

2025: a Year of Challenges

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All the commentaries published at the turn of the year had at least one thing in common: at the dawn of 2025, the European Union has rarely been faced with so many challenges, which some have not hesitated to describe as existential. Whether internal or external, political or economic, their accumulation represents an unprecedented test of the resilience of an integration model that emerged last century from a conflict that marked the end of European hegemony and ushered in a period of uncertainty, or rather a succession of certainties, about the new balance of the international system.

At the risk of sounding repetitive, the list is long indeed: the end of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, the end of violence and the unlikely stabilization of the Middle East, the launching of a security and defence policy that has remained in limbo for too long, the management of a new transatlantic relationship, the pursuit of an enlargement with parameters that are - to say the least - nebulous, catching up with a competitiveness that is in freefall, softening the implementation of the climate and digital agendas that were the mainstays of the previous legislature, and protecting a social and democratic model that looks like a besieged fortress. There is no order of priority between these deadlines, which all appear to be equally urgent. And yet this inventory, which is certainly partial and incomplete, only includes the foreseeable: no need to recall that a pandemic confined the globe within a few months of the first Commission chaired by Mrs. von der Leyen taking office.

This agenda is taking shape against a backdrop that makes it even more difficult. On the one hand, the international

environment is subject to so-called 'tectonic' changes, which make its readability somewhat uncertain, but with one constant: the weakening of the European Union's position in economic and demographic terms, and also as a (geo)political actor. On the other hand, even if the trauma of Brexit now seems to have been overcome, there are still concerns about the solidity of the solidarity and trust on which the unique experience of an ever-closer union was founded. The emergence of new democratic balances at the end of the 'year of all elections' and the (temporary?) internal fragility of certain Member States are further factors of uncertainty.

However, after a long transition that began at the end of the last plenary session of the European Parliament on 25 April 2024, the Union seems to be in good working order to meet these challenges.

It has a new strategic agenda, approved in June by the Heads of State and Government, based on three priorities: a free and democratic Europe, a strong and secure Europe, and a prosperous and competitive Europe. These priorities were set out in the political guidelines presented for the Commission by its President in seven areas further detailed in the mission statements sent to the designated members of the College: a new plan for Europe's sustainable prosperity and competitiveness, a new era for European defence and security, supporting people and strengthening the European social model, sustaining the quality of life (food safety, water and nature), protecting democracy and upholding values, asserting Europe's place in the world and preparing the Union for the future.

And this ambitious agenda should be served by a new President of the European Council who seems to be raising many expectations, a Commission installed on schedule despite the many behind-the-scenes twists and turns surrounding its appointment, not to mention a particularly determined first six-month Presidency of the new legislature (Poland).

2025 should therefore be another pivotal year for the European Union, but it would be presumptuous, to say the least, to predict its course.

The conditions appear to be in place to meet the challenges ahead, but doubts remain. The European Council's and the Commission's programme documents are certainly dense, but their analysis leaves the impression of a lack of long-term vision despite the multiplication of initiatives announced. Some will bet on voluntarism based on the conviction that there are no other solutions, while others will see in this activism another symptom of the fact that a certain model is reaching its limits.

Two examples illustrate this doubt.

While everyone agrees that, in the wake of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, enlargement has become more of a geopolitical issue than ever, and no clear objectives have been formulated: at most, there is a roadmap ranging from a review of policies to the establishment of a new multi-annual financial framework, leading to possible institutional reforms, without the candidate countries being able to draw any conclusions as to how and when.

Immigration remains a hot political topic, even if there is no sign of any crisis on the scale of those experienced in 2015-2016 or when temporary protection was activated for Ukrainians fleeing war. A 'pact' supposed to finally give the Union the common policy it is supposed to have under the terms of the Lisbon Treaty was painstakingly adopted in 2024, but its effects will not be felt until 2026. This parenthesis leaves open the question of solidarity, without which the very existence of the Schengen area

could be called into question. And in the meantime, the field remains open to disparate initiatives.

In his editorial for issue 1/2024 of *Revue de droit de l'Union européenne*, Jim Cloos suggested that we should avoid entering a wide-ranging institutional debate and instead concentrate on seeking to reform the Union's modes of action and governance in order to adapt them to the realities of the contemporary world. And, together with Giles Merrit, he illustrated what such an approach might entail in a recent publication by the Trans European Policy Studies Association.¹

This position is backed up by two recent high-profile reports.

A major source of inspiration for the new legislature, the report on the future of European competitiveness, presented in September 2024 by Mario Draghi, sets out a series of recommendations for strengthening the governance that is essential for the success of a new industrial strategy. In addition to putting in place mechanisms dedicated to the rapid implementation of priority actions, the absolute necessity of simplifying the regulatory framework is emphasized. It is true that achieving the objectives set by the European Union for 2019 has resulted in the adoption of a series of pieces of legislation whose impact has not been fully assessed. This has resulted in obligations that are difficult to understand and poorly coordinated for the key players involved in their implementation. The message has been well understood by the Commission, which has entered into dialogues with the main sectors concerned, and whose President, when presenting her guidelines, affirmed her desire to facilitate and accelerate economic life by reducing bureaucracy, strengthening confidence, improving the application of legislation, and speeding up procedures. It remains to be seen how this objective of simplification will be achieved in practice, without committing to deregulation, which does not currently appear to be on the agenda.

Less well publicized, the report by Sauli Niinistö, former President of the Republic of Finland, on strengthening the

1 J. Cloos and G. Merrit, *Streamlining the EU: Better Governance without Treaty change*, European Council Expert's Debrief, Issue XIII, TEPSA, December 2024

civil and military preparedness of the Union and its Member States, deserves attention. Considering the scale of current threats and future crises, the author recommends a series of measures which, within the framework of the current treaties, should make it possible to adapt the structures and procedures in place to consolidate the response capacity and resilience of institutional decision-makers. In addition, by returning to a global conception of human security, it calls for an approach that integrates public authorities, economic players, civil society organizations, and individual citizens, based on a new culture of risk management. This is undoubtedly a vast programme, which the Commission should put into practice at the request of the European Council.

But others seem to take the view that this approach will no longer suffice. Fabian Zuleeg, for example, in a commentary published in April 2024 by the EPC, denounced the ‘illusion of European progress’.²

The European Union has been in a state of permanent crisis since the beginning of this millennium, but it has shown remarkable resilience, emerging stronger each time from each of the multiple phases of this crisis, thus confirming the wisdom of Jean Monnet. It has also succeeded in launching two fundamental projects - the fight against climate change and the entry into the digital age - and in setting the framework for a common response to these challenges. These undeniable successes could therefore lead to a quiet confidence in the EU’s ability to overcome future shocks, while continuing in the meantime to adapt its operating methods at the margins.

But this model may have reached its limits. Responses to past crises have often been incomplete and, from the completion of the banking union to the achievement of genuine solidarity in the management of migratory flows, have left worrying gaps. Each time, the cause is clear: the lack of a systemic approach. Doubts are therefore permitted in the face of shocks affecting the very foundations of the Union. How, for example, can we agree

2. F.Zuleeg, *Overcoming the European Progress Illusion*, European Policy Centre commentary, 26/04/2024

on a common defence when the construction of Europe is founded on a project of peace and reconciliation?

While an institutional reform as ambitious as that which led to the Lisbon Treaty does not seem conceivable in the short term, the solution would be for an avantgarde to take the lead, as in the case of the euro zone.³ Differentiation, provided it is not exclusive, would therefore be less of a risk than an opportunity.

Of course, there are provisions in the Treaties that allow and organize enhanced cooperation within certain limits. But more radical scenarios, involving the (possibly temporary) adoption of cooperation frameworks outside the European Union could be envisaged, as was the case at the time of the Schengen Agreement and Convention, without excluding recourse to the know-how of the Institutions.

As far as enlargement is concerned, and in the wake of the Commission’s communication of March 2024,⁴ consideration is being given to the possibility of gradual integration, possibly involving the creation of an associated state status.⁵ Furthermore, some persist in seeing the European Political Cooperation, the shape of which is still uncertain, as an area for consultation that would make it possible to develop projects involving members and non-members of the European Union on a variable basis.

This opens up a period of uncertainty that will extend well beyond 2025. European integration has, since its beginnings and throughout its history, offered incomparable protection to the states that committed themselves to it. Its model has adapted to changing circumstances, not necessarily in crisis mode, and to serve new common objectives. There is nothing to suggest that this dynamic has been definitively halted, but blissful optimism is probably no longer the order of the day, if it

3. F.Zuleeg, A.Möller, J.A.Emmanouilidis, *Confronting the Permacrisis: Time for a Supra-governmental Avantgarde*, EPC Discussion Paper,16/07/2024

4. *Communication on pre-enlargement reforms and policy reviews*, COM (2024) 146 final, 20.3.2024

5. Sébastien Maillard, « Pour un statut d’État associé », *Policy Paper N°305*, Institut Jacques Delors, octobre 2024



ever was. Nor is resignation to the worst: the European Union might be mortal, but it is not yet agonizing.

Changes will be essential: that's for sure. But when and to what extent: these are open questions. And above all, what will the process be: a deliberate choice at the end of an in-depth internal robust debate or a survival reaction in the face of a brutal external shock? The coming year may provide the beginnings of an answer.

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