

THE FUTURE OF NORMATIVE POWER EUROPE: SCENARIOS FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE EU'S INTERNATIONAL IDENTITY

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INTRODUCTION

The rules-based international order (RBIO) is slowly but surely crumbling. The planet is on fire – literally and figuratively. Not only are wildfires and droughts more frequent, but its leaders are increasingly less concerned with putting out said fire and more preoccupied with igniting new sparks. Populist and divisive politics from both right and left are on the rise; international institutions are losing influence; efforts to combat climate change are delayed owing to global leaders pivoting back to fossil fuels (Covataru and Gamkrelidze, 2025); wars have re-emerged in Europe and the Middle East; and potential wars loom over East Asia. The European Union, as a peace project, is not particularly used to thriving in conditions like these, despite spending most of its early years as the European Community during the Cold War. The EU's *modus operandi* is based on constructive dialogue, multilateral problem-solving, strong adherence to international law, and reliance on international institutions. Such a framework is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain, as the biggest players on the board more often decide that none of the aforementioned aspects are important and instead favour transactionalism and interest-driven power politics. Can dialogue persuade someone who holds little regard for norms and understands only the language of coercion? As such, one may assume that the European Union, if it is to remain relevant in the emerging multipolar world, needs to adapt. Be it as it may, political scientists and

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scholars, despite lacking the vast amounts of data specialists from STEM fields possess, have the ability to observe and find patterns, and are able to make cautious predictions with a relative degree of certainty. As such, this article aims to make several predictions and outline scenarios in order to answer the question: what change will the European Union undergo if it is to survive the crumbling RBIO? How will its international identity change? Upon evaluation, it could be argued that the paths the EU could take are: one where the EU adapts and mixes normative power with hard power elements; one where it is unable to evolve and implodes; and one where the survival of the EU is ensured through a coalition of willing states.

WHY THE QUESTION OF EU'S FUTURE IS IMPORTANT

It is important to explain why the future of the European Union should be analysed in this way at all. Certainly, one could pick any polity and hypothesise its future paths, but the case of the EU is different. As a hybrid polity and a *sui generis* organisation, the European Union has been observed to wield a specific type of power, one with 'the ability to define what passes for "normal" in world politics' (Manners, 2002, p. 236). Briefly put, this type of influence has been described by Ian Manners as normative power – power which 'shapes the conceptions of "normal"' (Manners, 2002, p. 240). Actors relying on normative power are characterised by their pursuit of solidifying international institutions without breaching existing legal and political norms; their 'ability to perpetuate, shape and implement international law and political norms in its relations with third parties' (Skolimowska, 2015, p. 37) is what makes actors relying on normative power distinct from others. That being said, not only does the European Union behave exactly as described, but even its foundations lie in norms; its conception is a result of, among other things, several state actors finding common ground through shared values and norms, such as peace or democracy (European Union, n.d.; Manners, 2006, p. 71). These norms are even codified in its treaties: Article 1a or 2.1 in the Treaty of Lisbon, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, and numerous other legal acts which draw from shared European norms. This foundation translates into effective policy. The continuing enlargement of the European Union is perhaps the best testament to that, as with successive enlargements it went from six members to twenty-seven, even managing to integrate the post-Soviet sphere. It highlights its considerable success in spreading norms outside its borders via constructive engagement. But these norms also spread passively. Brazil and Japan, for instance, adopted their own versions of data protection laws thanks to the EU's role in advancing privacy laws (OneTrust DataGuidance, n.d., p. 5); the former even adopted a version that is a virtual 'legal transplant' of the General Data Protection Regulation (Sombra,

2020, p. 116). Beyond that, some international organisations, like the African Union, are imitating the EU in their institutional make-up (Manners, 2006, pp. 76–77). The African Union specifically claimed that it ‘should not re-invent the wheel’ (p. 77). Clearly, the EU is unique, as the influence it has over its surroundings is something that has not occurred in global politics before; this is why it warrants deeper analysis of its future.

With this in mind, it is not difficult to doubt the effectiveness of ‘Normative Power Europe’ if one observes contemporary events. The US–China trade war, in which the EU’s own allies are trying to pressure it to take part (Slattery and Gray, 2025); the Russo-Ukrainian War; the Israel–Hamas conflict; Russian hybrid warfare (Chivvis, 2017, p. 1); and the weaponisation of migration by some countries (Miholjcic, 2022, p. 3), to name a few – these factors all contribute to the fall of the rules-based international order (RBIO) from which the EU derives its legitimacy (Manners, 2009, p. 2). Democracy, multilateral problem-solving, and international institutions are becoming increasingly less important. The European Union does not always have an answer to those problems; what is worse, it already struggles with many of them. Regarding migration, Member States frequently engage in illegal pushbacks (11.11.11 *et al.*, 2024, pp. 1, 11 and 15). It also struggles to apply its norms uniformly and consistently, harming its cohesion and geopolitical agency. Allowing a rogue Hungary to block aid to Ukraine through its exploitation of the unanimity rule in the Council of the EU, or selectively fast-tracking the membership of certain countries like Ukraine or Moldova while leaving the Western Balkans ‘on the shelf’ indefinitely, illustrates this issue. Even though the EU at times already breaks its own norms when it is not necessary, as in the case of pushbacks, in other cases resolving problems like the aforementioned ones is impossible without resorting to a certain degree of norm-breaking. Some believe Hungary deserves to have its membership frozen, but can the EU afford an internal crisis during such perilous times? Ukraine and Moldova’s fast-tracking is an understandable and necessary political decision in the context of an emboldened Russia, but does it not expose the political (rather than the claimed technocratic and unbiased) and even hypocritical nature of enlargement policies when the Western Balkans are left behind? Clearly, there needs to be change in the European Union; other instruments of power need to be adopted if the EU is not to be crushed both from outside and inside by challenges it cannot face legitimately, or at all. Its international identity must evolve.

THE FUTURE OF THE EU

Having said that, one can inquire as to how the EU will react to the changing political landscape; in other words, how it will assess whether the current model of politics is

feasible in an increasingly unstable, polarised world. In order to answer this question, certain scenarios outlining a potential path the European Union could take can be drawn up. It is important to underline that these scenarios assume that the decline of the RBIO will not stop in the future. During the course of research, several scenarios appeared, but some of them are unlikely enough to be dismissed as subjects of analysis. For example, the upholding of the *status quo* and uninterrupted reliance on normative power, or abandoning normative power altogether and transforming into a traditional geopolitical actor, is entirely unfeasible. The former is highly unlikely, as even the few selected challenges are already shaking the EU's normative foundation by forcing or pushing the EU into compromising its values and norms. The Union would surely collapse were it not to change its mode of operation. The latter path would also be virtually impossible, as there is no scenario in which the EU abandons its normative foundation and relies on traditional forms of power. The changes required to make this a reality are inherently contradictory; given the political landscape, it would require, at the highest political level, a fusion of two opposing political forces: the Eurosceptic one, in order to adopt a purely geopolitical outlook; and the traditional pro-EU elites, who are the driving force behind the integration of the Union, to preserve and enhance the power of such an EU at a global level. It would also mean the abandonment of more than seventy years of building a normative foundation; it would be immensely challenging to abandon it, and the attempt itself would most likely significantly weaken the EU, further underlining the contradiction. As such, three distinct scenarios have emerged as the most feasible: the Hybrid Model, the Zombie European Union, and the Coalition of the Willing.

THE HYBRID MODEL

The Hybrid Model assumes that the European Union will retain its normative power by preserving its normative elements and tools, but will adopt hard-power elements out of necessity. Strict adherence to core values of the EU, such as democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, is retained, and the formulation of policy continues to be informed by these principles. Aspects such as enlargement based on conditionality, and strong advocacy of multilateralism and international cooperation as means of solving problems, are still at the core of EU actions whenever applicable. At the same time, the EU in this scenario fully commits to boosting defence capabilities – industry, enhanced military cooperation, or even the creation of a European army; becomes more flexible on trade norms, not being afraid to utilise protectionism to defend its interests and to reduce dependence on third countries for critical resources; and its foreign policy becomes significantly more effective and unified, overcoming deadlocks created by bad-faith actors within.

Such a model would require several crucial changes. Firstly, Qualified Majority Voting in the Council on matters of foreign, defence, and security policy would have to be introduced, replacing the old unanimity rule. If the EU is to act more effectively in the face of crises, it cannot afford to be blocked by singular rogue actors.¹ This also means that procedures like Article 7 would have to be used more decisively; merely ignoring the rogue actor is not enough, as allowing Member States that violate the EU's norms to participate in the foreign policy formulation process ultimately puts the normative nature of said foreign policy in question. Thus, legitimacy suffers. Secondly, it would be imperative for a Hybrid Model EU to be energy independent. In an increasingly turbulent world order, strategic dependencies – especially in areas such as energy – are at near-permanent risk of being used as leverage against the EU. Needless to say, agency and legitimacy are severely limited once the energy supplier goes rogue, as in the case of Russia. The hypocritical and tragic situation where normative politics cannot be fulfilled because the whole continent relies on supplies from abroad simply to function would severely handicap the EU. Even today, the process of decoupling from Russia is lengthy and complex. As such, it could be argued that a push for nuclear and renewable sources of energy, such as biomethane (European Commission, 2022) or wind power, for which the EU already has manufacturing capacity (Janipour, n.d.), is imperative for a Hybrid Model scenario to succeed. Lastly, the political aspect should not be underestimated; all aforementioned reforms are generally more in line with pro-European environments, which means such parties would have to remain consistently stronger than Eurosceptic ones, or even increase their advantage.

The effects of such a scenario materialising would be multiple. It would allow the European Union to navigate persistent challenges without necessarily sacrificing its core values and norms. It is entirely feasible for such a European Union, for instance, to practise free trade based on World Trade Organization norms with some countries while utilising defensive, protectionist policies toward actors that attempt to exploit it, such as China with BEVs. Furthermore, it could be argued that the legitimacy of the EU would increase. Not only would it remain faithful to the values that bind it together, as it would be able to address problems more effectively without necessarily resorting to drastic norm violations, but its legitimacy would be enhanced precisely because of this increased ability to address problems. Consider the following example: increased agency in providing aid to Ukraine, resulting from abolishing unanimity in foreign, security, and defence policy, would not only reiterate the EU's commitment to safeguarding democracy, the rule of law, and liberty, but would also significantly help Ukraine deal

¹ It is necessary to acknowledge that a rogue actor is not a Member State that is simply in disagreement with the majority; it is a Member State which deliberately obstructs the political process while being in severe violation of multiple norms and laws themselves. Hungary would fit this description.

with the invader; by extension, it would weaken the EU's primary geopolitical threat – Russia. However, the risk of a more independent EU with increased agency is that it would inevitably add fuel to rising multipolarity; in other words, another player would actually appear on the arena – a player with a set of interests that, in today's geopolitical landscape, are bound to collide with those of others at some point.

Given the changes that would have to be introduced, the probability of this scenario could be estimated at around 40%. Signs of movement in this direction are already visible; the previously mentioned Macron's strategic autonomy (Mašlanka, 2024) and von der Leyen's references to a 'geopolitical commission' as early as 2019 (von der Leyen, 2019) are positive indicators. Following the escalation of the Russo–Ukrainian War in 2022, the topics of accelerating defence cooperation and spending have risen in prominence, as indicated by the announced ReArm Europe Plan (European Commission, 2025) or the European Parliament's white paper on European defence (European Parliament, 2025). Moreover, the matter of streamlining the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) is reported to be viewed positively by some Member States (Gubalova *et al.*, 2022, p. 55), indicating existing support for changes required for a Hybrid Model to be made a reality. There is also momentum from citizens; the public has overwhelmingly supported integration in areas of defence and security for over twenty years (European Commission, 2024, p. 48). If people demand such reforms from the EU, bottom-up political pressure could rise in the future, prompting leaders to take more decisive action. Of course, one can never be too optimistic; while it is true that CFSP and CSDP reforms are viewed positively by some, the lack of certainty about which instruments to use for such reforms is not insignificant, nor is the lack of political will from the leadership, not to mention countries that, put simply, have prioritised different organisations and mechanisms (Gubalova *et al.*, 2022, p. 55).

THE ZOMBIE EUROPEAN UNION

In this scenario, the European Union essentially scales down and significantly diminishes its influence, both domestically and internationally. It is a European Union that, colloquially speaking, stops trying. No coherent foreign policy emerges, and trade policy is handled case by case, with no clear underlying motive or normative foundation. The EU still relies on external actors for security, with occasional outliers among Member States that choose to boost their defence capabilities. There is no significant action taken to prevent democratic backsliding, with Eurosceptic and populist right, as well as left, scoring more victories across the European Union. Internal relations between Member States are reduced mostly to economically driven partnership rather than political,

value-driven cooperation. There is no political end goal in sight, only an economic union. The EU, in this scenario, becomes a glorified trading bloc.

For such a Union to materialise, populist, Eurosceptic political forces would have to secure victories in more and more European elections. The nation-centric narrative characteristic of such movements and parties inherently shifts focus away from international cooperation and supranationalism in favour of national politics; consequently, a divergence of interests is virtually guaranteed, and it is hard to conceive of any meaningful integration attempts beyond efforts to uphold the economic union. What would also be a significant driver of such change would be the decision of mainstream political parties not only to cooperate with Eurosceptic parties, but also to perceive undermining the European Union as the optimal way to conduct politics in their own countries. Further, a continued lack of vision and drive from pro-integration political forces in the EU on issues such as defence or foreign policy consolidation, combined with the inability to reach consensus, could result in a gradual fading of the EU's importance, especially if combined with the previous condition; no action, or rather counter-reaction, to a rising Eurosceptic vision will lead to a politically inept European Union.

Consequences of such a scenario would guarantee a gradual decline of the EU and its eventual fade into obscurity and irrelevance. Of course, there is potential for continued economic prosperity among European states, but there are obstacles; incoherent stances on key issues not only delegitimise the EU as a political entity, but even as an economic bloc. The trustworthiness and credibility of an actor that is unable to enforce norms in its own territory and does not speak with one voice are severely undermined. The survival of the EU would also be at stake. Should the normative link be lost, and not accounting for geopolitical circumstances, there would be little incentive to continue cooperating extensively except in the economic sphere. Should that incentive be lost – and it is feasible in a would-be EU of politically incompatible members – the EU would likely cease to exist at some point. In other words, there is a significant risk of collapse in this scenario.

Whether it is probable or not depends on a few variables. Firstly, whether Eurosceptic forces such as *Alternative für Deutschland* or *Rassemblement National* continue gaining support from the public. Recent results in, for example, the German parliamentary elections (*Politico*, 2025a), the Dutch parliamentary elections in 2023 (*Politico*, 2025b), and the second round of the Polish 2025 presidential elections (*Politico*, 2025c) do not suggest a retreat of populist movements; on the contrary, they seem to be getting stronger. Political will to, for example, reform treaties to push for integration is also not particularly high among Member States (Gubalova *et al.*, 2022, p. 51). These factors significantly increase the probability of this outcome. Yet, as mentioned in the Hybrid Model scenario, signs of a desire to

change and integrate are present. It could even be argued that citizens' attachment to the European Union is still high; they trust EU institutions more than their national ones, the general image seems more positive or neutral than negative, and they feel optimistic about the EU's future (European Commission, 2024, pp. 11, 15 and 17), which means it will not be easy to push the EU into obscurity. Moreover, the complete victory of Eurosceptic parties across, for example, up to 8–10 Member States is not especially likely; it is far more probable that it would occur in three states at most. Partisan cooperation with Eurosceptics is also unlikely; one such coalition government recently collapsed in the Netherlands (Meijer and van den Berg, 2025). As such, the probability of the Zombie Scenario could be estimated at around 20%.

COALITION OF THE WILLING

In the Coalition of the Willing scenario, a few motivated Member States decide to cooperate closely on matters related to common foreign policy, defence, and security, creating structures parallel to the European Union. It would not be a multi-speed Europe *per se*, as the scope of cooperation would be significantly narrower, but the logic behind such action would be similar. If the Hybrid Model is a scenario where the EU combines normative and geopolitical identities, and the Zombie EU is one where it fails to do so and collapses inwards, then this scenario is one in which the former fails, but not severely enough for the latter to play out. In other words, in a situation where hard-power building proves too difficult for any reason – ranging from simple constraints to fears of centralisation or outright opposition to enhanced cooperation – it provides European states, and by extension the EU, with tools to tackle at least part of their problems.

Restarting the Franco-German engine would be of paramount importance to this scenario's success; it is beyond doubt that France's atomic arsenal combined with Germany's financial resources and potential is absolutely essential. Arguably, Poland's and Italy's participation would also help significantly. Poland, as a country that has grown in importance since the Russo-Ukrainian War owing to its strategic position on the eastern flank and its sizeable army, is a crucial asset for such a coalition; Italy's significance, meanwhile, lies in its influence in the Mediterranean Sea. The United Kingdom, if convinced, would also be a valuable asset due to its economic, naval, and atomic capabilities, but given its geopolitical shifts following Brexit, one can argue it is valuable but not absolutely necessary. The issue of framing and narrative is also crucial here; if such structures were to be established, they cannot function as an exclusive club, as this would threaten the Union's cohesion. Other states need to be aware that, should they express interest, they are welcome to participate.

The Coalition of the Willing's success would mean the survival of the EU in an environment where some states are unwilling to integrate further. It should be stressed, however, that such a coalition would not be able to solve all of the EU's problems. It would, however, bring sufficient results to address one key problem, namely the lack of cohesion and agency in geopolitical issues, giving the EU a slight boost to its legitimacy. It would not resolve the core issue of what the EU's international identity is or should be, but it would be sufficient to keep it from collapsing under pressure.

It could be argued that this scenario is not unlikely, as precedent for such structures to emerge already exists. For instance, it happened with the European Stability Mechanism, where eurozone countries, feeling the need for reform following the European sovereign debt crisis, decided to found a new treaty parallel to the structures of the EU; changes to existing treaties, which would have been required had these reforms been conducted internally, were considered too difficult following past struggles with treaty ratification. In essence, a problem common to some states was identified and resolved swiftly with a completely new treaty. Another example would be the Schengen Agreement, which later evolved into the Schengen Area; at first, it was a treaty functioning outside the European Economic Community and later the European Union, only subsequently being incorporated into EU law. When it comes to the political impetus needed, Friedrich Merz's chancellorship could be an opportunity, as already in his first days in power he visited the French president Emmanuel Macron and declared a plan to establish a Franco-German defence and security council, deepening defence cooperation (Ruitenbergh, 2025; Khatsenkova, 2025). This alone signifies potential vitality in the Franco-German partnership; the amendment of the 'debt brake' in Germany to allow borrowing for defence spending (Zespół Niemiec i Europy Wschodniej OSW, 2025) is also a very positive signal. The question of Polish involvement is uncertain; it needs to be underlined that Poland has always seen the United States as a key ally and often prioritised relations with them above pursuing EU integration. Although the current government is EU-aligned, the recent victory of Karol Nawrocki in the 2025 presidential elections, along with the continuing strength of the Law and Justice party, suggests that Polish involvement is not fully certain, even after Donald Trump's attempts to reorient the US geopolitically away from Europe to Asia. Italy appears equally ambiguous; despite a rather Eurosceptic government under Giorgia Meloni, it has remained fully aligned on, for example, the issue of Ukraine. The possibility of a transactional arrangement in the form of, e.g. joining and supporting such a coalition in exchange for help with migration issues cannot be ruled out. Nevertheless, it is difficult to predict. As such, the probability of this scenario could be estimated at 40%, similarly to the Hybrid Model.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the European Union, upon analysis, is most likely to take one of three outlined paths. The first is the Hybrid Model, in which the EU evolves, retains its normative power, but adopts elements of hard power in order to better answer contemporary challenges. Despite requiring extensive changes, such as the adoption of Qualified Majority Voting in the Council or the push for complete energy independence, it is highly likely to unfold due to European leaders' readily apparent willingness to consider these prerequisites. The second, the Zombie European Union scenario, suggests that, through the rise of Eurosceptic forces and lack of political will from pro-EU politicians, the EU will implode and fade into obscurity. In spite of the rising popularity of anti-EU parties, it is only 20% likely due to citizens playing a key role thanks to their continued support and faith in the Union; the low likelihood of a complete Eurosceptic takeover; and the low probability of pro-EU–Eurosceptic partisan cooperation. The final scenario, the Coalition of the Willing, describes a future where a few motivated Member States establish structures parallel to the European Union and band together to tackle issues of defence. It would not solve all problems the EU faces, but it would solve enough for the EU to survive in a turbulent world. Existing precedent in, for example, the European Stability Mechanism or the Schengen Area existing outside EU law at their conception makes this scenario 40% likely to play out. Political science may not be physics or chemistry capable of making highly accurate predictions about future events; we simply lack the data to do so. Yet, in spite of imperfect datasets, it is incredibly important to think and to hypothesise. Arguably, the European Union represents not only a significant shift in how politics is conducted, but perhaps even a civilisational leap in how human beings attempt to organise public life. If the slow but approaching fall of the RBIO is ignored by leaders and citizens alike, the Union could fade into obscurity as quickly as it was built. And the measure of a good leader is to make perfect decisions based on imperfect information; perhaps the best course of action is to help them make that information a little less imperfect.

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THE FUTURE OF NORMATIVE POWER EUROPE: SCENARIOS FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE EU'S INTERNATIONAL IDENTITY

Abstract

The European Union, described by numerous scholars as a normative power, has traditionally relied on multilateral dialogue and problem-solving, as well as on strengthening and promoting international law and institutions. It faces an existential threat today, as the rules-based international order is crumbling; its traditional reliance on normative power is insufficient in the face of both internal and external challenges such as migration, wars, populism, and opportunistic politics, which threaten its legitimacy, international agency, and even existence. As such, its international identity necessarily needs to evolve. This article possible trajectories of such evolution. Three scenarios for the future of the European Union are outlined and thoroughly analysed, describing prerequisites and consequences of their unfolding: the Hybrid Model, in which the EU evolves, retains its normative power, but adopts elements of hard power; the Zombie European Union scenario, which suggests that, through the rise of Eurosceptic forces and the lack of political will among pro-EU politicians, the EU will implode and fade into obscurity; and the Coalition of the Willing, which describes a future where a few motivated Member States establish structures parallel to the European Union and band together to tackle defence issues.

Keywords: European Union, normative power, scenario, rules-based international order

PRZYSZŁOŚĆ EUROPY JAKO POTĘGI NORMATYWNEJ: SCENARIUSZE TRANSFORMACJI TOŻSAMOŚCI MIĘDZYNARODOWEJ UNII EUROPEJSKIEJ

Streszczenie

Unia Europejska, definiowana przez wielu badaczy jako potęga normatywna, w zakresie stosunków międzynarodowych skupiała się multilateralizmie i wzmacnianiu prawa oraz instytucji międzynarodowych. Ponieważ porządek międzynarodowy oparty na zasadach ulega rozpadowi tworzy jej skupienie na oddziaływaniu za pomocą norm tworzy wyzwanie, które może przerodzić się w kryzys i charakterze egzystencjalnym. Zjawiska takich jak imigracje, wojny, populizm czy oportunizm polityczny, dziś coraz powszechniejsze, zagrażają jej legitymizacji, sprawczości, a być może nawet kwestionują sens jej dalszego istnienia. Konieczna zatem jest adaptacja i świadoma ewolucja tożsamości międzynarodowej Unii Europejskiej. Niniejszy artykuł koncentruje się na jej możliwych trajektoriach. Nakreślono i szczegółowo przeanalizowano trzy scenariusze dla przyszłości Unii Europejskiej, opisując przesłanki oraz konsekwencje ich realizacji. Pierwszy scenariusz to Model Hybrydowy, w którym UE ewoluuje, zachowując swoją potęgę normatywną, ale przyjmuje elementy siły twardej. Drugi scenariusz to Unia Europejska Zombie, w którym UE imploduje przez wzrost sił Eurosceptycznych i brak woli politycznej polityków proeuropejskich. W trzecim scenariuszu opisana jest Koalicja Chętnych, gdzie nieliczna grupa państw członkowskich ustanawia struktury równoległe do Unii Europejskiej i jednoczy się, aby sprostać wyzwaniom w zakresie obronności.

Słowa kluczowe: Unia Europejska, potęga normatywna, scenariusze, porządek międzynarodowy oparty na zasadach