European Studies Review

European Studies Review

European Studies Review is a peer-reviewed journal which involves students and recent graduates in publishing opinion pieces and research articles regarding European affairs. Run by students and recent graduates, European Studies Review is composed of a team of enthusiastic and passionate young people across Europe.

EUROPEAN STUDIES REVIEW

DECEMBER 2025

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Projecting Europe: Cultural Power and Visual Sovereignty in the EU

Alessia Capanna

Introduction

Cultural diplomacy is gaining relevance within the traditional concept of diplomacy.[2] In this article, I draw upon the concept of cultural diplomacy to discuss how European identity can be strengthened *vis-à-vis* contemporary challenges. I analyse the role of cultural and media diplomacy in shaping European identity and values, both within the Union and internationally. I first define the term "cultural diplomacy" and its implementation in today's world. In the first part, I present the contemporary social media context and the rapid development of new digital technologies and social media. With new opportunities and channels of communications, risks connected to manipulation of cultural narratives grow higher. In the second section, I present how a pluralistic approach to values strengthens European identity with the means of cultural diplomacy. Visual and cultural sovereignty represent an opportunity for the European Union to foster unity through plurality.

Diplomacy and culture are not univocal terms. The academic literature on the topic has been growing consistently in recent years, offering insights into the complex role of culture in the EU's foreign and internal policy and perception.[3] Following Cummings, cultural diplomacy represents a constant exchange of ideas or any cultural product in an international environment. These exchanges aim to "*foster mutual understanding*" between people from different countries.[4] I argue that culture and diplomacy are to be understood as a combination of the political realm and the cultural world. Its manifestations may change according to the historical period and the geopolitical context, in line with national ambitions.

While cultural diplomacy has existed for centuries, the term itself has only been established recently. States and the EU employ cultural diplomacy to define their identities and foreign policy, based on

---

1   Alessia Capanna holds a Bachelor's degree in Political Science and International Relations from the University of Parma and a Master's in International Cooperation and Development from the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, both awarded cum laude. She completed a traineeship at the Consulate General of Italy in Stuttgart, Germany. She also has experience in European fieldwork and project work, having worked at the European University Institute.

2   Milton C. Cummings Jr., Cultural Diplomacy and the United States Government: A Survey (Washington, DC: Center for Arts and Culture, 2003); Simon Mark, A Greater Role for Cultural Diplomacy (The Hague: Netherlands Institute of International Relations "Clingendael," 2009); Nicholas J. Cull, "The Tightrope to Tomorrow: Reputational Security, Collective Vision and the Future of Public Diplomacy," The Hague Journal of Diplomacy, no. 14 (2019).

3   Alina Stoica, Culture and Paradiplomatic Identity: Instruments in Sustaining EU Policies, with Ioan Horga and Maria Manuela Tavares Ribeiro (Cambridge Scholars, 2016); Caterina Carta and Richard Higgott, eds., Cultural Diplomacy in Europe: Between the Domestic and the International (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Richard Higgott and Alessandro Giovanni Lamonica, "The Role of Culture in EU Foreign Policy: Between International Cultural Relations and Cultural Diplomacy," Økonomi & Politik 94, no. 4 (2021).

4   Milton C. Cummings, Jr., Cultural Diplomacy and the United States Government: A Survey (Washington, DC: Center for Arts and Culture, 2003), 1.

the idea that "co-optive power" is a more effective tactic than coercion.[5] Therefore, the use of culture, values, and policies becomes functional to reinforce credibility and attractiveness on the global stage.

The increasing production and circulation of digital content amplify the urgency and relevance of cultural diplomacy. In today's interconnected world, *Digital Culture* and *Digital Diplomacy* provide practical frameworks for understanding and applying cultural strategies. For this reason, this article examines how, through cultural diplomacy, the EU can both support its internal cohesion and assert a credible, value-based presence internationally, addressing contemporary challenges and uncertainties while fostering a shared imagination.

Yet a central question arises: How can the EU use cultural and media diplomacy to strengthen its identity and project influence in a complex and digitalised world?

Navigating Digital Media: Opportunities and Risks for the EU

To address this question, it is essential to examine how the European Union manages the contemporary digital and cultural landscape. Processes have definitely accelerated, and the passage of human heritage *from one to many*, to be understood both as an individual and as a written source, has shifted *from many to many* with the advent of new digital technologies and the creation of the Internet.[6] The relationship between convergence and participatory culture is not always harmonious, but it has enabled the emergence of a so-called "convergent culture",[7] composed of ideas produced either bottom-up or top-down by the media on a large scale, subsequently adapted and reworked by audiences through cultural processes.[8] In this context, misinformation and incitement to hatred, often justified by cultural background and generated by the fear of the *other*, create the conditions in which violence appears as a considered choice.

In response, the EU increasingly leverages digital tools and media strategies to promote shared values, combat misinformation, and consolidate solidarity. The goal is not merely to communicate messages, but to create participatory spaces where citizens engage with their European personality, thereby reinforcing a sense of belonging and mutual understanding across diverse communities.

With the exponential growth in the number and use of media, culture has also begun a process of digitalisation, aimed at improving the digital environment for all European citizens. The recent political developments demonstrate the importance of ensuring online platforms are safe, allowing all the benefits that come with the new features adopted in the world of communication. In accordance with democratic principles, the EU combats misinformation, invests in education

5   Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Soft Power," Foreign Policy, no. 80, Twentieth Anniversary (Autumn 1990): 166–168.
6   Manuel Castells, The Rise of the Network Society, 2nd ed., with a new preface (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
7   Henry Jenkins, Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide (New York: New York University Press, 2006).
8   Renato Stella, Claudio Riva, Cosimo Marco Scarcelli, and Michela Drusian, Sociologia dei new media [Sociology of New Media], 2nd ed. (Torino: UTET Università, De Agostini Scuola S.p.A., 2018), 47.

and best practices, and monitors the impact of its policies.[9] As meaningful use of media encourages participation and a sense of community, the EU should follow this path to strengthen the European identity among its Member States and in the wider world. In this regard, media function as tools that define social reality, establishing an ideological framework through the institutionalised production and dissemination of symbolic goods and cultural content.[10]

Cultural and Visual Sovereignty in the EU

In today's media landscape, two perspectives coexist: one holds that the European spirit is more alive than ever, founded on shared and pluralist values; the other states that such values no longer exist, along with idealism, though a renewed culture can emerge based on new principles.[11] It is more natural to seek unity in specificity; not by chance, the official motto of the European Union is "*United in diversity.*"[12] One is not born European in an identity sense; one becomes European. The European ethos comprises dynamic systems of values that can conflict and continually evolve.[13] I argue that cultural differences, which amplify European consciousness while promoting common values, help reduce internal pressures toward fragmentation.

The European flag, shared values, and collective narrative are not merely aesthetic elements, but instruments of visual sovereignty through which the EU communicates its power, legitimacy, and sense of belonging. The definition of European identity is not precise; the European Commission considers that each generation should contribute to it. Therefore, it only refers to the existence of a combination of historical, geographical, and cultural elements.[14] This remains a persistent challenge, and cultural diplomacy presents a strategic avenue for the EU.

Identity is formed through interactions between citizens and political institutions, as well as through external perceptions. Recognising that otherness exists within and between societies is crucial.[15] For this reason, I assume that visual sovereignty cannot be imposed from above. Its effectiveness relies on transparent, participatory, and inclusive communication that engages citizens in defining the European imagination. In an era marked by global symbolic competition — between states, organisations, and digital platforms— the EU must foster "*purposeful cultural cooperation.*"[16] Cultural and media diplomacy is essential to reinforce

---

9   Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market for Digital Services (Digital Services Act), OJ L 277, 27.10.2022, 1–177; European Commission, 2022 Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation, June 16, 2022.

10 Davide Bennato, Sociologia dei media digitali: Relazioni sociali e processi comunicativi del web partecipativo [Sociology of Digital Media: Social Relations and Communication Processes of the Participatory Web] (Bari–Roma: Laterza, 2011), 19.

11 Heikki Mikkeli, Europa: Storia di un'idea e di un'identità [Europe: History of an Idea and an Identity] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002), 187.

12 Johan Fornäs, Signifying Europe (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 104.

13 Viktoria Kaina, Ireneusz Pawel Karolewski, and Sebastian Kuhn, eds., European Identity Revisited: New Approaches and Recent Empirical Evidence (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

14 Cris Shore, "Investing in the 'People's Europe': Critical Approaches to European Community 'Cultural Policy'," Man 28 (1993): 786.

15 Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior," in Psychology of Intergroup Relations, 2nd ed., 7–24. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986.

16 Ien Ang, Yudhishthir Raj Isar, and Phillip Mar, "Cultural Diplomacy: Beyond the National Interest?" International Journal of

credibility and maintain a coherent voice on the world stage.

Cultural diplomacy can be a powerful tool in constructing a common European identity and supporting global peace processes.[17] Culture is a *"system of signification through which a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced, and explored."*[18] It shapes political, social, and cultural aspects and reflects influence and power.[19] The EU frequently frames culture through terms such as *"cultural heritage of European significance," "respect for national diversities,"* or *"common cultural legacy."*[20] The 1973 Declaration on European Identity emphasised the importance of defining the EU's global relations while acknowledging the responsibility of Member States.[21]

Beyond understanding inter-European relationships, attention should also be given to how Europeans perceive their own values. European image should not be compared to, nor could it replace, national ones; it exists independently. Each citizen holds a personal vision of Europe, shaped by available elements, their use, and how one perceives oneself and is perceived by others.[22] The EU's global image reflects the histories of its Member States and their shared cultural heritage, founded on reason, justice, and charity.[23] However, I acknowledge that the push toward managing the EU's outward image must not risk conditioning, even partially, one's own identity in relation to the intentions of external actors, who have interests aimed at satisfying their respective needs.

Revealing Europe to Its Citizens: Engagement and Perception

In an era of *peer-to-peer* technology, public diplomacy must focus on individuals who can effectively communicate with their peers to create targeted channels for specific audiences. This approach enhances both efficiency and interactivity.[24] The European Commission supports policies that ensure European citizens can access social media content freely, while promoting continuity and interactive flows.[25] Although new media pose challenges such as the spread of fake news, misinformation, and illicit content, they also offer significant opportunities if genuine digital connections are established.

Within the framework of its international relations, I assert that the European Union should promote the diversity of cultural expressions in all their forms. The EU appears to be on the right path

---

Cultural Policy 21, no. 4 (2015): 366.

17 Stefano Baldi, Diplomazia culturale e relazioni internazionali: Il caso dei rapporti tra l'Italia e la Bulgaria [Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations: The Case of Relations between Italy and Bulgaria] (Sofia: Avangard Prima, 2019), 8.

18 Raymond Williams, Culture and Society (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).

19 Federica Olivares, Diplomazia culturale e relazioni internazionali: Il caso dei rapporti tra l'Italia e la Bulgaria [Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations: The Case of Relations between Italy and Bulgaria] (Sofia: Avangard Prima, 2019), 16.

20 European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Towards an Integrated Approach to Cultural Heritage for Europe, COM(2014) 477 final, July 22, 2014; Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (consolidated version, OJ C 326, 26 October 2012); Treaty on European Union (consolidated version, OJ C 326, 26 October 2012).

21 Declaration on European Identity (Copenhagen, 14 December 1973).

22 Timothy Garton Ash, Homelands: A Personal History of Europe (London: Vintage Publishing, 2023), XVI.

23 Mikkeli, Europa, 175–176.

24 Nicholas J. Cull, The Tightrope to Tomorrow: Reputational Security, Collective Vision and the Future of Public Diplomacy, 269.

25 European Commission, "Supporting media and digital culture," Shaping Europe's digital future, last updated October 11, 2024, European Commission website, https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/supporting-media-and-culture.

toward fostering intercultural dialogue. This strategy should address global challenges, including conflict prevention and resolution, the protection of cultural heritage, and the combating of political violence. Strategic collaboration with international organisations and national ministries is essential to strengthen the impact of cultural diplomacy by shaping a collective European narrative and policy actions.

In times of growing skepticism toward the European project, cultural diplomacy can act as a bulwark against uncertainty and disengagement, helping reconcile divided and diverse populations.[26] European Parliament elections illustrate *second-order election* dynamics, where voters often view them as less consequential than national elections, reflecting domestic dissatisfaction and support for smaller parties.[27] National political landscapes are decisive: parties with more extreme positions often adopt critical or openly hostile stances toward the EU, channeling existing discontent and affecting public opinion.[28] Cultural diplomacy represents a "*strategic tool*" to address otherwise "*impenetrable walls*" of tensions, thus building bridges between "*worst enemies*" and becoming a "*stabilizer in international relations.*"[29]

The EU must intensify its efforts to provide transparent and secure information. Misinformation poses a significant threat to the European project's survival, and cultural diplomacy can play a vital role in addressing it. In this context, building a stronger and more informed relationship between citizens and institutions remains a fundamental objective for consolidating the Union's future.

Conclusion

Cultural diplomacy, when strategically articulated through media and digital platforms, constitutes a central tool through which the European Union can shape both its internal cohesion and its global influence. The EU can foster its identity by promoting a pluralistic and not monolithic approach to values. In this context, the concept of pluralistic visual sovereignty emerges as a crucial framework: it denotes the EU's capacity to project a coherent yet inclusive symbolic representation of European identity, one that simultaneously acknowledges diversity and reinforces shared values. New media and digital tools pose at the same time a great opportunity to enhance participation among citizens and a risk in terms of misinformation development.

The Union must ensure that cultural plurality does not lead to fragmentation, but rather that it strengthens shared values and autonomy, toward "*peace, security, and progress in Europe and in the world.*"[30] In conclusion, citizens' engagement fosters mutual understanding, counters

---

26 Gaetano Castellini Curiel, Soft Power e l'arte della diplomazia culturale [Soft Power and the Art of Cultural Diplomacy] (Firenze: Editoriale Le Lettere, 2021), 9.

27 Niklas D. Steiner, "The 2024 European Parliament Election: Another Second-Order National Election?," European Union Politics 26, no. 4 (2025): 783–89.

28 Paul Taggart e Andrea L. P. Pirro, "European Populism before the Pandemic: Ideology, Euroscepticism, Electoral Performance, and Government Participation of 63 Parties in 30 Countries," Italian Political Science Review 51, no. 3 (2021): 292–293.

29 Federica Olivares and Dalya A. Zafirova, Diplomazia culturale e relazioni internazionali: Il caso dei rapporti tra l'Italia e la Bulgaria [Cultural Diplomacy and International Relations: The Case of Relations between Italy and Bulgaria] (Avangard Prima, 2019), 27.

30 Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union, 26 October 2012, Official Journal of the European Union C 326/13.

fragmentation, and fosters a sense of belonging across the Union. In this perspective, diversity and unity mutually reinforce each other, rather than being contradictory concepts. The EU's support of fair and respectful engagement strengthens core values of European belonging.

Cultural diplomacy initiatives can facilitate citizen engagement with Europe's diverse identities, thereby consolidating a sense of belonging and reinforcing democratic legitimacy. Such a strategy enables the EU to assert itself as a normative and credible actor on the global stage, stressing how unity does not necessitate uniformity. By embedding pluralistic principles into its visual and cultural narratives, the EU enhances its capacity to project values of dialogue, freedom, and intercultural cooperation. In doing so, the EU can improve its democratic foundations, promote internal cohesion, and establish itself as a credible defender of dialogue, freedom, and pluralism in a rapidly evolving and interconnected world.

The Orphaned Myth: Symbolic Minimalism and the Limits of Cultural Identity in the European Union

Priscila Walquiria Romero

Introduction

Few political projects have achieved as much institutional cohesion and as little emotional resonance as the European Union (EU). Despite its remarkable success in building a common market, legal order, and framework of rights, the EU has struggled to translate integration into a shared sense of belonging.

This article argues that the weakness of European cultural identity is not the result of indifference or lack of political will, but of three interrelated structural deficits. The first is conceptual: the very notion of European identity remains ambiguous, oscillating between civic values and cultural heritage. The second is institutional: legal constraints and fragmented governance have produced a fragile framework incapable of sustaining coherent symbolic action. The third is affective: European symbols and cultural initiatives have failed to foster emotional identification or everyday resonance among citizens.

At the core of this tension lies the Union's official motto, "United in Diversity". Far from serving as a catalyst for identity, it functions as what Laclau calls an empty signifier —a formula designed to generate consensus through inclusivity, but too abstract to inspire genuine affective attachment.[2] The result is a polity that governs meaning procedurally but struggles to produce a compelling cultural narrative.

The Administrative Imagination of Europe

The question of Europe's cultural identity is not new; from the cosmopolitan proposals of Victor Hugo to the functionalist visions of the European project, efforts have been made to articulate a narrative that gives meaning to «being European» beyond formal citizenship.[3] Hugo's vision, though utopian in nature, provided a fundamental symbolic reference that continues to resonate in contemporary attempts to construct European identity.

The construction of a cultural identity presupposes shared references and narratives that allow citizens to imagine themselves as part of a collective «we». This dynamic has long sustained national identities, giving them emotional depth through symbols, shared memories, and daily acts of reaffirmation.[4] Their strength

---

1   Priscila Walquiria Romero is an LL.M. candidate in European Union Law and Politics at LUISS University, Rome. Her research focuses on symbolic governance, legitimacy, identity and cultural integration in the EU.
2   Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 2020), 45.
3   Claudio Giulio Anta and Victor Hugo, "Victor Hugo and the idea of Europe. Opening Speech of the Peace Congress. Paris, August 21, 1849," *Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali* 80, no. 1 (317) (2013): 101.
4   Ernest Renan, "What Is a Nation? Lecture at the Sorbonne, 11 March 1882," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 15.

often derives not from historical accuracy but from invented traditions,[5] which creates a sense of continuity with a mythologised past.[6] As Hobsbawm argues, their strength often stems not from historical accuracy but from «invented traditions» that produce a sense of continuity with a mythologised past.[7] Habermas, by contrast, proposes a post-national identity rooted in constitutional principles rather than ethnocultural unity.[8] Taken together, these perspectives illuminate the enduring difficulty of articulating a European «we» capable of transcending administrative structures.

The EU has instead embraced procedural pluralism, avoiding exclusionary narratives while acknowledging its limited authority to promote a single foundational myth.[9] As Delanty points out, European identity has been articulated more as a reflexive project than as an organic community, that is, as a form of identity that does not depend on cultural or ethnic homogeneity, but on the recognition of plurality and continuous deliberation on the values that define belonging.[10] In its approach, the EU does not constitute a substantial unit but a space of openness that allows for the constant reconfiguration of its collective meaning. However, these qualities, although theoretically virtuous, tend to produce a weak identity from the mobilising point of view, since it lacks foundational myths, affective symbols, and heroic narratives that structure the collective imaginary; Europe has imagination without myth.[11]

The notion of "banal Europeanism" captures the subtle, almost invisible ways in which Europe inserts itself into the texture of everyday life.[12] Rather than invoking collective emotion or grand narratives, it operates through habitual encounters with symbols, documents, and procedures.[13] This quiet Europeanism sustains familiarity rather than passion: it normalises the Union as a background presence, something lived through routine rather than celebrated through imagination.[14] In this sense, European belonging becomes an administrative habit more than an affective commitment —a form of identity that is legalistic, procedural, and discreetly pervasive.

The European Union's attempt to articulate a shared political identity can be understood through two complementa-

---

5   Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 25, Accessed December 1, 2025, Perlego.

6   Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

7   *Ibid.,* 12.

8   Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).

9   Monica Sassatelli, "Imagined Europe: The Shaping of a European Cultural Identity through EU Cultural Policy," *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 4 (2002): 435-451.

10   Gerard Delanty, "What Does It Mean to Be a 'European'?" *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 18, no. 1 (2005): 11-22.

11   The European Commission's adoption of the portfolio title "Protecting our European Way of Life" in 2019 —later reframed as "Promoting our European Way of Life"— illustrates the shift. Intended to introduce an emotional and ethical dimension into the EU's technocratic narrative, the phrase has been widely debated for its ambiguous and potentially exclusionary undertones, particularly in relation to migration and cultural diversity. See European Commission, *Mission Letter to Vice-President Margaritis Schinas*, September 10, 2019.

12   Laura Cram, "Identity and European Integration: Diversity as a Source of Integration," *Nations and Nationalism* 15, no. 1 (2009): 109–28.

13   "Symbols, documents, and procedures" refers to the mundane artefacts through which the EU becomes familiar in everyday life. Symbols include the EU flag, the twelve-star emblem on ID cards, or the euro's visual iconography. Documents cover standardised instruments such as the European Health Insurance Card (EHIC), the Europass CV, or Erasmus+ paperwork. Procedures involve harmonised practices like Schengen border checks, cross-border recognition of professional qualifications, or residence applications shaped by EU law.

14   Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation.*

ry modes of governance. The symbolic mode relies on soft cultural programmes whose effectiveness depends on voluntary engagement and tends to coordinate meaning rather than generate deep identification.[15] The market-based mode, by contrast, regulates the circulation of cultural goods within the internal market, producing shared norms without necessarily fostering affective attachment.[16] Taken together, these mechanisms organise Europe's cultural space efficiently but offer limited narrative or emotional traction, illustrating the structural weakness of the EU's identity-building efforts.

Taken together, these dynamics expose a cultural project that is structurally coherent yet symbolically fragile. The EU succeeds in organising a shared cultural space, but it does so without generating the emotional resonance that anchors collective identity. In the absence of strong myths, common narratives, or widely internalised symbols, Europe's cultural imaginary remains overshadowed by national frameworks that continue to command greater affective power. The Union integrates, but struggles to inspire; it coordinates meaning, but rarely captures it.

Governing Diversity

One of the most relevant discursive shifts in the EU's approach to cultural identity was the shift from a cohesive narrative based on a common heritage to one focused on diversity and intercultural dialogue. As Calligaro shows, this transition implied leaving behind a cohesive narrative based on historical cultural references, in favour of a more inclusive rhetoric that seeks to manage plurality through normative procedures.[17] This was accelerated by the 2004 enlargement, which exposed the limits of the integrative paradigm founded on a supposedly common symbolic heritage, now overwhelmed by a more heterogeneous, post-communist, and multicultural EU.[18]

Criticised for its Eurocentrism and lack of representation, the EU replaced cultural hierarchies with a procedural approach to diversity. This solution helped avoid exclusion but weakened the emotional power of shared narratives. Europe learned to manage difference but not to narrate it, revealing a structural inability to translate diversity management into a compelling narrative framework capable of generating a cohesive and instinctive sense of European identity. As a result, the Union struggles to build an identity that is inclusive and recognisable, yet still capable of inspiring attachment. Intercultural dialogue, while normatively appealing, exposes the limits of a project that lacks strong symbols and remains politically fragile and only weakly internalised by citizens.

Instead of reinforcing a European identity based on historical symbols, a normative and procedural approach was prioritised, valuing mutual respect and tolerance as structuring principles. However, this evolution had ambivalent effects: while it

---

15 For instance, the European Heritage Label and various cross-border cultural initiatives exemplify the EU's use of soft instruments to foster symbolic identification among citizens without recourse to binding legal mechanisms.
16 Mark Thatcher, "Direct and Market Governance Paths for the Creation of an EU Political Identity: Cultural Heritage Policy," *Comparative European Politics* 17, no. 4 (2019): 531–552, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41295-019-00179-0.
17 Oriane Calligaro, "From 'European Cultural Heritage' to Cultural Diversity?" *Politique Européenne* 45 (2014): 60–85.
18 European Commission, "*European Year of Intercultural Dialogue: Opening Remarks by President Barroso*," Press Release, Brussels, January 8, 2008, accessed Dec. 3, 2025.

avoided the risks of an exclusionary identity, it also diluted the ontological foundations of a European identity in a strong sense, by substituting concrete referents with abstract values such as democracy, human rights, or the rule of law. This symbolic dematerialisation, although normatively inclusive, has generated a certain discursive vagueness and emotional detachment in broad sectors of the citizenry.[19] This identitarian asymmetry reveals that the EU has failed to produce an emotionally significant community that rivals national or local loyalties.

European identity, conceived as a postnational and normatively open construct, risks remaining a symbolic identification without affective depth. Unlike national identities sustained by myths, rituals, and historical narratives, European citizenship lacks mechanisms of symbolic socialisation capable of generating attachment. As Habermas notes, a postnational identity requires an active transnational public sphere —one that the EU has yet to foster.[20] Such a sphere would entail communicative spaces in which Europeans engage one another across national boundaries through shared media, debates, and civic practices. A concrete manifestation could be a genuinely Europeanised public broadcasting platform or deliberative forum, in which political controversies, social issues, and cultural debates are discussed not as national matters but as common European concerns. The delegation of symbolic production to sub-state levels has produced a narrative vacuum, leaving the Union dependent on Member States for cultural legitimacy and emotional resonance.

This symbolic fragility is reflected in the Union's official motto, "United in Diversity", which seeks to reconcile plurality and cohesion but often serves as a managerial formula rather than a shared narrative. The following section examines how this principle shapes —and limits— the EU's cultural imaginary.

"United in Diversity": Symbolic Minimalism in the EU

The European Union's motto, "United in Diversity", encapsulates one of the most revealing paradoxes of European identity-building. Conceived to reconcile pluralism with integration, the phrase aspires to affirm commonality without erasing difference. Yet, rather than generating symbolic cohesion, it has functioned as a rhetorical device that stabilises governance by neutralising meaning. Far from a communicative accident, this semantic emptiness has become a strategic feature of the EU's identity discourse —a form of symbolic minimalism that ensures inclusivity by avoiding conflict.

As Cram observes, diversity was initially framed as a potential resource for integration, capable of turning pluralism into a unifying theme.[21] However, the institutional uptake of that idea diluted its affective dimension. Shore interprets "United in Diversity" less as a call to unity than as an administrative formula: a technology of governance that organises coexistence

---

19 According to the *Standard Eurobarometer 102* (2024), only 15% of European citizens report feeling «very attached" to the European Union, compared to 50% who feel this way towards their country and 48% towards their locality. Although 63% claim to feel "somewhat attached" to the EU, these data reflect a weak symbolic bond in comparison to national and local identities.
20 Habermas, *Postnational Constellation*.
21 Cram, "Identity and European Integration," 109–28.

while displacing the question of belonging.[22] Laclau's notion of the empty signifier allows us to understand why this linguistic openness, rather than a weakness, may serve a deliberate political function.[23] By remaining universally acceptable and politically unassailable, the motto offers a discursive surface onto which divergent identities can project their own meanings.

This dynamic shapes the limits of symbolic governance. As Thatcher shows, initiatives grounded in the motto often enhance visibility but struggle to acquire narrative traction; they render Europe recognisable without making it affectively compelling. "United in Diversity" therefore operates as an inclusive but narratively thin instrument of legitimation.[24]

In accommodating difference through semantic openness, the motto forfeits much of the affective depth that could make European identity politically resonant. It avoids imposing a hegemonic definition but leaves the Union's symbolic grammar underarticulated. In this sense, "United in Diversity" crystallises a broader dilemma for the EU: a polity that governs meaning procedurally while maintaining a deliberately minimalist narrative vocabulary.

The Failure of Symbols: Law, Limits, and Disaffection in EU Identity

European symbolic weakness should be understood not as a communicative shortcoming but as a structural consequence of the Union's legal and institutional configuration. The very architecture that guarantees inclusivity also inhibits affective cohesion, sustaining legitimacy through procedural law rather than emotional integration. This tension becomes evident in the cultural programs through which the EU has attempted —and often failed— to translate its integrative principles into tangible instruments of collective identification.

According to Littoz-Monnet, EU cultural policy suffers from low political relevance and fragmentation on the agenda.[25] These are frequently shaped by bureaucratic interests and lack cohesive political support. Furthermore, as Thatcher points out, many of these projects are shared with or originate in other institutions, such as the Council of Europe, which dilutes their specifically European identitarian impact.[26]

The limited scope of EU cultural action stems, in part, from the legal architecture that governs the Union's competences. Under Article 6 of the TFEU, culture is defined as a supporting competence, which allows the Union to intervene only to

---

22   Cris Shore, "'In uno plures' (?): EU Cultural Policy and the Governance of Europe," *Cultural Analysis* 5 (2006): 7–26.
23   Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, 45.
24   Thatcher, "Direct and Market Governance Paths," 531–552.
25   Annabelle Littoz-Monnet, "Agenda-Setting Dynamics at the EU Level: The Case of EU Cultural Policy," *Journal of European Integration* 34, no. 5 (2012): 505–522.
26   This diagnosis is not exclusive to the 2018 Framework. It is also reflected in more recent documents such as the Work Plan for Culture 2023–2026, adopted by Council Resolution in 2022 (2022/C 466/01). This plan establishes key priorities such as the green and digital transition, the mobility of artists and cultural professionals, culture for health and well-being, and the strengthening of the role of cultural heritage in post-COVID Europe. While it explicitly acknowledges the value of heritage in constructing identity and social cohesion, its design remains constrained by the logic of voluntarism, the fragmentation of competences, and the absence of structural implementation mechanisms. Consequently, it reproduces the same dilemmas as its predecessors: significant normative ambition but limited effective symbolic capacity to produce sustained citizen identification

complement, coordinate, or support the actions of Member States.[27] This classification is reaffirmed by Art. 167, which explicitly prohibits any legislative harmonization in the cultural field.[28]

What appears as a legal limitation functions, in effect, as a political technology of self-preservation. By relegating culture to a supportive domain, the Union transforms juridical restraint into a strategy of symbolic governance: it legitimises its post-national order not through affective integration but through the management of neutrality. In doing so, the EU converts what seems like weakness into a mode of control, preserving consensus precisely by deferring meaning.

The absence of binding legislative competence has consequences that extend beyond the legal. It institutionalises the marginal status of culture within the European project and reinforces the perception that identity remains peripheral to integration. Cultural policy thus operates through soft governance mechanisms with limited reach, while the deeper processes of symbolic socialisation and collective imagination remain largely confined to national contexts.

This tension also manifests in the failure of the Union's official symbols to generate a shared emotional imaginary.[29] Although conceived as devices of collective identification, their appropriation has been uneven, weak, and largely superficial. The problem is not only institutional but perceptual: these symbols fail to resonate within citizens' lived experience. Their limited affective power undermines the democratic legitimacy of the European project, as weak identitarian ties contribute to civic disengagement, low electoral participation, and the perception of the EU as a remote, technocratic entity.

As Díez Medrano shows, attitudes toward European integration vary across countries and social groups, shaped by distinct symbolic capitals, historical memories, and national narratives.[30] While elite sectors may view the EU as a cosmopolitan or emancipatory project, large segments of the population experience it as distant,

---

27 Article 6: The Union shall have competence to carry out actions to support, coordinate or supplement the actions of the Member States. The areas of such action shall, at European level, be: (a) protection and improvement of human health; (b) industry; (c) culture; (d) tourism; (e) education, vocational training, youth and sport; (f) civil protection; (g) administrative cooperation. European Union. *Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union*, Article 6. Official Journal of the European Union C 115, 9 May 2008. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:12008E006:EN:HTML.

28 Article 167: 1. The Union shall contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity and at the same time bringing the common cultural heritage to the fore. 2. Action by the Union shall be aimed at encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, supporting and supplementing their action in the following areas: - improvement of the knowledge and dissemination of the culture and history of the European peoples, - conservation and safeguarding of cultural heritage of European significance, - non-commercial cultural exchanges,- artistic and literary creation, including in the audiovisual sector. 3. The Union and the Member States shall foster cooperation with third countries and the competent international organisations in the sphere of culture, in particular the Council of Europe. 4. The Union shall take cultural aspects into account in its action under other provisions of the Treaties, in particular in order to respect and to promote the diversity of its cultures. 5. In order to contribute to the achievement of the objectives referred to in this Article: - the European Parliament and the Council acting in accordance with the ordinary legislative procedure and after consulting the Committee of the Regions, shall adopt incentive measures, excluding any harmonisation of the laws and regulations of the Member States,- the Council, on a proposal from the Commission, shall adopt recommendations. European Union. *Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union*, Article 6. Official Journal of the European Union C 115, 9 May 2008. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:12008E006:EN:HTML.

29 The European Union recognizes five official symbols: the European flag, the anthem (*Ode to Joy*), the motto "United in Diversity," Europe Day (9 May), and the single currency, the euro. These were adopted by the European Council in 1985 and reaffirmed in Declaration No. 52 attached to the Treaty of Lisbon (2007). See European Union, *Symbols of the European Union* (Brussels: European Commission, 2024), https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/symbols-eu_en.

30 Juan Díez Medrano, *Framing Europe: Attitudes to European Integration in Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003)

technocratic, or alien. This gap between institutional intention and social reception confirms that symbolic initiatives alone are insufficient: without rooted cultural resonance, the European imaginary remains a projection without popular anchorage.

Conclusion: Reclaiming the Orphaned Myth

The crisis of European cultural identity cannot be explained simply by a deficit of political will; it exposes a deeper structural paradox. In its effort to guarantee pluralism and avoid exclusion, the European Union has produced an orphaned myth —a governance framework that aspires to belonging while depriving itself of affective depth. Its symbols circulate without narrative energy, and its cultural programs, though institutionally consistent, rarely translate into emotional identification.

As Anderson reminds us, imagined communities depend on shared stories that bind individuals through emotion as much as through law. The European project, by contrast, has cultivated consensus through procedures, not passions. What emerges is a polity sustained by administrative rationality but haunted by the absence of a collective imaginary.[31]

The task, therefore, is not merely to design new symbols or expand cultural competences, but to recover a narrative capacity: to articulate meanings that can be collectively inhabited rather than bureaucratically managed. "United in Diversity" will gain significance only when it ceases to describe an institutional condition and begins to evoke a shared affective horizon. Until then, Europe remains an imagined community without imagination —a political order in search of its own story. In the end, Europe's challenge is not to invent new symbols but to inhabit the meanings it already proclaims.

Looking forward, this orphaned myth will continue to face new tests. The resurgence of nationalist movements in countries such as Hungary and Poland, the electoral consolidation of far-right parties in Italy, France, and Germany, and the democratic erosion visible in several Member States all challenge the EU's legitimacy and its symbolic cohesion. The Brexit experience and the EU's fragmented response to the migration and energy crises have further exposed the fragility of its collective narrative. Yet, these very pressures could also act as catalysts for a renewed sense of belonging, as shared adversity often produces moments of reflection and redefinition. Whether Europe can transform these fractures into a civic narrative that combines emotional resonance with institutional coherence will determine if its myth remains orphaned or finally finds a home. True unity may emerge only when the continent learns to turn political crises into shared memory —when the myth of Europe stops wandering and becomes part of its living history.

---

31   Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 25.

Europe's Turn to Consent-Based Rape Laws: A Call for Non-Carceral Action

Ada Haliloğlu

Introduction

In 2024, the case of Gisèle Pelicot shook France, if not the world. It was not only the horrific nature of the crimes against her that made headlines, but how Gisèle responded to them.[2] Almost a year after the conclusion of the trial, France amended their coercion-based rape law into a consent-based model in October 2025.[3] The amendment followed protests where thousands of French citizens marched in solidarity with Gisèle and other victims of sexual violence, and its ratification marked what is deemed a feminist victory by human rights organisations.[4] France is far from the only European country that made this change. In fact, it is one of many European countries that has done so in response to a highly publicised criminal case. However, in the midst of celebrating these developments, it is important to consider the potential risks of using punitive measures as a reactionary state response to public outcry.

With this necessity in mind, the paper at hand analyses the European turn to consent-based models in the legal definitions of rape. The analysis is grounded in a decarceral feminist approach that treats sexual violence as a structural issue rather than a problem solvable through punitive expansion. Following this line of thinking, criminal law reforms can inadvertently reinforce the power dynamics they aim to address. By interrogating how the consent-based definitions reinforce a specific way of understanding rape, this paper discusses the consequences of framing rape as primarily a matter for criminal law. Accordingly, the paper argues that while consent-based rape laws may be a positive — or even necessary— step towards fighting sexual violence, they also carry the risk of framing rape as an individualised problem due to the carceral logic that underpins the laws themselves.

The Switch to Consent-based Rape Laws

At their core, rape laws can be divided into two models: coercion- and consent-based models.[5] In coercion-based systems, the definition of rape is dependent on factors such as force, resistance, or intimidation. Consent-based approaches instead criminalise rape based on the lack of freely given agreement by all parties. Consent-

---

1. Ada Haliloğlu is a Turkish scholar residing in the Netherlands. She holds a BSc in Political Science and an MSc in Crime and Criminal Justice, both from Leiden University. Her research interests include crimmigration, victimology, and prison reform.

2. Vivienne Walt, "Gisèle Pelicot Is Galvanizing a Movement for Survivors of Sexual Violence," TIME, February 20, 2025, https://time.com/7216401/gisele-pelicot-rape-case/.

3. Macarena Sáez and Elvire Fondacci, "France Redefines Rape in Landmark Law: A Critical Step Toward Ending Sexual Violence," Human Rights Watch, October 30, 2025, https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/10/30/france-redefines-rape-in-landmark-law.

4. Amnesty International, "France: 'Historic Victory' as French Law Adopts Consent-based Definition of Rape," October 30, 2025, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/10/france-historic-victory-as-french-law-adopts-consent-based-definition-of-rape/.

5. Sara Uhnoo, Sofie Erixon, and Moa Bladini, "The Wave of Consent-based Rape Laws in Europe," International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice 77 (2024): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcj.2024.100668.

based models are not without their critics. Feminist and legal scholars have pointed out issues with these models for various reasons, such as the difficulties in proving lack of consent in court or the actual possibility of truly voluntary consent in patriarchal societies.[6] Despite these criticisms, consent-based approaches are still commonly seen as a positive for survivors of sexual violence, since they are believed to have a higher probability of bringing justice to victims of sexual violence compared to their coercion-based counterparts.[7]

Recently, Europe has seen a surge in consent-based models. As of November 2025, there are 24 European countries with consent-based rape laws, with 18 European Union (EU) member states and 6 non-EU states.[8] Moreover, in September 2025, Estonia passed a draft bill which, if ratified, will also shift the country to a consent-based model.[9] The vast majority of these countries switched from the coercion-based model over the last 10 years.[10]

The surge in these reforms can be traced back to international societal developments. Global waves of activism, particularly the *#MeToo* movement, exposed the systemic and pervasive nature of sexual violence and pressured governments to modernise outdated statutes.[11] Meanwhile, the European Court of Human Rights' 2003 ruling in *M.C. v. Bulgaria* established a jurisprudential foundation for consent-based models. In the ruling, they stated that lack of physical resistance should not be the core factor in recognising rape, and that states must ensure their legislation reflects that.[12] However, perhaps the most important international development in the European context was the introduction of the Istanbul Convention, the first legally-binding instrument in Europe encompassing violence against women and domestic violence.[13] It recognises gender-based violence as a human rights violation, and crucially, defines rape based on the lack of consent. Accordingly, states that ratified the Convention were legally obligated to realign their legal standards on rape in order to align with the Convention's definition.[14]

The public reaction to these reforms has, in the majority, been positive.

---

6   Caroline Adoch, "Defining Rape: The Problem With Consent." Strathmore Law Journal 6, no. 1 (2022): 71–92, https://doi.org/10.52907/slj.v6i1.172.

7   Stefano Bergman and Sophia Thunberg, "Rethinking Rape Laws Emphasizes the Central Role of Consent in Shaping Both Legal Frameworks and Public Understanding," International Journal of Law and Public Policy (IJLAPP) 7, no. 2 (2025): 55–62, https://doi.org/10.36079/lamintang.ijlapp-0702.822.

8   The complete list of these countries is as follows: Belgium, Croatia, Republic of Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom.

9   ERR, "Estonian Government Approves Draft Sexual Consent Law," ERR News, September 18, 2025, https://news.err.ee/1609804500/estonian-government-approves-draft-sexual-consent-law.

10 For a historical overview of this shift to consent-based rape laws, see Uhnoo, Erixon, and Bladini, "Consent-Based Rape Laws in Europe."

11 Uhnoo, Erixon, and Bladini, "Consent-Based Rape Laws in Europe."

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Importantly, the Istanbul Convention does not actually require the crime of rape to be defined through non-consent. States are free to adapt coercion-based definitions if they wish to do so. What State Parties are required to do, however, is to ensure that all non-consensual acts covered in Article 36 of the Convention are covered in their national rape laws, regardless of their definition of rape. See Minni Leskinen, "The Istanbul Convention on Sexual Offences: A Duty to Reform the Wording of National Law or the Way We Think?," in International Law and Violence Against Women, ed. Johanna Niemi, Lourdes Peroni, and Vladislava Stoyanova, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2020), 133–56.

For example, a study conducted after Sweden's adoption of the consent-based rape law found that 72% of the Swedish public supported the consent-based model, while 18% remained neutral.[15] However, these reforms risk implying that the solution to the rape 'problem' is better lawmaking, effectively problematising rape as an individualised issue rather than a structural one. The assumptions that underpin this framing are twofold: (1) rape is an exception to the norm; and (2) the criminal justice system fulfils its purpose. If one believes that rapists are the few 'bad apples' in an otherwise peaceful society, the system will not focus on collective reform. It will instead focus on deterring the bad apples and re-balancing the scales for victims through criminal sentences. Such assumptions are a result of carceral feminism, and they obscure the deep social inequalities and large-scale power dynamics that sustain sexual violence even when legal definitions are modified.

Carceral Feminism and Reactive Lawmaking

Carceral feminism is a type of carceral logic referring to feminist advocacy that relies on criminalisation and incarceration as primary solutions to gender-based violence. Based on the assumption that justice is best served through legal punishment, carceral feminist approaches advocate for harsher sentencing, increased policing, and prosecutorial expansion to address gendered violence. Especially in neoliberal societies, this dependency on carceral and punitive measures is not surprising, as these societies tend to be built on various other carceral logics that show themselves across institutions (from prison systems to education) where structural problems are reframed as individual moral failures.[16] In this way, neoliberal societies replace social solidarity with blame and punishment, tackling social problems through intensified surveillance, policing, and incarceration.[17]

Decarceral feminism critiques this view, arguing that instead of promoting social conditions that foster safety and equity, carceral feminism inadvertently aligns itself with oppressive structures that perpetuate cycles of criminalisation and state control.[18] The dependency on the state reinforces monolithic accounts of gender and gendered violence through the assumption that all survivors have the same relationship to the state.[19] In every society, certain groups have less access to the criminal justice system, and certain groups are less likely to be taken seriously by law enforcement. For instance, a woman of colour will have a different relationship with the state than

---

15 Bergman and Thunberg, "Rethinking Rape Laws Emphasizes the Central Role of Consent."
16 Noah De Lissovoy, "Conceptualizing the Carceral Turn: Neoliberalism, Racism, and Violation," Critical Sociology 39, no. 5 (2012): 739–55, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258130809_Conceptualizing_the_Carceral_Turn_Neoliberalism_Racism_and_Violation.
17 When tackling violence, neoliberal governance, with its emphasis on individual responsibility, translates public demands into managerial solutions while dismantling welfare and community infrastructures that might prevent violence in the first place. In addition, another factor relevant in the European context is how colonial legacies racialise danger. For example, media discourse (and the following public reactions) around sexual violence often centres on migrant men, reinforcing punitive nationalism. For an overview of the role of the colonial and racial history of Europe's carceral states, see Sabrina Axster and Ida Danewid, "Countermapping the Carceral Security State: Beyond the Imperial Boomerang," International Studies Quarterly 69, no. 4 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaf070.
18 Anna Terwiel, "What Is Carceral Feminism?," Political Theory 48, no. 4 (2019): 421–42, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26966187.
19 Sarah Deer and Abigail Barefoot, "The Limits of the State: Feminist Perspectives on Carceral Logic, Restorative Justice and Sexual Violence," Kansas Journal of Law & Public Policy 28, no. 3 (2019): 505–26.

that of a white woman. It can therefore be argued that through ignoring the realities of intersectional feminism, and by turning a blind eye to the differing ways women experience state oppression, carceral feminism exacerbates a structure where some women are more deserving of safety than others.

Moreover, carceral feminism is amplified by strong (public) emotions. Peršak (2019) illustrates how public outrage and empathy after high-profile crimes often produces reactive criminalisation, what she terms *"victim-based lawmaking."*[20] In the case of rape and sexual assault cases, the aftermath often leads to legislative amendments that take the form of harsher sentences, widening the scope of the law, or clarifications to reduce vague language. However, when these amendments are presented as a solution to the problem of rape, it risks enforcing the societal belief that the fight against sexual violence should focus on criminal justice system's responses to rape, rather than the underlying factors that lead to rape and the underreporting of it in the first place.

Many European countries' rape law reforms exhibit this reactive pattern: Germany's 2016 *Nein heißt Nein* (No means no) law followed the Cologne attacks in December 2015; Sweden's 2018 reform followed the rape of a 15-year-old girl; Spain's 2022 *Solo Sí es Sí* (Only Yes means Yes) law followed the Pamplona case; and now France's Gisèle Pelicot case triggered the shift to a consent-based rape definition.[21] As Peršak points out, while public emotions can have a legitimate place in lawmaking, laws that are created this way carry the risk of *"the intricate details and complexities of the actual situation in which the victim has found herself"* being ignored or completely lost.[22] When this nuance disappears, the resulting reforms can produce overly broad or rigid laws. Such laws tend to serve the public emotional need for punishment, but fail to properly account for the various realities of survivors' experiences and needs.

Comparative research supports the idea that these reforms are reactive. While the change in definition may be advertised as a survivor-centred approach, victims of sexual violence still face significant challenges within the criminal justice system.[23] For example, criminal trials are often sites of secondary victimisation, where survivors frequently experience disbelief, minimisation, or retraumatisation during questioning and evidentiary challenges.[24] Moreover, adversarial procedures force survivors to perform 'ideal' victimhood. Certain victims of sexual violence (such as sex workers, transgender women, or individuals suffering from addiction) are often not recognised as victims when they do not fit the *"vulnerable and innocent woman"* stereotype of a rape victim.[25] The reactive expansion of criminalisation without

---

20   Nina Peršak, "Beyond Public Punitiveness: The Role of Emotions in Criminal Law Policy," International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice 57 (2019): 47–58, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcj.2019.02.001.

21   Uhnoo, Erixon, and Bladini, "Consent-Based Rape Laws in Europe."

22   Peršak, "The Role of Emotions in Criminal Law Policy," 49.

23   Clare McGlynn and Vanessa E. Munro, "Rethinking Rape Law: An Introduction," in Rethinking Rape Law: International and Comparative Perspectives, ed. Clare McGlynn and Vanessa E. Munro (Routledge, 2010), 1–14.

24   Selena Mariano, "The 'Double Bind' of Gender-Based Violence: Secondary Victimization in Courtroom Cross-Examinations," Behavioral Sciences & The Law, 2025, 1-13.

25   Ibid.

altering these institutional dynamics can therefore deepen survivors' mistrust and disengagement. For these individuals, the promise of the just legal system falls short, providing symbolic recognition without substantive safety.[26]

Furthermore, as previously explained, not all victims of sexual violence have the same relationship to the state. As a result, the false promise of the legal system is especially harmful to marginalised communities who have been affected by state (in)action. Viviane Saleh-Hanna argues that the relationship between these communities and the criminal justice system resembles an abusive relationship, where promises of reform mirror the manipulative *"honeymoon phase"* in cycles of interpersonal abuse.[27] She suggests that after periods of overtly discriminatory violence or injustice, the state offers reforms or rhetorical repentance as a way to restore legitimacy and reestablish control, much like an abuser promises to change to regain trust. However, these reforms are often temporary and strategically necessary to sustain systemic oppression. Just as abuse victims may cling to hope during calm periods, marginalised communities may invest in the illusion of meaningful change, when in fact these reforms are part of a larger, ongoing structure of domination.

The Path Forward for European Governance

In order to discuss what the path forward for European governance of sexual violence ought to be, it is important to consider what is currently missing in the widespread adoption of consent-based rape laws. These reforms neglect the socio-economic and cultural foundations of sexual violence (such as, but not limited to, the pervasiveness of patriarchal thinking, housing insecurities, and gendered labour inequality) and sideline non-punitive feminist practices such as community accountability and transformative justice. Anna Terwiel urges instead a spectrum of decarceration: feminists should engage the state strategically while working to shrink the centrality of penality.[28] In addition, a genuinely feminist ethics of consent must rest on the role of rape as a relational act embedded in a larger power structure and move away from the isolated culpability carceral solutions create.[29]

In line with this view, the European rape law reform must be embedded in structural transformation. In countries with greater gender inequality and lower rejection levels of rape myths, legal reform alone has minimal impact.[30] As these two factors are found to be significantly linked to the propensity to report sexual crimes in the first place, such countries cannot benefit from reform that primarily affects sentencing decisions.[31] Meaningful progress depends on allocating resources

---

26 McGlynn and Munro, "Rethinking Rape Law."
27 Viviane Saleh-Hanna, "An Abolitionist Theory on Crime: Ending the Abusive Relationship With Racist-Imperialist-Patriarchy [R.I.P.]," Contemporary Justice Review 20, no. 4 (2017): 419–41, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321223229_An_abolitionist_theory_on_crime_ending_the_abusive_relationship_with_Racist-Imperialist-Patriarchy_RIP.
28 Terwiel, "What Is Carceral Feminism?"
29 McGlynn and Munro, "Rethinking Rape Law."
30 Uhnoo, Erixon, and Bladini, "Consent-Based Rape Laws in Europe."
31 Stina Holmberg and Lars Lewenhagen, "Reported and Cleared Rapes in Europe: Difficulties of International Comparisons," The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention (Brå) (Brå, 2020), accessed December 3, 2025.

towards education, survivor support, and community engagement. European institutions should therefore treat legislative reform and social investment as co-dependent. Furthermore, consent-based laws must be accompanied by comprehensive sexuality education for primary prevention of sexual violence as well as funding for services for rape victims who choose not to report or file charges.

Moreover, in order to achieve true justice that goes beyond punishment, non-carceral methods must be explored further. Restorative- and transformative-justice programmes ought to be prioritised and promoted in order to offer survivors agency while avoiding the retraumatisation of adversarial trials. Restorative justice approaches such as survivor-centred mediation services and community accountability initiatives are already available in several European countries. In Belgium, access to restorative justice is seen as a right and restorative justice avenues have been available to victims since the early 1990s.[32] In Finland, where the criminal justice system is viewed as a last resort in crime prevention, and the priority is bettering social policy, non-carceral justice practices such as victim-offender mediation are widely used.[33]

However, while non-carceral avenues are not yet widespread in Europe, countries with large indigenous communities (such as New Zealand and Canada) have been using alternative justice models for decades.[34] Accordingly, various projects in Europe have focused on creating guidelines based on these countries' practices to adopt similar models. For example, in 2015, the Leuven Institute of Criminology published a detailed practice guide for using restorative justice in sexual assault cases.[35] The publication was part of an EU-funded research project and the guide consistently draws from New Zealand's Project Restore programme. EU-level funding could incentivise further research into these models and encourage (pilot) programmes that build on their findings.

Finally, European governance should activate the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence's (GREVIO) non-carceral recommendations under the Istanbul Convention. GREVIO is the monitoring body overseeing the Convention's implementation.[36] In their country reports, they point out which of these dimensions are neglected. States often overlook GREVIO's recommendations because they lack enforcement power, yet these evaluations are among the few mechanisms that systematically assess gaps beyond carceral responses. These

---

32   Marie Keenan, Estelle Zinsstag, and Caroline O'Nolan, "Sexual Violence and Restorative Practices in Belgium, Ireland and Norway: A Thematic Analysis of Country Variations," Restorative Justice 4, no. 1 (2016): 86–114, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/299416755_Sexual_violence_and_restorative_practices_in_Belgium_Ireland_and_Norway_a_thematic_analysis_of_country_variations.

33   Daniela Bolívar, Ivo Aertsen, and Inge Vanfraechem, eds., "Victims and Restorative Justice: Country Reports," European Forum for Restorative Justice (European Forum for Restorative Justice, 2015).

34   Julie Stubbs, "Restorative Justice, Gendered Violence, and Indigenous Women," in Restorative Justice and Violence Against Women, ed. James Ptacek (Oxford University Press, 2009), 103–22, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228134045_Restorative_Justice_Gendered_Violence_and_Indigenous_Women.

35   Vincer Mercer and Karin Sten Madsen, "Doing Restorative Justice in Cases of Sexual Violence: A Practice Guide," ed. Marie Keenan and Estelle Zinsstag (Leuven Institute of Criminology, 2015).

36   "Group of Experts on Action Against Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence & the Evaluation Process," WWP European Network, accessed November 5, 2025, https://www.work-with-perpetrators.eu/learn/istanbul-convention/group-of experts-on-action-against-violence-against-women-and-domestic-violence-the-evaluation-process.

reports can serve as a starting point in highlighting when states rely excessively on punitive measures. Using the findings from these reports, states could redirect funds from policing and imprisonment to education, housing, healthcare, and social services when needed. They can also focus on reforming the structural problems within criminal justice systems (such as previously mentioned issues like secondary victimisation, dismissive attitudes towards non-ideal victims, and rape myth persistence among criminal justice officers). This reorientation would ensure that rape law reforms go beyond mere symbolism.

Conclusion

Europe's embrace of consent-based rape laws marks a historic achievement for feminist advocacy, but it is shadowed by the risks accompanying carceral expansion and reactive policymaking. Using a decarceral feminist framework, this paper has shown that these reforms often represent misjustices in rape cases as a legal definitional gap, assume the sufficiency of punitive justice, ignore structural gender inequality by focusing on punishment instead of reduction, and emerge within neoliberal contexts that individualise harm.

The paper argues for an European policy approach that recentres the current problem framing of rape away from carcerality. Such governance ought to recognise the limitations of criminal justice systems and actively constrain the carceral state's reach. It is clear that European states are hearing the disapproval of their citizens in response to the misjustice experienced by survivors of sexual violence. However, only by coupling these legal reforms with structurally transformative practices can Europe adequately respond to the root causes of public outcry.

Resilience by Design: The Role of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism in Future Disasters

Mohamad Fadl Haraké

Introduction

Europe has entered a new era of vulnerability. In the past decade, the continent has endured wildfires in Greece, Spain, and Portugal, severe floods in Germany and Belgium, destructive earthquakes in Croatia and Turkey, and a pandemic that pushed health systems to the brink. Climate change has amplified both the frequency and intensity of such disasters, challenging the European Union (EU) to respond collectively, effectively, and rapidly. In this context, the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) has become a flagship of European solidarity.

Created in 2001, reformed in 2013, and enhanced through *rescEU* in 2019, the UCPM aims to strengthen cooperation between the EU and its Member States in civil protection, enabling quicker mobilisation of resources and more coordinated crisis responses.[2] rescEU is a reserve of EU-owned or EU-financed emergency capacities, such as firefighting planes, medical stockpiles, and field hospitals, designed to provide direct support when national resources are overwhelmed.[3]

While UCPM was hailed as a step toward a more resilient Europe, recent crises have raised important questions: is the UCPM truly *resilient by design*, or is it still dependent on ad hoc contributions and goodwill? Additionally, can project management principles help strengthen its resilience in the face of future disasters?

This article evaluates the UCPM from a resilience and project management perspective. It argues that while progress has been made, the system remains incomplete and at times fragile. By incorporating project management principles, such as agility, stakeholder alignment, and resource redundancy, the EU can transform the UCPM into a mechanism capable of withstanding the cascading crises of the climate era.

Theoretical Context: Resilience and Crisis Governance

In European Studies, crisis governance is often understood through the prism of multi-level governance, in which EU institutions, Member States, and local author-

---

1 Dr. Mohamad Fadl Haraké is a Management Professor, currently a research fellow at the CEREGE Research Laboratory at the University of Poitiers (France) and the manager of the research center of GBSB Global Business School (Spain/Malta). He specialises in public management, with a particular focus on the transformation of managerial models in the public sector within post-conflict countries. He can be contacted via: linkedin.com/in/m-f-haraké

2 European Commission, "EU Civil Protection Mechanism," *European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO)*, [Accessed October 03, 2025], https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/what/civil-protection/eu-civil-protection-mechanism_en

3 *Ibid.*

ities share competences.[4] Yet crises, by their nature, strain this system. Disasters do not respect borders, and coordination across levels often proves slow and contested.

Resilience theory provides a useful corrective. Resilience entails the capacity of a system to absorb shocks, adapt under stress, and recover stronger.[5]

Resilience scholarship often conceptualises system performance through "resilience curves", which illustrate how a system absorbs a shock, enters a degradation phase, and recovers over time. These curves allow analysts to compare how different systems withstand and rebound from disruptions, offering a quantitative and visual tool for understanding adaptive capacity.[5] Introducing this concept is essential for later evaluating whether the UCPM's performance dips too sharply or recovers too slowly in the face of multi-hazard crises.

In governance terms, resilience requires flexibility, redundancy of resources, and learning loops. Andrea Mentges *et al.* remind us that "resilience" is not a one-size-fits-all concept but a context-specific practice, requiring nuanced definitions for critical infrastructures.[5] In infrastructure contexts, resilience can even be expressed mathematically through "resilience curves" showing performance before, during, and after disruptions.[6,]

From a project management perspective, this resonates with the principles of adaptive governance: projects operating in uncertain environments must embrace scenario planning, agile teams, and risk registers. A state's capacity, its administrative quality, bureaucratic competence, and ability to mobilise resources also shape vulnerability to disasters.[7]

While crisis governance in the EU is often examined through multi-level governance or bureaucratic coordination frameworks, these perspectives primarily describe institutional arrangements rather than how systems behave under stress.[8] Resilience theory, by contrast, captures dynamic system performance during disruption, emphasising adaptability, redundancy, and recovery speed. This makes it particularly suited for analysing the UCPM, whose effectiveness depends not only on formal coordination structures but also on its capacity to maintain function during cascading or simultaneous crises. As C.S. Holling's foundational work on socio-ecological systems demonstrates, resilience theory provides analytical tools for understanding non-linear change and system thresholds.[9] More recent governance scholarship similarly shows that resilience frameworks better illuminate organisa-

4   Guida all'Europrogettazione, *"Mécanisme de protection civile de l'UE et RescEU [EU Civil Protection Mechanism and RescEU],"* *Guida all'Europrogettazione,* [Accessed October 03, 2025], https://www.guidaeuroprogettazione.eu/fr/guida/programmes-communautaires/mecanisme-de-protection-civile-de-lue-et-resceu/.

5   Andrea Mentges, Lukas Halekotte, Moritz Schneider, Tobias Demmer, and Daniel Lichte, "A resilience glossary shaped by context: Reviewing resilience-related terms for critical infrastructures," *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 96 (2023): http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdrr.2023.103893.

6   Craig Poulin and Michael B. Kane, "Infrastructure Resilience Curves: Performance Measures and Summary Metrics," *Reliability Engineering & System Safety* 216 (2021): https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ress.2021.107926.

7   Jie Tang, Shuaijun Han, Jian Wang, et al., "A Comparative Analysis of Performance-Based Resilience Metrics via a Quantitative-Qualitative Combined Approach: Are We Measuring the Same Thing?," *International Journal of Disaster Risk Science* 14 (2023): 736–50, https://doi.org/10.1007/s13753-023-00519-5.

8   Jan Hupkens, Christine Neuhold, and Sophie Vanhoonacker, "One Crisis Is Not Like Another: Exploring Different Shades of Crisis in the EU," *Politics and Governance* 11, no. 4 (2023): 252–62.

9   C. S. Holling, "Resilience and Stability of Ecological Systems," *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* 4 (1973): 1–23. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2096802.

tional adaptability and learning than traditional institutional models.[10] Unlike classical governance theories, resilience theory therefore allows us to evaluate not merely *how* the UCPM is organised, but *how well* it can withstand and recover from systemic shocks.

Thus, evaluating the UCPM requires asking not only whether it mobilises resources, but whether it does so in ways that are predictable, adaptive, and sustainable.

Building on this theoretical foundation, the next section examines how the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM) has evolved institutionally, in order to assess whether its design aligns with the principles of resilience outlined above.

The Union Civil Protection Mechanism

The UCPM was established in 2001 after a series of devastating floods and forest fires highlighted the limits of national responses. It provides a framework for co-operation between EU Member States and participating states, coordinated through the Emergency Response Coordination Centre (ERCC) in Brussels. Historical analyses emphasise that its creation reflected both functional needs and symbolic aspirations for European solidarity.[11] The system functions on the basis of voluntary contributions of assets such as firefighting planes, medical teams and rescue equip-

ment, pooled into a European reserve.

In 2019, the EU created rescEU as a fully EU-funded strategic reserve inside the UCPM framework, designed to complement voluntary national contributions by providing European-owned capacities such as water-bombing aircraft, medical stockpiles, and field hospitals.[12]

The UCPM has recorded several notable achievements. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it facilitated the repatriation of stranded EU citizens and coordinated the delivery of personal protective equipment. In 2021, when wildfires raged across Greece, Cyprus, and Italy, the ERCC coordinated more than a dozen firefighting aircraft from across the Union. In 2022, the mechanism was mobilised to support Ukraine with medical evacuations and humanitarian assistance.[13]

Yet challenges remain. The mechanism still depends heavily on national goodwill; assets are not always available, especially when multiple countries face simultaneous crises. Funding, while increasing, remains modest relative to the scale of needs. Moreover, bureaucratic procedures can delay deployments.[14]

To illustrate how the UCPM operates under real-world stress conditions, the following section draws on three representative recent disasters: the 2021 floods in Germany and Belgium, Mediterranean wildfires,

10 Louise K. Comfort, "Crisis Management in Hindsight: Cognition, Communication, Coordination, and Control," *Public Administration Review* 67, suppl. 1 (2007): 189–97, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2007.00827.x; Andreas Duit, "Resilience Thinking: Lessons for Public Administration," *Public Administration* 94, no. 2 (June 2016): 364–380, https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12182.
11 Arjen Boin and Magnus Ekengren, "Preparing for the World Risk Society: Towards a New Security Paradigm for the European Union," *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management* 17, no. 4 (2009): 285–94, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5973.2009.00583.x.
12 Newton Matandirotya, "The 2021 Western Germany Flood Event," *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 14 (2022), https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9772704/
13 German Committee for Disaster Risk Reduction, "Report on the 2021 Floods," *Civil Protection Knowledge Network*, 2024, https://civil-protection-knowledge-network.europa.eu/stories/german-committee-disaster-risk-reduction-report-2021-floods.
14 European Commission, "Legal Framework," *ECHO,* [Accessed October 08, 2025], https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/who/about-echo/legal-framework_en.

and the COVID-19 pandemic. Case study analysis is widely used in crisis governance research to capture system performance during disruption. These specific cases were selected because they span different hazard types (*e.g.,* hydro-meteorological, environmental, public-health emergencies, *etc.*), allowing a comparative evaluation of the mechanism's performance across diverse crisis categories. They also represent moments in which the UCPM was activated at scale, thereby providing empirical material to assess its resilience, coordination capacity, and structural limitations.[15]

Illustrative Examples Demonstrating Systemic Challenges in the UCPM

Recent disasters across Europe highlight recurring structural issues within the Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM). The 2021 floods in Germany and Belgium exemplify persistent coordination and communication shortcomings.[16] Although the UCPM was activated and assistance arrived from neighbouring states, mobilisation delays exposed weaknesses in cross-border warning procedures and the operational interface between national and EU-level actors.[17] Post-event assessments in Germany emphasised that unclear responsibilities and fragmented

communication channels slowed the response, illustrating that the presence of EU coordination structures does not automatically translate into efficient operational delivery.[18]

Similarly, the repeated waves of Mediterranean wildfires, particularly in 2021 and 2023, show both the strengths and limitations of the mechanism. While the rapid deployment of firefighting aircraft and personnel under the UCPM illustrates the value of EU-level solidarity, the near-simultaneous outbreaks across multiple states strained the voluntary pool of assets.[19] This indicates that the mechanism still relies heavily on the availability of national resources, which can be insufficient during region-wide crises, especially in situations where EU coordination should be most effective.

The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored these structural vulnerabilities. Although the UCPM facilitated repatriation flights and the distribution of medical stockpiles, the scale of demand revealed the limits of a system designed primarily for short-term, event-based emergencies.[20] The pandemic demonstrated that the mechanism struggles when confronted with sustained, multi-sectoral crises that require continuous resource mobil-

15   David E. Alexander, "Resilience and Disaster Risk Reduction: An Etymological Journey," *Natural Hazards and Earth System Sciences* 13 (2013): 2707–16, https://doi.org/10.5194/nhess-13-2707-2013; Arjen Boin and Martin Lodge, "Designing Resilient Institutions for Transboundary Crisis Management: A Time for Public Administration," *Public Administration* 94, no. 2 (2016): 289–98, https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12264; Lynn T. Drennan, Allan McConnell, and Alastair Stark, *Risk and Crisis Management in the Public Sector*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2014), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315816456.

16   Alvaro Prida, "2021 European Summer Floods: A Warning about the Climate-Induced Increase in Flood Risk?," *AXA Climate*, September 2021, https://climate.axa/publications/2021-european-summer-floods-a-warning-about-the-climate-induced-increase-in-flood-risk/

17   European Commission, "Advancing risk management and resilience-building in Europe: First report on the implementation of the union disaster resilience goals (COM(2025) 561 final), Staff Working Document, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52025DC0561.

18   Mentges et al., "A resilience glossary shaped by context: Reviewing resilience-related terms for critical infrastructures."

19   European Commission, "EU Organises Firefighting Teams and Fleet of Aircraft to Support Wildfire-Hit Countries," *ECHO*, May 26, 2025, https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/news-stories/news/eu-organises-firefighting-teams-and-fleet-aircraft-support-wildfire-hit-countries-2025-05-26_en.

20   European Commission, "Civil Protection," *ECHO*, [accessed October 12, 2025], https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/what/civil-protection_en.

isation beyond what Member States can voluntarily provide.

Discussion: Is the UCPM Resilient by Design?

1. Structural Strengths and Emerging Capacities

Recent reforms have undeniably strengthened the Union Civil Protection Mechanism. The gradual shift from a purely coordination-based tool toward a system with partially EU-owned assets reflects a significant conceptual evolution. The *rescEU* initiative, for instance, demonstrates an institutional acknowledgement that the scale and simultaneity of contemporary disasters can no longer be absorbed by voluntary contributions alone.[21] The Emergency Response Coordination Centre likewise shows improved situational awareness and operational coordination, especially in transboundary events where national authorities have limited visibility of neighbouring risks. These developments are grounded in the evolving legal framework governing the mechanism, which increasingly embeds solidarity and shared response obligations at the EU level.[22]

Moreover, the most recent evaluation of the UCPM highlights the continued need for integrated crisis-management structures and deeper interoperability among Member States, signalling that resilience-building is an ongoing process rather than a finished project.[23] Historical analyses reinforce this trajectory, showing how the UCPM has progressively evolved from an intergovernmental cooperation platform into a more structured and coordinated European mechanism.[24]

Yet the presence of stronger institutions does not automatically translate into resilience. Improvements in coordination and capacity are necessary but insufficient; resilience requires consistent, reliable performance under conditions of stress. In this regard, the UCPM remains marked by systemic asymmetries between member states, diverging administrative capabilities, and uneven national investment in preparedness. Even where solidarity mechanisms are well designed, the performance of the UCPM is constrained by the structural realities of twenty-seven domestic crisis-management systems, as demonstrated by the uneven national warning capacities revealed during the 2021 floods, the disparities in aerial firefighting assets during Mediterranean wildfire seasons, and the varied levels of health-system preparedness exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Persistent Vulnerabilities and Systemic Limitations

From a resilience theory perspective, the UCPM exhibits characteristics of a system that performs well under routine stress

---

21   European Commission, "rescEU," *ECHO*, [Accessed October 06, 2025], https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/what/civil-protection/resceu_en.

22   European Commission, "Legal Framework," *ECHO*, [Accessed October 08, 2025], https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/who/about-echo/legal-framework_en.

23   European Commission, "Evaluation of the EU Civil Protection Mechanism shows need for more integrated crisis management," *ECHO,* 29 May 2024, [Accessed October 14, 2025], https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/news-stories/news/evaluation-eu-civil-protection-mechanism-shows-need-more-integrated-crisis-management-2024-05-29_en.

24   Federico Lannuli, "EU Civil Protection Mechanism: History and Perspectives," *Tema Project*, May 11 2023, https://tema-project.eu/articles/eu-civil-protection-mechanism-history-and-perspectives.

but becomes vulnerable when confronted with compound, protracted, or multi-hazard events. The reliance on voluntary national assets continues to expose the mechanism to predictable shortages during simultaneous crises, as demonstrated by the Mediterranean wildfires of 2021 and 2023, where concurrent outbreaks across several countries depleted the shared pool of aerial firefighting resources and limited the EU's ability to respond promptly to all requests. This reflects not only a resource gap but also a governance dilemma: states are rationally inclined to retain assets for domestic needs, especially during climate-driven events that increasingly strike broad regions at once.[25] Research on state capacity further suggests that institutional constraints and uneven administrative capabilities amplify these vulnerabilities, particularly when national systems face overlapping shocks.[26]

Integrating project-management insights deepens this critique. The mechanism's operational model still favours reactive mobilisation rather than anticipatory deployment. Scenario planning, agile response units, and risk-based pre-positioning remain unevenly implemented across Member States, limiting the mechanism's adaptive capacity. While planning frameworks have improved, redundancy remains thin, and contingency strategies lack the depth expected in a system designed to respond to large-scale, high-uncertainty threats. Evidence from recent disasters illustrates this gap: both the 2021 Western

Germany floods and subsequent wildfire seasons required repeated emergency procurement and ad-hoc coordination, underscoring the structural lag between planning ambitions and operational readiness.[27]

Resilience scholarship by Craig Poulin and Michael B. Kane emphasises that systems under stress follow identifiable performance trajectories in the form of resilience curves, which map degradation and recovery after disruption. Applied to the UCPM, this perspective highlights a persistent shallowness in recovery.[28] The mechanism tends to re-establish functionality, but not rapidly or robustly enough to match the accelerating tempo and magnitude of climate-related hazards. Its recovery curve is therefore not only slow but vulnerable to being overwhelmed by successive shocks, a pattern visible in recent flood–wildfire–health crisis sequences across Europe. This suggests that the mechanism is resilient in intent but not yet resilient by design, insofar as its structural configuration does not guarantee performance stability across the full spectrum of foreseeable disruptions.

Conclusion

The Union Civil Protection Mechanism has become a highly visible expression of European solidarity, symbolising the EU's commitment to collective security in an era of escalating risk. However, the succession of extreme events in recent years

25 European Commission, "EU Civil Protection Mechanism," *ECHO,* [Accessed October 03, 2025], https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/what/civil-protection/eu-civil-protection-mechanism_en.

26 Richard S.J. Tol, "State capacity and vulnerability to natural disasters," *arXiv:2104.13425* (2021), https://arxiv.org/abs/2104.13425.

27 Matandirotya, "The 2021 Western Germany flood event, International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction"; German Committee for Disaster Risk Reduction, "Report on the 2021 floods," *Civil Protection Knowledge Network*, 2024, [Accessed October 01, 2025], https://civil-protection-knowledge-network.europa.eu/stories/german-committee-disaster-risk-reduction-report-2021-floods.

28 Poulin and Kane, "Infrastructure Resilience Curves: Performance Measures and Summary Metrics."

has demonstrated that solidarity, when dependent on voluntary contributions alone, is insufficient for ensuring reliable and equitable protection across the continent. A system that is expected to function under climate-induced stress must be resilient by design rather than resilient by intention. The growing scale, simultaneity, and complexity of disasters mean that the EU can no longer rely on ad hoc coordination or the discretionary availability of national resources.

Designing such resilience requires a shift from a coordination model to a structurally integrated crisis-management architecture. Embedding project-management principles into the UCPM offers a practical pathway toward this objective. Agility enables faster decision-making and adaptive mobilisation when crises evolve unpredictably. Redundancy ensures that critical capacities do not fail when multiple states are affected at once. Organisational learning strengthens the mechanism's ability to refine procedures, avoid repeated operational bottlenecks, and institutionalise best practices across member states. Together, these principles can transform the UCPM from a mechanism that reacts effectively to isolated emergencies into a system capable of proactively navigating complex, overlapping shocks.

Such transformation would carry implications far beyond civil protection. Enhancing the resilience of the UCPM would reaffirm the EU's broader normative project: that integration provides tangible security benefits unavailable to states acting alone. Disasters expose not only physical vulnerabilities but also the limits of intergovernmental cooperation when pressures intensify. A UCPM capable of operating predictably under stress would demonstrate that European solidarity can be both principled and reliable. This, in turn, would reinforce public trust in the Union and strengthen the political foundations of integration at a time when crises increasingly test its cohesion. The resilience of the UCPM is therefore not only a technical requirement but a determinant of Europe's ability to act collectively, sustain internal unity, and protect its citizens in an age of accelerating uncertainty.

The 4th Industrial Revolution: Does Artificial Intelligence Threaten European Digital Sovereignty?

Adam Fergus Wareham

Introduction

The proliferation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is expected to have multifield and cascading second-order effects, changing labour dynamics. While the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) has yet to present its full effects, there is evidence to suggest a threat to social and economic welfare and thus the stability of the European Union.[2] Furthermore, the risk that Europe will not be steering the direction of development for the new global economy becomes increasingly present in its leaders' minds. This anxiety was clearly echoed at the "Summit on European Digital Sovereignty", held in Berlin on 18 November, 2025. The German Chancellor, Friedrich Merz, summed up the dichotomy in his statement that "*Digital Sovereignty has costs, but the costs of digital dependence are even higher*".[3]

The present challenge for Europe is finding a way to balance the welfare of its citizens while striving to keep up the pace in the race to control the foundations of a new global economic reality. Now, over a year on from the European Commission's "Report on the Future of European Competitiveness", the Commission hails over half of its recommended initiatives "*delivered*". However, its author, Professor Mario Dra-ghi, stated at the same conference: "*EIB [(European Investment Bank)] finds European firms are taking up advanced technologies at a pace close to US peers, though from a lower base. But the gaps are stark. On the AI frontier, the US produced 40 large foundation models last year, China 15 and the EU just 3*".[4] With that in mind, it is crucial to be wary of what "costs" are needed to "close the gap" in this technological race. It is imperative to question which values are being placed at the forefront of legislators in the governance of European citizens.

While the effects of 4IR are novel, one can look to the past to conceptualise the magnitudes of change that are being discussed. This article delves into the nature of "Digital Sovereignty" and its prevalence in the minds of European leaders at present. From there, what is explored is how these ideas fit into the international landscape in which Europe finds itself, along with the measures that the European Union is taking to address this innovative economic shift. As will be highlighted, this issue has been prevalent since 2020, with the initial proposal of the Digital Markets Act, recognising the importance of "Qua-

---

1   Adam Wareham is a master's graduate from the University of Bologna in International Cooperation and the Protection of Human Rights. He also holds a bachelor's in history and Hispanic Studies from the University of Sheffield. His research interests include political economy, European integration, geopolitics, and digitalisation.

2   Frederik Federspiel, Ruth Mitchell, Asha Asokan, Carlos Umana, and David McCoy, "Threats by Artificial Intelligence to Human Health and Human Existence" *BMJ Global Health* 8, no. 5 (2023): e010435, https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2022-010435.

3   Arthur Sullivan, "Europe Considers Cutting out Huawei and China for Good" *Deutsche Welle*, November 19, 2025, https://www.dw.com/en/europe-china-huawei-zte-ban-internet-telecommunications-artificial-intelligence-chips-5g/a-74798073.

4   European Commission, "High Level Conference -One Year after the Draghi Report: What Has Been Achieved, What Has Changed,"n.d.,https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/0951a4ff-cd1a-4ea3-bc1d-f603decc1ed9_en?filename=Draghi_Speech_High_Level_Conference_One_Year_After.pdf.

si-Public" digital spaces and the fair competition of European business online.[5]

Historical Context

The term "Industrial Revolution" entails a drastic change in production methods, and consequently, the re-organisation of labour within an economy. The First Industrial Revolution started in the second half of the 18th century in Britain and resulted in the creation of mechanised production and locomotives, dramatically shifting the socio-economic organisation of Britain and Continental Europe by the early 19th century. The Second Industrial Revolution spanned from the 1870s until the start of the First World War, in 1914, which induced mass production, communications such as telegraphs, radio, and electrification on a large societal scale.[6] These periods resulted in a fundamental change to society, where human labour was, in a sense, devalued, with many workers shifting from being artisans to "attendants" of the machine that vastly increased their previous labour productivity.[7]

The Third Industrial Revolution is considered to have started from 1947 with the invention of the transistor and the development of ever more miniscule microchips, which only reached a relative hardware ceiling in the past decade. From this stems the Fourth Industrial Revolu-

tion, where digital infrastructures, cloud computing, and AI integration serve to massively increase labour productivity in the economy, but also threaten to effectively devalue human intelligence in large parts of society.[8] 4IR is a phenomenon that threatens to cause large societal and economic disruption; however, this is not an issue limited to European states. It is a global phenomenon with two conspicuous major competitors: the United States (US) and China.[9] From here on, this competition drives the pressing issue on European leaders' minds: "Digital Sovereignty".

What is Digital Sovereignty?

ECFR's Jeremy Shapiro defines "Digital Sovereignty" as a concept that addresses "*who owns the technologies of the future, who produces them, and who sets the standards and regulates their use*".[10] Shapiro also states the importance of this is the "*ability to control the new digital technologies and their societal effects*".[11] Therefore, European leaders see this as paramount in trying to steer the direction of 4IR in their own societies, with their own priorities being applied in the regulation of this technological shift. This mentality was evidenced by Emmanuel Macron at the recent Berlin conference on Digital Sovereignty: "*We clearly want to design our own solutions*".[12]

The risks of foreign powers with different

5   European Commission, "Europe Fit for the Digital Age: Digital Platforms," Press Release, December 15, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_2347.

6   Wu Shang-su and Teck-Boon Tan, "Public Policy Implications of the Fourth Industrial Revolution for Singapore" *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies* 2017, 5–7, https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/PR171220_Public-Policy-Implications-of-the-Fourth-Industrial-Revolution-for-Singapore_WEB.pdf.

7   Manolis Simos et al., "From the 'Post-Industrial Society' To the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution,'" *Icon* 27, no. 1 (2022): 100.

8   *Ibid.,* 98–100.

9   Carla Hobbs, ed., "Essay Collection - Europe's Digital Sovereignty: From Rulemaker to Superpower in the Age of US-China Rivalry" *European Council on Foreign Relations* 2020, 8. https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/europe_digital_sovereignty_rulemaker_superpower_age_us_china_rivalry.pdf.

10   *Ibid.*, 6.

11   *Ibid.,* 7.

12   Sullivan, "Europe Considers Cutting out Huawei and China for Good."

interests, mainly the US and China, controlling the infrastructures of 4IR prompted the idea of the "Eurostack".[13] The concept, put forward this year by University College London, is *grounded in Europe's core values of shared governance, subsidiarity and solidarity*" and "*seeks to modernize and reorient the continent's approach to digital sovereignty*".[14] In addition to access to essential hardware, such as semi-conductors or chips, AI is considered a catalyst for both innovation and strategic autonomy, which has to be built on the "backbone" of digital economy data.[15] This opinion is backed up by the position of the International Monetary Fund, who see the introduction of AI to European economies as a way to boost slumping labour productivity.[16] However, this also indirectly outlined the potential threats to European societal welfare while extolling the benefits of AI adoption:

"*[It will bring] average productivity gains across occupations. Contrary to past automation technologies, AI exposure is especially large in professional, managerial, or administrative work that is non-manual and often knowledge-based, like finance or software development.*"[17]

The incentives outlined are saving labour costs to boost GDP, but these company gains are at the expense of employees. The risk of AI as an unemployment driver presents multiple challenges to European states, including the destabilisation of democracies, rising inequality, and the fuelling of support for populist politics.[18] This links to "Digital Sovereignty" insofar as Europe risks experiencing an AI-driven "labour shock", without seeing the GDP benefits due to actions of foreign based companies, particularly given the hiring freezes already instituted by US based tech giants such as Microsoft, Meta, and Amazon.[19] Thus, if Europe is to experience welfare costs from the 4IR transition, it needs to also retain the gains in productivity within its own market, but this can only occur if European states hold jurisdiction over the companies driving this transformation.

Given the potential gains and damages of widespread AI adoption into the economy, it is therefore easy to understand why European leaders themselves may want to control the pace or nature of its adoption into their own economies. This is very much the drive behind the Eurostack initiative, calling for a tailored European digital infrastructure, contrasting against: "*the centralized dominance of U.S. Big Tech or China's state-directed strategies*".[20] It is particularly these two world powers that can provide context for the push in addressing the concept of European Digital Sovereignty on the global stage.

---

13   Bria Francesca, Paul Timmer and Fausto Gernone, "EuroStack – A European Alternative for Digital Sovereignty" *Bertelsmann Stiftung*, 2025, https://doi.org/10.11586/2025006.

14   *Ibid.,* 10.

15   *Ibid.,* 77.

16   "How Europe Can Capture the AI Growth Dividend," *International Monetary Fund* 2025, https://www.imf.org/en/blogs/articles/2025/11/20/how-europe-can-capture-the-ai-growth-dividend.

17   *Ibid.*

18   Erik Brattberg et al., "National European Efforts on AI, Europe and AI," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace* 2020, 11, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep25784.6.

19   Pozzi Federico et al., "AI's Impact on Europe's Job Market: A Call for a Social Compact," *European Policy Centre*, 2025, https://www.epc.eu/publication/ais-impact-on-europes-job-market-a-call-for-a-social-compact/.

20   Bria et al., "EuroStack – A European Alternative for Digital Sovereignty," 24.

European Digital Sovereignty in a Multipolar World

Europe finds itself in a volatile international position between increasingly unpredictable policies from both China and the US.[21] For at least the last decade, China has evidenced a shift toward a "Multipolar World", challenging the US's global economic position. This has been demonstrated by its expanded Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which funded development across the Global South, spending $240bn between 2008 and 2021 on the bailing out of member countries' sovereign debts, alone.[22] Its long-term digital strategy has also allowed for international projection, with AI systems such as DeepSeek able to threaten US dominance in this sector.[23]

Exacerbating matters for Europe, Donald Trump's second presidency has already seen an *"unprecedented"* unilateral shift through the introduction of import tariffs to over 60 states, including long-standing allies.[24] The implications of this behaviour to European Digital Sovereignty are stated by Clotilde Bomont in a recent report for the European Union Institute for Security Studies:

"Donald Trump's return to the White House has laid bare the strategic vulnerabilities inherent in this reliance. His administration's confrontational approach has triggered a shift in perception across Europe, and while already present in EU policymakers' discourses, digital sovereignty, strategic autonomy, and economic security have now surged to the top of the EU agenda."[25]

Indeed, the European Union is becoming increasingly concerned about the reliability of trade partners following the introduction of US tariffs. However, beyond the software requirements for a sovereign digital infrastructure, hardware is also essential. Rare earth metals, such as lithium and cobalt, are key to producing the computer chips powering the European tech sector.[26] It is in this capacity that China dominates, controlling 95% of the global rare-earth oxide market.[27] The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, raised criticism recently against China following further restrictions on the export of rare earth materials:

"If you consider that over 90% of our consumption of rare earth magnets comes from imports from China, you see the risks here for Europe and its most strategic industrial sectors … In the short term, we are focusing on finding solutions with our Chinese counterparts. But we are ready to use all of the instruments in our toolbox to respond if needed."[28]

---

21   Hobbs, "Essay Collection," 31–32.

22   Amy Hawkins, "Xi Jinping's Wants a 'Multipolar World', as China Accelerates Its Shift Away from the West," *The Guardian*, October 8, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/09/xi-jinpings-wants-a-multipolar-world-as-china-accelerates-its-shift-away-from-the-west.

23   Alex He, "China's AI Development Before DeepSeek," *AI Development and Governance in China amid Geopolitical Tensions*, Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2025, 5, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep73066.7.

24   Petros C. Mavroidis, "Tariffs, Deals and Multilateral Ideals: Can The World Trade Organization Survive?" *Bruegel,* 2025, 1, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep72971.

25   Clotilde Bômont et al., "Reining in the US 'Tech-Industrial Complex': The EU amid Transatlantic Divides and Shared Concerns, Low Trust," *European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS),* 2025, 41.

26   Hamed Ghiaie and Filippo Gorelli, "From Chips to Turbines: How Europe Depends on Rare Earths." *World Economic Forum,* October 29, 2025, https://www.weforum.org/stories/2025/10/from-chips-to-turbines-europe-depends-on-critical-raw-materials.

27   *Ibid.*

28   Andrew Gray, "EU Steps up Efforts to Cut Reliance on Chinese Rare Earths," *Reuters*, October 25, 2025, https://www.reuters.

Considering that China's actions are deemed retaliatory to US tariffs, it is indicative of the risks to international cooperation and trade that the race of the 4IR brings to the global stage. It also highlights that even if sound domestic policies are adopted, the risk of external shocks remain in the international globalised market. The effects of the advanced chip ban by President Biden in 2022 severely hampered the development of AI in China, but due to longstanding policies and a drive to domesticise production of chips and other digital infrastructure, China was able to overcome this, releasing DeepSeek as a viable AI competitor.[29] If the same restrictions were to be applied to the European Union, it is uncertain as to whether they would yet have the domestic capacity to prevail in the same way, even despite its recent efforts to shift from US or potential Chinese digital dependency.[30]

The Threat to European Values

The risks of economic dependence through a lack of Digital Sovereignty could hold serious political ramifications for Europe. In the case of China's digital influence, the exporting of "*Digital Authoritarianism*" to third party states has been monitored for some time. Tools of repression, such as facial recognition coupled with surveillance, censorship, and internet shutdowns have been adopted by BRI

beneficiaries such as Zimbabwe, Venezuela, and Belarus.[31] Therefore the incorporation of digital infrastructures enabling this state behaviour, or access of these states' surveillance apparatus, would be anathema to European principles.

The US integration to the European digital market has come with friction. The EU Commission launched a three-fold probe of Amazon, Microsoft, and Google on 18 November 2025. They seek to assess their compliance with the Digital Markets Act and to investigate if they hold monopoly powers over cloud computing, which could stifle access to the market by domestic European companies.[32] The risk with the large US companies is an effective *"gatekeeper"* role to the digital market, placing undue control of the European market' 4IR transition under the American private sector.[33]

Robin Berjon, Deputy Director of the IPFS Foundation, explored this concept in discussion at the European Centre for Development Policy Management. Berjon stated that power in technology comes through operating its infrastructures and control points (*i.e.,* revenue flows and system defaults). Furthermore, with the autocratic model of digital governance currently set by Silicon Valley or Beijing, Europe risks replicating this approach if it follows their models.[34] Therefore, Europe must devel-

---

com/world/china/eu-steps-up-efforts-cut-reliance-chinese-rare-earths-2025-10-25.

29   He, "China's AI Development Before DeepSeek," 4-5.
30   Bomont et al., 11.
31   Danielle Cave et al., "Enabling & Exporting Digital Authoritarianism, Mapping China's Technology Giants," *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, 2019, 11–14, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep23072.8.
32   Supantha Mukherjee and Alessandro Parodi, "EU Probes Amazon, Microsoft's Cloud Services for Potential Curbs, *Reuters*, November 18, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/boards-policy-regulation/european-commission-probes-cloud-computing-services-by-amazon-microsoft-2025-11-18/.
33   Brigitte Dekker, Martin Xiaoxue and Maaike Okano-Heijmans, "Dealing with Foreign Technology Companies, Towards Open and Secure Digital Connectivity," *Clingendael Institute*, 2021,12–13. https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/Report_EU_Taiwan_Digital_Connectivity_April_2021.pdf.
34   Chloe Teevan and Gautam Kamath, "What Is Digital Sovereignty and How Can Europe Achieve It?" *ECDPM*, 2025, https://ecdpm.org/work/what-digital-sovereignty-and-how-can-europe-achieve-it.

op its own governance models in tandem with its digital infrastructure. This would have to extoll European principles without punishing innovation, as feared by some critics.[35]

Europe's Path Forward

The path for Europe must therefore protect existing principles and the welfare of its citizens while working to foster growth in the sector's fuelling 4IR, such as AI and cloud computing. This would mean creating the conditions for the creation of "Unicorns" (tech-based startups with valuations of $1 billion or more).[36] According to an EU report from April 2025, the EU is lacking behind the US nearly seven times in an order of magnitude, while lagging behind China by nearly 50%, as shown in the graph illustrated in Figure 1.
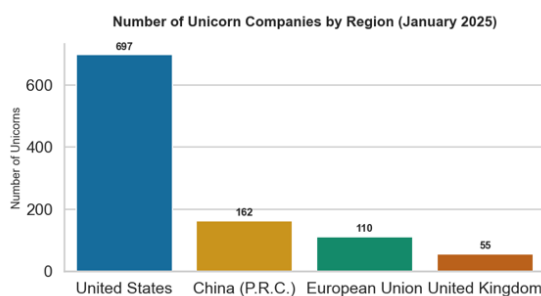

Figure 1: *Comparison of Unicorn companies as of January 2025 (graph generated by the author based on figures from an EU Press Release published on 28.05.2025).*

This economic reality is no doubt also at the forefront of the minds of Europe-an legislators, with the urgency of action highlighted by several Tech entrepreneurs to Ekaterina Zaharieva, European Commissioner for Startups, Research and Innovation, at the State of Europe conference held in October of this year.[37] As such, efforts are indeed being made by the European Commission: its upcoming "Digital Omnibus" chiefly aims to simplify legislation surrounding data, cybersecurity, and AI. This aims to cut administrative costs and, thus, increase European competitiveness in this field. As described by Executive Vice-President for Tech Sovereignty, Security and Democracy Henna Virkkunen:

"*We need to make doing business in Europe easier without compromising our high standards of online fairness and safety. We want an innovation-friendly rulebook: both in the way we apply the rules, and in simplifying the laws where our objectives can be reached at lower costs and streamlined procedures. We aim for less paperwork, fewer overlaps and less complex rules for companies doing business in the EU.*"[38]

This package is not without contention. An open letter from 127 civil rights groups criticised the proposal as *"the biggest rollback of digital fundamental rights in EU history,"* ceding citizens protections in order to boost the data collection capacity of European AI companies.[39] On the other hand, AI industry representatives such

---

35   James Broughel, "Beware the Coming Artificial Intelligence Tax," *Forbes*, January 16, 2024, https://www.forbes.com/sites/jamesbroughel/2024/01/16/beware-the-coming-artificial-intelligence-tax.

36   Michael A. Cusumano et al., "The Future of Platforms," *MIT Sloan Management Review* 61, no. 3 (2020) https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/the-future-of-platforms/.

37   Dharmendra Kanani, "State of Europe 2025 – Europe Matters: Now or Never," *Friends of Europe*, 2025, https://www.friendsofeurope.org/events/state-of-europe-2025-the-festival-of-politics-and-ideas-2025/.

38   European Commission, "Commission collects feedback to simplify rules on data, cybersecurity and artificial intelligence in the upcoming Digital Omnibus," Press Release, September 16, 2025, https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/news/commission-collects-feedback-simplify-rules-data-cybersecurity-and-artificial-intelligence-upcoming.

39   Supantha Mukherjee et al., "EU Eases AI, Privacy Rules as Critics Warn of Caving to Big Tech," *Reuters*, November 19, 2025,https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/boards-policy-regulation/eu-ease-ai-privacy-rules-critics-warn-caving-big-tech-

as the Tech lobbying group CCIA Europe (membership including Alphabet, Meta, and Apple) state that *"bolder action was still needed"*.[40] Therefore, there is an apparent risk of upsetting all sides with this proposal by not setting a clear boundary based on Europe's pre-existing protections and principles.

Concluding Remarks

The onset of 4IR highlights multiple issues for the European Union. The considerations for legislators and leaders are weighed between citizen welfare and geopolitical pressures. How the policy is devised to navigate the European states through this time will be extremely consequential in both the socio-economic organisation of the future and the control of this new landscape. It is more important than ever for the principles of European integration and cooperation to be held first and foremost: Peace, Democracy, Equality, and Human Dignity. If Europe wishes to create a European style of digital governance through 4IR, these principles should be the pillars of a policy framework. Digital sovereignty is vital to steering the future course of Europe, but Europe must still retain its values without sacrificing them in the name of economic progress.

---

trump-2025-11-19/.
40   *Ibid.*

SCHUMAN

People v. Lobby: What Does Banning Vegan Burgers Reveal About the European Parliament?

by Joanna Walkowiak[1]

Introduction

In 2025, the European Union (EU) faces a war immediately outside of its borders, declining competitiveness of its internal market, and risks falling behind the US and China in technological developments.[2] The list of challenges faced by Europe certainly does not end there. Yet, the emergence of "existential challenges" to Europe does not mean that a more trivial topic would disappear from the agenda.[3] Recently, one of the EU's most powerful and publicly accountable institutions —the European Parliament (EP)— debated and submitted legislation on the seemingly trivial topic of banning meat-resembling names of vegetarian and vegan meat replacements.[4] This decision allegedly aims to help farmers and consumers, but as this article argues, the real beneficiary of this decision may be different. It is especially interesting to ponder whether and how lobbying might have influenced the outcome of the EP's voting. The following analysis will outline the context of the vote, its implications, and how the reasons behind the vote reflect the current *état de fait* of the EP.

---

1   Joanna Walkowiak is a Law graduate at the University of Warsaw and a current LL.M. candidate in European Law at the Maastricht University. She combines her passion for all things EU with a keen interest in moot courts, as she participated in the Vis Moot and CEEMC, and is currently a proud coach of the University of Warsaw Pax Moot Team. She is an associate editor at the Maastricht Student Law Review.

2   A well-known document addressing EU's most urgent challenges is the famous Draghi Report: Mario Draghi, "The Future of European Competitiveness—A Competitiveness Strategy for Europe," *Publication Office of the European Union*, 9 September, 2024, https://commission. europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/draghi-report_en; Reports on the state of the Union were also prepared by Enrico Letta (Enrico Letta, "Much more than a market: the future of the single market," *European Council,* 2024, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/ny3j24sm/ much-more-than-a-market-report-by-enrico-letta.pdf; and Sauli Niinistö (Sauli Niinistö, "Safer Together Strengthening Europe's Civilian and Military Preparedness and Readiness," *European Commission,* 2024, https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/5bb2881f-9e29- 42f2-8b77-8739b19d047c_en?filename=2024_Niinisto-report_Book_VF.pdf.

3   See *e.g.,* Council Regulation (EU) 2025/1106 of 27 May 2025 establishing the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) through the Reinforcement of the European Defence Industry Instrument, rec 1. [accessed November 5, 2025] http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2025/1106/oj.

4   Johanna Kantola and Emanuela Lombardo, "Challenges to Democratic Practices and Discourses in the European Parliament: Feminist Perspectives on the Politics of Political Groups," *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 28, no.3 (2021): 579.

INSIGHT

The Context and Results of the Vote

On 8 October 2025, the EP voted on the proposal for a Regulation as regards the strengthening of the position of farmers in the food supply chain.[5] The regulation aims to provide an answer to the demands which were made most frequently during farmer protests which took place across Europe between 2023 and 2024.[6] The Explanatory Memorandum attached to the EP's Report on the Regulation contended that European farmers *"find themselves in a weaker position of power and have very limited bargaining power"*.[7]

In light of this, the EP voted in favour of regulating that the meat-related terms and names that fall under Article 17 of the Regulation on Food Information to Consumers (FIC) and are currently used for meat and meat cuts shall be reserved exclusively for the edible parts of the animals.[8] As follows, if the Regulation is passed, the names: steak, escalope, sausage, burger, hamburger, egg yolk, and egg white will be reserved for meat products. The EP also specified that these should not be used for cell-cultured products,[9] meaning meat grown in the laboratory.[10] In practice, this means that names such as "veggie burger", "vegan sausage", "plant steak", commonly encountered on products in supermarket chains across the EU, would have to disappear. Céline Imart, the rapporteur for the regulation, stated the resolution is a *"victory for farmers"*.[11] Whether the amendment will make it to the final text depends on the discussions in trilogues, which shall soon follow.[12] Recently, Politico reported that the ban is, indeed, likely to be confirmed and enter into force.[13]

Why the Justification of the Change Does Not Stand Ground

This amendment, if confirmed, could affect millions of consumers across the EU.

5   Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulations (EU) No 1308/2013, (EU) 2021/2115 and (EU) 2021/2116 as regards the strengthening of the position of farmers in the food supply chain, COM/2024/577 final [accessed November 2, 2025] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52024PC0577; European Parliament, "Report on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulations (EU) No 1308/2013, (EU) 2021/2115 and (EU) 2021/2116 as regards the strengthening of the position of farmers in the food supply chain - Explanatory statement," *European Parliament,* 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0161_EN.html.

6   Alan Matthews, "The farmer protests in the EU," *Progressive Yearbook* 25, no. 6, (2025): 69 *et seq.*, https://feps-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/10.-The-farmer-protests-in-the-EU.pdf; Alan Matthews, "Farmer Protests and the 2024 European Parliament Elections," *Intereconomics* 59, no. 2, (2024); Robert Finger et al., "Farmer Protests in Europe 2023–2024," *EuroChoices* 23, no. 3, (2024): 59 *et seq.*

7   European Parliament, "Report on the proposal…. ".

8   Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2011 on the provision of food information to consumers, amending Regulations (EC) No 1924/2006 and (EC) No 1925/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council, and repealing Commission Directive 87/250/EEC, Council Directive 90/496/EEC, Commission Directive 1999/10/EC, Directive 2000/13/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council, Commission Directives 2002/67/EC and 2008/5/EC and Commission Regulation (EC) No 608/2004 Text with EEA relevance OJ L 304, 22.11.2011, pp. 18–63 (FIC) [accessed November 2, 2025] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2011/1169/oj/eng; Amendments adopted by the European Parliament on 8 October 2025 on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulations (EU) No 1308/2013, (EU) 2021/2115 and (EU) 2021/2116 as regards the strengthening of the position of farmers in the food supply chain (COM(2024)0577–C10-0209/2024–2024/0319(COD))(1); Amendment 113; Article 1–paragraph 1–point 8f (new) Regulation (EU) No 1308/2013 Annex VIII–part II a (new).

9   *Ibid.*

10   William K. Hallman and Eileen E. Hallman, "Cell-based, cell-cultured, cell-cultivated, cultured, or cultivated. What is the best name for meat, poultry, and seafood made directly from the cells of animals?," *npj Science of Food* 7 (2023).

11   "EU Parliament votes to restrict 'steak' and 'burger' labels to meat only," *Le Monde,* October 8, 2025, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/economy/article/2025/10/08/eu-parliament-votes-to-restrict-steak-and-burger-labels-to-meat-only_6746230_19.html.

12   The procedure can be followed with the EP Legislative Train: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-sustaining-our-quality-of-life-food-security-water-and-nature/file-strengthening-of-the-position-of-farmers-in-the-food-supply-chain and its legislative observatory here: https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/en/procedure-file?reference=2024%2F0319(COD), [both accessed November 2, 2025].

13   Bartosz Brzeziński, "How a 'veggie burger' ban nobody wanted became one Brussels might actually pass," *Politico,* November 24, 2025, https://www.politico.eu/article/veggie-burger-ban-nobody-wanted-eu/.

Estimates show that around 4-7% of the EU population (around 450 million people) are vegetarian or vegan, and one does not have to be vegetarian or vegan to choose plant-based alternatives.[14] The increased popularity of a more plant-based diet is reported across Western countries.[15] Indeed, from 2010 to 2020, the sales of plant-based products rose 10% annually and continued to grow.[16] Sales continue to grow considerably in the EU's largest markets, with an average of more than 7% sales volume increase across France, Germany, Italy, and Spain in 2024.[17] In 2024, the plant-based market in Europe was worth USD 2.47 billion and expected to grow further in value.[18] Studies showed that consumers in Europe further reduced their meat consumption from 2021 to 2023, and over 50% of them say that they try to limit their meat intake.[19] Thus, the stakeholders affected by this decision are not just the consumers of plant-based products, but also their manufacturers, distributors, and suppliers.[20]

During the plenary debate in the EP, Carlo Fidanza, an Italian MEP from the European Conservatives and Reformists, argued not only that the amendment fosters farmers' interests, but also that it is indispensable to combat consumer misperception of plant-based products.[21] This was a key argument made by proponents of the bill, yet one may ask if it is such a confusing label that buyers would mistake burgers labelled as vegan or vegetarian with their meat counterparts. Indeed, a study prepared by BEUC showed that almost 70% of EU consumers favoured the use of meat-related names on vegetarian products.[22] Another study has disputed the notion that banning the use of meat-related terms would be necessary to avoid misunderstanding and errors regarding what the product contains.[23] A draft document by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration recommends the use of meat-derived names, but adding the plant that the food is made from, *e.g., "chickpea and lentil fishsticks"* or *"vegan soy burger"*.[24] In any case, consumer confusion is a weak justification

---

14 European Vegetarian Union, "Food Sector Report from the Smart Protein Project," [accessed November 2, 2025] https://www.euroveg.eu/relevance/. One can add here that the plant-based diet is increasing in popularity in Western countries more broadly; Smart Protein Project, "Evolving appetites: an in-depth look at European attitudes towards plant-based eating" (2023).

15 Alexandra Alcorta, Adrià Porta, Amparo Tárrega, María Dolores Alvarez, and M. Pilar Vaquero, "Foods for Plant-Based Diets: Challenges and Innovations," *Foods* 10, no. 2 (2021): 293.

16 THINK ING, "Growth of meat and dairy alternatives is stirring up the European food industry," 2020, https://think.ing.com/reports/growth-of-meat-and-dairy-alternatives-is-stirring-up-the-european-food-industry/#:~:text=As%20a%20result%2C%20we%20expect,EUR%205%20billion%20in%202025; Liam J.S. Boldt, Jill E. Hobbs, Patrick Lloyd-Smith, Yang Yang, "Beyond Labels: Exploring Consumer Preferences for Plant-Based Meat Labeling Policies," *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy* 45, (2025): 1.

17 GFI Europe, "Plant-based retail sales in six European countries, 2022 to 2024," [accessed December 4, 2025] https://gfieurope.org/european-plant-based-sales-data/.

18 Vegocnomist, "Europe Plant-Based Meat Market Trends Report 2025-2033," August 11, 2025, https://vegconomist.com/businesswire/europe-plant-based-meat-market-trends-report-2025-2033/; Renub Research, "Europe Plant-Based Meat Market Size and Share Analysis - Growth Trends and Forecast Report 2025-2033," [accessed December 4, 2025] https://www.renub.com/europe-plant-based-meat-market-p.php. Other studies have reported lesser values.

19 Smart Protein Project, "Evolving appetites: an in-depth look at European attitudes towards plant-based eating," 2023, https://smartproteinproject.eu/european-attitudes-towards-plant-based-eating/.

20 GFI Europe, "Planting the seeds of change – how Europe's farmers can reap the benefits of plant-based foods," June 18, 2024, https://gfieurope.org/blog/planting-the-seeds-of-change-how-europes-farmers-can-reap-the-benefits-of-plant-based-foods/.

21 See European Parliament, "Verbatim report of proceedings," October 7, 2025, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-10-2025-10-07-ITM-010_EN.html.

22 BEUC, "One Bite at a Time: Consumers and the Transition to Sustainable Food," *BEUC*, 2020, 36 https://www.beuc.eu/sites/default/files/publications/beuc-x-2020-042_consumers_and_the_transition_to_sustainable_food.pdf.

23 Liam J.S. Boldt, Jill E. Hobbs, Patrick Lloyd-Smith, Yang Yang, "Beyond Labels: Exploring Consumer Preferences...," 12; Irina Popescu, "Are veggie burgers' names confusing? Not according to EU consumers," *BEUC,* October 2, 2025, https://blog.beuc.eu/veggie-burgers-names-not-confusing/.

24 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Food and Drug Administration Human Foods Program, "Labeling of Plant-Based Alternatives to Animal-Derived Foods: Draft Guidance for Industry," (2025), 9, https://www.fda.gov/media/184810/download?attachment.

for the amendment.[25] If this was really the case, the EP should have shown more interest in regulating other foods whose names are just as confusing, such as an egg cutlet or a cottage pie.

It is worth investigating if the name and label on the product truly influence the purchase decisions of buyers. German consumer protection organisation *Verbraucherzentrale* found a preference for products meant to mimic the taste of meat that also have names that identify them as such.[26] Hence, the value of the "meat-like" names lies in their persuasive power. This effect may be particularly important when one considers the people who are thinking of changing their diet to a more plant-based one, and introducing meat replacements. Especially for those who prefer traditional meat dishes, the ability to identify foods that they enjoyed will play a role in making food choices. For consumers who have been purchasing plant-based products for longer, the shift is less likely to play a role.[27] Yet, studies from US and Australia reported that the use of familiar names on plant-based products may provide an incentive to buy them because it provides more information to consumers about how the product tastes or how to prepare it.[28]

Hence, the crux of the matter is the persuasive power of the label rather than its alleged potential to confuse a consumer. The amendment thus prevents brands from encouraging customers to buy plant-based products. This does not support the interest of consumers, as it has been shown that low meat consumption is favourable for health.[29] Indeed, promoting such a diet was proposed by the Commission not long ago.[30]

The Broader Picture – How Is the Meat Lobby Changing the *Status Quo*?

The food-naming debate is not a novelty for the EU institutions. If confirmed, the decision would go against the findings of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) in a recently decided case *Protéines France and Others.*[31] The CJEU ruling interpreted Art. 7 and Art. 17 FIC, the same ones that the EP proposed to amend, which concern fair information practices about foodstuffs marketed in the EU and mandatory rules on their names, respectively. According to the CJEU, they serve the *"protection of consumers from the risk of being misled by the use of names, other than legal names, consisting of terms from the butchery, charcuterie, and fish sectors to describe, market or promote foods containing vegetable proteins instead of proteins*

25 Schiphorst, "Solving a problem that didn't exist."
26 Tim Schauenberg, "Plant-based 'burger' label grilled in EU parliament," *Deutsche Welle,* October 9, 2025, https://www.dw.com/en/dishing-out-veggie-sausage-alternatives-leaves-lobbyists-hungry-name-debate-europe/a-74274363.
27 Marija Branković, Anastasija Budžak, Itana Đurašković, Branko Vlajin. "What is in a label: Effects of labeling on the preference for plant-based products," *Appetite* 206 (2025) PMID: 39716630.
28 Schiphorst, "Solving a problem that didn't exist."
29 Joint Research Council, "Nitrogen pollution reduction targets: a more plant-based diet is key," *European Commission,* December 23, 2023, https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/jrc-news-and-updates/nitrogen-pollution-reduction-targets-more-plant-based-diet-key-2023-12-20_en.
30 European Commission, "Farm to Fork Strategy. For a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system," *European Commission,* 2020:14, https://food.ec.europa.eu/document/download/472acca8-7f7b-4171-98b0-ed76720d68d3_en?filename=f2f_action-plan_2020_strategy-info_en.pdf.
31 Judgement in Case C-438/23 *Protéines France and Others v. Ministre de l'Économie, des Finances et de la Souveraineté industrielle et numérique*, Luxembourg, Court of Justice of the European Union, October 24, 2024, ECLI:EU:C:2024:826, https://curia.europa.eu/juris/document/document.jsf?text=&docid=290706&pageIndex=0&doclang=en&mode=lst&dir=&occ=first&part=1&cid=1551632.

of animal origin".[32] Thus, under the judgement, an EU Member State cannot ban the use of terms traditionally associated with a product of animal origin to describe a product containing plant proteins if it has not formally adopted a legal name for it.

After the verdict, Christine Schneider (a German MEP associated with the European People's Party)[33] requested the Commission state what labels are allowed, under EU law, for plant-based products, and what labels for such products the Commission would find suitable.[34] The answer seems to be that no meat- or dairy-related terms are suitable for purely plant-based produce. In the proposal for an amended Regulation on EU School Scheme put forward in July 2025, the Commission vowed to introduce specific terms to protect meat-related terms. It justified the change with the aim of enhancing transparency in the internal market as regards food composition and nutritional content, and ensuring that consumers can make well-informed choices, particularly for those seeking a *"specific nutritional content that is traditionally associated with meat products".*[35] Further, in the proposal, the Commission claimed that *"meat-related terms often carry cultural significance".*[36] With this in mind, it seems likely that the amend-ment voted by the EP in the FIC will survive the trilogues and make its way to the final version of the act.

This phrasing of the Commission text is worrying because it could hint at a shift in the policy change that might have been influenced by a certain political agenda and the impact of lobbying. Only two years ago, the Farm to Fork strategy was enacted by the Commission as one of the initiatives under the umbrella of the EU Green Deal.[37] The strategy recommended that EU consumers shift to a more plant-based diet given both its health benefits and the positive impact of such a shift on the environment.[38] At the same time, the discussion over introducing universal Nutriscore labels with a view to help EU consumers make healthier food choices was everywhere in the media.[39] In January 2025, BEUC reported that over 130 organisations called for an EU-wide action plan for Plant-Based Food, which would aim to help consumers transition towards a more plant-based diet.[40] In view of the proposal of the Commission, as well as the EP's resolution to ban "veggie burgers" and similar names for plant-based products, the Plan is not likely to materialise. These documents contrast with the previous tone and mark a shift from the approach of promot-

---

32   *Ibid*, para. 96.
33   Christine Schneider is a MEP associated with the European People's Party (Christian Democrats), [accessed November 2, 2025] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/197422/CHRISTINE_SCHNEIDER/home.
34   Christine Schneider, "Labelling of food made from plant-based alternatives. Question for written answer E-002312/2024 to the Commission," October 30, 2024, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-10-2024-002312_EN.html.
35   European Commission, *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) No 1308/2013 as regards the school fruit, vegetables and milk scheme ('EU school scheme'), sectoral interventions, the creation of a protein sector, requirements for hemp, the possibility for marketing standards for cheese, protein crops and meat, application of additional import duties, rules on the availability of supplies in time of emergencies and severe crisis and securities*, COM(2025)553 final [accessed November 5, 2025] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52025PC0553.
36   *Ibid*.
37   European Commission, "Farm to Fork Strategy."
38   *Ibid.*, 14.
39   Food Watch, "Foodwatch Demands Transparency on Nutri-Score Regulation Failures," September 10, 2024, https://www.foodwatch.org/en/foodwatch-demands-transparency-on-nutri-score-regulation-failures.
40   BEUC, "Blueprint for an EU Action Plan for Plant-Based Foods," June, 2025, https://www.beuc.eu/sites/default/files/publications/BEUC-X-2025-056_Blueprint_EU_Action_Plan_for_Plant-based_Foods.pdf; European Environmental Bureau, "Joint Call for EU Action Plan for Plant-Based Foods," January 23, 2025, https://eeb.org/en/library/joint-call-for-eu-action-plan-for-plant-based-foods/.

ing a plant-based diet that has been on the agenda in the past.

The EU, if it decides to indeed ban "veggie burgers", would not be alone in doing so. This year, the Swiss Federal Tribunal decided that meat substitutes cannot use labels such as "chicken", "fish", or other species-animal designations, even if they further say that they are plant-based.[41] No similar rules have been enacted in the UK or Norway for now, but the judgement in Switzerland and the current trend at the EU level could well be a push for more stringent rules elsewhere in Europe, in accordance with the well-known "Brussels effect".[42]

Who Is the Real Winner – and Who Is the Real Loser – In the Name Game?

It is worth considering who would benefit from the ban introduced with the EP's resolution if it is ultimately confirmed. One can raise doubts whether the change will bring real benefits to European farmers, and for good reasons. Pär Holmgren, Swedish MEP with the Greens/Free European Alliance, implied during the debate in plenary that the ban acts to the detriment of consumers who choose vegetarian and plant-based food, but also of the farmers who choose to supply such food.[43] Quoting Anna Strolenberg, Dutch MEP associated with the same political group, *"to help farmers, give them stronger contracts. Give them a better income. Let's help them innovate".*[44] Proposals along these lines would work for the benefit of all farmers, not only those who produce meat products.

Certain commentators have argued that the meat lobby made quite an impact on the European Parliament's decision.[45] The meat lobby in the EP refers to powerful meat (and dairy) companies, industry organisations, and lobbying groups that have influenced EU policies aimed at reducing carbon footprint and emissions in the food sector.[46] In fact, the lobby made a similar proposal on the labelling issue in 2021, only then it was rejected.[47] During the preparation of the new act in 2025, many companies representing the French agricultural sector were involved in lobbying with the bill's Rapporteur.[48] In this way,

---

41 Tribunal federal, 2 May 2025, Case No 2C_26/2023.
42 The term "Brussels effect" was first coined by Anu H. Bradford, *The Brussels Effect: How the European Union Rules the World* (Oxford University Press, 2020). The term has reached such popularity that there exists a website which showcases book reviews, but also press articles and podcasts that refer to it: [accessed December 4, 2025] https://www.brusselseffect.com/.
43 Pär Holmgren, *"But then we have these meddlesome people on the right who just can't resist tabling amendments to suddenly ban words like 'veggie sausage' and 'veggie burger'. Obviously at the behest of parts of the European meat lobby. It is completely frivolous and has nothing to do with the position of farmers, but is simply a way of messing with consumers who want to eat more vegetarian food today, and thus also with the farmers who want to supply that food,"* European Parliament verbatim report of proceedings, October 7, 2025, (author's translation from Swedish) [accessed December 4, 2025], https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-10-2025-10-07-ITM-010_EN.html.
44 *Le Monde*, "EU Parliament votes to restrict."
45 Ronald Guerts, "The ban on the veggie burger is nothing more than symbolic politics in service of the meat lobby," *DiEM*, October 14, 2025, https://diem25.org/the-ban-on-the-veggie-burger-is-nothing-more-than-symbolic-politics-in-service-of-the-meat-lobby/.
46 "InfluenceMap: Meat and dairy industry lobbying stalls EU Climate Legislation," *Financial Investigator*, May 29, 2024, https://www.financialinvestigator.nl/nl/nieuws-detailpagina/2024/05/29/influencemap-meat-and-dairy-industry-lobbying-stalls-eu-climate-legislation; "Truths, Tactics and the Mist of Meat Lobby Science," *Food Unfolded*, January 15, 2024, https://www.foodunfolded.com/article/truths-tactics-and-the-mist-of-meat-lobby-science.
47 Zosia Wanat and Gabriela Galindo, "War against 'veggie burgers' not over yet, lobby groups say," *Politico*. January 29, 2021, https://www.politico.eu/article/the-war-on-veggie-burgers-not-over-yet-lobby-groups-say/.
48 See especially: European Parliament, Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development, "Report on the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulations (EU) No 1308/2013, (EU) 2021/2115 and (EU) 2021/2116 as regards the strengthening of the position of farmers in the food supply chain, 2024/0319(COD)), (2025), Annex: Declaration of Input" listing, among others, European Milk Board, Chambres d'Agriculture de France and FNSEA (Fédération nationale des syndicats d'exploitants agricoles) as some of the involved groups, [accessed November 2, 2025] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-10-2025-0161_EN.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

voting for this amendment highlights the outsized role of the agricultural lobby in the EP.

The decision taken has possibly met the expectations of the meat industry. However, one should not overlook that it might have also upset many of the European citizens and was widely criticised by mainstream media.[49] In particular, the flimsy justification for the resolution, which seems to cover the real reasons for the EP's decision, may be disappointing for citizens as reflected in the public backlash that it received.[50] This article argues that the institution should not ignore those signs of disapproval. This is because, in making this decision, the EP might have prioritised the demands of a narrow lobbying group over the wider interests of the EU citizens and damaged the public's view of the EU institutions.[51]

The EP was created with a simple goal: to address the accusations of the EU's democratic deficit. Direct elections to Parliament took place for the first time in 1979, meaning that in four years, the institution will celebrate its 50 year anniversary.[52] In 2023, the EP called for strengthening its competences in the proposal to amend the Treaties. This resolution highlighted the importance of reforming decision-making in the Union to more accurately reflect a bicameral system by further empowering the EP,[53] calling for it to have the right to legislative initiative and the reversal of the roles of Council and Parliament in nominating and confirming the President of the Commission.[54] The amendments involved creating a common financing of the Defence Union with the EP as a co-legislator and controller of the programme's budget.[55] While it is not the aim of this article to delve deeper into all of the amendments and what they would aim to introduce into the institutional practice of the EP, one thing is clear: their primary aim is to significantly increase and expand its role.

With these ambitions in mind, the case of plant-based products highlights an important issue. The EP had promised to enhance the democratic legitimacy of the EU's actions. However, regrettably, in this case, the EP has only reinforced a sense of disconnect between institutions and ordinary citizens. Therefore, if a debate on strengthening the EP competences ever comes back in the discussions on the Treaties amendment, one should take a step back and evaluate not what the EP can do but, first and foremost, what it stands for

49   Jennifer Rankin, "'Veggie burgers' could be off EU menu…,"; Melissa Eddy, "In Food Label Fight, Europeans Debate How the Sausage Gets Made," *New York Times,* October 8, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/08/business/europe-veggie-vegan-meat-food-names.html; "Europaparlament serviert Mitarbeitern nach Namensstreit 'vegane Burger,'" *Der Spiegel,* October 9, 2025, https://www.spiegel.de/ausland/veggie-burger-verbot-europaparlament-serviert-vegane-burger-trotz-namensstreit-a-c9c869f8-8ad0-429b-9f7d-a844c74bbcae.

50   Zosia Wanat and Gabriela Galindo, "War against 'veggie burgers' not over yet, lobby groups say," *Politico,* January 29, 2021, https://www.politico.eu/article/the-war-on-veggie-burgers-not-over-yet-lobby-groups-say/; Christoph Holzbach, Christoph Matras, "Don't we have other problems? Thoughts on the EU veggie burger ban," *GGI Global Alliance,* November 26, 2025, https://www.ggi.com/news/ggi/dont-we-have-other-problems-thoughts-on-the-eu-veggie-burger-ban; Jennifer Rankin, "Veggie burgers' could be off EU menu as MEPs back renaming plant-based foods," *The Guardian*, October 8, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/oct/08/veggie-burgers-off-menu-meps-vote-ban-plant-based-food-terms.

51   Such a view was expressed *e.g.,* by Christoph Holzbach, Christoph Matras, "Don't we have other problems? Thoughts on the EU veggie burger ban" *GGI Global Alliance,* November 26, 2025, https://www.ggi.com/news/ggi/dont-we-have-other-problems-thoughts-on-the-eu-veggie-burger-ban.

52   Britannica, "European Parliament," [accessed November 2, 2025] https://www.britannica.com/topic/European-Parliament.

53   European Parliament, "Proposals of the European Parliament for the amendment of the Treaties," November 22, 2023, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0427_EN.html, point 3 of the preamble (institutional reforms).

54   *Ibid.*, points 5 and 6 of the preamble.

55   *Ibid.*, amendment 51.

and how it operates.

At present, it remains inconclusive if the EP enhances the democratic legitimacy of the European Union in the eyes of its citizens.[56] According to the 2025 Eurobarometer, 41% of respondents had a *"very positive"* or *"fairly positive"* view of the EP but this in itself does not reveal much about the institution's democratic legitimacy.[57] In the past, the trend was that fewer EU citizens voted in the European Parliament elections,[58] which, as some argued, showed the generally "unfavourable perception" of the institution by the EU citizens.[59] Last year, the turnout improved, but in some countries it remained below 30%, showing that citizens of those countries have little interest in the institution.[60] All in all, this article contends that banning veggie burgers is unlikely to win the EP new supporters.

The quest for increasing democratic legitimacy within the EU is important. Yet, as has been shown, it will not be achieved merely through increasing the engagement of the EP in the EU legislative process and policymaking.[61] In fact, alternative ways must be designed in order to ensure that EU citizens have a voice that is heard and respected across the EU institutions. Moreover, this situation highlights that greater scrutiny, transparency, and awareness about the impact of lobbying in the EP is highly desirable.

Conclusion

The paper aimed to scrutinise the debate on plant-based meat alternatives. It has shown that, while the topic may seem trivial, it has significant implications for the EU. It appears that institutions' views on EU consumers can change rapidly and justify changes that do not reflect their interests or demands. Altogether, the amendment may be seen as an attempt to —through policing language of food labels— resist changing diet preferences. Moreover, it aims to restrict the growing plant-based market instead of protecting consumers. While the language of vegetarian food labels may be a relatively trivial issue in light of the challenges Europe is facing, the development in itself can be read as worrying. The murky world of lobbying in Brussels and the prominent role of special interests in formulating legislation that may not reflect normal citizens requires closer scrutiny and more research in order to verify whether it is a one-off occurrence, and not a general trend.

---

56 It is difficult to find reliable and up-to-date data on how the EU citizens perceive the European Parliament. It may, however, be interesting to notice that a lot of European citizens have a limited knowledge of the EU and its internal operations. See: Florian Stoeckel, "What do Europeans know about the EU before they go to the polls?," *LSE Blog,* May 17, 2019, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2019/05/17/what-do-europeans-know-about-the-eu-before-they-go-to-the-polls/.

57 European Commission, "Standard Eurobarometer 103 - Spring 2025," [accessed December 3, 2025] https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3372.

58 Maria Grazyk, "Academic: A Vision for Europe is Desperately Needed," *EurActiv,* November 22, 2018, https://www.euractiv.com/interview/academic-a-vision-for-europe-is-desperately-needed/.

59 Henri de Waele, "Union Citizens and the European Parliament: Perception, Accessibility, Visibility and Appreciation" [in:] Paul E. Minderhoud et al. (eds), *Caught In Between Borders: Citizens, Migrants and Humans. Liber Amicorum in honour of prof. dr. Elspeth Guildm*, (Wolf Legal Publishers, 2019), 180.

60 European Parliament, "2024 European Election Results," [accessed December 3, 2025] https://results.elections.europa.eu/en/.

61 A highly insightful analysis to the same result, which in detail discusses the topic of why merely engaging the EP will not improve the democratic legitimacy can be found in: Dieter Grimm, "The Democratic Costs of Constitutionalisation: The European Case," *European Law Journal* 21 no. 4, (2015): 460-473.

EU 4U

The European Union and Arab League: Contrasting Regional Capacities

Dr. Eman Demerdash

Introduction

Regional organisations are a form of international organisation whose membership is defined by a specific geographic area, such as a continent, subregion, or economic bloc, and whose aim is to promote cooperation among member states in political, economic, or security matters. Unlike global institutions, regional organisations are shaped by shared histories, geographic proximity, and common political or economic challenges. These organisations have developed primarily in the post-World War II era, shaped by both the cooperative spirit of the time and the increasing fragmentation brought by globalisation. Their institutional frameworks often reflect persistent tensions between national sovereignty and the drive toward collective governance.[2] Two of the oldest and most prominent regional blocs, the European Union (EU) and the Arab League, offer a striking contrast. While both were established to promote political cooperation, economic development, and collective diplomacy, their ability to function as unified actors in global affairs differs dramatically.

The European Union, despite its many challenges —including Brexit, the rise of nationalist movements, and East-West divides— remains a functioning and often influential political body. It has managed to coordinate common foreign policy positions, enforce trade agreements, and even impose sanctions during major crises such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The Arab League, on the other hand, has repeatedly struggled to act in unison, especially in moments of deep regional crisis. From the devastating wars in Syria and Yemen to the prolonged collapse of Lebanon's political order, its paralysis has been most glaring in its failure to respond meaningfully to the ongoing Palestinian conflict. The League

1   Completed a PhD in Euro-Mediterranean Studies at Cairo University, with a thesis on The Political Role of Spanish Football Clubs in Catalan Separatism: A Comparative Study between FC Barcelona and Real Madrid CF. Holds a master's in the same program, focused on far-right parties and European political challenges, and a bachelor's in political science from Cairo University. Research interests include comparative political systems, elections, political parties, and the intersection of football and politics, with a focus on the Euro-Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Middle East.

2   Gabriel Eyo Matthew, "Regional Organizations, Integration and Strategic Governance: A Comparative Analysis," in *Issues in Global Governance and Strategic Studies*, ed. Akpan, O., Afaha, P. and Dickson M. University of Abuja Press, 2023), 160-187, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/376911847_Regional_Organizations_Integration_and_Strategic_Governance_A_Comparative_Analysis.

has frequently been criticised for issuing symbolic declarations without the institutional capacity, enforcement mechanisms, or political will to implement meaningful action. Despite its founding goals of increasing Arab unity and joint action, the organisation has consistently failed to mediate conflicts effectively or enforce collective decisions among its members.

Why do two organisations with similar regional aspirations function so differently? The answer lies in the institutional design and decision-making processes of each regional organisation, as the strength of an institution depends on its ability to enforce decisions on its members. This article compares how institutional frameworks shape the effectiveness of both blocs. In this study, effectiveness is assessed along four dimensions: the ability to make binding decisions, the capacity to implement them, the presence of enforcement mechanisms, and the tangible impact of policies on the ground. These criteria allow for a systematic comparison between the EU and the Arab League, beyond rhetorical or symbolic statements.

Moreover, examining the EU's use of these tools illustrates that, despite its own shortcomings, its institutional structure offers important analytical insight into why regional cooperation in the Arab world remains limited and fragmented.

Overview of the European Union and the Arab League

The European Union

The European Union (EU) is a unique political and economic partnership composed of 27 Member States. Originally established to secure peace and economic recovery in postwar Europe, the EU has evolved into a supranational entity with legally binding authority across many policy areas. Its institutional structure includes the European Commission, which proposes legislation and oversees implementation; the European Parliament, which exercises democratic oversight; and the European Council, which defines broad political direction. Additionally, the Court of Justice of the European Union ensures the consistent application of EU law across all member states.[3]

Crucially, EU institutions operate on both intergovernmental and supranational levels, blending national interests with collective governance. The EU possesses its legal personality, meaning it can sign treaties, enact regulations, and compel compliance through judicial means. Member states delegate certain sovereign powers, particularly in trade, competition, and monetary policy, to central institutions. While political disagreements among members persist, the EU's institutional depth allows for a level of continuity and coherence unmatched by most other regional organisations.[4]

The Arab League

The League of Arab States, commonly known as the Arab League, comprises 22 member states united by language, culture, and geography. Founded in 1945, its primary mission is to promote political

3   "Types of Institutions and Bodies," European Union, accessed July 18, 2025, https://european-union.europa.eu/institutions-law-budget/institutions-and-bodies/types-institutions-and-bodies_en.
4   Michelle Cini and Nieves Pérez-Solórzano Borragán, *European Union Politics*, 6th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2018), 32–50.

coordination, economic cooperation, and the preservation of the sovereignty of its member states.[5]

Institutionally, the Arab League includes a Secretary-General, various specialised councils, and sectoral committees. Member states retain full control over their national policies and may opt out of collective decisions. The League's declarations are often viewed as largely symbolic, with limited real-world implementation. While it has served as a platform for dialogue and occasional coordination, it has struggled to act decisively in times of regional crisis, largely due to internal divisions and the absence of enforcement mechanisms or supranational authority.[6]

The EU and Arab League: Institutional Differences

At the heart of the difference between the European Union and the Arab League lies their institutional architecture. While both aim for regional cooperation, their structures reflect fundamentally different approaches to integration and sovereignty.

The European Union employs a combination of intergovernmental and supranational decision-making processes. In areas like foreign policy and security, decisions are made by consensus in the European Council, meaning all member states must agree. The Council of the European Union generally makes decisions by Qualified Majority Voting (QMV), which allows collective action even without full agreement. However, when it meets as the Foreign Affairs Council, unanimity is required for most decisions. This makes foreign policy the area where divisions among member states most directly block common action, as illustrated by the EU's fragmented responses to the Gaza crisis.[7]

The EU has its own legal personality under its treaties, which means it can make laws, sign international agreements, and ensure that all members follow the rules[8]. Its main institutions are: the European Commission, which proposes laws, manages daily work, and enforces EU rules; the European Parliament, which is directly elected and shares law-making power with the Council of the EU; and the Court of Justice of the European Union, which ensures the uniform application of EU law and can sanction states that violate it. In foreign affairs, a central role is played by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who chairs the Foreign Affairs Council and represents the EU externally in diplomacy, security, and crisis management.[9]

In terms of capacity, the EU has a broad range of tools at its disposal. These include binding legal enforcement through the Court of Justice, financial instruments such as the EU budget and humanitarian aid, and the ability to impose sanctions that apply uniformly across all member

5   "Charter of Arab League," Refworld, accessed July 18, 2025, https://www.refworld.org/legal/constinstr/las/1945/en/13854.
6   Dalia Ghanem, "The Summit of Arab States," *European Union Institute for Security Studies,* December 1, 2022, https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/summit-arab-states.
7   European Commission, "The EU - What It Is and What It Does," *Publications Office of the European Union*, March 2022, https://op.europa.eu/webpub/com/eu-what-it-is/en/.
8   European Union, "Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union," March 15, 2025, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:12016M/TXT.
9   "European Election 2024: How Do EU Institutions Work?," *Reuters*, June 7, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/how-do-european-union-institutions-function-2024-06-07/.

states once adopted. Diplomatic capacity is also concentrated in the office of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who chairs the Foreign Affairs Council and represents the EU externally. While unanimity often limits foreign policy, mechanisms like Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in other policy areas allow the Union to adopt decisions even without complete agreement. By combining institutional authorities with voting rules like QMV, the EU is able to act collectively and with relative speed, even when internal disagreements exist.

In contrast, the Arab League operates almost entirely through an intergovernmental decision-making system. This means that decisions depend on the agreement of its member states, and no supranational authority can enforce rules in the same way as the EU. Most decisions are made by consensus in the Council of the Arab League, and even when decisions are adopted, they are usually binding only on the states that voted for them.[10]

The Arab League's structure is based on the principle of state sovereignty and non-interference in domestic affairs. It does not have a legal personality that would allow it to make binding laws over its members. Its main bodies are: the Council of the Arab League, made up of member state representatives; the General Secretariat, which carries out the League's administrative and coordination work; and a set of specialised ministerial councils and committees for areas like health, culture, and transport.[11] Given this organisational framework, the Arab League acts more as a forum for dialogue and coordination than as a body that can take collective action against the will of its members.

Beyond institutional design, the main hurdle in moving toward a supranational framework in the Arab League lies in the deep attachment of its member states to sovereignty and regime survival. Arab governments remain wary of binding commitments that could constrain their freedom of action. The region encompasses a mix of monarchies, presidential systems, and military-led regimes, each with very different priorities and survival strategies. Monarchies often prioritise preserving dynastic authority, while presidential systems emphasise centralised control and national sovereignty, and military-led regimes placing security and stability above all else. These differences foster mutual distrust, as governments fear that stronger regional institutions might challenge their domestic legitimacy or empower rival political models. Even when attempts were made to establish common markets or collective security arrangements, they faltered because states prioritised national agendas and resisted any transfer of authority. This persistent reluctance prevents the Arab League from developing strong, binding institutions, thereby limiting its effectiveness in foreign policy.

The European Union and the Arab League also pursue regional cooperation through fundamentally different institutional models. The EU blends intergovernmental and supranational elements, enabling it to take binding decisions in many areas. Mechanisms like Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) allow policies to be adopted even without unanimous agreement, while in-

10 Ghanem, "The Summit of Arab States."
11 "Arab League," *LotusArise,* May 10, 2023, https://lotusarise.com/arab-league-upsc/.

stitutions such as the European Commission, European Parliament, and Court of Justice ensure laws are implemented and enforced uniformly across member states. This combination of shared authority and enforceable rules gives the EU the capacity to act collectively and with greater efficiency.

In contrast, the Arab League operates on a strictly intergovernmental basis, where consensus is the norm and decisions are often binding only on states that support them. Lacking a legal personality and supranational authority, it relies on voluntary cooperation among members. Its structure, centered on the Council of the Arab League, the General Secretariat, and specialised ministerial bodies, institutionally prioritises state sovereignty and non-interference over collective enforcement.

The Arab League's capacities are significantly more limited. Its main instruments are political rather than legal: issuing communiqués, convening ordinary or extraordinary summits, and coordinating with other regional or international actors such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) or the United Nations. Specialised ministerial councils and committees also exist, but their influence is largely sectoral and technical rather than political. Because decisions are voluntary and binding only on the states that support them, the League's tools rely on consensus and national implementation rather than coercive or enforceable regional mechanisms. As a result, the League functions primarily as a platform for dialogue rather than a mechanism for decisive, unified action.

Case Study: Gaza/Palestine: What the EU and Arab League Did

The Gaza crisis was selected as a case study because it presents a high-stakes, ongoing conflict in which both the European Union and the Arab League have publicly intervened, making it an ideal test of their comparative effectiveness. For evaluation, effectiveness is operationalised through four indicators: (1) decision-making speed, or the time taken from crisis onset to official organisational response; (2) bindingness of outcomes, distinguishing between legally enforceable measures and voluntary declarations; (3) implementation, or the extent to which member states act on organisational decisions; and (4) enforcement, reflecting the capacity of the organisation to compel compliance. These indicators allow a systematic comparison of the EU and Arab League, linking observable outcomes directly to the institutional designs described in previous sections.

Since October 2023, EU leaders have repeatedly called for humanitarian pauses leading to a ceasefire, hostage release, and protection of civilians; these are formal European Council conclusions that guide the Union's common positions.[12] Beyond statements, the EU also deployed binding instruments: it expanded targeted sanctions against violent extremist settlers in the West Bank under the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, measures that automatically apply across all member states once adopted.[13]

On the other side, the Arab League con-

---

12 "European Council, 21-22 March 2024," *Council of the EU,* March 21, 2024, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2024/03/21-22/.

13 "Extremist Israeli Settlers in the Occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem, as Well as Violent Activists, Blocking Humanitarian

vened with the Organisation of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in an extraordinary joint summit (Riyadh, Nov 2023), calling for an immediate end to military operations and urging international accountability (ICC/ICJ). Although the *communiqués* were robust, implementation remained voluntary and state-driven.[14] In January 2024, the League endorsed the Egyptian-Qatari initiative for a Gaza ceasefire, and in March 2025, an extraordinary summit issued a joint declaration reaffirming support for a two-state solution and calling for a UN protection force.[15]

Case-study: Interpretation

The EU combines legal instruments, enforcement mechanisms, and procedural rules, giving it the capacity to act collectively. However, political cohesion gaps can limit the practical impact of even binding measures. The Arab League, by contrast, achieves rhetorical unity but lacks enforceable mechanisms, making its effectiveness contingent on the voluntary actions of individual states. This systematic evaluation illustrates that effectiveness is shaped both by institutional capacity and the political will of members, providing a clearer framework for comparing the two regional organisations.

Effectiveness Indicators:

	European Union[16]	Arab League[17]
Binding decision-making	Decisions such as sanctions are legally binding across all member states once adopted	Decisions are political statements, binding only on states that choose to follow them
Implementation capacity	Mechanisms exist to ensure member states comply, supported by EU institutions.	Lacking centralised enforcement, member states retain discretion over whether and how to act
Enforcement mechanisms	The Court of Justice of the EU and centralised monitoring enforce compliance.	No supranational authority or legal framework ensures compliance
Policy impact	While binding, the impact of EU measures on the ground was limited due to political divisions. In the UN General Assembly vote on 27 October 2023, only eight member states voted in favor of a humanitarian truce, four opposed, and fifteen abstained, reflecting internal disagreement and limiting EU influence	While the League projects diplomatic unity, outcomes rely on national initiatives; tangible influence on the conflict is limited

---

Aid to Gaza: Five Individuals and Three Entities Sanctioned under the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime," *Council of the EU,* July 15, 2024, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/07/15/extremist-israeli-settlers-in-the-occupied-west-bank-and-east-jerusalem-as-well-as-violent-activists-blocking-humanitarian-aid-to-gaza-five-individuals-and-three-entities-sanctioned-under-the-eu-global-human-rights-sanctions-regime/.

14 Aziz El Yaakoubi and Nayera Abdallah, "Arab and Muslim Leaders Demand Immediate End to Gaza War," *Reuters*, November 12, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-host-extraordinary-joint-islamic-arab-summit-riyadh-saturday-2023-11-10/.

15 "Final Communiqué: Emergency Arab Summit for Palestine," *Daily News Egypt,* March 4, 2025, https://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2025/03/04/final-communique-emergency-arab-summit-for-palestine/.

This case makes the distinction between capacities clearer. The EU activated its sanctions regime and provided budgeted humanitarian aid as binding measures, but political disunity limited its broader impact. The Arab League, in contrast, responded through extraordinary summits, joint declarations, and appeals to international law, demonstrating its strength in rhetoric and diplomacy but also its institutional weakness, since implementation ultimately depended on national governments rather than a regional authority.

Overall, the Gaza case confirms the broader argument of this paper: institutional design determines not only the tools available to regional organisations, but also the depth of their influence. The EU's formal mechanisms allow it to adopt binding measures, yet their effectiveness is ultimately constrained by internal political divisions. The Arab League, meanwhile, can project collective political messaging but lacks the institutional authority to translate consensus into enforceable action. This comparison demonstrates that effectiveness depends on the interaction between institutional capacity and member-state cohesion, supporting the hypothesis that formal rules matter only insofar as political will exists to operationalise them.

Conclusion

The EU and the Arab League's reactions to the Gaza crisis show how their structures affect what they can do. The EU has rules and tools to make binding decisions, but disagreements between member states — especially over calling for a ceasefire and recognising Palestine— made it difficult to speak with one voice. The Arab League, which works only by consensus and has

no power to enforce decisions, agreed in words to condemn Israel's actions but was unable to translate them into coordinated action.

This case shows that in sensitive conflicts, regional organisations need both strong institutions and real political agreement to turn statements into tangible outcomes. Institutions provide the framework and tools, such as voting procedures, enforcement mechanisms, and diplomatic representation, but without agreement among member states on the political direction, these tools remain underused. The EU's experience on Gaza illustrates this gap: while it had the institutional capacity to coordinate sanctions, humanitarian aid, or a unified diplomatic stance, divisions among its members limited the use of these instruments. Similarly, the Arab League has frequently issued declarations on Palestine but, lacking both supranational mechanisms and unified political will, has struggled to translate rhetoric into binding collective action. This suggests that effectiveness in regional organisations arises from the interaction of institutional design and member state cohesion, rather than from either factor alone. It further indicates that lessons from this case may inform improvements in how regional organisations respond to future crises.

The Arab League appears to be ineffective because its decisions require consensus and are usually binding only on states that agree, leaving little room for collective enforcement. Member states frequently prioritise national interests over regional ones, and differences in regime type, strategic priorities, and attachment to sovereignty create structural obstacles to establishing binding regional authority. The

historical trajectory of political systems in the Arab world also does not suggest the immediate possibility of creating supra-national authority, as this would demand radical regime changes not in one country but across the entire region, fundamentally altering how sovereignty and legitimacy are understood. Despite these constraints, the League possesses significant economic and diplomatic potential, which remains largely underutilised.

The comparison shows that while the EU possesses legal, economic, and diplomatic instruments that can be applied collectively, it often lacks the political cohesion to use them effectively. The Arab League, on the other hand, achieves rhetorical unity but lacks the institutional mechanisms to translate declarations into binding regional action. Effectiveness therefore depends not only on political will but also on the scope and enforceability of the tools each organisation has at its disposal. Effectiveness therefore depends not only on political will but also on the scope and enforceability of the tools at the organisation's disposal. What distinguishes the EU is the existence of a procedural chain obliging members to move from joint declarations to binding regulations or sanctions, backed by monitoring and legal enforcement. In the Arab League, no such chain exists: decisions end at the stage of political consensus, leaving implementation to the discretion of individual states.

Did you enjoy reading European Studies Review?

GET INVOLVED!

Submit your article to be featured in the Quarterly Journal!

How?
Email your article to
europeanstudiesreview@gmail.com

Don't forget to check our
requirements on our website.

European Studies Review

Est. 2020