of the same policy was the order by the US authorities in 2021 to delist five Chinese corporations with ties to the Chinese People’s Liberation Army from the New York Stock Exchange.

An important tool of American geoeconomics was huge investment programs, often offering tax breaks to American entrepreneurs in exchange for developing their business in strategic directions preferred by the federal authorities. These initiatives were directly related to the geoeconomic rivalry between the USA and the PRC. For example, in 2021, the US Congress passed the *Innovation and Competition Act*, which allocated 250 billion dollars to support the domestic semiconductor industry, the development of 5G technology, and the funding of the National Science Foundation. The following year, the *Inflation Reduction Act (2022)*, which provided funding for the American economy in the amount of 891 billion dollars, including 783 billion for the energy sector and climate change initiatives was also passed.

Another form of US geoeconomics was the support provided to allies abroad. An example of such a policy was the aforementioned *Strategic Competition Act* of 2021, which established a communication infrastructure development program for countries in the Indo-Pacific region. It was a direct response by the US to China’s *Belt and Road Initiative*.

The United States exerted huge influence over the shaping of international regulations and technological standards in the global economy. However, as China’s geoeconomic influence has grown, the regulatory influence of the USA worldwide has decreased. Therefore, the Americans have increasingly sought agreement with the Europeans when setting technological and industrial standards. In addition, federal authorities, including specialised agencies, have assumed a greater regulatory role than before. This has weakened the previous practice, which had granted a lot of freedom in this matter to the most dynamic private entities and business organisations (Zúñiga et al., 2024, p. 1642).

## **Beijing's Reply**

The challenge posed to the Chinese by Trump and Biden was, of course, met with a reaction from Beijing. Although in 2019 the National People's Congress – the parliament of the People's Republic of China – passed a law prohibiting the forced transfer of intellectual property to foreign investors operating in the PRC, the aforementioned law also introduced a number of instruments facilitating retaliatory measures in the event of sanctions imposed on citizens or companies from the PRC. Moreover, in 2021 the same parliament passed a special anti-sanctions law, thus enabling effective retaliation from China (Zhang, 2021). Beijing responded primarily to customs sanctions, albeit on a much smaller scale than those the US imposed. This led to a prolonged trade war. For instance, in August 2019, in response to Donald Trump's sanctions, the import of some American agricultural products to the PRC was suspended. The disputes were temporarily resolved in January 2020, but it soon became apparent that the Chinese side was not fulfilling its commitments and was not importing, among other things, agricultural products from the US in the appropriate quantities. This led to a resumption of the trade war.

The PRC has also responded to political sanctions. For example, it has reacted to sanctions imposed by Washington over alleged human rights abuses in Xinjiang or Hong Kong, and has also retaliated against US military support for Taiwan. Another example of political punishment was the imposition of restrictions on twenty-eight members of the outgoing Republican administration in early 2021. The aim was to exploit the deep polarisation in American democracy and exacerbate existing divisions. However, the incoming Biden administration strongly condemned the Chinese sanctions. Thus, the change of administration in Washington has not ended the exchange of blows between the two sides.

The Chinese authorities have reduced their dollar reserves (by over 25% in total) and have also lowered the yuan's exchange rate against the US dollar. They have also introduced their own "list of unreliable entities", modelled on a similar US list. In February 2023, it included, among others, US arms corporations supplying equipment to Taiwan (Ministry of Commerce, 2025a). These companies have been banned from engaging in import-export activities in the PRC and from making new investments in China. Senior management staff have been banned from entering China, and their previous work and residence permits have also been revoked. Moreover, these companies have been fined an amount twice the value of their arms sales to Taiwan.

In 2023, the Ministry of Commerce of the PRC (2025b) decided to cut off the American economy from access to two strategic metals – gallium and germanium – taking advantage of the fact that about 90% of gallium and 60% of germanium on a global scale were supplied by Chinese corporations (Jakóbkik, 2023). The restrictions aimed to limit the production capacity of advanced semiconductors in the USA. The Chinese side’s response to the American sanctions was also to focus on the production of semiconductors on a mass scale that were slightly less technically advanced, but still essential for the military and automotive industries as well as for such climate transformation initiative as those implemented in the EU and the USA. The aim was to make rival economies dependent on supplies of relatively cheap processors produced in China, to develop the manufacturing and technological potential of Chinese enterprises so that it could meet domestic and export needs, as well as to bypass trade barriers imposed by the United States (Uznańska, 2024, pp. 6–7). To this end, Chinese entrepreneurs cooperated intensively with entities operating in Mexico and Canada, among other countries.

Following the US export sanctions, Beijing introduced similar, reciprocal measures against the US, such as restrictions on the export of Chinese laser radars, drones, and biotechnology products (Freeman, 2024). Beijing later extended the restrictions to devices and technologies with dual civilian-military uses.

A characteristic feature of the Chinese authorities’ actions was their attempt to respond to Washington’s successive sanctions in a similar way, employing almost identical instruments and arguments as the US. Following the US’ accusations to the WTO, the PRC also initiated, for example, anti-dumping procedures and sought to use international law against the US. China presented itself as another victim of Trump’s chaotic actions and called for common sense, responsibility, and respect for international trade norms. Sometimes it even defended the principles of globalisation against the Americans, accusing them of destructive actions and destroying their own economic order. Nevertheless, the Americans were more often on the defensive, trying to stop the development and expansion of the People’s Republic of China, while also having to respond to the asymmetric geoeconomic methods used by the PRC. It is also worth emphasising that the competitive approach to China was a non-partisan policy in America.

## **The Next Phase of the Dispute**

In 2018, Donald Trump began a systemic geoeconomic rivalry with the People's Republic of China. As a result, he began to deconstruct globalisation, that is, the economic system that the Americans had built after World War II, which conferred too many benefits on China. After returning to power in 2025, Trump continued this economic rivalry with Beijing, mainly by imposing high tariffs on goods imported from the PRC (in April 2025, these tariffs amounted to 145%). In this way, he tried to transfer production and industrial investment from China to the United States, as well as to reduce the dependence of the American economy on Beijing. Some goods produced in the People's Republic of China such as smartphones, laptops, hard drives, memory chips, processors, and semiconductor production equipment – all of which are important for the American economy – were traditionally exempted from punitive tariffs. Trump also sought to limit other countries' economic relations with the PRC. For example, in exchange for easier access to the American market, he demanded that they reduce the scope of their trade with China. He also wanted to cut Beijing off from American technology and capital, including a complete closure of the US capital market to Chinese companies.

The People's Republic of China has been preparing for another round of geoeconomic clashes with the US for several years, mindful of the policy pursued by Washington since 2018 and aware of the scale of sanctions imposed on Moscow after 2022. Above all, it has sought to become independent of American technology and capital (Zhang, 2024, p. 3), find new markets for its goods, and portray US policy to everyone as a threat to free trade in the world. It has also sought to make Europe and America dependent on strategic raw materials, production chains, and relatively cheap components or devices. China has responded to Trump's tariffs by refraining from purchasing American raw materials, food, and flagship exports, such as Boeing passenger planes. It has also imposed its own tariffs on American goods, which in April 2025, reached 125%. As with the US, the Chinese authorities have also exempted some American goods from punitive tariffs, including pharmaceuticals, integrated circuits, and aircraft engines. Beijing has also decided to limit access to rare earth elements for the US and its allies, including the EU. This could hamper plans for the revival of industry in America. Beijing has also consistently sought to reduce the role of the dollar as an international currency. At the same time, it wanted to capitalise on the chaos caused by Trump's mass imposition of tariffs (on the famous, so-called "Liberation Day" in early April 2025) to deepen economic relations with the EU, as well as

African, Asian, and Latin American countries. The aim was, therefore, to supplant the US as the main partner in global trade relations, while simultaneously increasing the credibility of the PRC as a stabilising force in global economic exchange. It was also about drawing US partners and allies closer to China in the ongoing geoeconomic conflict.

A good example of such developments is the European Union; threatened by Moscow and increasingly linked to Beijing in the economic sphere, while being previously linked by strong geoeconomic relations with Washington. After World War II, Western Europe was dependent on the USA in the sphere of security, which had consequences in the form of the strengthened influence of the Americans over European integration and promoted the development of transatlantic economic relations. However, Trump's distancing of himself from the responsibility for the security of Europe, which is commonly referred to as the offshore balancing strategy (Bartosiak, 2025, pp. 144–145), has geoeconomic consequences. It may not only lead to a reinforcing of the EU's economic dependence on Beijing, but also encourage European elites to seek support from the PRC in the field of security, considering the extent to which China has become a broad base for Moscow in its war waged in Ukraine.

In May 2025, representatives of the US and the PRC decided to slow down the trade war. Washington reduced punitive tariffs imposed on Chinese products to 30%, while Beijing reduced tariffs on American products to 10% (Verhelst et al., 2025). Subsequently, both sides held intensive talks on the further reduction of mutual sanctions. Washington expected Beijing to curb the illegal flow of fentanyl into the United States, and limit Chinese support for Moscow during the war in Ukraine, particularly through the purchase of Russian oil and other energy resources. Nevertheless, the Trump administration was primarily interested in lifting Beijing's restrictions on the import of rare earth elements and other strategic raw materials into the United States. In exchange for the unblocking of Chinese supplies of rare earth elements and other strategic raw materials, the United States permitted the export of American advanced AI chips, such as Nvidia's H20, whose shipment to China had previously been banned for national security reasons. In October 2025, the US reduced the "fentanyl" tariff on Chinese goods entering the US from 20 percent to 10 percent, following a meeting between President Donald Trump and President Xi Jinping in Busan, South Korea. The US also extended the 10 percent "retaliatory" tariff rate for another year, suspending the additional 24 percent rate that it initially imposed on China in April, 2025. In response, China adjusted its countermeasures and both sides agreed to extend certain tariff exemptions. For instance, the US Trade Representative extended tariff exclusions on

178 Chinese products until 10 November 2026. The excluded products cover a broad range of industrial materials and equipment, including solar manufacturing equipment, various types of machinery components, plastic films, electric motors, and catalysts, as well as medical devices, certain fabrics, and a number of vehicle components. This all indicated that the Trump administration appeared to be conceding to Beijing in the trade war.

However, the fundamental conflicts of geoeconomic interests remain unresolved, paving the way for further escalations of the dispute in the future. For instance, in October 2025, both sides introduced additional charges on maritime cargo transport, including fees imposed on vessels and carriers – American ones operating in Chinese ports and Chinese ones in American ports. These measures may also have affected European shipping companies with even minimal American investor participation. Furthermore, China has been drastically reducing rare earth element supplies to the US and the EU since at least September 2025, particularly to defence, aircraft, automotive, and telecommunications companies. The tensions on both of these issues were resolved during the aforementioned meeting in Busan, South Korea, but they nonetheless demonstrate how easily the economic war can escalate again. At the same time, geopolitical conflicts between both sides have continued to grow, concerning issues such as Ukraine, Iran, North Korea, and Taiwan. All this means that the prolonged economic rivalry has been compounded by increasingly strong geopolitical tensions, which might one day lead to direct military confrontation between the US and the PRC. Military confrontation, however, is not a foregone outcome. The US could choose to withdraw from the rivalry with China in Asia, similar to the Trump administration's attempt to withdraw some of its armed forces from Europe and shift the burden of security responsibility onto European allies. This would entail Washington relinquishing its global hegemonic ambitions and a geopolitical retreat in order to control its immediate sphere of influence, primarily the Americas.

## **Conclusions**

At the outset of the geoeconomic conflict with the People's Republic of China, Donald Trump tweeted that "trade wars are good and easy to win" (Trump tweets..., 2018). It turned out, however, that this was just the beginning of a protracted dispute, which, moreover, extended far beyond the issue of the excessive trade deficit with China. It was a geoeconomic confrontation, the primary aim of which was to curb China's rising technological, financial, industrial, and export capabilities, and, by

extension, its military potential. Collectively, these development posed a great geopolitical challenge for the American elites.

The dispute with China was risky for the United States. At stake were the potential loss of the privileged position of the American dollar, and the turning of previous partners and allies towards China, thereby the strengthening of Beijing's central role in the world economy. Instead of a revival of industrialisation in the USA, the country faced the prospect of financial turbulence, difficulties in servicing its debt, and a potential recession. The risk of a transition from an economic war to a military conflict between the United States and China was also increasing.

During the analysis, the research hypotheses were confirmed. First, China introduced the geoeconomic paradigm into its policy on a large scale and thus challenged the US, as it began to undermine the primacy of this great power on a global scale. Second, although the United States had possessed the geoeconomic instruments described by Luttwak since the 1970s, it was not until the Trump presidency that it was forced to respond to the Chinese challenge, and on a much larger scale than it had done before. Third, the Biden administration continued and even strengthened Trump's geoeconomics towards China, while simultaneously pursuing a completely different policy towards US allies (primarily EU countries) compared to the Republican administration. Fourth, Beijing consistently tried to respond to US sanctions, while adapting its own geoeconomic strategy to the situation of the deepening conflict with the US. For example, it tried to base its own development to a greater extent on domestic demand and domestic technologies and investments, sought geoeconomic expansion in Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa, and also sought to avoid US sanctions as much as possible, particularly those related to access to financial markets and modern technologies.

The theoretical conclusion resulting from the author's analysis is that the logic of geoeconomic rivalry carries the potential to escalate into a full-scale military. Contrary to Luttwak's concept, the author therefore considers that there is a possibility of an economic conflict turning into a military one. For now, though, in the middle of the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so-called "proxy wars" involving both powers have been intensifying. This is how we can look at the war in Ukraine, for example, in which Kiev has been supported by the West – led by the USA until 2025 – while Moscow has received backing from Beijing and its geopolitical allies.

The growing US–China rivalry is having an increasingly negative impact on the European Union, being costly both economically and in terms of its international standing, and thus geopolitically. Washington has been shifting a number of its own hegemonic costs onto the EU and its

Member States, including those related to America's economic recovery. It has also pressured allies to limit economic relations with Beijing and even impose sanctions on China in some cases. Europe has been dependent on America for decades as regards its security, and the growing threat from Moscow has further accentuated this dependence. This has compelled the EU to accommodate many of Trump's expectations.

At the same time, the EU has become increasingly dependent on China, particularly in geoeconomic terms. This applies to access to the Chinese market and its dependence on Chinese raw materials and products, essential not only for the climate transition but also for industry, including arms production. Therefore, Brussels has been reluctant to unequivocally side with Washington in its rivalry with China. For example, it has hesitated to impose serious economic sanctions on China, even if they are limited to select Chinese companies. Certainly, the EU could not afford a full-scale trade war with Beijing. As a result, the EU has found itself trapped in the US–China rivalry. Nevertheless, at least in the middle of the third decade of the twenty-first century, continental Europe remains geopolitically aligned with the United States. However, this relationship could change, particularly if Beijing secures a geoeconomic advantage over Washington and the latter adopts a strategy of curtailing its global hegemonic ambitions, definitively withdrawing from its responsibility for European security.

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*Malgorzata Mołęda-Zdziech*\*

## **Evaluating 20 Years of Poland’s Membership in the European Union – Results of an Expert Survey**

### **Abstract**

May 2024 marked the twentieth anniversary of Poland’s membership in the European Union. Two decades provide a unique opportunity to take stock and thoroughly analyse the successes, failures, and challenges of this period in the context of Poland. In the summer of 2024, the author invited Polish nationals working in EU institutions and agencies, as well as in Brussels-based think tanks, to express their opinions about Poland’s membership in the EU in an online expert survey. The survey was conducted in technical collaboration with Dr Marta Pachocka from the Department of Political Studies at the SGH Warsaw School of Economics, while the visualisations were prepared by Ksenia Naranovich, a PhD student at the same institution.

The main group of respondents comprised members of two Polish networks actively engaged in the EU forum – the Network PL Association and the Polish European Professionals Network, who the authors consider experts on European affairs, and whose knowledge and access to information in this field exceed that of ordinary citizens. They represent the elite in the sense of neo-functional theory, which provides the theoretical framework for the authors’ considerations. In this approach, the drivers of integration are elites and interest groups that operate at the supranational level, who seek solutions to their problems and opportunities to articulate their needs before supranational institutions. This implies that elites and interest groups shift their loyalties and interests to supranational structures, thereby weakening

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the role of national governments. The elites include members of political parties, national officials, and European bureaucracy employees, all of whom are motivated by their own interests. This article presents the results of an online survey (using the CAWI technique) conducted among Polish European experts, one which was particularly important in the context of preparations for the Polish Presidency in 2025.

**Keywords:** EU Membership, European Union, Expert Survey, Poland, Networking, Opinion Leaders

## Introduction

1 May 2024 marked the twentieth anniversary of Poland's accession to the European Union. Along with joining NATO in 1999, accession to the Community became a symbol of a permanent shift in Poland's strategic place in the international forum. Two decades provides an opportunity to take stock of what has been achieved and where there have been failures. On this occasion, there was no single official government commemoration of the anniversary; instead, a series of events was organised in various parts in Poland over an extended period – for example, the European Funds Open Days, which occurred on 10–11 May 2024. Most of these events were grassroots initiatives, including meetings, seminars, and conferences, and were recorded on the *YES!teśmy – 20 years in the EU* website, which reported on activities undertaken by academic institutions, think tanks, and NGOs.

Studies summarising this period have emphasised, above all, the positive economic effects and the significant developmental progress that has been achieved as a result of EU accession (Dobrzyński et al., 2024; Ambroziak, 2024). The so-called “great enlargement” has fulfilled the expectations placed upon it in terms of the economic development of the new Member States. The inflow of EU funds and private investment, together with the export opportunities associated with access to the single market, have driven economic growth that has narrowed the development gap between them and Western Europe. At the time of accession (2004–2007), the per capita GDP of the ten former Eastern Bloc countries stood at 25.7% of Germany's level, whereas by 2022 it had reached 44.8% (Szczepanik, 2024, p. 11).

It is worth recalling that the Centre for Public Opinion Research (CBOS), the research institution that has been studying this issue for the longest period, once conducted a qualitative study in addition to its regular quantitative study. The survey was conducted using the Focus

Group Interview (FIG) method and was conducted in two regions of Poland – Wielkopolska (Leszno) and Podlasie (Łomża). These are medium-sized cities located in the west and east of Poland respectively. In each region, two discussion sessions were conducted with male and female participants: one session with a younger group (aged 20–35) and one with an older group (aged 40–55) (Roguska, Głowacki, 2024). The results – both in the quantitative and qualitative surveys – indicate an evolution in attitudes towards Poland's presence in the EU. The initial Euro-enthusiasm observed in 2014 – when 90% of respondents declared satisfaction with EU membership – was replaced by a turn towards a more balanced Euro-realism. Nevertheless, the overall perception of EU accession remained strongly positive, with 77% expressing satisfaction in 2024. Reservations were voiced mainly in relation to more specific issues, but the general assessment is clearly positive.

The overall conclusion from the responses received to the question on attitudes to EU membership was still very positive: 77% of respondents declared that they were satisfied with their membership of the community. This is admittedly a decrease compared to the 90% declared in 2014, but it was still a clear majority. The decline corresponds with an increase in the share of those dissatisfied, which had reached 17%. The more specific the question – for example, regarding the effects of integration for Poland or the personal impact of membership – the less optimistic, though still largely positive, the assessments became. A majority of 59% considered that Poland's integration with the EU had brought more benefits than losses, while 50% expressed this view in relation to themselves personally. It is worth noting that, since 2019, there has been a rise in the proportion of respondents perceiving more losses than benefits; in the 2024 survey, this view was held by 21% in relation to Poland, and by 17% at the individual level.

Respondents clearly recognise the advantages of EU membership, primarily citing EU funds, open borders, benefits for citizens (22%), as well as improvements in the economy, living standards, security, and Poland's participation in the political community. Only 8% of respondents reported that they do not see the positive effects of accession, and 12% provided the so-called “escape” answer, or, a non-committal response (“I don't know” / “hard to say”).

When asked about the disadvantages of Poland's accession to the EU, 19% of respondents stated that they did not see any. Among those who did identify negative aspects, the most frequently mentioned issues concerned perceived negative effects on law and sovereignty, including excessive interference in Polish affairs, and the primacy of EU law over Polish law.

Other concerns related to the economy, such as difficulties in agriculture, insufficient free-market mechanisms, and excessive regulation. The aforementioned “escape” answers were selected by 18% of respondents.

Anti-European narratives often include fears of threats to national identity. Currently, half of respondents indicated that they feel both Polish and European, an increase of 5 percentage points from 2009. Meanwhile, 45% declared that they feel exclusively Polish, representing a decrease of 7 percentage points relative to 2009.

## **Rationale for the Selection of the Study Groups**

The authors’ idea for their survey was to ask Poles working within the European bubble – including officials of EU institutions, European agencies, and think tanks – to reflect on two decades of Poland’s membership in the EU. Respondents were reached through two associations bringing together Poles employed in EU institutions and based in Brussels: Network PL and the Polish European Professionals Network (PEPN).

The Network PL association was founded in 2013 in Brussels, and a branch in Luxembourg was established in 2023. It was the first association to integrate Poles working in European institutions. The organisation’s objectives include exchanging experiences, sharing knowledge, building relationships with the institutional environment, and promoting a positive image of Poles involved in international activities. The Association has its own Programme Council, which supports the organisation in its strategic planning and development. The four-member Council consists of experienced EU officials: Professor Danuta Hübner, former Commissioner and MEP (EPP); Dr Jarosław Pietras, former Director-General at the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union (2008–2020); Dr. Marek Prawda, former Ambassador at the Permanent Representation of the Republic of Poland to the EU (2012–2016) and Director of the European Commission Representation in Poland from 2016 to 2021, as well as former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs; and Agnieszka Walter-Drop, Director-General for Logistics and Interpretation of Conferences at the European Parliament (see the Network pl website).

The second organisation, the Polish European Professionals Network (PEPN), founded in 2023 in Brussels, brings together professionals working in the EU public sector, as well as in the private sector and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It also unites alumni from the College of Europe, as well as graduates from universities specialising in European law, international relations, and the functioning of EU institutions. PEPN

focuses on networking activities and actively promotes information about internship opportunities in EU institutions. It collaborates with student organisations, scientific associations, and NGOs by organising meetings with officials from both Poland and the European Union, as well as thematic seminars. PEPN is a non-registered association.

As can be seen, both organisations complement each other: Network PL primarily brings together individuals with several years of professional experience in the EU arena, while PEPN focuses on those who are only beginning their careers in EU institutions, often graduates of internships in the European Commission (so-called “Blue Book” trainees). Both organisations, following a change of government in Poland after the parliamentary elections of 15 October 2023, have remained in contact with government institutions and have been actively involved in the preparatory work for Poland’s Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2025. On 1 January 2025, Poland began its six-month Presidency of the EU Council. In 2009, the Lisbon Treaty introduced the Trio Presidency system, a collaboration of three consecutive presidencies that, together with the European Commission, prepare an 18-month work programme. Each of the trio countries develops a detailed 6-month programme. Poland first held the Presidency of the EU Council in the second half of 2011, forming a Trio Presidency with Denmark and Cyprus. The forthcoming Presidency Trio will again be composed of Poland, Denmark, and Cyprus.

## **Theoretical Framework for the Study**

The primary aim of the survey, as outlined in the *Theoretical Framework for the Study* and *Data and Research Methods* sections, was to assess the views of Polish elites on 20 years of Poland’s EU membership, to identify key challenges, and to evaluate the future direction of European integration. The study was primarily grounded in the neo-functional theories of integration and the communication theory of integration. In addition, it drew on research perspectives from the field of media and communication, particularly the concept of the opinion leader and the two-stage flow model of information (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, Gaudet, 1944).

The respondents were treated as representatives of the elite in the sense of neo-functional theory, which provides the theoretical framework for this study (Pareto, 1994; Sztumski, 2007). Within this approach, the drivers of integration processes are elites and interest groups that operate at the supranational level, who seek to resolve their problems at this level and the opportunity to articulate their needs through supranational

institutions. This implies that elites and interest groups shift their loyalty and interest to supranational structures, thereby weakening the role of national governments. The elite may include members of political parties, national officials, and European bureaucrats who are driven by their own interests. The spill-over process, which helps to explain the dynamics of integration, thus becomes more critical.

The authors refer to the terms *expert*, *influential*, and *general opinion leader*. The concept of *opinion leadership* constitutes one of the key theoretical frameworks in research on social influence and the diffusion of information and innovation. It concerns individuals within a particular social group who exert significant influence over the opinions or behaviour of other members of that community.

The notion of *opinion leaders* is linked to the theory of two-step media influence (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, Gaudet, 1944; Katz, Lazarsfeld, 1955), which posits that information on a given topic first reaches these individuals, primarily because they follow media content more diligently. Such individuals, by virtue of their particular characteristics, shape how this information is interpreted within their communities. In other words, they influence what others think about various topics covered in the media. The concept of opinion leadership has gained prominence and evolved within the social sciences. However, the extensive body of research does not provide a definitive answer to the important question of whether the influence exerted by opinion leaders is domain-specific or more general, extending across multiple, even unrelated, fields.

Research has confirmed the importance of interpersonal communication and the influence derived from an individual's position within a social network. A simple definition offered by Katz and Lazarsfeld describes opinion leadership as a process manifested in everyday situations – sometimes subconsciously – within a small group of friends, family members and neighbours. It constitutes an almost invisible form of leadership at the level of ordinary, informal, day-to-day contact between people. According to Katz's distinction, a leader's capital is built upon three elements: a set of specific personal characteristics of an opinion leader (*who one is*); competence and knowledge in a specific field (*what one knows*); and a strategic position within a social network (*who one knows*) (Katz, Lazarsfeld, 1955).

Merton's division between monomorphic and polymorphic opinion leaders is considered the most classic formulation of the concept (Merton, 1949). In his view, monomorphic leaders are experts in specific fields. Within classical opinion leader theory, an important characteristic of such leaders is their higher level of exposure to mass media, which

underpins the central conclusion of the two-tier media influence theory. According to this model, opinion leaders act as intermediaries of mass media influence; being more active recipients of media content, they can influence other people's opinions.

From the authors' perspective, the contemporary context is no longer solely defined by mass media, but by direct access to information. The respondents have access to such information from its source, namely within the EU institutions themselves. These institutions maintain a so-called "two-stage information flow": firstly, by communicating information internally to their staff, and secondly by facilitating its informal dissemination. This latter phase is supported by the circulation of information through various networks such as Network PL and PEPN. This process is further supported by European institutional initiatives such as the *Back to School* programme, which encourages EU officials to engage with schools, universities, and communities in their countries of origin.

The following assumptions and research questions were made:

1. The members of the two organisations were treated as experts on European affairs. Without entering into a theoretical discussion on the definition of the term *expert*, the colloquial understanding of the term is adopted. According to the *Dictionary of the Polish Language*, an expert is "a person considered an authority in a certain field, a specialist, a person with extensive experience". Such an individual possess the ability to collect, interpret, and apply knowledge in practice to solve problems (Słownik Języka Polskiego, n.d.). It was therefore assumed that their knowledge of the EU is broader and more specialised than that of the average person.
2. Direct experience of working within a European institutional environment may make the answers more realistic and empirically grounded. Their responses would be less declarative and more reflective than those in standard opinion polls (cf. the CBOS studies cited previously).
3. The expert respondents may also be regarded as *opinion leaders* or *influencers* who are capable of shaping public debate and influencing its direction.
4. The role of professional networks and their strategic use. Do such networks place topics on the public agenda, and if so, how? Do they contribute to shaping the forum for debate and the process of agenda setting? From the information available, no comparable study has yet been conducted among the members of these organisations.

It is, therefore, worth exploring their views. Poland's rotating Presidency of the Council of the European Union offered an opportunity to enhance

the visibility and promotion of the country's priority issues. Poland's main priority for the Presidency was identified as security. The official presentation of the Presidency's priorities was scheduled for 7<sup>th</sup> December 2024.

## **Data and Research Methods**

The purpose of the survey was to assess the elites' views on twenty years of Poland's EU membership, identify key challenges, and evaluate the direction of European integration. The main research question or hypothesis was formulated as follows: Do Polish experts share the Euro-realist approach observed in public opinion?

The study employed the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interview) method, which involved an online questionnaire distributed to respondents. It contained twenty-eight questions: seventeen closed and eleven open. The main advantages of this method include reduced time and cost of survey preparation and implementation, and the amount of data given for analysis. Moreover, it is also much easier to manage such a project, thanks to the possibility to observe the survey's progress. Additionally, the greater sense of anonymity experienced by the participants makes this tool extremely useful for addressing difficult, sensitive, or potentially embarrassing topics.

The questionnaire was preceded by a brief introductory letter explaining the purpose of the survey, identifying its authors, and inviting participation. The SGH Warsaw School of Economics signed formal cooperation agreements with both organisations; with Network pl on 12 May 2022, and with PEPN on 8 August 2024. Consequently, the authors were not anonymous to the respondents, but clearly associated with SGH.

Participation in the study was voluntary, and the questionnaire guaranteed full anonymity of responses. The questionnaire was administered via the Network PL and PEPN platforms between July and September 2024. In total, 70 questionnaires were returned, of which 69 were used in the analysis. One respondent had opened the survey and answered only a single question, therefore, their response was excluded from the dataset. A five-point Likert scale was applied in the survey.

## **Discussion of Research Results**

The results of the open-ended questions are presented in a visualised form (as word clouds) generated from the responses received, while the closed questions are presented quantitatively in the form of percentage

graphs. The text highlights general conclusions drawn from the findings. Several questions (19, 20, 24, and 25) were replicated from the CBOS survey, which provided an opportunity for a comparative analysis of the responses of the two groups of respondents surveyed. Overall, Poland's position in the EU (question 1) was assessed positively, with 75% of respondents rating it as "good" or "very good".

The respondents were asked to identify up to five of the most important achievements of Poland's 20 years of EU membership. The indicated successes can be grouped into the following three main categories.

**1. Concerning the economy – the economic dimension (predominant):**

Respondents most frequently mentioned economic development, growth, EU funds and their use, infrastructure, roads, agriculture, and access to the single market. Specific sectors, such as energy, agriculture were also highlighted in the context of their transformation;

**2. Concerning politics – the political and public policy dimension:**

The most frequently cited achievements included democracy, Schengen membership, border opening, the Eastern Partnership, political standards, administrative development, the rule of law, and programmes such as Erasmus. Additionally, "not adopting the euro" was also mentioned as a positive outcome. Two names also appear in this category: Donald Tusk, as President of the European Council, and Jerzy Buzek, as President of the European Parliament and multiple-term MEP;

**3. Concerning cultural and social aspects – the axionormative dimension:**

Respondents emphasised European values and broadly defined security. Among the European values most frequently cited were Western standards, a change in mentality, European identity, and youth engagement,

In the category of security, respondents most frequently mentioned issues related to the war in Ukraine, relations with "russia" (yes, in lower case), and NATO. It is worth noting that economic and political achievements clearly dominate the following word cloud visualising the achievements indicated by the respondents.

In response to the question concerning failures during the period under review (Q3 – *What do you consider to be the most important failure of Poland's 20 years of membership of the EU? Please list up to five such failures*), respondents most often indicated some omissions or shortcomings – the word *lack* came up most often in their answers. These may be grouped



**4. Poland's weak diplomatic position in the EU:** this was attributed to eight years of Law and Justice (PiS) rule, alongside hopes and expectations of change after the 2023 elections.

The two following statements from open-ended responses clearly illustrate this problem:

**Weak diplomatic position** – “Playing below capacity for the fifth largest country and sixth largest economy. The situation has changed after D. Tusk took over again in 2023, but there is still much work to be done, particularly at a less political and more administrative level, given the eight years of weakening our position and reducing our influence between 2015 and 2023.”

**Departure from the rule of law under Law and Justice** – “Lack of education necessary to fully understand the European Charter of Human Rights (for example, after 20 years in the Union, there are still anti-LGBT resolutions in more than 100 Polish towns – withdrawn only because of the threat of losing EU funds). The attitude towards migration policy, its negative perception in recent years, and the rapprochement with Orbán. The 27:1 vote.”

These responses encapsulate a broader set of concerns raised by participants, including:

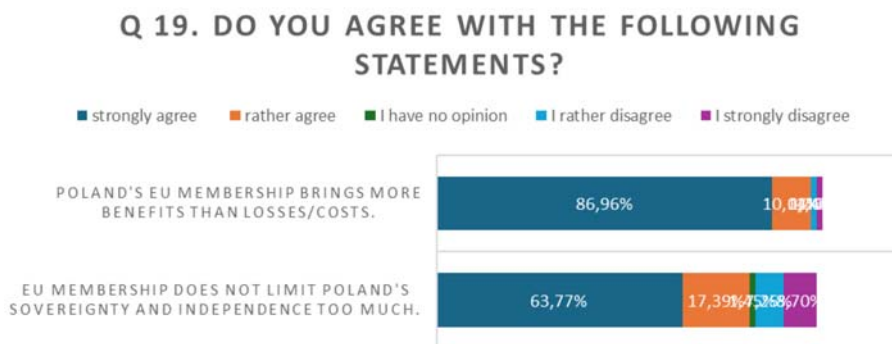
- 1) the rise of populism and Euroscepticism;
- 2) the failure to adopt the euro in Poland;
- 3) omissions in several policy areas – particularly climate (insufficient action to counter climate change), migration, energy, and combating disinformation, especially regarding the war in Ukraine and Russian infiltration.

The next two questions, 19 and 20, were taken from the CBOS survey and addressed concerns and visions about Europe. In question 19, respondents were asked to express their views on the following statements:

- 1) *Poland's EU membership brings more benefits than losses* – as many as 97.10% indicated the answer “more benefits than losses”;
- 2) *EU memberships do not limit Poland's sovereignty and independence too much* – 81.16% agreed with this statement.

It can therefore be concluded that experts view Poland's membership of the European Union very positively. They do not share the concern that Poland's sovereignty is threatened by EU membership – an argument most often advanced by right-wing political parties and opponents of European integration.





**Picture 1. Question 19 – Do You Agree With the Following Statements?**

in exactly the same manner as for the group of national experts from Team Europe Direct Poland, who had completed a similar survey a few months earlier. The survey's results, conducted among members of the European Commission's expert network – Team Europe Direct Poland – were presented at the network's expert team meeting in March 2024 (a publication is in preparation). Among this group, 81% were in favour of introducing the euro as soon as possible. In the CBOS survey, the euro issue appeared only among the indicated negative consequences of EU membership – as a potential threat associated with adopting the common currency – and was mentioned by only 1% of respondents in 2024.

Half of the experts of the authors' survey were in favour of adopting the euro "as soon as possible" (51%). Interestingly, 9% of experts believed that "Poland should not adopt the euro at all". Thus, enthusiasm for adopting the euro was markedly lower among national experts from Team Europe Direct Poland.

The final two questions of the survey asked respondents to evaluate the efforts of successive Polish governments over the past 20 years to strengthen Polish representation in EU institutions. Respondents rated the performance of the Law and Justice (PiS) governments the lowest, with as many as 80% describing their efforts as "poor" or "very poor".

At the same time, high expectations were placed on Donald Tusk's government due to its knowledge and experience, as well as Poland's rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union, which ran from 1 January until 30 June 2025.

It is worth recalling that the Presidency held from July to December 2011 served as a test of the maturity of Poland's EU membership. During that period, talks on the Association Agreement with Ukraine were



**Visualisation 3. What Are the Priority Challenges Facing the European Union in the Upcoming Term of the European Commission and the European Parliament (2024–2029)? (Q22)**



**Visualisation 4. Action Plan by Geographical Area. Q23. What Are the Priority Challenges Facing Poland as an EU Member State in the Next Term of the European Commission and the European Parliament (2024–2029)?**

concluded, accession talks with Croatia were finalised, and the adoption of the so-called “six-pack” – a package of legal acts reinforcing budgetary discipline under the Stability and Growth Pact – was achieved. The Eastern Partnership Summit in Warsaw, boycotted by Belarus and failing to deliver an EU membership perspective to the other partners, should be considered the biggest disappointment. Overall, however, Poland’s presidency of the Council was well appreciated in Europe. In 2014, during the pro-European Revolution of Dignity (Euromaidan) in Ukraine, the Polish government became actively involved in promoting the Ukrainian cause within the EU forum. Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski, together with his French and German counterparts, engaged in mediation between the authorities and the opposition. However, due to Russia’s objections, Poland was excluded from the Normandy Format (comprising Germany, France, Ukraine, and Russia), which subsequently became the principal platform for negotiations on the war in Donbas and the statehood of Crimea.

## Conclusions

Since the so-called “Big Bang” enlargement, the Union has survived decades of what has been labelled as “permanent crisis” yet remains more strongly integrated than it was twenty years ago. Cooperation has been strengthened in economic and budgetary policy, as well as migration, energy, and defence. Although the solutions adopted may appear insufficient, the overall assessment of the EU’s response to successive crises must be regarded as positive. The Union has not only withstood these challenges but has also taken steps to secure its strong position in a world marked by increasing rivalry among global powers. Both political elites and citizens tend to view cooperation within the EU as the most effective means to addressing challenges that transcend national borders.

Given the expert status of the respondents, it was essential to gather their opinions on the assessment of government actions to support the representation of Poles in EU institutions. Respondents were asked to assess three periods: up to autumn 2015 (the end of the Civic Platform (PO) government), the Law and Justice (PiS) government from autumn 2015 to December 2023, and, from December 2023, the coalition government of the Civic Coalition (KO). The period of the Law and Justice right-wing government received the most negative assessment: 81.16% of respondents rated its actions to support the representation of Poles in EU institutions as “poor” (21.74%) or “very poor” (59.42%). The activities undertaken during the liberal Civic Coalition government

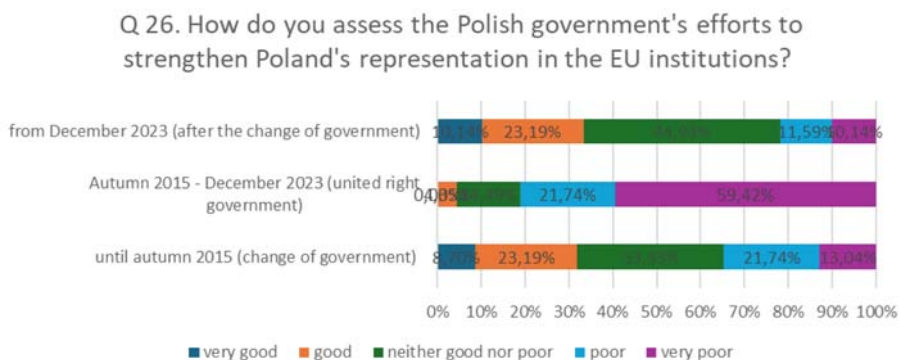
were evaluated much more favourably. Approximately one-third of respondents (34.78% to be precise) rated them as “poor” (21.74%) or “very poor” (13.04%).

The change of government following the parliamentary elections in December 2023, with the Civic Coalition assuming power, led to an improvement in sentiment, and consequently, a more favourable assessment of measures to support Poles working in EU institutions. Over one-third of respondents rated the measures as “good” (23.14%) or “very good” (10.14%). Approximately one-fifth of respondents considered them “poor” (11.59%) or “very poor” (10.14%). The largest proportion of respondents (44.33%) chose the neutral option, “neither good nor poor”. This outcome may be attributed to the relatively short period that the government had been in office (approximately seven months), along with the timing of the survey (July–September 2024).

The results of the study indicated that, although the perceived scale of the problem varies, the lack of a coherent strategy to increase the representation of Poles in international institutions remains a persistent issue, regardless of the ruling party. European data also confirm challenges related to national representation in the EU. According to the *Action Plan on Geographical Balance, Poland 2023* (European Commission) with a guiding rate of 8.2%, under-representation is defined as a level below 80% of the guiding rate, which for Polish nationals corresponds to 6.6% (*Action Plan on Geographical Balance, Poland 2023*).

The conclusions of the study are as follows:

1. There is a very positive assessment of Poland’s twenty years of membership in the EU. 75% of experts assess Poland’s position as at least “good”. This finding confirms the earlier results of public opinion surveys conducted by CBOS, as well as those of Team Europe Direct Poland experts, among whom 81% rated the effects of accession as at least “good”.
2. The respondents demonstrated a high level awareness regarding the challenges facing the EU, and Poland within it, including migration, climate change, energy, and enlargement.
3. The study revealed a strong need for in-depth, long-term employment strategies within EU institutions.
4. The survey results showed that expert respondents were not concerned that EU membership limits Poland’s sovereignty. It is, in fact, to the contrary; they expressed strong support for the idea of a more united Europe, with 90% agreeing with this view.
5. The experts strongly believed that Poland’s membership of the EU brings more benefits than losses or costs, with 97.10% sharing this particular view.



**Picture 2. Question 26 – How Do You Assess the Polish Government’s Efforts to Strengthen Poland’s Representation in the EU Institutions?**

6. Half of the experts were in favour of commencing euro adoption preparations as soon as possible (51%), while 9% of experts believed that Poland should not adopt the euro at all.
7. In the context of Ukraine’s path towards accession to the European Union, it is worth recalling that the history of European integration demonstrates that Europe develops through crises. The contemporary EU requires new challenges and long-term plans to be implemented, and enlargement could serve as one of them. Following the European Parliament elections in June 2024, the shift to the right created a new context for the enlargement debate. The results of those elections reflect the consolidation of right-wing and populist parties in several EU Member States including Austria, France, and Italy, signalling a broader populist turn. On the rise of working-class support for the far right, see I. Krastev (Krastev, 2017, pp. 33–35), but also D. Eribon, whose sociological and literary book *The Life, Old Age, And Death Of A Working-Class Woman* (Eribon, 2024) provides additional insight on the subject. Bringing the war in Ukraine to an end should be a top political priority in the European Union.
8. In the economic sphere, digitalisation, artificial intelligence, and big data represent areas of global competition that the EU should prioritise and further develop, as it continues to lag behind China and the United States in these domains. The 2021 European Commission Communication already noted that, in several sectors regarded as key to the development of the modern economy – such as AI, big data, microelectronics, and robotics – the EU is second to its main rivals, China and the United States.

To address the above challenges, it is essential to strengthen the human resources of the Polish representation within European institutions. This involves addressing the geographical imbalances and increasing the presence of Polish professionals in key institutional positions (Lisiecki-Zurowski, 2023). The experts who participated in the survey strongly emphasised this need.

The results of the survey, conducted among employees of European institutions, revealed a high level of awareness of the problems and challenges facing Poland within the European Union. Despite twenty years of membership in the Community, Poland still lacks a coherent and effective strategy for increasing its representation in EU institutions. The experts' assessments on Poland's membership remain unequivocally positive, both in economic and social terms.

It is also worth considering whether, after two decades of EU membership, Polish employees working in EU institutions are sufficiently organised and mutually supportive. However, this question lies beyond the scope of the present study and should be explored in future research.

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*Radosław Kupczyk\**

## **The Impact of EU Energy Policy on Poland's Development Potential**

### **Abstract**

This article examines the impact of the European Union's energy policy on the development of its Member States, with a particular focus on Poland. The analysis situates energy policy within the broader context of security, which constitutes a significant determinant of economic growth potential. Accordingly, the opportunities, threats, and challenges resulting from the assumptions underpinning EU energy policy are discussed. The article also considers the economic implications of the EU's energy and climate package for Poland, and illustrates that the adopted package of solutions may be an example of the fact that a single, common development strategy may not be optimal for all of the EU's Member States, as the diverse structures of national energy sectors preclude uniform dynamics of change.

**Keywords:** EU, Energy Policy, Energy Development Potential of Poland

### **Preface**

The most important element of energy policy for ensuring stable economic growth is energy security. Energy security is commonly defined as having access to various forms of energy at reasonable, justifiable costs (Bartodziej, Tomaszewski, 2009, p. 73). This definition, however, seems rather shallow. Access to energy sources in the twenty-first century can

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undoubtedly be viewed as one of the core components of state security, underpinning stable economic growth. Energy policy is also becoming an increasingly important foreign policy tool, as exemplified by case of Russia, a country whose energy resources have positioned it as a regional hegemon. By leveraging its natural gas reserves, Russia has exerted, and continues to exert, substantial influence over gas prices in Europe, with direct consequences for the economic stability of European consumers. In addition, by building gas pipelines, Russia has also exerted influence over the political climate within the European Union itself. The construction of the Nord Stream gas pipeline has triggered long-standing tensions not only between Poland and Russia, but also within the EU itself, mainly between its “new” and “old” Member States. The decision to construct Nord Stream, as taken by German companies, has disproportionately affected the countries of Central Europe, rendering them dependent on the political interests of Russia. For this reason, the diversification of supply sources is such an important aspect of the EU’s current energy policy. Diversification is also particularly relevant in the context of the ongoing armed conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The ability to draw on multiple energy sources has an impact on both price levels and on providing safeguards against the emergence of a monopoly of a single supplier. Daniel Yergin offers a clean and concise definition of energy security, describing it as “the availability of adequate supplies at affordable prices” (Yergin, 2013, p. 248). He also identifies the key dimensions of energy security:

- 1) Physical security – the protection of supplies, resources, and trade routes.
- 2) Access to energy – the ability to acquire and manage energy resources effectively.
- 3) Policy framework – the development and implementation of appropriate policies by states and international organisations, which influence investment, innovation, and technological progress.

From the above division, it can be deduced that ensuring energy security in a given country requires more than just an appropriate government policy or access to external resources. A coherent strategy is needed, and in the case of Poland, this strategy must be aligned with European Union policy (Kurtyka, 2021, p. 31). Poland, like most EU Member States, depends on the supply of raw materials such as oil or natural gas; raw materials that are fundamental to the functioning of modern economies. Contemporary economies, and indeed civilisation as a whole, are entirely dependent on energy. Its absence would lead to a complete paralysis of the economic system of any given country. Conversely, increases in the costs

of energy's raw materials, which directly translate into higher electricity prices, raise production costs, undermine the competitiveness of an economy, and consequently reduce its development potential (Makridou, Matsumoto, Doumpos, 2024, pp. 25–26).

In the EU context, the security dimension is determined by aspects of environmental policy. As a global leader in this area, the EU is striving to reduce carbon dioxide emissions in order to create an energy sector that stimulates development across the entire economy (Wysokińska, 2024, pp. 75–76). The environmental aspect, implemented through the transposition of directives mandating increased energy efficiency and a higher share of renewable energy sources (RES), is becoming an integral part of the internal policy of each EU Member State. This has generated the aforementioned significant difference in interests between the “new” and “old” EU Member States. The primary source for dissatisfaction is financial, and consequently technological. Alternative energy sources provide substantial opportunities for the wealthiest EU economies which manufacture RES-based equipment. Unfortunately, many Central European countries lack both the necessary technology and infrastructure to produce such equipment. EU plans are often too ambitious and far-reaching, meaning that the EU's less developed economies, including Poland, cannot afford such costly investments. A particular challenge for the Polish energy sector is its heavy dependence on coal – under EU climate law, Poland is required to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 (*Fit for 55* package, p. 2). This could significantly undermine the competitiveness of its economy, especially in the short to medium term. In order to mitigate this adverse effect, the European Union supports Poland in its efforts to transform the energy sector through greater use of RES, providing opportunities to finance such investments with European funds.

### **The Energy Union's Impact on the EU**

The Energy Union was launched by the Member States in March 2015. A year earlier, the European Council had identified it as one of the five priorities of its strategic agenda. The Union was designed to provide affordable, secure, and sustainable energy for all Member States (Mengolini, Masera, 2021, pp. 153–154). In 2015, the European Commission published a package comprising three Communications. The first of these, the *Framework Strategy for a Sustainable Energy Union*, built on the *2030 Climate and Energy Package* and the *2014 Energy Security Strategy*, and set out the EU's energy policy with three long-term objectives: security of supply, competitiveness, and ensuring market balance.

Energy efficiency is central to this adopted strategy. It is seen as a specific way to reduce energy consumption and consequently reduce energy demand, primarily by seeking energy savings in construction and transport. Member States are also encouraged to strengthen cooperation for the internal energy market (Skłodowska, 2015, p. 12). Another priority is the aforementioned energy security, which has become particularly significant following Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. In this context, the main objective is to make the EU more resilient to external crises by reducing its dependence on external supplies, and, moreover, unstable external suppliers (Lorek, 2017, pp. 97–98). The foundation of the Energy Union, and of the European Union's energy policy more broadly, rests on modern technologies that harness Member States' potential through increased innovation, the adoption of renewable energy sources, and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions (Kałużna, Rosicki, 2010, p. 125).

The Paris Agreement, intended to address global climate change beyond 2020, was a particularly important element of EU energy and climate policy. They were designed to replace the expiring Kyoto Protocol with a new global framework. Achieving meaningful emissions reductions without such an international agreement would have been very difficult for the EU (Borozan, 2024 p. 649). If the main international actors and major emitters of greenhouse gases – namely, Canada, the United States, China, and Japan – fail to take substantive action to reduce emissions, it will be very difficult for the EU to remain competitive in the global economy.

Poland did not fundamentally oppose the objectives of the Paris Agreement. Rather, it sought to align with the already existing legal framework in order to improve the EU's position *vis-à-vis* Russia, while maximising the security of its natural gas sector. The Energy Union priorities proposed by the Polish government were only marginally reflected in the European Commission's draft proposals. Consequently, the burden of the Energy Union has been placed on the production of electricity generated from renewable energy sources.

The expansion of energy transmission links between Member States constitutes an extremely important element of the Energy Union (Spiridonovs, Bogdanova, 2017, pp. 93–94). Enhanced interconnections will increase the transferability of electricity and natural gas, with the revised infrastructure designed to allow the exchange of energy equivalent to 10% of a country's market capacity. This initiative also facilitates the development of solar and wind power.

In order for the energy transmission system to function properly, it is necessary to maintain stable power. Large fluctuations can lead to

unplanned shutdowns, commonly known as “blackouts”. Renewable sources such as wind turbines and photovoltaic panels are not able to supply energy continuously, as their output depends on specific weather conditions. Therefore, stable energy sources capable of compensating for shortfalls in the system are indispensable for the reliable operation of renewable energy. The construction of new interconnectors will facilitate the transfer of energy between neighbouring countries, thereby reducing the costs associated with stabilising the energy system. The conclusion is that energy security for Poland and the other Member States cannot be achieved solely through renewable energy sources. The establishment of a common energy market, underpinned by an interconnected energy infrastructure, is also of paramount importance.

### **The Economic Implications of the EU's Energy and Climate Package for Poland**

As already noted, the energy and climate package represents a key component of EU energy policy. Its priority objective, consistent with the climate protection agenda, is to mitigate excessive carbon dioxide emissions. The Polish government's concerns are linked with the mechanisms for implementing the package rather than the objectives themselves. The principal bone of contention was the European Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) Directive, which forms the cornerstone of the EU's strategy to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The ETS operates by setting an annually declining cap on total emissions for industrial sectors with high-levels of pollution. Within these limits, companies are permitted to trade emissions allowances, buying or selling them as required. This scheme constitutes the world's largest emissions trading market and also serves as a catalyst for the development of national and regional emissions trading systems.

The low-emission limits have compelled countries to purchase additional allowances. Member States that have reported surpluses have been able to sell theirs, while countries such as Poland have had to purchase additional allowances, consequently facing reduced financial capacity to make environmental investments. In addition, this policy has contributed to the bankruptcy of many companies, causing serious economic and social consequences (Skłodowska, Zasuń, 2019). As a result of such a policy, the Polish economy, with an energy structure still reliant on coal for over 60% of its supply, has become a less attractive investment destination for foreign investors. For the citizens of Poland, the political decisions associated with this system have not yielded the intended

developmental effects, leading to energy price surges. It is anticipated that the creation of the EU Social Climate Fund, scheduled for 2026, will help mitigate the social impacts of the implemented solutions.

From Poland's perspective, the mining sector also faces serious challenges – highly subsidised renewable energy is displacing coal-fired power plants, among other issues (Jeżowski, 2017, pp. 72–73). Climate policy in its current form also has an adverse impact on the condition of the Polish coal mining industry. Traditional power plants consume fewer raw materials, resulting in coal surpluses and ultimately intensifying price competition on the domestic market among Polish mines. The Polish mining industry is placed at a disadvantage, as reductions in coal prices compel mines to sell coal below the cost of extraction. However, implementing a more rational policy is difficult. It requires not only changes in national legislation, but also competition at the supranational level, which is challenging and often prone to failure. In such a context, it is difficult to imagine that further artificial increases in the price of emission allowances could achieve the desired effect (Turowski, 2015, pp. 13–14).

## **Poland's Perspective on the Energy Union**

The foundation of the Energy Union is the European Union's climate policy, which focuses on two sectors; natural gas and electricity, and Poland has been active in shaping this policy. As early as 2014, the Polish government launched diplomatic initiatives to promote and disseminate the idea of an Energy Union based on natural gas supply. These proposals were designed to reduce the EU's dependence on gas imports from Russia. Polish priorities were articulated within and made maximum use of the existing legislation, and were reflected in the adopted final draft.

It is also worth noting that the European Union is still pursuing its policy initiated under the Climate and Energy Package (Sadowska, 2023, p. 49), which emphasises low-carbon solutions, the development of renewable energy sources, and decarbonisation. From the perspective of Poland's energy security, these key demands appear to be unfavourable. Similar to the Climate and Energy Package, the shape of the energy union is clearly shifting away from conventional energy sources, which, after all, remain the cornerstone of the Polish energy sector (Dyjak, 2018, p. 57). The expansion of electricity interconnections with countries such as Germany may also be unfavourable for Poland; uncontrolled energy flows from Germany can destabilise the national power distribution system, necessitating the installation a system of devices that block unwanted cross-border energy

flows. However, the expansion of electricity interconnection capacity between Member States is crucial in the long term, as it facilitates increased cross-border trade in energy. While increased competition benefits Polish consumers, it may adversely affect domestic producers, particularly when exposed to a subsidised foreign market. A consequent decline in demand for coal could lead to a suspension of planned investments, thereby further impacting the Polish mining sector.

The Energy Union has also introduced provisions that are beneficial to Poland, particularly regarding the security of gas supply. Of particular significance is the proposal granting the European Commission access to contracts concluded by producers, which has substantially increased transparency in gas trading. Another key proposal, promoted by the Polish government, is the voluntary option for groups of Member States to make joint purchases of gas. It is important, and not only for Poland, that the Energy Union is striving to create supranational plans that will enable a rapid and coordinated response in the event of a gas supply shortage. This solution facilitates faster and more effective actions. It could be argued, therefore, that in exchange for increased security of natural gas supply, Poland has conceded to unfavourable solutions in the electricity market (Motowidlak, 2018, pp. 215–216).

### **Polish Energy Policy Until 2030**

As already indicated in this article, Poland, along with other EU countries, faces a serious challenge in ensuring energy security. Poland's membership in the European Union obliges the government to implement EU legislation, which is often highly restrictive, particularly as regards climate and energy policy. The EU's approach to energy policy rests on four pillars: environmental protection, competitiveness, climate objectives, and the establishment of a common European market (Karpińska, Dul, 2014, p. 152). This model requires less affluent countries to make substantial investments and intensify efforts to create suitable conditions for the application of new technologies. Therefore, these measures should be supported through state aid within the framework of industrial policy (Ambroziak, 2017, pp. 88–89).

The development directions adopted by Poland focus primarily on enhancing energy security through sustainable development. From the perspective of environmental protection, the most controversial aspect appears to be the resurgence of nuclear power, given the trend within the European Union towards phasing out nuclear energy. However, it is worth noting that economies of most European countries rely on nuclear

power plants, including countries that strongly advocate renewable, environmentally friendly energy sources, such as Finland and Sweden. Moreover, all of Poland's neighbouring countries possess nuclear reactors. The construction of such a facility is therefore a key component of Poland's energy security. In the context of reducing dependence on imported raw materials and diversifying energy sources, the development of reactors remains a strategic priority for Poland (Zajączkowska, 2011, pp. 93–94). The implementation of biofuel-based technologies is also an important developmental aspect. Renewable energy sources are typically located close to consumers and rely on locally-available raw materials (Dogan, Hodzic, Sikic, 2023, p. 140). They contribute to regional energy security and, moreover, may stimulate the development of underdeveloped, marginalised or specially protected regions, such as those covered by the *Natura 2000* programme.

The measures planned by the Polish government are designed to achieve the targets associated with the required share of renewables. A positive dimension of these aspirations is the energy mix which, though increased diversification, may improve Poland's energy security and support sustainable development while avoiding adverse effects on the food or forestry sectors. It may also reduce carbon dioxide emissions. The measures intended to meet these objectives are mainly linked to the development of low-carbon technologies and the introduction of emission caps and limits. CCS technology, understood as the capture and storage of carbon dioxide, also plays an important role. Tauron was the first energy company in Poland to start researching carbon dioxide capture from flue gases. In the Polish context, coal will continue to be the basis for energy production for a long time. The solution is, therefore, to invest in so-called "clean-coal" technologies.

As already mentioned, energy efficiency constitutes a key objective for the Member States. The rational use of energy involves both environmental protection and the energy security of each country, making progress in this regard crucial. Polish plans envisage the implementation of a number of measures designed to avoid emissions and stimulate investment in innovative technologies and products. Poland has also reaffirmed the crucial role of coal as a stabiliser of the country's energy security, which is of great importance given Poland's huge dependence on external supplies of imported gas and oil. Work on the diversification of energy sources is also crucial, as current coal and lignite extraction is expected to be depleted by around 2030. For this reason, measures are being developed to protect areas containing deposits of these raw materials. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that Poland's priority is to diversify its energy sources to the

greatest extent possible. This diversification will apply not only to supply routes, but also to the range of available technologies, including the construction of a nuclear power plant, and the increased importance and use of renewable energy sources. Hence, financial investment in research and development and in increasing innovation in the Polish energy sector is of considerable importance (Pach-Gurgul, 2012, p. 201). Commitments to reducing greenhouse gas emissions require Poland to expand existing generation capacity and to seek new low-carbon solutions. Furthermore, Poland has declared its intention to exploit any coal-fired power generation capacity capable of reducing air pollution.

The natural gas and oil sector presents significant challenges for Poland. In the current context, it is necessary to increase the capacity of both transmission and storage systems and to maximise the use of natural gas reserves in the country. Enhancing domestic extraction capabilities may prove crucial should disruptions occur in gas imports, especially following Russia's aggression against Ukraine. This also requires greater support for domestic energy producers. For national energy security, it is essential to have entities that are capable of competing effectively on the European energy market. Improving the competitive position of Polish companies will strengthen the competitive position of the country's economy both within and beyond the EU. A robust competitive economy increases the potential for participation in major investments and also provides the opportunity for large enterprises to undertake investments outside their home country.

All of Poland's energy policy should be supported by actions within the international environment, with a particular emphasis on leveraging the development opportunities offered by the European Union. Decisions adopted at the EU level should take into account the specific characteristics of the Member States, including their energy resources and the realistic capacity to adapt energy generation technologies. A key task for Poland will be to strive to prevent the implementation of projects detrimental to its energy security.

## **Conclusions**

Energy policy implemented at a supranational level presents a huge challenge for Poland. The accelerated pace of the Polish energy sector's modernisation has come at a huge cost, with substantial investment outlays reflected in rising electricity prices.

The situation in which Poland has found itself after the ratification of the energy and climate package has proved more difficult than

anticipated. The package illustrates that a common development strategy is not optimal for all Member States. The diverse structure of nation energy sectors does not allow for non-invasive, far-reaching changes to be introduced, especially within such a short timeframe. For the least developed economies, including Poland, the EU's policy may prove to be the greatest challenge, as clearly demonstrated by high energy prices and a decline in enterprise competitiveness, both domestically and internationally. Regulations that have been in place for more than a decade are negatively affecting the development of Member State economies, the consequences of which may include reduced economic growth generating a slowdown in wage increases, and hindered job creation, potentially leading to increased unemployment levels. The future direction of energy and climate policy will therefore depend on political engagement at the EU level. Abandoning the top-down approach to energy sector regulation in favour of subjecting it to market forces should be an objective for the governments of countries with similar energy sector characteristics to Poland.

Certainly, the debate on the Energy Union and its shape is not yet a closed topic. There is no single, simple solution to all the challenges currently facing the European Union and, above all, its Member States. Already during the formation of the Energy Union, differences of opinion on the interdependence of energy security and climate policy became apparent. Germany, together with the most industrialised countries, has emphasised decarbonisation and investment in renewable energy, whereas Poland has identified a contradiction between ensuring energy security and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. This illustrates that the European Union does not operate as a fully unified actor in the field of energy, and achieving such cohesion in the near future appears rather unlikely. Member States approach energy policy primarily from a national rather than a collective perspective. This lack of consistency is further reflected in the difficulty of formulating a common position *vis-à-vis* Russia, even following its armed aggression against Ukraine. Moreover, the expansion of energy transmission channels may result in a loss of competitiveness for smaller economies that remain reliant on conventional energy sources. Consequently, the structure of the Energy Union also entails certain risks, and the debate and efforts concerning its optimal design should therefore continue.

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## **Is the EU a Credible Normative Actor in Times of War? A Discourse Analysis of Its Response to Russia's Invasion**

### **Abstract**

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022 called into question the international identity of the European Union as a values-based actor. This paper examines the extent to which the Union has managed to maintain normative consistency and credibility in the context of war, drawing on the concepts of “normative power” and “securitisation theory” to interpret its official discourse. The discourse analysis of EU institutions from 2022 to 2025 shows that democracy, human rights, and international law have remained constant anchor points in key political documents. However, these values increasingly appear in combination with language of security and strategic justifications, indicating a rhetorical shift – not a complete abandonment of fundamental principles, but certainly a re-framing of them. The analysis shows that the EU has largely maintained its identity based on values, although elements of instrumentalising these norms to justify geopolitical decisions can be observed in the discourse. Such findings raise new questions about how the EU's role in the world is changing. Instead of maintaining a firmly defined normative identity, the Union is clearly adapting it to circumstances – especially in times of external crises. The Ukrainian case illustrates this clearly: the EU aims to balance its integration goals with *realpolitik*, thereby reshaping the way it positions itself on the international stage.

**Keywords:** European Union, Normative Power, Securitization, Russia-Ukraine War, Discourse Analysis

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## **Introduction**

Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022 not only opened a new chapter in European security landscape but also abruptly exposed the limits of the EU's foreign policy to that point and the its self-perception as a global actor. For a long time, the Union had built a narrative of itself as an advocate of democracy and international law, grounded in the concept of what has been described as "normative power". However, the war that erupted on European soil posed a fundamental dilemma for the EU's external identity: can the EU remain faithful to its declared principles when confronted with a direct security threat? The response to Russian aggression was swift and extensive: the EU imposed more than ten packages of sanctions and – for the first time in its history – participated in the financing and delivery of weapons to a defending country (Rutigliano, 2022; Silingardi, 2024).

The European Union's response to the Russian invasion was surprising in both its speed and scope. It is particularly striking that the EU's Member States, despite numerous differences, acted with unusual unity and publicly expressed strong support for Ukraine (Bosse, 2022). In this context, this research investigates whether the Union has managed to maintain normative consistency and retain credibility as a values-based actor during the crisis – even under wartime conditions. Understanding this question requires a closer examination of how norms are articulated, justified, and adapted in times of geopolitical tension. The analytical framework consists of two complementary theoretical perspectives: the concept of "normative power" (Ian Manners) and "securitisation theory" (the Copenhagen School). The empirical part of the research is based on a discourse analysis of institutional statements and EU resolutions from 2022 to 2025.

The central research question guiding this paper is whether the EU's wartime discourse remained anchored in its proclaimed values or shifted toward security-based reasoning. This question gains particular relevance in light of the Union's unprecedented response to the Russian invasion, which included both normative language and coercive measures. To address this tension, the paper examines how the EU articulated, justified, and adapted its norms in the context of war. The analysis draws on a framework that combines discourse analysis with selected theoretical insights on normative power and securitisation. The paper proceeds by outlining the conceptual and methodological approach, followed by an empirical analysis of key EU documents from 2022 to 2025. Particular attention is paid to issues of normative consistency and credibility in

times of crisis, and the conclusion reflects on the broader implications of the findings for the EU's external identity.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The idea that the European Union represents a distinctive form of power in world politics emerged in the early 2000s, describing an actor that does not rely on traditional instruments of influence such as military force or economic coercion, but instead promotes a particular set of political and legal norms (Manners, 2002). Democracy, human rights and the rule of law form the basis of this approach. These values, embedded in the Union's institutional structure and legal order, are intended to define what counts as legitimate behaviour in international relations. From this perspective, the EU seeks to shape its environment through the attraction of its model and persuasion, rather than through pressure or threats. Scholars have pointed out that the EU's normative identity cannot be taken for granted and that it should be understood as an aspiration or tendency rather than a permanent feature. Forsberg (2011) defines it as an ideal type, which helps to capture the tension between values and interests in the Union's external actions. Similarly, Diez (2013) interprets normative power as a form of hegemony that connects ethical principles and political interests, suggesting that inconsistencies in the EU's behaviour are not necessarily evidence of hypocrisy, but part of the normal process through which norms are shaped and contested. Other authors have observed that the concept itself has entered a period of theoretical and empirical crisis. Skolimowska (2015) notes that the EU's external policies often reveal a gap between its declared principles and practical actions. She argues that this crisis should not lead to the abandonment of the concept but rather to its redefinition so that it encompasses material and strategic dimensions. According to her, the Union's ability to combine ethical claims with tangible, sometimes coercive, instruments of power has become essential to its credibility in the current international context.

Since its introduction, the concept of the European Union as a normative power has undergone significant evolution. Scholars such as Wiener (2014) and Dandashly, Noutcheva (2022) argue that normative power should not be viewed as a static attribute, but as a dynamic and contested role that evolves through practice and interaction. In the context of crisis, such as the war in Ukraine, this contestation becomes more visible, revealing how the EU simultaneously reaffirms and adapts its identity. Rosberg (2023), for instance, demonstrates that the EU's

rhetorical consistency is not necessarily a sign of normative purity, but part of a strategic recalibration under external threat.

While often conflated, “civilian power” and “normative power” refer to distinct, though related, concepts. The term “civilian power”, coined by Duchêne in the 1970s, emphasised the EU’s reliance on diplomacy, law, and economic instruments instead of military means. “Normative power”, as conceptualised by Manners (2002), shifts the focus from instruments to objectives – namely, the ability to define what is “normal” in international relations through the diffusion of values such as democracy and human rights. Manners and Whitman (2003) argue that civilian and normative power are not interchangeable but can coexist, with the EU acting both as a rule-abiding civilian actor and a promoter of norms. Subsequent scholarship further clarifies this distinction; a civilian actor does not necessarily act normatively, and normative influence can be exercised through both civilian and military means (Manners, 2011). The distinction lies not in the tools used, but in the purpose and normative framing that underpin external action.

In recent years, several authors have also written about the idea of *norm contestation*. They argue that norms are not fixed but are constantly discussed and redefined through practice and interaction between actors (Wiener, 2014; Dandashly, Noutcheva, 2022). This perspective can be extended by considering how norm contestation operates beyond the EU’s internal dynamics. Bettiza and Lewis (2020) demonstrate that China and Russia challenge liberal norms in ways that are not always overt. Instead of rejecting them openly, they often imitate or reframe liberal ideas while advancing different values rooted in their own political models. These efforts are part of a broader attempt to erode Western influence in global norm-setting. From this angle, the EU’s normative identity must be understood as not only evolving internally, but also responding to external pressure from actors that actively promote rival norm systems. Looking from this perspective, the EU’s normative role can be seen as a process rather than a stable feature – one that the Union must defend, adapt, and at times reinterpret when its values are questioned from outside or within. In this context, the EU’s wartime discourse can also be seen as a practical test of the dynamics described in the theoretical section – in which values and interests interact and sometimes collide. The war created circumstances in which the Union was compelled to act both as a normative and as a geopolitical actor, illustrating the coexistence rather than the replacement of these roles (Diez, 2013; Forsberg, 2011). The Union swiftly framed the Russian aggression not only as an assault on Ukrainian sovereignty but also as a grave threat to European peace

and regional stability. In response, the EU adopted unprecedented measures including financial and military support to Ukraine – marking a departure from its traditional foreign policy repertoire. In the language of securitisation theory, EU leaders portrayed Russia’s aggression as an existential danger to the European continent and its citizens, thereby legitimising an extraordinary, unified response. This evolution aligns with expanded interpretations of securitisation that emphasise discursive practices, audience reception, and institutional contexts (Balzacq, 2011; McDonald, 2008), allowing for a more flexible reading of how the EU constructs and performs security narratives. This raises the question of whether such a security-oriented framing diluted the Union’s normative stance or simply repositioned it within a changing geopolitical context (Bosse, 2022; Buzan et al., 1998). From this perspective, the EU’s wartime communication provides an empirical example of how normative power adapts and endures under pressure, aligning with recent arguments that the Union’s normative and strategic identities can coexist within the same discursive framework. Diez (2013) argues that normative power does not necessarily preclude the use of hard power; rather, the key lies in how such instruments are legitimised and framed. In this light, the EU’s strategic turn can be interpreted not as a departure from its normative ambitions, but as their recalibration within an increasingly competitive and contested global environment (Skolimowska, 2025; Piskorska, 2025; Orenstein, 2025).

This perspective is further supported by authors who reject the assumption that normative power requires the absence of coercive instruments. Manners (2011) explicitly argues that normative power can operate through strategic means, provided that action remains anchored in value-based justification. Similarly, Sjursen (2017) notes that legitimacy in EU foreign policy arises not from the instruments employed, but from the ethical frameworks used to justify them.

Recent scholarly contributions further develop this line of reasoning by conceptualising the coexistence of normative and strategic logics in the EU’s external posture. Diez (2021) introduces the notion of “Normative Power 2.0” – a model in which strategic pragmatism complements rather than supplants ethical foundations. From this perspective, the Union’s increasingly geopolitical vocabulary, including the idea of a *geopolitical Commission*, reflects an effort to defend liberal norms under pressure, not their abandonment. In a similar vein, Pänke (2019) presents the EU as a “liberal empire,” in which norms and interests are structurally interwoven through a dual strategy. His analysis highlights how norm diffusion and strategic interest coexist in practice, and how this duality

stabilises the EU's external legitimacy and internal identity. Collectively, these perspectives support the theoretical premise of this paper: that the EU's normative role is not eclipsed by power politics but continuously renegotiated within them. This convergence of value-based discourse and strategic practice thus illustrates not only the EU's evolving international role, but also the conceptual resilience of normative power in contemporary global politics.

## **Methodology**

The research employed qualitative discourse analysis of communications from EU institutions regarding Russia's aggression against Ukraine, covering the period from 2022 to 2025. The corpus includes official statements, speeches, press releases, conclusions of the European Council, resolutions of the European Parliament, and other public messages issued by key Union institutions. Through the examination of these texts, the analysis reconstructs how EU actors publicly framed their actions and positions during the war.

Discourse analysis is situated in the interpretive tradition of political science (Blatter, Haverland, van Hulst, 2016), which focuses on how language constructs meaning and social reality. Such an approach enables the identification of linguistic patterns that reveal deeper structures of meaning through which ideological frameworks, normative assumptions, and security justifications present in the EU's wartime narrative are articulated (Lynggaard, 2019). For the analytical part of this paper, a broader sample of institutional statements and communications from key phases of the conflict was collected and examined.

Key documents included the joint statement by EU leaders of 24 February 2022 (the day the invasion began), major speeches and press conferences by senior EU officials between 2022 and 2025, European Parliament resolutions condemning Russian aggression, and official timeline summaries of EU measures as published by the European Council (Consilium, 2023). The analysis also considered less formal communications, such as posts on EU institutional social media accounts (for example, Twitter, now rebranded as X) during the first year of the war, in order to capture the broader public messaging strategy (Ruiz-Incertis, Tuñón-Navarro, 2024). A diverse source base allowed for the inclusion of official rhetoric from institutional leaders and messages directed towards the broader public, often shaped in a populist key, thus providing a more comprehensive insight into the EU's discourse. The coding of texts was conducted according to predefined theoretical frameworks. Guided by the

NPE framework, the analysis coded for normative language, including references to values such as democracy, human rights, international law, peace, human dignity, and moral condemnations of Russia's actions. Drawing on securitisation theory, it also coded for security language, such as references to threats, stability, defence, survival, urgency, and other terms justifying exceptional measures. The coding process traced how EU leaders described the nature of the conflict, the justifications given for EU actions, and balanced invocations of principles versus security needs in their speeches. Longitudinally, the period of 2022–2025 allowed for an analysis of whether the discourse evolved over time – for example, whether early value-laden rhetoric gave way to more pragmatic language as the war continued, or whether normative references persisted alongside security imperatives. The materials also encompassed discourse addressing the secondary effects of the war – such as energy insecurity, refugee flows, and economic fallout – to determine whether and how these issues were securitised. Academic and policy literature on the EU's response was used to contextualise and corroborate the interpretation of the findings (EEAS, 2022). This design enables the research question to be addressed by directly linking the EU's wartime communication to theoretical expectations of normative coherence and securitisation. The combination of theoretical frameworks allows for a more nuanced insight: not only into whether the EU has remained rhetorically consistent with its own proclaimed values, but also into the extent to which the shift towards a security discourse has influenced how it defines its own identity as a normative power.

## **Analysis and Findings**

### ***Value-Based Narratives: Upholding Norms Amid Aggression***

In the first weeks of the invasion, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Charles Michel made it clear that European support for Ukraine was not a matter of pragmatism but rather of principle. In their public addresses in late February and early March 2022, they repeatedly emphasised terms such as *sovereignty*, *freedom*, and *the rule of law* – not as mere rhetorical flourishes, but as signals that the EU was invoking its own legal and political foundations. When von der Leyen stated on 24 February 2022 that the target of the attack was “broader than Ukraine” and concerned the stability of Europe and the preservation of peace as an order, her words can be interpreted as a deliberate affirmation of the EU's foundational legal and political principles. This framing underscored how the Union understood its own role in the crisis: not only defending a country under attack, but also

defending a principle of international order. Michel, in similar language, affirmed that the issue at stake concerned not only geopolitics but also the fundamental rules that the Union regards as binding – even, and perhaps especially, in times of war.

On 1 March 2022, Charles Michel spoke before the European Parliament and described Russia's assault as "an outrageous invasion of a sovereign, independent state", pointedly avoiding any grand metaphors or hyperbole. Instead, he explicitly invoked "freedom, democracy, and human rights", essentially listing these core values without elaboration – a direct reference to the ideals enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union. Michel offered no sensational language beyond the stark facts; he simply presented this vocabulary as the Union's response, even using the phrase "our values" to link Ukraine's plight to the EU's own foundational principles. Notably, throughout this early discourse, the war was not framed in classical strategic or realpolitik terms but was firmly cast in legalistic and normative language. A similar tone is present in other EU statements from the same period. For example, Union leaders promised to stand "shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine", presenting its struggle as aligned with the core values of the EU, such as democracy and the people's right to self-determination, as articulated in the Union's founding treaties. Russian actions were routinely described as "serious breaches of established international legal norms" and "a violation of the UN Charter", with frequent emphasis on the fact that borders cannot be redrawn by force. Around the same time, von der Leyen stated that the EU would resist any attempt to replace the rule of law with the rule of force (EEAS, 2022).

Such rhetoric consistently established a clear normative dichotomy: on one side stood law; on the other, force. There was no room for nuance – the position was clearly articulated and demonstrated how the Union wanted the war to be interpreted. The conflict was not depicted merely as violence against Ukraine but as a fundamental challenge to the very notion that international law can limit the use of power. The European Parliament adopted the same framework. In resolutions passed in March and April 2022, parliamentary language condemned Russian war crimes, affirmed Ukraine's sovereignty and right to choose its own political course, and called for legal accountability for the aggression, including references to the International Criminal Court. These were far from neutral statements; they reiterated the same line articulated by the Commission and Council – a principled confrontation of law versus force, and of principle versus power. The EU's discourse positioned Russia's actions as antithetical to the international legal order and to the principles of legitimate governance.

In the speeches, resolutions, and statements of the Commission, Council, Parliament, and the European External Action Service, the terminology remained strikingly consistent. The message did not waver, which made the Union's position more convincing and resilient to accusations of inconsistency or improvisation. A recent study of EU officials' communication on social media during the first year of the war confirms this pattern: all four institutions operated within a coordinated narrative, displaying no significant deviations, indicating a high degree of message coordination. Further research also indicates that the EU's normative image is not only constructed externally, but also projected and contested within its own Member States. A study of Spanish media narratives by Boulos et al. (2023) demonstrates how internal public discourse shapes and reflects the EU's normative claims, revealing both reinforcement and friction in the domestic reception of human rights and democratic values. Throughout 2022, institutional statements repeatedly affirmed Ukraine's independence and its "place in Europe," using the same keywords – *sovereignty*, *democracy* and *freedom* – across all major EU bodies (Ruiz-Incertis, Tuñón-Navarro, 2024; Consilium, 2023). These terms were far from rhetorical ornamentation; they were employed as morally charged counters to what Russia's actions represented. With only a few minor exceptions, EU Member States also adhered to this narrative line. While one might have expected the EU's perennial internal splits to surface under such stress, they largely did not. Confronted with a direct challenge to the European legal-political order, the Union collectively maintained its core value-laden vocabulary and principled stance.

Still, the appearance of discursive consistency does not necessarily imply conceptual stability. Tereszkiwicz (2025), in his analysis of the EU's *Strategic Compass*, notes that while references to foundational norms remain present, they increasingly coexist with strategic terminology such as *deterrence* and *resilience*. This coexistence, he argues, illustrates a gradual shift in how normative language is operationalised – not through its abandonment, but through its absorption into a security-centered framework.

Yet, even amid this strategic reframing, references to fundamental EU values remained a consistent feature of its institutional discourse throughout the conflict. References to democracy, freedom, human rights, and international law have not weakened under pressure; on the contrary, it is precisely these values that have become more prominent in official discourse. In official speeches and texts issued during 2023 and 2024, Ukrainian resistance was frequently linked to ideas explicitly framed as "European," i.e., notions of liberty, human dignity, and democratic self-

determination. Even when the topic shifted – for instance, to Ukraine’s candidacy for EU membership – the language used by EU officials focused less on strategic calculus and more on shared norms and common values. As Zarembo (2024) observes, Ukrainian officials themselves perceived EU support not as a transactional or purely interest-driven matter, but as rooted in a shared political ethic based on norms and rules. EU-driven reform initiatives in Ukraine – especially in sensitive areas such as security-sector governance – reflected this normative influence: domestic actors in Ukraine leveraged EU norms to overcome internal resistance to reforms (Noutcheva, Zarembo, 2024). At the same time, public support in Ukraine for future EU membership has increased to over 85% during the war (Zarembo, 2024). This data has further solidified the Union’s self-perception not as a merely pragmatic community, but as a political and values-based entity that continues to exercise considerable appeal.

### ***Securitisation and Geopolitical Adjustment: The Strategic Discourse of the EU***

As the war progressed, EU officials increasingly began to interpret the conflict through a security lens while simultaneously invoking value-based principles. Especially since mid-2022, Russia’s actions have been increasingly described in public statements as a direct threat to European peace and stability. This security-focused discourse appeared in parallel with invocations of values, marking a noticeable shift in emphasis. The broader rhetorical trend was towards a securitised justification of EU policies: references to existential danger and the protection of Europe were used to legitimise measures that deviated from the Union’s traditional policy repertoire (Orenstein, 2025). In securitisation terms, EU leaders performed speech acts that framed Russia’s aggression not merely as an attack on Ukrainian sovereignty, but as an existential threat to the European continent and its people, thereby legitimising an extraordinary display of unity and action.

A clear example of this securitising turn can be found in President von der Leyen’s early statements on the matter. In her speech on 24 February 2022, Ursula von der Leyen asserted that the war was not directed solely against Ukraine. In her assessment, it constituted an attempt to dismantle the security order that had maintained peace in Europe since the end of the Cold War (von der Leyen, 2022). She linked Russia’s aggression to a broader threat to both the European and international order, emphasising that what was being defended was not merely a state, but the very system of rules upon which the European Union itself rests. This

rhetoric aligns with the conceptual parameters of a securitisation act as defined by the Copenhagen School: the framing of a situation as one that endangers the survival of a cherished order – peace in Europe itself – and thereby legitimises an extraordinary and unified EU response.

As the war progressed, the European Union increasingly framed the conflict as extending beyond Ukraine itself. Official statements began to suggest that the interests – and even the security – of the citizens of the Member States were at stake. The Union’s moral rhetoric thus acquired a new dimension, one grounded in strategy and pragmatism. One of the clearest examples concerned Russian gas. By the end of 2022, it had become evident that Moscow was using energy supplies as an instrument of political pressure, having begun to restrict flows to Europe. Consequently, the EU came to regard energy security as an immediate security concern directly linked to the war. During a Council meeting on 30 September 2022, Czech Industry Minister Jozef Síkela described the energy supply situation as “exceptional” and emphasised the need for a “united front” to reduce dependence on Russian energy. By explicitly labelling Russia’s gas cut-offs as a “weapon”, Síkela effectively securitised an issue that had previously been understood primarily in economic or infrastructural terms. His rhetoric – portraying the EU as acting in unison against a threat – was markedly more geopolitical and urgent than the technocratic language that typically characterises EU energy policy. Similarly, EU discussions on other spillover effects of the war adopted security-inflected language. The influx of millions of Ukrainian refugees was framed not merely as a humanitarian challenge but also as a security issue requiring decisive management, for instance through the reinforcement of border security in neighbouring Moldova. Similarly, Russia’s blockade of Ukrainian grain exports – which threatened global food security – was presented as a crisis demanding emergency measures. In response, the EU established “solidarity lanes” to facilitate the transport of grain and avert famine (Consilium, 2023). In each of these domains – energy, refugees, and food supply – the EU’s vocabulary featured terms such as *challenge*, *security*, *protect*, *stability*, and *emergency*, all hallmark expressions of securitisation discourse. This signified an expansion of the EU’s narrative: from defending norms to protecting Europe from tangible threats generated by the war.

In this context, the EU resorted to instruments that lay outside its traditional civilian and normative scope. The European Peace Facility (EPF), originally designed to support peacekeeping efforts, was used in 2022 – for the first time – to fund military aid to Ukraine, including the delivery of weapons. In March 2022, the EU doubled the EPF funding

allocated to Ukraine's armed forces, ultimately raising it to several billion euros (Fabbrini, 2023; Rutigliano, 2022). This marked the first instance in the European Union's history in which it collectively financed the provision of arms to a country under attack. The move signalled a structural shift in the EU's crisis-response model, effectively expanding the Union's de facto strategic and military capacities. Notably, EU officials framed this unprecedented policy in carefully normative terms: a Council press release justified the arms assistance as helping Ukraine "defend [its] territorial integrity and sovereignty" and "protect the civilian population against the ongoing military aggression" (Consilium, 2023). By framing military measures in terms of defending sovereignty and protecting human life, the European Union sought to maintain continuity with its normative identity – even though, in practice, it had entered a domain that had not previously been characteristic of its action. However, this tension was evident. This dilemma has been echoed in recent research by Bonaiuti and Bortolotti (2025), who argue that the EU's growing role in arms exports – particularly in the context of the Ukraine war – has eroded the conceptual clarity of its normative identity. For them, the shift from maintaining a values-based civilian approach to becoming an active supplier of arms reflects not just strategic necessity, but a blurring of ethical boundaries that once defined the EU's distinctiveness in international affairs. The very fact that something labelled a 'peace instrument' is used to finance military equipment shows how far the Union's self-perception has diverged from what it actually does (Hamilton, 2022; Maletta, Héau, 2022). Such moves raise the question of the extent to which the EU's normative framework can be stretched to accommodate hard forms of power without undermining its own internal coherence.

This duality in the EU's wartime discourse – upholding values as ends while employing security-driven means – suggests a degree of instrumentalisation of normative principles. The Union's value-laden justifications often served to rally domestic and international support for policies that also advanced classic *realpolitik* objectives, such as weakening Russia's warfighting capacity or strengthening European defence integration. For example, the EU's packages of economic sanctions against Russia were routinely framed as both morally righteous punishment for aggression and as necessary measures to enforce international law and to protect human rights. Carlberg (2023) demonstrates that, in the discourse surrounding EU sanctions, there was a deliberate link made between the invocation of legal norms and human rights and the pursuit of strategic goals – using the language of values to legitimise political moves driven by interests. Similarly, Mahato (2023) notes that the sanctions were

explicitly grounded in international law and presented as a continuation of the EU's normative identity, although in practice they produced tangible economic consequences for Russia. Other scholars have also observed the same pattern: concepts such as *values* and *rules* were used to ensure broad support for measures that simultaneously had clear security implications (Bosse, 2022; Mahato, 2023). In short, The European Union did not abandon its fundamental values, but rather redirected them, employing them in the service of a narrative that simultaneously served a strategic function. Norms thus became not only ends in themselves but also instruments to legitimise action and maintain unity in the face of an aggressor. This observation aligns with Bosse's argument that the EU's response effectively merged values and interests in practice.

The evolution of EU rhetoric was also evident in statements made by its senior representatives. High Representative Josep Borrell increasingly adopted explicitly geopolitical language. In a speech delivered at the University of Oxford in May 2024, he warned that Russia should be regarded as “the gravest threat to European survival,” adding that if it succeeds in Ukraine, “it will not stop there” (Borrell, 2024). These statements clearly demonstrate the EU's growing willingness to articulate its own security concerns. It was also evident that the rhetorical framework was gradually shifting from an idealistic, postmodern approach toward a more realistic and interest-oriented perspective, shaped under the pressures of wartime reality. Reflecting this shift, EU leaders – particularly within the European Commission – began referring to the current College of Commissioners as a “geopolitical commission” and pursued initiatives such as the *2022 Strategic Compass* to strengthen the EU's collective defence capabilities (Parliament UK, 2023).

These developments illustrate a deliberate effort to augment the EU's hard-power capabilities alongside its soft-power narrative. As one commentary observed, the war has compelled the Union to confront “whether the EU can become a geopolitical actor while remaining a normative actor” – a dilemma it is now attempting to resolve by pursuing both simultaneously (Paikin, 2022).

The discourse analysis conducted by Rosberg (2023) indicates that, after the invasion, the official language of the EU became more direct and security-oriented, while key elements of the normative vocabulary that traditionally characterise the Union were retained. Rosberg concludes that the EU's identity as a value-driven actor was not discarded but adjusted – the Union recalibrated its self-image to align with a more assertive, power-conscious role necessitated by external threat. Thus, the EU's normative identity persisted, yet it was now being deployed

in tandem with a realist narrative to legitimise actions such as arms deliveries and intensified defence cooperation (Rosberg, 2023). During the first year of the war, most EU Member States strongly supported the measures adopted. Although there were certain reservations – such as the initial German hesitation regarding the sending of weapons or Hungary’s opposition to certain sanctions – these differences in the EU’s institutional discourse were largely muted. Official communications emphasised the unprecedented unity of the EU response, glossing over divergences in national perspectives (indeed, parliamentary assessments highlighted the EU’s “rare unity” despite differing strategic cultures among its members) (Paikin, 2022). Nonetheless, observers noted that these uneven national commitments – however downplayed – raised questions about the absolute coherence of the EU’s approach to the issue. The Union’s messaging remained harmonised, but the underlying need to maintain consensus among twenty-seven countries on such consequential actions suggested an ongoing challenge in marrying normative rhetoric with collective action. This latent tension would later resurface as a key point of reflection when judging the EU’s overall credibility as a normative power under pressure.

### **Discussion: Normative Coherence and Credibility in Times of War**

Considering the findings above, the question arises as to whether the EU has preserved normative coherence during the Ukraine war and whether it remains a credible normative actor in wartime. The evidence points to a nuanced but largely affirmative answer: the EU has broadly maintained a values-based stance in both its discourse and decision-making. Nevertheless, its credibility in this role now comes with new complexities and caveats.

On the one hand, the Union’s response to the Ukraine crisis has largely corresponded to its normative self-image. From 2022 to 2025, EU leaders consistently invoked democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and related principles, with this discourse remaining harmonised across all key institutions. These concepts were not limited to the rhetorical level alone; they were also present in concrete decisions and actions. The EU backed its rhetoric with costly and tangible actions that aligned with its principles, for example, sanctioning an aggressive power, aiding a democratic nation under attack, and opening its borders to millions of Ukrainian refugees fleeing war. In this way, the EU has demonstrated its willingness to bear serious economic and political consequences in defence of democracy

and international law – which gives additional weight to its normative stance. It is also important that such a value framework has resonated among both the European and Ukrainian publics. Public opinion within the European Union was broadly supportive of aid to Ukraine and of sanctions on Russia, particularly when those sanctions targeted Russian elites and were accompanied by visible support for Ukraine's defence. This suggests that European citizens perceived these actions as justified not merely on emotional grounds, but on pragmatic and moral ones, thereby reinforcing the democratic legitimacy of the EU's stance. In the Eastern EU Member States, particularly within the Bucharest Nine (B9) group, research indicates strong endorsement of sanctions against Russia – especially when framed as simultaneously defending European security and upholding European values (Alexandrescu, 2024). From the Ukrainian perspective, the EU's normative power has also remained intact. As Makarychev and Dufy (2024) argue, the EU's actions during the war have further solidified a regional order grounded in values, standing in sharp contrast to Russia's revisionist exercise of power. Ukrainian political leaders have repeatedly emphasised that their struggle is for a return to Europe – in effect, for integration into the normative community of the Union – which further confirms the enduring appeal of the European model. Even after the invasion, observers noted that the EU still wielded considerable normative power in Ukraine, continuing to set standards and shape expectations of normal state behaviour (Zarembo, 2024). In short, the war did not undermine the EU's credibility as a beacon of norms; rather, it *vindicated* the Union's value-based identity, as the defence of Ukraine dovetailed with the defence of the liberal international order that the EU champions.

The EU's normative credibility has evolved under pressure, not through contradiction but through recalibration, although Friedrichs and Sommer (2025) point to signs that this process may reflect a deeper identity shift. Their analysis of the EU's institutional self-understanding during the Ukraine war suggests a growing disconnect between the Union's traditional image as a civilian and normative actor and its current role performance. What they observe is not merely a discursive adjustment but an internal role conflict, intensified by the securitisation of the EU's external environment.

The challenges of war compelled the Union to expand its repertoire of instruments while continuing to embed its actions in a language of legitimacy and values. The introduction of securitised discourse – arguably inevitable in context – meant that EU officials began speaking of enemies, threats, and weapons in a manner more reminiscent of traditional great-

power politics than of the Union's earlier civilian power tone. The fact that the EU found it necessary to justify economic sanctions in explicitly ethical terms – for instance, by portraying energy diversification and trade embargoes as moral imperatives to end the financing of Russian aggression – shows a deliberate coupling of interest and norms. This coupling proved effective and was largely persuasive in this scenario, but it also exposed the EU to external scepticism. Russia tried to exploit this contradiction in the EU's communications, claiming in its official narratives that the Union does not act out of values-based motivations but rather out of self-interest, while presenting references to democracy and rights as mere political tools. In that interpretation, sanctions were depicted not as principled reactions but as coercive measures cloaked in moral language (Hutsaliuk, 2022). Even among the EU's friends and allies, there is growing recognition that the Union is behaving more like a traditional power actor. Many have welcomed this development, seeing it as the EU finally 'growing up' in a hard security sense after years of being dismissed as naively idealistic. However, this evolution naturally raises the question of how distinctively normative the EU can remain if it fully embraces geopolitics. Since the outbreak of the war, the notion of security in the EU is no longer mentioned casually; it increasingly sets the tone and direction of policy. In this context, new defence initiatives are emerging, and messages from Brussels are becoming sharper and more assertive (Parliament UK, 2023). However, this raises the question: what happens if the interests that the EU seeks to protect on the ground cannot be easily reconciled with the values it proclaims in its declarations?

In such scenarios – for instance, when dealing with other authoritarian powers for energy or security cooperation – the strain on the EU's normative coherence could be considerably greater. Prior to the invasion of Ukraine, scholars including Veebel and Markus (2018) had already identified the limits of the EU's normative influence on Russia, noting that appeals to common values had little effect in deterring Russian aggression during Ukraine's earlier crises (Veebel, Markus 2018). This ineffectiveness underscores a broader challenge: normative power has limited traction against actors who reject those norms, compelling the EU to decide how far it is willing to compromise or override its principles in order to safeguard its interests.

Crucially, between 2022–2025, there was little evidence that the EU had overtly betrayed its declared values in the context of Ukraine. Rather, it strove to frame even its hard security measures as efforts to uphold these values. This framing appears largely credible in the Ukrainian case, as defending Ukraine's sovereignty and democracy was genuinely

consonant with the liberal principles espoused by the EU. In other words, the instrumental use of normative discourse by the EU did not come off as a cynical ploy; it could instead be interpreted as a sincere alignment of values and interests during this particular crisis. The EU demonstrated that when values and interests converge – as they largely did in Ukraine, where supporting a beleaguered democracy also advanced Europe’s strategic interest in deterring an aggressive Russia – it is possible to act forcefully without sacrificing normative legitimacy. The question is, however, whether such an alignment can be sustained under less-than-ideal circumstances. The war in Ukraine presented a case in which upholding the EU’s values – assisting a neighbour under attack, defending democracy, and enforcing international law – also advanced its immediate interests. Should a future crisis involve a more pronounced trade-off, the Union may face a considerably tougher test of normative coherence.

So far, the way the EU has explained and justified its actions during the Russian aggression shows a clear intention to maintain and recalibrate its normative identity in light of evolving geopolitical realities. Throughout the entire conflict, the Union’s rhetoric has remained consistent with the values it has long professed – there have been no indications that it intends to abandon them. The EU’s credibility as a normative actor has largely remained intact, not because it refrained from using power, but because it managed to embed that power within a consistent normative discourse. The Union’s consistent reliance on normative language, even under pressure, has reinforced its image as an actor capable of aligning principled discourse with strategic behaviour. However, the overlay of securitisation upon that normative base illustrates the Union’s effort to integrate strategic concerns with value-based reasoning – suggesting not an abandonment, but an expansion of its normative vocabulary. The EU has shown that it can act strategically – and even militarily – without discarding its ideals, but this has placed it in a grey zone between being a normative power and becoming a more conventional geopolitical power.

Recent events carry serious implications for the future of European integration. The EU’s response to the war in Ukraine has changed the way the Union is perceived – less as an exclusively economic or regulatory entity, and increasingly as a political actor with a clearer strategic vision. The activation of instruments such as the European Peace Facility, alongside a more explicit security discourse, could accelerate integration in the areas of defence, energy, and foreign policy. The war has therefore raised serious questions about the identity of the EU, but has also spurred internal discussions – how far integration can go in spheres that have not

traditionally been at the centre of European competencies until now. If this trend continues, it could represent a turning point: in the future, the development of the Union may rely less on agreements and institutional processes, and more on the need to respond to external crises. Hekimler and Cavlak (2024) describe such a change as a shift towards strategic realism – one that does not necessarily imply abandoning the value foundations on which the Union rests. This dilemma, therefore, lies in how to wield power effectively in a competitive environment without undermining the core values that define the Union, and has become central to the EU's evolving identity (Paikin, 2022). As Orenstein (2025) observes, the Ukraine war demonstrated both the EU's growing capacity to act decisively in a security crisis and the enduring limitations of its autonomy in the military domain (given its reliance on NATO and member state capacities).

The true test of the EU's normative credibility may only come after the war – in how the Union helps to secure a just peace and rebuild Ukraine, and whether it manages to apply its principles consistently in other foreign policy arenas once an immediate threat subsides. Ultimately, the consistency with which the EU upholds its values with partners and adversaries alike – avoiding double standards – will be a key indicator of whether the Union's wartime normative discourse possesses lasting credibility or whether it remains contingent on the unique circumstances of this conflict.

## **Conclusions**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine confronted the European Union with a serious foreign policy crisis. The Union faced a dual challenge: safeguarding its own security interests while remaining true to the principles on which its identity is built. This discourse analysis, based on a theoretical framework, shows that the EU – despite the pressures of war – has largely maintained the continuity of its own normative narrative. In the face of Russian aggression, the EU did not abandon its usual values-based arguments in favour of a purely *realpolitik* stance. Instead of departing from its principles, the EU decided to reaffirm them. Democracy, human dignity, and international law were not relegated to the background; instead, these very concepts were used to explain and justify concrete measures such as sanctions, military aid, and diplomatic pressure. In doing so, the Union not only reacted to the crisis but also actively sought to demonstrate that its values retain operational weight even under wartime conditions. The Union, despite facing a profound

security crisis, has managed to maintain a connection between its own value-based language and concrete policy. From 2022 to 2025, public messaging remained largely consistent and was clearly structured around the idea that the EU continues to represent a community founded on values. At the same time, elements of security and geopolitical logic became clearly evident in the wartime discourse. This opened up space for actions that had previously lain outside the Union's established repertoire. The conflict was rhetorically presented as a threat to European peace and stability, and terms such as *deterrence*, *defence*, and *confronting the aggressor* appeared with growing frequency in the language. The EU did not abandon its norms – rather, it began to use them as justification for collective defence. This points to a subtle process of instrumentalisation at work: normative principles served as both intrinsic objectives and justificatory frameworks for policy implementation. In other words, norms remained ends in themselves and became a means to legitimise action and maintain unity. The findings thus support the initial hypothesis that EU discourse during the war would remain value-based, while also showing signs of instrumentalisation and geopolitical adaptation. The EU's response to the Ukraine war can therefore be characterised as a recalibrated form of normative power – one that endures not despite strategic constraints, but by integrating them into a broader framework of legitimacy and values.

Is the EU a credible normative actor in times of war? The evidence suggests that it is – though in a form that is more adaptive, flexible, and strategically aware than in previous decades. Rather than retreating from its foundational values, the Union has integrated them into a discourse that legitimises even its more coercive measures. This strategic articulation of values through security language does not undermine the EU's normative identity; rather, it reflects its rearticulation in response to external pressures (Wiener, 2014; Diez, 2013). This shift has also been observed in broader EU crisis responses, where normative language is retained even as military instruments or economic sanctions are deployed. Ajao (2024) emphasises that the EU's external power now often operates through a dual logic, in which normative claims are used not to conceal coercion, but to confer legitimacy and coherence within frameworks of international law and liberal values. If the EU succeeds in maintaining consistency between its normative rhetoric and future actions, especially in less clear-cut crises, it may emerge not only as a defender of liberal values, but as a capable actor able to uphold them in an increasingly contested world.

However, the EU's credibility going forward will rest on its ability to balance these principles with effective power politics. In Ukraine's case, values and interests largely converged; a democratic nation's fight for

survival coincided with Europe's strategic interest in deterring Russian aggression. In future scenarios where norms and interests diverge, the strain on the EU's normative coherence may prove far greater. The war has propelled the EU towards becoming more of a normative actor equipped with coercive instruments – one that is willing to defend its ideals with hard measures when necessary. Whether this evolution makes the EU more credible or whether it begins to dilute the purity of its normative identity is a question that will only be answered in due course. For now, the Union's wartime discourse and actions suggest an entity that is recalibrating but not renouncing its founding values – essentially, a normative power that has not retreated from its principles, but has learned to articulate them through the strategic language of power. Further research could examine how this recalibrated normative identity is perceived by external actors, especially in regions where the EU's strategic and normative interests do not align as clearly as they have done in Ukraine.

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*Evita Dionysiou*★

## Improving the EU's Readiness to Admit Ukraine Without Amending the Lisbon Treaty

### Abstract

In the unprecedented circumstances of the full-scale war in Ukraine, the country's accession to the European Union (EU) has come to be viewed as a geopolitical imperative. However, despite renewed political commitment to enlargement, the Union remains poorly equipped to admit new members without jeopardising its internal cohesion and functionality. This article examines how the EU can enhance its institutional readiness to integrate Ukraine without amending the Lisbon Treaty. It identifies four complementary reforms that can strengthen the Union's decision-making and enforcement capacities: (a) broader use of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV); (b) activation of the *passerelle* clauses as a legal bridge toward flexibility; (c) strategic use of constructive abstention to preserve unity in the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP); and (d) development of a cooperative enforcement model to improve implementation of EU legislation. By linking these mechanisms to the current debate on enlargement and governance, the article demonstrates that meaningful institutional adjustment is possible within the existing Treaty framework. It argues that such reforms would not only prepare the EU for Ukraine's accession but also strengthen the Union's overall legal coherence, external credibility, and rule-of-law resilience. To conclude, this paper advocates that the momentum created by Ukraine's membership application should be seized upon to build a more responsive, credible, and strategically autonomous Union – one capable of deepening its integration while widening its membership.

**Keywords:** Lisbon Treaty, Qualified Majority Voting, *Passerelle* Clauses, Cooperative Enforcement, Enlargement, Ukraine's Accession

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## Introduction

In December 2023, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova.<sup>1</sup> The outcome of this process depends on three interrelated factors: (a) the evolution of the war with Russia and its eventual political settlement; (b) Ukraine's progress in meeting the conditions outlined in the European Commission's Opinion on its membership application (European Commission, 2022); and (c) the EU's institutional readiness to admit new members. This article focuses on the third factor – the Union's preparedness for enlargement.

Russia's full-scale invasion transformed Ukraine's EU membership from a distant aspiration into a geopolitical necessity. While enlargement now commands broad political support, the EU's decision-making structures remain poorly equipped to absorb new members without risking paralysis or internal fragmentation. Effective enlargement therefore requires targeted reforms that enhance the Union's capacity to act. However, internal reform should not become a pretext for delay; deepening and widening can reinforce one another if pursued through pragmatic institutional innovation (Dionysiou, 2023).

To achieve such innovation, a formal revision of the Lisbon Treaty does not appear to be a realistic prospect at present, as the Member States show little willingness to reopen the Treaty framework. Nonetheless, the Treaty already provides several underused instruments that could improve flexibility and decisional efficiency. These include broader use of QMV, activation of the *passerelle* clauses, strategic application of constructive abstention, and stronger cooperative enforcement of EU law. Together, these mechanisms could enhance the Union's functionality and resilience, enabling enlargement without undermining cohesion.

In light of the above considerations, this article's aim is to examine how institutional adjustments can prepare the EU to integrate Ukraine within the existing Treaty framework. In order to meet this aim, the article is structured as follows. The first section reviews key academic and policy debates on EU reform, decision-making, and enlargement. Section two provides a historical background that outlines the geopolitical and institutional context of Ukraine's candidacy and the EU's response to the war. The subsequent parts of the article analyse four complementary reforms – the expansion of QMV, use of *passerelle* clauses, constructive abstention, and cooperative enforcement – assessing their operation, their contribution to Ukraine's accession, and the broader implications for EU

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<sup>1</sup> This article focuses specifically on Ukraine; reference to Moldova's membership application falls outside its scope.

governance and external relations. To conclude, this article argues that the momentum generated by Ukraine's membership application presents an opportunity to modernise the EU's institutional architecture and reinforce its strategic autonomy without amending the Lisbon Treaty.

## Literature Review

Over the past decade, the EU's enlargement and decision-making reforms have become a central topic in the academic and policy discourse, particularly in the context of the Union's evolving response to the "polycrisis" and renewed geopolitical competition (Nicoli, Zeitlin, 2024). The literature on EU institutional capacity emphasises that further enlargement without internal adjustment risks diminishing the Union's effectiveness and unity (Fabbrini, 2025; Calliess, 2023). Scholars such as Rabinovych (2024), who examines the legal and rule-of-law dimensions of Ukraine's accession process, argue that the existing institutional framework rooted in the Lisbon Treaty constitutes a significant obstacle to accommodating new members while maintaining policy coherence.

At the same time, a growing body of work explores decision-making flexibility within the existing Treaty framework. Panizza (2019), Kotanidis (2020), and Mintel and von Ondarza (2022) underline that the *passerelle* clauses and the broader use of QMV are among the most promising legal mechanisms for strengthening the EU's decision-making capacity without requiring formal Treaty amendment. The European Parliament further supports this view, advocating their use as a means of enhancing responsiveness and overcoming institutional gridlock (European Parliament, 2024). Collectively, these analyses suggest that procedural innovation within the Lisbon framework is both legally feasible and politically necessary in anticipation of future enlargements.

From a broader governance perspective, research on constructive abstention and variable geometry in EU foreign policy (Bartoloni, 2022; Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform, 2023) highlights the potential for more flexible patterns of integration. These mechanisms, although imperfect, allow for differentiated participation that maintains unity while enabling timely decision-making in areas such as the CFSP. Recent contributions by Baerbock et al. (2023) and Fabbrini (2025) point out that extending QMV or applying constructive abstention in foreign policy could substantially enhance the Union's credibility as a geopolitical actor, especially in responding to external crises such as the war in Ukraine.

Parallel to the institutional debate, the literature on EU enlargement and Ukraine's accession has evolved rapidly since 2022. Early analyses framed Ukraine's application as a turning point for EU enlargement, linking it to a broader strategic vision of a "geopolitical EU" (Petrov, 2023; Dionysiou, 2023). More recent scholarship (Fabbrini, 2025; SWP, 2024; Buras, Morina, 2023; Raik, Blockmans, 2023) emphasises that Ukraine's membership perspective functions both as a geopolitical imperative and as a catalyst for internal reform. These studies converge on the argument that the EU must adapt its internal decision-making structures to accommodate a large and politically significant candidate such as Ukraine, while preserving the legitimacy and cohesion of its institutional order.

Furthermore, a growing number of studies examine enforcement and compliance mechanisms within the EU's legal system, identifying persistent deficits between legal commitments and practical implementation (Ballesteros Perals, 2025; Anzini et al., 2021). This body of literature supports the notion that improved cooperative enforcement – through networks of national and EU authorities – can bridge the gap between "law in books" and "law in action". Such approaches not only enhance rule-of-law consistency across Member States but also strengthen the credibility of the enlargement process by ensuring that new members effectively adhere to EU norms after accession.

Collectively, these strands of research reveal a significant analytical gap; while many scholars have examined enlargement and institutional reform separately, relatively few have explored their interconnection under the constraint of the Lisbon framework. This article seeks to address this gap by focusing on how feasible procedural reforms – such as broader use of QMV, activation of *passerelle* clauses, constructive abstention, and cooperative enforcement – can prepare the EU for Ukraine's accession without requiring Treaty amendment. In doing so, it positions itself within the emerging body of literature that conceptualises enlargement not only as a geopolitical choice but also as a constitutional and institutional challenge for the Union's long-term governance.

## **Historical Background: The Shock of the War and the Geopolitical Turn to EU Enlargement**

Before 2022, EU enlargement had largely stalled due to so-called "enlargement fatigue", internal divisions, and concerns regarding governance and the rule of law. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 transformed this landscape, turning enlargement from a technocratic exercise into a geopolitical necessity (Dionysiou,

2023; Fabbrini, 2025; Petrov, 2023). Confronted with Europe's gravest security crisis since the Cold War, the EU began to regard Ukraine's membership as essential to regional stability and to its own strategic identity.

Political leaders quickly adjusted their positions. For instance, President Emmanuel Macron's declaration in Bratislava in May 2023 that "the question is not whether we should enlarge, but how" (Buras, Morina, 2023, p. 3) signalled a broader shift among traditionally cautious Member States. These developments revealed a growing consensus that enlargement had become a core instrument of EU foreign policy and an expression of its geopolitical agency.

This reorientation was reflected in institutional practice. In June 2022, the European Commission recommended granting Ukraine candidate status, outlining seven reform priorities in areas such as judicial independence and anti-corruption (European Commission, 2022). The European Council endorsed this recommendation shortly afterwards, describing the decision as "a geopolitical choice" (European Council, 2022). By December 2023, the Council agreed to open formal accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, culminating in the first Intergovernmental Conference on 25<sup>th</sup> June 2024 (Council of the European Union, 2024). These steps marked a transition from political rhetoric to concrete institutional engagement.

Yet the geopolitical turn also exposed enduring structural weaknesses in the Union's decision-making architecture. Previous enlargements, notably that of 2004, demonstrated that expansion without institutional adaptation risks inefficiency and gridlock. Scholars have warned that admitting new members under the current rules could deepen asymmetries and undermine cohesion, echoing Kennedy's (1987) notion of "imperial overstretch" in institutional terms (Calliess, 2023; 2024). As Goulard cautions, enlarging the Union without reforming it risks compromising the entire integration project, as the EU could grow to the point of "exploding" (Fabbrini, 2025 citing Goulard, 2024). The challenge, therefore, is not whether enlargement should proceed, but how the EU can expand while remaining functional, united, and coherent.

Ukraine's candidacy thus compels the Union to match geopolitical ambition with institutional preparedness. Seizing this moment to strengthen decision-making within the Lisbon framework is essential to ensure that enlargement reinforces rather than strains the EU's capacity to act.

## **Necessary Reforms: Enhancing the EU's Readiness to Admit Ukraine**

Ukraine's accession is widely recognised as a geopolitical imperative, yet the EU's institutional capacity to absorb new members remains limited. The Union continues to face a "polycrisis" of overlapping challenges – including energy insecurity, migration, and democratic backsliding – that already tests its decision-making efficiency and internal solidarity (Nicoli, Zeitlin, 2024). Under such conditions, enlargement without internal adjustment risks amplifying existing weaknesses and straining political cohesion.

The aim, therefore, is to identify reforms that would enable the EU to enlarge while preserving functionality, legal integrity, and unity. In this context, the article proposes targeted institutional adjustments achievable without Treaty amendment, grouped into two categories.

First, decision-making reforms aimed at strengthening efficiency and responsiveness:

- (a) broader use of QMV in the Council;
- (b) activation of *passerelle* clauses to extend QMV to specific policy fields; and
- (c) strategic application of constructive abstention in the CFSP.

Second, implementation and enforcement reforms designed to ensure effective application of EU law, notably through a cooperative enforcement model linking national and EU authorities.

Each proposal builds upon mechanisms already embedded in the Lisbon Treaty and therefore requires no formal Treaty revision. Taken together, these reforms constitute a pragmatic roadmap for institutional modernisation, enabling the Union to integrate Ukraine while reinforcing its internal cohesion and external credibility.

### **Greater Use of Qualified Majority Voting in the Council**

The increasingly uncertain geopolitical landscape forces the EU to reconsider its decision-making process in order to proceed smoothly with enlargement while maintaining its capacity to act effectively in the international arena. To that end, adjustments to the Union's internal procedures are considered indispensable for preparing an enlarged EU to function efficiently.

In procedural terms, QMV refers to a decision-making method in the Council of the EU whereby measures are adopted if supported by

at least 55% of Member States, representing at least 65% of the Union's population. This rule, introduced by the Lisbon Treaty, replaced the earlier weighted-vote system and was designed to facilitate compromise in an increasingly diverse Union. QMV is used in most policy areas under the ordinary legislative procedure, yet key domains – such as foreign and security policy, and the admission of new members – still require unanimity. As enlargement advances, the unanimity requirement risks becoming a structural bottleneck.

From a functional standpoint, the broader use of QMV is regarded as a means to maintain decisional efficiency in a larger EU that may soon comprise more than 30 Member States (Mintel, von Ondarza, 2022). In the context of Ukraine's prospective membership, expanding QMV would help prevent individual Member States from blocking progress in key policy areas for domestic or tactical reasons. The experience of repeated vetoes on sanctions or budgetary matters has already demonstrated that unanimity can paralyse collective action (Buras, Morina, 2023). By contrast, decisions taken under QMV would reduce the number of veto players and thereby strengthen the Union's capacity to act, both internally and externally.

A greater reliance on QMV could also be applied to the enlargement process itself. Scholars such as Dionysiou (2023) contend that allowing the Council to adopt certain enlargement-related decisions by QMV could make the accession process more predictable and rules-based. For Ukraine, this would ensure that technical progress is not held hostage to political obstruction by individual Member States. It would also send an important geopolitical signal that the EU is capable of aligning its internal governance with its strategic ambitions.

At the same time, the transition to broader QMV use could be achieved without Treaty amendment, through the activation of the *passerelle* clauses – Article 48(7) TEU – embedded in the Lisbon framework. This route is both legally feasible and politically realistic, as it avoids reopening the Treaties while still allowing targeted institutional evolution. Several Member States – including Germany and the Netherlands – have recently supported this approach as a temporary but pragmatic step toward institutional flexibility (Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform, 2023; The Government of the Netherlands and the Federal Government of Germany, 2023).<sup>2</sup>

From an analytical perspective, a more extensive use of QMV would not only prepare the EU for Ukraine's accession but also enhance its

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that the report of the Franco-German Working Group itself explicitly states that it should not be regarded as representative of the French and/or German official position (Franco-German Working Group on EU Institutional Reform, 2023, p. 1).

coherence in external relations. The capacity to adopt common positions more swiftly would strengthen the EU's credibility in its neighbourhood and its ability to act as a strategic actor in global affairs. In the CFSP, for instance, applying QMV to sanctions could help the Union respond more rapidly to crises – an essential consideration given the geopolitical context of Ukraine's war. Furthermore, increased use of QMV could produce a positive spill-over effect on other areas of EU law, encouraging a culture of compromise and supranational decision-making that reinforces the EU's legal and political unity.

Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that QMV is not a panacea. Deep divisions among Member States may still impede decisive action even under majority rules, and excessive reliance on QMV could risk alienating smaller Member States that are concerned about marginalisation. Therefore, a gradual approach – beginning with less controversial policy areas such as sanctions, or selected aspects of the enlargement process – is advisable. This strategy would allow Member States to build confidence in majority decision-making while maintaining a sense of collective ownership.

In conclusion, a broader application of QMV within the existing Treaty framework represents a realistic and necessary adjustment to prepare the EU for Ukraine's accession. It would ensure the Union remains capable of acting effectively in an enlarged configuration, while simultaneously reinforcing its credibility both as a global and regional actor.

### ***Passerelle* Clauses**

While comprehensive Treaty reform remains politically unlikely in the short term, the Lisbon Treaty itself provides mechanisms for incremental institutional adaptation through the *passerelle* clauses. These clauses act as “bridges”, allowing the Union to shift from unanimity to QMV or from a special legislative procedure to the ordinary legislative procedure in specific areas, without amending the Treaties (Kotanidis, 2020). They embody a form of constitutional flexibility designed to ensure that the Union can evolve functionally in response to new challenges.

Two categories of *passerelles* exist. The general *passerelle* clause, contained in Article 48(7) TEU, allows the European Council to authorise the Council to act by QMV in areas where unanimity currently applies, provided that no national parliament objects within six months. The specific *passerelles*, on the other hand, such as Article 31(3) TEU in the field of CFSP, apply to particular policy domains. Although activation of both types still requires unanimity in the European Council, their procedural simplicity compared

with full Treaty revision makes them a more pragmatic option for short-term institutional adaptation (European Parliament, 2024).

In the context of Ukraine's accession, *passerelle* clauses could play a central role in ensuring a smoother and more credible enlargement process. They could, for example, extend QMV to certain enlargement-related decisions – such as the adoption of negotiation frameworks or assessment of progress benchmarks – reducing the risk of individual vetoes. Their activation in fields such as CFSP or sanctions policy would also enhance the EU's geopolitical agility, enabling faster and more unified responses to external challenges.<sup>3</sup>

From a legal-political perspective, the *passerelle* mechanism offers a balanced compromise between flexibility and legitimacy. It preserves Member States' constitutional prerogatives – since activation still requires unanimous consent – while creating a procedural tool to streamline decision-making once political agreement is achieved. Practically, this approach constitutes institutional reform within existing Treaty boundaries, allowing institutional practice to evolve to sustain integration momentum in times of crisis. In the context of Ukraine, this adaptability would demonstrate that the EU can innovate internally to meet external strategic challenges.

The use of *passerelle* clauses also carries broader implications for EU external relations. By accelerating decision-making in foreign policy, sanctions, and defence coordination, the Union would strengthen its capacity to project influence and respond coherently to external pressures – especially *vis-à-vis* Russia and the Eastern neighbourhood. Moreover, an EU capable of timely and unified decisions would send a strong signal of credibility to partner countries and candidate states alike, underlining the Union's dual role as a rule-based and strategic actor.

Nonetheless, it should be recognised that the *passerelle* route is not without political limitations. Smaller or more sceptical Member States often perceive its use as a potential erosion of national sovereignty, making it practically difficult to achieve unanimity to trigger the clause. Yet, even the possibility of invoking *passerelles* exerts a valuable normative pressure, signalling a willingness to modernise governance within the Treaty framework. Thus, while the *passerelle* clauses may initially serve as a selective, transitional measure, their careful application could build confidence in more flexible integration methods and lay the groundwork for future constitutional evolution.

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that, between 2016 and 2022, 30 individual vetoes, threats of veto, or delays occurred in the context of the CFSP (Wessel, Szép, 2022).

In conclusion, activating the *passerelle* clauses would enable the EU to advance towards greater decisional efficiency without formal Treaty reform – an essential step in preparing the Union for Ukraine’s accession. Such pragmatic adaptation would preserve the delicate balance between supranational functionality and national sovereignty, ensuring that enlargement becomes both politically viable and institutionally sustainable.

### **Constructive Abstentions**

Another procedural mechanism that can strengthen the EU’s readiness for enlargement – especially in the sensitive field of foreign and security policy – is constructive abstention. Introduced by the Treaty of Amsterdam and maintained under Article 31(1)–(2) TEU, it allows Member States to abstain from a vote in the Council without blocking the adoption of a decision. A state exercising this option is not obliged to implement the decision but must refrain from actions that would obstruct its execution by other Member States.

Procedurally, constructive abstention provides a middle ground between unanimity and full participation. Decisions can proceed even in the absence of complete agreement, preventing paralysis while respecting national preferences. A Member State may accompany its abstention with a formal declaration explaining its position, but this does not affect the validity of the decision for the Union as a whole (Bartoloni, 2022). In practice, the mechanism introduces flexibility into the CFSP, ensuring that collective action is not obstructed by a small number of dissenting governments.

In the context of Ukraine’s accession and the broader enlargement process, constructive abstention could be instrumental in maintaining unity during politically sensitive decisions – such as sanctions coordination, military assistance, or alignment with EU foreign policy. By permitting dissent without veto, it enables the Union to act collectively while accommodating political diversity among Member States. As Baerbock et al. (2023) emphasise, such flexibility would prevent future blockages that have previously delayed EU responses to crises.

The mechanism also reflects the broader evolution of EU governance towards differentiated integration. It enables Member States to modulate participation according to national constraints while preserving the EU’s operational capacity. For Ukraine, this sends a crucial signal that the EU can remain cohesive even when opinions diverge – reinforcing the credibility of its foreign and security policy during accession.

Externally, constructive abstention could render the EU a more agile actor in its neighbourhood and beyond. Faster decision-making in CFSP matters would enhance the Union's capacity to respond to external threats, strengthen its geopolitical credibility, and promote a unified stance towards Russia. The mechanism could also serve as a precedent for similar flexibility in other policy domains where unanimity often hampers collective action.

Nonetheless, constructive abstention should be applied with caution. Overuse could risk creating a so-called "two-speed Europe" in foreign policy, in which a core group leads while others remain passive. Its value lies in targeted, strategic application when consensus cannot otherwise be achieved. When used appropriately, it provides an essential balance between inclusiveness and effectiveness, ensuring that enlargement strengthens rather than diminishes the EU's capacity to act.

### **Enhancing the Implementation and Enforcement of the Adopted EU Legislation in Member States**

The EU's capacity to act effectively depends not only on how decisions are taken but also on how they are implemented and enforced. While the decision-making process determines the Union's ability to respond to political challenges, effective implementation ensures that EU law produces its intended outcomes across all Member States. However, a persistent gap between "law in books" and "law in action" has long been recognised as a major weakness of the European integration project (Ballesteros Perals, 2025). This challenge becomes even more pressing in the context of enlargement, as the inclusion of new members magnifies disparities in administrative capacity and rule-of-law compliance. As the European Commission (2025) notes, ensuring the consistent and effective application of EU law across all Member States remains a cornerstone of Union governance.

A promising solution lies in a model of cooperative law enforcement, in which implementation responsibilities are shared between national authorities and EU institutions through coordination, joint supervision, and mutual assistance. Rather than supplanting national powers, this model promotes collaboration and information exchange to ensure uniform application of EU rules (Anzini et al., 2021; Calliess, 2023). Cooperation may include data sharing, coordinated inspections, or joint operational teams. Existing examples – such as the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCG) and the European Competition Network (ECN) – demonstrate how shared enforcement can enhance compliance

and efficiency. Building on these precedents, the EU could extend cooperative enforcement to other key fields, including environmental and energy policy.

For Ukraine's accession, this framework offers several advantages. It would enable gradual integration of Ukraine into the EU's administrative system prior to full membership, ensuring that legal and institutional practices converge early. It would also grant the European Commission stronger oversight and facilitate post-accession compliance, thereby addressing Member States' concerns regarding uneven enforcement.

Moreover, cooperative enforcement would reinforce the Union's external credibility. A Union that consistently enforces its laws internally projects itself externally as a reliable, rules-based actor. Enhanced monitoring and coordination would improve the EU's capacity to negotiate and implement international commitments, particularly those linked to neighbourhood and association agreements. In Ukraine's case, this would support a coherent transition from association to accession, aligning national administration with EU standards in real time.

In sum, adopting a cooperative enforcement model would modernise the EU's governance and strengthen the uniform application of EU law across a larger Union. For Ukraine, it would offer a credible route to integration and durable post-accession compliance. Combined with the decision-making reforms discussed previously – QMV expansion, activation of *passerelle* clauses, and the strategic use of constructive abstention – this approach forms a coherent reform package capable of preparing the EU for enlargement within the existing Treaty framework.

## **Conclusions**

The EU finds itself at a critical juncture, facing a dual challenge: to respond decisively to the geopolitical realities created by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and to adapt its internal governance to remain effective as it enlarges. Ukraine's accession is no longer a distant objective but a defining test of the EU's strategic maturity. Yet enlargement without reform risks undermining both internal cohesion and external credibility.

In light of these considerations, this article focused on how the EU can enhance its institutional readiness to integrate Ukraine without amending the Lisbon Treaty. It has identified four complementary reforms capable of strengthening the Union's decision-making and enforcement capacities: (a) broader use of QMV to prevent paralysis caused by unanimity; (b) activation of *passerelle* clauses to extend majority voting to key policy areas; (c) strategic application of constructive abstention to

enable progress in foreign and security policy even when full consensus is unattainable; and (d) a model of cooperative law enforcement to enhance compliance and ensure that new members, including Ukraine, implement EU law effectively.

Together, these mechanisms offer a pragmatic path towards a more functional and strategically autonomous Union. They demonstrate that flexibility and credibility can coexist: procedural efficiency can be achieved without compromising legitimacy or the rule of law.

More broadly, these reforms would foster a culture of compromise, strengthen the EU's role as a rule-based actor, and reinforce its capacity to act cohesively in the international arena. Ukraine's accession therefore represents not only the expansion of membership but also the renewal of European integration. By fully utilising the Lisbon Treaty's inherent flexibility, the Union can prove that widening and deepening are mutually reinforcing – and that the EU's unity can grow stronger as it grows larger.

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## **Ukraine's Foreign Trade Policy: An Assessment of the Consequences of the War and the Formation of Strategic Development Directions**

### **Abstract**

Ukraine's external trade represents a key instrument for shaping and implementing international policy. The ongoing war has altered the trajectory of external trade development, leading to changes in the operating conditions for domestic economic entities. The aim of this research is to identify shifts in the structure of Ukraine's external trade in goods and to develop strategic directions for the external trade policy that align with the new wartime conditions in the country. To achieve this goal, the following methods were utilised: historical and logical analysis; statistical analysis based on the Revealed Comparative Advantage (RCA) index; along with deductive and inductive methods. The RCA was

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calculated for major product groups – agricultural products, fuels and mining, textiles, metals, and machinery – for 2021–2022, using data from the World Bank, the WTO, and the State Statistics Service of Ukraine. The results indicated that Ukraine retained strong comparative advantages in agricultural products (RCA = 5.29) and non-ferrous metals (RCA = 2.17), whereas other product groups such as machinery, textiles, and fuels exhibited RCA values below 1, reflecting reduced competitiveness under wartime conditions. The study substantiates the challenges encountered in the formulation and implementation of Ukraine's foreign trade policy resulting from the Russian invasion of Ukrainian territory. Although the analysis confirms both structural and geographical shifts in trade, it does not establish a direct causal link between wartime events and RCA variation, as the indicator reflects relative export performance rather than causality. An assessment of war-related consequences was conducted, revealing a reduction in the volumes of both exports and imports across almost all product groups, as well as a shift in global trade shares in favour of trade with EU countries. Based on the statistical and RCA analysis, a model of strategic directions for the formation and development of Ukraine's foreign trade policy was developed. The model integrates institutional, legal, and sectoral mechanisms designed to support priority sectors including agriculture, metallurgy, and extractive industries, and also to increase the share of high-value-added exports, optimise imports, and strengthen integration with EU markets.

This approach strengthens the coherence between empirical analysis and policy recommendations, providing a framework for restoring Ukraine's foreign trade potential and supporting post-war economic recovery and sustainable reconstruction.

**Keywords:** Foreign Trade, Food Security, State Policy, Russia's War Against Ukraine, Industry, Agriculture

## **Introduction**

The development of a national economy creates new opportunities for domestic economic entities and their integration into the international economic system. One of the key forms of international engagement is foreign trade. The role of foreign economic activity as an external driver of economic growth in the context of the development of a post-industrial economy is constantly increasing, with its impact on the socio-economic development of a country and each of its economic entities becoming more pronounced.

According to an analysis of the structure of import-export operations over the past 30 years, Ukraine is characterised as a country where

raw material exports and imports of high-value-added goods prevail. Therefore, prior to the outbreak of the war in 2022, the primary goal of state governance in relation to the strategic directions of foreign trade development was to create conditions for expanding the export of high-value-added goods. These efforts included enhancing the country's investment attractiveness, stimulating the development of small- and medium-sized enterprises, establishing an export credit agency, and fostering international trade cooperation. However, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine brought about changes in all components of societal development and necessitated a reorientation of export-import operations. The difficulties faced by economic entities thus became one of the key challenges for state authorities in shaping and implementing the country's foreign trade policy.

According to the National Council for the Recovery of Ukraine from the Consequences of War, as at June 2022, business asset losses amounted to at least \$8 billion and were rapidly increasing. Direct losses to the agricultural sector due to the war amounted to 4.3 billion USD. The largest share of indirect losses was sustained by enterprises and the industrial sector, amounting to 28.7 billion USD, followed by the agro-industrial complex and land resources at 23.4 billion USD. An additional 23.3 billion USD represented indirect losses inflicted on the trade sector. This has had an impact on Ukraine's foreign trade in goods, particularly the structure of the country's export operations, and has created new challenges for international food security.

Current research highlights a series of problematic issues in Ukraine's foreign trade. Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to identify changes in the structure of Ukraine's foreign trade in goods and to develop strategic directions for foreign trade policy that reflect the new wartime conditions in the country. The main objectives are as follows:

1. To provide a historical overview and identify the specific features of Ukraine's foreign trade development that affect the country's foreign trade balance.
2. To evaluate the changes that have occurred in the geographical and commodity structure of Ukrainian exports and imports following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.
3. To formulate strategic directions for the development of Ukraine's foreign trade policy that correspond to with the new wartime conditions in the country.

## Literature Review

The relationship between war and trade has been widely examined in academic literature, particularly through analyses of major global conflicts such as the Napoleonic Wars, the First World War, and the Second World War. These studies emphasise how military conflicts disrupt established trade routes, reshape the global division of labour, and alter the balance of economic and political power (Krpec, Hodulak, 2019; Glick, Taylor, 2010; Martin et al., 2005). For instance, some countries have lost strategic economic positions despite being victorious, whereas others, often not directly involved in a given conflict, have gained relative power due to the reorganisation of supply chains and the development of domestic substitutes.

More recent research has also explored the broader impact of wars on economic development. Scholars highlight the systemic transformations triggered by conflicts, including shifts in productivity, capital allocation, and institutional adaptation (Broadberry, Harrison, 2005; Litwiński, 2017; Chaliuk, 2022). The Russian–Ukrainian war, in particular, has led to an increase in scholarly interest due to its far-reaching consequences across multiple domains. Several studies have examined the implications of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict for global and regional food security. Research published in 2022–2023 highlights disruptions in agricultural exports, supply chain fragility, and the vulnerability of low-income countries (Abay et al., 2023; Lin et al., 2023; Arndt et al., 2023). Environmental policy and energy geopolitics have likewise become central areas of concern, particularly within the EU’s response framework (Kuzemko et al., 2022; Bricout et al., 2022).

Additionally, the war’s impact on energy consumption, carbon emissions, and economic growth is actively discussed in recent literature (Cui et al., 2023). Financial market reactions to geopolitical risks, including volatility and investor sentiment, have been analysed in both global and regional contexts (Izzeldin et al., 2023; Khalfaoui et al., 2022; Qureshi et al., 2022). Studies have also tracked shifts in international trade flows caused by sanctions, supply bottlenecks, and export reorientations (Wang et al., 2022). According to the Scopus database, 49 articles were published in 2022, with a further 36 more appearing in the first two months of 2023, underscoring the topicality and intensity of academic engagement with this subject.

Within the Ukrainian scholarly context, the war’s impact on trade remains under-researched. However, some recent contributions are noteworthy; Babets (2022) investigated threats to foreign trade security

across Ukrainian regions, while Bosak and Zhila (2022), applying the Heckscher-Ohlin model, highlighted the strategic role of trade in Ukraine's post-war recovery. Pashkuda and Afendi (2022) identified wartime trade development trends and proposed policy measures for trade regulation under crisis conditions.

The importance of conducting research in this field during the war in Ukraine is explained by the fact that foreign trade is considered one of the main components of the national economy, directly affecting the country's gross domestic product and balance of payments. Moreover, the development of foreign trade enables a country to occupy a relevant position on the international stage through the establishment and implementation of trade relations with other countries.

### **Methodological Approach**

The analysis and synthesis of historical experience make it possible to identify the patterns of foreign trade development and their impact on the country's economic progress. Accordingly, historical and logical research methods have been employed to assess the trajectory of the country's foreign trade activity.

Foreign trade, as a component of international economic activity, is characterised by a set of indicators that make it possible to assess its status, structure, dynamics, efficiency, and influence on the country's socio-economic development. In this study, the method of statistical analysis was applied based on data from the National Bank of Ukraine, which covered a broad range of indicators related to foreign trade activities and external sector statistics, compiled in accordance with the recommendations of the International Monetary Fund. This approach made it possible to identify the economic sectors, including groups of goods, in which Ukraine possesses a comparative advantage in international trade. Specifically, the Revealed Comparative Advantage (RCA) index was calculated to determine a country's relative strengths or weaknesses in specific classes of goods or services, based on David Ricardo's concept of comparative advantage.

Deductive and inductive methods were employed to formulate strategic directions for the advancement of Ukraine's foreign trade policy. The deductive approach was grounded in theoretical and historical models of international trade policy, enabling an analysis of Ukraine's divergence from global development cycles – from mercantilism to neo-protectionism. This approach helped to elucidate persistent structural challenges such as the raw-material orientation of exports, import dependency, and the weakness of state trade governance mechanisms.

The inductive method was employed to generate practical policy recommendations based on empirical data. This included an analysis of Ukraine's export-import structure before and after the full-scale Russian invasion, an assessment of war-related sectoral losses – notably in industry and agriculture – the calculation of the RCA index, and the identification of shifts in trade orientation toward the EU. These empirical findings informed the design of a sector-specific model for Ukraine's foreign trade policy, incorporating legal, institutional, and economic instruments. Deductive reasoning underscored historical policy misalignments, while inductive analysis provided an evidence based foundation for strategic wartime interventions.

## **Conducting Research and Results**

### *Trajectories of Foreign Trade Policy Development in Ukraine*

In formulating an effective foreign trade policy, it is both pertinent and well founded to analyse the historical aspects of foreign trade development in light of the theories of international economic relations applied in practice during the country's economic reconstruction. By summarising the presented stages of foreign trade development and analysing the transformative experience of implementing mechanisms of state governance in this field, this study constructs an original approach to the development of foreign trade policy globally and in Ukraine within a historical context, taking into account the degree of state intervention in regulating foreign trade.

The trends in the development of state regulation processes in Ukraine did not align with global characteristics. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, economic liberalism prevailed worldwide, promoting the minimisation of state intervention in economic processes, including foreign trade. In Ukraine, which was then a part of the Russian Empire, foreign trade developed under the strict control of state authorities and had a raw-material orientation. This laid the foundation for the formation of Ukraine's foreign trade relations after it became an independent state in 1991. For the first time in its history, Ukraine began building an open-market economy and integrated into globalisation processes alongside countries that already possessed some experience in shaping and implementing liberal foreign trade policies.

The identified differences and specific features in the development of Ukraine's foreign trade relations with other countries have influenced the raw-material nature of the national economy and determined its current position within the international trade system.

### ***The Development of Ukraine's Foreign Trade: Current Trends and the Impact of Russia's Full-Scale Invasion***

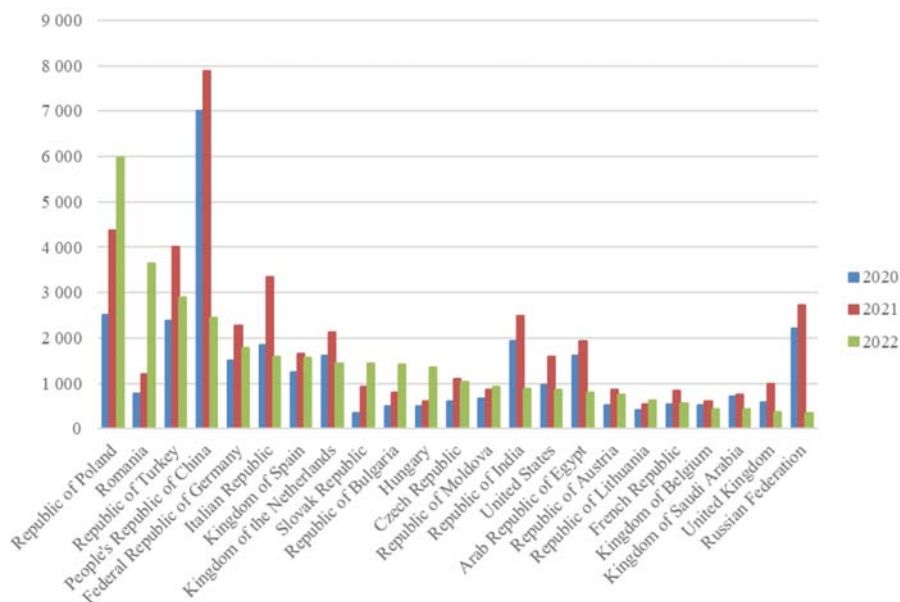
The key challenges in enhancing the efficiency of Ukraine's foreign trade include, *inter alia*, the raw-material nature of export operations, the absence of an effective foreign trade policy, an inadequate institutional framework for state regulation, and the national economy's dependence on imported goods. As regards the current state of import-export activities in Ukraine, these issues remain relevant and unsolved, requiring targeted policy responses. However, the Russian-Ukrainian war has shifted these questions into the background to a degree, as state governance has primarily focused on managing the consequences of a full-scale invasion. This situation underscores the need for a comprehensive assessment of the consequences of the potential and real threats that the war poses.

Prior to Russia's full-scale invasion, Ukraine had demonstrated significant economic progress. As noted by the National Council for the Recovery of Ukraine, 2021 was marked by record-high macroeconomic indicators; GDP reached an unprecedented level of 200 billion USD, foreign direct investment amounted to 6.7 billion USD, and exports of goods and services increased by 34.7%. These positive dynamics contributed to measurable improvements in living standards. Specifically, the real average wage of employees grew by 10.5%, while the real disposable income of the population rose by 4.3%.

First and foremost, it is worth noting that the openness of Ukraine's economy to participation in the external market of goods and services reflects the overall liberal direction of Ukraine's state policy. In recent years, the share of exports in GDP has ranged from 35.5% in 2022 to 52.6% in 2015, while imports have ranged from 52.3% in 2022 to 55.2% in 2015 (*Share of Exports in GDP*, 2023). Such a high proportion of imports in GDP indicates the economy's dependence on imports and requires corresponding governmental measures to regulate import-export operations.

Therefore, this study conducts a statistical analysis of changes in the geographical structure of Ukraine's export-import operations to countries worldwide during the period of 2020–2022 (see Figures 1 and 2).

In 2021, China was Ukraine's top export partner. However, in 2022, Poland assumed the leading position. Exports to Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Hungary also increased, driven by the EU's removal of tariffs, quotas, and duties on Ukrainian goods. Nevertheless, this shift also led to certain EU Member States banning imports of Ukrainian



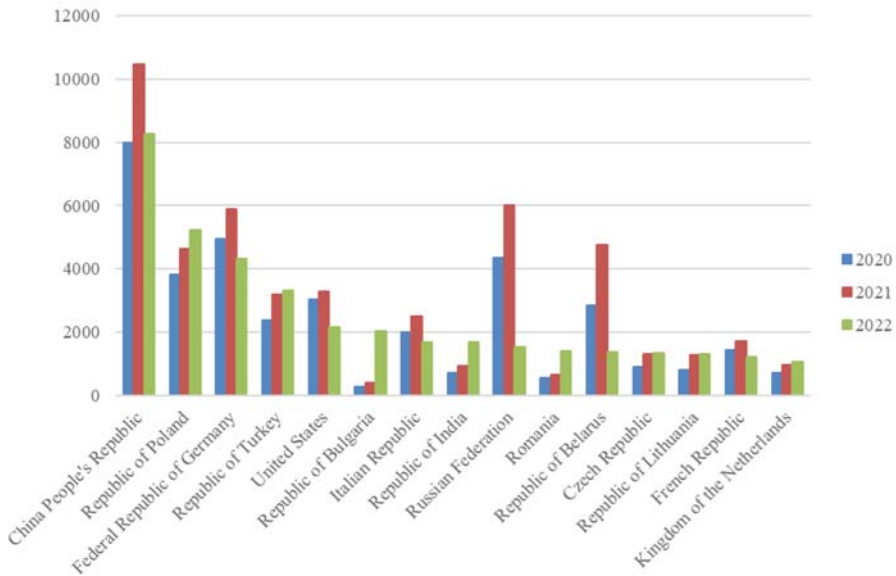
**Figure 1. Dynamics of the Export of Goods by Country in Millions of USD**

Source: Compiled by the author based on data from the National Bank of Ukraine (2022).

grain and other agricultural products. By contrast, countries such as Türkiye, Germany, Italy, India, the United States, Egypt, and Israel saw reduced export volumes due to disrupted logistics, damaged infrastructure, and weakened demand following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

In 2022, the geographical structure of Ukraine’s exports changed significantly. The European Union’s share increased markedly from 39% to 62%, while exports to Asia fell from 36% to 24%, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) from 11% to 6%, Africa from 10% to 5%, and the Americas from 5% to 3% (National Bank of Ukraine, 2022). Prior to 2022, Russia ranked among Ukraine’s top five export destinations; however, following the onset of the war, Ukraine imposed a complete ban on trade with the aggressor state.

Regarding import operations, China has not lost its position as Ukraine’s leading import partner, although the volumes of supplies to Ukraine have decreased quantitatively. This decline can be attributed to a reduction in the number of financially capable individuals in



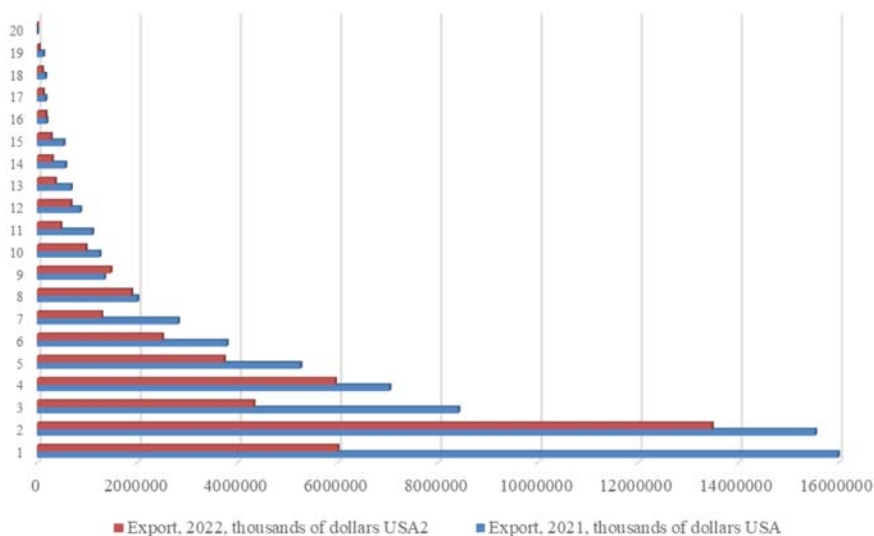
**Figure 2. Dynamics of the Import of Goods by Country in Millions of USD**

Source: Compiled by the author based on data from the National Bank of Ukraine (2022).

the country and, consequently, a decrease in domestic demand for imported goods. Meanwhile, countries such as Poland, Turkey, Bulgaria, India, and Romania have strengthened their positions among Ukraine's major import partners. At the end of 2022, the majority of imports were dominated by European Union countries. The share of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in domestic imports decreased by more than half, while the shares of Asia, Africa, the USA, and other countries remained stable.

The challenges of Ukraine's foreign trade policy are defined by the raw-material orientation and predominantly agricultural structure of exports, energy dependence in the import sector, and the high share of finished products such as machinery, equipment, and vehicles in the import structure. These factors necessitate a reevaluation of foreign trade policy approaches, particularly the reorientation of national production and the attraction of investment to facilitate Ukraine's integration into global value chains.

The study analyses and compares the commodity structure of Ukraine's export-import operations for 2021 and 2022 (see Figures 3 and 4).



**Figure 3. Commodity Structure of Ukraine’s Exports in 2021 and 2022, in Thousands of USD**

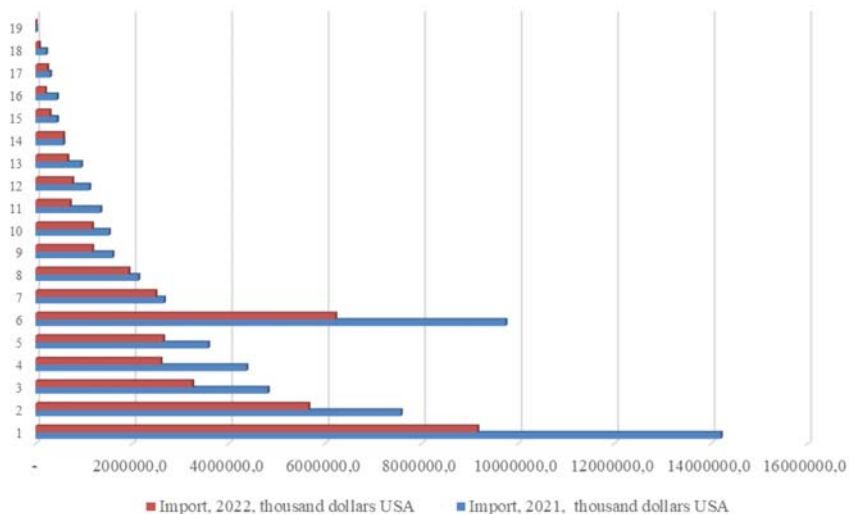
Notes: 1. Food Products; 2. Fats and Oils of Animal or Vegetable Origin; 3. Machinery, Equipment, and Mechanisms; Electrical Equipment; 4. Finished Food Products; 5. Products of Chemical and Related Industries; 6. Wood and Wood Products; 7. Live Animals; Animal Products; 8. Various Industrial Goods; 9. Polymeric Materials, Plastics, and Products Thereof; 10. Textile Materials and Textile Products; 11. Land Transport, Aircraft, Watercraft; 12. Stone Products, Gypsum, Cement; 13. Wood Pulp or Other Fibrous Cellulosic Material; 14. Footwear, Headgear, Umbrellas; 15. Optical, Photographic, Cinematographic, Measuring, Checking, Precision, Medical or Surgical Instruments, and Apparatus; 16. Raw Hides, Skins, Leather; 17. Natural or Cultured Pearls, Precious or Semi-Precious Stones; 18. Art Works.

Source: Compiled by the authors and based on data from the State Statistics Service of Ukraine.

In 2022, almost all product categories experienced a decline in export volumes, with a few exceptions. Exports of the “Live Animals; Animal Products” group grew by 109.4%, particularly for meat, dairy products, eggs, and honey. In the “Products of Vegetable Origin” category, exports of oilseeds, grains, and medicinal plants increased by 54.3% and 83.8%, respectively. Modest growth was also observed in the “Finished Food Products” group, with exports rising by 6.8% for meat and fish, 21.5% for sugar and confectionery, and 11% for vegetable preparations. Additionally, exports of mineral fuels and related products rose by 32.6%. Conversely, sectors such as chemicals, machinery, and non-ferrous metals saw significant declines; plastics and polymer materials fell by 57%, precious

stones by 68%, and non-ferrous metals by 62%. These trends reflect the destruction of industrial infrastructure, which had previously supported value-added exports.

In this context, Ukraine must reassess its export policy. Given the ongoing risks and structural losses, strategic emphasis should be placed on transforming the agricultural sector, which demonstrated resilience despite the war, limited state support, and adverse natural conditions. Agriculture not only maintained but strengthened its role in Ukraine's export structure in 2022, providing a solid foundation for sustainable economic recovery.



**Figure 4. Commodity Structure of Imports to Ukraine in 2021 and 2022, in Thousands of USD**

Notes: 1. Mineral Products; 2. Machinery, Equipment, and Electrical Machinery; 3. Ground Vehicles, Aircraft, and Floating Structures; 4. Polymer Materials, Plastics, and Products thereof; 5. Base Metals and Articles of Base Metal; 6. Prepared Foodstuffs; 7. Chemical and Related Industries Products; 8. Textile Materials and Textile Products; 9. Products of Plant Origin; 10. Live Animals; Animal Products; 11. Optical, Photographic, Cinematographic, Measuring, Checking, Medical, or Surgical Instruments and Apparatus; 12. Various Industrial Goods; 13. Wood and Articles of Wood; 14. Articles of Stone, Plaster, or Cement; 15. Footwear, Headgear, Umbrellas; 16. Animal or Vegetable Fats and Oils; 17. Wood and Articles of Wood; 18. Raw Hides and Skins; Leather; 19. Natural or Cultured Pearls, Precious or Semi-precious Stones; 20. Works of Art.

Source: the State Statistics Service of Ukraine.

Despite the overall decline in import volumes in 2022, certain commodity groups showed growth compared to 2021. Notably, imports of vegetables increased by 40.8%, plant-based industrial materials by 24.4%, explosives by 12.5%, and clothing and textile accessories by 75.4%. Mineral products remained the dominant import category, accounting for 20.5% in 2021 and rising to 23.7% in 2022. However, due to shifts in market demand, imports of fuel materials declined. Significant reductions were also recorded in machinery and equipment imports (-35%), base metals and related products (-40%), and chemical industry products (-36%).

An increase in the share of light industry goods in total imports – from 3.7% in 2021 to 4.5% in 2022 – is linked to military procurement, including uniforms. Similarly, imports of aircraft rose by 1.8%. Conversely, food imports decreased by 26%, reflecting the overall drop in consumer demand amid the full-scale war.

Ukraine's existing foreign trade policy aims to develop and increase external trade volumes with EU countries, the United States, Japan, and Canada. According to the analysed plan for Ukraine's reconstruction, the main priority directions for the economy's overall development and foreign trade include: 1) the military-industrial complex; 2) metallurgy and metalworking; 3) the agro-industrial complex; 4) energy; 5) mechanical engineering; 6) the mining industry; 7) logistics; and 8) furniture and woodworking industries.

The next stage of the research was to determine Ukraine's position in the international goods market. For this purpose, the calculation of Ukraine's revealed comparative advantage in international goods trade has been calculated and presented in Table 1 and Figure 5.

The Revealed Comparative Advantage (RCA) index was calculated using Balassa's formula (1.1):

$$RCA_{ij} = \frac{x_{ij} / x_{it}}{x_{wj} / x_{wt}}, \quad (1.1)$$

where  $x_{ij}$  – exports of product  $j$  by country  $i$ ,  $x_{it}$  – total exports of country  $i$ ,  $x_{wj}$  – world exports of product  $j$ , and  $x_{wt}$  – total world exports.

The reference group used for comparison comprised global exports (world level), based on data from the World Bank and the National Bank of Ukraine. The RCA was calculated for product groups that accounted for over 80% of Ukraine's total exports in 2021–2022, thereby ensuring the representativeness of key sectors such as agriculture, metals, and machinery.

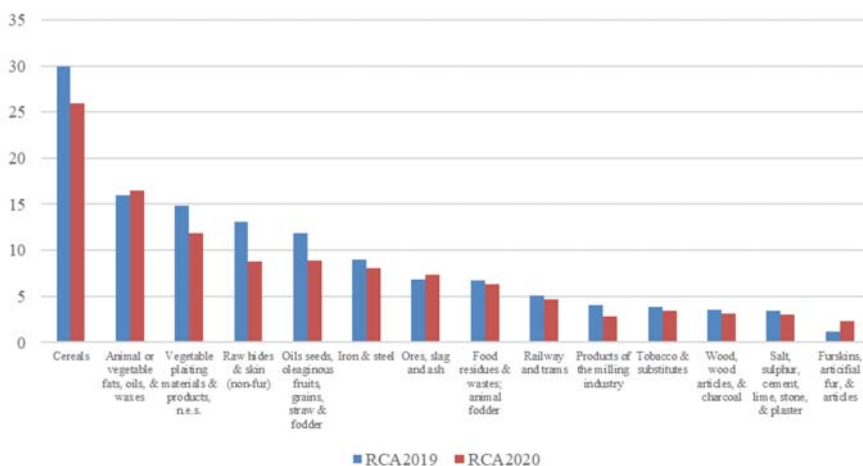
**Table 1. Revealed Comparative Advantage for Ukraine by Product Group, 2021–2022**

Product Group	Ukraine's Exports, 2021 (USD)	Ukraine's Exports, 2022 (USD)	Change in Export Structure, 2022 vs 2021 (%)	Worldwide Exports, 2021 (USD)	Worldwide Exports, 2022 (USD)	Revealed Comparative Advantage (RCA), 2021	Revealed Comparative Advantage (RCA), 2022
Agricultural and Food Products	27,708,932.3	21,039,958.9	6.82	2,162,376,000	2,326,000,000	4.2	5.3
Fuel and Mining Products	12,334,166.2	5,815,631.4	-5.01	3,654,527,000	5,158,000,000	1.1	0.7
Textiles and Clothing	1,054,845.4	784,226.7	0.22	903,099,000	576,000,000	0.4	0.8
Non-ferrous Metals (including Iron and Steel)	15,990,999.1	5,731,492.4	-10.59	585,704,000	1,541,000,000	9.0	2.2
Machinery, Equipment, Electrical Devices, and Vehicles	5,936,601.8	3,811,991.4	-0.11	16,019,453,000	6,040,000,000	0.1	0.4

Source: The authors' own calculations based on data analysis from World Bank Open Data and the National Bank of Ukraine.

Therefore, the calculation and analysis of RCA indicate that Ukraine possesses comparative advantages in the agricultural sector (the RCA for agricultural and food products is 4.2). Moreover, a comparison of structural changes in export operations shows that this group of goods recorded an increase of 6.82% in 2022 compared with 2021, despite the adverse effects of Russia’s war against Ukraine. Within this category, the following items demonstrated high levels of comparative advantage: “Vegetable Products” – cereals (corn, wheat, barley) (RCA = 25.9); oilseeds, oleaginous fruits, grains, straw and fodder (rapeseed, sunflower) (RCA = 8.9); and vegetable plaiting materials and products, not elsewhere specified (RCA = 11.9). Similarly, “Animal and Vegetable By-products” such as animal or vegetable fats, oils, and waxes (soybean oil, seed oils) recorded an RCA of 16.5, while “Animal Hides” (raw hides and skins, excluding fur, e.g., sheep hides) reached an RCA of 8.8.

Non-precious metals – including iron and steel – held a strong comparative position, with an RCA of 9.0. However, their share in Ukraine’s export structure decreased by 10.59%, which is primarily due to the destruction of a significant portion of industrial production capacity as a result of Russia’s full-scale war. Similarly, fuel and mining products continued to provide Ukraine with comparative advantages in international trade in goods, although their export volumes fell sharply in 2022 compared with 2021.



**Figure 5. Revealed Comparative Advantage of Ukraine by Selected Product Groups, 2019–2020**

Source: The authors’ calculations based on data from the World Bank Open Data and the National Bank of Ukraine.

While the war has significantly affected trade volumes, this study does not assert a direct causal relationship between wartime events and changes in the RCA. The RCA reflects relative export performance rather than causation; therefore, its variations should be interpreted as correlational rather than causal.

It is worth noting that Ukraine also has comparative advantages in the following groups of goods: furskins, artificial fur, and related articles (RCA = 2.3); salt, sulfur, cement, lime, stone, and plaster (RCA = 3.0); wood, wood articles, and charcoal (RCA = 3.1); tobacco and substitutes (RCA = 3.4); products of the milling industry (RCA = 2.8); railway and tram equipment (RCA = 4.7); food residues and wastes, including animal fodder (RCA = 6.3); and ores, slag, and ash (RCA = 7.3). These groups collectively characterise Ukraine's areas of comparative advantage in international trade.

Given the current conditions, the most probable scenario for the development of Ukraine's foreign trade involves a widening of the negative trade balance, primarily due to a decrease in export volumes and an increase in imports.

### ***Strategic Directions for the Formulation of Ukraine's Foreign Trade Policy under Martial Law and during Post-War Reconstruction***

Given the overall state of Ukraine's economy, decisions in the field of state management of foreign economic activity must be guided by clearly defined objectives and algorithms for their implementation. The liberal nature of economic relations requires the implementation of appropriate instruments for managing foreign economic processes. Furthermore, the state's foreign trade policy should prioritise the development of the country's export potential and the regulation of import operations to protect domestic manufacturers. Such an approach is consistent with Michael Porter's theory of competitive advantage which emphasises the role of national competitiveness in achieving sustainable economic growth. Accordingly, it is essential to formulate a policy framework that promotes free trade while taking into account the needs of exporters.

Based on the statistical and comparative analyses presented above, the authors have developed a model (Table 2) that integrates the identified economic sectors and governance mechanisms into strategic directions for Ukraine's foreign trade policy under wartime and post-war conditions.

**Table 2. Model for the Development of Strategic Directions for Formulating and Developing Ukraine’s Foreign Trade Policy**

<b>D1.</b> Harmonisation of Interests of Political Actors	D1.1. Establishment of an Institutional Framework for Information, Communication, and Financial Support for Economic Entities	D1.1.1.1. Full-scale launch of the Export Credit Agency’s operations.
		D1.1.1.2. Creation of business incubators.
		D1.1.1.3. Implementation of business relocation programmes from high-risk areas.
		D1.1.1.4. Coordination of powers and tasks between the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the regulation of foreign trade operations.
		D1.1.1.5. Cooperation with international organisations.
		D1.1.1.6. Development of military-technical cooperation with other countries.
<b>D2.</b> Development of the Legal Mechanism of Foreign Trade Policy	D2.1. Activation of Political and Diplomatic Instruments of Cooperation for Deepening International Integration	D2.1.1. Negotiation of preferential trade agreements, establishment of free trade zones, the advancement of Ukraine’s accession to the European Union.
		D2.1.2. Organisation of fairs, meetings, conferences, and partner-matching initiatives.
	D2.2. Improvement of the Legal Framework of Foreign Trade Policy	D2.2.1. Introduction of amendments to regulatory documents governing foreign trade operations and the application of economic and administrative instruments within foreign trade policy.

D3. Development of the Economic Mechanism of Foreign Trade Policy by Economic Sector	D3.1. Mining Industry	D3.1.1. Reduction of customs tariffs on equipment for mineral extraction to improve product quality.
	D3.2. Agro-Industrial Complex	D3.2.1. Enhancement of compliance with phytosanitary requirements and food safety measures in line with international standards.
		D3.2.2. Expansion of foreign trade opportunities and the facilitation of EU accession processes to promote exports of finished agricultural products.
		D3.2.3. Application of non-tariff restrictions on the export of raw materials.
	D3.3. consumer Goods Industry	D3.3.1. Stimulation of domestic market demand and growth of sales volumes.
		D3.3.2. Regulation of methods for determining the customs value of imported goods.
	D3.4. Engineering Industry	D3.4.1. Promotion of technological development.
		D3.4.2. Reduction of customs tariffs on raw materials
		D3.4.3. Improvement of the business conditions through enterprise relocation support and protection measures against military threats.
	D3.5. Metallurgical Industry	D3.5.1. Reduction of tariffs on industrial equipment that enhances energy efficiency in production.
	D3.6. Military-Industrial Complex	D3.5.2. Stimulation of enterprises participation in global value chains.
		D3.6.1. Establishment of a scientific, technical, and production-technological base for manufacturing combat aviation (aircraft, helicopters), air defence and missile defence systems, and ammunition of various calibres.
		D3.6.2. Expansion of enterprises' repair base.
D3.6.3. Review of tariffs on imported raw materials.		
D3.7. Furniture and Woodworking Industry	D3.7.1. Stimulation of the establishment of furniture production facilities.	
	D3.7.2. Monitoring the use and protection of raw materials in the woodworking industry.	
D3.8. Implementation of measures to overcome corruption and "grey" imports		
D4. Development of Foreign Trade Policy in Interaction with Other Policies	D4.1. Consideration of the interests of policy subjects in the educational process.	
	D4.2. Regulation of currency risk management processes in foreign trade.	
	D4.3. Stimulation of scientific research and development. The establishment of analytical centres for the study of global and regional trade dynamics at higher education institutions.	

Source: Developed by the authors based on the conducted analysis.

The proposed model illustrates the interlinkages between institutional, legal, and sectoral dimensions of Ukraine's foreign trade policy. It builds upon the results of the RCA findings, highlighting sectors with comparative advantages – such as agriculture, metallurgy, and mining – while addressing governance challenges through institutional coordination and export credit mechanisms. The following sectoral analysis expands on the results of the RCA and trade structure assessments, offering practical recommendations for industries that undergone significant transformations during wartime conditions.

To develop an original approach to identify the strategic directions for the formation and development of Ukraine's foreign trade policy, the authors employed statistical data analysis methods which enabled them to determine the specific features of development within Ukraine's priority economic sectors:

1) The Mining Industry: The volume of mineral product imports exceed export operations, which is partly objective, due to the absence of resources such as oil, natural gas, and coal. However, the negative balance of foreign trade in mineral products (-811,808,6.50 USD in 2019) arises due to the inefficient use of these resources and the outdated condition of fixed assets for extraction. To improve the quality of mineral products in the country, it is necessary to facilitate domestic economic entities' access to imported extraction equipment – for instance, by introducing reduced customs tariffs – which would promote the development of the mining sector and thus help reduce dependence on mineral imports in the long term.

2) The Food Industry: Grain products dominate Ukraine's export of food products, with their share increasing each year due to higher export volumes rather than price growth. Conversely, the export of finished grain-based products accounts for less than 1% of total food exports. The second largest export group is raw materials – fats and oils of animal or plant origin. In contrast, imports are primarily composed of finished food products.

3) The Consumer Goods Industry: There is a low presence of domestically-produced goods in the domestic market, with export growth driven by an increase in the share of raw textile products such as, *inter alia*, silk, cotton, wool, threads, and textile materials, alongside a decrease in the share of finished product exports including clothing and footwear. This indicates a decline in the competitiveness among light industry enterprises both in the domestic and foreign markets. A notable challenge in the foreign trade of the studied industry lies in the undervaluation of imported goods' customs value, which in turn partly affects consumer

choice and preference for final products. As regards Ukraine's food and light industries, there is a high level of smuggling and so-called "gray" imports which exert a negative impact on both the domestic market – national enterprises cannot compete with unreasonably low prices of such imports – and the foreign market; the underdevelopment of domestic production limits the country's capacity to export certain product categories.

4) **The Machine-Building Industry:** There are persistent challenges that Ukraine's machine-building sector faces, include its reliance on outdated production methods and equipment, high operational costs, and the low quality and reliability of electricity supply. Additionally, high customs tariffs on imported raw materials place further constraints on the sector's competitiveness.

5) **The Metallurgical Industry:** This sector is primarily focused on the export of ferrous metals, while the domestic market is oversaturated with imported goods. The absence of a strong domestic base for manufacturing products from ferrous metals – a segment with significant export potential – limits valueable production. An analysis of statistical data from previous periods suggests that the quality of products made from ferrous metals by Ukrainian metallurgical enterprises are not competitive internationally, primarily due to obsolete equipment and high operational risks characteristic of this industry.

6) **The Military–Industrial Complex:** The ongoing wars in Ukraine since 2014 has underscored the importance of developing this sector of the country's economy. As at 2021, the Ukrainian defense industry comprised more than 50 enterprises employing over 50,000 people, producing goods worth 7.2 billion UAH, of which more than 20% were exported.

7) **The Furniture and Woodworking Industry:** According to the State Statistics Service in Ukraine, in the first half of 2023, the country exported furniture worth 15 billion UAH (equivalent to approximately 407.8 million USD). Despite the decline in global furniture markets, Ukrainian exports decreased by only 5.6% compared to 2022. Moreover, Ukraine exported three times more furniture than it imported, with imports amounting to 161.2 million USD. Therefore, these indicators highlight the sector's resilience and export potential. Consequently, this industry warrants coordinated efforts from the state administration in terms of oversight and support for economic entities.

Thus, each sector-specific recommendation is grounded in empirical evidence presented in the preceding sections, ensuring consistency between statistical findings and Ukraine's strategic foreign trade policy formulation.

## **Conclusions**

The historical analysis of Ukraine's foreign trade policy reveals significant divergences from global development trajectories. While international trade policy has evolved through stages of mercantilism, liberalism, protectionism, and globalisation, Ukraine has largely remained anchored within protectionist practices since the inception of its trade relations. This has resulted in a structural imbalance characterised by a predominance of raw material exports, a high level of import dependence, and the absence of a robust state mechanism for trade governance within a liberalised global environment.

Russia's full-scale invasion has further destabilised Ukraine's external trade environment, amplifying risks for businesses that underpin Ukraine's export capacity. The conducted analysis of the commodity and geographical structure of import-export operations before and after the invasion revealed a sharp decline in trade volumes across most product categories, accompanied by a reorientation of trade flows towards the European Union. Despite these challenges, agricultural products have retained their leading position in Ukraine's export portfolio, while mineral products remain the dominant category of imports.

Ukraine's international trade position was assessed using the Revealed Comparative Advantage (RCA) index, which confirmed the country's competitive strengths in agricultural exports, base metals, and fuel and mining products. Notably, the agriculture sector demonstrated export growth in 2022 despite disruptions caused by wartime conditions. Based on these findings, agriculture, metallurgy, and mining have been identified as priority sectors for development. However, their advancement under conditions of armed conflict remains fraught with structural and operational risks. To address these challenges, a strategic model for foreign trade policy has been proposed, one which is structured around the coordination of stakeholder interests, legal and economic mechanisms, and sector-specific strategies for industries such as agriculture, light industry, mechanical engineering, defence, and woodworking. Furthermore, the proposed framework emphasises the integration of foreign trade policy with broader national policies.

The overarching objective is to promote the expansion of high value-added exports, optimise import structures, and enhance the international competitiveness of Ukrainian enterprises, thereby contributing to sustainable post-war economic recovery and reconstruction.

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## **The Origins of the US–Ukrainian Strategic Partnership**

### **Abstract**

This article analyses the preconditions, international and political circumstances, and the interests and objectives of the parties that led to the proclamation and formation of a strategic partnership between Ukraine and the United States in the second half of the 1990s. The author’s aim is to provide a comprehensive examination of the development of US–Ukrainian relations during this period in order to clarify their political content and nature, as well as the extent to which they conformed to the declared status of a strategic partnership.

The onset of NATO’s eastward enlargement and the formation of the Russian–Belarusian alliance in 1995–1996 created a potential threat that Ukraine could turn into a buffer state and face increased Russian pressure. Under these circumstances, Kyiv opted to pursue rapprochement with the West, primarily the United States, in order to strengthen its sovereignty. As a result, a patron-client partnership was established between the two countries’ leaders, and, in exchange for US geopolitical support in deterring Russia and facilitating Ukraine’s integration into Western structures, Ukraine agreed to function as a buffer between Europe and Russia. During the second half of the 1990s, the United States and Ukraine developed and reinforced asymmetric strategic relations and interdependence. Given the disparity in the geopolitical weight of the two countries, this relationship was unequal but mutually beneficial. It was further strengthened by the intensification of security cooperation, increased US economic assistance, and Ukraine’s participation in

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peacekeeping operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the time, the practical content and the level of US–Ukrainian relations did not correspond to the formal designation of a strategic partnership; rather, this status served as a diplomatic veneer behind which patron-client dynamics operated.

**Keywords:** US–Ukrainian Relations, Patron-Clientelism, Strategic Buffer, NATO Enlargement, Common Interests, US Economic Assistance

## **Introduction**

The inauguration of President Donald Trump in early 2025 has severely tested US–Ukrainian relations. The sharp and undisguised shift in the new US administration’s stance towards Moscow, set against the backdrop of Russia’s brutal war against Ukraine, is undermining the strategic partnership between the United States and Ukraine that was established almost thirty years previously. Furthermore, Washington’s new foreign policy approaches are challenging the established security order in Central and Eastern Europe.

Since declaring independence in 1991, Ukraine has regarded relations with the United States as one of its highest foreign policy priorities, enabling it to assert its sovereignty and counterbalance Russia’s geopolitical pressure. The large-scale military, diplomatic, and economic support provided by the United States to Ukraine since Russia’s full-scale invasion has once again demonstrated Washington’s critical importance as one of Kyiv’s principal foreign policy partners. Conversely, the Russian–Ukrainian war has highlighted Ukraine’s strategic importance for US foreign policy and global leadership.

In this context, it is both practical and theoretically useful to analyse the origins of the US–Ukrainian strategic partnership, including its preconditions, the international political context, and the goals of the parties when this new format of bilateral relations was established. It is also important to assess the extent to which the deepening of relations between Washington and Kyiv in the mid-1990s was aligned with the United States’ global geostrategic interests.

The central argument of this article is that the strategic-partnership formula proclaimed by the Clinton administration in relation to US–Ukrainian relations did not correspond their actual nature and substance, but rather served as a diplomatic *façade*. In reality, it concealed the patron-client relationship that was established between the United States and Ukraine during that period.

## **Methodological Framework of the Research**

The conceptual basis of this study is the paradigm of neorealism, primarily the theory of the balance of threats and the concept of patron-clientelism. Proponents of this approach interpret international politics and relations between states through the combination of ideas of their anarchic nature and the existence of an international system whose structural characteristics influence states' foreign policy behaviour.

On the one hand, states in the international arena strive to realise their national interests, which guide their considerations and actions. Their national interests are objective in nature and are conditioned by existing external threats, historical experience, geographical conditions, and specific societal needs. The main motives of states in foreign policy traditionally include ensuring their own security and conditions of economic development and strengthening their international influence. On the other hand, states interact with each other not in a vacuum, but within the framework of historically determined international systems. Therefore, neorealists consider states in the context of the structures they create to facilitate cooperation in achieving common objectives, such as international organisations, alliances, and partnerships. The rules of the game, enshrined in the structure of the international system, determine state behaviour according to their role and place within the international hierarchy.

Neorealism assumes that states may cooperate to achieve common goals, but they do so within alliances and partnerships solely in pursuit of their own interests and only for as long as such arrangements remain beneficial. In competing for influence, great powers seek to establish systems of hierarchical relations with weaker states, thereby forming their own spheres of influence and networks of friendly partners on this basis. In this way, great powers consolidate their structural power, while weaker states enhance security through the patronage provided by powerful partners.

Analysing US–Ukrainian relations through the prism of neorealism thus involves viewing them as interactions between states with different capabilities and statuses within the international system. The United States is a global power that seeks to maintain its influence across multiple regions of the world, while Ukraine is regarded as a state of strategic importance for ensuring stability in Central and Eastern Europe and for deterring Russia.

The narrow chronological scope of this study determined the choice of research methods. The principal methods employed are the historical

method, the systematic approach, and situational analysis. In particular, the historical method enabled a detailed reconstruction of the dynamics of US–Ukrainian relations in the second half of the 1990s, and allowed for an assessment of the degree of interrelationship of various events and processes. The application of a systemic approach is reflected in the examination of bilateral relations between Ukraine and the United States as a configuration of positions, interests, and mutual influences of the parties shaped by both internal and external factors and by spheres of cooperation. These interrelationships are structured and in dynamic interaction with each other and with the wider international context.

External impulses shaping bilateral relations between states can arise from the emergence or intensification of shared threats and risks, from international events, or from shifts in regional dynamics that significantly affect the national interests and generate new areas of cooperation. Bilateral relations are not only affected by the international environment, but can themselves contribute to shaping it in pursuit of their own objectives. Situational analysis provides an understanding of the regional context, the relationship between the interests and strategies of the United States and Ukraine at the time, and the specific events and conditions that led to the establishment of patron–clientelism relations between the two countries in the mid-1990s.

### **The Preconditions and Geopolitical Context for Establishing a Strategic Partnership Between Ukraine and the United States**

During the early years of Ukraine's independence, relations between Washington and Kyiv were complex and often contentious. Bilateral relations clearly exhibited an asymmetrical nature and reflected divergent interests. While the United States viewed Ukraine as insignificant to its interests, Ukrainian leaders regarded engagement with the US as one of their principal foreign policy objectives. The two countries also differed in their priorities for bilateral relations. Whereas Ukrainian officials paid equal attention to three areas during the negotiations – establishing partnerships, the nuclear issue, and securing economic assistance – the Americans were primarily interested in Kyiv's renunciation of nuclear weapons. At the same time, this issue became the principle source of Washington's interest in Ukraine and the key driver in the evolution of US–Ukrainian relations.

The successful resolution of the nuclear disarmament issue in 1993–1994 enabled Ukraine and the United States to intensify their political

dialogue, shift its tone from confrontational to one of partnership, establish favourable conditions for mutual commitment, and relaunch the bilateral agenda based on a broader range of issues and areas. Above all, it contributed to shifting the focus of US–Ukrainian relations from the nuclear question to the comprehensive development of political, regional, military, and economic cooperation. Notably, the 1994 bilateral *Charter of Partnership, Friendship and Cooperation* used the phrase “broad and strong partnership”, which indicated the beginning of a qualitative shift in the development of relations between the two countries.

Since the mid-1990s, the issues of political dialogue, security cooperation, Ukraine’s role within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), its integration into European structures, prospects for democratisation, and trade and economic relations began to play an increasingly important role in US policy towards Ukraine. The Clinton administration made a clear distinction between its policies towards Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and those directed at the post-Soviet space, and pursued different objectives in each. In its policy towards the CEE countries, Washington sought their integration into NATO and the EU. US support for democratisation in these states, as well as its provision of economic assistance, was significant. The accession of Eastern European countries to Western military and economic structures was intended not only to consolidate their transition to the Western sphere of influence, but also to strengthen US leadership in the transatlantic space and influence within NATO and the EU. In fact, having freed themselves from communism and chosen the path of integration with the West, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe quickly became US client states.

Instead, in the post-Soviet space, the United States limited itself to intensifying its relations with most of the CIS countries and supporting the geopolitical pluralism that emerged in the region after 1991. The existing regional fragmentation benefited the United States, as it prevented Moscow from becoming sufficiently strong to challenge American influence on the European continent. US Secretary of Defence William Perry was quite clear in this regard: “Ukraine and Uzbekistan are independent countries. If they remain independent, the Soviet Union will never re-emerge” (Shutak, 2010, p. 105).

In general terms, US policy towards post-Soviet countries during that period was similar to its policy towards Central and Eastern Europe, but with less assistance and a more limited political presence. Its content can best be described by the formula of “democracy + economic reforms”.

In the first half of the 1990s, US policy towards the newly independent states was twofold. On the one hand, the United States sought to integrate

them into the democratic community and make them friendly partners. On the other hand, given their commonalities and strong dependence on Russia, the US political establishment informally perceived those countries as part of Moscow's historical sphere of influence. Consequently, Washington placed primary emphasis on supporting Yeltsin's reform programme and the democratisation process in Russia, which was expected to act as a catalyst for democratisation across the entire region. In line with this approach, the United States initially refrained from establishing close relations with the CIS countries, and only the further curtailment of democratisation in Russia and the deterioration of US–Russian relations led to a change in policy.

In Washington's strategic considerations, Ukraine belonged to the post-Soviet space; however, given its borders with four CEE countries, certain aspects of the Ukrainian issue were also incorporated into US policy towards the Central and Eastern European region. In particular, the United States supported the establishment of close relations between Ukraine and its western neighbours, especially Poland, which became a conduit for US interests in the region. This assistance helped to "Europeanise" Ukraine and contributed to regional stability.

Between 1993 and 1996, US policy towards Ukraine lacked clarity and consistency, as Washington had not yet established strategic certainty regarding Kyiv. Therefore, the nature of bilateral relations in those years is better characterised as thematic cooperation than fully-fledged partnership (Kieninger, 2022, p. 579). The Clinton administration then sought to address two interrelated objectives – the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Ukrainian territory and the stabilisation of Ukrainian–Russian relations.

At the same time, once the issue of nuclear disarmament had been resolved, Ukraine was immediately confronted with a new security dilemma arising from NATO's eastward enlargement. The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact Organisation and the collapse of the USSR created a security vacuum in Central and Eastern Europe. Almost immediately after the fall of communism, the Visegrad countries declared their intention to integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures.

In April 1993, the presidents of Poland, the then Czech Republic, and Hungary personally approached the new US president, Bill Clinton, with a request that their countries be admitted to NATO (Tsependa, 2010, p. 154). Similar requests were made by the Baltic states, Romania, Slovakia, and Bulgaria. For the post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, NATO membership represented a guarantee of the impossibility of returning to Russia's sphere of influence in the future.

In response to their aspirations, the Clinton administration began developing the concept of NATO's eastward enlargement. In January and June 1994, during his visits to Prague and Warsaw, President Clinton noted that the question of NATO enlargement was not whether the Alliance would accept new members, but when and how it would do so. Finally, in October 1994, the US Congress designated Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary as recipients of targeted assistance to prepare for NATO membership (Stetsiuk, 2024, p. 31). Thus, in 1994, the issue of NATO's eastward enlargement had taken practical shape. In this context, the United States also sought to take Russia's position into account, not wanting to exclude Moscow from the solution of European security problems.

The US concept of NATO's eastward enlargement envisaged:

- the central role of NATO in the European new security architecture;
- the cautious and gradual enlargement of the Alliance to include CEE countries;
- the establishment of a close partnership between NATO and Russia;
- the development of constructive relations between NATO and Ukraine.

Within this framework, Ukraine was assigned the role of a strategic buffer, intended to significantly limit Russia's geostrategic capabilities in Central and Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space, thereby limiting the potential revival of its imperial ambitions. The notion of Ukraine's importance as a natural buffer between the West and Russia was first expressed by the American political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski in April 1994. Consequently, within the new security architecture in Europe that emerged after the end of the Cold War, an independent Ukraine was called upon to perform deterrence and prevention functions. The key to Ukraine's ability to fulfil these geostrategic tasks was its internal stability and pro-Western orientation.

In the early 1990s, based on the principles of a Europe without dividing lines and the indivisibility of international security, Ukrainian diplomacy advocated the formation of a new pan-European security system, premised on the convergence of NATO institutions and the Helsinki process. According to Kyiv, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) was to become the institutional platform for this initiative. Concurrently, against the background of a marked deterioration in relations with Russia, Ukrainian leaders sought to forge closer ties with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, particularly in the security

sphere. In particular, in 1992–1993, the Ukrainian and Polish presidents alternately proposed initiatives to create collective defence structures in the region.

Poland's President Lech Wałęsa proposed the creation of a NATO-Encore defence alliance, which would include former members of the Warsaw Pact Organisation (WPO) and would remain in place until NATO took a strategic decision on its enlargement. Ukraine's President Leonid Kravchuk proposed a project to create a Central European Security and Stability Zone, which would unite Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, Moldova, Hungary, Romania, the Czech Republic, Austria, Slovakia, and the Baltic states. Ukraine's military capabilities were supposed to guarantee the effectiveness of this security alliance. However, these proposals received only a lukewarm response from both Eastern European elites and the United States.

Like Russia and Belarus, Ukraine opposed NATO's eastward enlargement in the period 1993–1995, although the countries' motivations differed. Whereas Moscow and Minsk perceived the accession of Eastern European states to the Alliance as posing a potential threat to their national security, the Ukrainian leadership was primarily concerned about the prospect of becoming a buffer state positioned between NATO and Russia. In such circumstances, Ukraine's buffer status would have entailed being situated within a grey security zone, characterised by a high risk of increased Russian pressure and a return to Moscow's sphere of influence. Ukrainian diplomats repeatedly emphasised this danger. Even at that time, certain Russian politicians and intellectuals advocated the extensive use of subversive operations and the manipulation of oil and gas supplies to exert pressure on neighbouring states and secure Russian dominance in post-Soviet Eurasia (Śliwiński, 2023, p. 12). In November 1994, during a visit to Washington, President Kuchma publicly expressed doubts and reservations about the feasibility of CEE countries joining NATO.

The situation for Ukraine deteriorated even further in early 1995, following a deep rapprochement between Belarus and Russia. Between 1991–1993, the Belarusian leadership sought military neutrality and integration into Europe. However, after the election of Alexander Lukashenko as president in 1994, economic integration and a military-political alliance with Russia became the cornerstone of its foreign policy (Mahda, 2009, p. 127). In particular, in January 1995, the Russian–Belarusian agreement on a customs union was signed, and in April 1996, a treaty on the formation of the Community of Russia and Belarus was signed. These developments compelled the Ukrainian authorities to expedite their search for their place

in the new regional security architecture. Kyiv de facto faced a strategic choice: either continue opposing NATO enlargement and risk being left without Western support near the Russian-Belarusian alliance, or seek a closer partnership with NATO and the United States.

The Clinton administration, for its part, never seriously considered Ukraine's accession to NATO. The geographical limit of the Alliance's eastward expansion was considered to be the Baltic states and Poland, viewed as a historical part of the West (Sarotte, 2019, p. 27).

With regard to Ukraine, the United States sought to intensify relations between Kyiv and NATO through the *Partnership for Peace* programme. After 1994, Washington began to send signals to Kyiv that it did not intend to leave Ukraine in the aforementioned grey zone and was seeking to expand both bilateral and multilateral security cooperation. At the same time, the US was not ready to include Ukraine among potential NATO members nor provide it with bilateral security guarantees. Washington also maintained a cautious stance towards to concept of Ukraine's neutrality and non-alignment.

The Clinton administration understood the vulnerability of Ukraine's security situation and sought to help strengthen it. One of the main components of solving this problem was the deepening of bilateral US–Ukraine relations, including in the security sphere, the establishment of a special NATO–Ukraine relationship, and the stabilisation of Russian–Ukrainian relations.

In May 1995, US President Bill Clinton visited Kyiv. The discussions focused on economic reforms in Ukraine, NATO enlargement, nuclear disarmament, Russian–Ukrainian relations, and the closure of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. In light of subsequent changes in Ukraine's position on the NATO membership of neighbouring states and the expansion of US–Ukrainian military cooperation, the author believes that an informal agreement on a patron-client partnership was concluded at the level of the two leaders. Both sides were interested in preventing Ukraine from following the Belarusian path into Russia's sphere of influence. As part of this understanding, Ukraine agreed to play a dubious role as a buffer between Europe and Russia in exchange for US geopolitical patronage in containing Russia's imperial ambitions and on the path to integration into Western structures, increased economic assistance for reforms and an expanded bilateral partnership.

Three weeks later, on 1 June 1995, President Kuchma visited NATO's headquarters in Brussels, where he expressed Kyiv's desire to elevate relations with the Alliance to a new level. The US response came in the form of a statement from the State Department indicating its readiness to

participate in the development of a special mechanism for NATO–Ukraine relations. On 14 September 1995, a joint NATO–Ukraine statement was approved, announcing the beginning of “broadened and deepened” relations between the parties outside the North Atlantic Cooperation Council and the *Partnership for Peace* programme (Aleksiievets, Aleksiievets, 2020, p. 129). At the same time, the Ukrainian side submitted working proposals for an agreement on a special partnership between Ukraine and the Alliance.

Finally, at the end of 1995, the Ukrainian government suddenly began to shift its previously negative stance on NATO enlargement. In December 1995, in their public statements, President Leonid Kuchma and Prime Minister Yevhen Marchuk acknowledged the aspirations of the Visegrad countries to join NATO. In particular, Kuchma declared that Poland’s accession to the Alliance would not pose a threat to Ukraine’s security, but would contribute to the security and stability of Central and Eastern Europe (Vitriak, 2020, p. 6). Ukraine thus effectively accepted NATO enlargement. From that moment on, Ukrainian diplomats increasingly downplayed the risk of Ukraine becoming a buffer state.

The second indicator of patron-clientelism was Ukraine’s position on the military and political crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Following the collapse of the USSR and the socialist bloc, the United States became the sole global hegemon with strategic interests and objectives worldwide. The strategic goal of the Clinton administration’s foreign policy was to shape the international order in accordance with US interests.

Under these new geopolitical realities, the successful implementation of hegemonic status required Washington to gain international legitimacy for global dominance by expanding its group of supporters and demonstrating its capacity to maintain international peace. The first application of this strategy was the United States’ participation in the UN peacekeeping operation in Somalia, the active phase of which (1993) ended in failure.

Meanwhile, the Bosnian crisis was unfolding in the Balkans. Initially, the United States refrained from military intervention and adopted a passive stance, as it did not see the conflict as a threat to its interests in Europe. However, in mid-1994, Washington decided to become actively involved, viewing the Bosnian crisis as an opportunity to restore its credibility following the failure of the Somali operation.

Bill Clinton invested considerable political capital in resolving the conflict in the Balkans and in the conclusion of the Dayton Framework Agreement (21 November 1995), which established Bosnia and Herzegovina as a multinational federation under the supervision of

peacekeeping forces. The United States' involvement in the negotiation process, combined with its military leverage, was a decisive factor in its successful conclusion.

In December 1995, during a conference in London on the implementation of the Dayton Accords, Ukraine expressed its intention to participate in a NATO-led peacekeeping operation aimed at stabilising the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Zavhorodnia, Naumov, 2020, p. 79). As a result, Ukraine sent 400 peacekeepers to Bosnia in early 1996 as part of the Multinational Stabilisation Force (IFOR).

## **The Dynamics of the US–Ukrainian Strategic Partnership and the Interests of the Parties**

In the second half of the 1990s, US policy towards Ukraine was guided by two conceptual approaches: “ideological” and “pragmatic”. According to the former, Ukraine’s development as a democratic state with a market economy would foster closer ties with the United States and enhance stability in Central and Eastern Europe. According to US experts, Ukraine played a key role in the future of democratisation processes in the post-Soviet space, which were by that time already noticeably stalled (Dudko, 2020, p. 144). The building of strong democratic institutions and an efficient market economy in Ukraine could serve as a model for other countries in the region, primarily as an impetus for democratisation in Russia. To achieve this so-called “demonstration effect”, the United States was expected to support economic and political reforms in Ukraine.

By the end of President Clinton’s second term, the ideological approach began to dominate US policy. The development of bilateral relations became increasingly linked to internal factors, including Kyiv’s progress in economic reforms, human rights protection, democratisation, and the fight against corruption.

The pragmatic approach to partnership with Kyiv began to emerge in 1996, largely as a response to the deterioration of US–Russian relations. The Clinton administration’s policy towards Russia evolved from an initial desire to build a strategic partnership and offer full support to President Yeltsin to a stance of strategic patience, ultimately culminating in a return to containment.

After the ousting of reformers from power in Moscow between 1993 and 1995, the so-called “friendly partnership” between Washington and Moscow gave way to distancing and disillusionment. In the second half of the 1990s, against the backdrop of growing disagreements between the United States and Russia in international politics (NATO enlargement,

Russian-Iranian nuclear cooperation, and Kosovo), Washington adopted a policy of soft deterrence. Moscow's active involvement in conflicts in the post-Soviet space only reinforced the Clinton administration's view that Russia's policies were becoming increasingly rigid and destabilising.

Unwilling to become actively involved in regional affairs, Washington identified three key countries in the post-Soviet space as pivotal in containing the spread of Russian influence: Ukraine (the western periphery of the CIS); Azerbaijan (the Caucasus); and Kazakhstan (Central Asia). As US policy in the region became less Russia-centric, Moscow expressed increasing dissatisfaction with American encroachment on its sphere of influence. Within this context, Ukraine functioned as a critical element in the Russian deterrence system. A strong and independent Ukraine constrained Russian influence across other regions, including the post-Soviet space, the Black Sea region, and Central and Eastern Europe, where the United States was consolidating its presence. Thus, US policy towards Ukraine was largely shaped by its policy towards Moscow. In the early 1990s, it was almost entirely focused on the nuclear weapons issue, which was directly linked to Russia. However, even after this issue was resolved, US policy towards Kyiv was based on the US–Russia–Ukraine triangle rather than on a strictly bilateral basis. At the same time, the significance of Ukraine for US foreign policy during this period should not be overstated. Following the completion of nuclear disarmament, Ukraine was not perceived by Washington as a major regional actor or a middleweight state. Rather, it was seen as a young independent country with a weak economy and fragile political institutions, seeking to develop and maintain fully-fledged bilateral relations.

The period 1994–1996 was considered in Washington as the onset of Ukraine's economic reforms. Faced with a deep economic crisis, President Kuchma proposed an ambitious programme of market reforms that included accelerating privatisation, liberalising prices and tariffs, stimulating private enterprise, and the introduction of a national currency (the hryvnia). With the support of the United States, the IMF and the World Bank provided Ukraine with more than 5 billion USD to support the programme.

The US–Ukraine bilateral agenda between 1995–2000 was extensive, covering political dialogue, regional security, military cooperation, support for reform, energy, support for democracy, and trade and economic issues. The period of the establishment of the US–Ukrainian strategic partnership was marked by a significant increase in the intensity of political dialogue. During this period, several key US officials visited Kyiv, including President Clinton (in 1995 and 2000), Vice-President Al

Gore (1998), Secretaries of State Warren Christopher (1996) and Madeline Albright (1998, 2000), Secretaries of Defence William Perry (four visits in 1995–1996) and William Cohen (1997, 1999), Secretary of Energy Bill Richardson (2000), and Special Advisers of the Secretary of State for CIS Assistance Richard Morningstar (1997) and Stephen Sestanovich (1999), among others.

Ukrainian officials demonstrated even greater diplomatic activity towards the United States. President Leonid Kuchma visited the US three times (1996, 1997, 1999), while Prime Ministers Yevhen Marchuk (1995), Valeriy Pustovoitenko (three visits between 1998–1999), Viktor Yushchenko (2000) also made official trips. Other senior officials included Minister for Foreign Affairs Gennadiy Udovenko (three visits), Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council Vladimir Gorbulin (1996), and Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada Oleksandr Moroz (1995). Between 1994 and 2000, President Kuchma held fifteen meetings with US President Clinton and Vice President Gore (Shcherbak, 2005).

A symbol of the warming of US–Ukrainian relations during this period was President Clinton’s state visit to Kyiv on 11–12 May 1995. During the visit, the Ukrainian and US presidents discussed two main topics: situation in Ukraine and the prospects for NATO’s eastward expansion, as well as Ukraine’s role in the European security architecture. Clinton assured his counterpart that NATO enlargement was aimed at strengthening stability in Europe and was not directed against any state. He also called for deepening cooperation between Ukraine and NATO through multilateral programmes in order to alleviate Kyiv’s concerns. The presidents identified security and economic cooperation as key areas of bilateral cooperation. During the meeting, the idea of creating a joint commission to develop partnerships was also raised for the first time.

The visit resulted in a joint statement by the presidents, which focused mainly on economic issues. The United States expressed support for President Kuchma’s economic reforms, Ukraine’s cooperation with the IMF, and its desire to join the WTO. It also reaffirmed its commitment to provide Kyiv with 250 million USD in aid by the end of 1995 to cover critical imports. Key areas for bilateral economic cooperation included energy, aerospace, agriculture, telecommunications, and medicine (Joint Statement by President of Ukraine Leonid Kuchma and President of the United States William J. Clinton, 1995). It was also announced during the visit that Ukraine would be recognised as a country with a transition economy.

In a speech at Taras Shevchenko Kyiv National University, President Clinton stressed that “Ukraine’s future is extremely important to

America. A prosperous, secure, and stable Ukraine can become a centre of democracy and stability in Central Europe and an important political and economic partner for the United States” (Garnett, 1996, p. 118).

The intensification of US–Ukrainian political dialogue led to the institutionalisation of bilateral relations. In March 1994, two countries agreed to establish a Joint Commission on Trade and Investment Promotion. Its first meeting was held in Washington in November 1994, and the second in Kyiv in July 1995. This Commission became the principal instrument of bilateral cooperation in the trade and economic sphere. In October 1995, the US–Ukraine Business Council (USUBC) was established to protect the interests of American companies in Ukraine. However, the Kuchma administration sought to do more in the US direction, seeking to institutionalise bilateral relations at the presidential or governmental level.

The political rapprochement between the two countries continued with the visit of Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma to the United States between 20–22 February 1996. The main objectives of the visit were political; 1) to convince Washington of the Ukrainian government’s commitment to democracy and market reforms; and 2) to explore prospects for elevating bilateral relations to a new level. During the talks, Kuchma proposed the establishment of an intergovernmental commission to coordinate the key areas and projects of bilateral cooperation. The Ukrainian delegation cited the example of the successful US–Russian Commission on Economic and Technological Cooperation (the Gore–Chernomyrdin Commission), which was established in September 1993.

In response to Kyiv’s proposal, the Clinton administration presented its vision of an intergovernmental commission in May 1996, which would consist of four sectoral committees on – namely, foreign policy, security, stable economic cooperation, and trade and investment. Vice President Al Gore personally agreed to chair the US side of the commission.

On 19 September 1996, during the visit of NSDC Secretary Horbulin to the United States, a joint statement on the establishment of the US–Ukraine binational commission (the Kuchma-Gore Commission). For the first time in the history of bilateral political dialogue, the statement used the term *strategic partnership* to describe relations between the two countries. According to the document, the purpose of the Commission was to realise the potential of the bilateral relationship. Its high-level meetings were to be held annually, alternating between the two countries. Sectoral committees were to meet periodically to consider practical issues and projects and to report back to the co-chairs of the Commission.

In October 1996, during a meeting in Washington, D.C., Ukrainian Foreign Minister Hennadiy Udoenko and U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher described the countries' relations as a strategic partnership. Ukrainian Ambassador Yuriy Shcherbak defined this concept as follows: "The strategic partnership of the parties implies closeness and, in some cases, identity of goals and assessments of the international situation, and at the same time does not exclude the possibility of different views and disagreements, which are resolved and established in the course of active dialogue" (Bilovus, Homotiuk, 2021, p. 256).

The term *strategic partnership* was later formalised in a joint statement by the US and Ukrainian foreign ministers of 6 March 1998, in joint statements issued after three meetings of the US–Ukraine Binational Commission, and in a joint statement by the presidents of Ukraine and the United States of 5 June 2000.

The proclamation of a US–Ukrainian strategic partnership in 1996 resulted from several factors. First, since 1994, relations between two countries had shown a positive dynamic. Between 1994 and 1998, Ukraine was consistently among the top five recipients of US assistance. As Ukrainian Ambassador to the United States Yuriy Shcherbak noted, "after the difficult relations in the first years of independence, the period 1995–1998 can be called the first honeymoon in relations between the countries" (Shcherbak, 2005).

Second, the *strategic partnership* formula was lobbied for by the Ukrainian side. At the same time, Kyiv's place in the hierarchy of US foreign policy priorities, as well as the content of bilateral relations, clearly did not correspond to that of a strategic partnership. Nevertheless, the Clinton administration employed this term to build new formats of interaction and to signal a shift away from the rigid alliances of the Cold War.

The Clinton administration declared strategic relations with almost a dozen countries, including three post-Soviet states – Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan. In Washington, this formula was perceived largely as a diplomatic fiction: it did not impose any political obligations and, at the same time, served as a courteous gesture towards Ukraine, while enabling cooperation with Kyiv on US terms. Under these circumstances, the proclamation of a strategic partnership between the two countries signalled the consolidation of Ukraine's status as a US client state.

Third, in the second half of the 1990s, it became clear that US attempts to transform Russia into a market democracy had failed, and US–Russian relations were steadily deteriorating. Against the backdrop of growing authoritarian tendencies in Russia and mounting contradictions with it, the United States sought to weaken Moscow's influence in the post-Soviet

space. One of the key elements of this strategy was to increase US political engagement in the region.

The declaration of a strategic partnership with Ukraine was the first step. In 1997, the Clinton administration designated Kazakhstan as a strategic partner of the United States in Central Asia, and in 1998 it launched a strategic energy partnership with Azerbaijan. In addition, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, US–Georgian relations acquired a strategic dimension in the context of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline project. In effect, for Washington, its friendship with Ukraine formed part of a broader strategy to maintain global dominance. Ukraine was the first post-Soviet country with which the US established client relations, demonstrating that Washington was abandoning the perception of the CIS as a zone of Russia’s privileged interests.

Ultimately, the granting of strategic partner status to Ukraine meant that, after several years of uncertainty, Clinton’s foreign policy team had formed its own vision of US–Ukrainian relations. This could be characterised as a strategic friendship – a strong partnership with elements of geopolitical followership. In turn, the strategic partnership with the United States enabled Ukraine to mitigate Russian pressure and manoeuvre to secure its own interests while maintaining a significant degree of foreign policy independence. The Ukrainian side sought to develop a strong and mutually beneficial partnership with the United States in many areas, but it did not wish to follow Washington’s policy completely, as this risked confrontation with Russia, on which it was critically dependent economically, as well as restrictions on its relations with China, India, Iran, and the Middle East, which were seen as promising trade partners. Thus, even at the stage when the strategic partnership between the United States and Ukraine was proclaimed, there was a partial divergence in the parties’ visions of the trajectory of bilateral relations. Nevertheless, these differences in approaches to building relations did not contain critical contradictions and, given the liberal methods applied by the Clinton administration in asserting American hegemony, did not impede the development of dialogue between the two countries in the second half of the 1990s.

One of the main indicators of the strengthening of political friendship between Kyiv and Washington during this period was the intensification of bilateral security cooperation, with a particular focus on peacekeeping operations and joint exercises. Between 23–27 May 1995, the first of the US–Ukrainian military exercises, *Peace Shield-95*, took place under the PfP programme, involving 400 Ukrainian and 300 US military personnel (Nedzelskyi, 2011, p. 139). The opening of the exercise at the Yavoriv

training area in the Lviv region was attended by US Secretary of Defence William Perry. The following year, he again visited these exercises, which by then had already brought together 1,300 soldiers from both countries.

In August 1997, the US–Ukrainian naval exercise *Sea Breeze* was launched in the Black Sea region. Subsequently, both *Peace Shield* and *Sea Breeze* became annual, multinational exercises conducted according to the same protocol. The United States and Ukraine traditionally co-organised the exercises, with Ukraine providing the military infrastructure and the United States paying a significant portion of the cost of the exercises. A priority recipient of US support was the Yavoriv training area, which received NATO accreditation as an International Peacekeeping and Security Centre in 1999.

The first meeting of the US–Ukraine Binational Commission was held in Washington, D.C., on 16 May 1997 and resulted in a joint statement on security and economic issues. In the security sphere, the parties discussed Ukraine's participation in the NATO-led IFOR/SFOR peacekeeping mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina (400 troops), the first *Sea Breeze* naval exercises, the formation of a Ukrainian–Polish battalion, the NATO–Russia Founding Act, and the NATO–Ukraine Charter on a Distinctive Partnership (First Plenary Session of the US–Ukraine Binational Commission, 1997).

In 1998, Ukraine expressed its intention to join the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), which would grant it the opportunity to participate in satellite launch programmes. To meet the accession requirements, Ukraine was ready to halt the sale of missiles with a range of 300–500 km and related technologies to non-MTCR countries, as well as to abandon the development of new missile systems. However, the Ukrainian government was unwilling to relinquish its SCUD missiles, citing the potential threat from Russia and the need to maintain a deterrent.

On economic issues, the Commission discussed Ukraine's cooperation with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), agricultural and energy sector reforms, the participation of US companies in the privatisation of energy and industrial enterprises, and the potential for joint oil and gas exploration and production.

On 6 March 1998, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright visited Ukraine. In Kyiv, she met with President Kuchma and Foreign Minister Udovenko. The main purpose of her visit was to disrupt an Iranian–Ukrainian nuclear project. Kyiv intended to participate in the construction of a nuclear power plant in the Iranian city of Bushehr as part of a Russian–Ukrainian–Iranian project, and Ukrainian companies were to supply turbines and other equipment for the project. Given the

hostile relations between the United States and Iran, Washington sought to prevent the project from proceeding.

During the negotiations, Secretary of State Albright compelled the Ukrainian authorities to withdraw from participation in the construction of nuclear power plants in Iran. As a result, the Turboatom company alone lost contracts valued at 500 million USD. As compensation, the United States proposed the *Kharkiv Initiative*, a technological cooperation project between enterprises in the Kharkiv region that manufactured industrial equipment, including turbines, and US companies. Ultimately, the cooperation project was never implemented, and the total value of contracts amounted to only 5 million USD (Aslund, 2015, p. 79). Conversely, the United States facilitated Ukraine's accession to the MTCR, which enabled Ukrainian companies to participate in the lucrative *Sea Launch* project.

The second meeting of US–Ukraine binational commission was held in Kyiv on 22–23 July 1998. The joint statement issued after the meeting covered the two areas of security and economy. Concerning security, the parties discussed the establishment of an International Peacekeeping and Security Centre in Yavoriv and compliance with the MTCR. Al Gore expressed support for the Ukrainian initiative to establish the regional organisation GUAM as a counterbalance to Russian influence in the Black Sea region. The economic section included issues related to stalled reforms in Ukraine, the privatisation of energy production companies, the creation of a favourable investment environment, and bilateral trade.

In late 1998, US–Ukrainian relations began to cool. By that point in time, President Kuchma had failed to meet the West's expectations of him as an effective reformer, and Ukraine itself was experiencing a prolonged economic crisis and consistently seeking aid from international financial institutions. The Ukrainian government's inability to implement the necessary reforms led to skepticism about Ukraine's ability to become a reliable partner for the United States. The positive nature of the bilateral relationship was maintained largely through inertia. The State Department received clear signals from both the embassy in Kyiv and American companies that the Ukrainian government was failing to meet its commitments and that corruption remained rampant. In the second half of the 1990s and early 2000s, the Clinton administration perceived Ukraine as an economically weak, politically unstable, and corrupt country. Furthermore, periodic scandals involving pressure on the media, civic activists, and electoral manipulation during the 1998–1999 campaigns indicated that the democratic transition was stalling.

While between 1994–1997 Ukraine was seen in the United States as a promising partner temporarily facing difficulties and in need of support to accelerate post-communist transformations, in the late 1990s, US mid-level officials increasingly accused the Ukrainian authorities of presidential authoritarianism, corruption, and pressure on the media. Between 1997–2000, negative coverage in the US press grew, criticising the Ukrainian government for its inability to carry out economic reforms, restore order in the country, and overcome corruption (Dubovyk, 2006). US experts and media attributed most of these problems directly to the personality and policies of President Kuchma.

Following the second meeting of the US–Ukraine Binational Commission, a persistent pattern of so-called “vicious circle movement” emerged in bilateral relations: Kyiv publicly committed to reforms and measures in specific areas, but subsequently refrained from implementing them. This situation forced US representatives to revisit the same issues repeatedly, leading to cyclical discussions, all of which hindered progress from being made in the relationship. Observing the Ukrainian side’s delays and/or failures in fulfilling previous commitments, the United States refrained from initiating large-scale cooperation projects. Consequently, although the political dialogue between the countries remained formally intense, the agenda stagnated, and many issues were not addressed substantively.

US experts and diplomats were fully aware of the specifics of internal political processes and the mentality of Ukraine’s ruling elite during the transformation period of the 1990s. Despite the collapse of communism, the backbone of the Ukrainian political elite was made up of former party functionaries and so-called “red directors” who had superficially presented themselves as left-wing and patriotic, but retained a Soviet managerial outlook. As a result, behind the *façade* of constitutional institutions modelled on Western systems, authoritarian relations persisted.

It should be noted that the Americans had a different assessment of the reform capacities of Presidents Kravchuk and Kuchma at the beginning of their administrations. Regarding independent Ukraine’s first president, there was a clear scepticism from the outset – no significant changes were expected from him, and, as A. Åslund once noted, President Kravchuk did not have a clear economic reform programme and likely did not pursue one, preferring to engage in political manoeuvring instead (Åslund, 2015, p. 23). In contrast, the United States initially had high expectations of Leonid Kuchma in terms of domestic reforms. By the late 1990s, however, it had become clear that the Ukrainian ruling elite was unable to develop an effective programme of state development and transition to a market

economy that would lift the country out of a deep socio-economic crisis, and was primarily using power for personal enrichment, causing Washington considerable disappointment as a result. Indeed, in the United States, President Leonid Kuchma and his entourage were associated with rising levels of corruption in Ukraine.

In the late 1990s, President Kuchma's international and domestic policies no longer aligned with the United States' interests. His pursuit of a personalist regime, combined with his multi-vector foreign policy, caused irritation in Washington, which was occasionally exacerbated by Kyiv's manifestations of independence on sensitive international issues, including a cool response to the bombing of Yugoslavia, rapprochement with Moscow, cooperation with Iran, and cautious engagement with NATO.

Conversely, the level of relations between Ukraine and the United States at that time should not be overestimated. Despite the grand diplomatic statements, the proclaimed strategic partnership between the two countries was largely nominal. Ukraine occupied a relatively low position – third or fourth – in the hierarchy of US international priorities. US–Ukrainian relations were overshadowed by, and dependent upon, the state of US–Russian relations, which were a much higher priority for Washington. For example, during his eight years in office, Bill Clinton had eighteen meetings with Russia's President Yeltsin, and only seven meetings with Ukrainian presidents – two with President Kravchuk, and five with President Kuchma (Kubicek, 2003, p. 8).

Ukraine's leadership were also under no illusions about its strategic partnership with the United States and used this status for pragmatic purposes. In terms of foreign policy, President Kuchma pursued a multi-vector approach, successfully navigating the balance between Europe and Russia. For Kyiv, its partnership with the US created a balancing, and where necessary, deterrent effect in its complex relations with Russia. In other words, the status of being a strategic partner of the United States provided Kyiv with a form of geopolitical support, strengthening its position in dialogue with both Moscow and Brussels. However, Ukraine sought to receive enhanced US support without fulfilling its obligations as a client.

The strategic interests of the United States and Ukraine in the European region largely coincided. Both countries were interested in the gradual and cautious NATO eastward enlargement, stability in Central and Eastern Europe, Ukraine's integration into European structures, the containment of reintegration processes in the post-Soviet space and the establishment of transport corridors for Caspian oil bypassing Russia.

At the same time, the approaches of Kyiv and Washington to the goals of the strategic partnership were fundamentally different. Ukraine viewed

friendship with the United States as an important factor in its efforts to integrate into European economic and political structures. For the US, however, Ukraine was merely one element in a broader geopolitical game with Russia.

On 5 June 2000, US President Bill Clinton visited Ukraine for the second time during his term in office. The visit formed part of his farewell tour and was intended to demonstrate that Kyiv remained an important partner for Washington. US leader met with President Kuchma and delivered a speech on Saint Michael's Square. The two presidents discussed the closure of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant (a week before Clinton's visit, a government commission set the final closure date as 15 December 2000), cooperation in the space industry, and economic reforms in Ukraine.

In their joint statement of 5 June 2000, the presidents reaffirmed the strategic partnership between their countries. The statement contained a commitment by the United States to cooperate with Ukraine and the IAEA in closing the Chernobyl nuclear power plant and to allocate an additional 78 million USD for the Shelter Fund and 2 million USD to improve nuclear power plant safety. The Clinton administration also announced the allocation of 25 million USD for small business development programs in Ukraine.

During the visit, it was agreed to lift quotas on the launch of US satellites by Ukrainian rocket carriers and on the export of Ukrainian ferroalloys. President Clinton also advised President Kuchma not to dismiss the pro-Western Prime Minister Yushchenko. Speaking in Saint Michael's Square in the evening, Clinton urged Ukrainians to actively develop democracy, civil society, and a free press, and to fight corruption, which he identified as the main enemy of freedom. The US leader noted:

“Now more than ever, America needs a strong, democratic Ukraine as a partner. Communism has been defeated in Ukraine, but democracy has not yet won through. America will stand with you in your fight for a prosperous future” (Clinton, 2000).

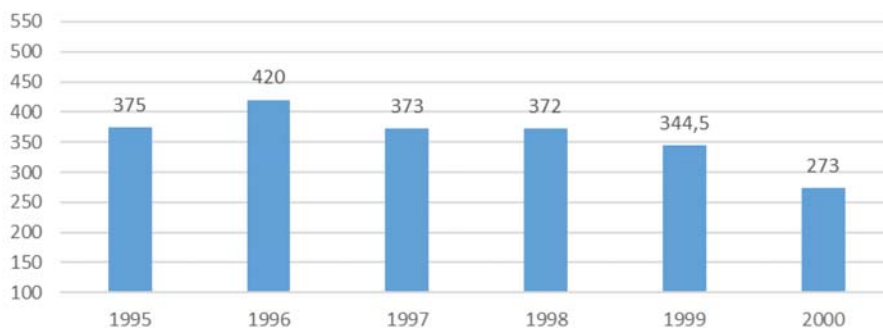
## **US Economic Assistance to Ukraine**

During this period, financial assistance for economic and political reforms became the main instrument of US policy towards Ukraine. In the second half of the 1990s, the Republican majority in Congress consistently pursued a policy of reducing foreign aid, deeming it ineffective and too costly. Nevertheless, despite the overall decline in US aid to post-Soviet countries, Ukraine remained a regional priority.

According to State Department reports, between 1992 and 2000, Ukraine received 2.6 billion USD in aid from the United States. This accounted for 14.6% of the total aid provided to post-Soviet countries, placing Ukraine second only to Russia. Over 80% of US economic and technical assistance to Ukraine originated from two programmes – 1.66 billion USD under the *1992 Freedom of Russia and Emerging Eurasian Democracies and Open Markets Act* (Freedom Support Act) and 500 million USD under the *Cooperative Threat Reduction Program* (the Nunn-Lugar programme) (Pifer, 2017). The remainder of the funds was provided under the programmes of the US Departments of Defence, Energy, Agriculture and the Peace Corps.

Between 1992 and 1994, Ukraine received 392 million USD in aid from the US government, much of which was directed towards nuclear disarmament (Dine, 1995, p. 28). The dynamics of US aid in the second half of the 1990s clearly reflect the evolution and trends in bilateral relations during that period.

The largest increase in US aid coincides with the proclamation of the strategic partnership between the two countries. Between 1995 and 1998, Ukraine ranked fourth among recipients of US aid, after Israel, Egypt, and Russia. The gradual reduction of financial support for Kyiv by the Clinton administration in the late 1990s was due to the cooling of bilateral relations, stagnation of reforms, and ongoing problems with corruption and democracy. Government agencies were the primary recipients of US aid, accounting for up to 85% of the total (Boys, 2023 p. 158). Up to half of the funds provided were allocated to the work of American experts advising government agencies on economic reforms through USAID projects.



**Figure 1. Dynamics of US Aid to Ukraine From 1995 to 2000, in Millions USD**  
Source: Boys, 2023; Trepanier, 2017.

The Clinton administration adopted a strategy of supporting a wide range of reforms in Ukraine, seeking to promote changes in many areas of society. US assistance projects and programmes have covered nuclear safety, law enforcement, energy, agriculture, education, health, human rights, public administration, election support, political party development, and parliamentary reform.

In the political sphere, USAID's priorities in Ukraine included supporting the development of NGOs and political parties, human rights organisations, and independent media, as well as increasing the transparency of political processes. Priority was given to projects aimed at strengthening civic engagement, promoting freedom of expression, ensuring transparency in elections, and fostering understanding about the US political system and culture.

In 1994, USAID launched its ambitious *Parliamentary Assistance Programme*, a modified version of which – namely, the *RADA: Next Generation Programme* – is still in place at the time of writing. The programme aimed to strengthen the legislative and analytical capacity of the Verkhovna Rada (the unicameral parliament of Ukraine) and optimise internal parliamentary procedures and functions, including the work of committees. In addition, some projects implemented between 1994 and 1998 contributed to the establishment and activities of the Association of Ukrainian Cities.

The costliest component of this area was training and internship programmes for young people. Between 1992 and 2000, the US government funded the education of approximately 13,000 Ukrainians in American universities and colleges.

## Conclusions

The US–Ukrainian strategic partnership is crucial for ensuring security and stability in Central and Eastern Europe. Its origins lie in the mid-1990s and are closely linked to NATO's eastward expansion, which began during that period. When shaping the new security architecture in Europe after the end of the Cold War, the Clinton administration placed NATO at its core. Ukraine was assigned a somewhat ambiguous role in this security structure, serving as a buffer between the enlarged Alliance and Russia.

By the mid-1990s, Ukraine, as a result of the renunciation of nuclear weapons and a deep economic crisis, had become a weak and unstable country that required external support to integrate into Europe and strengthen its sovereignty against the backdrop of pressure from Russia.

Moreover, the process of cooling US–Russian relations began during this period. These three processes – NATO enlargement, the weakening of Ukraine’s geopolitical subjectivity, and growing contradictions between the US and Russia – became the main prerequisites for the proclamation of the US–Ukrainian strategic partnership. The basis for the political rapprochement between Ukraine and the United States lay in their shared strategic interests in the security sphere, primarily the need to curb Russia’s geopolitical ambitions.

At the same time, the dynamics of US–Ukrainian relations in the second half of the 1990s demonstrate that their actual level and substance did not correspond to the declared format of a strategic partnership based on equal interaction. Given the disparity in military and economic potentials, as well as the differing importance of the countries in relation to one other, the United States and Ukraine developed asymmetric strategic relations and a form of interdependence that can be described as patron-clientelism. These relations were reinforced by the intensification of bilateral security cooperation, increased US economic assistance to Ukraine, and Kyiv’s support for key US foreign policy initiatives.

Both sides were guided mainly by the logic of geopolitics and used mutual cooperation to achieve their broader foreign policy objectives. The United States viewed an independent Ukraine as an important element in fostering geopolitical pluralism in the post-Soviet space, deterring Russia in the region, and stabilising the Central and Eastern European region. The Ukrainian authorities, in turn, viewed their strategic partnership with the United States as a means of integrating into European economic and political structures, as well as a way of balancing their strained relations with Russia. In this context, the status of the US–Ukrainian strategic partnership functioned as a diplomatic formula that concealed an unequal yet mutually beneficial relationship.

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## **The UN–NATO Partnership in Peacekeeping Missions: Joint Reform Prospects for Global Security**

### **Abstract**

One of the key mechanisms for maintaining international peace and security is the UN–NATO partnership in peacekeeping missions. The aim of this study is to assess the partnership between the UN and NATO in peacekeeping missions and to provide recommendations on the necessary reform of approaches to global security. The research methodology includes systemic, graphical, content analysis, quantitative, and comparative analyses. The findings, based on nine examined operations, show that the operational effectiveness of peacekeeping missions increases as a result of the UN–NATO partnership. The UN’s diplomatic and humanitarian expertise is complemented by NATO’s military capabilities, which enhances the overall effectiveness of joint operations. Additionally, NATO-supported training of UN peacekeepers and the exchange of intelligence increase the

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operational potential of missions. However, strategic divergences between the two institutions complicate the joint management process, and the absence of established mechanisms for information exchange remains one of the key challenges. The results of the study may be utilised in the formulation of political strategies, the enhancement of peacekeeping-mission mechanisms, and the development of effective models for inter-institutional cooperation between the UN and NATO. Prospects for future research include the study of cooperation between the UN and NATO, with particular attention paid to the use of new technologies to improve the effectiveness of peacekeeping missions, as well as clarifying the division of responsibilities between global partners.

**Keywords:** International Cooperation, Global Security, NATO, Threats, Security Institutions, Institutional Mechanisms

## Introduction

The modern global security system faces complex challenges that require extraordinary solutions and enhanced cooperation between countries, international organisations, and global institutions. This is due to the multi-dimensional nature of contemporary threats, the rise in interstate and interethnic conflicts, and the emergence of military confrontations with religious dimensions. The implementation of unilateral conflict-resolution measures by international institutions is a rather difficult task, given the legal, organisational, and financial components of these processes. Understanding the complexity of the issues of modern peacekeeping missions, the partnership between the United Nations (UN) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) represents a key mechanism for supporting international peace and security. At the same time, the dynamic nature of global threats, manifestations of hybrid warfare, and the increasing complexity of conflict zones necessitate a comprehensive review and potential modernisation of this partnership.

The relevance of studying UN–NATO cooperation in peacekeeping missions is enhanced by several factors:

- the evolving dynamics of the course and nature of modern conflicts, which necessitate more comprehensive and coordinated approaches to peacekeeping operations;
- the increasing intersection of regional and global security concerns, which requires increased interaction between international organisations;

- the need to form adequate responses to contemporary security challenges, associated with increasing the effectiveness of existing peacekeeping mechanisms.

The current discourse provides a comprehensive approach to the analysis of the UN–NATO partnership in peacekeeping missions, highlighting the need for structural reforms to increase the effectiveness of cooperation. Most existing studies tend to focus on the analysis of individual missions or operational aspects. Therefore, it is necessary to integrate both historical and contemporary contexts, analysing the partnership in light of global challenges such as hybrid wars and asymmetric threats.

The aim of the study is to assess the state of the UN–NATO partnership in peacekeeping missions and to develop recommendations for further strengthening global security. The aim entails the fulfilment of the following research objectives:

- analyse the current state of the UN–NATO partnership;
- identify problems and obstacles to institutional cooperation;
- and develop recommendations for modernising UN–NATO interaction.

## Literature Review

The global increase in conflicts is accompanied by increasing complexity resulting from the broader involvement of actors, the emergence of contentious factors, and escalating geopolitical tensions. The intensity of armed conflicts and the resulting human losses continue to rise. For example, the number of people killed in violent events increased by 37% compared to the previous year between 1 July 2023 and 30 June 2024, reaching almost 200,000 worldwide (IISS, 2024).

Statements issued by international organisations regarding the UN–NATO partnership in peacekeeping operations have attracted considerable scholarly attention, particularly in recent years as global security challenges have grown significantly more complex. In December 2023, NATO issued a statement emphasising its close cooperation with the United Nations in the field of peacekeeping. The document stressed that NATO supports a wide range of UN peacekeeping initiatives and intends to continue this collaboration in order to reinforce a rules-based international order, as reflected in the publication *UN Peacekeeping* from 2023.

In line with the UN initiative to develop the *New Agenda for Peace*, NATO's submission to the UN secretariat for the *Agenda* emphasises its own role as a key actor within the global multilateral architecture and

a defender of the international order, the principles of the UN Charter, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. The document outlines key areas that NATO believes should be included in the *New Agenda for Peace*, including cooperation between the UN and regional organisations, crisis prevention, counter-terrorism, support for peacekeeping, security cooperation, and arms control (NATO, 2023).

NATO and the UN have agreed to strengthen their practical cooperation in building UN peacekeeping capacity. The primary objective is to increase the operational effectiveness and security of UN peacekeepers, as well as to implement the Secretary-General's *Initiative on Action for Peacekeeping*. NATO will focus on training UN peacekeeping personnel and providing experts to join UN teams. The Alliance's capabilities in the areas of military assessment processes, countering improvised explosive devices, and communications will contribute to the development of UN peacekeeping training programmes (NATO, 2020).

According to a strategy that was formally adopted in 2022 at the NATO summit in Madrid, the prevention of and response to security crises remain a key task. NATO's strategy restored the Alliance's emphasis on collective defence as its core mission. NATO also announced that it would strengthen cooperation with the UN, the European Union, and other partners. In turn, partnership with NATO enabled the UN to gain practical experience in specific areas, such as combating asymmetric threats (Bara, Hultman, 2020; PISM, 2022).

The analysis reveals that although the UN and NATO have made significant contributions to conflict resolution, the effectiveness of their actions is determined by the specific context of the conflict and their unique operational focus. Future efforts in conflict resolution can be strengthened by addressing existing challenges, including optimising resource allocation, clarifying mission mandates, and strengthening UN–NATO cooperation (Miller, 2024). Paris (2024) explores how hybrid threats and authoritarian regimes require new approaches to the peacekeeping use of coalitions involved in the UN activities.

Over the past two decades, several UN multi-purpose peacekeeping missions have demonstrated stability influenced by the development of NATO's stabilisation doctrine and the broader shift towards counterinsurgency and terrorism. In the case of Kosovo, Resolution 1244 was crucial in coordinating the various actors and actions involved. The region was placed under UN administration through the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) (Duursma et al., 2023). Peacekeeping activities involving multilateral institutions will likely influence the future security order, power

relations, and the norms and values associated with future peacekeeping operations (Albrecht et al., 2024).

The existing literature does not sufficiently explore the structural and legal differences between the UN and NATO, particularly the conflicts between the UN impartiality principle and the political-military interests of NATO member states (Newman, Visoka, 2024). It is therefore necessary to address the analysis of the structural and legal barriers in the UN–NATO partnership, integrate contemporary challenges into the context of peacekeeping reform, and formulate proposals for improving coordination.

## **Materials and Methods**

### ***Research design***

The research consists of three stages. The first stage involved the analysis of official reports and databases of UN peacekeeping operations and NATO missions in order to identify trends in operational results over a 20-year period covering 2004 to 2023. The second stage comprised a review of joint UN and NATO peacekeeping initiatives and their outcomes for the most representative missions. The final stage encompassed a comparative analysis and generalisation of operational procedures in peacekeeping missions.

### ***Sampling***

The empirical background is derived from official UN and NATO documents, statistics on peacekeeping operations, and academic assessments. The criteria for selecting documents included: relevance to the research topic; publications within the last 20 years; and the availability of data on mission goals, challenges, and outcomes. The criteria for selecting peacekeeping missions were: the existence of UN–NATO cooperation; the representation of different geographical regions; the diversity of conflict situations; and demonstrable success in contributing to stability (UN Peacekeeping, 2025a; UN Peacekeeping, 2025b; NATO, 2025). The analysed conflict types comprised humanitarian crises, interstate conflicts, internal conflicts, and hybrid threats. From a total number of 50 to 65 long-term missions conducted annually, nine joint missions were selected from different regions of the world. Although the missions operate in different regions, they share common challenges and offer opportunities to strengthen partnerships. Global reports (SIPRI, 2024; UNOCHA, 2024; IISS, 2024) were also used to support the assessment of available results, operational effectiveness, and mission impact.

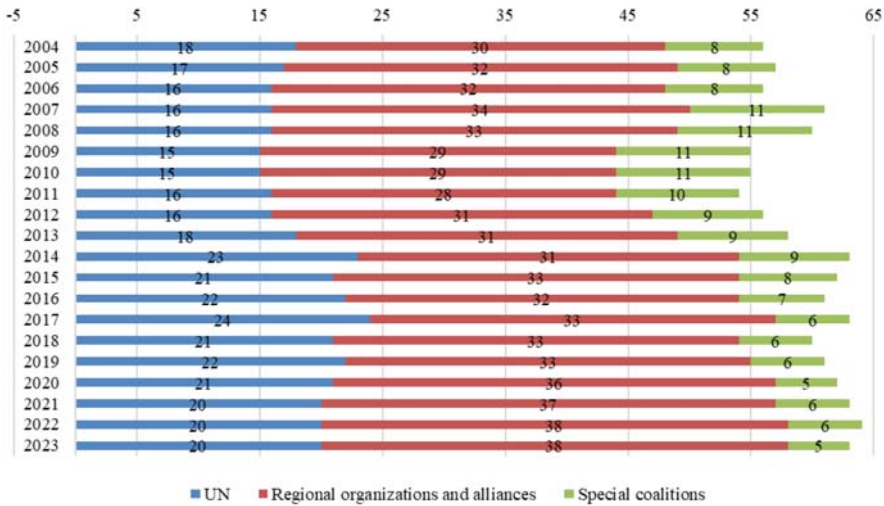
### ***Research methods***

The research applies content analysis, systems analysis, comparative analysis, and a graphical research method. Content analysis was employed to examine official UN and NATO documents, resolutions, and reports. It enables the identification of key themes and categories and facilitated an assessment of the degree of divergence in the strategic priorities of the organisations and planned activities. The systems approach is aimed at assessing the complex nature of UN–NATO interaction. It made it possible to distinguish the main components of the partnership and determine the interdependencies between political and military factors to identify a model of interaction that covers different levels. Comparative analysis served to assess the similarities and differences between UN and NATO peacekeeping missions. The graphical method was applied to assess the quantitative aspect of peacekeeping operations during the research period through statistical analysis.

### **Results**

In 2023, the United Nations conducted 63 active peacekeeping operations. It remains the primary organisation responsible for deploying multilateral peacekeeping operations, accounting for approximately one third of all operations and 67% of all personnel involved as at December 2023. However, the majority of peacekeeping operations were undertaken by regional organisations and alliances, which led 38 multilateral peacekeeping operations in 2023 (SIPRI, 2024). An overview of the participation of actors in peacekeeping missions between 2014 and 2023 is presented in Figure 1.

In 2023, trends concerning multilateral peacekeeping operations persisted. At the national level, dissatisfaction with existing peacekeeping operations grew, and there was a gradual shift away from UN-led operations alongside a rise in those led by regional actors. The trends indicate expected future developments, including the international community's inaction in conflict resolution, only partial resolution of conflicts, and the deinstitutionalisation of decision-making and implementation processes related to conflict management (SIPRI, 2024). Individual examples of international operations conducted by the aforementioned institutions are identified below according to the list of parameters of NATO and UN missions and their main objectives (Table 1).



**Figure 1. Dynamics of Multilateral Peacekeeping Operations by Type of Organisation, 2004–2023**

Source: the authors’ own elaboration based on SIPRI (2024; 2025).

**Table 1. International Peacekeeping Missions and Partner Operations of NATO and the UN**

Mission	Chronological stages	Purpose and objectives
NATO Mission in Iraq (NMI)	Started in 2018, expanded in 2023.	Non-combat advisory mission to build more resilient and effective armed forces and security institutions in coordination with the UN.
NATO Peacekeeping Operation in Kosovo – The Kosovo Force (KFOR)	Expanded in 2023.	Deter the resumption of hostilities, create a safe environment and ensure public safety and order, and support humanitarian efforts.
Cooperation with the African Union (AU)	Started in 2005.	Operational support; training support; and structural assistance, along with coordination activities.
NATO-led Resolute Support Mission (RSM) in Afghanistan	Started in 2015, completed in 2021.	Provide further training and assistance to Afghan security forces and government institutions.

United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei, Sudan (UNISFA)	Started in 2011.	Monitoring the North-South border and facilitating the delivery of humanitarian assistance in Abyei.
United Nations Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO)	Started in 2010.	The protection of civilians, humanitarian personnel, and human rights defenders, and to support the DRC government in its stabilisation and peacebuilding efforts.
Stabilisation Force (SFOR/ UNMIBH) in Bosnia and Herzegovina	Completed in 2004.	Provide support for peace and stability in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan (ISAF)	Completed in 2014.	Train security forces in Afghanistan and rebuild state institutions.
United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)	Completed in 2015.	Provide support for human rights, humanitarian assistance, political dialogue in Afghanistan.

Source: developed by the authors based on NATO (2025), and UN Peacekeeping (2025a; 2025b).

Complex peacekeeping missions involve addressing issues that require clearly defined approaches, operational focus, organisational structure, and other relevant aspects. A comparative analysis of the UN and NATO approaches to conflict resolution demonstrates the key institutional differences. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Comparative Analysis of the Aspects of the UN and NATO in Conflict Resolution**

Aspect	UN	NATO
Core mandate	International peace and security, development, and human rights.	Collective defence, security cooperation, and crisis management.
Operational focus	Broad support for peace, development, and humanitarian assistance.	Defence operations, military forces, and rapid deployment.
Challenges	Limitations in powers and resources, and the need for consensus among member states.	Political disputes, civilian casualties, and post-conflict planning.

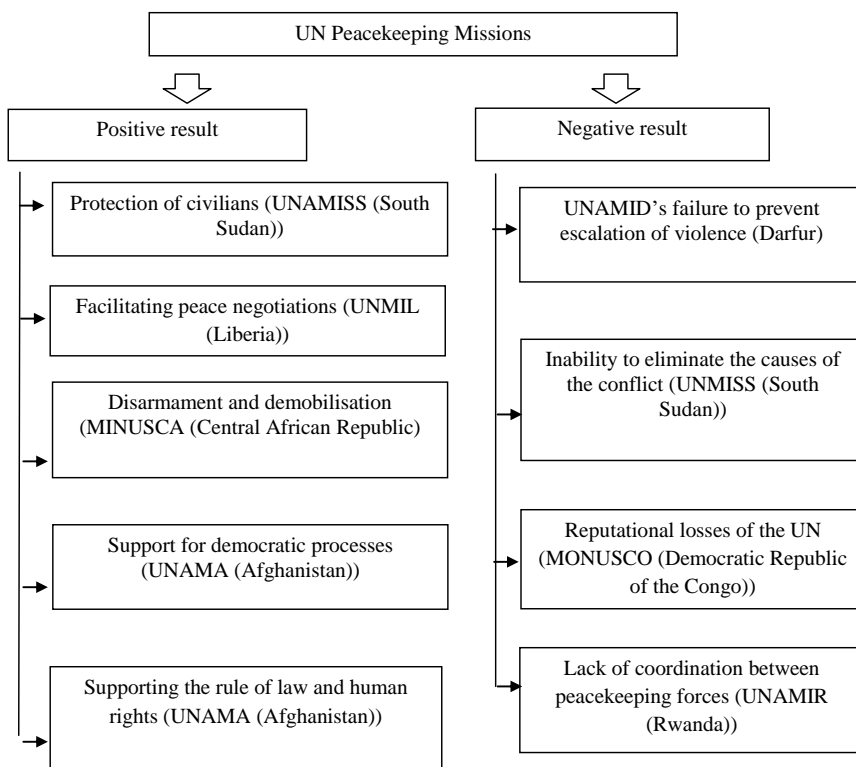
Effective-ness in con-flict zones	Long-term peacebuilding, and effectiveness in stabilising post-conflict areas.	Effectiveness in urgent military response and stabilisation.
Impact on global secu-rity	Promoting international norms and cooperation in the world.	Ensuring the protection of member states and regional stability.

Source: developed by the authors based on Miller (2024), and Lunsford, (2023).

Table 3 illustrates the key differences between the UN and NATO in conflict resolution, highlighting their complementarity. The UN primarily focuses on diplomatic relations, peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance, and long-term conflict resolution, whereas NATO emphasises rapid military response, stabilisation, and the defence of its member states. The findings suggest that effective coordination of the two institutions requires a reform of the partnership, particularly through the enhancement of cooperation mechanisms and the harmonisation of mandates, which could improve the effectiveness of peacekeeping operations. At the same time, UN peacekeeping missions, given the complexity of the missions conducted in individual countries, have produced both positive and negative outcomes (Figure 2).

The analysed missions (Figure 2) emphasise the complexity of implementing UN peacekeeping missions. Activities such as the protection of civilians, disarmament and demobilisation, peace negotiations, and support for democratic processes and the rule of law have indeed contributed to the long-term stabilisation of post-conflict regions. However, these missions have revealed limitations in addressing the root causes of conflicts and preventing the escalation of violence. Such problems underscore the need to modernise the UN peacekeeping approach, particularly by ensuring better coordination, strengthening interaction between regional partners, and adapting mission mandates to contemporary security challenges.

A further challenge is NATO's reluctance to share information with UN missions, stemming from the absence of a formal system for classifying documents or sanctions for unauthorised disclosure. For example, in Afghanistan, NATO and UN missions interpreted their mandates in ways that constrained cooperation. The outcomes of UN and NATO peacekeeping operations can be summarised according to specific criteria (Table 3).



**Figure 2. Consequences of UN Peacekeeping Missions**

Source: developed by the authors based on UN Peacekeeping (2025a) and Al Midfa, (2024).

**Table 3. Criteria for Conducting UN and NATO Peacekeeping Operations and Missions**

Criterion	Analysis of Implementation Features
Institutional structure	Division between UN and NATO missions. Missions operate under a UN mandate.
Legal framework	Most missions are based on UN Security Council resolutions; existing mandates and legal frameworks.
Functional features	A key component of most missions is the protection of civilians. Building the capacity of local security institutions.
Adaptability of operations	The ability to adapt to changes in the security situation. Proposed possibility of expanding the mandate and increasing the contingent.
Integrated approach	Combining civilian and military areas and aspects. Coordination with other international actors.

Source: developed by the authors based on NATO (2025) and UN Peacekeeping (2025a; 2025b).

The analysis indicates that international peacekeeping operations changes have undergone changes towards greater complexity and adaptability, particularly through efforts to build local capacity and protect civilians. The findings suggest that establishing a special external communications unit could facilitate secure and efficient data exchange, thereby increasing coordination between institutions.

## Discussion

The analysis of the UN–NATO partnership in peacekeeping missions demonstrates that cooperation between the two international institutions is a key mechanism for global security, although it requires further adaptation to the changing environment of contemporary conflicts. The findings align with research arguing that effective crisis management should be grounded in multilateral cooperation and the pursuit of strategic partnerships (Reynaud de Sousa, 2023; Larsen, 2021). They are also consistent with studies examining the enhancement of operational effectiveness and resource allocation in peacekeeping missions within the framework of UN–NATO cooperation. Bara and Hultman note that NATO's support in data exchange and military training strengthens the UN peacekeeping architecture, thereby increasing the operational capacity of UN missions (Bara, Hultman, 2020).

Similarly, earlier studies corroborate the findings of this research, indicating that cooperation with the UN can serve NATO's political and strategic interests. Given the Alliance's military capabilities and strategic and analytical resources, collaboration between the UN and NATO constitutes a requisite component of multi-faceted transformational missions (Rzhevskaya, Moroz, 2022).

Other researchers have likewise demonstrated – consistent with the findings of this study – that regional and specialised coalitions operating alongside UN peacekeeping missions contribute to improved security outcomes (Schumann, Bara, 2023). NATO's cooperation with the African Union (AU) in supporting peacekeeping operations in Sudan and Somalia illustrates this dynamic. NATO's involvement in counter-terrorism and capacity-building initiatives has proved particularly useful, aligning it with the broader UN mandate to maintain international peace and security (Pomarede, 2024). The need to define coordination structures and mission mandates is a separate issue supported by previous studies (Foley, 2023).

There are also opposing perspectives on some of the research findings. The authors have identified several areas in which the UN–NATO

partnership has encountered challenges, as indicated in individual studies. One of the key issues is the question of strategic autonomy. NATO's military-oriented approach is not always compatible with the UN principles of impartiality and non-use of force, which can result in operational complications (Newman, Visoka, 2024). The literature also contains extensive criticism of the outcomes of peacekeeping operations, often pointing to significant violations of the norms and rules of the international order (Cusumano, Bures, 2021).

The findings suggest that structural problems persist in the UN–NATO partnership, necessitating comprehensive improvements in inter-organisational cooperation mechanisms that prioritise efficiency, transparency, and adaptability. Equally urgent is the clarification of joint mandates through legally-binding agreements. The UN has already proposed several approaches in this regard, including the definition of specific tasks (Wane et al., 2024). Such measures could reduce inconsistencies in mission implementation and expand NATO's role in capacity building and conflict prevention, rather than limiting it to military intervention.

This study has several limitations. First, it relies on publicly available documents and reports, which limits the ability to analyse confidential information that may be key to understanding the overall state of the issue. Second, the study covers only a 20-year period of peacekeeping missions, which does not fully reflect the broader scope of cooperation between institutions. Finally, although the study does include an analysis of missions in different regions, it does not encompass all possible conflict zones, which further limits the completeness of the generalisation of the results.

## **Recommendations**

The obtained results provide grounds for recommending the development of a comprehensive mechanism for information exchange between the UN and NATO in order to increase the effectiveness of current and future joint missions. It would be advisable to improve the coordination of strategic planning by introducing common mission assessment standards. Expanding joint peacekeeping training programmes could serve as an important means of promoting better integration of tactical and strategic approaches. Furthermore, the relevant authorities of the member states of both institutions could establish a joint management centre for operational response in crisis situations.

## Conclusions

A study of the UN–NATO partnership in peacekeeping missions emphasises the importance of cooperation in maintaining global security and stability. The analysis reveals that combining NATO's military capabilities with the UN's diplomatic and humanitarian expertise contributes to the stabilisation of crisis-affected regions and enhances the effectiveness of conflict responses. However, despite significant achievements, the partnership faces a number of challenges, including issues of strategic autonomy, inconsistencies in mandates, and limited coordination between the two entities.

It has been established that UN–NATO cooperation improves the operational effectiveness of peacekeeping missions, especially in situations requiring rapid military intervention to stabilise a given situation. NATO's support for training UN peacekeepers and its involvement in intelligence-sharing significantly enhance the operational capacity of missions. At the same time, NATO's military approach often contradicts the principles of impartiality and non-use of force that underpin the UN's activities. This leads to operational inconsistencies and complicates cooperation, while limited information exchange between the organisations further reduces the effectiveness of joint efforts.

The UN–NATO partnership must adapt to emerging challenges in the current security environment, where global threats are becoming increasingly complex, particularly due to hybrid warfare and asymmetric threats. Effective conflict resolution and long-term peace can be achieved only through close coordination and complementarity between the two institutions. The results of this study may inform the development of political strategies of global institutions, the improvement of peacekeeping mechanisms, and the creation of effective models of inter-institutional cooperation. The findings could also be applied in practice in military planning and operations, the development of peacekeeper training programmes, and the design of future peacekeeping initiatives. Further studies may focus on cooperation models that include new technologies, expanded intelligence-sharing protocols, and a more clearly regulated distribution of responsibilities between global institutions.

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*Lucas Pitaval*\*

## **The Roles of the European Peace Facility and the Security and Defence Partnership in Supporting Moldova’s EU Integration**

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the role of the European Peace Facility (EPF) and the Security and Defence Partnership (SDP) as key instruments in Moldova’s European Union (EU) integration process. Amid increasing threats from Russian hybrid warfare – including cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine – Moldova faces pressing security challenges that hinder its EU accession trajectory but also act as catalysts for change. The EPF, established by a Council Decision of March 2021, provides financial and material assistance aimed at conflict prevention, peacebuilding, and the strengthening of security, with Moldova being a major beneficiary. Complementing this, the 2024 Security and Defence Partnership (SDP) formalises deeper EU–Moldova cooperation, emphasising areas such as the countering of hybrid threats, cyber issues, strategic communication, and border management, thereby enhancing Moldova’s preparedness and resilience. The author seeks to determine how these instruments support Moldova’s EU integration and the improvement of its security framework through policy transfer, institutional capacity-building, transnational socialisation, and the promotion of EU standards, contributing to Moldova’s progress in aligning with EU foreign and security policy positions. This paper underscores the importance of sustained EU support to address unresolved issues such as corruption and the presence of Russian troops in Transnistria, which pose

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diplomatic and strategic dilemmas. Furthermore, it explores how these EU instruments facilitate Moldova's alignment with the EU *acquis* in external relations (Chapter 30) and common foreign and security policy (Chapter 31), fostering institutional reforms necessary for integration. Overall, the author argues that the EPF and the SDP not only enhance Moldova's security but also support its EU accession process, in the context of an evolving geopolitical landscape characterised by Russia's assertiveness and the strategic importance of Moldova's stability for the EU.

**Keywords:** European Peace Facility (EPF), Moldova–EU Integration, Security and Defence Partnership (SDP), Hybrid Threats, Russian Interference, Cyber Defence, Disinformation, EU Security Policy, Defence Assistance

## Introduction

“The focus is on Moldova becoming stronger and safer for its citizens” (European External Action Service, 2025). With these simple words, Kaja Kallas, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, describes the support provided by the EU to Moldova through the European Peace Facility (EPF). This financial instrument, established by a Council Decision on 22 March 2021, aims to “enhance the EU’s ability to prevent conflicts, build and preserve peace, and strengthen international security and stability” (European Council, 2021). In a context where Moldova has become a primary target for Russian hybrid warfare, as evidenced during the 2024 presidential elections and the EU referendum (Pitaval, 2025) as well as during the 2025 legislative elections, the EU’s role in supporting its neighbour has become more critical than ever. The visit to Chişinău by French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk on Moldova’s Independence Day in 2025 showcased the extent to which the country has gained strategic importance for EU leaders in the current geopolitical context at the time of writing. The representatives of the Weimar Triangle have reiterated their continued support to Moldova’s European path and their commitment in safeguarding the country’s security and sovereignty. The results of the legislative elections and the pro-EU PAS (*Partidul Acţiune şi Solidaritate*) party’s victory will allow Moldova to maintain its political orientation and are likely to result in a growing military and security support from the EU. Therefore, the objective of this article is to determine how the EPF and the SDP can accompany and support Moldova on its path towards EU integration.

## Methodology

This article primarily employs a historical methodology combined with a qualitative policy analysis approach based on a systematic review of EU official documents, including various Council decisions, to provide a brief overview of the EU's support to Moldova through the EPF and the Security and Defence Partnership (SDP) between 2021 and 2025. While it does not rely on new data collection, this article places emphasis on official documents, empirical observation, and verifiable evidence, which, in the positivist tradition, ensures factual accuracy, objectivity, and analytical rigour. Inspired by the Annales School, it also seeks to go beyond a merely descriptive historical chronology by integrating an interdisciplinary perspective. By returning to the origins of the EPF and by contextualising Moldova's security landscape, it aims to capture processes of continuity and gradual transformation of the EU support to Moldova rather than isolated events. This research direction allows for a deeper understanding of the EPF and the SDP as evolving instruments of EU external governance, shaping Moldova's security and institution resilience in times of geopolitical tensions and persistent hybrid threats. The use of quantitative indicators, such as Moldova's alignment rate with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) positions, has been limited and is employed only to complement the qualitative analysis, enhancing understanding of the scale of the EU's support and to monitor the country's progress. The article examines how EU instruments support Moldova's accession process and the implementation of the EU *acquis* in the field of security and defence, particularly with regards to the reforms needed to close Chapter 30 (external relations) and Chapter 31 (CFSP). From the theoretical standpoint, the article draws on neo-functionalism perspectives by analysing the potential spillover effects of EU instruments and by showing how Moldova, through its close ties with Romania and the Baltic countries, benefits from a strong European socialisation, especially when compared to other EU candidate countries in the Western Balkans.

## Key Terminology

Different concepts will be used throughout this article. The most important undoubtedly that of *integration*, understood as the legal, economic, and political process of accession to the EU. At the core of integration lies compliance with the EU *acquis*, that is, with the main body of European Union law, currently consisting in 35 Chapters referring to various political and legal topics. Another key concept used in this article is *Europeanisation*, understood as “an incremental process

reorienting the direction and shape of politics to the degree that EC political and economic dynamics become part of the organisational logic of national politics and policymaking” (Ladrech, 1994). The author seeks to determine to what extent this process is supported by the EPF and the SDP, and through which specific mechanisms (Saurugger, Surel, 2006). Given the multifaceted nature of the concept of *Europeanisation* (Olsen, 2002), it will also be necessary to assess the type and effectiveness of this potential Europeanisation, particularly in the context of the crisis (Saurugger 2014) linked to Russian hybrid warfare against both Moldova and the EU (Graf, Solik, 2023). *Hybrid warfare* can be described as “an interplay or fusion of conventional as well as unconventional instruments of power and tools of subversion. These instruments or tools are blended in a synchronised manner to exploit the vulnerabilities of an antagonist and achieve synergistic effects” (Arsalan, 2021). The potential conditionality of EU instruments, that is, the possibility for the EU to suspend the use of some instruments in case of non-compliance with EU law (in this case, with the CFSP), will be taken into consideration, given Moldova is not yet a Member State but a candidate country (Schimmelfennig, Sedelmeier, 2008). As Moldova is also subject to intense pressure from Russia, the author draws on policy learning theory (Zito, Schout, 2009) to explain how the pro-EU government might be tempted to voluntarily engage in the adoption of EU standards. In addition, and in contrast to other candidate countries in the Western Balkans, Moldova’s integration process may benefit from the country’s close links with an EU Member State – namely, its Romanian neighbour. Therefore, processes of transnational socialisation (Schimmelfennig, 2005) may have effects on the Moldova’s integration. Drawing on this neo-functional perspective, the concept of *spillover effect* will also be employed to explain how EU instruments dedicated to security and defence can generate pressure for integration in other areas.

### **A Brief History of the EPF**

Discussions on the establishment of this instrument, which provides assistance to a wide range of partner countries worldwide, began in November 2018 (European Council, 2018), and a political agreement was reached on 18 December 2020 (European Council 2020). The initial budget for the 2021–2027 period was set at 5 billion euros (Council Decision, 2021). On 28 February 2022, just six days after the launch of Russia’s war against Ukraine, the EU adopted two assistance measures worth 500 million euros to support the Ukrainian armed forces (European Council, 2022), a figure that had tripled by April 2022.

Since then, a large portion of the EPF budget has been allocated to Ukraine, which has become a strategic priority for the EU. This is exemplified by the creation of a dedicated Ukraine Assistance Fund within the EPF in March 2024 (European Council 2024). Overall, the EPF budget has been progressively increased to respond to escalating geopolitical tensions. It now amounts to 17 billion euros for the 2021–2027 period, of which 12.628 billion euros have already been allocated. The significant increase compared with the initial budget reflects the growing importance of defence among the EU's strategic priorities.

Nevertheless, the EPF was not created *ex nihilo*; it is rooted in the broader context of the EU Global Strategy, adopted in 2016 as a replacement for the 2003 European Security Strategy. Alongside instruments such as the Civilian CSDP and the European Defence Fund, the EPF forms part of the evolving EU security and defence dimension. It also superseded the African Peace Facility, which had previously financed operations led by the African Union. The scope of the EPF is significantly broader, as it can be activated globally. In addition, it replaced the Athena mechanism, which had been used to fund the operational common costs of individual EU military CSDP missions and operations.

All this reflects the new strategic dimension the EU has progressively acquired. With the launch of the Global Strategy, and especially through the creation of the EPF, the EU has sought to position itself as an influential geopolitical actor. The so-called “Geopolitical Commission” under President von der Leyen committed itself to this newly asserted role, and the crisis triggered by the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine has given that decision marked impetus.

### **The Share of EPF Funding Allocated to Moldova**

The first assistance measure for Moldova was adopted on 2 December 2021 (Council Decision, 2021), with the aim of strengthening the country's military and defence capacities, promoting domestic resilience and peace, and enhancing the capacity and interoperability of its armed forces to contribute to Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations. The seven-million euro package supported the Military Medical Service and the Engineering Battalion, and included measures to improve responsiveness to civilian crises.

In March 2022, following the launch of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, Moldova submitted its application for EU membership and was granted candidate status in June of the same year. This new status, combined with the uncertainty triggered by the war, contributed to an acceleration of EU support for Moldova.

The second assistance measure, worth 40 million euros, was adopted on 30 June 2022 (Council Decision, 2022). This tranche was significantly more ambitious and addressed key priorities in the context of growing hybrid threats. It aimed to strengthen the capacities of the Moldovan Armed Forces in areas such as logistics, mobility, command and control, cyber-defence, unmanned aerial reconnaissance, and tactical communications. This was achieved through the provision of relevant non-lethal equipment, supplies, and services, including equipment-related training.

A third assistance measure, also worth 40 million euros, was adopted on 4 May 2023 (Council Decision, 2023) following a direct request from Moldova. While its scope remains similar to that of the previous measure, it places a greater emphasis on increasing the operational effectiveness of the Moldovan armed forces. It also includes training components.

The fourth assistance measure was adopted on 4 April 2024 (Council Decision, 2024). Valued at 41 million euros, it is intended to accelerate compliance with EU standards and improve interoperability, thereby enhancing the protection of civilians during crises and emergencies. It also aims to strengthen the Republic of Moldova's capacity to participate in EU military Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions and operations.

This measure was followed shortly thereafter, on 13 June 2024 (Council Decision, 2024), by a fifth tranche worth 9 million euros, dedicated to strengthening Moldova's air-defence capabilities through the acquisition of man-portable, short-range air defence systems, including launchers and missiles.

The sixth assistance measure was adopted on 7 April 2025 (Council Decision, 2025). Totalling 40 million euros, it aims to support the Moldovan Armed Forces' infantry mobility (light tactical vehicles, protective gear, and mobile ambulances) as well as air defence-related command and control capabilities.

The seventh and most recent assistance measure was adopted on 24 April 2025 and comprised 20 million euros. It is designed to modernise Moldova's short-range air defence capabilities by financing the procurement of launchers and missiles.

In total, the seven assistance measures adopted by the EU to support Moldova represent an investment of 197 million euros. However, it is important to note that Moldova also receives additional financial assistance, including from USAID and through ten NATO Defence and Related Security Capacity Building Initiatives (DCBIs) (DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance, 2024). This diversified support allows Moldova to align with NATO standards and avoid becoming over-reliant on EU funding for the development of its security sector.

Date of Adoption	Amount (in millions EUR)	Focus Areas	Implementing actors
2 December 2021	7	Strengthening military and defence capacities, promoting domestic resilience, and enhancing the interoperability of armed forces for CSDP missions. It specifically included the provision of medical equipment for the Military Medical Service and of explosive ordnance disposal equipment for the Engineering Battalion.	Lithuanian Central Project Management Agency (CPMA)
30 June 2022	40	Strengthening the capacities in terms of logistics, mobility, command and control, cyber-defence, unmanned aerial reconnaissance, and tactical communications by providing relevant non-lethal equipment, supplies and services, including equipment-related training.	Estonian Centre for Defence Investments (ECDI) e-Governance Academy (Estonia)
4 May 2023	40	The financing of non-lethal equipment, supplies and services to the units of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Moldova, including technical training where requested. The equipment includes air surveillance, mobility and transportation, logistics, command and control, and cyber-defence equipment.	Estonian Centre for Defence Investments (ECDI) e-Governance Academy (Estonia)
4 April 2024	41	The provision of non-lethal equipment in the following areas: mobility; air surveillance; electronic warfare; and logistics equipment. The aim consists in accelerating compliance with EU standards, interoperability, civilian crisis/emergency protection, and CSDP mission participation.	Estonian Centre for Defence Investments (ECDI)
13 June 2024	9	The strengthening of air-defence capacities (man-portable short-range air defence systems, launchers, and missiles).	Estonian Centre for Defence Investments (ECDI)
7 April 2025	40	Supporting infantry mobility (light tactical vehicles, protective gear, and mobile ambulances) and air-defence command and control (equipment for the tactical and operational integration of short-range air defence systems).	Estonian Centre for Defence Investments (ECDI)
24 April 2025	20	Modernising short-range air defence capabilities (launchers and missiles).	Estonian Centre for Defence Investments (ECDI)
Total	197		

## **The Role of the EPF in the Context of Russian Hybrid Warfare Against Moldova**

Moldova is the second-largest recipient of assistance measures under the EPF after Ukraine. In terms of total financial allocation received, it ranks third behind the African Union (805 million euros) and far behind Ukraine (10.822 billion euros). This significant proportion of financial support for Moldova, a country of just 2.458 million inhabitants and 33,846 km<sup>2</sup>, highlights its strategic importance for the EU.

Like Ukraine and Georgia, Moldova was formerly part of the Soviet Union. Therefore, these countries have a keen understanding of existential finitude experienced by small nations, as defined by Kundera: “One whose very existence may be put into question at any moment; a small nation can disappear, and it knows it.” This feeling is likely to have fuelled Moldova’s defiance towards Russia, especially given the Russian regime’s neo-colonial attempts to maintain its influence over these former Soviet republics, which have intensified in recent years. Interference in Moldova’s most recent elections is a clear manifestation of this imperial strategy and of the hybrid warfare Russia is waging not only against its neighbours, but also against the EU and its candidate countries.

Recent reports that Russia “had established secret paramilitary camps in the Balkans to train Moldovan citizens in destabilisation tactics ahead of Moldova’s October 2025 presidential elections” (Jones, 2025) provide further cause for concern. In this context, the assistance provided through the EPF is a key tool for helping Moldova counter hybrid threats and further advance its EU accession process.

It is worth noting that this financial support is not conditional on the prior implementation of reforms. This reflects the urgency of supporting Moldova and enables the EU to better monitor the reform of the Moldovan Armed Forces. It is, therefore, important to examine more closely the content of this financial assistance, how it is being implemented, and how it contributes to Moldova’s compliance with the European *acquis*.

### **The EPF and the Financing of Defensive Military Equipment: Debunking the Myth of a Bellicose West**

As shown in the previous table, the EPF has primarily supported the modernisation of the Moldovan armed forces, particularly through the provision of equipment for various branches of the military. The value of assistance measures allocated to Moldova increased significantly in 2022; while the first package amounted to only 7 million euros, subsequent

measures rose to 41 million euros. Importantly, all these assistance packages have focused exclusively on medical or defensive purposes.

A substantial effort has been devoted to strengthening Moldova's air-defence capabilities. Russia's widespread use of drone attacks in Ukraine provides a clear rationale for this focus, as drones have become a key component of modern warfare tactics and are frequently used to terrorise civilian populations. The provision of medical equipment and mobile ambulances further reflects Moldova's preparedness in the event of external aggression.

This emphasis on defensive and humanitarian support undermines the legitimacy of Russian propaganda, which frequently portrays the EU as militarising Russia's neighbours and pursuing aggressive intentions. Similar narratives, such as NATO "provocations", have been employed to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It is likely that EPF assistance to Moldova will also be instrumentalised by Russian disinformation campaigns to perpetuate the obsidional myth of Russia as a besieged fortress (Gonneau, 2013).

Even in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EPF has consistently limited its assistance to defensive materials, avoiding the provision of any equipment that could be classified as offensive weaponry.

## **The EPF and Cyber Threats**

The EPF also contributes to efforts in the field of cyber-defence, demonstrating that hybrid threats have been integrated into the EU's financial support for Moldova and that they remain a pressing concern in the current geopolitical context. Addressing external threats must be a priority for EU candidate countries, as they are particularly vulnerable to destabilisation by hostile actors. However, financial support alone is insufficient; Moldova should be more comprehensively integrated into the EU's broader cyber-defence strategies, and its participation in the work of the Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats is crucial in this regard. While Moldovan institutions already receive assistance through the EU Partnership Mission in Moldova (EUPM) to manage cyber and hybrid threats, the sharing of technical expertise and operational capacities needs to be significantly expanded.

The instrumentalisation of the online platform TikTok during the Romanian general elections illustrated the critical impact of social media platforms on democratic processes, along with the urgency for both EU Member States and candidate countries to implement safeguards against

digital manipulations. The TikTok ban implemented by Albania (Gkristi, Weizman, 2025) could serve as a model for Moldova to enhance its digital security framework.

### **Implementing Actors as Transnational Socialisation Actors**

Once assistance measures under the EPF are approved, various implementing actors are tasked with the procurement and delivery of equipment. Given the emphasis on cyber-defence in the support provided to Moldova, the Estonian e-Governance Academy and the Estonian Centre for Defence Investment (ECDI) were designated as key implementing partners (e-Governance Academy, 2023). Since 2015, Estonia has been a primary target of cyber-attacks by Russia-backed hackers and has consequently developed considerable expertise in this domain. The choice of these actors reflects the EU's intent to provide high-level, context-specific support to Moldova. The e-Governance Academy already has experience working with Moldova, as it also implements the EU-funded *Moldova Cybersecurity Rapid Assistance 2.0* project. Another implementing actor is the Central Project Management Agency (CPVA) in Lithuania, which also supports assistance projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and Ukraine.

Similarly, in other contexts, EPF implementing actors are selected based on geographic proximity and expertise, with France in Mali, along with Portugal in Mozambique serving as examples (Santopinto, 2020). The repeated designation of the ECDI as an implementing actor for six of the seven Moldovan assistance measures has enabled it to accumulate valuable field expertise and improve operational efficiency and to “contribute [their] experience and knowledge” (Militaryleak, 2024). However, over-reliance on the same actors may limit diversity of perspective. A broader range of implementers could expose the Moldovan Armed Forces to different equipment types and operational approaches.

Importantly, the role of implementing actors is a critical element of the transnational socialisation and the EU's top-down Europeanisation process through which it influences the third-country decision makers and thus the national policies and strategies of candidate countries. It is also noteworthy that many implementing actors originate from the Baltic States, which, like Moldova, were once part of the Soviet Union. This shared historical experience, a similar early political socialisation, and a deep understanding of Russian threats all foster closer cooperation. The implementation of EPF measures is monitored by the EU's Member

States, particularly through their diplomatic missions in Brussels. Thus, Europeanisation is operationalised through cross-loading processes: “the EU creates [through implementation actors] frames for the Member States to exchange best practices and experience, with little or no involvement from the institutions” (Dosenrode, 2020).

In addition, the close links between Moldova and Romania are also a powerful tool of transnational socialisation, as illustrated by a joint statement signed in August 2024 by Maia Sandu and Klaus Iohannis with the aim of “advancing military cooperation to strengthen Moldova’s defence capabilities and enhance institutional and societal resilience against external challenges.” Such socialisation naturally favours Europeanisation by subconsciously incentivising decision-makers and civil society actors to modify their behaviours and mental representations with respect to the EU.

### **The Security and Defence Partnership**

In addition to the support provided through the European Peace Facility, the EU has also established a bilateral Security and Defence Partnership with Moldova (European External Action Service, 2024). Signed in May 2024, the Partnership formalises close cooperation between the EU and Moldova and paves the way for deeper integration into the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). It outlines eleven areas of cooperation in which both parties are expected to enhance alignment.

Among these, four areas are particularly critical in improving Moldova’s preparedness to respond to the hybrid warfare tactics deployed by Russia against the EU and its allies: countering hybrid threats, cyber issues, capacity building in security and defence, and strategic communications – including countering foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI). Cooperation in these domains is expected to include joint analysis by centres of excellence and academic institutions, the exchange of best practices in strategy, policy design and diplomatic responses to hybrid threats, as well as targeted support to Moldovan institutions in countering FIMI.

This last aspect is especially significant in the lead-up to Moldova’s parliamentary elections in September 2025. It has already been a priority for the European External Action Service (EEAS), as illustrated by the 2015 launch of *EUvsDisinfo*, a project led by the East StratCom Task Force to debunk Russian disinformation campaigns (European External Action Service, 2019). According to international observers, recent elections in Moldova, Romania, and Georgia have seen substantial Russian

interference and manipulation via social media platforms and other types of destabilisation tactics (Pitaval, 2025). For these reasons, the Security and Defence Partnership may be even more strategically important than the financial support provided through the EPF. It facilitates not only material assistance but also political and strategic alignment between Moldova and the EU. The SDP goes far beyond material concerns by fostering institutional exchange and long-term cooperation. As with the EPF, the exchange of best practices foreseen under the SDP constitutes a key mechanism of institutional transfer, defined as the transmission of knowledge and policy instruments from the EU political system to national frameworks (Dolowitz, Marsh, 2000). It represents a compelling example of top-down Europeanisation in action. While the EPF represents the financial-incentives component of EU policy, the SDP enhances awareness about defence issues, supports the development of new legislation, and provides models of best practice. Together, the SDP and the EPF constitutes a comprehensive set of instruments the EU has in order to influence decision-makers' behaviours and effect change in public policy (Libaert T. EESC, 2016).

### **The Potential Spillover Effect of the SDP**

The Security and Defence Partnership (SDP) between the EU and Moldova also encompasses other important areas of cooperation, including counterterrorism, training and education, the *Women, Peace, and Security* agenda, and integrated border management. The Partnership is therefore not limited to traditional defence topics, but may also generate broader spillover effects on Moldovan society and domestic reform processes.

Particular emphasis is placed on gender equality, and the Partnership also supports Moldova's alignment with the European Border and Coast Guard community, which is currently the only uniformed body of the European Union and a key component of both internal and external EU's security. By promoting the transfer of knowledge and experience across multiple security-related domains, the SDP complements the financial assistance provided through the EPF and advances Moldova's alignment with EU standards expressed in various *acquis* Chapters, thereby facilitating its integration into the Union. Parallel security dialogues reinforce this trajectory.

However, it is important to note that such partnerships are not limited to countries with official candidate status. The EU has signed SDPs not only with candidate countries, but also with potential candidates and other strategic partners. Consequently, these partnerships serve a broader

geopolitical and security purpose and should not be understood solely as instruments for accession preparation.

### **Conclusions: The EPF and the SDP as Key Tools to Support Moldova's Path Towards the European Union**

As demonstrated throughout this paper, both the EPF and the SDP are valuable instruments for streamlining Moldova's accession process and supporting its alignment with European standards as defined in the *acquis*. Together, they provide financial, strategic, and political support that helps Moldova address its most pressing security challenges, including hybrid warfare conducted by the Russian Federation via cyberspace and disinformation campaigns.

The 197 million euros in financial and material assistance under the EPF is complemented by institutional and knowledge transfers across a wide range of defence sectors, as set out in the SDP. These policy transfers contribute to strengthening Moldova's strategic preparedness within the broader framework of European security and increase the interoperability of its armed forces with EU counterparts. Between 2022 – shortly after the first EPF assistance measure – and October 2024, Moldova's alignment rate with EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) declarations rose from 64% to 91% (Cazaubon, 2025). The country has also aligned with most EU sanctions regimes. This growing rate of convergence signals a successful “downloading” of EU norms and practices (Howell, 2004).

While it is difficult to precisely assess and quantify the EPF and the SDP roles in Moldova's EU accession, it can be concluded they have undoubtedly contributed to the country's EU integration process, especially by supporting progress towards compliance with Chapter 30 and Chapter 31. They function as information and awareness tools on defence issues, offering financial incentives and models of exemplarity, and facilitating the adaptation of national legislation to better comply with EU standards in the security domain. Taken together, they encompass the full range of mechanisms through which the EU seeks to influence external actors – whether at the individual or institutional levels – to reshape behaviours and representations of the EU.

### **Perspectives on Moldova's European Future**

However, considerable challenges remain, and most notably the persistent issue of corruption. In this respect, continued EU support will be essential. Another critical obstacle is the ongoing presence of Russian

military forces in the secessionist region of Transnistria. Given the current geopolitical context, a diplomatic solution appears unlikely, and there is little indication that Russian troops intend to withdraw voluntarily.

This unresolved situation poses a legal and strategic dilemma for the EU. Admitting Moldova under current conditions would mean incorporating a territory that is, de facto illegally occupied by Russia, potentially triggering the mutual assistance clause under Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union, even if Moldova retains its neutral status (Anisimova, 2024).

Furthermore, with the United States reducing its presence in Moldova under the isolationist approach of the Trump Administration (Jozwiak, 2025), the EU bears a moral responsibility to compensate for the lost security guarantees. The recent EPF assistance packages adopted in April 2025 represent a step in this direction. Addressing this challenge will require sustained commitment from both Moldova and the EU to prevent a scenario in which Moldova, and potentially Europe as a whole, becomes vulnerable to Russian influence (Vitols, 2022).

As President Maia Sandu has stated, “there are two principal threats to our national security – the aggressive policy of the Russian Federation against our country as a whole, and deep-rooted corruption in Moldova” (Tanas, 2024). While the EPF and the SDP are powerful tools for addressing these existential threats, they must be reinforced by broader, long-term engagement if Moldova is to fully meet EU accession criteria. In this regard, the potential spillover effect of the SDP might have an unexpected influence in fields that are not strictly related to security and defence.

Lastly, the recent Romanian presidential election, which resulted in the victory of a pro-EU and pro-NATO candidate, holds great significance for Moldova’s European trajectory. Given the historically close ties between the two countries, intensified intergovernmental cooperation and transnational socialisation can be expected, enabling Moldova to benefit from Romania’s experience in EU integration and reform.

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*Cihan Daban*\*

## **An Analysis of Border Relations in the Balkans After the Dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia: The Case of Serbia and Croatia**

### **Abstract**

This study provides a comprehensive examination of border disputes between Serbia and Croatia from historical, legal, and political perspectives. The main focus of this research is the status of both the de facto and de jure of the Vukovarska and Gornja Šarengrad islands located on the Danube. These disputes stem from the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the legacy of Tito's border policy. This study analyses the tensions between effective control and the principles of international law in border delineation. In this context, the thalweg principle and the *uti possidetis juris* doctrine are comparatively assessed through historical documents and existing international agreements. The research is theoretically grounded in border analysis theory, which posits that borders should not be viewed merely as geographical demarcation lines but rather as reflections of political sovereignty, identity construction, and regional power relations. This theoretical framework demonstrates that borders are continuously reproduced within historical and social contexts, emphasising their nature as dynamic sociopolitical constructs that extend beyond physical geography. The findings reveal that borders are shaped through the interaction of political, ethnic, and social forces, rather than existing solely as geographical lines. The results further

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indicate that disputed borders often possess the characteristics of so-called “frozen boundaries” – territories under de facto control but lacking full legal resolution. Consequently, the study concludes that, in the context of the Balkans in general and Serbia–Croatia relations in particular, the resolution of border disputes requires a holistic approach that integrates historical, social, political, and theoretical dimensions, rather than relying solely on cartographic or legal instruments.

**Keywords:** Balkans, Serbia, Croatia, Danube River, Border Analysis Theory, Territorial Disputes

## Introduction

World history has shown that borders have frequently shifted, dividing ethnic, religious, and racial communities across states. These divisions are largely the result of political decisions and territorial expansion by major-power countries. Crises, conflicts, and wars have shaped history, leading some communities to be assimilated under foreign rule, while others have fought for and gained independence (Donnan, Wilson, 2002, pp. 17–24).

The Treaty of Westphalia ended European wars and laid the foundation for modern nation-states, highlighting ethnically based state systems as empires declined. The First and Second World Wars accelerated this shift, making the Balkans central to the rise of new nation-states (Patton, 2019, pp. 91–94). The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, established in the Balkans in 1918, marked the first effort to unite South Slavic people. This sovereignty ended with the Second World War and subsequent Nazi occupation (Ülger, 2003, pp. 33–40). After Josip Broz Tito came to power in 1943, Yugoslavia was established as a federation of six republics and two autonomous provinces within Serbia. The 1963 constitutional amendment officially renamed the state the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Bibb, 2009, pp. 39–46).

The Tito era was characterised by a socialist governance model that remained independent of Soviet influence, alongside an active role in the Non-Aligned Movement. Following Tito’s death and the dissolution of the USSR, the Balkans entered a period of significant change. In the 1990s, the breakup of Yugoslavia prompted federal republics to seek independence, which brought border disputes to the forefront (Güler, 2021, pp. 264–266; Simic, 2001, pp. 99–105). As illustrated in Map 1, border disputes emerged as one of the most fundamental issues in the Balkan region.

In particular, the Serbian–Croatia border dispute is characterised by geographical and political dimensions. At the core of the issue are the



**Map 1. Map of Regions Illustrating Border Disputes in the Balkans**

Source: Reka, 2018.

meanders of the Danube River and their influence on the delineation of the boundary line. Additionally, Serbia asserts its status as the successor of the former Yugoslavia, while Croatia has demanded a redrawing of these borders. However, bilateral talks have failed to produce a concrete solution, and, as a result, the dispute has persisted for decades (Hajdinjak, 2004, pp. 2–5).

The main research questions of this study focus on the historical, geographical, political, and legal factors underpinning border disputes between Serbia and Croatia. This study explores how these factors shape border delineation. It examines the impact of the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and border policies during the Tito era on contemporary conflict. The influence of the meanders and geographical features of the Danube River on the de facto and legal status of the border is also discussed. This study considers the applicability of international law principles, such as the *thalweg* principle, to river boundaries. It analyses the legal arguments of the parties concerning sovereignty, territorial integrity, and historical ownership. This study also reviews the effects of domestic politics and nation-building processes in Serbia and Croatia on their approaches to border disputes. It also assesses how the European Union accession process shaped both countries' willingness to resolve this issue. Finally, within a border analysis framework, this study examines how historical, geographical, political, and legal factors interact.

This provides a scholarly framework for addressing border disputes in the Balkans.

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Perspectives on Border Analysis**

The concept of borders plays a central role in international relations and in legal geography. Throughout history, borders have assumed diverse forms and fulfilled varying functions, ranging from those of city-states and empires to those of modern nation-states and nations. This variability has been driven by factors such as territorial expansion policies, competition, and war. However, as states emerged, borders became more than just military or political gains; they became markers of sovereignty embedded within legal and political frameworks. The process that began with the Treaty of Westphalia paved the way for the systematic establishment of nation-state consciousness and borders in the West. In this context, a *border* is understood as territorial integrity through which a state asserts its sovereignty, while a *boundary* is the line that physically separates these territories (Tekin, 2012, pp. 159–166).

Colonialism and warfare are two significant processes that have led to border transformation. Colonial policies have resulted in the redrawing of many nations' borders and the transformation of their sociocultural structures. Similarly, victories by great powers often resulted in the takeover of smaller territories, contributing to border fluidity. This process was particularly evident in regions such as Latin America, Africa, and Central Asia, but the Soviet influence also played a significant role in the Caucasus and Balkans. Thus, the historical evolution of borders is a multilayered phenomenon encompassing political, legal, and social dimensions, rather than being confined to merely geographical or military matters (Aluede, 2017, pp. 11–16).

Border analysis theory emphasises that borders are dynamic constructs shaped by social, political, economic, and legal processes, rather than fixed demarcations. This theory systematically identifies the root causes of border disputes, potential crises, and evaluates possible solutions by examining the historical, geographical, political, and legal dimensions of borders within a given region (Bialasiewicz, Minca, 2010, pp. 1085–1087).

Anssi Paasi conceptualises borders not merely as geographical lines but as spaces continuously reproduced through social practices and discourses, thereby acquiring political significance. According to Paasi, borders are social structures that are constantly reshaped at the

intersection of historical, cultural, and political processes, providing a critical framework for understanding states' border policies (Paasi, 1999, pp. 669–671). Building on this perspective, Henk van Houtum considers borders not only as physical or legal dividing lines but also as the result of power relations and identity formation processes. According to van Houtum, borders are politicised forms of geography; in this sense, a border functions both to separate and unite, as well as to exclude and include borders. Therefore, a border is not merely an element defining the sovereign territories of states but also a dynamic social space where concepts of identity, belonging, and otherness are continuously reproduced (Van Houtum, 2005, pp. 672–674).

Mathias Albert defined borders, from a postmodern international relations perspective, as multidimensional structures that must be understood at the intersection of states' sovereignty claims, regional power balances, and social interactions. Albert emphasises that borders are continuously negotiated not only via interstate agreements, but also through political, economic, and social processes (Albert, 1998, pp. 58–61). Diez, Stetter, and Albert analyse borders within the context of security and identity politics, demonstrating that borders continuously interact with both local and global processes. These authors view borders as spaces reproduced within geographical and political contexts, highlighting the impact of power balances and identity formation on borders in international relations (Diez, Stetter, Albert, 2006, pp. 565–567).

Within this framework, border analysis functions as a theoretical tool that is directly integrated into international relations, legal geography and political science. The primary aim of this analytical approach is to understand the dynamic nature of borders and evaluate the interplay of historical and geographical factors with political and legal processes. Major developments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the Cold War and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, led to the emergence of numerous new states and the creation of complex border disputes in the region. Border analysis provides a critical theoretical framework for identifying the root causes of these issues and developing potential solutions to them.

### ***Defining the Problem: An Analytical Approach***

Globally, border disputes are largely associated with colonial practices and the division of the legacies of dissolved empires. In Asia, Latin America, and Africa, colonial powers often drew borders without regard to ethnic, cultural, or religious differences, leading to long-term tensions and conflict among communities. In the Balkans, Central Asia, and the

Caucasus, border disagreements primarily stem from the collapse of central authority and the role of ethnic differences. Following the dissolution of major powers such as Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, the delineation of new state borders was accompanied by disputes arising over the division of inheritance and ethnic diversity. Therefore, a proper understanding of border disputes requires a simultaneous consideration of historical, political, and social dimensions. In this context, the Serbia–Croatia border dispute serves as a concrete example of the emergence of new states. Geographical factors, such as the meanders of the Danube River, ethnic differences, and claims related to the legacy of the former Yugoslavia, are key elements complicating the issue. This underscores the importance of the border analysis approach, as it evaluates historical, geographical, and political dimensions together to understand the dynamic nature of the dispute (Biger, 2020, pp. 69–75).

### ***Analysis of Historical Background***

When examining borders or other international issues, it is essential to analyse their emergence, development, and consequences. The historical background analysis seeks to identify the root causes of a problem and understand its context. This involves considering the interactions between political, social, economic, and geographical factors. Determining the period and conditions under which the issue arose, the actors involved, and how it evolved over time forms the foundation for the analytical process. This approach not only provides a chronological account of events but also reveals the historical and structural dynamics that shape the contemporary dimensions of the problem. Thus, historical background analysis elucidates cause-and-effect relationships in borders and similar disputes while providing an academic framework for developing potential solutions.

### ***Analysis of Underlying Causes***

When examining the historical background of an issue, analysing the causes of its emergence and the effects these causes produce is critical. Cause analysis seeks to identify the factors that shape a problem and reveal the relationships between them. Not every crisis or dispute is coincidental; most are triggered by one or more underlying causes. These causes may be political, economic, social, geographical, or historical in nature, and they directly influence the scope, intensity, and potential solutions to the problem. Therefore, conducting a cause analysis not only facilitates a deeper understanding of the issue but also lays the groundwork for developing effective strategies for its resolution. This approach is

particularly important for addressing multidimensional challenges such as complex border disputes, as producing lasting and feasible solutions is not possible without a focus on the root causes.

### ***Situation Analysis***

Problems rarely arise suddenly, and every dispute has a historical and causal background. Some issues are rooted in long-term historical processes, while others emerge from more recent events. In both cases, failure to resolve these issues leads to their persistence and eventual entrenchment. Therefore, conducting a general situation analysis is essential for understanding and managing these problems. This analysis involves identifying the geographic area in which the issue arises, determining the events or processes that act as triggers, and assessing the current state of the problem. Furthermore, by considering factors such as the intensity, scope, and actors affected, the current context of the issue can be established. In this way, the dynamic nature of the problem is revealed, and a foundation is laid for developing effective resolution strategies (Donnan, Wilson, 2002, pp. 260–272).

## **An Analysis of Regional, Global, and Organisational Actors**

Border disputes are typically multidimensional and complex problems that cannot be resolved at the local or national levels. Therefore, for a peaceful resolution, the intervention of regional actors in the affected area is required first. In this context, the policies of the states involved and neighbouring countries should be analysed, and potential solutions developed accordingly. If regional initiatives fail to yield results, global actors such as the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany may intervene. The involvement of global actors is crucial for both the enforcement of international law and the maintenance of a balance of power among the parties. However, when neither regional nor global actors can resolve this issue, the support of international and regional organisations becomes essential. Institutions such as the United Nations, the European Union, the African Union, NATO, the Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization can contribute to resolving disputes through diplomatic means. These actors facilitate the addressing of issues within a legal framework, balance the claims of the parties, and develop peaceful solutions. After assessing the contributions of regional, global, and organisational actors, a solution-oriented analysis can be conducted. This

analysis allows for the identification of potential resolution pathways based on the current state of a given dispute, the positions of the parties involved, and international norms. Finally, on the basis of these analyses, feasible recommendations are developed, and a systematic process for addressing the issue is planned (Viotti, Kauppi, 2014, pp. 6–9).

### **Solution Analysis**

Solution analysis is a critical stage in achieving a peaceful resolution to a problem. This process follows the identification of the issue and an analysis of its root causes, encompassing a systematic evaluation of potential solutions. During the solution analysis phase, mediators, parties involved in the dispute, representatives of regional, global, and organisational actors, and expert analysts collaborate. In these meetings, an issue is thoroughly examined, and different perspectives and possible resolution options are discussed. The goal is to ensure that the problem is resolved peacefully, considering the interests of the parties while adhering to the international norms and legal frameworks. This approach aims to identify an optimal solution and ensure that the resolution process is transparent, participatory, and sustainable. Solution analysis enables strategic planning based on the root causes of a problem and allows for the identification of measures to prevent a recurrence of conflict. Thus, the resolution process is framed within a comprehensive structure that considers both short- and long-term impacts.

### **Border Dynamics Between Serbia and Croatia: From the SFRY to the Present**

The concept of Yugoslavia is critical for understanding the historical and ethnic contexts of border issues in the Balkans. According to Mediha Akarslan, the term “Yugoslav” in Serbo-Croatian literally means “South Slavs” and with the addition of the suffix -ia, it conveys the meaning of “the land of the South Slavs”. The term was first coined in 1839 by Serbian writer, translator, and historian Teodor Pavlović (Akarslan, 1992, p. 11). Following the First World War, in 1929, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was officially established, replacing the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, and the concept of “Yugoslavia” began to be used as the official state name. As İrfan Kaya Ülger emphasises, the peoples who have long inhabited the Balkan Peninsula are largely of Slavic origin: Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, and Bulgarians constitute the South Slavs; Poles, Czechs, and Slovaks are classified as West Slavs; and Russians, Ukrainians, and

Belarusians are classified as East Slavs. Bosniaks are also considered an ethnic Slavic group within this framework (Ülger, 2003, p. 15).

During the Second World War, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia was occupied by Germany, Italy, Bulgaria, and Hungary, which created a political vacuum within the country. Among the resistance movements against the occupation, the most effective was the partisan movement led by Josip Broz Tito. With the support of the Soviet Union, Tito seized power in 1943 and garnered the backing of both the Serb and Croatian majorities to abolish the monarchical system. He established the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which comprised six federal republics and two autonomous regions. The republics included Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Serbia, while the autonomous regions within Serbia were Kosovo and Vojvodina. Following the elections held in November 1945, the country was renamed the Federal Democratic People's Republic of Yugoslavia. The 1963 constitution officially designated it as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Bozkurt, 2010, pp. 53–54). As of 1991, prior to the dissolution of Yugoslavia, border and regional arrangements are illustrated in Map 2.



**Map 2. Map of Yugoslavia (1945–1991)**

Source: University of Central Arkansas (n.d.).

Tito's socialist orientation initially brought him closer to the Soviet Union (USSR); however, disagreements soon emerged between Tito and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, prompting both leaders to pursue independent paths. The core of this conflict lay in the USSR's insufficient support for Yugoslavia during its struggle against the Germans in the Second World War. Under Tito's leadership, Yugoslavia achieved victory in the postwar period while maintaining its distance from Moscow. Despite cooperating with socialist countries, Tito refused to make Yugoslavia a satellite of the Soviet Union. This tension came to the forefront at the Cominform meeting held in Bucharest in June 1948, where the Stalin-controlled organisation decided to punish Yugoslavia and expel it from the group, citing allegations that Soviet troops had been mistreated within Yugoslav borders (Ülger, 2003, pp. 54–57).

Expelled from the Cominform, Yugoslavia developed its own self-management system under Tito's leadership. This system sought to establish new methods for socialism from a Marxist perspective, while emphasising the human dimension of socialist governance (Işıklı, 1983, pp. 99–101). Tito's self-management model and the implementation of market socialism aimed to develop bilateral relations with the West; however, this approach resulted in embargoes imposed by both the USSR and pro-Soviet countries. These embargoes caused agricultural crises and a decline in production across Yugoslavia while also triggering uprisings among pro-Soviet groups in domestic politics (Zizmond, 1992, pp. 101–105).

The implementation of Tito's socialist policies and the self-management system led to the marginalisation of certain ethnic groups, particularly Muslim communities, while Serb–Croat elites became dominant in the state administration. Although the self-management system theoretically promoted the principle of equality, in practice it conferred privileges upon specific groups, brought the economy under tighter state control, and paved the way for the emergence of an elite ruling class (Tito, 1978, pp. 7–9). These developments intensified ethnic and political tensions among the federal republics of Yugoslavia. From the perspective of border analysis theory, Tito's Yugoslavia sought to balance the autonomy demands of different ethnic communities through a centralised administration; however, this balance proved unsustainable over the long term. As Paasi notes, borders are not merely geographical lines, but are also products of social practices and political power relations. According to Newman and Paasi, borders function as active processes in the construction of state and societal identities, and these processes can generate conditions conducive to conflict (Newman, Paasi, 1998, pp. 189–195). The policies

implemented by Tito created power imbalances among social and ethnic groups, generating potential crises in border policy.

Factors such as the USSR's embargoes on Yugoslavia, uprisings by pro-Soviet groups in domestic politics, the 1968 invasion of then-Czechoslovakia, events in Croatia in 1972, and Tito's declaration as lifelong president in 1974 laid the groundwork for the six federal republics and two autonomous regions of Yugoslavia to pursue independence within a relatively short period (Bozkurt, 2010, p. 54). These developments demonstrate, as emphasised by border analysis theory, that borders are shaped not only by legal or geographical lines but also by political, economic, and ethnic dynamics. According to Newman, borders are not merely lines between states but processes through which social and political power is materialised in space. Therefore, the independence movements in the Balkans must be analysed by taking into account the historical, cultural, and ethnic dimensions of borders. Furthermore, borders function as instruments for regulating social and economic relations, a role that becomes particularly pronounced during political crises. In this context, Newman highlights that state border policies carry not only geographical but also social and symbolic meanings (Newman, 1999, pp. 5–8).

After Tito's death, the economic and political crises in Yugoslavia deepened, and successive leaders were unable to steer the country out of chaos. The federal republics became embroiled in the conflicts to protect their borders and sovereign rights. This process paved the way for each federal republic to declare independence and for serious disputes to arise along the Serbia–Croatia border. Tito's preferential policies and investments in the Croatian and Slovenian regions provoked strong reactions among Serbian nationalists. The autonomous regions of Vojvodina and Kosovo were also affected by these developments, becoming entangled in Serbia's border disputes (Kahramanyol, Emgili, 2016, p. 318).

The Serbia–Croatia border dispute can be understood within the context of Tito's era and the subsequent Yugoslav experience by examining both central authority policies and ethnic and social dynamics at play. From the perspective of border analysis theory, borders should be viewed not merely as lines on a map but as products of historical, political, and social processes. This approach enables a deeper understanding of the roots of the dispute and allows for a clearer assessment of its potential resolution.

### ***Analysis of the Serbia–Croatia Border Issue***

The Danube River represents the central geographical element in the Serbia–Croatia border dispute. Extending approximately 2,850 kilometres from Central Europe to the Black Sea and flowing through

ten countries, the Danube is a major waterway. Serbia and Croatia, two of these riparian states, recognise a specific segment of the river as their border. However, this recognition gives rise to significant geographical and legal disagreements concerning the exact demarcation and criteria by which the border should be determined. Croatia maintains that the border along the Danube to be approximately 325 kilometres long, whereas Serbia claims it is 262 kilometres long, of which only 138 kilometres lie directly within the riverbed. This discrepancy is not merely a matter of measurement; it also reflects the contrasting opinions of the two countries regarding whether the border should be defined according to natural or administrative criteria (Selo-Sabic, 2019, p. 5).

From a methodological perspective, the Serbia–Croatia border dispute illustrates the tension between a natural geographical line – the middle of the Danube River-Thalweg principle – and an administrative-legal boundary, based on the 1945 decisions of the Autonomous Assembly of Vojvodina. Serbia contends that the border should be determined based on the river’s midpoint (thalweg), whereas Croatia argues that the existing administrative boundary remains valid under the principle of maintaining the *status quo*, despite shifts in the river’s course over time. The roots of this disagreement lie in the process of redefining borders, which accelerated after the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). In the early 1990s, emerging sovereignty claims intensified disputes over territorial ownership and jurisdiction in the Baranja and Bačka regions along the Danube River. Over time, these tensions escalated beyond diplomatic channels, leading to armed clashes and making border issues significant factors in regional instability. Although the two countries have engaged in technical negotiations since 2003, particularly concerning the disputed area near Bačka Palanka, no permanent settlement has been reached. In this context, the Danube River is regarded not only as a geographic boundary, but also as a space where struggles over sovereignty, identity, and principles of international law are concretely manifested (Dimitrijević, 2012, pp. 13–14).

### ***Historical, Legal, and Identity-Based Background Analysis of the Serbia–Croatia Border Dispute***

The Serbia–Croatia border was established during the period of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which was founded in 1945 after the Second World War. More specifically, these borders were determined by the Anti-Fascist Council for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia (*Antifašističko Vijeće Narodnog Oslobođenja Jugoslavije*, or AVNOJ) and

are referred to in the literature as the AVNOJ borders (Calic, 2019, p. 138). During this period, no major disputes over border delineations occurred; only minor discussions arose regarding the extent of Croatia's borders. These debates primarily focused on the status of the Baranja and Dubrovnik regions, with the view that Baranja belonged to Croatia and which gained broad acceptance. However, the border issue between Serbia and Croatia later became central to debates over political identity, sovereignty, and regional affiliation (Dimitrijević, 2012, pp. 5–8).

Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito maintained the socialist regime until the adoption of the 1974 Constitution, but thereafter adopted a more pro-Western orientation in foreign policy, thereby limiting relations with the Soviet Union (USSR). Tito's death in 1980 accelerated the disintegration of the federal structure, bringing independence claims and territorial disputes among federal republics to the forefront. In particular, Serbia's *Greater Serbia* ideal and Croatia's *Greater Croatia* rhetoric sparked ethnically based competition. In the post-Tito period, borders ceased to function merely as administrative lines and became spatial symbols of national identity and sovereignty. This transformation paved the way for the entrenchment of nationalist discourse on both sides of the border (Tekin, 2018, pp. 44–46).

From the late 1980s onwards, nationalist tendencies momentum strength in Croatia, and the Croatian Democratic Union, led by Franjo Tuđman, quickly articulated the goal of independence from Yugoslavia. Tuđman's *Greater Croatia* project sought to consolidate the Croatian identity and limit the political influence of the Serb population. In 1991, the Serb minority in Croatia constituted just over 12% of the population, a figure that had decreased to 4.54% by 2001 (Hoh, 2015, p. 71). Therefore, the decision to pursue independence represented not only a political shift but also a demographic transformation. Rising tensions escalated into armed conflict in 1991, and Croatia declared its independence on 25<sup>th</sup> June 1991 (Ülger, 2003, pp. 117–122).

During the same period, Slobodan Milošević, who came to power in Serbia in 1989, sought to reassert central authority by abolishing the autonomous status of Kosovo and Vojvodina, triggering a new power struggle within Yugoslav territory. Milošević's policies aimed to redefine borders in the name of national unity, whereas Croatia perceived them as a threat to its sovereignty. The European Community intervened to assess the claims of the republics seeking independence; however, these diplomatic efforts were unable to fully halt the conflict. In particular, policies pursued under the *Greater Serbia* ideal exacerbated regional instability. During this period, borders functioned not only as lines between states but also as arenas in

which Europe's "new security architecture" was being tested (Ketkanlı, 2022, pp. 92–95).

During this period, ethnic conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina necessitated international intervention, and the war was brought to a close by the 1995 Dayton Agreement. However, this agreement did not provide a permanent solution to the problems; rather, it resulted in the borders and identities remaining in a so-called "frozen" state. This phenomenon is referred to in the literature as the concept of "frozen borders", highlighting situations where de facto control does not coincide with international recognition (Szasz, 1997, pp. 759–768).

In this context, the Danube River has become the most prominent geographic manifestation of sovereignty disputes and identity-based perceptions of borders between Serbia and Croatia. The Danube functions as both a natural boundary and a contested area of sovereignty under international law. Approximately 300 kilometres of the river's total 2,850-kilometre length constitute the border between Serbia and Croatia. However, differing views exist as regards the precise demarcation of these stretches. Serbia argues that the border should be determined according to the thalweg principle, which follows the line of the river's deepest channel. This approach is frequently applied in international law in cases where rivers serve as boundaries (Shaw, 2008, pp. 528–533). In contrast, Croatia maintains that the principle of *uti possidetis juris* – preserving existing administrative boundaries – should be applied despite the river's changing meanders over time. According to Croatia, certain settlements along the eastern bank of the Danube have historically remained under Croatian sovereignty, even though the riverbed has shifted (Nation, 2003, pp. 149–155).

In this dispute, the positions of the two countries are grounded in different concepts of international law: Serbia emphasises the "natural boundary principle" and the argument of "legitimate geographic change", while Croatia stresses the principles of "status quo" and "administrative continuity". This divergence highlights a classic international law debate regarding whether changes in the natural course of rivers affect border status. According to Prescott and Triggs, the principle of recognising natural river boundaries – particularly the aforementioned thalweg, or, the line along the river's deepest channel – as international borders is well established in traditional international law. However, they emphasise that if the riverbed shifts physically due to natural processes such as erosion, sediment deposition, or flooding, it does not automatically alter the legal status of the border. Two key concepts are relevant here; *accretion*, which allows the border line to move gradually in parallel with slow, natural

changes in the riverbed over time, and *avulsion*, which holds that if the riverbed changes suddenly due to a flood or natural disaster, the border remains in its original channel. Prescott and Triggs note that states often invoke the “natural boundary” argument in border disputes, often with a flexible interpretation of these two concepts to serve their political interests. They further highlight that disputes over river boundaries are not merely geographic or technical but have multilayered geopolitical dimensions, including sovereignty, control over economic resources, and regional stability, and it is in this context that they explain the legal foundations underlying Serbia’s “natural boundary” and Croatia’s “administrative continuity” arguments, emphasising that changes in the riverbed do not automatically alter the border unless explicitly stipulated in international treaties (Prescott, Triggs, 2008, pp. 210–213).

The Serbia–Croatia border dispute is concretely manifested along the Danube River, particularly on Vukovarska Island, located in the middle section of the river. Vukovarska Island is a small landmass of approximately 32,000 square metres situated near the left bank of the river. The island is separated from the mainland by a channel approximately 30 metres wide and is directly adjacent to the eastern boundary of the city of Vukovar. This geographic position enhances the island’s strategic and economic significance, as it lies close to the river’s navigation route, making it critical for navigation and logistical activities. Additionally, Gornja Šarengrad Island, another disputed area on the Danube, is smaller than Vukovarska Island but remains significant from strategic and legal perspectives. Located on the river’s right bank, Gornja Šarengrad Island constitutes a contested area in the determination of the Serbia–Croatia border, particularly concerning the river’s natural flow and channel changes. Croatia claims that the island is part of its national territory, whereas Serbia asserts control based on its current *de facto* administration and the *thalweg* principle, interpreting the island’s status in its favor. Sovereignty disputes over both islands directly impact regional security, affecting navigation rights, water resource management, and local administrative authority along the Danube (Ptáčník, 2022).

Politically, the Vukovarska and Gornja Šarengrad Islands have been under Serbian control since the early 1990s, but Croatia maintains that the islands fall within its national borders. This situation raises questions regarding the applicability of international law concepts, such as the status of river islands, *de facto* control, and the *thalweg* principle. In particular, changes in the river’s natural course over time and variations in channel width complicate the determination of which country’s claim to sovereignty is valid. Geographic and legal ambiguities have made the

Vukovarska and Gornja Šarengrad Islands sensitive points in diplomatic and security relations between Croatia and Serbia. Control over these islands is strategically significant not only in terms of physical boundaries but also in terms of navigation rights, water management, and local administrative authority along the Danube. In this context, both islands are among the most concrete and technically complex examples of the Croatia–Serbia border dispute (Dimitrijević, 2012, pp. 13–16).

The sovereignty dispute over these islands demonstrates that the border issue between the two countries is not merely a geographic matter but also a reflection of post-war perceptions of identity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. For Croatia, control over the islands is equated with the preservation of the state's territorial integrity, whereas for Serbia, sovereignty over the Danube is a symbol of regional influence. To date, the parties have made limited progress in negotiations mediated by the European Union. Despite the arbitration committee convening more than ten times since 2002 to determine the precise border, no concrete agreement has been reached.

Therefore, the border dispute along the Danube River can be regarded as a typical example of the “frozen border” phenomenon in the post-Dayton context in Bosnia. The distinction between *de facto* control and *de jure* sovereignty has led the two countries to construct divergent narratives of legitimacy in international forums. In this regard, Croatia and Serbia developed significantly different positions on the international stage after the war. Croatia's primary argument is that the administrative borders among the former Yugoslav republics should remain valid even after independence – an approach grounded in the opinions of the Badinter Arbitration Commission. The Serbia–Croatia border dispute, which emerged alongside the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, has particularly focused on the river islands along the Danube. This represents a classic case of a *uti possidetis juris* dispute arising from the transformation of former federal administrative boundaries into international borders between newly independent states (Pellet, 1992, pp. 178–180).

Opinion No. 3 of the Badinter Arbitration Commission, dated 20<sup>th</sup> November 1991, directly illuminated the legal status of the borders between Serbia and Croatia. The primary question addressed by the Commission was whether the internal administrative boundaries between Croatia and Serbia could be recognised as state borders under international law. After determining that Yugoslavia was undergoing a process of disintegration, the Commission relied on three fundamental principles of international law to determine borders: first, the inviolability of existing external borders; second, that no boundary changes may occur without the free

consent of the parties; and third, that former administrative boundaries, unless otherwise agreed upon, become internationally recognised state borders. Within this framework, the Commission emphasised that the principle of *uti possidetis juris* is not limited to post-colonial contexts but constitutes a general principle of international law to be applied in any newly independent state system to ensure border stability. Accordingly, under the Badinter Commission's decision, the borders between Croatia and Serbia should coincide with the administrative boundaries that existed between the two republics within the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. These borders may not be altered without mutual consent, and any de facto changes imposed through the use of force are deemed invalid under international law (Pellet, 1992, pp. 181–185).

Vukovarska Island on the Danube River serves as a concrete example of the application of this principle. The island's shoreline has shifted over time due to hydrological changes in the river. However, according to the principle of *uti possidetis juris*, the border should be determined based on the pre-dissolution administrative boundary rather than the river's dynamic natural course. In this context, Croatia's claim that the island forms part of its territorial integrity aligns with an international legal approach to maintaining the *status quo*. By contrast, Serbia argues that the border follows the thalweg of the Danube, asserting that the islands remain within its sovereign territory. Nevertheless, the Badinter Commission's approach rejects border claims based on the river's natural flow, reasoning that such arguments could threaten the stability of newly independent states emerging from the dissolution process (Ratner, 1996, pp. 590–592).

These two divergent narratives of legitimacy illustrate a profound distinction between de facto control and legal recognition. Croatia invokes international legal norms in favour of maintaining the *status quo*, asserting sovereignty based on historical continuity, whereas Serbia seeks to construct a legitimacy rooted in geographic reality by redefining natural boundaries. These dynamics transformed the Danube River border dispute from a mere technical disagreement between the two states into a symbolic contest over national identity and conceptions of sovereignty. Consequently, the Serbia–Croatia border dispute serves as a typical example of the “frozen border” phenomenon in the post-Dayton Balkan order, situated at the intersection of international legal norms and local sovereignty claims. Thus, the Danube is not merely a geographic boundary but also a tangible reflection of the fragile balance between sovereignty, identity, and law in the post-Yugoslav spatial order of Europe (Stefanov, Radović, 2021, pp. 14–18).

***From Natural Processes to Political Tensions: The Role of the EU and NATO in the Danube Border Dispute***

According to Klemenčić and Schofield, the disputed area covers approximately 140 kilometres of a 188-kilometre section of riverbed. This indicates a pronounced gap in control along with administrative ambiguity along the Danube, clearly illustrating why the border has evolved into a complex dispute in terms of de facto control and legal recognition. Furthermore, the presence of numerous settlements of strategic and economic significance within this area renders the resolution of the dispute particularly sensitive in terms of national interests (Klemenčić, Schofield, 2001, pp. 14–17).

However, the area is defined differently by these two countries. Serbia, citing a law enacted by the 1946 Assembly of Vojvodina, claims a 900-hectare area on the western side of the river. This claim may be interpreted as Serbia's effort to reinforce its concept of a "natural border", based on the current riverbed and de facto control, within the framework of international law. In contrast, Croatia claims sovereignty over an 11,500-hectare area on the eastern bank of the Danube (Reka, 2018). According to Balfour and Basic, border disputes between the two countries are influenced by natural factors. Natural events, such as soil erosion and floods, have shifted the flow of the Danube River westward, creating a significant border issue over an area of approximately 14,000 hectares. This situation complicates the interpretation of legal boundary lines in light of natural changes in the river's course and has led the two countries to advance divergent sovereignty claims in international forums (Balfour, Basic, 2010, pp. 1–4).

Since 2003, Serbia and Croatia have sought to resolve border disputes along the Danube River near the town of Bačka Palanka. In February 2018, Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić announced that border negotiations would not commence for at least two years. Stevanović, who chaired the Serbian delegation during the border talks, stated that the core issue between the two countries stems from disagreements on almost every aspect of the dispute. This assessment indicates that one of the main reasons for the stalemate is not merely a lack of political will but is directly related to mutual distrust and the regional balance of power (Stojanovic, 2020).

Nevertheless, occasional efforts have been made to improve bilateral relations. Notably, Serbia's material and moral assistance following a 6.4-magnitude earthquake in the Croatian city of Petrinja in December 2020 demonstrated that the basis for solidarity between the two countries during crises has not entirely disappeared. However, the tendency for every new

intercommunal dispute to be rapidly reflected in diplomatic relations has transformed the border issue into both a political and societal crisis of trust (Petrović, 2023, pp. 1–4).

The European Union addresses the Danube River border dispute between Serbia and Croatia within the framework of regional stability, environmental sustainability, and Serbia's accession process. In this context, the EU has implemented financial and technical programmes between 2020 and 2025 to promote good-neighbourly relations, support cross-border cooperation, and encourage environmental protection initiatives. In particular, coordination mechanisms between local governments and the strengthening of navigation rights have been used to enhance economic interaction between the parties, while Croatia's membership experiences have been integrated into Serbia's candidacy process, linking the resolution of border issues directly to the EU accession process. The 2021 and 2023 enlargement reports emphasised that Belgrade's progress in its relations with its neighbouring countries played a decisive role in the opening of negotiation chapters. The EU perceives the Danube River dispute not merely as a geographic issue but also as a strategic element for regional peace and sustainable integration, supporting the resolution of border disputes by encouraging dialogue and cooperation between parties. This approach is implemented as a core component of the EU's enlargement and integration policy in the Balkans, aligning with its objective of ensuring regional stability (European Commission, 2023, pp. 4–9).

NATO has developed comprehensive policies and mechanisms to promote security and stability in the Western Balkans. Through initiatives such as the *Partnership for Peace* and *Regional Cooperation Programmes*, NATO seeks to enhance cooperation among regional states in the military, legal, and technical domains. These programmes have strengthened communication channels between parties, increased crisis management capacities, and facilitated the implementation of confidence-building measures through joint exercises. Although NATO has not directly intervened in specific issues, such as the Danube River border dispute, the technical advice, exercises, and regional security mechanisms provided by the organisation have indirectly contributed to fostering mutual trust and exploring diplomatic solutions. In particular, cooperation in disaster management, border security, and emergency coordination has facilitated the development of security protocols along the border and enabled "frozen" disputes to be managed within an organised framework. This approach simultaneously preserves Serbia's neutral status while allowing Croatia, as a NATO member, to assume a regional conciliatory role (NATO, 2024).

At the global level, an analysis of the general orientations of the two countries reveals that the new administrations in these territories, formerly part of the Eastern Bloc, have adopted divergent foreign policy trajectories. Serbia has sought to cultivate close relations with global powers such as Russia and China, whereas Croatia has pursued a Western-aligned path, joining NATO in 2009 and the EU in 2013. An important point to note, however, is Croatia's support for Serbia's EU membership (European Commission, 2024, pp. 6–9). This policy also reflects the desire of the two countries to resolve historical disputes by participating in the process of European integration. Indeed, the EU, as part of its accession process, requires Serbia to establish good relations with its neighbours, resolve border disputes, and adopt positions consistent with European values, particularly in the context of the Ukraine-Russia war. In this framework, Serbia's EU membership is not only a measure of compliance with technical criteria but also an indicator of its capacity for regional consensus. In short, Serbia is expected to strengthen good neighbourly relations in accordance with the Royaumont Process, which was initiated on 13<sup>th</sup> December 1995. Launched at France's initiative, this process aimed to integrate the Balkans into the European security architecture by promoting stability, minority rights, and cross-border cooperation. Consequently, the prominence of the EU and NATO dimensions in Serbia-Croatia relations should be understood as an extension of this historical and institutional background (Jelesijević, 2024, pp. 22–24).

The border dispute over the Danube River represents not only territorial claims between the two countries but also a reflection of international institutions' strategies for maintaining regional stability. When combined with natural transformations and historical claims, the tension between de facto control and legal recognition perpetuates this dispute as an unresolved case of a "frozen border". Between 2020–2025, the EU's technical, financial, and diplomatic support, together with NATO's security and crisis management programmes, emerged as an effort to manage this frozen status within a non-conflictual framework. However, a definitive resolution remains contingent upon the parties' ability to build mutual trust, demonstrate commitment to regional integration, and align with international law principles.

## **Conclusions**

This study comprehensively has examined how the Serbia–Croatia border dispute in the post-Yugoslav Socialist Federal Republic period have been shaped by security, political, and economic processes within

the broader context of international relations in the Balkans. The analysis demonstrates that the national policies of regional actors are largely influenced by their relations with the EU and NATO, whereas cross-border cooperation and local-level coordination mechanisms reinforce this regional stability. Paasi's theories on spatial identity and borders elucidate how regional belonging is intertwined with state policies, whereas Newman, Diez, and Van Houtum emphasise that ethnic and political tensions constitute structural issues that must be addressed in connection with the international system. Stefanov's analyses highlight the conflict-mitigating role of economic integration and cooperative mechanisms, while Prescott and Triggs, along with Albert, support the potential of security and governance cooperation beyond national borders as a pathway to future resolution. Croatia's support for Serbia during its EU accession process, aimed at safeguarding regional stability, not only helps to prevent new conflicts in the region but also provides Serbia with diplomatic and economic opportunities.

In light of these findings, the main recommendations for ensuring the sustainability of regional stability are as follows: strengthening policies aligned with the EU and NATO frameworks; recognising the strategic importance of Croatia's support in Serbia's EU accession process; enhancing cross-border cooperation and inclusive governance models; and prioritising the development of multi-actor strategies aimed at reducing ethnic, economic, and environmental risks. Looking ahead, the potential resolution of the "frozen border" situation between Serbia and Croatia will depend on the initiatives of both regional and global actors. In particular, renewed tensions in Serbia–Croatia relations could once again render the region's security environment fragile. On the other hand, economic integration and cooperation in the fields of energy and the environment may strengthen regional solidarity and contribute to crisis prevention. In this context, the theoretical approaches of Paasi, Newman, Diez, Van Houtum, Stefanov, Prescott and Triggs, and Albert provide a valuable framework for understanding current regional stability and assessing future prospects.

In the specific context of the Danube River dispute, this study demonstrates that conflict is not merely a geographical or technical issue but also encompasses multiple dimensions involving international law, sovereignty, and regional stability. The framework proposed by Paasi and Newman highlights the social and political dimensions of borders, whereas Prescott and Triggs's analysis explains the legal implications of natural changes in the riverbed. In this regard, Serbia emphasises the arguments of a "natural border" and "legitimate geographical change",

while Croatia stresses the principles of “status quo” and “administrative continuity”. According to Prescott and Triggs, gradual natural changes in a riverbed may shift the boundary line over time, whereas sudden alterations do not affect it. Therefore, a change in the course of a river does not automatically entail a change in boundary. In light of these insights, Croatia’s arguments appear to rest on a stronger legal foundation, as they are based on the principles of “status quo” and “administrative continuity” under international law.

This study recommends that the parties establish a transparent cooperation mechanism from both legal and technical perspectives, promote mediation to resolve disputes within the framework of international legal principles, and encourage agreements that enhance regional stability. Future prospects indicate that natural changes in riverbeds, coupled with evolving regional political developments, may bring such border disputes back onto the agenda.

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## **The European Union's Policy Towards Pakistan: The Role of Selected External Determinants**

### **Abstract**

The main objective of this article is to analyse selected external determinants of the EU's policy towards Pakistan. The analysis focuses on power dynamics and the international system. Neorealism explains state behaviour primarily through the structure of the international system, especially the distribution of power. The EU's policy towards Pakistan is shaped not only by bilateral interests but also by the regional balance of power involving India, Pakistan, and China. It can be assumed that while promoting specific norms and values, the European Union must also consider structural factors, particularly the distribution of power in South Asia. The research methods used are qualitative in nature, with content analysis serving as the principal method. One of the key findings is that neorealism effectively captures how systemic pressures and regional rivalries shape the EU's foreign policy choices towards Pakistan in the context of the India-Pakistan conflict and China's growing presence in South Asia. The EU's foreign policy thus reflects systemic incentives to maintain relevance within a changing power structure, rather than being based purely on values.

**Keywords:** Pakistan, European Union, Foreign Policy, India, China, External Limitations, External Determinants

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## **Introduction**

South Asia plays a significant role in the European Union's global strategy. The most important element is the development of a political and economic partnership with India, although neighbouring Pakistan also occupies a significant position in the EU's approach, especially due to its geopolitical location as well as issues related to international security. At the same time, closer cooperation with Pakistan may pose a considerable challenge for EU policymakers, given the country's internal instability, problems related to human rights violations and challenging neighbours such as India and Afghanistan. The factors listed above affect the nature and quality of EU-Pakistan relations and can be divided into two groups: internal determinants and external determinants. These determinants are also taken into account when formulating goals and implementing the EU's foreign policy toward Pakistan.

The first group is related to the internal political situation in Pakistan. In this context, it is necessary to analyse the potential limitations in the implementation of the EU's foreign policy towards Pakistan due to the country's domestic challenges. The main factors are related to the violation of human rights and violations of the rule of law. The second group pertains to the external environment, focusing on selected limitations of the European Union's policy towards Pakistan due to the country's geopolitical context, particularly its proximity to such major powers as the People's Republic of China and India.

The main objective of this article is to analyse these external determinants of the EU's policy towards Pakistan. To examine the correlation between external factors and EU policy objectives and actions towards Pakistan, two working hypotheses have been formulated.

**Hypothesis 1** – The EU's policy towards Pakistan is determined by the current state of India-Pakistan relations.

**Hypothesis 2** – The EU's policy towards Pakistan is limited by the proximity and influence of the People's Republic of China.

The research methods applied are qualitative in nature. The primary research method is content analysis, while the main research technique involves the analysis of official documents adopted by EU institutions in relation to Pakistan, with particular emphasis on international factors. These documents include the 2004 *Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development*, the *EU-Pakistan Strategic Engagement Plan* of 2019, the *Generalized Scheme of Preferences Plus* (GSP+), European Council

conclusions, and statements issued by the High Representative. An important complement to the assumptions and declarations contained in official documents is the analysis of publications describing the actual actions undertaken by EU institutions in relation to Pakistan. Among them are selected monographs, academic articles, interviews, and press reports.

## **Theoretical Background**

The impact of the India–Pakistan conflict and China's proximity on the EU's policy toward Pakistan can be analysed through the lens of structural realism, which is also known as neorealism (Waltz, 1990, p. 21). Among the main classical assumptions of this theory is the portrayal of the international system as anarchic, that is, a system without any central authority (Kapitonienko, 2022, p. 99). Neorealists also assume that states are rational actors whose behaviour is driven mainly by the distribution of power and that their actions are based on relative gains rather than absolute morality or norms (Waltz, 2010).

Neorealism focuses on power dynamics and the structure of the international system, explaining state behaviour primarily through the distribution of power (Tabak, 2025, p. 182). The EU's policy toward Pakistan is shaped not only by bilateral interests but also by the regional balance of power involving India, Pakistan, and China. It may therefore be assumed that while promoting specific norms and values, the European Union must also consider structural factors, particularly the distribution of power within the South Asian region. These factors create a context that, in turn, determines the extent to which constraints exist on the EU's policy towards such states as Pakistan.

One of the most important factors is the emphasis on security and strategic balancing. China's growing influence in South Asia and its alliance with Pakistan have altered the regional balance, prompting the EU to engage cautiously with Pakistan in order to maintain strategic relevance and avoid deepening regional instability. Neorealism provides a useful framework for understanding these security-driven calculations. According to Joyce Kaufman, to many neorealists "the post-Cold War period is more dangerous and unstable than the Cold War was, with the ongoing power of the United States, but also the European Union, Russia, and more recently the rise of China, as well as any number of other countries also seeking to gain more power and international prestige" (Kaufman, 2022, p. 54).

Attention should be paid to a limited role of domestic factors and norms. While the EU emphasises human rights and trade standards, its

policy often reflects pragmatic strategic interests, especially in security and trade. Neorealism accounts for these interest-based behaviours more convincingly than liberalism or constructivism. At this point, however, an important question arises: can such a pattern be observed in the case of the EU's policy towards Pakistan, given its proximity to India and China? Is the European Union limiting itself in its policies or actions towards Pakistan taking into account the positions of these key regional players?

### **A Brief Overview of EU's Policy Towards Pakistan in the Post-Cold War Period**

EU–Pakistan relations date back to the 1960s. Diplomatic relations between the European Economic Community (EEC) and Pakistan were established in 1962. Initial cooperation focused on development aid and trade preferences under the EEC's general assistance for developing countries. Pakistan was one of many Asian partners receiving technical and economic assistance from the European Community (Noor, 2008, p. 19). The first commercial cooperation agreement between the EEC and Pakistan was signed in 1976, and, nine years later, the EEC opened its first office in Islamabad.

However, in the 1990s, bilateral cooperation was seriously limited and hindered by EU concerns over Pakistan's human rights record and its acquisition of nuclear weapons. The situation changed after the 9/11 attacks, when Pakistan joined the international anti-terror operations in Afghanistan at the beginning of the twenty-first century, various countries and international financial institutions restructured Pakistan's debt or offered financial support, and the European Union was among them, reducing duties on Pakistan's export and increasing import quotas for products made in Pakistan (Belokrenitsky, Moskalenko, 2014, p. 378). In this way, the Pakistani authorities benefited from their decisions that aligned with the Union's policy toward South Asia and its counterterrorism objectives.

The main objectives of the European Union at that time were, however, largely limited to Pakistan's internal social situation. These included the improvement of human development, the eradication of child labour, the promotion of democracy and human rights, and only very general references to regional security. As a result, the objectives were not directly related to diplomatic relations or cooperation between the EU and Pakistan, except in the areas of trade and conflict resolution efforts. The dynamics of change in the region, particularly those resulting from the situation in neighbouring Afghanistan and the need to secure supplies

for the military forces stationed there as part of the ISAF mission, quickly altered this state of affairs. In the opinion of Muhammad Riaz Shad, although the EU prioritised “its security in its relations with Pakistan, it did not lose interest in the promotion of norms” (Shad, 2017, p. 28).

Current EU–Pakistan relations are based on two major agreements: the 2004 *Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development* and the *EU–Pakistan Strategic Engagement Plan* of 2019. The 2004 agreement expanded cooperation beyond aid to include trade, energy, governance, and human rights. Article 11 of the agreement refers to regional cooperation and clearly states that “the parties agree that cooperation between them may include actions undertaken under cooperation agreements with other countries in the same region, provided that such action is compatible with this agreement” (Council Decision, 2004).

In response to shared global challenges, the European Union and Pakistan launched a strategic dialogue in 2012. Within the framework of new areas of cooperation, bilateral relations were broadened and specified. The *5-Year Engagement Plan* for 2012 and 2017 proved to be particularly successful and fruitful. This new dimension of cooperation facilitated the development and signing of the most important and comprehensive document within the framework of EU–Pakistan relations, namely, the *Strategic Engagement Plan* (Kugiel, 2012).

The main areas addressed in the *EU–Pakistan Strategic Engagement Plan* are peace and security, democracy, the rule of law, good governance and human rights, migration and mobility, trade and investment, sustainable development, education and culture, and science and technology (*EU–Pakistan Strategic Engagement Plan*, 2019). Regarding the issue of maintaining peace and security in the region, both sides committed to exchanging “views and perspectives on regional stability and fostering inclusive cooperation towards regional peace, security, and prosperity,” as well as to holding “regular security and defense staff talks with special focus on regional security and in the field of crisis management” (*EU–Pakistan Strategic Engagement Plan*, 2019). Notably, the European Union concluded this agreement with Pakistan despite tensions in that country’s relations with India in 2019. The document proves that the EU treats Pakistan as an independent partner, rather than solely through the lens of its relationship with India.

Since 2014, Pakistan has benefited from Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) status, which is a special trade arrangement offered by the European Union to selected developing countries. These partners are required to implement 27 international conventions on human rights, labour rights, the environment, and good governance. In

return, the EU cuts “its import duties to zero on more than two thirds of the tariff lines of their exports” (Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus – GSP+, 2025). The current GSP+ status is valid until 2027 and provides Pakistan with duty-free access to EU markets. Pakistan is one of eight countries which have been granted this special status, alongside Bolivia, Cape Verde, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Uzbekistan.

From 2014 to 2022, Pakistan’s exports to the EU increased by 108%, and the total trade volume rose from 8.3 billion euros to 14.85 billion euros. However, a significant limitation constraining the further development of the bilateral trade cooperation is Pakistan’s underutilisation of its GSP+ potential. Although it has the largest share in the textile sector of the EU, Pakistan could enhance its benefits by diversifying exports and increasing value-added products to its export basket (Shad, Malik, Rashid, 2025, p. 58). Nonetheless, political factors, rather than economic issues, constitute the principle challenge in the EU’s relations with Pakistan, especially in the context of that country’s relations with India and China.

### **The EU and the India-Pakistan Rivalry**

The conflict between India and Pakistan has persisted since the end of British colonisation and the emergence of these two independent states since 1947. The territorial division of colonial India led to the emergence of a number of international disputes, especially in the Kashmir region (see Khan, 2017; Puri, 2012; Sanjeev Kumar, 2022; Schofield, 2021). Over the past six decades, Pakistan and India have fought four wars, one of which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 (Pande, 2021, p. 21; see also Hali, 2021; Raghavan, 2022).

The issue of the India–Pakistan conflict was not mentioned directly either in the *2004 Cooperation Agreement on Partnership and Development*, or in the *EU-Pakistan Strategic Engagement Plan* of 2019. This omission does not mean that this issue has no impact on the EU’s policy towards Pakistan or the South Asian region. Rather, it demonstrates that the EU avoids language that could be misinterpreted by either of the conflicting parties. Nevertheless, the fact that the conflict influences the EU’s actions towards Pakistan can be observed by analysing other sources and publications.

It is certainly worth noting that unresolved issues in the Kashmir region affect not only the situation in the region itself, but also the entire country. They also contribute to increasing security threats in India. According to Tughral Yamin and Muhammad Makki, “the conflict

between India and Pakistan over Kashmir has also been contributing to the weakened security situation in the country. The dispute has not, or has never, remained restricted to the region divided by the line of control (LOC) between India and Pakistan but has recurrently been voiced as a reason behind different terrorist incidents in the two countries” (Yamin, Makki, 2021, pp. 268–269).

The India–Pakistan conflict adds urgency to these dialogues, especially during times of heightened tension. The EU, guided by structural constraints, adopts a cautious balanced approach to South Asia, avoiding favouritism towards India or Pakistan. India’s growing regional and global influence forces the EU to hedge its relations with Pakistan, maintaining a limited yet strategic engagement in order to preserve its influence in the region. This is one of the reasons why the EU remains neutral in the Kashmir dispute. It has repeatedly called for dialogue and a peaceful resolution, emphasising respect for human rights and international law. After the 2019 Pulwama–Balakot escalation, the EU urged both sides to “exercise utmost restraint”, deliberately avoiding direct alignment with either country. On 27 February 2019, High Representative Federica Mogherini stated: “Following the recent terrorist attack in Pulwama, tensions along the line of control between India and Pakistan have escalated militarily during the last days. This has the potential to lead to serious and dangerous consequences for the two countries and the wider region. We expect both countries to now exercise utmost restraint and avoid any further escalation of the situation. To this end, the resumption of diplomatic contacts at political level and implementation of urgent measures by both sides is vital” (Statement, 2019).

Kaja Kallas’s statement of 8 May 2025, referring to the terrorist attack in Jammu and Kashmir, serves as another example of this attitude. The incumbent High Representative neither identified those responsible for the attacks, nor exerted any pressure on either India or Pakistan. At the same time, Kallas declared: “The EU urges both sides to engage in dialogue. It is vital that India and Pakistan also live up to their obligations under international law and take all measures possible to protect civilian lives” (India/Pakistan Statement, 2025). This formulation illustrates the EU’s pragmatic approach to tensions in India–Pakistan relations and highlights its own diplomatic limitations in that part of the world. Wherever possible, the EU strives to maintain a neutral stance while maximising the potential benefits of pursuing such a cautious and balanced policy.

This neutral stance may have been appreciated by citizens of the EU or Pakistan, but not by those of India, where the terrorist attacks occurred.

Some Indian commentators directly accused the EU of hypocrisy, even claiming that its neutral stance effectively legitimised the actions of Islamabad-backed terrorist groups. Shreya Sinha, for instance, stated that “Europe, being a normative power, with its historical commitment to human rights, international law, and principled foreign policy, must recognise that treating India and Pakistan as equals in moments of terror completely misreads the regional security architecture in the South Asian theatre” (Sinha, 2025). Although such opinions are not officially shared by the Indian authorities, they reflect a widespread perception of the EU’s neutrality towards the conflict in South Asia. A similar reaction was evident during the crisis in 2019, when Federica Mogherini, instead of condemning the attacks by Pakistani-backed groups, as expected by the Indian public, limited her response to urging Pakistan to de-escalate the conflict (EU dials Pakistan, 2019).

### **The Proximity of the People’s Republic of China**

In the twenty-first century, the People’s Republic of China has increasingly sought to weaken the dominance of the United States and the European Union in Asia. China has challenged the West not only in key international institutions but also in individual regions (Cheng, 2016, p. 322). There is little doubt that China views its immediate neighbourhood, including Pakistan, as being within its own sphere of influence. Although it avoids using this term and constantly emphasises the partnership-based nature of these relations, in practice, as the stronger actor, it demands loyalty – if not submission – from other states.

According to Shivshankar Menon, “the India–China fault line in the subcontinent has not achieved the salience or nature of the India–Pakistan one, which has prevented subcontinent-wide cooperation from gaining momentum. The subcontinent’s Asian or global significance remains largely a function of India’s role, one that would be strengthened if India worked with, rather than against, her neighbours” (Menon, 2021, p. 282). At the same time, it would be difficult to deny that the People’s Republic of China exerts significant influence over the political situation in Pakistan and, therefore, plays a major role in the South Asian region (Bhaskar, 2022, p. 11). This raises an important question: does Chinese involvement in Pakistan indirectly influence the European Union’s actions towards the country?

As with the rivalry between India and Pakistan, official EU documents related to its cooperation with Pakistan lack any reference to the growing role of the People’s Republic of China in South Asia, and especially in

Pakistan. This omission does not, however, imply that Chinese influence in Pakistan is disregarded by EU diplomats. In this respect, the EU adopts a position akin to structural realism, taking into account the actual distribution of political and economic power in the region. The EU does not directly challenge Beijing in Pakistan, but continues to promote democratic values and respect for human rights in the country. At the same time, European policymakers act cautiously, realistically assessing the situation and trying not to damage their positive economic relations with Pakistan (Small, 2020, p. 96).

It is indeed the case that “China is an even stronger ally for Pakistan. Antipathy towards India provides them their common strategic glue” (Dogra, 2020, p. 101). Security considerations make good and close relations with China absolutely essential for Pakistan. Pakistan’s security strategy is built on cooperation with Beijing, a factor that must be taken into account not only by the EU but also by all other international actors.

The EU remains mindful of the geopolitical dynamics in South Asia, especially where these intersect with its interests in trade, connectivity, and global security (South Asia, 2025). European policymakers must also respond to the realities of global polarity and the intensifying rivalry between the United States and China. Deepening relations with Pakistan enables the EU to retain strategic flexibility in Asia, even though it is not a traditional hard-power actor.

The European Union observes the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as evidence of deepening ties between Beijing and Islamabad. Agnieszka Nitza-Makowska, for instance, identified several key factors affecting the EU’s position on the CPEC. According to her, “establishing a peaceful environment and improving connectivity in Pakistan serves both China’s and the EU’s strategies *vis-à-vis* the country. However, while the EU and China have similar goals, they are applying different strategies to achieve them. Contrary to China’s schemes, the EU’s emphasise conditionality” (Nitza-Makowska, 2020, p. 39).

In China’s case, this corridor primarily serves to achieve its foreign policy goals, especially as an integral component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For the European Union, by contrast, it represents an infrastructure initiative expected to contribute to the development of Pakistan. Although the Chinese authorities also highlight that they support the development of Pakistan, it is easy to see that the development of the corridor primarily advances China’s strategic interests. For the EU, meanwhile, it constitutes just one of many forms of economic cooperation it supports in the countries of the Global South.

The CPEC also affects the EU's approach to regional connectivity and infrastructure standards, as the Union promotes its own Global Gateway strategy as a counterweight to China's model. As Ursula von der Leyen stated, the EU "will support smart investments in quality infrastructure, respecting the highest social and environmental standards, in line with the EU's values and standards" (Global Gateway, 2025). The EU remains cautious about investing in areas such as the Gwadar port, due to China's dominant presence and strategic influence.

Seeking regional stability, the EU views the China–Pakistan nexus as a factor that complicates its conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts. Its selective cooperation with Pakistan can be interpreted as an effort to preserve strategic access in a China-dominated neighbourhood without engaging in direct confrontation. From a neorealist perspective, the Union must consider how closer EU–Pakistan ties could be perceived by Beijing, potentially disrupting regional power equilibriums. While the EU supports engagement with Pakistan, it often emphasises rules-based multilateralism, partly as a contrast to China's state-led model.

## **Conclusions**

Neorealism effectively captures how systemic pressures and regional rivalries shape the European Union's foreign policy choices towards Pakistan in the context of the India–Pakistan conflict and China's growing presence. EU foreign policy in that region reflects systemic incentives to maintain relevance within a changing power structure, rather than decisions based purely on values.

The India–Pakistan conflict influences the EU's policy toward Pakistan, but it does not fully determine it. The Union maintains a balanced, multi-dimensional policy that considers regional tensions, while simultaneously addressing trade, development, human rights, and counterterrorism.

While the conflict constitutes a contextual factor, the EU's policy toward Pakistan is ultimately shaped by independent and pragmatic interests, including development aid, trade, and diplomatic engagement. China's proximity and deepening ties with Pakistan further influence the EU's strategic caution, its focus on transparency and rules, and its push for alternatives such as the Global Gateway initiative. Although the EU does not confront China directly in Pakistan, it adjusts its engagement in response to China's expanding influence.

The EU's neutral stance on Kashmir, its strategic prudence regarding the CPEC, and its efforts to balance ties with both India and Pakistan in a region of rising Chinese power are best understood through a neorealist

lens focused on power balancing, survival, and influence within an anarchic international system.

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## **From Investment to Impact: The Role of European FDI and Corporate Social Responsibility in Africa's Sustainable Growth**

### **Abstract**

Africa continues to face persistent development challenges, making foreign direct investment (FDI) essential for growth and sustainability. This paper examines the role of the European Union (EU) as Africa's leading investor, with particular emphasis on how European companies employ Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to complement their FDI. The study is guided by three research questions. First, what is the overall role of FDI in African development, and to what extent does it influence per capita income and inequality? The underlying hypothesis is that European FDI strengthens productive capacity and supports structural transformation, thereby contributing to higher GDP per capita and reduced inequality. Second, how do CSR initiatives enhance sustainability at the micro level? Here, the hypothesis is that multinational enterprises seek to mitigate externalities, apply European ESG standards in weaker regulatory environments, and counter neo-colonial narratives. Third, do CSR strategies differ across sectors? It is hypothesised that firms adapt CSR to specific social and environmental externalities. Using data from

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UNCTAD, the World Bank, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the study finds that FDI correlates positively with GDP per capita but does not have a significant effect on inequality, while environmental outcomes show clearer improvement. Case studies of European firms confirm sector-specific CSR contributions while also highlighting reputational risks and controversies.

**Keywords:** EU, Foreign Direct Investment, Africa, Sustainability, CSR, European Companies, European Union

## Introduction

Africa faces some of the most profound development challenges, an issue that affects nearly all countries on the continent, albeit under diverse circumstances (Nomsoor, 2025; UNCTAD, 2024). While many Asian and Latin American nations have made substantial progress in their development (Hemor, Kapilya, 2025), most African countries, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, continue to rank low in terms of human development. Indeed, according to the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2025), 73% of countries classified as having low human development are located in Africa. That means only two African countries (Seychelles and Mauritius) are categorised as very highly developed, eight as upper medium income (Algeria, Egypt, Tunisia, South Africa, Gabon, Botswana, Libya, and Morocco), twenty-one (out of forty-three) have lower medium income, and twenty-two (out of twenty-six) exhibit low development levels of development.

One of the key factors in addressing development deficits is the inflow of external capital, which can help break the poverty trap (Nurkse, 1953; Azariadis, 1996). Many African nations, especially those in the Sub-Saharan region, remain caught in this trap (Anjande et al., 2022). However, the capacity to absorb foreign direct investment (FDI) is insufficient on its own unless it is supported by adequate levels of human capital and robust institutional frameworks (Guo et al., 2021; Arogundade et al., 2022). FDI plays a vital role not only by expanding the productive capacity of host countries but also by creating positive spillovers in terms of skills development and knowledge transfer (Todo, Aoki, 2008).

Analysing the relationship between FDI and development is complex. However, assessing the effects of FDI on sustainable development is even more intricate. Foreign direct investment should support both development and sustainability by promoting:

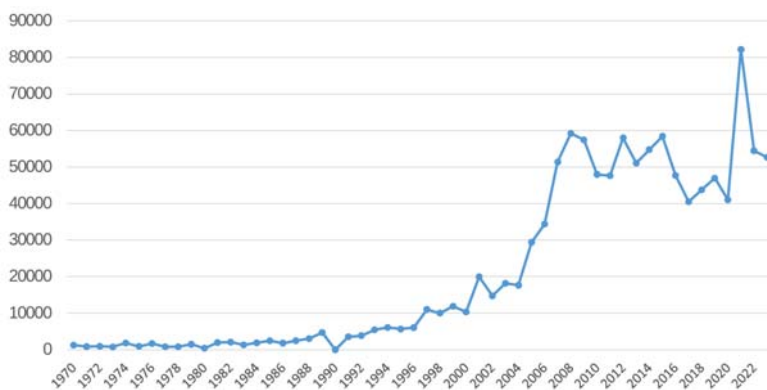
- Technological advancement and innovation (Guo et al., 2021), as FDI often introduces more advanced technologies;

- Productivity gains (Javorcik, 2004), given that FDI usually involves capital-intensive investment that raises the capital-labour ratio;
- Employment creation and income generation (OECD, 2008), which generally results in more and better-paid jobs, partly due to productivity improvements;
- The adoption of global standards and codes of conduct (UNCTAD, 2023), contributing to improved labour conditions and a reduction in environmental impacts.

Nonetheless, FDI can also generate potentially negative effects (Forsgren, 2008; Umiński, Borowicz 2021). These include not only adverse impacts on economic growth (Emako et al., 2022) but also detrimental consequences for sustainable development, especially regarding environmental degradation and persistent poverty (Dhrifi et al., 2020). Specifically, in the African context, FDI has been positively linked to environmental harm, such as increased greenhouse gas emissions, pollution, and overexploitation of resources, particularly in lower-middle-income economies (Opoku et al., 2023).

Since the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, Africa has experienced a notable rise in FDI inflows. Figure 1 illustrates the evolution of these inflows, highlighting considerable volatility in recent years. Between 2006 and 2023, FDI inflows to Africa generally fluctuated between 40 and 60 billion USD, while the continent’s share of global FDI stood at approximately 4% in 2023 (UNCTAD, 2024b).

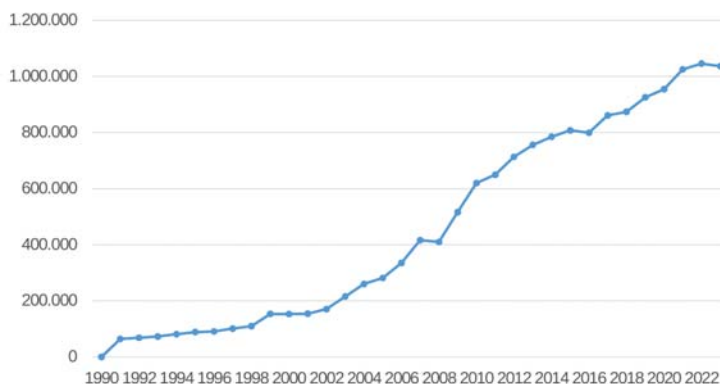
According to UNCTAD data (2025 a), it is also important to emphasise that Africa continues to receive below-average investment in projects aligned with SDGs, with only emerging Asia significantly surpassing global averages.



**Figure 1. Evolution of FDI to Africa (USD Millions)**

Source: Authors’ own elaboration based on data from UNCTAD (2025a).

Although official 2024 data have not yet been incorporated into the UNCTAD statistical database, preliminary figures indicate that Africa received 97 billion USD in FDI during that year (UNCTAD, 2025b). Notably, this growth in investment was concentrated exclusively in North Africa, with no comparable increase observed in other African subregions (UNCTAD, 2025b).



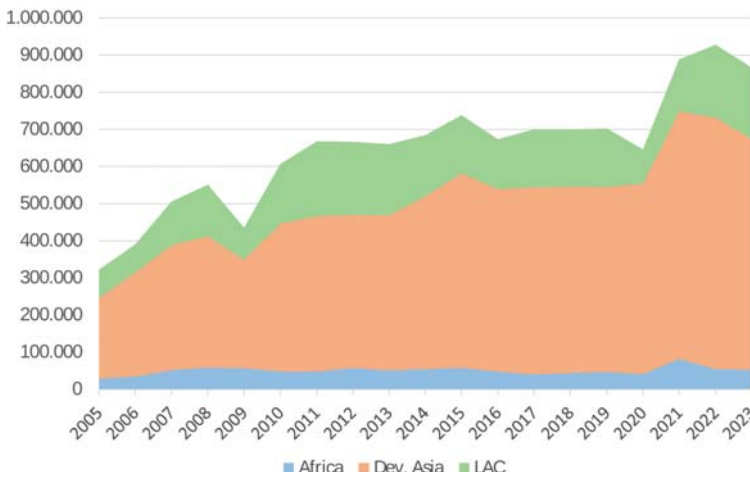
**Figure 2. Evolution of FDI Stock to Africa (USD Millions)**

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data from UNCTAD (2025a).

Regarding the stock of FDI received by Africa, Figure 2 indicates that growth plateaued between 2021 and 2023, with a slight decline recorded in 2023. An analysis of the distribution of FDI across major emerging regions of the world highlights Africa's relatively low share, as illustrated in Figures 3 and 4. After reaching a peak in 2009 – when Africa accounted for more than 13% of total FDI directed towards emerging economies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America – the continent's share steadily declined, dropping to just 6.1% in 2023. A similar downward trend is evident in the development of Africa's overall FDI stock.

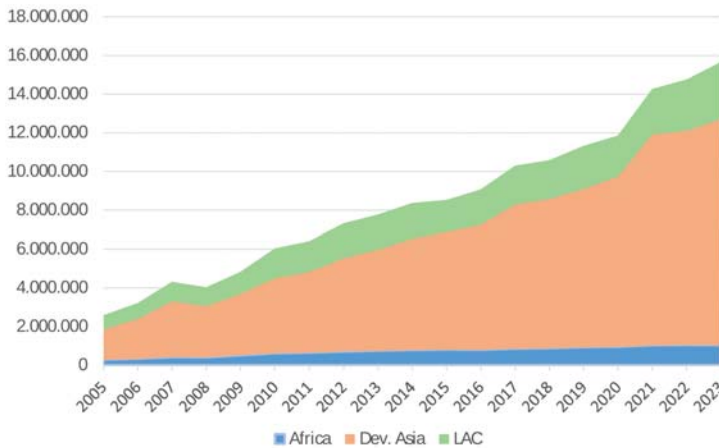
Figure 5 displays data on the top ten source countries of FDI in Africa, comparing figures from 2023 with those from 2017. In 2023, the leading investor was the Netherlands. Among the top ten countries, four are members of the European Union, in addition to the United Kingdom. When combined, the investment stock from these four EU countries amounted to 178 billion USD in 2023, far exceeding the levels for the United States (56 billion USD) and China (42 billion USD). When the United Kingdom is included, the total investment volume from these European investors rises to 236 billion USD.

In terms of sectoral distribution, three areas dominate investment flows to Africa: oil extraction and mining, construction, and infrastructure.



**Figure 3. FDI Received by the Different Developing Regions 2005–2023 (USD Millions)**

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data from UNCTAD (2025 a).

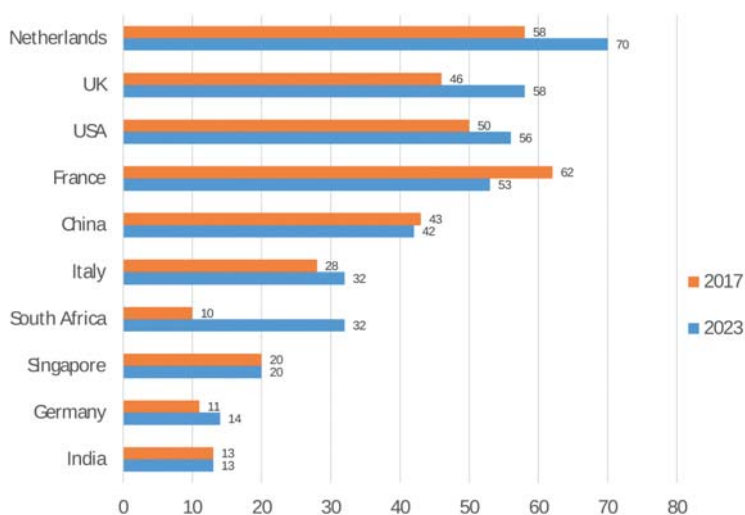


**Figure 4. Stock of FDI Received by Developing Regions (USD Millions)**

Source: Authors' own elaboration with data from UNCTAD (2025a)

However, many African countries have expressed a strong interest in attracting investment to other sectors, such as the pharmaceutical industry, where FDI remains almost non-existent (UNCTAD, 2025b).

Through FDI, European companies contribute to Africa's development by enhancing infrastructure and services, modernising productive systems, and supporting structural transformation processes in host economies. Yet, the impact of their presence may extend beyond



**Figure 5. Main Countries of Origin of FDI to Africa (Billions USD)**

Source: UNCTAD (2025).

economic indicators. European firms increasingly operate in ways that differ from past practices, aiming to foster constructive relationships with host countries and local communities. This shift is not only driven by corporate values rooted in sustainability and ethical governance principles but also by the lingering legacy of colonial and neo-colonial perceptions. As a result, many European companies face the need to actively counter negative historical associations.

In this context, implementing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) strategies, especially those aligned with Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles, serves a dual purpose. First, it reflects corporate commitments rooted in European regulatory and ethical standards; second, it helps to establish legitimacy and trust within African host societies, where such investments might otherwise be met with suspicion.

## **Theoretical Framework**

In general terms, the theoretical framework underlying this study posits that the inflow of foreign direct investment (FDI) exerts positive effects on economic growth – both in absolute terms and per capita – as well as on employment generation. Growth and international trade theories emphasise that FDI can serve as a key engine for economic development, particularly in low- and middle-income countries.

It is, however, important to clearly state that the relationship between FDI and economic growth is bidirectional. Not only can FDI stimulate economic development, but the level of economic development itself – along with factors such as market size, infrastructure, institutional quality, and political stability – can also significantly influence the volume and nature of FDI inflows. In this sense, economic growth and FDI interact with and reinforce one other, creating a feedback loop that shapes long-term development trajectories.

**Table 1. Theoretical Framework on FDI and Development**

Theory / Model	Key Authors	Main Contribution of FDI	Implications for Developing Economies
Endogenous Growth Models	Romer (1986, 1990), Lucas (1988)	FDI fosters technological progress, knowledge diffusion, and human capital formation	Sustained productivity growth through transfer of skills and innovation
Neoclassical Growth Model	Solow (1956)	FDI increases physical capital stock and boosts short- to medium-term growth	Accelerates convergence and raises per capita income in developing countries
Product Life-Cycle Theory	Vernon (1966)	MNEs relocate production to developing countries once products mature	Supports industrialisation, job creation, and global market access
Dynamic Comparative Advantage	Findlay (1978), Lall (2000)	FDI catalyses structural transformation and economic diversification	Enables shift from low-value to higher-value activities
Investment Development Path (IDP)	Dunning (1981)	FDI is not only seen as a source of capital but as an indicator and driver of economic development, reflecting structural changes and stages of economic maturity. The model links a country's level of development (proxied by GDP per capita) with its net outward investment position over time	Dunning's IDP concept is not only about the flows of foreign capital or investment position of a country, but also about the broader process of economic development. By taking GDP per capita into account, it reflects changes in societal prosperity. For developing economies, this implies that attracting FDI can be both a consequence and a catalyst of development, moving countries through different IDP stages as they industrialise, build institutions, and integrate into the global economy.

<b>Theory / Model</b>	<b>Key Authors</b>	<b>Main Contribution of FDI</b>	<b>Implications for Developing Economies</b>
Technological Spillovers	Caves (1974); Blomström, Kokko (1998)	FDI enhances domestic firm performance via imitation, competition, and labour mobility	Strengthens local industries and stimulates domestic innovation
Catalytic Capital Hypothesis	Agosin, Machado (2005)	FDI stimulates domestic investment by lowering risks and improving institutions	Expands business opportunities and deepens local investment climate
Global Value Chain Integration	Dunning (1993); UNCTAD (2005)	FDI incorporates economies into global production, trade, and innovation networks	Improves competitiveness and access to international markets

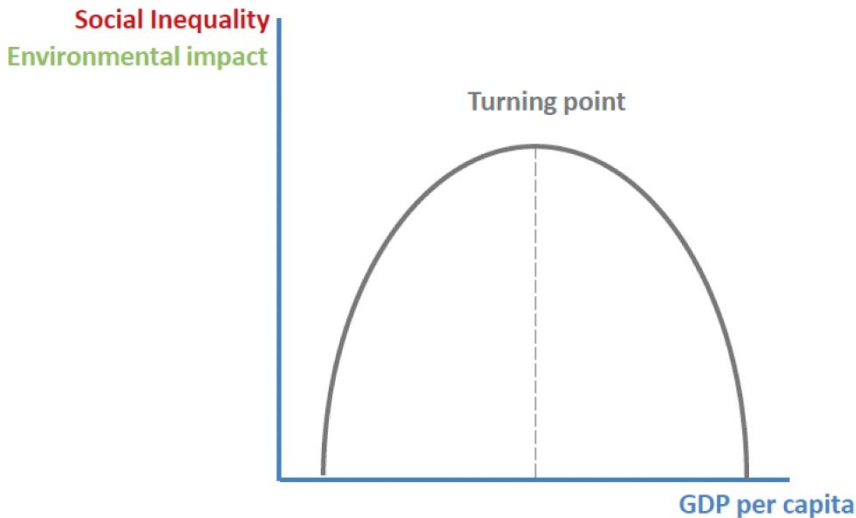
Source: Authors' own elaboration.

However, despite these potential positive effects, FDI may also generate adverse social and environmental impacts, particularly when rapid growth exacerbates inequality or ecological degradation.

One theoretical foundation for the social dimension of these concerns is found in the Kuznets' curve (Kuznets, 1955), which illustrates the relationship between GDP per capita and income inequality. Inequality is a key component of social sustainability and is explicitly addressed by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

A similar conceptual model has been proposed for environmental dynamics. The Environmental Kuznets Curve (EKC), introduced by Grossman and Krueger (1991), suggests that at low levels of GDP per capita, environmental impact is minimal. As economic activity intensifies, environmental degradation rises due to weak regulation, overexploitation of resources, and industrial expansion. Beyond a certain income threshold, however, this trend reverses: environmental quality begins to improve as firms adopt cleaner technologies, environmental regulations are enforced, and societal pressures – through civil society, NGOs, and global standards – compel companies to act more responsibly.

Although sustainable development extends beyond income inequality and environmental harm, this study adopts the premise that Kuznets-type relationships are applicable to the analysis of sustainability, particularly given that both inequality and environmental degradation constitute central dimensions of sustainability.



**Figure 6. Social and Environmental Kuznets Curve**

Source: Authors' own elaboration from Kuznets (1955), and Grossman, Krueger (1991).

In the following section, the social and environmental Kuznets curves are combined to explore their connection with GDP per capita growth, highlighting an inverted U-shaped trend between per capita income and both inequality and environmental degradation.

Within the framework of FDI, the inflow of investment into African countries contribute to rising per capita income levels. If the assumptions of the social and environmental Kuznets curves hold, such investment initially causes higher inequality and environmental degradation during the early stages of development. However, once FDI raises GDP per capita beyond a certain threshold, its impact on inequality and environmental harm begins to diminish, thereby improving conditions and supporting greater social and environmental sustainability.

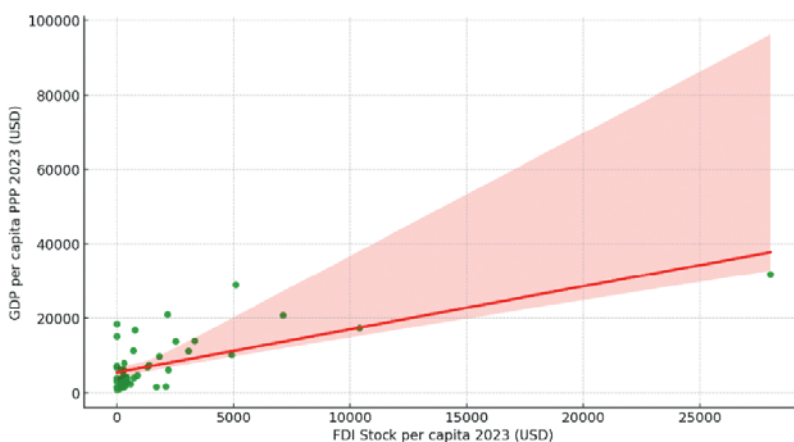
Nevertheless, multinational enterprises (MNEs) in the twenty-first century do not operate in the same manner as they did in the latter half of the twentieth century. As outlined by Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), companies have adopted a more responsible approach to the societies and markets in which they operate. According to Carroll's pyramid of corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Carroll, 1991), firms are expected not only to create economic value but also to fulfil legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities. Similarly, Porter and Kramer's (2011) theory of Shared Value Creation (SVC) posits that firms can simultaneously generate both

economic and social value by developing products that address social needs (such as food, health, or energy), improving working conditions through increased productivity, and creating positive local effects in the regions where they invest.

The key distinction is that SVC treats creation of social value as a core component of a firm’s competitive edge, rather than viewing it as a secondary or peripheral CSR activity. In this way, shared value is not merely about reputation or ethics, but constitutes a strategic asset embedded within the business model itself.

### **The Relationship Between FDI, Income Growth, and Levels of Inequality and Environmental Degradation**

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA, 2022) analyses recent trends in foreign direct investment (FDI) in Africa and highlights its impact on economic growth, with particular emphasis on the increase in GDP per capita.



**Figure 7. Regression: FDI Stock vs. GDP Per Capita**

Source: Authors’ own elaboration based on data from UNCTAD (2024) and World Development Indicators (World Bank, 2024).

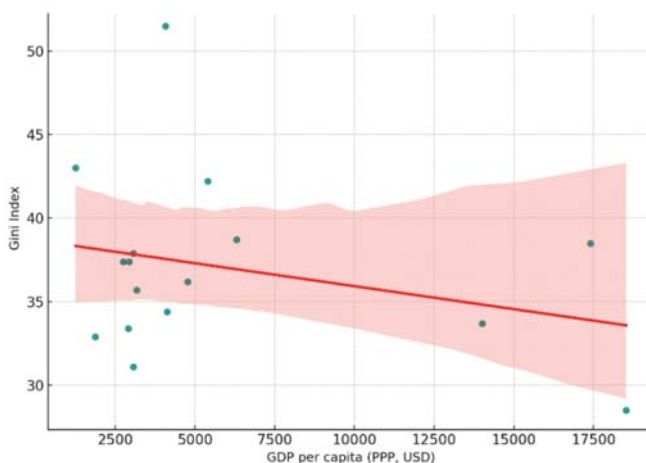
The authors’ analysis, based on FDI data from UNCTAD and GDP per capita figures from the World Bank, both for 2023, reveals a moderately positive correlation between foreign direct investment and income per capita, as shown in Figure 10, with a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.69. This indicates that, generally, African countries with higher levels of FDI per inhabitant also tend to record higher per capita income levels. While correlation does not

imply causation, the observed relationship suggests a potentially significant link between foreign investment and national income. It could be argued that institutional improvement enables an increase in GDP per capita through FDI (Hayat, 2019; Baiashvili, Gattini, 2020).

One of the key findings of the previous study is that the type of FDI significantly influences positive development effects. Specifically, greenfield investments (USDA, 2022), where a foreign company sets up new production facilities, are positively associated with growth in real GDP per capita. In contrast, mergers and acquisitions (M&A), which merely involve transferring ownership of existing assets, do not exhibit the same positive link with economic development. This conclusion is based on the work of Harms and Méon (2018), as cited in the report.

The reason for that difference lies in the capacity of greenfield investments to boost productive capital stock, create jobs, enhance competition, and promote technology transfer to host countries. In contrast, M&A transactions do not necessarily involve economic expansion or the addition of new productive capabilities.

Building on the theoretical framework outlined above, this study first analyses the relationship between GDP per capita and levels of income inequality in African countries. The analysis draws on data from World Development Indicators (World Bank), using the most recent available Gini index figures for 2021 or 2022 (depending on data availability for each country), along with GDP per capita measured in purchasing power parity (PPP) for 2023.

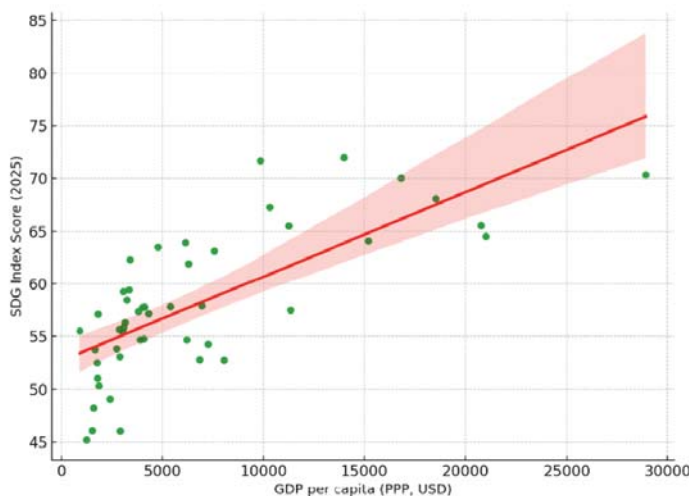


**Figure 8. Regression: GDP Per Capita vs. Gini Index**

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data from World Development Indicators (World Bank, 2024).

As regards the Gini index and its link to income, the analysis is limited by the absence of income distribution data for all African nations. Using the most recent data available (2021 or 2022, depending on the country), estimated Gini index values are available for only 16 African countries. With this limited sample, the authors attempted to examine the relationship between the Gini index to GDP per capita in PPP terms. The statistical analysis reveals a weak negative trend (see Figure 11), which is not statistically significant, with a correlation coefficient of -0.28 and an  $R^2$  of 0.079. This suggests that, in the African context, increases in income per capita do not automatically or directly translate into reductions in inequality, as highlighted by recent empirical studies (e.g. Batuo et al., 2022).

With regard to the relationship between FDI and environmental degradation, Bokpin (2017) finds that FDI significantly worsens environmental quality, thereby negatively affecting sustainability. This could be because large volumes of investment are often associated with extractive activities, particularly those involving energy raw materials, which implies greater environmental impacts. These findings are consistent with the Kuznets curve, which posits that investment inflows may initially cause greater environmental damage, and only after reaching a certain level of income per capita – usually associated with stronger institutions – does the environmental impact begin to stabilise and eventually improve.

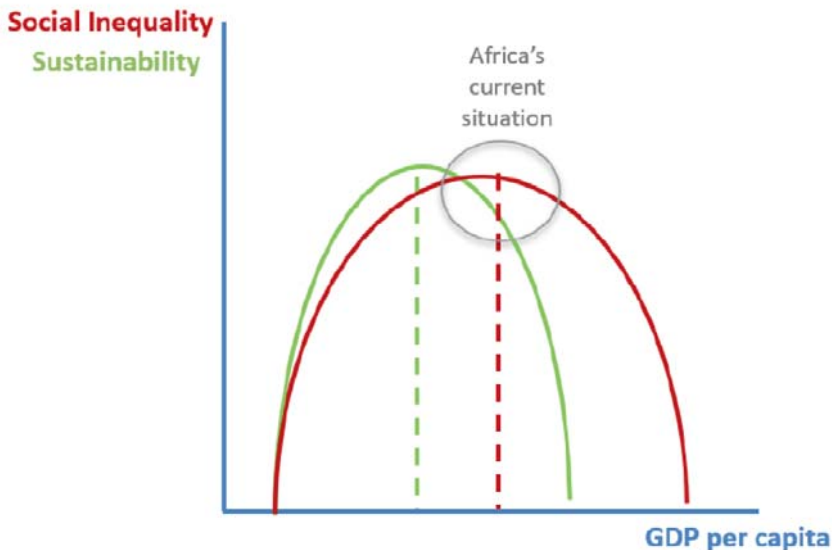


**Figure 9. Regression: GDP Per Capita vs. SDG Index Score**

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data from World Development Indicators (World Bank, 2024) and Sustainable Development Report (Sachs et al., 2025).

In this study, a comprehensive perspective on sustainability is adopted, encompassing not only environmental factors but also sustainable development across its three pillars: economic, social, and environmental. To achieve this, the authors examined the relationship between GDP per capita (PPP) and the 2025 SDG Index Score for African countries. The statistical analysis shows a correlation coefficient of 0.73 and a coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ) of 0.53. Therefore, 53% of the variability in the SDG Index is explained by differences in GDP per capita, indicating a stronger relationship than that observed with inequality. Figure 12 illustrates the scatter between both indicators. Although the relationship is moderate, a positive trend is evident between higher income per capita and better progress towards achieving each country's SDG targets.

Martins et al. (2023) specifically analysed FDI between 2010 and 2018 across 20 Sub-Saharan African countries and its impact on the three pillars of sustainability. Their conclusions suggest that FDI exerted no significant impact on the economic, social, and environmental pillars of sustainability in those countries. For FDI to fully contribute to sustainable development, it is necessary to strengthen regulatory frameworks, governance, and host countries' absorptive capacity. This conclusion aligns with earlier arguments advanced by Jorgenson (2009).



**Figure 10. Hypothetical Position of Africa on the Social and Environmental Kuznets Curves**

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Martins et al. (2023) results.

If it is assumed that the results of both studies are correct – namely, that environmental sustainability is improving more rapidly than social conditions – this may suggest that Africa, as a continent, remains in the upward phase of the social Kuznets curve, or is near its turning point, while many countries may already have entered the downward phase of the environmental Kuznets curve. In other words, the environmental Kuznets curve appears to be shifted to the left relative to the social curve related to income inequality. One possible explanation is that while reducing inequality depends on a wide range of internal factors – such as institutional quality, governance, and social protection systems – sustainability, especially its environmental aspect, can benefit from the adoption of technologies through FDI.

However, to sustain GDP growth, it is equally important to encourage further flows of foreign direct investment, especially if the objective is to accelerate progress towards the turning point. Simultaneously, FDI should contribute more directly and substantively to social and environmental sustainability by promoting socially and environmentally responsible FDI and by fostering positive, widespread CSR initiatives. Such actions could help to shift the Kuznets curves downward.

The next section examines the CSR activities undertaken by European companies in Africa.

## **Methodology**

In the analysis of CSR activities of European companies in Africa, it was not possible to employ robust statistical methods due to the absence of comprehensive databases containing systematic information on European companies that engage in foreign direct investment (FDI) on the continent and implement CSR initiatives there. Neither UNCTAD, Eurostat, nor private business databases such as Orbis or FDI Markets provide reliable data identifying this specific subset of firms or the scale of their social projects. Consequently, the potential population of observation is unknown and non-parametric, preventing any meaningful econometric analysis or statistical generalisation. Therefore, a qualitative case-study approach has been adopted, focusing on major European companies operating in Africa. This approach enables a contextual and explanatory analysis, which is better suited to the phenomenon's exploratory nature.

The case study is a well-established and widely applied research method in the social and economic sciences for investigating contemporary phenomena within their real-life context, particularly when quantitative data are limited or incomplete (Yin, 2018; Eisenhardt, 1989; Stake, 1995). In situations where

the sample population is unknown or not statistically definable, and where key variables are qualitative – for instance, the motivations, strategies, or social impacts of firms – the case study approach facilitates a deeper causal and contextual understanding rather than mere statistical generalisation (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Its validity derives not from the number of observations, but from the analytical depth and theoretical coherence linking the selected cases to the conceptual framework on investment and sustainability. In this paper, the method enables the integration of empirical evidence drawn from corporate sustainability reports and secondary sources with the theoretical hypotheses on the relationship between European investment and sustainable development in Africa.

### **Analysis of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Initiatives by European Companies in Africa**

Beyond the macro-level effects of FDI in African countries, multinational companies operating on the continent can promote social and environmental sustainability through targeted actions and projects aimed at improving quality of life or environmental conditions.

**Table 2. European Companies Operating in Africa With Relevant CSR Actions**

<b>Company</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Sector</b>	<b>Global Compact member</b>
<b>Total Energies</b>	France	Oil, Gas, & Coal	Since 2002
<b>Unilever</b>	UK	Home and Personal Use Goods	Since 2000
<b>Vodafone</b>	UK	Telecommunications Equipment and Communications Services	Since 2019
<b>Siemens</b>	Germany	Technology Hardware & Equipment	Since 2003
<b>Nestlé</b>	Switzerland	Food Industry	Since 2001
<b>Iberdrola</b>	Spain	Gas, Water & Multiutilities	Since 2002
<b>Danone</b>	France	Food Industry	Since 2003
<b>Orange</b>	France	Telecommunications Equipment; Telecommunications Services	Since 2000
<b>British Petroleum</b>	UK	Oil, Gas, & Coal	Since 2000

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on UN Global Compact.

European companies operating in Africa that have made notable contributions to sustainability and which actively engage in corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives have been identified and are presented in Table 2. All of these firms are members of the United Nations Global Compact, a voluntary initiative founded on ten principles covering human rights, labour standards, the environment, and anti-corruption.

**Table 3. Main European Economic Sectors Operating in Africa and Representative Companies for Each Sector With Relevant CSR Actions**

Sector	Company
1. Energy Companies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Total energies</li> <li>• Iberdrola</li> </ul>
2. Food Industry:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Danone</li> <li>• Nestlé</li> </ul>
3. Technological Companies:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Siemens</li> <li>• Orange</li> <li>• Vodafone</li> </ul>
4. Consumption Goods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unilever</li> </ul>
5. Finance and Financial Institutions:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Banco Santander</li> <li>• Deutsche Bank</li> <li>• Standard Chartered</li> </ul>
6. Industrial and Construction Companies:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holcim Group</li> <li>• Saint-Gobain</li> <li>• Vinci</li> <li>• Heidelberg Materials</li> </ul>

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on companies' sustainability reports available on their corporate websites.

In addition to the previous search, a further review was conducted to identify the main European economic sectors operating in Africa that share common approaches to promoting sustainability, including notable or representative companies engaged in corporate social responsibility within each sector. Representative examples were found in four of the six sectors examined. Table 3 presents, in a cross-sectional format, the sectors that display these sustainability patterns.

Once the companies had been identified, their sustainability and corporate social responsibility reports were analysed to evaluate their contributions to sustainability across the African continent, both through their core business activities and sector-specific CSR initiatives. The main findings are summarised as follows:

1. Energy companies (oil, gas, renewable energies): reducing environmental impacts, ensuring energy access, supporting local

- communities, and enhancing reputation (e.g., Total Energies, 2024, 2025; Iberdrola Energia Internacional, 2025).
2. Food industry: promoting sustainable agriculture, affordable food, food security, lifting local emergency restrictions, and strengthening rural economies (e.g., Nestlé, 2024).
  3. Technological companies: education and digital skills, digital inclusion, and technological capacity (e.g., Orange, 2024).
  4. Consumer goods (fashion, cosmetics, retail): promoting sustainable consumption, waste management, and support for local communities including employment and gender equality initiatives (e.g., Unilever, 2024).
  5. Finance and financial institutions: promoting financial inclusion through microcredits schemes and the development of economic infrastructure (e.g., Standard Chartered, 2024).
  6. Industrial and construction companies: developing sustainable local infrastructure (water, roads, etc.) and creating local employment opportunities (e.g., Saint-Gobain, 2024).

The analysis of sustainability reports confirmed that the observed initiatives align with the typology identified for each sector. To mitigate the risk of reproducing exclusively positive corporate narratives found in CSR and sustainability reports, all of the reported disputes were cross-checked and verified using reputable media outlets and relevant organisations, with preference given to initiatives corroborated by multiple sources.

## Discussion and Conclusions

This study demonstrates that the relationship between foreign direct investment (FDI), income growth, and sustainability in Africa is both significant and complex. Empirical analysis confirms a moderate positive correlation between FDI stock per capita and GDP per capita, supporting the theoretical assumptions of endogenous growth models (Romer, 1990; Lucas, 1988) and the neoclassical growth framework (Solow, 1956), which emphasise the role of foreign investment in fostering human capital, technology transfer, and capital accumulation. The comparatively stronger development effects of greenfield investments, in relation to mergers and acquisitions, further validate the findings of Harms and Méon (2018), highlighting the importance of productive rather than purely financial investment flows.

However, the anticipated positive relationship between FDI and income equality is not statistically significant, suggesting that many African economies remain in the ascending phase of the social Kuznets

curve (Kuznets, 1955). This finding highlights the constraining influence of weak institutions, regressive tax systems, and large informal sectors in the redistributive effects of growth. By contrast, environmental sustainability shows a more discernable improvement linked to FDI inflows, as reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Index. This trend corresponds to the environmental Kuznets curve (Grossman, Krueger, 1991), whereby the adoption of cleaner technologies and international standards – often embedded in FDI – may advance the environmental turning point relative to the social one.

The findings emphasise that FDI can make a positive contribute to Africa's sustainable development, but only under specific conditions: when it strengthens productive capacity, is supported by robust institutional frameworks (Hayat, 2019; Baiashvili, Gattini, 2020), and is accompanied by responsible corporate behaviour. In this respect, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives undertaken by European companies emerge as crucial complements to investment flows. As Kolk and van Tulder (2010) observe, multinational enterprises are increasingly pressured by stakeholders to integrate CSR strategically into global operations, rather than treating it as a peripheral activity. This paper confirms that CSR initiatives in Africa often follow three main logics: (i) compensating for direct environmental and social impacts, particularly in the energy and construction sectors (e.g., TotalEnergies, Holcim); (ii) responding to consumer and reputational pressures in the food and consumer goods industries (e.g., Danone, Nestlé, Unilever); and (iii) aligning with market expansion strategies in the technology and finance sectors (e.g., Vodafone, Orange, Standard Chartered). While such initiatives generate positive outcomes – such as community infrastructure, digital inclusion, and renewable energy – they are frequently undermined by controversies including human rights violations, child labour, deforestation, and reputational “greenwashing” (Bokpin, 2017; Opoku et al., 2023).

These insights highlight the dual nature of European FDI in Africa: it can catalyse structural transformation (Vernon, 1966; Findlay, 1978; Lall, 2000) and integrate economies into global value chains (Dunning, 1993; UNCTAD, 2005), but it can also exacerbate inequalities and environmental harm if not properly regulated (Dhrifi et al., 2020; Emako et al., 2022). CSR has the potential to anticipate or mitigate these risks by reshaping the trajectory of the Kuznets curves, but its transformative capacity depends on both genuine corporate commitment and robust public governance.

On this basis, the study proposes several policy recommendations. First, African governments should develop national CSR frameworks

aligned with the SDGs to channel corporate efforts toward priority development areas (Sachs et al., 2025). Second, thematic focus should be placed on high-impact actions such as water access, energy transition, education, and community health (Jorgenson, 2009). Third, institutional mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating CSR must be strengthened to ensure accountability and prevent superficial or purely reputation-driven projects. Fourth, incentives such as fiscal benefits or preferential access to public tenders can stimulate more ambitious CSR commitments (Agosin, Machado, 2005). Finally, CSR should be framed as a complementary governance instrument, especially where regulatory capacity is limited, enabling well-structured public–private partnerships to fill development gaps.

In conclusion, European FDI and CSR in Africa possess significant potential to foster sustainable growth, but their effectiveness depends on context-specific strategies, institutional robustness, and the capacity to balance economic goals and social responsibility. Only through coordinated governmental guidance and genuine corporate dedication can CSR transcend reputational motives and generate meaningful structural transformation in African societies.

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## **A Digital Crossroads: The Digital Evolution of Romania in the European Union Landscape – A Comparative Analysis With the Baltics, With Emphasis on the Business Sector**

### **Abstract**

Romania's digital trajectory is examined in relation to broader European and global benchmarks, with a particular focus on its path towards digital transformation. This study examines Romania's digital performance using key metrics from the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), comparing *2030 Digital Compass* targets to those of the Baltic States. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, testing several hypotheses primarily through simple linear regression. A qualitative analysis of policy and strategic documents further enhances the robustness of the findings, supplementing the quantitative data. The results outline important differences between Romania and the European Union average, with clearer contours in what is considered the adoption of artificial intelligence, the use of cloud computing services, big data analytics, and digital intensity amongst small and medium enterprises. Romania lags behind the Baltic States, indicating that the country continues to grapple with significant challenges in the European digital landscape. The findings of this study indicate that, in the case of Romania, there have been significant gaps that have hindered its full integration with

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the digitalised European market. In summary, this paper recommends that Romanian policymakers focus on digitalisation initiatives, renew digital infrastructure, and ensure continuous, convincing, and coherent preparation for the needs of advancing digital literacy, inclusive growth, and a competitive European digital economy. These areas, if addressed, will facilitate the rapid digital transformation of Romania and reduce the digital gap within Europe.

**Keywords:** Digital Transformation, DESI, 2030 Digital Compass, European Economy, Mixed Methodology, Romania, Baltic States

## **Introduction and Background**

The European Union (EU) has increased its efforts to promote digital transition and artificial intelligence (AI) innovation in order to boost economic growth and competitiveness, as well as to close the gap with the United States (US) and China (European Commission, 2021). The initial assessment of the *EU Digital Decade* (European Commission, n.d.) stressed its importance for the EU's future prosperity and called for accelerated action on improving the business environment, digital technologies, infrastructure, and skills. Although Europe has been at the forefront of every industrial revolution, including the digital revolution that created the internet (Centre for European Policy Studies, n.d.), it currently lags behind the US and China in artificial intelligence.

According to the *AI Watch Index 2021* (AI Watch, 2021), firms constitute 93.96% of AI economic players in the EU, 97.37% in the US, and 86.93% in China, while governmental and research institutes are minor players. Business strength and dynamism greatly affect AI performance.

The EU's gap-closing effectiveness is still debated. In 2021, the US led in AI development with 299 newly funded AI companies, followed by China with 119 and the EU with 106, but the gap narrowed from 2013 to 2021 (Stanford Institute for Human-Centered AI, 2022). Despite these negative statistics, Balland and Renda (Centre for European Policy Studies, n.d.) emphasise that Europe possesses strong AI talent and technological potential. The authors argue that Europe's AI expertise and scientific excellence could lead to reliable AI development. The EU's Digital Economy and Society Index has tracked digital progress since 2015, while the *State of the Digital* report started in 2023.

Energy-saving, climate-neutral, high-efficiency, and interconnected services require high-capacity infrastructure and innovative technologies (European Commission, 2022). In contrast, the EU's AI efforts have

been evaluated since 2020. Since then, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre has published the *AI Watch Report* (2021) and the *National Strategies on Artificial Intelligence: A European Perspective* (2021, 2022) on an annual basis. The DESI framework evaluates EU Member States' digital readiness across four areas: human capital; connectivity; digital technology integration; and digital public services, covering the period from 2015 to 2022.

Romania has consistently faced challenges in digitalisation, ranking below the EU average in several key assessments (DESI 2016–2022 and *Digital Decade Report*, 2023). This paper compares EU digital progress from 2017 to 2022, focusing on Romania and the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to determine the direction and magnitude of digital change. The Baltic States provide a good comparison for two reasons. Firstly, all of these countries were formerly communist countries. Secondly, at the beginning of the analysed period (2015 versus 2014), each of the three Baltic States belonged to one of three specific clusters in terms of digitalisation level, namely, “running ahead” (Estonia), “lagging ahead” (Lithuania), and “catching up” (Latvia). Romania was also part of the “catching up” group, which includes countries that “score below the EU average but [whose] score grew faster than that of the EU over the [previous] year” (European Commission, 2016). The main purpose of this study is to evaluate their individual progress and determine the trajectory of their digital transformations. To this end, an assessment of the Baltic States' and Romania's digital performance, measured by the overall DESI index and one of its main sub-components, namely, the integration of digital technology during the 2017–2022 interval, is conducted.

The following research questions are posed:

RQ1: How has Romania's digital performance evolved, both in terms of overall DESI score and the integration of digital technology, during the 2017–2022 period, in comparison to the EU average and the Baltic States? The research hypothesis is that Romania's digital disparities decreased during the 2017–2022 period, relative to both the EU average and the Baltic States.

RQ2: How does Romania perform against the key indicators of the *2030 Digital Compass*, particularly regarding “business digitalization” in relation to the EU and the Baltics? The research hypothesis is that the gaps observed between Romania, relative to the EU and the Baltics States, are similar to those recorded by DESI.

## **Research Methodology**

The study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative analysis of DESI and Eurostat data with qualitative document reviews. Hypotheses were tested using simple linear regression. To test the hypothesis from the second research question, Romania's gaps with the EU and the Baltic States in the "business digitalization" key indicators from the *2030 Digital Compass* are compared with those recorded by DESI. In addition to quantitative data analysis, qualitative document analysis of relevant articles and reports was conducted. Regarding the analysis of EU Member States' digital evolution from 2017–2022, only DESI reports and data from this period were considered due to data availability. Eurostat metadata served as the primary source for DESI's main data. Furthermore, the *Stanford AI Index Report* for 2022, the *AI Watch Index* for 2021, the 2020 European enterprise survey on AI-based technologies, and national AI strategies were also reviewed.

Romania's digital performance is compared with that of the Baltic States and the EU using the one of four dimensions of the DESI framework, namely, the integration of digital technology. From the European Commission's website, the authors also extracted and analysed DESI's digital technology integration dimension as it relates to enterprise adoption of digital technologies and AI use (DESI, 2022).

The Eurostat metadata provide the source for the DESI data. The indicators examined include artificial intelligence, big data analytics, cloud computing, and basic digital skills in SMEs. The last indicator is based on the Digital Intensity Index, whereas the first three derive from enterprise ICT usage data (isoc\_e) (Eurostat, n.d.). These indicators are relevant to digital transformation and AI adoption. DESI data do not go beyond 2022 because the *State of the Digital Decade* report tracks digital goals through 2023, per the *Digital Decade Policy Programme 2030*. Romania's digital trajectory, encompassing policy, technology infrastructure, and cross-border collaborations in its efforts to catch up to the Baltic States and the EU, is covered in this paper.

## **Results and Discussion**

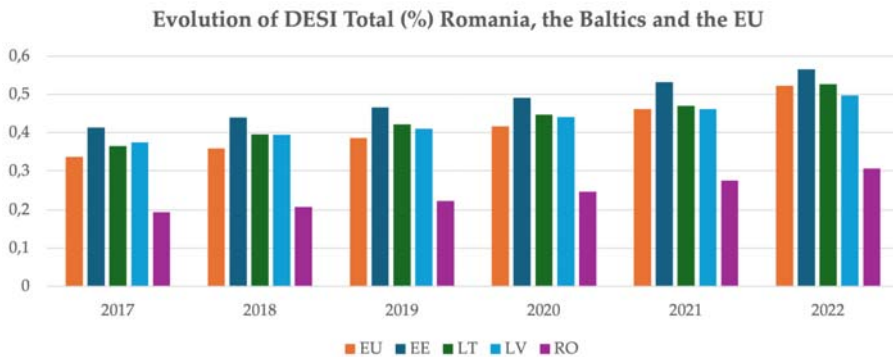
This section explores Romania's digital performance from 2017 to 2022 in comparison with the EU average and the Baltic States, addressing the two research questions. Over the past decade, Romania has promoted digital transformation across multiple sectors with a range of policies. The *2015 Romanian National Strategy for the 2020 Digital Agenda* (Government

of Romania, 2020) used information and communication technology to foster economic growth and achieve Europe 2020 targets. The transition from project conception to realisation, from idea to tangible outcome, has proven difficult and full of unpredictability in Romania (Dimitriu, 2022; Hartwell et al., 2022).

DESI monitored EU Member States' digital performance annually from 2015 to 2022. The *State of the Digital Decade* report includes DESI after 2023 to assess progress towards the *Digital Compass 2030* targets (European Commission, 2021). Romania has faced persistent challenges in keeping pace with EU digitalisation efforts, consistently ranking below the EU average (DESI, 2016–2022 and *Digital Decade Report*, 2023).

### How Has Romania's Digital Performance Evolved During the Period 2017–2022, Compared to the EU Average and the Baltic States?

To observe how Romania's digital performance evolved during the 2017–2022 period compared to the EU average and the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the evolution of DESI Total and its integration of the digital technology dimension and sub-dimensions over the aforementioned period is assessed. Figure 1 presents these evolutions, based on Eurostat data (DESI, 2022).



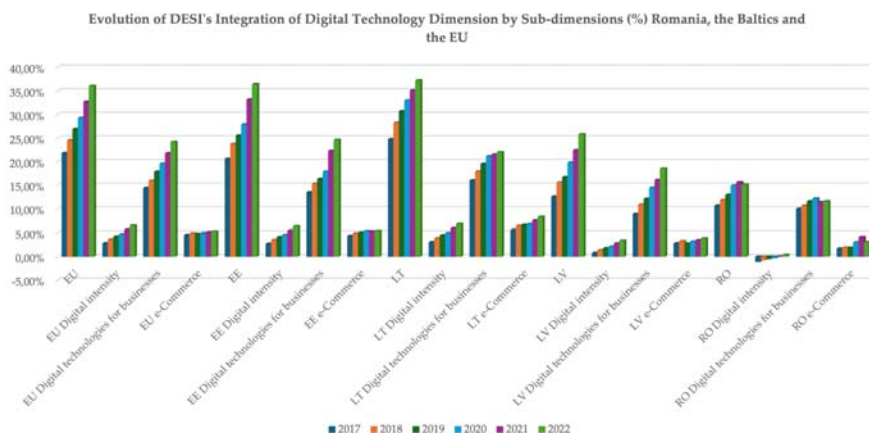
**Figure 1. The Evolution of DESI Total (%) for Romania, the Baltic States, and the EU**

Source: the authors' own, based on Eurostat data (DESI, 2022).

From 2017 to 2022, DESI levels increased at different rates across the three countries (the Baltic States and Romania). DESI scores in the Baltic States were higher than the EU average, with the exception of Latvia in

2021 and 2022. Romania consistently exhibited the lowest DESI scores, preventing it from closing the gaps relative to the Baltic States and the EU average (DESI, 2017; DESI 2018; DESI 2019; DESI 2020; DESI 2021; European Commission, 2022).

Figure 2 shows the evolution of DESI’s Integration of Digital Technology dimension across three main sub-dimensions (“Digital Intensity”, “Digital Technologies for Businesses”, and “E-commerce”) in Romania and the Baltic States, based on Eurostat data (DESI, from 2017 to 2022).



**Figure 2: Evolution of DESI’s Integration of Digital Technology Dimension by Sub-dimensions (%) for Romania, the Baltics and the EU**

Source: the authors’ own, based on Eurostat data (Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), 2022)

The integration of digital technology dimension assesses how businesses utilise digital technologies. Figure 2 presents the post-2020 structure of this DESI component, which is based on three aspects: the Digital Intensity Index (DII), which measures enterprise use of twelve selected digital technologies; “digital technologies for business”, encompassing electronic information sharing, big data analytics, social media, and cloud computing; and “e-commerce”, which evaluates how many SMEs are used. Romania ranks last in this component, recording low values for all three sub-components, especially in the DII and e-commerce categories. Methodological factors may provide an explanation as regards some of the results. *Digital Decade* data shows Romania reported negative DII values from 2017 to 2022. These indicators may likely require revision due to calculation methodology or data collection issues (DESI, 2022).

## An Analysis of the Variation in DESI (Its Total and in Respect of the Integration of Digital Technology) Over the Period 2017–2022, With a Focus on Romania and the Baltic States

Romania’s performance is compared to the Baltic States and the EU average in terms of overall DESI scores and the “integration of digital technology” component from 2017 to 2022. A simple linear regression model is employed to test the first hypothesis (H1) of the initial research question (RQ1). The independent variable (year) is correlated with the dependent variable (DESI values). This regression analysis uses “X Variable 1” to estimate the independent variable’s effect on the dependent variable. The slope coefficient of this variable predicts the dependent variable’s change for a unit change in “X Variable 1”. If the *p*-value is less than 0.05, this slope coefficient indicates a significant relationship; otherwise, it may be due to chance, and have very little or no effect.

Table 1 presents the main results obtained for the overall DESI scores during 2017–2022.

Despite the hypothesis of decreasing disparities, Romania’s rising DESI values indicate that the gap with the EU average and the Baltic

**Table 1. Results of the Regression Analysis Regarding the DESI Total – Romania, the Baltic States, and the EU Average**

Country/EU average versus Romania	X Variable 1	p-value
EU average	0.0138	0.0020
Estonia	0.0078	0.0009
Lithuania	0.0079	0.0152
Latvia	0.0018	0.0916

Source: the authors’ own, based on Eurostat data (DESI, 2022).

**Table 2. Results of the Regression Analysis Regarding DESI’s Integration of Digital Technology Dimension for 2017–2022: Romania, the Baltic States, and the EU Average**

Country/EU average versus Romania	X Variable 1	p-value
EU average	0.0179	0.0031
Estonia	0.0212	0.0055
Lithuania	0.0142	0.0009
Latvia	0.0155	0.0058

Source: the authors’ own, based on Eurostat data (DESI, 2022).

States is widening. The trends show that closing the gap is difficult, despite statistical significance in most cases.

Table 2 shows the main results obtained for DESI's Integration of Digital Technology dimension during 2017–2022.

As Romania integrates, positive coefficients across comparisons suggest wider Digital Technology Integration gaps, contradicting the hypothesis. The statistical significance of these findings suggests ongoing issues.

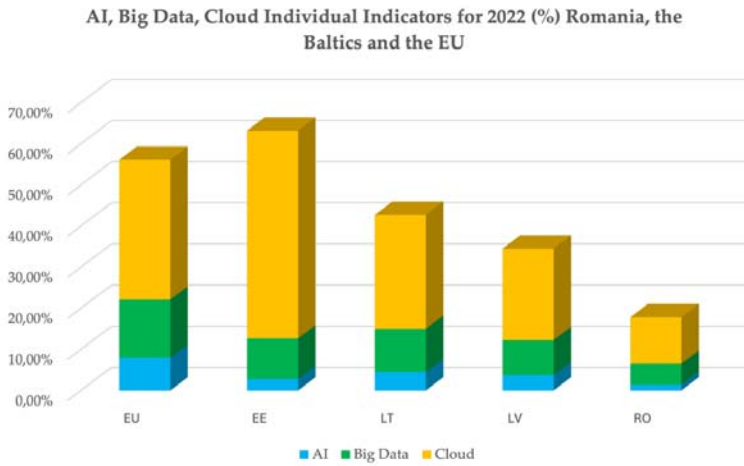
### **Charting Business Digitalisation: An Examination of the Key Indicators of the 2030 Digital Compass, and the “Business Digitalisation” Component**

The European Commission's 2021 Digital Compass emphasises progress in digital transformation across four areas: skills; business digitalisation; secure digital infrastructures; and public service digitalisation, in order to implement the EU's 2030 digital ambitions (European Commission, 2021). By 2030, the Digital Compass aims for 75% of European businesses to adopt cloud computing, big data analytics, and AI (European Commission, 2021). This initiative seeks to double the number of innovative scale-ups – so-called “unicorns”, which are privately held start-ups valued at over USD 1 billion – to ten, and digitalise over 90% of European small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (European Commission, 2021).

Key indicators show significant digital technology adoption gaps between Romania, the EU, and the Baltic States. The first key indicator of business digital transformation suggests that three out of four European companies with ten or more employees should be using AI, cloud services, and big data analytics by 2030.

Figure 3 illustrates the situation in 2022 for these indicators as a percentage in the EU, Romania, and the Baltic States, as sourced from Eurostat data (DESI, 2022a; DESI, 2022b; DESI, 2022c).

Companies of all sizes in the Baltic States exhibit low levels of AI adoption, with 4.45% in Lithuania, 3.72% in Latvia, and 2.77% in Estonia. Romania records the lowest adoption rate in the EU, at only 1.38%. In 2021, 34% of EU companies utilised cloud computing to improve operations and cut costs. Adoption rates in Lithuania and Latvia averaged 28% and 22% respectively, while Estonia led with over 50%. Romania's adoption stood at 11%, markedly below the leading performers. Regarding big data technologies, EU companies increasingly use such modern solutions for storage, analysis, and collection. In 2022, 14% of companies engaged in big data analytics. Romania again ranked last, whereas the Baltic States performed below, albeit close to, the EU average.



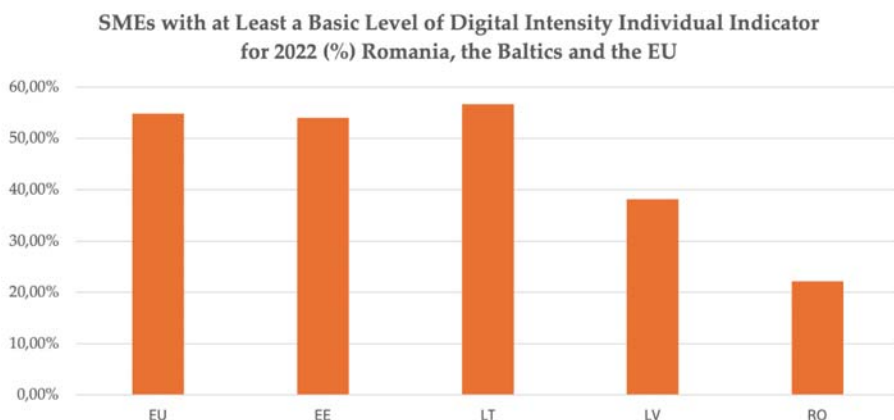
**Figure 3. AI, Big Data, and Cloud Individual Indicators for 2022 (%) Romania, the Baltics, and the EU**

Source: the authors' own, based on Eurostat data (DESI, 2022a; DESI, 2022b; DESI, 2022c).

The second “business digitalization” key indicator applies exclusively to SMEs, defined by the EU as businesses with fewer than 250 employees and generating an annual turnover of below EUR 50 million (European Union, 2003). Over 90% of SMEs are expected to be digitally active by 2030. The DII measures the extent to which enterprises adopt digital technology, using a scale from 0 to 12. Achieving so-called “basic digital intensity” requires four of these twelve technologies.

Figure 4 presents the percentage of Romanian and Baltic SMEs with basic digital intensity in 2022, based on Eurostat data (DESI, 2022a; DESI, 2022b; DESI, 2022c; DESI, 2022d, 2022e; 2022f; 2022g). The EU average in 2022 was 58.7%, indicating that more than half of small businesses were online. Lithuanian and Estonian SMEs exceeded the EU average of digital tool usage, at 60.9% and 56.9% respectively. In contrast, Latvia recorded only 38%, significantly less than its Baltic counterparts. Romania’s DII stood at 22%, much lower than both the Baltic states and EU, indicating that fewer small businesses in the country had adapted digital technologies.

The third key indicator aims to double the number of European unicorns. The *DESI 2022 Report* (European Commission, 2022) analyses technology companies founded since 1990 with valuations exceeding USD 1 billion. According to international reports (Dealroom, n.d.),



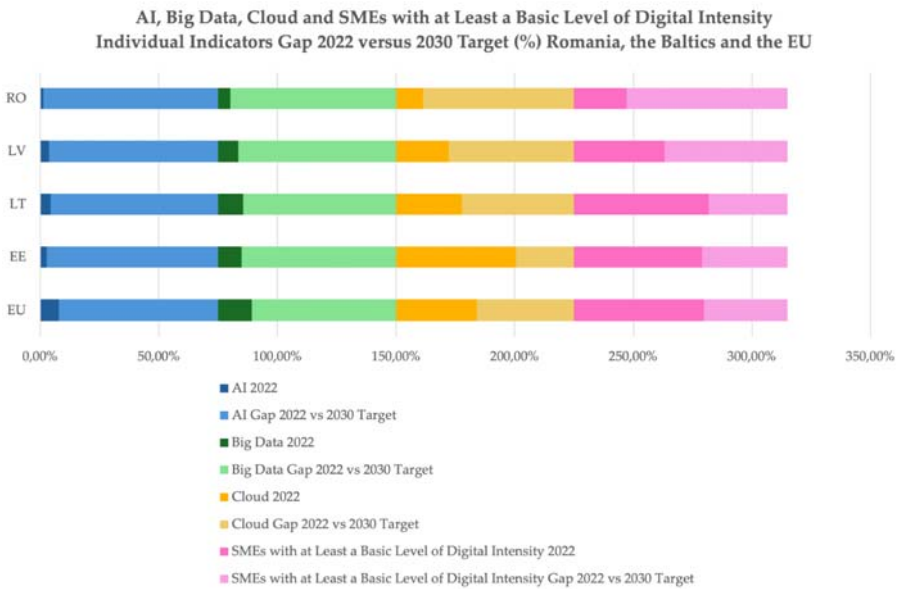
**Figure 4. SMEs With at Least a Basic Level of Digital Intensity for 2022 (%) for Romania, the Baltic States, and the EU**

Source: the authors' own, based on Eurostat data (DESI, 2022a; DESI, 2022b; DESI, 2022c; DESI, 2022d).

there were 2,805 unicorns worldwide in 2023, of which 536 were located in the Europe, Middle East, and Africa (EMEA) region. In 2023, the Baltic States recorded eleven unicorns in Estonia, nine in Lithuania, and three in Latvia (Statista, 2022). According to the *DESI 2022 Report*, Germany, France, and Sweden hosted the highest numbers of unicorns, with 58, 35, and 30 respectively. Romania is among the eight EU Member States without any unicorns. Countries with weaker performance in AI and big data, such as Romania, tend to have fewer unicorns (European Commission, 2022).

In Figure 5, the 2030 gaps are calculated using using a 75% benchmark for enterprises adopting AI, Big Data, and Cloud technologies, and a 90% benchmark for SMEs with at least a basic level of digital intensity, in accordance with the Digital Decade targets.

As shown in the figure above, all regions remain far below 2030 targets across all indicators. Romania exhibits the biggest gaps in most categories, particularly in AI and cloud adoption. Its 2022 level of 1.38% falls significantly short of the 2030 target of 73.62%. Overall, the EU outperforms individual European countries in the share of SMEs with at least basic digital intensity – 54.86% in 2022 – but it still faces a substantial 35.14% gap to close by 2030. Latvian SMEs, in comparison to Romanian SMEs, are in a comparatively better position, with 38.14% displaying digital intensity in 2022, leaving a remaining gap of 51.86% to achieve the 2030 target.



**Figure 5. Gaps Between 2022 Performance and 2030 Targets for AI, Big Data, Cloud, and SMEs With at Least a Basic Level of Digital Intensity (%) in Romania, the Baltic States, and the EU**

Source: the authors' own, based on Eurostat data (DESI, 2022a; DESI, 2022b; DESI, 2022c; DESI, 2022d).

These countries have invested heavily to ensure SMEs reach a minimum digital intensity, according to the indicators. However, AI and big data implementation is lower, indicating that these countries are improving digital business practices but could improve further with more advanced technologies. These findings, together with the earlier DESI analysis, support the authors' hypothesis that Romania, the EU, and the Baltic States exhibit comparable patterns of digital disparity.

## Conclusions

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of Romania's digital landscape, positioning it within the broader European Union framework and in comparison with the Baltic States. By addressing two key research questions, the study sheds light on Romania's digital performance and its potential for future growth in the context of the EU's digital transformation goals. First, the findings reveal that Romania faces significant challenges in narrowing its digital gap with both the EU average and the Baltic

States. Despite some improvements, Romania consistently ranks among the lowest in the Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), particularly in areas such as artificial intelligence (AI) adoption, cloud computing, and digital business intensity. These growing disparities indicate that without substantial and well-targeted interventions, Romania risks falling further behind in the rapidly advancing digital economy. To address these challenges, the study emphasises the need for targeted policies that prioritise key areas such as education, digital skills development, and the adoption of advanced technologies by both public institutions and private enterprises. By investing in these critical sectors, Romania can create a stronger foundation for long-term digital development and innovation.

A central priority should be on the digital transformation of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which are crucial drivers of economic growth. Facilitating SMEs' access to digital tools, big data analytics, and AI technologies could significantly boost their productivity and innovation potential. Policymakers must therefore work to create favourable conditions for SMEs to integrate into the digital economy, which will, in turn, drive overall national competitiveness. Finally, international cooperation is paramount. By drawing on the experiences of countries including Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, which have successfully advanced their digital infrastructures, Romania can leverage EU support to close its digital gap. Collaboration at the European level will be essential in achieving Romania's alignment with the *2030 Digital Compass* objectives, particularly in areas such as cross-border digital services, cybersecurity, and the consolidation of a unified European digital market.

In conclusion, Romania's path to digitalisation demands a multifaceted approach that includes policy reform, targeted investments, and international partnerships. Only by addressing its structural weaknesses and prioritising digital innovation can Romania effectively bridge the gap with its European counterparts and ensure a competitive position within the European digital economy of the future.

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## **Artificial Intelligence Systems in the Context of UN Resolution A/78/L.49, Council of Europe Framework Convention CETS No. 225, and EU Regulation 2024/1689**

### **Abstract**

The aim of this article is to examine the approach to artificial intelligence reflected in three key international instruments adopted in 2024: the UN Resolution A/78/L.49, the Council of Europe Framework Convention CETS No. 225, and the European Union Regulation 2024/1689. Although these texts are commonly referred to as legal acts on artificial intelligence, their actual subject matter is more precisely defined as artificial intelligence systems – that is, specific entities with which humans interact. Despite differences in content and legal force, each document delineates, in its own way, the role of AI systems within human society and establishes safeguards against their undue influence. Additionally, each assigns responsibilities aligned with the objectives of the respective issuing organisation. A shared point of reference among them is the framework of international human rights protection, supplemented by various additional requirements unique to each instrument. This article analyses the substantive provisions of the three documents, comparing their terminology, scope, proposed protective mechanisms, and procedures for implementation.

**Keywords:** Artificial Intelligence, Artificial Intelligence Systems, UN Resolution A/78/L.49, Council of Europe Framework Convention CETS No. 225, European Union Regulation 2024/1689, Human Rights

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## **Introduction**

The *PWN Dictionary of the Polish Language* (*Słownik Języka Polskiego PWN*) provides the following definition of artificial intelligence: “artificial intelligence – a branch of computer science that studies the rules governing human mental behaviour and creates computer programmes or systems that simulate human thinking” (*Słownik PWN*, 2025).

The origins of artificial intelligence can be traced to the work of the eminent British mathematician Alan Turing (1912–1954). Following the Second World War – during which he was engaged in decrypting the codes of the German ENIGMA machine (Hodges, 2014) – Turing conducted the first so-called “Turing Test” in 1950. This experiment aimed to determine whether a machine could engage in conversation in a manner that demonstrated human-like cognitive abilities (Oppy, 2021). Although Turing’s untimely death curtailed further development of his research, the promising results of his early work inspired a gathering of leading scientists at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, in 1956. This meeting is widely regarded as the formal beginning of artificial intelligence research. The participants posited that “every aspect of learning or any other feature of intelligence can in principle be so precisely described that a machine can be made to simulate it” (Veisdal, 2019). John McCarthy, a professor of mathematics and the organiser of the Dartmouth Conference, was the first to identify artificial intelligence as a distinct field of research (Schneppat, 2025). The development of artificial intelligence is commonly divided into three stages: (1) the logic-based approach, (2) the knowledge-based expert systems approach, and (3) the data-driven approach (Flasiński, 2016).

The first stage, emerging in the 1950s and 1960s, resembled the early Turing Tests and relied on logical operations applied to simple textual inputs, constrained by the limited computing power of the time. The second stage, which gained prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, introduced expert systems capable of handling more complex tasks. However, these systems lacked the ability to learn and adapt. It was not until the early 21<sup>st</sup> century that a technological breakthrough occurred, driven by a dramatic increase in computational power, the availability of vast datasets, the emergence of large-scale computing and cloud technologies, and significant advances in related disciplines such as neuroscience and cognitive science.

This development paved the way for the adoption of neural networks, which enabled the simulation of human cognitive and learning processes. Given the rapid advancement of systems that utilise artificial intelligence to replicate human actions, there is an increasing need to

regulate their impact to ensure they do not pose a threat to humanity. While various recommendations and legal frameworks have been or are being developed at the national, corporate, and bilateral levels, this article focuses on three key international documents adopted in 2024 that are crucial for shaping the future of artificial intelligence in human society. These include: the UN Resolution A/78/L.49 (United Nations, 2024a), the Council of Europe Framework Convention CETS No. 225 (Council, 2024b), and the European Union Regulation 2024/1689 (Regulation, 2024b).

### **UN Resolution A/78/L.49**

If arranged chronologically, the first of these documents is the United Nations Resolution entitled *Seizing the opportunities of safe, secure and trustworthy artificial intelligence systems for sustainable development*, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2024 (A/78/L.49) (United Nations, 2024a). This Resolution, proposed by the United States and supported by 123 UN Member States, including China and Russia, was adopted by consensus (Mishra, 2024; United Nations, 2024b). Its primary objective is to oversee artificial intelligence systems with a focus on safeguarding human rights – particularly the right to privacy – while harnessing AI's potential to implement the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlined in the UN's *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (A/RES/70/1) (United Nations, 2015b), across all economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Adopted by 193 countries in 2015, the *Agenda* sets a target for implementation by 2030.

The Resolution on artificial intelligence was published in all official UN languages: English (being the official version), Arabic, Chinese, French, Spanish, and Russian. Although the Resolution has a global scope and its adoption can undoubtedly be regarded as a historic event, it is not a legally binding document.

Akin to other UN resolutions, it serves as an appeal, manifesto, or proclamation, as only resolutions of the UN Security Council carry binding legal force. The Resolution consists of a preamble and an operative part. The preamble references key UN documents, including the *Charter of the United Nations* (Charter, 1945) and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, 2025b), alongside other documents specifically related to information and communication technologies.

While the Resolution does not provide a definition of artificial intelligence itself, the preamble includes a definition of artificial intelligence systems, which states: “Recognizing that safe, secure and

trustworthy artificial intelligence systems – which, for the purpose of this resolution, refers to artificial intelligence systems in the non-military domain, whose life cycle includes the stages: pre-design, design, development, evaluation, testing, deployment, use, sale, procurement, operation and decommissioning – are such that they are human-centric, reliable, explainable, ethical, inclusive, in full respect, promotion and protection of human rights and international law, privacy-preserving, sustainable development-oriented, and responsible – [and] have the potential to accelerate and enable progress towards the achievement of all 17 Sustainable Development Goals and sustainable development in its three dimensions – economic, social and environmental – in a balanced and integrated manner; promote digital transformation; promote peace; overcome digital divides between and within countries; and promote and protect the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, while keeping the human person at the centre” (pp. 2–8).

The title and content of the preamble clearly indicate that the central theme of this Resolution is its role as a vital tool for advancing the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (United Nations, 2015b), which encompasses 17 goals aimed at improving socio-economic and environmental conditions for humanity. These goals seek to eliminate poverty and hunger; ensure good health and quality of life; provide quality education; achieve gender equality; ensure clean water and sanitation; offer clean and affordable energy; promote decent work and economic growth; foster innovation in industry and infrastructure; reduce inequalities; build sustainable cities and communities; encourage responsible production and consumption; address climate change; protect life on land and under water; promote peace, justice, and strong institutions; and foster partnerships to achieve all these objectives (United Nations, 2025a).

The preamble’s references to key documents further confirm the global perspective on the role of artificial intelligence systems in achieving these goals. Notable references include: *Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (A/RES/70/1) (United Nations, 2015b); *Impact of Rapid Technological Change on the Achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and Targets* (A/RES/77/320) (United Nations, 2021); *Information and Communications Technologies for Sustainable Development* (A/RES/78/132) (United Nations, 2023a); and *Science, Technology and Innovation for Sustainable Development* (A/RES/78/160) (United Nations, 2023b).

The preamble also highlights the efforts of the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), undertaken in collaboration with

40 other UN agencies and the Swiss Government, which led to the establishment of the *AI for Good* platform in 2017 (ITU, 2025).

This initiative serves as a catalyst for leveraging the development of artificial intelligence systems in support of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Launched during the *AI for Good Global Summit* held in Geneva in 2017, the platform brings together leading experts and stakeholders from diverse sectors – including industry, academia, international organisations, governments, and non-governmental organisations – with the shared objective of promoting AI systems that contribute to sustainable development. It is now a vibrant initiative with over 37,000 active participants representing more than 180 countries, meeting every year in Geneva and other parts of the world. The platform also encourages young people to cooperate and intensifies efforts in response to the postulates of the G20, the UN’s High-Level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence (United Nations, 2025c), and the UN’s *Global Digital Compact* (United Nations, 2024c) in the field of artificial intelligence. It further seeks to improve the governance of artificial intelligence systems for sustainable development, aiming to ensure their use for the common good. With only five years remaining until the implementation deadline of the *2030 Agenda*, artificial intelligence systems are increasingly viewed as essential tools to support progress toward its goals.

The operative part of the Resolution, comprising 13 points, outlines a range of recommendations, including calls for the participation of all countries – particularly developing nations – as well as other relevant stakeholders in the creation of safe, ethically sound, and inclusive AI systems accessible to all. The Resolution emphasises the need to develop the infrastructure necessary for the deployment of AI technologies, increase financial investments in AI development and innovation, and ensure that such progress aligns with the protection of privacy and other fundamental human rights. Additional recommendations include efforts to improve public skills and digital literacy for interacting with AI systems, the promotion of responsible data governance given the central role of data in AI, and the formulation of legal frameworks at all levels that reflect the values articulated in core UN documents – namely, the *United Nations Charter* (Charter, 1945), the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, 2025b), and the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (United Nations, 2015b).

The adoption of this Resolution by the UN General Assembly resonated widely across the globe. Its central appeal to humanity can be succinctly captured in the call: “Let us – humans – govern this technology rather than have it govern us”.

## **Council of Europe Framework Convention CETS No. 225**

The Council of Europe (Council, 2025) is an international governmental organisation dedicated to promoting human rights, democracy, and cooperation among its Member States, particularly in the realm of culture. Established on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1949 in London by 10 founding members, the organisation now includes nearly all European countries, as well as several non-European states. Headquartered in Strasbourg, France, the Council of Europe currently comprises 46 Member States, collectively representing a population of approximately 700 million people. Its primary objectives include, but are not limited to, the defence of fundamental rights and freedoms, such as freedom of speech, the right to free and fair elections, freedom of the media, social rights, privacy, and the protection of national minorities and their languages, the rights of people with disabilities, as well as addressing violence against women and children, corruption, cybercrime, money laundering, and other societal threats. The Council of Europe also seeks to foster civil society and addresses contemporary human rights issues, such as bioethics, environmental threats, and artificial intelligence.

It operates through binding international legal instruments known as conventions or treaties, which encompass a broad range of human rights concerns. Notably, it remains the only organisation of its kind globally. These conventions are originally published in two official languages: English and French. They are adopted by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe – following deliberation within the Parliamentary Assembly, the organisation's decision-making body composed of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Member States – and subsequently signed and ratified by the relevant parties. The entry into force of a convention depends on the number of states that ratify the instrument. Ratification of conventions is voluntary for the parties, with the exception of the founding convention, which is mandatory for all Member States (Council, 1950). Both Member and non-Member States of the Council of Europe, as well as international organisations, may ratify individual conventions. This approach facilitates the extension of the European *acquis* in the field of human rights to other regions of the world. In 2024, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted its 225<sup>th</sup> convention: the *Council of Europe Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law* CETS No. 225 (Council, 2024b). The Convention was formally adopted on 17<sup>th</sup> May 2024 and presented to the interested parties for further processing in Vilnius on 5<sup>th</sup> September 2024. It will enter into force once it has been ratified by

at least five parties, including a minimum of three member states of the Council of Europe. To date, the Convention has not yet been ratified by any party. However, it has been provisionally signed by ten member states – including Norway and the United Kingdom – two non-member states, including the United States of America, and one international organisation, namely, the European Union. As a result, the Convention has not yet entered into force. The ratification process involves the incorporation of the convention's provisions into the domestic legal framework of the party concerned. Nevertheless, its adoption by the Committee of Ministers – the Council of Europe's principal decision-making body – and its submission for further processing represent a significant milestone in the global effort to regulate the relationship between humans and artificial intelligence. The explanatory report accompanying the Convention (Council, 2024a) emphasises that its primary focus is the protection of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law, as reflected in its title. It explicitly states, however, that the Convention does not aim to regulate the economic or market dimensions of artificial intelligence systems. The preamble to the Convention underscores the expectation that incorporating its provisions into the domestic legal frameworks of the parties will ensure adherence to the established standards, thereby promoting safety, social well-being, and respect for human dignity.

The main body of the Convention comprises eight chapters. Chapter I outlines the object and purpose of the Convention. As in the previously discussed international instruments, the term “artificial intelligence system” is employed, with the Convention specifying that its scope encompasses the entire life cycle of such systems. It is emphasised that this life cycle must be aligned with the principles of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Parties are required to implement legal frameworks that are consistent with the Convention's provisions in a manner that most effectively safeguards these values. Moreover, the method by which each party intends to implement the Convention must be submitted to the Council of Europe for approval during the process of signature or ratification. The Convention also explicitly states that its provisions do not apply to systems used in scientific research or within the defence sector. For the purposes of this Convention, an artificial intelligence system is defined thusly “artificial intelligence system – a machine-based system that, for explicit or implicit objectives, infers, from the input it receives, how to generate outputs such as predictions, content, recommendations or decisions that may influence physical or virtual environments. Different artificial intelligence systems vary in their levels of autonomy and adaptiveness after deployment” (Art. 2).

Chapter II of the Convention sets out provisions concerning the protection of human rights, which must be upheld in the domestic legislation of parties implementing the Convention. These provisions are required to align with both international and national legal frameworks. Furthermore, artificial intelligence systems must not undermine democratic processes or the rule of law. The Convention also mandates the establishment of mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of the actions taken.

Chapter III addresses the activity of artificial intelligence systems throughout their lifecycle and outlines a set of requirements that each party implementing the Convention is obliged to adopt. These requirements pertain to:

1. human dignity and individual autonomy,
2. transparency and oversight,
3. accountability and responsibility,
4. equality and non-discrimination,
5. privacy and personal data protection,
6. reliability,
7. safe innovation.

Chapter IV sets out provisions concerning legal remedies applicable throughout the entire lifecycle of artificial intelligence systems. It emphasises the necessity of access to relevant documentation and information regarding potential risks posed by such systems. The Convention underscores the importance of safeguarding the right to object to the use of artificial intelligence systems and to challenge decisions made through their application. It also mandates the establishment of mechanisms for lodging complaints with competent authorities and stresses the need for transparent and accessible procedures at both national and international levels. Additionally, it requires that individuals be informed when they are interacting with a system rather than a human being.

Chapter V is dedicated to the principles for risk assessment and the mitigation of adverse outcomes in situations where human rights, democracy, or the rule of law may be endangered.

Chapter VI concerns the procedures for implementing the Convention. It emphasises the principle of equal treatment for all future users, including persons with disabilities and children. The chapter highlights the importance of public consultation processes, the promotion of adequate digital literacy, and the provision of safeguards to ensure the protection of human rights in line with their established formulations.

Chapter VII sets out the requirements for verification and cooperation processes. It establishes a Conference of the Parties, assisted by the

General Secretariat of the Council of Europe, as a forum for information exchange regarding the Convention and for the periodic review of its implementation. Each party is required to submit an initial report within two years of acceding to the Convention and to provide subsequent reports at regular intervals. Furthermore, each party commits to establishing at least one mechanism to monitor compliance with the Convention's provisions. The chapter also introduces a framework for international cooperation aimed at facilitating the exchange of information on both the positive and negative impacts of artificial intelligence systems, and at supporting non-party entities in addressing issues falling within the Convention's scope.

Chapter VIII comprises the final provisions of the Convention. These relate, among other things, to procedures for submitting amendments to the Convention's text, as well as for its signing and ratification. Notably, Article 32, titled "Territorial Application", introduces a potentially contentious issue. It stipulates that each party to the Convention may specify the internal territory within which the Convention's provisions will apply, and may subsequently alter this territorial scope. This diverges significantly from the model used by the European Union, where regulations are addressed to Member State governments and are uniformly applicable across the entirety of a Member State's territory. In contrast, under this Convention, a party – whether a state or an international organisation – may determine the geographical area within which the Convention will be implemented, or even revise this scope at a later date. This raises concerns, particularly in scenarios where more authoritarian governments might seek to limit the Convention's application. The question may even be posed, albeit provocatively, whether it would be legally permissible for a state such as Poland to implement the Convention solely within the city of Kraków, while excluding the remainder of its territory. The situation becomes even more complex in the context of countries with federal systems. Conventions such as this one typically do not prescribe penalties for non-compliance. However, they usually indicate that each party, during the ratification process, should adopt appropriate criminal law instruments to ensure the effective implementation of the Convention.

The timeline for the Convention's entry into force remains uncertain, as there is no obligatory deadline for ratification and the process is entirely voluntary. Although the protections offered by the Council of Europe Framework Convention CETS No. 225 (Council, 2024b) are of pressing importance, it is currently impossible to predict when the Convention will attain binding force. Ratification must be undertaken individually by each party, meaning that the ratification

of the Convention by the European Union does not imply automatic ratification by its Member States. To date, no EU Member State has signed the Convention (a particularly striking fact), not even Lithuania, where the ceremony marking the opening of the Convention for signature was held. Unfortunately, this process may take a very long time, judging by the course of events surrounding, for example, the Convention on Cybercrime (ETS No. 185) (Council, 2001), adopted on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2001 in Budapest. It entered into force only on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2004, and Poland ratified this document on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2015 – 14 years later! One explanation for such delays is the need to adequately prepare the justice system for the implementation of the Convention's provisions, including equipping law enforcement agencies and courts to handle relevant cases effectively and streamlining procedures for filing complaints with the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg (European, 2025), which serves as the final and authoritative judicial instance. This was, for instance, the justification provided by the Polish authorities for the delayed ratification of the Convention on Cybercrime. As for when CETS Convention No. 225 (Council, 2024b) becomes a fully operational protective instrument – only time will tell.

### **The European Union's Regulation (2024/1689)**

The next document is Regulation (EU) 2024/1689 of the European Parliament and of the Council, adopted on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2024, commonly referred to as the Artificial Intelligence Act. This regulation is binding in its entirety and directly applicable in all Member States of the European Union. It is also relevant to the countries of the European Economic Area. The primary objective of the regulation is to structure and regulate the functioning of artificial intelligence systems within the single European market (Regulation, 2024b).

The origins of the AI Act can be traced back to 2017, when the European Parliament adopted the Resolution of 16<sup>th</sup> February 2017 with recommendations to the Commission on civil law rules on robotics (2015/2103(INL)) (European, 2017). This document outlined general principles concerning the development of robotics and artificial intelligence for civil use. Subsequently, on 25<sup>th</sup> April 2018, the European Commission issued a Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions – *Artificial Intelligence for Europe* (COM(2018) 237 final) (European, 2018), which marked the formal launch of a European initiative on artificial intelligence.

The objectives of this initiative included the implementation of AI systems across the EU economy to enhance its economic and industrial capacity, prepare for the socio-economic transformations brought about by AI, and ensure the development of an ethical and legal framework aligned with the values enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (*Charter*, 2012). Among the key measures outlined in this instrument were increased financial investments in research, innovation, and development for the period 2018–2020, as well as the creation of an “AI on Demand” platform. This platform was intended to serve as a collaborative laboratory for all interested stakeholders within the Member States, with a particular emphasis on supporting small and medium-sized enterprises. Developed between 2019 and 2021 under the Horizon 2020 programme, the platform is currently used to facilitate the sharing of resources, tools, and knowledge related to artificial intelligence algorithms (AI4EU – AI on Demand) (AI on Demand, 2025). In June 2018, the European Commission appointed the High-Level Expert Group on Artificial Intelligence (AI HLEG) (European, 2024a), tasked with providing advisory services to the Commission. The group comprised 52 specialists from diverse scientific backgrounds, including computer science, robotics, philosophy, and law, alongside representatives from business and social sectors. In the Commission Communication of 8<sup>th</sup> April 2019, entitled *Building Trust in Human-Centric Artificial Intelligence* (COM(2019)168) (European, 2019), the European Commission outlined seven key requirements developed by AI HLEG that must be fulfilled for the use of artificial intelligence systems to be considered trustworthy. These requirements are: human agency and oversight; technical robustness and safety; privacy and data governance; transparency; diversity, non-discrimination, and fairness; social and environmental well-being; and accountability. Although the AI HLEG concluded its mandate in July 2020, the forum established around it – comprising hundreds of participants organised within the AI Alliance (European, 2024b) – continues its activities in cooperation with the European Commission. One of the main outcomes of these efforts was the preparation of the *White Paper on Artificial Intelligence* (COM(2020)65 final/2), published on 19<sup>th</sup> February 2020 (European, 2020a). The White Paper sets out a policy and regulatory framework for the development of AI systems within the European Union, aiming to establish an “ecosystem of excellence” and an “ecosystem of trust” grounded in European values, with particular emphasis on high-risk AI systems. On the same day, the European Commission also issued the *Communication European Strategy for Data* (COM(2020)66) (European, 2020d), dedicated to the role of data in the development of artificial intelligence. This document outlined a vision for

a data-driven economy and addressed the challenge of regulating access to data in a manner that respects privacy, while also defining the framework for the use of data from both the public and private sectors.

The initiatives described above took place within the framework of the Europe 2020 strategy (Europe, 2010) and can be regarded as preparatory steps toward their eventual materialisation in the form of binding EU legislation. This process was further advanced under the subsequent development framework of the European Union, namely the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021–2027 (MFF) (Council, 2020) – a strategy formulated under the challenging conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, which also necessitated the creation of an additional economic stimulus program, the Recovery Plan for Europe (Regulation, 2021).

The Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2021–2027 covers seven main areas:

1. Single market, innovation, and digital economy,
2. Cohesion, resilience, and values,
3. Natural resources and the environment,
4. Migration and border management,
5. Security and defence,
6. Neighbourhood and the world,
7. European public administration.

The Recovery Plan for Europe supports only the first three areas of the MFF, which are dominated by two major transformations: the green and digital transitions, both highlighted in Ursula von der Leyen's address to the European Parliament on 27<sup>th</sup> November 2019 in Strasbourg (von der Leyen, 2019). The focus on digital transformation – which is also seen as a key tool for achieving climate goals – accelerated the European Commission's legislative initiatives to structure the digital sphere within the EU, emphasising technology, infrastructure, and data. As part of these efforts, a comprehensive package of regulations has already been adopted, including:

- The Digital Markets Act (2022/1925) (Regulation, 2022a),
- The Digital Services Act (2022/2065) (Regulation, 2022b),
- The European Chips Act (2023/1781) (Regulation, 2023a),
- The Data Act (2023/2854) (Regulation, 2023b),
- The European Digital Identity Framework (2024/1183) (Regulation, 2024a),
- The Artificial Intelligence Act (2024/1689) (Regulation, 2024b).

The latter consists of an extensive preamble with 180 recitals, followed by a main body structured into thirteen chapters and 113 articles, supplemented by thirteen annexes.

Although the title of the Artificial Intelligence Act (Regulation, 2024b) suggests the establishment of harmonised rules for artificial intelligence, the legal text specifically addresses artificial intelligence systems, consistent with the approach outlined in both the previously discussed UN Resolution A/70/L.49 (United Nations, 2024a). and the Council of Europe Convention CETS No. 225 (Council, 2024b). For the purposes of the Regulation, an “AI system” is defined as a “machine-based system designed to operate with varying levels of autonomy, potentially exhibiting adaptiveness after deployment, and, for explicit or implicit objectives, inferring from the input it receives how to generate outputs such as predictions, content, recommendations, or decisions that may influence physical or virtual environments” (Art. 3, par. 1).

Although the “pyramid” model, which classifies artificial intelligence systems into four categories based on the degree of risk (minimal risk, limited risk, high risk, and unacceptable risk), is frequently referenced in various documents (Atack, Limam, 2021), this specific model is not explicitly adopted in the Artificial Intelligence Act. However, the Regulation makes a significant contribution by establishing a list of prohibited AI practices, which outline activities leading to the complete exclusion of certain systems from use. It also sets the criteria for qualifying systems as high-risk AI systems, which can only be deployed under specific conditions.

In the context of the Regulation, “risk” is defined as “the combination of the probability of an occurrence of harm and the severity of that harm” (Art. 3, par. 2). High-risk AI systems, as detailed in Annex III of the Artificial Intelligence Act, include, among others:

- Systems that operate with biometric data,
- Systems that manage critical infrastructure,
- AI systems used in education and vocational training,
- Systems involved in employment procedures,
- AI systems regulating access to private and public services,
- Systems applied in law enforcement,
- AI used in migration, asylum, and border control,
- AI systems involved in the administration of justice and democratic processes.

However, regarding the latter category, Recital 61 clarifies that “The use of AI tools can support the decision-making power of judges or judicial independence, but should not replace it; the final decision-making must remain a human-driven activity”. Furthermore, this list of high-risk categories is subject to potential expansion in the future.

The Artificial Intelligence Act imposes supervisory obligations on manufacturers, distributors, importers, and entities using high-risk AI systems, as well as on state authorities. Each Member State must establish a notifying authority responsible for overseeing the proper designation and functioning of conformity assessment bodies and their subcontractors. The goal is to manage the entire lifecycle of high-risk AI systems through a risk management framework that ensures transparency, accuracy, robustness, and cybersecurity, while also considering the impact on fundamental rights.

Article 6, paragraph 3, clarifies that systems will not be classified as high-risk if they do not pose a significant risk to the health, safety, or fundamental rights of individuals, including not materially influencing decision-making outcomes. The Regulation thus distinguishes between three categories of systems based on the level of risk associated with their use: unacceptable risk; high risk; and systems that do not pose a significant risk.

The Artificial Intelligence Act also establishes requirements for the training, validation, and test data used in AI systems. These principles aim to eliminate gaps, biases, and errors, while ensuring the security of special categories of data, such as personal data. Additionally, the Regulation introduces comprehensive procedures for handling incidents related to AI systems.

A distinct category within the Artificial Intelligence Act is General Purpose AI (GPAI). These are not AI systems in the traditional sense, but rather general models capable of performing a wide range of tasks. These models are trained on vast datasets and only become AI systems when integrated with a user interface or other application layers. GPAI models are typically deployed through libraries, application programming interfaces (APIs), and similar tools. Examples of such models include ChatGPT, DALL·E 2, and Bard, which consist of at least one billion parameters and can execute diverse functions.

Systems that implement these models may pose specific hazards and large-scale risks, including systemic harm. Therefore, if such a system is placed on the market, the provider must notify the European Commission. Based on this notification, the Commission may assess on a case-by-case basis whether the model in question constitutes a systemic risk. The Regulation defines systemic risk as “a risk specific to the high-impact capabilities of general-purpose AI models, having a significant effect on the Union market due to their reach or because of actual or reasonably foreseeable negative consequences on public health, safety, public security, fundamental rights, or society as a whole, which could spread across the

value chain”. In response to these concerns, the European Commission has announced the creation of a dedicated Code of Practice for such systems. Stakeholder participation is encouraged in this process, which is expected to be finalised by May 2025 (European, 2025b).

The Commission is also responsible for publishing a list of General Purpose AI systems. In addition to addressing risks, the AI Act includes provisions designed to foster innovation. These include regulatory sandboxes, which allow the testing of high-risk AI systems under controlled conditions, as well as the possibility of testing outside these sandboxes. The Regulation also provides support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to encourage their participation in AI development and innovation.

To ensure effective governance, the AI Act establishes the European Artificial Intelligence Board. This board will be supported by an advisory forum made up of independent scientific experts. The Regulation also introduces a centralised EU database to monitor high-risk AI systems and includes mechanisms for supervising AI systems after their deployment. Non-compliance with the Regulation’s provisions can lead to substantial penalties. Regulation 2024/1689 (Regulation, 2024b) will come into effect on 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2026, and it will be published in all official languages of the European Union.

Undoubtedly, the Artificial Intelligence Act represents a pioneering regulatory initiative that establishes a general framework for the deployment of AI systems, placing the human being at the centre as the ultimate overseer of all such processes. This approach reflects core European values and underpins the broader objective of achieving European digital sovereignty. The Regulation is intended to govern the functioning of AI systems within the European single market. However, given that many of these systems originate outside the European Union, its provisions are also expected to exert significant extraterritorial influence. Non-EU producers aiming to access the EU market will be required to adapt their products to comply with the Regulation’s standards. Consequently, Regulation 2024/1689 (Regulation, 2024b) is anticipated to become a global benchmark for AI governance.

In Poland, preparatory work is underway to implement the Regulation, including the designation of a national notifying authority and the development of adjudication procedures. The Court of Justice of the European Union in Luxembourg will serve as the final adjudicative body in matters arising from the Regulation.

## **Artificial Intelligence Systems and Human Rights**

As evidenced by the analysis of the aforementioned documents, a fundamental issue lies in the relationship between humans and the “black box”, which constitutes the core of every artificial intelligence system. Typically, individuals lack an understanding of the underlying mechanisms that drive these increasingly complex systems and are often unaware that such mechanisms can be applied to their lives. The documents reviewed reveal that the primary framework for safeguarding human rights in the context of artificial intelligence is grounded in established systems of human rights protection, particularly those of an international nature. These frameworks include the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the European Union, each of which is supplemented by specific provisions found within the documents discussed. Therefore, creators of artificial intelligence systems intended for use in sectors governed by the aforementioned human rights frameworks should primarily adhere to these frameworks, alongside the additional requirements set forth in the three regulations discussed above. However, it is important to recognise that artificial intelligence systems are not exclusively developed within these regulated areas but are also emerging in other regions of the world. Consequently, the aim of these documents is to establish a protective filter that shields sectors covered by these requirements from technologies that fail to meet these standards, while also serving as a form of supervisory normative authority. This raises the question: Is such a regulatory approach sustainable in the face of global systems such as TikTok or DeepSeek?

## **Conclusions**

In 2024, three pivotal international documents concerning artificial intelligence were adopted: UN Resolution A/78/L.49 (United Nations 2024a), the Council of Europe Framework Convention CETS No. 225 (Council, 2024b), and EU Regulation 2024/1689 (Regulation, 2024b). At present, none of these documents is legally binding; the UN Resolution, by its nature, does not have the force of law, while the Council of Europe Framework Convention and the EU Regulation have yet to enter into force. Notably, none of these documents directly addresses artificial intelligence itself but rather focuses on artificial intelligence systems with which humans interact. This distinction arises from the recognition that artificial intelligence, as a rapidly evolving technology, is not merely a tool but also a distinct field of research. This field encompasses disciplines such as computer science, cognitive science, and philosophy. Humans interact

with specific artificial intelligence systems as products of this rapidly advancing technology, such as diagnostic medical devices, employment qualification systems, unmanned vehicles, and more. It is these systems that necessitate regulatory requirements. However, the documents discussed set different goals for these systems. The UN (United Nations 2024a) views them primarily as tools to accelerate the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals outlined in the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (United Nations, 2015b). Recognising that artificial intelligence systems can facilitate more efficient progress towards these goals, the Council of Europe's CETS Convention No. 225 (Council, 2024b) emphasises the expectation that AI systems will contribute to the development of civil society, as well as protect human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. In contrast, the European Union Regulation (2024/1689) (Regulation, 2024b) focuses on regulating the functioning of AI systems within the European market. The range of expectations placed on artificial intelligence systems by these three documents is indeed vast. However, in the areas most impacted by these documents, AI systems continue to be deployed without comprehensive legal protection, unless specific local regulations are in place. The international human rights frameworks of the UN, the Council of Europe, and the European Union serve as the foundation for protecting against the undesirable effects of AI systems, and each of the discussed documents introduces additional requirements. However, not all of these requirements are legally binding at present. Moreover, it remains uncertain whether these requirements can be maintained in light of the technological advancements occurring in other parts of the world. The possibility of deregulatory movements in this field cannot be ruled out. A particularly concerning aspect is that, for instance, the Council of Europe Framework Convention CETS No. 225 (Council, 2024b) has not yet been preliminarily signed by any EU Member State. Whether these regulatory frameworks will be effectively implemented and maintained remains uncertain, and time will ultimately tell how the situation unfolds.

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## **Standpoints and Core Themes in Recent Web of Science Literature on European Migrant Women**

### **Abstract**

Increasing tensions in Europe and the so-called “migrant crisis” call for a scientific analysis of the European migrant woman’s intersectional experience and representation in knowledge domains. This study aims to identify and map a sample of recent scholarship in the field of European migrant women from Web of Science (WoS) literature. A critical dialogue investigates authorship standpoints and perspectives, the scientific methodologies used, and the core themes in the data sample. The multimethod approach enriches assessments of both the frame and what lies beyond it, while facilitating an understanding of the field’s development within the conceptualised geopolitical frontiers of Europe. Migrant standpoints are identified through the absence of non-EU migrants in authorship and epistemology, as well as core themes of female migrants’ socioeconomic burdens, education, labour, social gaps, stereotypes, and policy. The study also highlights the need for more migrant women as knowers in research. Mapping scientific knowledge production examines how meanings intertwine across studies, shedding light on what representational infrastructures may signify and symbolise within the complex trajectories that migrant women navigate across European societies.

**Keywords:** Europe, Identity, Migrant, Migrant Women, Scientific Research, Standpoint, Web of Science

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## **Introduction**

Knowledge production constitutes a key site of scientific inquiry concerning Europe. As a dataset, the research canon is examined to identify intersectional authorship identities (Cho et al., 2013) in relation to gendered writing on European migrant women, and to investigate the geopolitical and cultural locations that shape core themes. Standpoint epistemology (Harding, 2009) provides a critical framework for this research endeavour, assessing and delimiting content by situating knowledge and experience within their social contexts and revealing what may otherwise remain obscured (Harding, 2009). Internalised emotions such as shame and anger due to discrimination may suppress evidence, leading to echoing injustice (Rolin, 2009, p. 221) which further exacerbates reverberations on migrant women's multilayered identities at psychological and sociopolitical levels of relationality, visibility, and societal belonging and integration within Europe.

Drawing on scientific analyses of how European migrant women's resilience and complex journeys are articulated within knowledge that traverses diverse margins across Europe – where disparities within the EU persist as regards the availability and quality of services provided to women experiencing violence (EIGE, 2025) – this study examines how such representations shape understandings of gendered migration and vulnerability. The Istanbul Convention (2014) addresses the specific struggles that migrant women face as victims of domestic violence or forced marriage. Integration policies tend to frame harm as intrinsic to ethnic minorities, depicting and treating women as victims, and men as threats to gender equality (van Mol, de Valk, 2016, p. 77), and to European security and the European way of life (Goodman et al., 2017). Discursive research has shown that representation configures claims regarding how migrants and refugees should be treated (Goodman et al., 2017, p. 2). Women's vulnerability is shaped by dual patriarchies (Loza, 2023), and reinforced through layered intersectional discrimination (EIGE, 2025, p. 18). A feminist, migrant-centered assessment of Europe addresses intersectional identities in the scientific production of knowledge concerning both internal and external European migrant women. The European gaze which views others persists through systematic symbols of Orientalism – a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (Said, 2016). The Orient is constructed as the Other – woman, outsider – within Europe, not only as a human being and her experiences, but also, arguably, in the way knowledge is produced;

a process which may perpetuate stereotypes and discrimination rather than dismantle these structures.

The content of the produced knowledge is critically examined to map the symbolism and trajectories of European migrant women across European terrains and to assess the extent to which this discourse is reinforced or interrogated within the data sample. Migration policy implementation purportedly aims to ensure that generations of Europeans continue to benefit from the continent's distinctive, European-trademarked freedoms (Commission, 2024). Adopting a standpoint perspective interwoven with thematic content analysis in recent publications, this study analyses the values and limitations in terms of authorship perspectives, scientific methodologies, and core themes and meanings, in order to assess persisting inequalities and to question whether these freedoms are merely reserved primarily for male, native Europeans.

As codes and symbols relating to European migrant women become embedded, multi-method research provides critical reflections on recurring and pressing issues facing Europe. This is discussed against the backdrop of the *Pact on Migration and Asylum*, which focuses on EU security, begrudgingly describing migration as not being a “passing phenomenon” (Commission, 2024, p. 1) which will “dominate political agendas” (Commission, 2024, p. 1). *Europeanness* – a broad and encompassing construct – is an elusive master signifier, perennially fraught with ambiguities and uncertainties, even as its salience seems ever more pronounced (De Genova, 2016). Shifts in perceptions of the crisis prioritise European borders and security, rendering migrant and refugee claims to international protection secondary and illegitimate (Goodman et al., 2017, p. 9). Knowledge on migrants mirrors how Europe conceives itself and treats newcomers upon their arrival. As the geopolitical entity of Europe is understood as one which is shifting, the conceptual focus on the contemporary period revisits enduring racialised and gendered discrepancies evident in contemporary frameworks, as well as the powerful potential of standpoints within scientific infrastructures to enrich European identity, security, and citizens' sense of societal belonging.

## Methods

Upon identifying the research scope, a thorough search was conducted using the title query “Europe\* and woman/women/female and migrant/immigrant” in the Web of Science (WoS) database. WoS is a selective (Birkle et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2021), and long-established citation index of scientific and scholarly publications, encompassing journals,

proceedings, books, and data compilations (Birkle et al., 2020, p. 363). It is thus illustrative of the scientific output represented in the dataset. A total of 103 articles were retrieved and subsequently limited to a subset according to the following criteria: they had to be English language, open access, research articles, published in the 2022–2025 timeframe, and appearing in credible Q1 or Q2 journals. Eight articles were ultimately identified as meeting the research criteria. The selected publications encompass a multidisciplinary scope and delimit the thematic assessment of knowledge production.

Interpretative content analysis considers sources and thematic patterns extrapolated inductively from the data, including categories of research outputs (Braun, Clarke, 2006). This research method moves beyond statistical evidence, extending the analysis beyond the explicit content of the data (Drisko, Maschi, 2016, p. 58) in order to deconstruct resilience and vulnerability. The thematic data represent a signifier of the current scientific canon on a highly pertinent subject within European, migration, and security studies. Although this constitutes a qualitative approach, scientific evidence is grounded in empirical data and “interpretations must be justified through validating evidence” (Drisko, Maschi, 2016, p. 59). Coupling standpoint methodology with content analysis acknowledges the significance of the researcher’s positionality in shaping critical contextual understandings within the data and ensuing meta-analysis.

From this epistemological perspective, texts do not simply contain meaning but are instead rendered meaningful through the perspective and understanding of the reader for specific purposes (Drisko, Maschi, 2016, p. 67). The researcher, herself a European migrant woman, adopts an outsider-within approach (Collins, 1986) to engage with the multilayered complexities of intersectional identity in reflexive dialogue with the data sample. The authorship background (first author), methodology, and core themes are organised through connotative codes which are inductively derived from the data to detect underlying patterns, carefully analysing “both manifest and latent content” (Drisko, Maschi, 2016, p. 72). The investigation of scientific knowledge is not limited to the content frame, offering a more comprehensive understanding of scientific production as an evolving process rather than a fixed moment.

## **Results**

The articles ranged across diverse WoS categories, most commonly within demography, sociology, social sciences (interdisciplinary), political science, economics, social work, and health or infectious diseases. Despite

the small sample size, the wide multidisciplinary scope reflects various domains impacting European migrant women and thematic lenses dedicated to each investigation.

### **Authorship & Lenses**

The literature identified predominantly female-first authorship, employing a range of analytical lenses. Single-authored studies by women include research on: the resilience of ageing non-EU migrant women from a Finnish university (Smarika, 2024); migrant women's overeducation in the labour force, conducted by the European Trade Institute in Belgium (Akgüç, Parasnis, 2023); a comparative analysis of migrant fertility across multiple origins and destination contexts from a Swedish university (Mussino, Cantalini, 2024); and barriers to HIV testing among migrant women from the perspectives service providers from a Polish university (Krankowska et al., 2024). Additional studies include an assessment of Turkish migrant women's employment in comparison to native women conducted by a UK university (Guveli, Spierings, 2022), and an examination of perceptions of the quality of maternal and newborn care around the time of childbirth from a Portuguese university (Costa et al., 2022). Skill requirements across jobs held by migrant and native women in five European destinations were assessed by a first author based at an American university (Adserà et al., 2023). A further study discussed Romanian migrant women's socio-economic adaptation drivers and was the only paper led by a male first author from a Romanian university (Dragan et al., 2025).

The presence of only one male first author may indicate a stronger correlation between identity standpoints and the higher publication rates of women, suggesting that women are more likely to lead research on women, while men may feel less authority or interest in doing so. The wide geopolitical range of universities and research institutes represented conveys continued European engagement with the subject, and, in the forthcoming years, more studies that are still in progress will emerge. Gender inequalities must be more thoroughly scrutinised in terms of the lingering patriarchal apparatus that shapes how migrant and native women in Europe live and experience life. Comparative analyses should not only address the differences between migrant and native women in Europe but also extend to comparisons between women and men, encompassing diverse intersectional significances that go beyond gender alone.

## Scientific Methods

The scientific methods identified in the data ranged from online surveys conducted across EU countries on migrant women's socioeconomic adaptation (Dragan et al., 2025), to an online survey for stakeholders and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working with migrant populations in 33 countries from the World Health Organization (WHO) European Region (Krankowska et al., 2024). Other methods included statistical analysis and “random walk” sampling (Guveli, Spierings, 2022), as well as an “online questionnaire including demographics and childbirth experiences of migrant and non-migrant women who gave birth in health facility in eleven countries” (Costa et al., 2022). A holistic, data-driven analysis also studied migrant fertility using the European Labour Force Survey across multiple origins and destinations (Mussino, Cantalini, 2024).

The methods also included semi-structured interviews conducted in Finland, focusing on: ageing non-EU migrant women and their personal narratives (Smarika, 2024); an econometric analysis of occupation-education mismatch of migrant women within a cross-country framework of recent data from the *European Social Survey* (Akgüç, Parasnis, 2023, p. 78); and an exploration of job skill requirements of migrant women in EU countries, based on data from the *European Labour Force Survey* (2005–2015) of migrant women and the *Occupational Information Network* (Adserà et al., 2023).

Most studies focused directly on migrant women in Europe, whether through generational analysis, comparisons with native women, or health providers' perspectives on migrant women. This also exemplifies the significance of perception and representation in fostering inclusive societies and access to and treatment within public sector services such as healthcare, education, and employment. Insights derived from qualitative research can be utilised by European statistical databases to address persistent gaps in existing data. Further research incorporating migrant women's narrative experiences should be carried out, extending beyond closed-ended surveys and questionnaires to achieve greater data saturation. Although such data are more difficult to measure and qualify as being scientific, the politics of measurement, publication, and EU-level surveys may contribute to a more humanised understanding of data when analysis is delimited beyond the quantitative and statistical in order to engage more deeply with human experience, resilience, and narratives as forms of scientific knowledge.

## **Core Themes and Meaning**

The core themes that emerged include: the socioeconomic burdens on migrant women in Europe; education, labour, and social relations; the focus on stereotypes and policy; and women's narratives and power in knowledge production.

### **Migrant Women's Socioeconomic Burdens**

The socioeconomic adaptation of migrants is defined as the “process by which migrants become accepted into society, both as individuals and as groups” (Dragan et al., 2025, p. 3). Pregnant women and newborn migrants experience increased vulnerability (Costa 2022, p. 40). Other intersectional identities are considered in the data; the ways in which individual communities interplay with larger societal structures have a significant impact on fertility choices and trends, at times even more than that of socioeconomic factors (Mussino, Cantalini, 2024, p. 921). Maladaptation tends to burden women disproportionately, with blame shifted on their supposed inability to integrate rather than society's failure to accommodate them. This is further exacerbated by intersectional factors such as the economic- and care-based burdens of aging women migrants on both the state and families (Smarika, 2024, p. 354). Such blame-shifting fuels the cycle of invisibility and vulnerability, further increasing the burdens on migrant women. Moreover, as both women and migrants, they stand at the “intersection of migrant and gender disadvantage in the labour market” (Akgüç, Parasnis, 2023, p. 76). It has been observed that “women work regardless of their gender attitudes because of their economic household needs” (Guveli, Spierings, 2022, p. 735). Migrants “generally work in jobs requiring fewer analytical skills and more physical strength skills than the native born” (Adserà et al., 2023, p. 37), meaning that migrant women may face extra burdens in employment and a higher risk of unemployment if their skills are more analytical. There is evident fear and mistrust within healthcare settings (Adserà et al., 2023, p. 355), and 51% of EU health stakeholders reported that access to full healthcare was restricted according to residency status (Krankowska et al., 2024, p. 557). Lack of access and undocumented vulnerabilities must be considered, as many realities are silenced or unreported due to a lack of support networks and reciprocal mistrust in relationships. Such isolation further widens research data gaps and must be addressed to reduce structural and societal inequalities.

## **Education, Labour, & Social Relations**

More educated individuals possess increased cultural adaptability (Dragan et al., 2025, p. 12) and social networks may help women to “relate more to the broader community, which enhances their economic opportunities and reduces the risk of labour market segregation in the host country” (Dragan et al., 2025, p. 13). The demand for education might increase as a consequence of migration, both for migrant women and the second generation (Guveli, Spierings, 2022, p. 729). A correlation between education and migrant fertility was identified, whereby “early motherhood can hinder women’s opportunities for higher education or career advancement, leading to long-lasting negative impacts” (Mussino, Cantalini, 2024, p. 912). Limited access to education, and a lack of resources for transportation to and from health facilities (Krankowska et al., 2024, p. 561) emotionally and physically encumber women, and gaps in maternity care were observed among both migrant and non-migrant women across the EU (Costa et al., 2022, p. 45). The cultural and social norms linking migration to fertility, and how these interact in institutional and policy contexts, is evident in community effects (Costa et al., 2022, p. 921).

Inequalities in labour force participation and access are defined by a worker’s attributes, e.g., their education, country-specific human capital, and institutional barriers (Adserà et al., 2023, p. 38). The phenomenon of skill waste, whereby “migrant women are significantly over-qualified in their jobs compared to native women” (Akgüç, Parasnis, 2023, p. 90) is conveyed. The over-education gap may be lessened through the “overall increasing participation of women and changing attitudes over generations” (Akgüç, Parasnis, 2023, p. 92), although research shows it has worsened over time (Akgüç, Parasnis, 2023, p. 93). Over-education may be linked to a lack of employment and opportunity, due to structural, gendered, and racial discrimination.

Cultural mediators may assist migrants with language and health awareness (Krankowska et al., 2024, p. 561), illustrating assimilation conditionalities. Social networks are identified in the literature as a means of resilience and reworking, “cultivating home place and social connection, a sense of sisterhood, alternative ways of healing, and spirituality” (Smarika, 2024, p. 357). Despite existing gaps, sociocultural networks provide means of resilience among migrant women when other institutional domains fail to accommodate them.

## **Stereotypes & Policy**

Multi-fold prejudice impacts upon migrant women's access to opportunities. Negative portrayal of migrants as excluded peoples exacerbates discriminatory hierarchies within dominant narratives (Smarika, 2024, p. 354). These portrayals – for example, that Romanian women migrants are all low-skilled – must be contested (Dragan et al., 2025, p. 15), as women continue to be exposed to patriarchal stereotypes (Dragan et al., 2025, p. 3). Core barriers hindering migrant women's access to HIV testing were “stigma and discrimination, [along with] language and cultural barriers” (Krankowska et al., 2024, p. 557). Prejudice and stereotyping are also evident in maternity care, with migrant women facing verbal and physical abuse as well as neglect (Costa et al., 2022, p. 47).

Policy and normative context are significant in shaping migrant fertility (Mussino, Cantalini, 2024, p. 921) and “norms may carry over from the origin country or be reshaped at the destination, while policy influences occur only at the destination” (Mussino, Cantalini, 2024, p. 912). For example, lower fertility may be a result of a lack of social policies supporting adequate work-family conciliation (Mussino, Cantalini, 2024, p. 918). Although barriers to HIV testing and early diagnosis are structural and policy based, there are also prominent issues at both the societal and the individual level (Krankowska et al., 2024, p. 557) and generalised action to improve respectful care in healthcare facilities is recommended (Costa et al., 2022, p. 47).

Bridging the gap between policy and community practices in Europe is essential in order to acknowledge migrant women's struggles and strengthen state-society relations in terms of social integration. More policies aimed at helping migrant women are necessary (Dragan et al., 2025, p. 15) to foster higher gender equality in the labour market and within societal attitudes, thereby making better use of women's skills (Akgüç, Parasnis, 2023, p. 92) and reducing labour market disparities. Policymakers viewing migrant women as a “potentially underutilised resource” (Adserà et al., 2023, p. 37) conveys women's agency and assets as cohesive, advantageous or of “use” to European society. Although seemingly self-serving, collaborative efforts can foster greater solidarity in Europe as the European “we” evolves.

## **Migrant Women Narratives and Power in Knowledge Production**

Counter-narratives may “reimagine ways of narrating the multifaceted stories of women in the margins and illuminate new pathways for social work by untangling questions on power and who gets to participate as knowers” (Smarika, 2024, p. 354). Knowledge sharing is likewise emphasised as being important for empowerment through information, e.g., as regards healthcare. These initiatives address migrant women’s needs directly, overcome language barriers, tailor social services to be dedicated to women, and fight cycles of stigma (Krankowska et al., 2024, p. 557). A strengths-based perspective to the rhetoric surrounding the negative representation of non-EU women migrants (Smarika, 2024, p. 355) reworks narratives of trauma into narratives of resilience (Smarika, 2024, p. 355), framing migrant women as resilient agents (Smarika, 2024, p. 356) capable of circumventing societal harm.

Mapping migrants’ geographical positioning reveals gaps in the literature of longitudinal data limiting analyses of the assimilation process (Adserà et al., 2023, p. 37). Such gaps overlook “how migrants integrate once arrived in the destination country or what influences their desire to remain in the destination country” (Dragan et al., 2025, p. 2), as well as the identification of individual fixed effects. Longitudinal follow-up is crucial for assessing migrants’ societal and structural experiences and relationships after settling in a host country, conveying a sense of familiarity among migrants when they are regarded as permanent members of society. Merely studying migrants “upon arrival” perpetuates foreign and fleeting discourses which may reflect European sentiments more than those of migrants themselves. Migrant voices, as epistemic agents, interrupt othering discourses along with the patriarchal, misogynistic, and racist blame-shifting that occurs when they are categorised as “non-European”, thereby falsely depicting migrants as passive signifiers of violence and threat. Recognising migrant women’s narratives as enriching to European research and broader societal frameworks epistemologically bridges discrepancies in knowledge production.

## **Conclusions**

Studies that measure scientific production on a particular topic, such as European migrant women, shed light on qualitative and quantitative contributions, highlight existing gaps, and provide a thematic landscape of the current and most recent scientific literature indexed in the Web of

Science (WoS). While the small data sample indicates a predominantly female first authorship, it does not reveal whether these women are themselves migrants or not. Most studies adopt perspectives that are framed within European contexts and standards as regards migrant women, underlining the significance of authorship standpoints and the need to identify this among authors' positionalities. Locating women within research may itself employ politics of positionality and processes of "orchestrating" (Lentin, 2004, p. 310) in order to meet the conditionality of European norms, highlighting the need for critical perspectives and multidisciplinary methodologies to counter gendered and racialised discrimination across European knowledge arenas. Predominantly drawn from European universities, the disciplinary range of data largely represents social, political, and health concerns, where the core themes detected are consistently observed across the sample. The inductive approach to data collection and coding delimits preconceived notions, focusing instead on content observations and highlighting migrant women's vulnerability and experiences of stigma as core themes in the data. Including migrant women as knowers and experts helps to reconcile mistrust and facilitates integration into EU society from both perspectives.

Eurocentric apparatus asserts itself through the signifiers of "us" and "them" and through the mechanisms of state regulations. These govern the lives of migrants and other racialised minorities, including equality mechanisms, which reproduce racialised populations as ultimately unequal, as the promise of equality is always conditional (Lentin, 2004, p. 304). The literature illustrates academic production politics and demonstrates a positive inclusion of gender, although non-EU migrant women within Europe may be more present as first authors and in both single and comparative studies in credible academic journals, exemplifying how this conditionality may "suppress or distort evidence" (Rolin, 2009, p. 223), not only within individual articles and studies, but also through the selective process of publication.

Statistical data are limited but nonetheless substantial, highlighting the need for critical knowledge to address policy-implementation gaps and disparities in access and opportunity across education, labour, social relations, health, wellbeing, and trust. The absence of a legal definition of "migrant" (Anderson, Blinder, 2011, p. 3) communicates the ambiguity of identity within legal frameworks. As this study did not include asylum seekers or refugees, nor data from a larger timeframe, the detection of themes is limited to the scope of analysis, specifically addressing European migrant women in English in accordance with the inclusion criteria. The scope is further delimited by focusing on migrant women in Europe,

encompassing a broad definition of migrants from multiple locations and perspectives. The politics of specificity in WoS results may be compared to other databases in the future.

Systematically overlooking or failing to ask questions pertaining to, for example, the various meanings that places hold for people at different moments in their physical or metaphorical lives, or viewing migrants as “in-between” and transient, undermines both conceptual and empirical analyses of migrant journeys and reinforces anti-immigrant discourses prevalent across much of the Global North (Crawley, Jones, 2021). Research that attends to standpoint, methodology, and thematic focus may expose discourses perpetuating invisibility mechanisms, which hinder anti-discrimination research as well as adequate policy formation and implementation. Gender equality frameworks can operate across societal and political domains – such as education, health, public space, and political representation and parties – to address the urgent, so-called “migrant crisis”, the current rise of anti-migrant sentiments, and tensions and reciprocal mistrust across the EU, thereby significantly deconstructing inequalities and barriers to recognition and connection, most pressingly in the context of migrant women in European societal terrains. Consequently, research on the gendered aspect of migration within European funding agencies and scientific journals may be a potential avenue to expand both migrant and migrant women’s channels to promote conscious, informed human rights dialogue across Europe and reconsider the margins of who and what constitutes a European citizen.

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