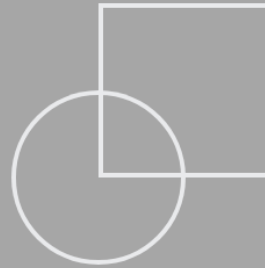


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LA LIGNE FINE

Institut



European Union: The end of the integrationist consensus. Why is integration no longer a sufficient goal?

Series: Thinking Europe after the integrationist consensus

Thematic Cluster: RIDS – International Relations, Defence and Security

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The European Union is not going through a phase of uniform rejection of its existence. The available opinion polls even invite us to reject such a simple reading. In the spring of 2026, 72% of Europeans believed that their country had benefited from its membership of the Union, 60% said they were optimistic about its future and 51% said they trusted it. At the same time, 81% supported a common security and defence policy between Member States, one of the highest levels ever recorded on this issue¹. A few months later, a European Parliament survey still indicated that 74% of respondents considered their country's membership of the Union to be beneficial, while 68% wanted the EU to play a more important role in protecting citizens against global crises and security risks in the future, and 73% felt that it needed to have more means to face global challenges².

These data make it difficult to assimilate the current period with a process of general disintegration. On the other hand, they reveal a more subtle evolution: adherence to the European project and support for the deepening of integration are no longer necessarily the same. A citizen or a government may want a stronger Union in defence, energy or industry, while rejecting the idea that every European problem automatically calls for a new institutional centralisation. Displacement is essential. For several decades, integration has benefited from a favourable political presumption: its deepening could be presented as the normal direction of the European project, even when the states diverged on its ultimate destination. The contemporary transformation lies in the fact that this presumption is weakening. Each new commonality must better demonstrate what it actually produces in terms of protection, prosperity, autonomy or power. It is precisely this change that the Strategic Note of La Ligne Fine - Institut identifies as one of the foundations of post-Europeanism: integration does not disappear, but it gradually ceases to be a sufficient political goal in itself.

¹ European Commission, 2026, *Standard Eurobarometer* 105 – Spring 2026, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3613?etrans=fr>

² European Parliament, 2026, *European Survey: High expectations of the EU in an uncertain world*, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/fr/press-room/20260629IPR46203/enquete-europeenne-de-grandes-attentes-envers-l-ue-dans-un-monde-incertain>



1. From permissive consensus to binding dissensus

The literature on European integration provides a particularly useful framework for understanding this transformation. Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks have proposed, in their postfunctionalist theory, the now classic distinction between *permissive consensus* and *constraining dissensus*. The first refers to a period during which integration could progress with a relatively limited involvement of public opinion in European institutional arbitrations; the second describes a configuration in which European issues are more politicised, parties take more differentiated positions and citizens' preferences, particularly when they affect identities and the distribution of resources, become decisive for choices concerning the distribution of competences between the national and European levels³.

It would, however, be excessive to reconstruct the first decades of the Community as a period of homogeneous adherence to a federal project. The European Defence Community failed in 1954, Charles de Gaulle defended a fundamentally intergovernmental conception of Europe in the 1960s, and the Luxembourg compromise illustrated very early on the limits that states could impose on supranational dynamics. The permissive consensus therefore did not mean an agreement on the completion of European integration. Rather, it referred to a configuration in which divergences on the purpose could be contained by a general progression of cooperation. Governments could support the common market, then the internal market, the single currency or enlargement for different reasons without having to definitively decide on the question of the point of arrival. This partially indeterminate nature of European integration has long been one of its strengths: it allowed different institutional conceptions to participate in the same movement.

The transformation begins when integration itself becomes an electoral and referendum issue. The Maastricht Treaty is a decisive sequence in this respect. By officially creating the European Union, organising the Economic and Monetary Union and deepening several common policies, it brings European integration closer to areas directly linked to sovereignty and distribution. The French referendum of 1992, which was narrowly won, already shows that institutional deepening can no longer be totally separated from national political conflict. The French and Dutch referendums of 2005 on the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe make this development even more visible. Their interpretation must remain cautious: the negative electorates combined different economic, social, partisan and institutional motivations. They nevertheless point out that a deepening presented as a rationalisation of the European architecture could now itself become the central object of the contestation.

The crises of the 2010s then accentuated this shift. The eurozone crisis transformed European economic governance into a conflict over solidarity, budgetary discipline and the responsibility of states. The migration crisis of 2015 made the border, asylum and the distribution of responsibilities objects of confrontation between profoundly different national conceptions. Finally, Brexit carried the logic to the point of belonging itself: the British campaign did not only contest a particular policy but the level at which political decisions should be taken. These episodes do not show that Europeans collectively reject the Union. They show that European choices have entered the sphere of ordinary democratic conflict. An organisation that had become important enough to intervene in the currency, borders, economic standards or security policies could not remain outside political competition for the long term.

It is therefore preferable to speak less of a disappearance of permissive consensus than of a change in the nature of European consent. Integration no longer enjoys the same autonomy

³ Hooghe, L., & Marks, G., 2009, "A Postfunctionalist Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus", *British Journal of Political Science*, 39(1), 1-23, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123408000409>



with regard to public debate; it must be defended, justified and sometimes limited. This transition from implicit to conditional consent is one of the main features of the current period.

2. The European purpose has become an object of political conflict

The contemporary politicisation of Europe is no longer just about the policies implemented by the Union. It is increasingly about the form that the Union should take. It is this development that distinguishes a simple sectoral disagreement from a conflict over the end. In a stabilised political community, it is possible to profoundly disagree on budgetary or social choices without calling into question the nature of the political order itself. In the European Union, a growing number of conflicts relate precisely to the location of competences, the extent of the power of the common institutions, the use of qualified majority voting or the possibility of lasting differentiated integration.

The European elections of 2024 illustrate this plurality. During the founding session, the European Conservatives and Reformists had 78 seats, the Patriots for Europe 84 and the Europe of Sovereign Nations 25, alongside groups supporting, in very different ways, further integration. These parties, which are critical of certain aspects of the functioning of the Union, do not constitute a homogeneous bloc: they diverge on the currency, foreign policy, NATO, enlargement, the primacy of European law and the extent of common competences⁴. Their political weight confirms however that the European institutional question has become an ordinary dimension of political competition.

This development makes the simple opposition between "pro-European" and "anti-European" actors less and less effective. A government can defend the internal market and the common commercial policy while refusing an extension of majority voting in foreign policy. It may want more industrial pooling in defence while maintaining a high degree of autonomy in fiscal matters. Conversely, a party in favour of economic integration may refuse budgetary union or increased social harmonisation. European preferences are becoming sectoral, and this sectorisation weakens the relevance of a single axis going from "less" to "more" Europe.

The White Paper on the Future of Europe presented by the European Commission in 2017 is an important indication of this transformation. Instead of affirming a single trajectory, the Commission presented five possible scenarios: continuing on the same path, focusing on the single market, allowing those who wish to do so to do more together, doing less but more effectively, or doing much more together. The "those who want more do more" scenario explicitly envisaged groups of states deepening their cooperation in certain sectors without waiting for all members⁵. The scope of this document should not be overinterpreted: it was a forward-looking exercise and not a doctrinal revision of the treaties. It nevertheless shows that even the institution historically associated with the deepening of the Community recognised that several trajectories could now be discussed openly.

The conflict over purpose thus becomes distinct from the conflict over membership. Contemporary opinion data confirms this: support for the Union remains high while preferences on how it should act remain variable. In spring 2026, 74% of Europeans surveyed by the Parliament considered that their country's membership of the Union was beneficial, while 68% wanted to strengthen its protective role and 73% wanted to increase the means at its disposal

⁴ European Parliament, 2024, *Results of the European elections 2024-2029*, <https://results.elections.europa.eu/fr/resultats-des-elections/2024-2029/>

⁵ European Commission, 2017, *White Paper on the Future of Europe*, https://commission.europa.eu/publications/white-paper-future-europe_fr



to respond to global challenges⁶. These results indicate an expectation of action, not an explicit mandate for a specific constitutional form. Support for a more capable Europe does not automatically mean support for a uniformly more integrated Europe.

3. Integration remains deep, but it is no longer a sufficient measure of European progress

One of the possible mistakes would be to draw from this politicisation the idea that European integration has stopped advancing. The reality is more complex. Since the financial crisis, the Union has created new stabilisation mechanisms, deepened the banking union, developed common instruments in the field of health and energy, created NextGenerationEU after the pandemic and strengthened its industrial and defence policies. The European integration therefore remains cumulative in several areas. The Treaty on European Union itself continues to affirm that it marks "a new stage in the process of creating an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe".⁷

The question is therefore not whether integration still exists, but whether its extension is still a sufficient indicator of European success. On this point, the institutional language is clearly evolving. The European Council's Strategic Agenda 2024-2029 is organised around three priorities: a free and democratic Europe, a strong and secure Europe and a prosperous and competitive Europe. It emphasises defence preparedness and capabilities, resilience, security, competitiveness, technological and industrial sovereignty, collective investment and the reduction of certain strategic dependencies. The document also provides for enlargement to progress in parallel with the internal reforms necessary for the functioning of the Union⁸.

This lexical evolution is significant because it shifts the justification for European action. A common policy is less and less presented as desirable because it would naturally prolong the construction of the Union; it is more justified by the capacity it allows to produce. Defence must be strengthened because Europeans must be able to protect their territory and contribute more to their security; industrial policies must be coordinated because fragmentation reduces investment and production capacity; energy must be thought of on a European scale when external dependence threatens security of supply. Integration remains one of the instruments available, but it is increasingly related to a functional purpose.

In autumn 2025, 83% of Europeans believed that the Union should strengthen its economic independence and diversify its trade relations, while 79% supported a common security and defence policy⁹. In the spring of 2026, 81% supported this common security and defence policy, and 73% saw the Union as an area of stability in a troubled world¹⁰. The demand for Europe is therefore frequently formulated as a demand for protection, security or capability, rather than as an abstract institutional preference.

This shift changes the very meaning of European ambition. A new competence should no longer be considered as progress because it is exercised at Union level, but because it makes it possible to obtain a result that the separate action of the States would produce less effectively. This requirement also applies in the other direction: retaining a competence at

⁶ European Parliament, 2026, *European Survey: High expectations of the EU in an uncertain world*, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/fr/press-room/20260629IPR46203/enquete-europeenne-de-grandes-attentes-envers-l-ue-dans-un-monde-incertain>

⁷ European Union, 2016, *Treaty on European Union, Article 1*, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/treaty/teu_2016/art_1/oj/eng

⁸ European Council, 2024, *Strategic Agenda 2024-2029*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/fr/european-council/strategic-agenda-2024-2029/>

⁹ European Commission, 2025, *Standard Eurobarometer* 104 – Autumn 2025, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3378>

¹⁰ European Commission, 2026, *Standard Eurobarometer* 105 – Spring 2026, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3613?etrans=fr>



national level does not in itself constitute a guarantee of sovereignty if the State no longer has the material or economic means necessary to exercise it effectively. The European question is thus tending to move from a debate on the formal location of competences to a debate on the real capacity produced by each level of action.



4. The European dissensus is not a general crisis of legitimacy

However, this development must be distinguished from a general crisis of confidence in the Union. Recent data show a more favourable situation than the public debate sometimes suggests. In spring 2026, 51% of Europeans said they trusted the Union, 57% said they were satisfied with the functioning of democracy in the Union and 60% said they were optimistic about its future¹¹. In July 2026, the European Parliament's Eurobarometer recorded 74% of respondents considering membership to be beneficial, the highest level observed for this issue since its introduction in 1983, on par with 2025¹².

These results suggest that three levels of legitimacy can be distinguished. The first concerns the existence of the Union itself, which enjoys high support. The second concerns European intervention in a given area, and can vary greatly depending on the policy. The third concerns the Union's general institutional trajectory: federalisation, intergovernmental strengthening, maintenance of the current system or increased differentiation. It is above all at this third level that the lack of consensus becomes structural.

This distinction helps to understand why a stronger demand for a Europe cannot be equated with automatic support for uniform integration. When 68% of Europeans want the Union to play a greater role in protecting them from crises, or when 90% want Member States to act more together in the face of contemporary challenges, they are expressing an expectation of results and unity, but they are not answering the institutional question of whether these objectives should be achieved through federalisation, enhanced cooperation or coordination between governments¹³.

The contemporary challenge therefore lies less in the collapse of European legitimacy than in the fragmentation of preferences on the form that joint action should take. The Union can benefit from a strong functional legitimacy in one area without having an equivalent mandate to transform its entire political architecture. This distinction is fundamental to avoid inferring wrongly from the popularity of a common policy the existence of a consensus on a federal purpose.

¹¹ European Commission, 2026, *Standard Eurobarometer* 105 – Spring 2026, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3613?etans=fr>

¹² European Parliament, 2026, *European Survey: High expectations of the EU in an uncertain world*, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/fr/press-room/20260629IPR46203/enquete-europeenne-de-grandes-attentes-envers-l-ue-dans-un-monde-incertain>

¹³ European Parliament, 2026, *European Survey: High expectations of the EU in an uncertain world*, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/fr/press-room/20260629IPR46203/enquete-europeenne-de-grandes-attentes-envers-l-ue-dans-un-monde-incertain>



5. From cumulative integration to conditional integration

The literature on differentiated integration confirms that the Union has long since developed mechanisms for reconciling unity and diversity. Schimmelfennig and Winzen define differentiation as a variation in the application of Union rules between Member States and distinguish between several forms: temporary "multi-speed" integration, in which some states later join a common policy; "multi-tier" integration, which creates permanently distinct levels of integration; and "multi-menu" integration, in which the composition of participants varies over a long period of time depending on the policy¹⁴¹⁵.

Their analysis is particularly useful because it prevents any differentiation from being considered as evidence of disintegration. The authors show that differentiation has historically facilitated integration by allowing an increasingly heterogeneous Union to continue to move forward, even if it can also complicate solidarity and feed the risk of belonging at several levels¹⁶. This conclusion is important: differentiated integration does not automatically herald the end of community dynamics.

However, it reveals a deeper question. As long as differences in participation are thought of as temporary, they remain compatible with a paradigm of general convergence. Political change becomes more substantial when certain differences are considered sustainable and legitimate. The question is then no longer how to bring all states to the same degree of integration, but how to organize a system in which several degrees can coexist without calling into question the unity of the common core.

The transition from cumulative to conditional integration can be summed up by three requirements. First, any new pooling must respond to an identifiable deficit: insufficient scale, external vulnerability, fragmentation or cross-border externality. Second, it must produce a greater capacity than would be obtained by states individually. Third, it must have a sufficient basis of legitimacy, i.e. mechanisms of control and accountability corresponding to the intensity of the power exercised. This logic is not anti-integrationist; it is more demanding on the reasons for integration.

¹⁴ Schimmelfennig, F., & Winzen, T., 2020, *Ever Looser Union? Differentiated European Integration*, Oxford University Press, <https://academic.oup.com/book/36955>

¹⁵ Schimmelfennig, F., & Winzen, T., 2020, "Concepts: Differentiated Integration and Its Modes", <https://academic.oup.com/book/36955/chapter-abstract/322248900>

¹⁶ Schimmelfennig, F., & Winzen, T., 2020, "Introduction", in *Ever Looser Union?*, <https://academic.oup.com/book/36955/chapter-abstract/322248412>



6. The European language itself is moving towards the ability

The evolution of institutional terminology is a further indication of this transformation. The major European strategic documents now regularly mobilise notions such as "sovereignty", "resilience", "economic security", "independence", "critical technologies", "defence capability" and "competitiveness". The Strategic Agenda 2024-2029 thus calls for a more sovereign Europe that is better equipped to face future challenges, while insisting on industrial and technological power, collective investment and military readiness¹⁷.

This evolution is not a simple semantic change. It reflects a shift in the very purpose of European policy. The European Community was first designed to organise interdependencies between Europeans; contemporary Europe must increasingly determine how to transform these interdependencies into means of action in the face of a more conflictual external environment. Technological competition, the vulnerability of supply chains, the war in Ukraine, investment needs and the question of defence force the problem to be posed in terms of resources, autonomy and decision-making capacity.

From this perspective, integration gradually ceases to be a sufficient criterion for success. It becomes one of the possible means of obtaining a capability. In some sectors, this logic can lead to more Europe: defence, critical technologies, energy or capital markets may require much more ambitious pooling. In others, it may justify the maintenance of large national margins if standardisation does not produce sufficient gains or if the political cost exceeds the functional advantage. The shift is therefore less quantitative than methodological: it forces us to start from the problem to be solved rather than from the supposedly preferable institutional level.

It is at this precise point that the hypothesis of post-Europeanism acquires its scope. It does not describe an exit from integration, but a modification of the principle that justifies it. Integration is no longer automatically presumed to be desirable because it deepens the construction of Europe; it must demonstrate that it improves the capacity of Europeans to act.

7. The end of the integrationist consensus must be understood as the exhaustion of a presumption, not as the end of integration

It would therefore be too categorical to assert that the integrationist consensus has disappeared in the sense that Europeans no longer wish to deepen any common policy. Opinion data show precisely the opposite in several areas. Successive crises have also led to the creation of new common instruments, and the treaties continue to place European integration in a logic of "ever closer" union. The hypothesis of a general end to integration does not stand up to empirical examination.

What seems to be more exhausted is the presumption that institutional deepening is, in itself, the normal measure of European progress. Three developments are converging in this direction: the first is politicisation: any extension of common competences becomes more likely to be challenged electorally. The second is the permanence of a strong heterogeneity between Member States, which enlargement may further accentuate. The third is the shift in political

¹⁷ European Council, 2024, *Strategic Agenda 2024-2029*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/fr/european-council/strategic-agenda-2024-2029/>



language towards protection, sovereignty, competitiveness and capabilities. Integration remains possible, but it must be more useful.

This distinction also makes it possible not to confuse post-Europeanism with sovereignism. A classical sovereignist logic could conclude from the politicisation and permanence of states that a restitution of competences to the national level is the natural response. The approach developed here leads to a different conclusion: the national level remains central to legitimacy, but it is not always sufficient for capacity. A post-Europeanist policy can therefore support a considerable deepening when the common level produces a higher effective sovereignty.

The question is no longer whether Europe should automatically move forward or backward. It is a question of determining, policy by policy, what degree of integration produces the best balance between capacity, autonomy and legitimacy.

Conclusion: A Europe that must now justify integration by what it allows to do

The end of the integrationist consensus therefore corresponds neither to the disappearance of popular support for the Union, nor to a generalised crisis of legitimacy, nor to the victory of a homogeneous sovereignism. It designates a more precise change: the deepening of integration no longer benefits from the same political presumption as before. Membership of the Union remains widely supported, but the question of its future organisation has become much more open.

The consequence is important. Integration must now be justified by its contribution to an identifiable capacity. This applies to areas in which more ambitious joint action appears necessary, as well as to those in which national preferences or small gains in scale justify maintaining substantial autonomy. The European debate can no longer be satisfied with a single criterion based on the quantity of competences transferred.

This shift does not necessarily weaken the Union. On the contrary, it can make it more demanding about its priorities and more selective about the areas in which it chooses to deepen its action. It simply forces us to abandon the idea that a policy becomes politically superior simply because it is more integrated.

The paradigm shift can be summed up by a simple question: **not only how far to integrate, but to be able to do what?** It is on the basis of this question that the European trajectory can now be assessed.

