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We declare no conflicts of interest.

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BALKAN JOURNALS

European Unity and Security: From Post-War Integration to Modern Challenges in Defense and Governance

Teodora Tea Ristevska

Abstract

This article examines the historical evolution of European unity and traces the development of the European Union from the aftermath of the Second World War to the present day. Divided into six phases, it highlights the key political, economic, and institutional milestones that have shaped the EU's path. The study begins with the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community and the formation of the European Economic Community and EURATOM. It examines the challenges of the Cold War era, the influence of key treaties on the deepening of integration, and the expansion of EU competencies. The analysis also covers the post-Lisbon period and looks at issues such as the Eurozone crisis, the migration crisis, Brexit, and the EU's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It also discusses the adoption of the AI Act in 2024, progress on cybersecurity through the NIS2 Directive, and the increasing recognition of the need for a common defense strategy to ensure the security and stability of the Union. These developments underline the continued need for reforms to strengthen democratic legitimacy, cohesion, and collective security within the Union. It concludes that while the EU has made significant progress towards becoming a true political community, it must continue to adapt and evolve to address its democratic shortcomings and better meet the diverse needs of its member states and citizens. Through strategic reform, enhanced defense cooperation, and a renewed commitment to its founding principles, the EU can strengthen its unity and manage the complexities of the modern age.

Keywords: European Integration, European Union History, Institutional Development, Post-War Europe, European Treaties, AI Act, Cybersecurity, Common Defense

Introduction

The concept of a united Europe is almost as old as the idea of the sovereign state. However, for centuries, the idea of national sovereignty overshadowed any vision of European unity. It was only with the devastating consequences of the two world wars in the 20th century and the forces of globalization that the idea of the sovereign state began to lose its dominance (Schütze, 2012). The period after the Second World War marked a decisive turning point when European nations moved from a focus on coexistence within the framework of international law to a cooperative legal framework (Friedmann, 1962). The outbreak of the Cold War further divided Europe into East and West and shaped the continent's geopolitical landscape for almost four decades.

This article analyzes the history of Europe since 1945, focusing on the major political and socio-economic events that reshaped the continent. The historical development of European integration is examined through six distinct phases. Beginning with the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951, followed by the creation of the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM) and the European Economic Community (EEC) in the 1950s, the dynamic integration efforts of the 1960s and 1980s. Moreover, important milestones, such as the Maastricht Treaty in the 1990s, led to a complex era of deeper integration. This development culminated in the post-Lisbon Treaty era, which began in 2010. The EU has faced new challenges and made significant progress towards greater unity in the middle of global and internal pressures. By examining these phases, this article provides an in-depth understanding of the development of European unification, focusing on the post-World War II period and the challenges Europe faced in its quest for unity.

In order to examine the development of European integration since 1945, this article adopts a historical-analytical approach. The study begins with a comprehensive overview of the existing literature, drawing on primary sources such as treaties and official documents, as well as secondary analyses. The article organizes the presentation chronologically and thematically and traces the development of European integration in six key phases. This approach highlights the patterns, challenges, and turning points in the European unification process, focusing on sovereignty, economic integration, and political cooperation. The analysis culminates in a reflection on current challenges such as the democratic deficit and Brexit, linking the historical insights to the current state of the European Union. The conclusion offers an outlook on the future of European integration and emphasizes the need

for continued reforms and adjustments to meet the different needs of member states and citizens.

The Idea of a United Europe Through Historical Distance

The idea of a united Europe can be traced back to the 9th century and the Medieval period, with Charlemagne (Carlo the Great) at the helm. Charlemagne, who ascended the Frankish throne in 768 and became King of Italy in 774, was crowned the first Holy Roman Emperor in 800. His reign was the first significant attempt to unite much of Western Europe since the collapse of the Western Roman Empire three centuries earlier and laid the foundations for modern France and Germany. The unification of Western Europe by Charlemagne, also known as the 'Father of Europe', is often seen as the first attempt to re-establish a unified European state after the fall of the Roman Empire (Collins, 1998). While this unification was a crucial historical milestone, it also laid the foundations for future conflict, as the struggle for control of the empire's throne led to numerous wars. As Sullivan (2010) notes, Charlemagne's renewal of the Roman Empire laid the ideological foundation for a politically united Europe, a concept that has inspired – and sometimes gotten Europeans into trouble – throughout history.

Over time, the political emancipation of medieval monarchies and the idea of territorial sovereignty took hold, leading to a growing sense of national identity and demarcation within national borders. The Protestant Reformation, which began in the 16th century, deepened the divisions in Europe not only along religious lines but also politically. The resulting Thirty Years' War was a direct consequence of these divisions. It was not until the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which ended the Thirty Years' War, that a serious attempt was made to implement the principle of religious freedom. However, even this was not enough to guarantee lasting peace in Europe. Exhausted by the relentless power struggles, European rulers began to advocate a balance of power that would prevent any one state from gaining political supremacy. This idea first emerged as a reaction to the growing power of the Habsburgs and later the Bourbons, both of whom were seen as a threat to European peace (Sheehan, 1996).

The term 'Europe' gained prominence in political discourse in the second half of the 17th century, particularly as European states united to oppose the hegemonic ambitions of France under Louis XIV. The concept of Europe became increasingly associated with a policy of balance of power, religious tolerance, and expanding

trade networks of sovereign states (Schmidt, 1966). William Penn, in his "Essay Toward the Present and Future Peace of Europe" (1693), proposed one of the earliest significant peace plans for Europe. Penn argued that a parliament composed of different states should make decisions on international affairs and that only this body should have the power to use force in the event of disputes. His belief in people's innate sense of justice led him to reject the need for a permanent international police force once national armies were disbanded (Penn, 1983).

Another notable plan for European peace was the "Projet de traité pour rendre la paix perpétuelle en Europe" proposed by the French Abbé de Saint-Pierre in 1713. This plan was based on the recognition of the status quo within Europe and did not extend to non-European states. Saint-Pierre, who is often regarded as the first major proponent of peace, saw his ideas spread widely through the publication and dissemination of his works at a time when peace plans were gaining traction (de Saint-Pierre, 1713).

As Europe entered the 18th century, Napoleon Bonaparte sought to harness the power of nationalism as the intellectual seed of a new European order. After his defeat at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815, Napoleon said that his aim had been to create a unified European system, with a common European law and a supreme court – a single European nation. Had he succeeded, Europe would have become a united state in which the traveler would always feel at home (Mikkeli, 1998). The idea of economic integration persisted, albeit with limited support, during the 19th and early 20th centuries. After the Second World War, however, it experienced a revival and eventually paved the way for the establishment of the European Community (Thompson, 1994).

The Congress of Vienna convened after the defeat of Napoleon, was led by the four great powers – Britain, Russia, Prussia, and Austria – who had played a key role in his overthrow. The aim of the Congress was to stabilize the map of Europe after more than two decades of conflict. Although each participant was keen to ensure that none of the others became too powerful, the negotiators in Vienna largely succeeded in creating a lasting peace. The solutions they worked out remained effective for several decades and led to a 19th-century Europe characterized less by frequent wars and more by internal struggles, especially revolutions (Jarrett, 2013).

At the end of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire was in decline, which led to a wave of independence movements in the Balkans. The Congress of Berlin in 1878 recognized Bulgaria as an autonomous principality within the Ottoman Empire

and granted full independence to Serbia and Romania, while Bosnia-Herzegovina was placed under Austro-Hungarian administration. As a result, the European territories of the Ottoman Empire continued to shrink, a process that had already begun at the beginning of the century with the independence of Greece. The subsequent Balkan wars were precursors to the First World War, which shattered the dreams of both the internationalism of the workers' movement and the imperialism of the European states. The trauma of the First World War led to widespread pessimism about the future of Western civilization and Europe in particular.

After the First World War, the League of Nations was founded on January 10, 1920, as part of the Paris Peace Conference. It was the first intergovernmental organization with the primary task of maintaining world peace. The main objectives of the League of Nations were the prevention of war through collective security and disarmament and the settlement of international disputes through negotiation and arbitration (Convention of the League of Nations, 2011). At its height, the League of Nations had 58 member states, but its failure to prevent the outbreak of World War II revealed its fundamental weaknesses. Among the factors that contributed to its failure were internal shortcomings and the decision of the United States not to join the organization (Northedge, 1986).

European History Since 1945: Six Phases of European Unification after the Second World War

In 1945, within just three decades, Europe had left behind the devastation of two catastrophic world wars that had left the continent in ruins, both physically and psychologically. The scale of the destruction forced European leaders to look for ways to ensure that such conflicts would never happen again. The growing threat of Soviet Union expansionism and the spread of communism emphasized the need for a strong and united Western Europe that could serve as a counterweight. Paul-Henri Spaak, a key figure in European integration and one of the architects of the Treaty of Rome, noted in his memoirs that although many heads of state were addressed as the "fathers of European integration," it was in fact Joseph Stalin's actions that indirectly spurred Western Europe into closer cooperation. The fear of communism drove Western European nations to unite, laying the foundation for the European project (Spaak, 1969).

Immediately after the Second World War, Europe faced the enormous challenge of rebuilding itself from the ashes. Bruno Foa, reflecting on the post-war crisis, noted

that the economic and social upheavals Europe faced were far more profound than the turmoil of the war itself. The conflict had shattered the continent's old structures and plunged Europe into what he called a "new dark age," creating an atmosphere ripe for nihilism and despair (Foa, 2000, p. 284). This period, often referred to as the 30-year European Civil War, completely destroyed the old European order – politically, socially, culturally, and psychologically. In order to restore stability and find new meaning in the chaotic post-war reality, Europe had to shed outdated paradigms and adopt a more progressive, cooperative approach to governance and integration. Philip Ruttley summarizes this change by highlighting that European integration over the last fifty years has been expressed primarily through legal frameworks. The former enemies of two devastating world wars have interwoven their economies and legal systems so deeply that the prospect of a future conflict between the major European powers now seems almost unthinkable. Ruttley even assumed that a comprehensive economic, monetary, and political union between the member states of the European Union could become a reality within a few decades (Ruttley, 2000, p. 288).

The development of European integration in the post-war period can be traced through six distinct phases, each characterized by significant institutional developments and a deepening of cooperation. This path reflects a methodical approach to constructing a united Europe from the ruins of a shattered continent.

The First Phase: 1945–1955

Key federalist politicians such as Robert Schuman, Jean Monnet, Paul-Henri Spaak, and Jacques Delors played a decisive role in guiding Europe through the most critical phases of integration. The experience gained by the Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), founded in 1948, in administering the Marshall Plan was a valuable model for intergovernmental cooperation. Although the OEEC primarily promoted political alliances, it also laid the foundations for meaningful economic cooperation between states. British skepticism about deeper integration, however, led to the creation of a more limited body, the Council of Europe, which established a Committee of Ministers (meeting every two years) and a Parliamentary Assembly with limited powers to make recommendations to the Council (History of the EU, n.d.).

The turning point came with Jean Monnet's bold proposal to merge the coal and steel industries of France and Germany, particularly in the heavily industrialized

regions of the Ruhr and Saar, which had been contested since the 1870s. Robert Schuman, the French Foreign Minister, strongly supported this visionary plan, which led to the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). In contrast to earlier efforts at intergovernmental cooperation, the ECSC represented a groundbreaking step towards European unification. It created a supranational High Authority with far-reaching regulatory powers, a Council with legislative functions, a politically representative Assembly, and a European Court of Justice to monitor compliance. For the first time, the European states created a supranational entity with independent institutions capable of binding its member states. The ECSC Treaty of Paris, signed in 1951 by France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Belgium, and the Netherlands, was intended as a prototype for more comprehensive European integration. The scope of the treaty went beyond the mere pooling of coal and steel production; it set a precedent for future European cooperation (Duchene, 2004).

The Second Phase, 1955–1968

In 1955, a conference of the six ECSC foreign ministers was held in Messina, Italy, without the participation of the United Kingdom. Under the leadership of Belgian Prime Minister Paul-Henri Spaak, a far-reaching proposal was drawn up for a European Economic Community and a European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC). The basic idea of the EEC was the creation of a trading bloc with a customs union and the removal of barriers to internal trade (such as the free movement of persons, goods, services, and capital).

In addition, this "common market" was to harmonize the national economic, fiscal, and social policies of the six participating states. Accordingly, the six ECSC states founded a far-reaching and radical European Economic Community with the Treaty of Rome in 1957. The reasons for EURATOM were, of course, different from those for the ECSC and the EEC. Moreover, the six states realized that they (individually) were not in a position to match the resources and technological strength of the United States or the USSR in the field of nuclear energy. Consequently, their best option was to combine their individual strengths in a joint undertaking, EURATOM (Pagden. 2002, pp. 235–237). Moreover, the EURATOM Treaty had the same institutional pattern as its sister communities: a Council, a Commission, an Assembly, and a Court of Justice. In 1965, the six states concluded a merger treaty to merge the institutions created by the ECSC, the EEC, and EURATOM into a

common Council Commission, a common Parliament, and a common Court of Justice. From then on, the Commission became a single Commission with the powers of all three founding treaties of the EC in the areas covered by its provisions (see Consolidated version of the Treaty establishing the European Atomic Energy Community, 2010).

Finally, the Treaty establishing the European Economic Community was, in its original form, a far-reaching treaty on economic and political cooperation. Its aim was to increase the prosperity of the citizens of the EEC states: The Community shall have as its task establishing a common market and an economic and monetary union by implementing the common policies and activities referred to in Articles 3 and 3a. To be concrete, to promote throughout the Community a harmonious and balanced development of economic activities, sustainable, non-inflationary and environmentally sustainable growth. Also, a high degree of convergence of economic performance, a high level of employment and social protection, the raising of the standard of living and quality of life, economic and social cohesion, and solidarity among Member States (European Community Treaty, Article).

The Third Phase: 1965–1987

The third phase of European integration, which lasted from 1965 to 1987, was regarded as both active development and significant internal conflicts. This period was characterized by the tension between nationalist ambitions, particularly those of France under General Charles de Gaulle, and the growing vision of a more integrated European Community. De Gaulle's opposition to supranational governance and his vision of a Europe of sovereign states led to challenges within the Community, particularly as it sought to expand its membership.

The enlargements of the European Community in 1973 and 1980, which saw the accession of the United Kingdom, Denmark, Ireland, Greece, Spain, and Portugal, dramatically changed the political and social landscape of the Union. These new members brought with them different political traditions and economic conditions that complicated the integration process but also enriched the collective experience of the Community. However, the 1980s were also a period of political and institutional stagnation in which the European Communities seemed to have lost momentum and struggled to maintain the pace of integration achieved in earlier decades.

Externally, the Community began to show a stronger presence and, despite its internal complexity, gradually found a unified voice in international affairs. In 1961, the United Kingdom, which had rethought its global strategy in the face of the dissolution of its empire and self-government movements in its former colonies, recognized the growing economic potential of the European Economic Community. Consequently, the UK applied for membership in the EEC in 1961, but de Gaulle vetoed the application and repeated his veto on the UK's second application in 1967 (Pagden, 2002, p. 252).

After de Gaulle stepped down from power following the events of May 1968, the path to enlargement became clearer. The United Kingdom, Ireland, and Denmark successfully joined the EEC on January 1, 1973, increasing the number of member states from six to nine. Norway, on the other hand, rejected membership following a national referendum in 1973. Greece joined as the tenth member after the fall of its military regime in 1981, while Portugal and Spain, also in transition from dictatorship to democracy, were admitted in 1986. These enlargements underlined the ongoing tension between national sovereignty and the collective power of the European Union, an issue that would continue to shape the Union's development.

The integration process at this stage was also characterized by the need to reconcile national interests with the growing demand for a more unified European identity. The United Kingdom, for example, required a national referendum in 1975 to confirm the approval of its electorate for EC membership, reflecting the deep-seated concerns about national sovereignty that persisted even after countries joined the Community.

The Fourth Phase: The Single European Act of 1987

In response to opposition from some member states, particularly the UK, to further political integration, European leaders took a more nuanced approach and focused on economic integration. The aim was to drive economic, monetary, and fiscal integration through the creation of a "core" single market rather than pushing for immediate political union. The Single European Act (SEA) of 1987 was a landmark treaty that introduced significant institutional reforms to deepen economic integration. It created European Political Cooperation (EPC), which provided a formal mechanism for member states to reach common international positions, giving treaty status to previously informal cooperation (Weiler, 1991, p. 2457). The SEA also changed the Community's decision-making processes by introducing a

"cooperation procedure" whereby the European Parliament had to be consulted before new legislation was adopted. In addition, the Parliament was granted a right of veto on the accession of new member states and on the conclusion of association agreements with non-member states. This marked a significant change in European Community policy, reducing the dominance of the Council (made up of the governments of the Member States) and strengthening the European institutions, which could transcend narrow national interests.

By focusing on economic and fiscal integration while avoiding politically controversial issues, the EEA succeeded in reconciling two competing visions of European integration. It satisfied both the integrationists, who sought deeper unification, and the sovereigntists, who did not want to give up too much national power. As one commentator noted, financial, fiscal, and monetary policy lie at the heart of national sovereignty, which made the proposals for greater Community centralization in these areas particularly controversial. Nevertheless, the original six member states managed to agree on the principle of a monetary union, setting the course for the future development of European unification (The European Single Act, n.d.).

The Fifth Phase: The Maastricht Treaty, the Treaty of Amsterdam, and the Lisbon Treaty

The transition from the European Community to the European Union was set into motion in 1989 when the European Council agreed to initiate the first stage of economic and monetary union, starting with the freedom of capital movement in July 1990. Simultaneously, negotiations began in Rome on a draft treaty that would lay the groundwork for the future European Union. The geopolitical landscape of Europe had shifted dramatically with the fall of the Berlin Wall, which increased Germany's population by 30% and expanded its economy by 40%. This significant change changed the balance of power within Europe, prompting French President François Mitterrand and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl to accelerate efforts to construct a new political framework for Europe. Their joint efforts culminated in the Maastricht Treaty, which formally established the European Union in 1993. The Treaty, finalized in December 1991 and signed on February 7, 1992, came into force on November 1, 1993, marking the official birth of the EU. The process of postwar integration in Europe, far from being a continuous progression, had been characterized by gradual evolution punctuated by decisive moments of action (Mikkei, 1998, pp. 109–113).

The Maastricht Treaty represented a significant deepening of integration, introducing a political dimension that extended beyond economic cooperation and began to overlap with national sovereignty. The Treaty structured the EU around three pillars: the first, supranational, pillar comprised the European Communities (which unified the existing European Communities); the second and third pillars were intergovernmental, focusing on the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Justice and Home Affairs (JHA), respectively. One of the Treaty's most notable innovations was the creation of European citizenship, which conferred new democratic rights, including the right to vote and stand as a candidate in European and municipal elections, regardless of the member state of residence, and the right to petition the European Parliament and submit complaints to the Ombudsman. The Treaty also introduced the co-decision procedure, granting the European Parliament the power to block proposed legislative acts, thereby enhancing its role in the legislative process. The alignment of the European Commission's mandate with that of the Parliament further strengthened the Parliament's political influence, making its approval of the College of Commissioners a significant political decision. This development marked a crucial step in enhancing the democratic legitimacy of the EU, indirectly empowering European citizens to influence the composition of the Commission (Maurer, 2001, p. 10).

Democracy became a fundamental principle in the EU's foreign and security policy, as well as in its internal affairs, with the Treaty on European Union (TEU). The Treaty of Amsterdam, signed in 1997, further amended the Maastricht Treaty, placing greater emphasis on citizenship and individual rights. It also expanded the powers of the European Parliament, particularly through the co-decision procedure, which became the standard legislative process for much of the EU's secondary legislation. Article 6 of the Amsterdam Treaty, amending Article F of the TEU, asserted that the Union is founded on the principles of liberty, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law (Treaty of Amsterdam, 1997, p. 10). The Treaty also specified that potential EU members must have stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, thereby setting a democratic standard for enlargement (Article 49).

The Lisbon Treaty, which entered into force on December 1, 2009, marked the beginning of a new era for the EU. It introduced several significant changes aimed at making the EU more democratic and closer to its citizens. Giandomenico Majone argues that the Lisbon Treaty exposed a fundamental flaw in the European structure: the gap between elite and popular opinion on the scope, aims, and achievements of

the integration project (Majone, 2009). The Treaty introduced principles of democratic equality, representative democracy, and participatory democracy to bring the EU "even closer" to its citizens. However, the ratification process emphasized the EU's ongoing democratic challenges. The failed referenda in France and the Netherlands in 2005 to ratify the EU Constitution and the initial rejection of the Lisbon Treaty by Irish voters in 2008 underscored the perception of the EU as an elitist and technocratic project, distant from its citizens. These events indicated the need for the EU to strengthen its democratic legitimacy, with the Lisbon Treaty aiming to address these concerns.

The Lisbon Treaty brought several key innovations: it expanded the areas where legislation would be passed through the ordinary legislative procedure (formerly the co-decision procedure), requiring the approval of both the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers. The Treaty also broadened the Parliament's powers in areas such as agriculture, trade, and home affairs and clarified the distribution of competencies between the Union and member states, making it easier for citizens to understand "who does what." Moreover, the Treaty introduced special arrangements to fully involve national parliaments in the EU legislative process, effectively turning them into "watchdogs" of the subsidiarity principle (Matarazzo, 2011).

The Current State of the Union: Post-Lisbon Developments (2010–Present)

Since the Lisbon Treaty, the European Union has undergone significant evolution, revealing both its strengths and the persistent challenges it faces. The Treaty of Lisbon was a critical milestone in addressing the EU's democratic deficit by empowering the European Parliament, introducing new mechanisms for citizen participation, and clarifying the division of competencies between the EU and its Member States (European Parliament, 2009). However, to remain relevant and resilient in a rapidly changing world, the EU must continue to adapt and evolve.

In the decade following the Lisbon Treaty, the EU has confronted a series of existential challenges that have tested its unity and governance structures. The Eurozone crisis of 2010-2012 exposed significant weaknesses in the EU's economic governance framework. In response, the EU introduced key mechanisms such as the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) and the banking union (European Stability Mechanism, 2012). While these measures were crucial in stabilizing the Eurozone,

they also pointed to the limitations of economic integration when not accompanied by deeper political union.

The migration crisis of 2015 further strained the EU, revealing deep divisions among Member States regarding border control, asylum policies, and burden-sharing (Carrera & Guild, 2015). This crisis displayed the urgent need for a more unified and coherent approach to managing external borders and migration – a challenge made more complex by the strong emphasis many Member States place on national sovereignty in these areas.

The United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union (Brexit) in 2016 represented a profound setback for the EU, shaking its foundations and prompting serious reflections on the future of European integration (Bulmer & Quaglia, 2018). Brexit underscored the difficulties of maintaining cohesion within a union of diverse nations, each with varying levels of commitment to the concept of "ever closer union."

The COVID-19 pandemic presented another major test for the EU, one that it met with unprecedented solidarity. In 2020, the EU agreed on the Next Generation EU recovery plan, which includes the largest stimulus package ever financed through the EU budget (European Commission, 2020). This agreement, which involved collective debt issuance – a previously unthinkable step – signals a move towards deeper fiscal integration and showcases the EU's capacity to respond to crises with unity and resolve.

However, internal challenges related to the rule of law persist, particularly in Member States like Hungary and Poland, where democratic backsliding has raised serious concerns about the EU's ability to uphold its core values (Bugaric, 2019). The activation of the Rule of Law Mechanism, which links EU funding to adherence to democratic principles, reflects the ongoing struggle to balance national sovereignty with the enforcement of common standards across the Union (Pech & Scheppele, 2017).

Despite these enormous challenges, the EU has also made significant progress. The adoption of the European Green Deal in 2019 underlines the EU's commitment to lead the global fight against climate change (European Commission, 2019). This ambitious plan, which aims to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050, reflects a strategic shift towards sustainability that could determine the future course of European integration.

In addition to its environmental leadership, the EU has also taken proactive steps in the area of digital transformation and technological regulation. The adoption of the AI Act in 2024 is an important milestone in the EU's efforts to regulate artificial intelligence, balancing innovation, ethical standards, and fundamental rights (European Parliament, 2024). By setting global precedents for AI governance, the EU aims to ensure that AI technologies are developed and deployed in a way that is trustworthy, transparent, and in line with European values.

Moreover, the EU has made significant progress in improving its cybersecurity framework. Faced with the increasing threat of cyber-attacks in an interconnected world, the EU has taken a number of measures to strengthen its collective cybersecurity resilience. These include the revised Network and Information Security Directive (NIS2) and the establishment of the European Cybersecurity Competence Center for Industry, Technology and Research (NIS2 Directive, 2022). These advances not only protect the EU's digital infrastructure but also strengthen the EU's role as a global leader in setting cybersecurity standards.

In parallel with these technological advances, the EU has increasingly recognized the need for a common defense strategy to ensure the security and stability of the Union. The geopolitical landscape, characterized by growing tensions and global security threats, has underlined the importance of a unified defense policy. Recent initiatives such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defense Fund reflect the EU's determination to improve its military capabilities and promote greater cooperation between member states in the field of defense. A common defense strategy is seen as crucial to protect the EU's values, safeguard its sovereignty, and ensure the security of its citizens in a volatile global environment.

Looking to the future, the EU faces the critical task of reforming its institutions to better reflect the realities of an increasingly diverse and complex union. The Conference on the Future of Europe, launched in 2021, is a significant initiative aimed at directly engaging citizens in shaping the future of the EU, potentially paving the way for further treaty changes (European Commission, 2021). This initiative underscores the EU's recognition of the need to bridge the gap between its institutions and its citizens – a gap that has long been a source of tension within the Union.

Conclusion

The future of the European Union depends on its ability to transform itself into a new and dynamic political project. It needs more than the mere idea of a "just political and social order;" it needs a vision that is – politically, economically, culturally, and intellectually more convincing than the existing structures in its member states. As Antony Pagden (2002) argued, if the EU is to succeed, it must offer a future that is not only equal to the status quo but also clearly superior to it. It must offer a brighter and more unified vision that encourages people to transcend their national identities.

The most urgent challenge facing the EU today is the need to evolve into a true political community by addressing its democratic deficit. While considerable progress has been made in improving the democratic foundations of the EU, there is still a widespread perception that these efforts are insufficient. Many Europeans still feel that the European Parliament, despite being the only directly elected EU institution, does not exercise the same power and influence as national parliaments. As Majone (2009) notes, the European Parliament cannot represent a non-existent European people in the same way that national parliaments represent their historical people. National interests are still deeply rooted at the level of individual countries and naturally find expression in national parliaments and political parties.

Extending the powers of the European Parliament to those of national parliaments could potentially reduce the influence of the Council, which represents the governments of the Member States. However, such a shift could challenge the balance of national sovereignty within the EU and push it towards a more federal structure. While this prospect may allay some democratic concerns, it is unlikely to meet with widespread approval from member states, many of whom are unwilling to give up significant parts of their sovereignty.

Even if such a transformation were to occur, it would not completely solve the EU's democratic challenges. What the EU needs most is a clearer separation of powers that ensures that each institution can fulfill its role more effectively. In addition, the EU must continue to develop a common defense strategy, recognizing that collective security is essential for maintaining the stability of the Union and protecting its values in a volatile global environment (NIS2 Directive, 2022). Initiatives such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defense Fund are steps in the right direction and underline the need for greater

military cooperation between member states to protect the sovereignty of the Union and ensure the security of its citizens.

The road ahead is undoubtedly full of challenges, but by embracing reform and seeking greater democratic legitimacy, the EU has the potential to transform itself into a more unified and resilient political community, capable of tackling the complexities of the modern world and fostering a shared sense of purpose among its diverse member states.

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