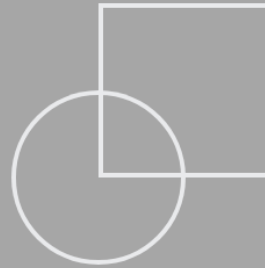


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The permanence of the national fact: sovereignty, legitimacy and political community in Europe

Series: Thinking Europe after the
integrationist consensus

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The construction of Europe has profoundly transformed the conditions for the exercise of sovereignty without making nations disappear as central political spaces. This permanence of the national fact constitutes one of the most lasting paradoxes of European integration. Since the 1950s, the Member States have agreed to place in common competences, norms, resources and sometimes instruments traditionally associated with sovereignty. They have built an internal market, an autonomous legal order, a common currency for a majority of them, shared policies and institutions with significant powers. However, democratic legitimacy, government responsibility, taxation, the essence of social redistribution, the definition of vital interests and a large part of political identification continue to be structured mainly at the national level. Integration has therefore modified the state without abolishing the nation; it has displaced certain functions of sovereignty without simultaneously creating a European political community that has replaced national communities.

This situation cannot be interpreted as proof of the failure of European integration. It corresponds more to the composite nature of the Union. It is neither a classic international organisation nor a completed federal state. It is based on a multi-level political system in which European institutions, national governments, parliaments, courts and societies remain closely intertwined. Fritz Scharpf insisted in particular on this dimension by showing that European legitimacy cannot be assessed as if the Union were an autonomous state comparable to its members: it is part of a multi-level political order in which an essential part of democratic consent and political obedience continues to be produced by the Member States¹.

However, the permanence of the national fact does not automatically lead to the conclusion that renationalisation would constitute a sufficient response to the Union's contemporary difficulties. This is precisely where the strategic problem lies. Nations remain particularly dense areas of political legitimacy, but the national level no longer always guarantees the material capacity necessary for the effective exercise of political choices. In defence, industry, energy, technology or certain critical infrastructures, a State can legally retain competence without having the critical mass, financial resources, industrial capacities or technological autonomy to fully exercise it. The European question is therefore not simply opposed to national sovereignty and integration. It requires a distinction to be made between "the space in which a decision is politically legitimate and the scale at which its objective can be materially achieved".

The thesis of this memo can therefore be formulated as follows: "the nation remains the main area of political responsibility and solidarity in Europe, without necessarily constituting, in all areas, the sufficient scale of strategic capacity". This distinction is essential to avoid two symmetrical simplifications: to consider that nations would gradually be made obsolete by integration, or to consider that their permanence would automatically legitimize a general return to the national level.

¹ Scharpf, F. W., 2009, "Legitimacy in the Multilevel European Polity", *European Political Science Review*, 1(2), 173-204, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/european-political-science-review/article/abs/legitimacy-in-the-multilevel-european-polity/8959648443EB5836A9602ED8A85B5E6C>



1. The nation has never disappeared from the European construction

The idea that European integration has gradually replaced national policy with a supranational logic does not perfectly describe the history of the Community. From the first decades, European integration developed through a constant tension between common institutions and the persistence of the States. Neofunctionalism has rightly highlighted the dynamics by which sectoral cooperation could produce new demands for integration, but intergovernmental critics were quick on to point out that these mechanisms neutralised neither national interests nor the ability of governments to impose limits on Community deepening.

As early as 1966, Stanley Hoffmann formulated one of the most structuring criticisms of the idea of a linear overcoming of the nation-state. His analysis recognizes the depth of economic integration but emphasizes that the sectors of "high politics" remain more directly linked to the fundamental choices by which states define their security, their external interests and their political identity. Functional integration can therefore progress considerably without automatically producing the political convergence necessary for the common exercise of all sovereign functions².

This intuition remains particularly useful for interpreting the contemporary Union. European history does not correspond to a gradual substitution of the supranational for the national, but to a growing interweaving of the two levels. Governments accepted European constraints not only because they had renounced their national interests, but also because they considered that the institutionalisation of cooperation could enable them to pursue these interests more effectively. Andrew Moravcsik has shown that several major stages of European integration can be analysed as the result of national preferences, negotiations between governments and institutional commitments aimed at securing agreements deemed mutually advantageous³.

This reading leads to an important conclusion: the maintenance of the nation is not the result of a recent resurgence caused by the crises of the twenty-first century. Nations had never disappeared. They have continued to structure governments, party systems, public budgets, administrations, social arrangements, and the main mechanisms of democratic representation. What is changing today is not so much their existence as the growing difficulty in considering their differences as necessarily transitory. A Union of twenty-seven states, potentially destined to enlarge further, brings together profoundly different historical trajectories, constitutional cultures, economic structures, and geopolitical perceptions. Interdependence alone is not enough to produce political homogenization.

The Treaty on European Union explicitly recognises this permanence. Article 4(2) requires the Union to respect the "national identity" of the Member States, inherent in their fundamental political and constitutional structures, including local and regional self-government. This provision shows that the European legal order itself is not based on the assumption of a gradual disappearance of national constitutional identities, but on their articulation with a common framework⁴.

The nation is therefore not a residue external to the European project. It belongs to its political architecture.

² Hoffmann, S., 1966, "Obstinate or obsolete? The Fate of the Nation-State and the Case of Western Europe", *Daedalus*, 95(3), 862-915, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20027004>

³ Moravcsik, A., 1993, "Preferences and Power in the European Community: A Liberal Intergovernmentalist Approach", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 31(4), 473-524, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.1993.tb00477.x>

⁴ European Union, 2016, *Treaty on European Union, Article 4*, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/FR/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12016M004>



2. Democratic accountability remains primarily national

The first reason for this permanence is the very structure of political responsibility. The European Union has powerful representative institutions: the European Parliament is elected by direct universal suffrage, the Commission is subject to its approval and the Council brings together governments from national democratic majorities. It would therefore be wrong to present the Union as an area devoid of democratic legitimacy. However, the political experience of citizens is still largely structured by national systems.

It is at the national level that governments are formed, that most of the partisan competition is formed, that the main budgets are adopted and that citizens can most directly attribute political responsibility. A voter can sanction a government for its economic, social, migration or foreign policy; this chain of responsibility is more immediately identifiable than the one that links a European decision to the different institutions that have contributed to its development. The Union's system adds several levels of decision-making, which can improve cooperation but also makes the allocation of responsibility more complex.

This difficulty is particularly visible when European policies produce significant distributional effects. A decision can result simultaneously from a Commission proposal, from negotiations between governments in the Council, from amendments by the European Parliament and from national implementation. Political responsibility then becomes diffuse. However, a democracy is not based solely on the legal conformity of the decision; it also presupposes the possibility for citizens to identify those who have decided and to sanction them.

In this respect, Scharpf distinguishes between several forms of legitimacy and reminds us that the effectiveness of a political system cannot entirely replace its ability to produce consent based on mechanisms of representation and responsibility. In the Union, this issue is all the more sensitive because the European level intervenes in policies that were once mainly national, while the spaces for political debate remain strongly structured by languages, media systems and national partisan⁵ competitions.

The permanence of the nation can therefore be explained in part by an institutional fact: the States remain the places where citizens most directly perceive the relationship between vote, majority, government and public policy. European integration has added a level of representation without erasing the national chains of legitimation.

However, this situation does not lead us to consider that all important decisions must necessarily remain national. Democratic accountability can also be organised at European level. But the more a policy touches on redistributive, sovereign or identity-based choices, the more demanding the question of legitimacy becomes. The ability to decide at the European level cannot progress in the long term without a corresponding development of mechanisms to explain, control and sanction this decision.

3. Redistribution and solidarity: the special depth of national communities

The second basis of national permanence lies in redistribution. European social systems are still very largely organised at the national level: pensions, health insurance, unemployment

⁵ Scharpf, F. W., 2009, "Legitimacy in the Multilevel European Polity", *European Political Science Review*, 1(2), 173-204, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/european-political-science-review/article/abs/legitimacy-in-the-multilevel-european-polity/8959648443EB5836A9602ED8A85B5E6C>



benefits, household taxation, family policies and social benefits are mainly financed and administered by national institutions. The Union is increasingly involved in coordination, regulation, structural funds and certain forms of budgetary solidarity, but it does not constitute a European welfare state comparable to national social systems.

This situation is not only the result of a historical distribution of competences. Redistribution presupposes significant levels of political trust and consent to transfers between social groups and territories. In a national framework, these mechanisms have been constituted over decades, sometimes centuries, through institutions, social compromises and common political narratives. Fiscal solidarity does not depend on absolute cultural homogeneity, but it presupposes that citizens accept that a common authority takes resources and redistributes them according to majority decisions from which they can sometimes lose out in the long term.

The euro area crisis has shown how divisive this issue can become when transposed to the European level. Debates on financial assistance, austerity, debtor state responsibility and solidarity between euro area members have revealed the existence of different national interpretations of cost-sharing. In several countries, the same instruments have been perceived as excessively restrictive or, conversely, excessively generous. The disagreement was not simply about the economic efficiency of the arrangements, but about the obligations of solidarity between political communities.

Recent work on support for European redistribution confirms that trust in other European societies influences solidarity preferences. A study published in *the European Journal of Political Research* shows that in four countries studied (Germany, Italy, Romania and Sweden) citizens who attribute more positive economic characteristics to other European nationalities are more favourable to European solidarity and to the reduction of inequalities between Member States. The result suggests that supranational redistribution depends in part on mutual perceptions and relationships of trust that are not automatically produced by economic integration⁶.

The creation of NextGenerationEU after the pandemic has nevertheless shown that European solidarity can deepen when a shock is perceived as sufficiently common and states deem collective action necessary. It would therefore be wrong to conclude that European redistribution is politically impossible. Recent experience indicates that it is easier to build around defined problems and objectives than as an indefinite extension of a general solidarity.

The difference between the national and European levels is therefore less absolute than gradual. Nations today have older, denser and more institutionalised infrastructures of solidarity. The Union can build new mechanisms, but these still need to produce the level of trust and political responsibility necessary for sustainable transfers.

4. The strategic culture remains profoundly national

The permanence of the national fact appears with particular clarity in defence and foreign policy. European states do not share exactly the same military histories, the same perceptions of threats, the same priority alliances or the same conception of the use of force. The historical experiences of France, Germany, Poland, Finland, Italy and Portugal have produced different strategic cultures. These divergences do not mean that joint action is impossible; they do,

⁶ Bauhr, M. et al., 2026, "The Honest, the Efficient, and the Trustworthy: National Stereotypes and Public Support for EU Redistribution", *European Journal of Political Research*, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/european-journal-of-political-research/article/honest-the-efficient-and-the-trustworthy-national-stereotypes-and-public-support-for-eu-redistribution/3258B133263C4E1E98F7D0A9656BE956>



however, explain why the integration of defence is politically more complex than that of the internal market.

Russia's war against Ukraine since 2022 has brought together several strategic assessments and profoundly transformed European defence policies. However, it has not eliminated national specificities. The level of perception of the Russian threat, the relationship with NATO, the role attributed to the United States, the nuclear issue or defence industry preferences continue to vary between states. A study by the European Parliament's research service published in 2025 precisely analyses the European security architecture from several national perspectives and highlights the persistent role of national motivations in defining defence policies, even in a context of rapid progress in European strategic autonomy⁷.

The European institutions themselves recognise this reality. The European roadmap for defence preparedness for 2030 explicitly states that Member States remain sovereign in defining their national security and defence objectives. At the same time, it underlines that the fragmentation of national efforts limits collective effectiveness and that part of the capabilities must be developed jointly. The document thus recommends coalitions of capabilities in which States decide sovereignly on their role and contribution while pursuing common operational objectives⁸.

This combination is particularly revealing of the general problem studied in this memo. Defence simultaneously illustrates the persistence of national sovereignty and its material limits. Fundamental decisions on the use of force remain linked to states, but the capabilities needed for this use increasingly depend on an industrial, technological and financial base whose scale exceeds that of several member states.

The 2025 European Defence White Paper articulates the same tension: Member States remain responsible for their defence, while the EU can aggregate demand, foster joint purchasing, support industry and help fill capability gaps. The priority areas identified (air and missile defence, artillery, ammunition, drones, military mobility, cyber, artificial intelligence and strategic capabilities) illustrate areas where national fragmentation can reduce overall effectiveness⁹.

The strategic culture therefore remains national, but the strategic capacity tends to require transnational instruments. It is precisely this discrepancy that prevents political sovereignty from being confused with national self-sufficiency.

5. National identity and European identity are not necessarily in competition

The question of the national fact is often treated through an opposition between national identity and European identity. This representation is too simple. Studies on political identity show that individuals can simultaneously belong to several communities and articulate local, regional, national and European identifications. The existence of a European identity does not necessarily require the weakening of national identity.

⁷ Anghel, S. E., & Damen, M. G. H., 2025, *The Future European Security Architecture: Dilemmas for EU Strategic Autonomy*, European Parliamentary Research Service, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/fr/document/EPRS_STU%282025%29765785

⁸ European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2025, European Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52025JC0027>

⁹ European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2025, White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52025JC0120>



Recent research explicitly emphasizes that national and European identities coexist, interact and vary across contexts. They are not two mutually exclusive categories between which each individual should choose. Their respective intensity can evolve according to political experiences, events and social situations¹⁰.

Dario Castiglione develops a similar idea by considering that European political identity must be thought of in the particular context of a multilevel entity that combines intergovernmental and supranational dimensions. A European identity does not necessarily need to reproduce the cultural or historical density of a national identity to produce political loyalty. It can develop around institutional practices, rights, values and common experiences while allowing other forms of belonging to remain¹¹.

This coexistence is important because it avoids two mistakes. The first would be to consider that deeper political integration requires the prior creation of a homogeneous European nation. The history of political systems shows that identities can be constructed, superimposed and transformed. The second would be to consider that the persistence of national identities condemns all European solidarity. European citizenship, mobility, common institutions and several decades of integration have created forms of political belonging that did not exist before.

However, the density of these identifications is not equivalent. In moments of crisis, political mobilization often continues to be structured around states, not least because they have the most directly accessible administrations, budgets, security forces, and mechanisms of representation. Identity is therefore not only a cultural issue: it is also linked to the institutions through which citizens experience political power.

National permanence does not mean that Europe is incapable of producing its own political identity. Rather, it indicates that a European identity is developing in an environment already occupied by deeply institutionalized national communities. The European challenge is not so much to replace them as to organize their articulation.

6. Central and Eastern Europe reminds us that sovereignty has a history

Understanding the European national fact requires particular attention to historical trajectories. Not all Member States have the same experience of sovereignty. For several countries of Central and Eastern Europe, political independence and national sovereignty were recovered or profoundly reconfigured at the end of the Cold War, after several decades of Soviet domination or communist regimes. This experience necessarily changes the political meaning attached to the national state.

The 2004 enlargement cannot therefore be interpreted as the entry of States into a process intended to overcome their recently regained sovereignty. For many actors in this region, membership of the Union and NATO was, on the contrary, a means of securing this sovereignty by anchoring it in a democratic Western order. European integration could thus be perceived simultaneously as a sharing of competences and as an instrument for consolidating national independence.

¹⁰ European Journal of Political Research, 2025, "European Identities and Immigration Attitudes", <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/european-journal-of-political-research/article/european-identities-and-immigration-attitudes/4E9101A70768E508FBA32FAC1A928F7E>

¹¹ Castiglione, D., 2009, "Political Identity in a Community of Strangers", in J. T. Checkel & P. J. Katzenstein [eds.], *European Identity*, Cambridge University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511806247.003>



This difference in trajectory explains some of the subsequent divergences on the relationship with Russia, the rule of law, migration, and the depth of political integration. It prohibits the mechanical application to the new members of the narratives developed from post-war Western European history. Where some founding states may have conceived of the reciprocal limitation of sovereignty as a response to the excesses of European nationalism, other members may see national sovereignty as a recent conquest obtained after a long experience of external domination.

This historical diversity does not make integration impossible. It does, however, explain why the idea of uniform political convergence can meet with lasting resistance. It also requires a distinction between nationalism, sovereignty and attachment to the state. A government can strongly defend certain national prerogatives while being in favour of integration in other areas. The relationship with Europe is then determined by a combination of history, security and strategic calculation.

Future enlargement to Ukraine or Moldova is likely to reinforce this dimension. These societies are approaching European integration in a context where the very existence of the state, territorial integrity and national security are immediate issues. An enlarged Union will therefore have to deal with even more diverse conceptions of sovereignty. The European Council's Strategic Agenda 2024-2029 recognises that enlargement will have to progress in parallel with the internal reforms needed by the Union, a sign that growing heterogeneity is now a central institutional issue¹².

7. National sovereignty remains legitimate, but it is not always sufficient

Recognizing the permanence of the national fact does not mean concluding that the State is sufficient. This is probably the most important point of the reasoning. A strictly legal conception of sovereignty considers that a State is sovereign as long as it retains the competence to decide. This definition remains fundamental, but it becomes insufficient when the concrete exercise of a competence depends on resources that the State does not control.

A state can legally decide on its energy policy while being massively dependent on external suppliers. It can retain responsibility for its defence without having certain technologies, satellite capabilities or anti-missile systems on its own. It can maintain industrial competence while being unable to mobilise the investments necessary for a strategic sector. In these situations, formal sovereignty is real but strategic freedom is reduced.

The recent evolution of the European language reflects precisely this difficulty. The European Council's Strategic Agenda 2024-2029 insists on the need to make Europe more sovereign, to improve its defence capabilities, to reduce harmful dependencies, to secure supply chains and to strengthen strategic technologies¹³. Similarly, the European defence policies developed since 2025 are based on the idea that states remain sovereign but must invest and produce more together to fill their capability gaps¹⁴.

This evolution leads to a distinction between two dimensions of sovereignty: "legal sovereignty", which concerns the competence to decide, and "effective sovereignty", which concerns the real possibility of implementing this decision. The second depends on material,

¹² European Council, 2024, *Strategic Agenda 2024-2029*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/fr/european-council/strategic-agenda-2024-2029/>

¹³ European Council, 2024, *Strategic Agenda 2024-2029*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/fr/european-council/strategic-agenda-2024-2029/>

¹⁴ European Commission and High Representative, 2025, White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52025JC0120>



financial, industrial and technological resources. It can therefore sometimes be reinforced by joint action rather than weakened by it.

This distinction makes it possible to go beyond much of the traditional debate between Europe and nations. The transfer or shared exercise of a competence does not automatically constitute a loss of sovereignty if this pooling increases decision-making capacity and reduces external dependence. Conversely, formally retaining a competence does not guarantee autonomy if the State is entirely dependent on other actors to exercise it.

The relevant problem is therefore not simply "who legally holds the competence", but "at what level this competence can be transformed into real capacity".

8. The nation as a space of legitimacy, Europe as a possible capacity multiplier

The reasoning leads to a more complex architecture than the classic opposition between federalism and sovereignty. The nation retains several functions that European integration has not replaced: it remains a central space for democratic representation, redistribution, solidarity and political identification. These functions give the States a political density that the Union does not possess in an equivalent way.

However, Europe has other advantages. Its economic mass, its internal market, its regulatory capacities and the possibility of pooling certain investments allow it to reach a scale that is inaccessible to many states taken in isolation. In sectors such as defence, energy, digital technology or industry, fragmentation can produce costs, dependencies or insufficient resources that precisely reduce the real sovereignty of states.

The relationship between nation and Union should therefore not be thought of as a zero-sum game. Sovereignty can be exercised through common institutions when they can produce additional capacity. Moravcsik had already shown that governments can accept European commitments precisely because they see them as instruments for national preferences, not as a mere negation of them¹⁵.

This logic leads to a more functional conception of the relationship between the levels. The State must remain the privileged level when its capacity for action is sufficient and the nature of the policy requires a particular proximity to the national political community. The European scale becomes more relevant when size gains, externalities or dependencies make separate action insufficient. Between these two levels there may also be differentiated configurations grouping together only those States wishing and able to exercise certain capacities in common.

The permanence of the national fact is therefore not an argument in favour of institutional immobility. Rather, it is a design constraint: any European architecture must take into account sustainable national political communities instead of presupposing their disappearance.

¹⁵ Moravcsik, A., 1993, "Preferences and Power in the European Community: A Liberal Intergovernmentalist Approach", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 31(4), 473-524, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.1993.tb00477.x>



Conclusion: Preserving national legitimacy without renouncing European capacity

The construction of Europe has shown that it is possible to considerably deepen interdependence between States without abolishing their political communities. This result is neither an anomaly nor a necessarily transitory stage. It is probably one of the most enduring characteristics of the Union.

Nations remain the main spaces of democratic responsibility, redistribution and political solidarity. They structure party systems, administrations, budgets and a large part of collective identities. In strategic areas, they also retain ultimate responsibility for a significant number of sovereign decisions. This permanence explains why any extension of integration to these areas raises particularly strong demands for legitimacy.

But the nation is not synonymous with material autonomy. The transformation of the international system, investment needs, industrial fragmentation and technological dependencies show that a legally sovereign state can have a limited real capacity. The challenge is therefore not to choose between nation and Europe, but to understand that legitimacy and capacity are not always on the same scale.

The conclusion is twofold. On the one hand, no lasting European architecture can be built against nations or on the assumption of their gradual disappearance. On the other hand, the recognition of their permanence cannot serve as a justification for a systematic renationalisation that would reduce, in certain areas, their real capacity for action.

European sovereignty must therefore be thought of as an articulation rather than a unidirectional transfer. The nation remains a privileged space of legitimacy; Europe can become, when the scale justifies it, a capacity multiplier.

It is precisely this distinction that makes it possible to reformulate the central question: "sovereignty does not consist only in retaining the right to decide, but in effectively having the means to make this decision exist".

