September 2026

The political economy of differentiated integration in a fragmenting world

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Written for the Center for Economic Policy Research initiative "Europe of the Future 2050: Geometries of Peace, Power and Prosperity," initiated by Olivier Blanchard, Pascal Lamy, Enrico Letta, and Beatrice Weder di Mauro.

Introduction

The European Union (EU) was built in and for an international order characterized by rules-based multilateralism and Western dominance that now seems a relic of the past. Recent years have seen dramatic changes in the international arena that suggest a transition towards a power-based system in which Europe plays a much less central role. These changes confront the EU with considerable challenges. The United States has turned away from its traditional leadership role, and from multilateralism, and now treats the EU more like an adversary than an ally, including with threats to EU territory. Europe lacks a strong digital industry of its own, and risks falling behind in cutting-edge technologies and their applications. Europe's competitiveness problems and China's export drive threaten leading Europe's industries, its long-standing labor market institutions, and its social contract. On the strategic front, the American retreat and the Russian threat to European security have highlighted Europe's weak military position.

Although the ultimate nature of the new order is unclear, there is little doubt that for the EU to play a leading, autonomous, role in the world, it will need to transform itself in important ways. Europe remains one of world's largest and wealthiest integrated markets with many strengths, such as a highly educated population, strong regulatory power and research capabilities, and globally competitive firms. But to successfully navigate the new international order and to carve out a role as an influential, prosperous and secure actor on the global stage, Europe, with the EU in the lead, needs to develop more effective, and more united, economic, foreign, and defense policies to confront these challenges.

Bringing about the necessary changes presents both economic and political challenges. Designing functioning and effective institutions and policies is no easy task. Obtaining and sustaining the *political support* for the reforms necessary to create such institutions and implement such policies both among the member states and within them is even harder: There is no agreement among the EU's member states about where and how to move forward. In addition, most of the EU's member states are themselves internally divided on these questions. Populist movements and parties of both the Right and the Left are skeptical of the broader and deeper measures of European integration it involves. Many Europeans are reluctant to embrace a thorough-going change in the structure of the EU, with all the uncertainties, trade-offs and potential costs deep reforms typically entail. While some integration steps carry large potential payoffs, they also carry risks that may lead many Europeans to contest the value of integration itself. Movement in that direction thus risks provoking a backlash from at least part of the public. At the same time, if Europe does not move forward with reforms at a time of massive geopolitical and global economic change it faces fundamental risks.

In this contribution, we lay out some of the political challenges confronting policymakers engaged in institutional and policy reform, discuss the implications for the feasibility of such reforms, and sketch out some ways in which these political obstacles could be addressed We suggest that reform efforts focus on areas where the political obstacles are lowest and economic payoff is highest, while allowing more flexibility and differentiation in areas that are politically fraught or where the integration payoff is lower. This will allow Europe to act decisively and to capitalize on its strengths.

The challenge: Politics

Significant shifts in the global order create strong pressures for Europe in its current form. To stand "as an autonomous actor capable of shaping outcomes" (Blanchard et al 2026), Europe needs serious reform. The key challenge is to move the Union from its current political-economic equilibrium to a new one that is better suited to this emerging order, while ensuring that this transition strengthens rather than fragments and weakens it, both politically and economically. The United States demonstrates that such movement is likely to be difficult and potentially conflictual – it took 80 years and a civil war for the US to transition from a *confederation* toward a *federation*. But this experience also shows that such fundamental reforms are possible.

To address this challenge, European states will have to build consensus for measures that require full participation by all countries in the EU, to encourage cooperation among those member states willing to cooperate for measures suitable for "coalitions of the willing," and to leave the rest at the discretion of national governments. Politically, this task confronts a difficult reality on two fronts: differences *among* countries in their policy preferences, and differences *within* countries over the appropriate national strategy.

Convergence and divergence among countries.

National positions on further European integration vary considerably across countries. Some support much deeper integration, while others are notoriously skeptical. Driven both by material considerations about the national consequences of further integration steps and domestic political considerations, such as electoral concerns and special interest pressures (Moravcsik 1997; Hooghe and Marks 2009; Finke et al. 2012; Frieden 2002), support for integrationist steps also tend to vary considerably across issue areas. Not all issues and proposals for reform are contested; sometimes, a consensus emerges. At other times, clearly defined camps emerge, while at yet other times, national positions are more varied. These varying constellations are a challenge for reform, but they also present some opportunities.

To illustrate this divergence and convergence in national positions across different policy issues and reform proposals, we draw on data compiled by the EMU Choices project (Wasserfallen et al. 2019).[1] This project used the textual analysis of more than 5,000 documents, along with 27 expert interviews, to characterize member-state government positions on 47 contested EMU-related reform proposals discussed during the Eurozone crisis. Because national positions can change over time, these data – collected in the aftermath of the Eurozone debt crisis – do not necessarily reflect current thinking in European capitals. However, they illustrate that at the same point in time, a range of different preference constellations can co-exist among member states even within a broad and contested issue area such as macroeconomic governance in the Eurozone (see Figure 1).

We select four reform proposals that illustrate convergence and divergence in national positions. Panel a illustrates that there are issue areas where there is a consensus, or close to one, among member states about the desirability of a European approach – in this case evident by the near total support for a larger ESM lending capacity. However, there are also issues on which national positions strongly diverge. Sometimes, such as with the issue of European debt mutualization (panel b), there are clear divisions, but there are also member states that occupy a

[1] https://emuchoices.eu/

possible zone of compromise. Other issues – illustrated here with national positions on a proposal to suspend member states voting rights in the Council if they breach EU deficit rules (panel c) – are characterized by clearly-delineated opposing camps, in this case the familiar pattern of mostly traditionally frugal creditors of northern Europe supporting a tough line with member states that violate fiscal rules (and opposing debt mutualization, see panel b), and the more traditionally deficit and debtor countries of peripheral Europe taking the opposite position. And finally, there are reform proposals for more European integration that are met with almost universal rejection – such as the proposal that the EU Commission should review national budget proposals before national parliaments vote on them.

Figure 1: National negotiation positions on selected issues during the Eurozone crisis

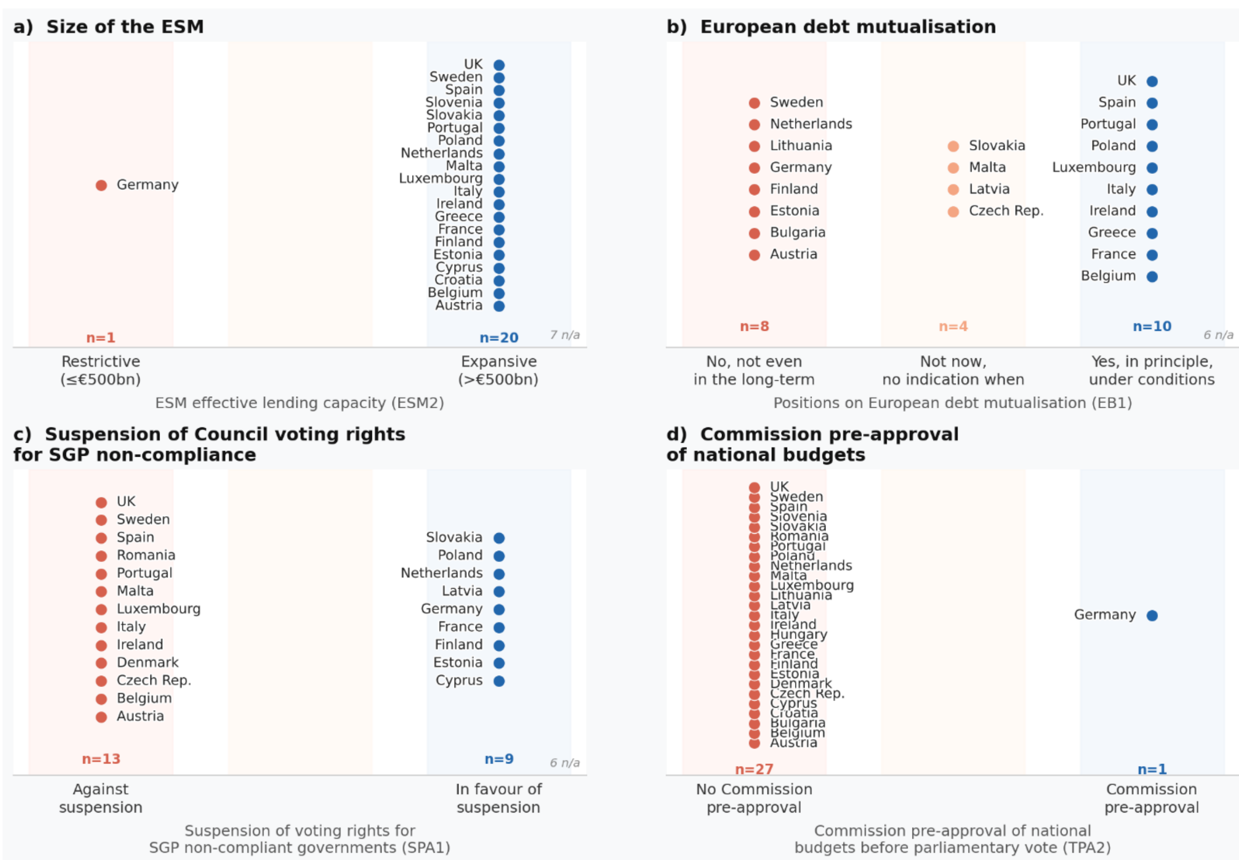


Figure 1 shows that at any given time the political feasibility of different reform proposals varies considerably. What matters for the EU's overall ability for reform is how many reform proposals fall into which category. After all, political obstacles have often allowed the EU to move forward only in incremental ways in recent years, "failing forward" rather than making bold reforms (Jones et al. 2015). We return to some suggestions along these lines below.

Convergence and divergence within countries.

The divisions among member states can be wide; divisions *within* them can be wider still. Virtually all EU member states have powerful populist movements and parties, whether of the Right or of the Left, that have typically been skeptical of or hostile to many of the integrationist initiatives of the past. As these groupings have become politically more powerful in recent years, the issue of European integration has become more politicized and contentious in domestic politics (Hooghe and Marks 2009; De Vries and Hobolt 2020). While this development has been a major constraint on efforts to significantly deepen European integration, however, vast majorities of European citizens and political parties continue to support European integration and view the EU positively. Overall, domestic politics in member states is thus divided rather than skeptical of European integration.

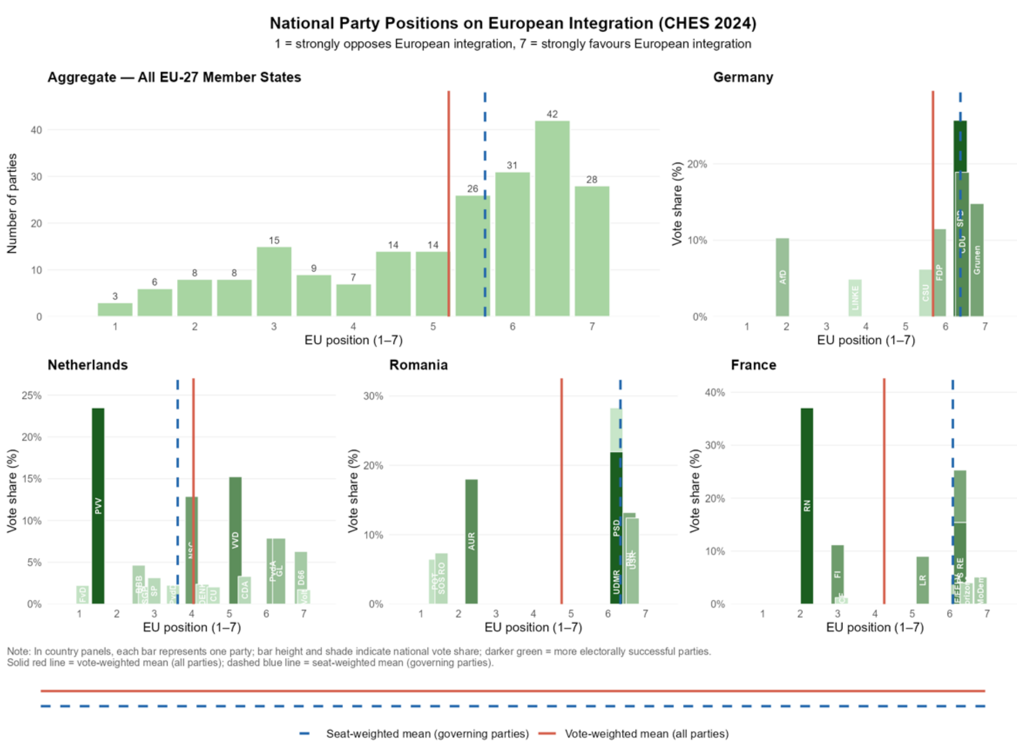
We use the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES), which relies on expert characterizations of *party-specific* policy positions of up to 279 European parties, to illustrate these divisions.[2] These data have been collected in seven rounds, from 1999 until 2024, for almost all EU countries and

[2] https://www.chesdata.eu/

have involved between 116 and 609 experts to code between 143 and 279 political parties per round.

Party positions on European integration vary considerably among parties, as Figure 2 shows. This is true both across all EU member states and within many European countries (of which we show a selection). Two findings stand out from this simple descriptive graph: Overall, most parties – and governing parties in particular – exhibit a favorable position towards the EU, although many parties voice considerable skepticism. Second, there is also substantial variation within countries: In some countries, such as in Germany, the majority of parties clusters on the pro-EU pole, in some, such as the Netherlands, party positions are distributed across the full spectrum, and in yet others, such as in Romania and France, parties are highly polarized when it comes to EU integration.

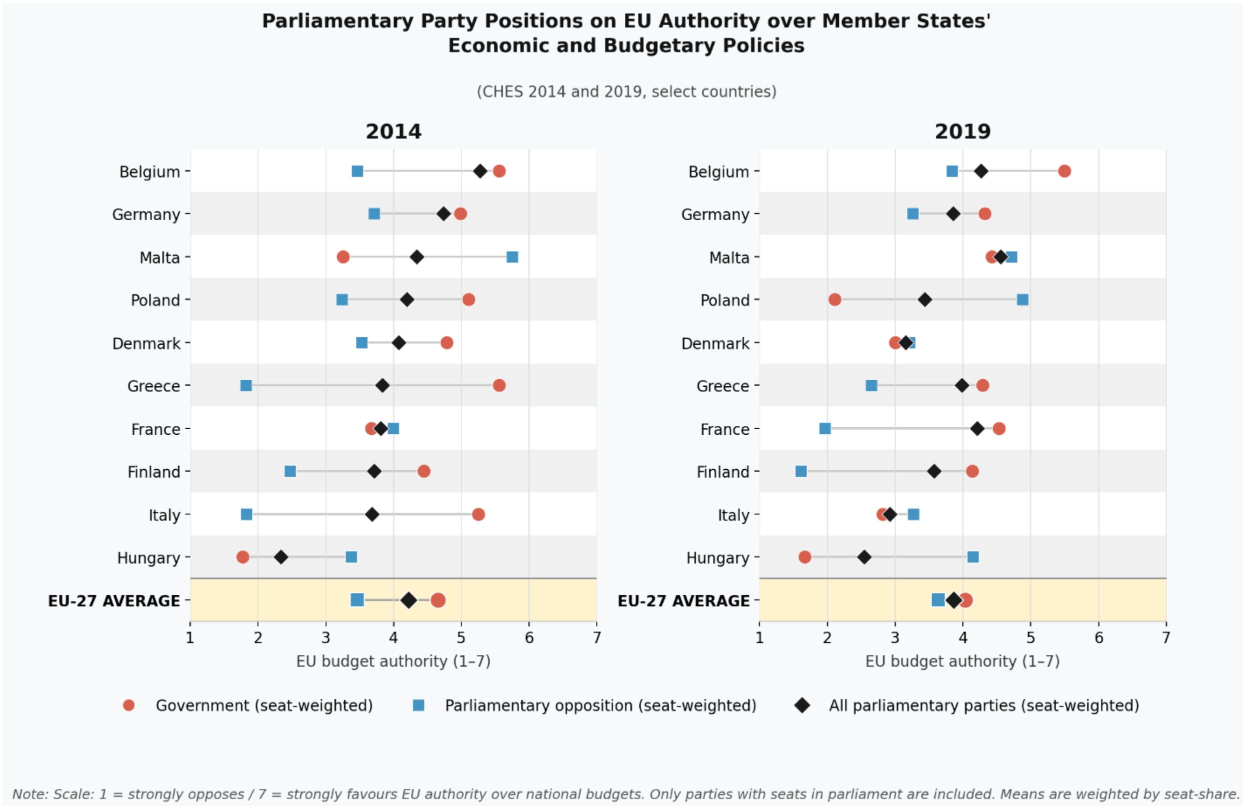
Figure 2: Positions of national political parties in Europe on European integration



These divisions have implications for European politics, especially in countries in which political parties are highly polarized on the issue of European integration. First, national governments are more constrained in their ability to compromise on the European level when they face political competition from Euroskeptic parties at home. Second, when political entrepreneurs stand ready to exploit issues such as European integration that can drive a wedge into the electorate of more mainstream and Europhile parties (De Vries and Hobolt 2020; De Vries et al. 2021), reform proposals that seek to advance and deepen the EU in a more federal direction tend to be more contested domestically. In such contexts, integrationist proposals have the potential to further inflame populist sentiments. Finally, domestic party polarization makes it likely that national elections may result in significant shifts in member states' stances towards European integration. National negotiating positions and support for integrationist projects are thus likely to be much more volatile in polarized countries.

Figure 3 illustrates this point for one specific issue: EU authority over national budgets. It compares the average party positions of government and opposition parties in 2014 and 2019 (the only two years in which these data were collected) for a selected set of EU countries, as well as the EU27 average. It shows that the discrepancy between government and opposition on EU-related issues can be very large (Italy and Greece in 2014 are glaring examples) and that national negotiating positions on these issues can change dramatically when government composition changes, as the striking reversals in government positions in Poland and Greece show. With political parties like the AfD in Germany and National Rally in France on the rise, this suggests that the traditionally pro-integrationist positioning of major EU member states may be at risk in the long run.

Figure 3: Average government and opposition positions over time



<u>Paths to unity and diversity</u>

Confronting the external and internal threats to European autonomy requires winning both the minds and the hearts of its citizens and elites, in an environment in which there is little consensus among or within nations as to what is to be done. Reforms need to be both ambitious enough to unlock Europe's potential, and calibrated enough to be politically feasible and sustainable. The path to a more effective Union requires changes in policies, changes in political institutions, and changes in attitudes. Charting the way forward involves considering possible coalitions of nations that can take the lead when not all member states are willing to participate. Policies must be crafted in ways that muster support for the reforms necessary, allow these coalitions to form and advance, and address a potential backlash from those who oppose the reforms. And these efforts need to be accompanied by narratives that explain to Europeans why they are being asked to make potentially difficult changes that are likely to pay off only in the longer run.

The differences both among and within countries on whether and how to proceed with European integration presents the European integration project with considerable political challenges. But as we have seen, not all policy areas in the EU are equally contested politically. Likewise, the payoff from integration varies across issue areas. One key task is thus to identify issues on which integration is likely to be relatively feasible, and areas in which the political costs of integration outweigh the benefits so strongly that it is best to keep them on the national level (Table 1). There remain many issue areas that are, and should remain, the domain of national policy. In some cases, this is because there is little reason for dealing with them at a supranational level – such as linguistic or cultural matters. In other cases, while there might be some argument for harmonization, the strength and diversity of national commitments demands separation – such as social policies.

Unfortunately, political agreement on jointly moving forward is not necessarily strongest where economic analysis implies the largest payoff from integration. Unanimous political agreement among member states often lacks on topics on which analysis suggests the need for Union-wide inclusion, and vice versa. That then raises the political challenges the Union faces that we discussed above.

Table 1: Payoffs from and obstacles to European integration

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2" rowspan="2"></td><td colspan="2">Aggregate payoff from integration</td></tr>
<tr><td>Low</td><td>high</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Political obstacles</td><td>low</td><td>Small-scale integration

<u>Examples</u>
Small-scale harmonization of technical issues</td><td>“Low-hanging fruit”

<u>Examples:</u>
Limited joint defense procurement and capabilities; integration of the energy grid/markets</td></tr>
<tr><td>high</td><td>National policy priority

<u>Examples:</u>
Harmonization of national welfare or pension models, housing policy, education policy</td><td>Important but highly contested

<u>Examples:</u>
Joint defense decision-making, capital-markets union; common borrowing/debt mutualization; common foreign policy; significant institutional EU reform</td></tr>
</table>

Making Europe fit for 2050 thus requires ways of addressing the political obstacles it faces. A second – and harder – task is therefore to identify and focus on those policy areas where the aggregate payoff from integration is high, and to find ways to reduce political obstacles without giving up too much of the potential gains. This is not a new task: unanimous support for far-reaching reform has always been difficult to reach in the EU, especially as membership has grown. As a result, the EU has successfully experimented with differentiated integration (Leuffen et al. 2013): Member and non-member states participate in EU policies selectively, reflecting heterogeneity of integration preferences, interdependence, and state capacities. Although differentiated integration always confronts member states with a trade-off between the capacity to act and inclusiveness, as Catherine de Vries (2026) points out in her contribution, this has enabled the EU to engage in integration processes in areas such as monetary policy (most notably

EMU), migration and asylum (Schengen and Dublin), or defense and security cooperation (e.g. PESCO or SAFE).

Coping with preference divergence among member states

Differentiated integration is one way to address political obstacles, because it reduces the number of states whose agreement is necessary to move forward. Cooperation among member states varies in the extent to which it favors, or requires, all-inclusive participation of all, or nearly all, member states. In some areas, unanimity is absolutely required; in others, it may not be necessary, so that joint policy may move forward with the involvement of several member states. And there are many policies that can and should be left to governments to pursue at the national level. The challenge is to think both about the issues in which joint action is necessary and those in which differentiated integration is possible, on the one hand, and how the political realities that may constrain these choices can be addressed.

A useful way to think about which issues fall into which category is to imagine whether the public (or club) good in question can be provided without the participation of every member state or, put differently, whether its provision would be undermined by the non-participation of a member state. The common external tariff for goods is an example of a policy that requires the participation of all member states (assuming they are all part of the Single market): it only holds if all member states apply it. Looking ahead, it may be that the Capital Markets Union (and the Savings and Investment Union more broadly) with common regulatory standards requires full inclusion: if some member states have notably more lax regulation than others, there is a potential for evasion, arbitrage, and eventual financial crisis.

There are other areas where universal participation is desirable, but not strictly necessary. Here, new forms of integration can be launched with a subset of countries. This allows for cooperation by a select group of EU members while others hold back to see the results. Candidates for either voluntary participation or a club might be research and development, higher education, and certain industrial policies. Although the cooperation gains in such more limited schemes are typically lower than in issue areas with universal participation, such areas have several political advantages: not only are they easier to launch, they can also demonstrate to skeptical member states that cooperation gains are real. In addition, over time they can create new realities on the ground that make participation more attractive for countries that initially opted to remain outside.

The creation of a cooperative club of one group of member states with a common policy can, if successful, therefore give other member states incentives to join later. There are many areas in which scale matters, and for which the advantages of cooperation become clear only as they are demonstrated in practice. The Schengen Area, too, started with a limited cooperation club of five countries, but expanded gradually as it was shown to be workable. Today it excludes two EU members for particularistic reasons (Cyprus and Ireland) and includes four non-EU members (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland). The visible travel, transport, and security benefits and increasing costs of exclusion made Schengen membership attractive, eventually making it part of the EU acquis and near universal membership of EU countries. This suggests that as a coalition of the willing demonstrates its value, it can expand.

Starting small may even be the best way forward where a prospective reform ultimately requires universal participation. When political obstacles are high, political realities may dictate gradualism as the best way to achieve this level of participation. In addition, there are many policies that can be sustained without universal participation, and cooperation clubs may be the best way to deal with policy areas in which unanimity is neither necessary nor feasible. Here the public (or club) good can be delivered to members only. The Eurozone is an obvious example: it provides monetary and exchange-rate stability only to EMU club members.

Two hotly debated issues demonstrate these dynamics. The first is the debate about the creation of an EU safe asset that member states stand behind collectively. This is a crucial step toward, as Olivier Blanchard and Angel Ubide (2025) have put it, "creating a European financial ecosystem that can compete with that of the United States. And a necessary condition for such a system to function is to have at its base a deep and liquid Eurobond market." The goal, aimed at establishing the euro as a truly leading international currency, is to create an ample supply of euro-denominated safe assets, backed jointly by EU governments. Their proposal, and virtually any other along similar lines, would seem to require the involvement of all, or virtually all, member states. Nonetheless, it might be more prudent to begin with a subset of member states, to provide proof of concept, in the hope that this would lead to the accession of others. After all, to the extent that the scheme leads to a reduction in the cost of government borrowing, its attractiveness to non-member governments will increase. Other financial "clubs" that include only some EU members may be feasible, especially if plans for a truly integrated all-EU financial system prove difficult to achieve in the first instance.

Another realm is defense. While some common defense policies may benefit from universal inclusion, others may be amenable to club formation. Although there is general agreement on the need for a more cohesive European defense posture, and for greater coordination in defense procurement, there is no universal willingness to participate in a common defense force. Austria, Ireland, and Malta are neutral; they, along with Cyprus, are not NATO members; and some other EU member states have indicated that they are not enthusiastic about such proposals. Despite a lack of unanimity on this dimension, it is probably feasible for a "coalition of the willing" to move forward on its own. A strong candidate for such a club could be defense of the Eastern border. This certainly requires the full participation of each frontline state and of the countries that will provide the principal firepower for this defense. But while it would seem that that the frontline states, plus France, Germany, and Italy, are needed to move in this direction, the lack of participation from, say, Ireland, Spain, or Cyprus, would not be a notable obstacle.

This kind of variable geometry has risks: the clubs can get permanently "stuck" in a provisional construct. When this limits payoffs from integration, they can also wither away. But an upward spiral of accretion to a successful coalition is much of the story of the course of European integration. The task is to find ways that create conditions in which a positive spiral is more likely to emerge. This requires tackling some of the domestic politics challenges facing the unions, in ways that make it more likely for national governments to join in and continue to support joint European initiatives.

In this context, it is crucial to note that neither the distribution of reform proposals nor national positions are fixed: National negotiation positions – and in some cases national preferences – change. As structural conditions, distributional consequences and geopolitical circumstances evolve, EU member states can and do change their positions and perceptions of desirable policies over time, and this can open ways to overcome disagreements and political obstacles to meaningful European integration. The issue of joint European debt, which faced major headwinds during the Eurozone crisis (see panel b), is a good example of how national positions and the political feasibility of reform proposals can evolve over time: Several of the countries staunchly opposed to Eurobonds in the mid-2010s have revised their positions since then. For example, Germany softened its opposition to joint borrowing during the pandemic, and Estonia and Lithuania have become supportive of joint EU borrowing for defense-related purposes in the face of growing security risks related to Russia.

Along similar lines, reform proposals have been modified in ways that have made them more acceptable to a larger group of countries. An example is issuing joint debt only under exceptional circumstances, using a mix of grants and loans, and tightly delineating the type of expenses that can be funded with such debt. Some ongoing proposals about joint European debt, such as Johannes Marzian and Christoph Trebesch's (2025) more limited suggestion for mutualized debt only for defense spending, also combine these elements. They limit the scope, and presumably would only involve the club of countries that agreed to create a common military force. Such strategies open up room for compromise and also help with efforts to overcome some of the domestic challenges for reform. It is these challenges we turn to next.

Addressing Europe's domestic political challenges

Economically sound reform proposals that generate aggregate benefits will not, by themselves, overcome the political obstacles to EU reform. Domestic divisions over EU reform, the growing politicization of European integration that constrains national governments and makes their positions more volatile, and the uneven distributive effects of EU reform often stand in the way. Overcoming these obstacles requires creativity, a willingness to harness Europe's potential, and a positive narrative. We discuss three strategies along these lines.

1. Be creative in policy and reform design. Reform proposals need to take political feasibility as seriously as economic efficiency. This requires identifying feasible clubs and coalitions of the willing, designing institutions that are stable and can function when national negotiating positions may shift suddenly, as well as creative and flexible policy design.

Where agreement among all member states is not possible, it may be necessary to trade off some efficiency gains for greater political feasibility. Ideally, such schemes should seek to lessen these trade-offs in the long run, by designing them in ways that make it possible and attractive for other countries to join later, and possibly even increasingly unattractive for them to remain outside. For those reforms that do require the participation of a larger number—or even all—of the member states, the challenge is to design them in a way that both generates support but also allows for an efficient functioning without opportunities for constant vetoes and hold-ups. One way to do this is to create lock-in effects that disincentivize successive governments from unravelling existing agreements – particularly important in a context where growing politicization makes larger swings in national positions regarding EU integration more likely.

In addition, policymakers should think creatively about designing reforms in ways that lessen distributive conflict and domestic opposition. For example, institutional flexibility – such as transitional periods, opt-in provisions or escape clauses –may help states overcome domestic opposition by lowering the hurdles to achieve cooperation. Likewise, cross-issue compromises and logrolling can be used to compensate states and domestic groups that lose from a reform in one area through gains in another, thereby encouraging them to come on board.

The challenge for all these strategies is to make sure that they do not create new divisions and structures that hamper EU integration in the long run. This means that creative thinking that allows meaningful reform without generating large domestic opposition is needed. A potentially encouraging example for this kind of thinking is the EU's proposed "28th regime," which aims at creating an optional, harmonized European company form alongside existing national forms rather than replacing them. This approach aims at generating benefits from common EU-wide rules while limiting direct confrontation with politically sensitive national institutions. If successful, uptake by firms would generate evidence about the operation of common rules and demonstrate the regime's benefits. This in turn might help build constituencies for extending the approach to other areas.

In sum, policymakers should invest in thinking about how to design politically feasible reforms that allow for flexibility and adaptability while also creating resilience for the European project.

2. Recognize divisions and harness public support. A second strategy is to recognize the divisions surrounding European integration without allowing Euroskeptics to dominate the debate, and to simultaneously harness the substantial public support that the EU continues to enjoy. In a democracy, disagreement and contestation are normal. They demonstrate that political decisions matter and are worth fighting over; they also keep policymakers on their toes and prevent complacency. At the same time, it is important to remember that a clear majority of Europeans continue to view European integration and the EU positively. By focusing excessively on Eurosceptics and their concerns, mainstream politicians risk neglecting or even losing their own base. Instead, they should harness this support and build on it much more forcefully.

This requires taking the European public seriously and being honest about the effects of different proposals, both positive and negative. It often seems that policymakers are so afraid of Eurosceptics that they shy away from admitting that compromises have downsides, rather than explaining why they believe the benefits outweigh those costs. Yet acknowledging trade-offs is likely to make a policy proposal more, not less, credible. Citizens are often able to think through foreign-policy issues in strategic terms and tend to understand the difficult choices governments face (e.g., Kertzer 2016; Jurado et al. 2022; Kiratli and Ertan 2024). The EU should therefore explain its reasoning and the implications of its decisions more clearly. Rather than presenting the EU–US trade agreement reached at Donald Trump’s Turnberry golf course as an unqualified win for Europe, for example, it would have been more honest—and potentially more convincing—to explain that the Commission considered the compromise the better of two bad options in a difficult geopolitical and security environment. Such an explanation would not eliminate disagreement, but it would treat citizens as capable of judging the underlying trade-offs.

The challenging geopolitical environment Europe faces is not incidental to this strategy. It creates both an imperative and an opportunity to articulate more clearly what Europe stands for. European values such as liberal democracy, the rule of law, human dignity, privacy protection, and compromise are increasingly challenged on the global stage. Autocracies are on the rise, major global players such as the US, Russia, and China have turned towards more coercive foreign policies, and international institutions are under pressure. But European values continue to be attractive to many people worldwide, including Europeans themselves. By emphasizing these values, the EU could signal both to its own public and to others that it is willing and able to stand up for what makes Europe European.[3]

Ultimately, the aim should therefore not be to depoliticize European integration, but to contest its politicization on more favorable terms: acknowledging genuine costs and disagreements while making a confident case for the values and cooperation that the EU embodies. A Union that speaks candidly about trade-offs and mobilizes its supportive majority is more likely to sustain ambitious reform than one that communicates defensively and allows its critics to set the terms of debate.

3. Create a positive and convincing narrative about Europe. Finally, this also means that European policymakers should work on creating a much more positive narrative about Europe, with a focus on European strengths and widely shared European values. Sometimes this is partly a matter of labelling and framing. A "safe European asset," for example, is likely to sound more attractive than "debt mutualization." Explaining that such an asset would allow financial investors to fund major European projects, such as infrastructure or defense, may also resonate more strongly with voters than a narrative that emphasizes that taxpayers in some countries might become liable for the debts of others. As discussed above, such an effective framing should

[3] Such a strategy could also generate tangible economic benefits, provided that regulatory ambition is combined with policies that enable European firms to innovate and scale. Well-designed AI and digital regulation could create demand for trustworthy, secure and privacy-preserving technologies, potentially giving European firms a comparative advantage as governments, businesses and citizens seek to reduce their dependence on digital infrastructures that may be exploited for political leverage.

not hide genuine costs or distributive consequences, but by creating a sense of purpose it can open new opportunity spaces.

Another strategy for winning European hearts is making the EU's achievements more visible. Citizens often take for granted such benefits as consumer protection, and the ease of travel, communications, and cross-border payments, without recognizing the role the EU plays in these everyday interactions. Here, it is worth explaining that the relevant comparison is not between the EU and an idealized state of national sovereignty, but between the EU and the vulnerability of small and middle-sized states in a world dominated by larger powers.

Finally, reforms must be explained in clear and accessible language. This requires a change in EU communication, which is often overly technical and difficult to understand. Research shows that EU institutions communicate in unusually complex and technocratic language that often obscures political agency and responsibility (Rauh 2023). Indeed, EU Commission press releases employ, on average, an even more specialized vocabulary than abstracts in leading academic journals. Investing in a clearer, more accessible, and more engaging communication approach is therefore a comparatively low-cost strategy for strengthening support for European cooperation.

Toward Europe's future

European integration has overcome extraordinary obstacles and made remarkable achievements. Within a few short years of its initiation, it fostered an atmosphere of amity and cooperation among nations that had been bitter enemies for generations. In the face of opposition and skepticism, the Union created a single market and a common currency among disparate national economies – initiatives without significant historical precedent. The current level of European integration was practically unimaginable several short decades ago; disintegration of the Union is almost unimaginable today.

Today the European Union faces challenges that rival those of the early post-war period in difficulty. After nearly a century of relying on American leadership and good will, Europeans will need to draw upon their own resources, energy, and imagination to chart a path forward in a difficult international environment. Europe confronts important political obstacles on this path, both among and within its constituent nations. To succeed in this high-stakes endeavor, supporters of European integration and autonomy need to plan economically desirable and politically feasible initiatives that can protect the achievements of the past and create conditions for further successes.

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