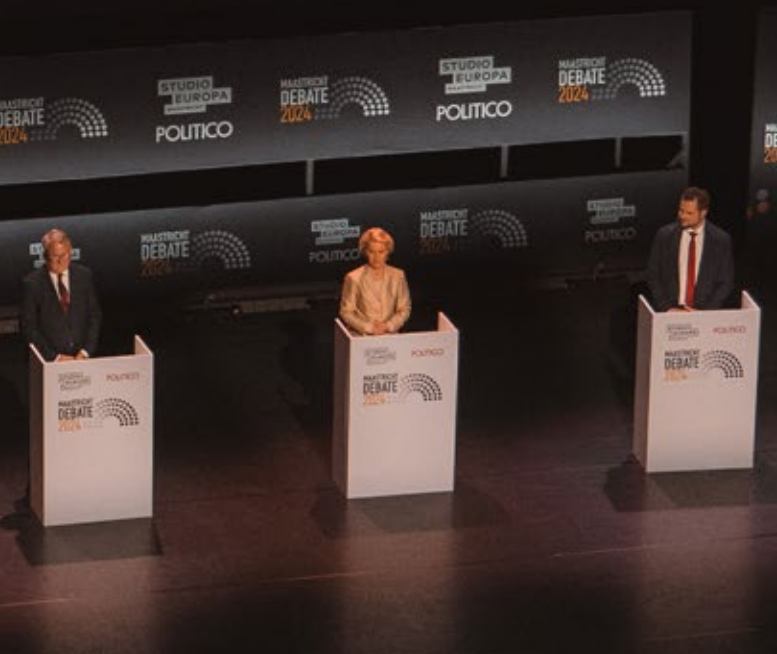




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#MaastrichtDebate



UM Research Agenda on Europe

 Maastricht University

3 December 2025



Table of contents

1. SEM - Centre of expertise for interdisciplinary research on Europe	5
Studio Europa Maastricht	
2. Research agenda	6
Research Themes	
Research Theme 1	
European Integration, Rule of Law and Democracy	10
Research Theme 2	
Sustainability, Prosperity and Cooperation	14
Research Theme 3	
Knowledge, Technology and Digitalisation	18
Research Theme 4	
Europe and the World	



1

SEM - Centre of expertise for interdisciplinary research on Europe

1. SEM Centre of expertise for interdisciplinary research on Europe



Studio Europa Maastricht (SEM) is UM's interfaculty centre of expertise for research, policy and public debate on the future of Europe. Alongside its role as a forum for critical debate and citizen engagement, SEM works to strengthen the UM's science-to-policy impact. SEM also aims to stimulate interfaculty collaboration on European research and to raise the visibility and impact of Europe-focused work across all UM faculties at regional, national and European levels.

Recognising that contemporary societal challenges necessitate sustained cross-disciplinary cooperation, SEM and the UM faculties have placed multi- and interdisciplinarity at the core of their shared mission.

By providing a university-wide platform and connecting with the UM-wide research theme *Europe and a Globalising World*,¹ SEM contributes to advancing the university's European research ambitions as set out in UM's Strategic Programme and its Europe Strategy (2025-2030).

¹The other three themes are Quality of Life, Learning and Innovation, and Sustainability and Circularity.



2

Research agenda

2. Research agenda

The European Union is at a crossroads. In a rapidly changing domestic and international landscape, longstanding assumptions about how to safeguard democracy, prosperity and security are under pressure. The sense of urgency is high. In the Political Guidelines for her second term (2024-29), President Ursula Von der Leyen is unequivocal: *'The next five years will define Europe's place in the world for the next five decades. It will decide whether we shape our own future or let it be shaped by events or by others'*. At the same time, the EU faces challenges from within. The rise of populist parties is eroding internal cohesion and undermining shared democratic values.

These internal and external shifts are felt in the everyday lives of citizens – and it is at this level that the EU's added value is ultimately judged. Through its research agenda on Europe, UM aims to contribute to the current debate by offering academically grounded insights and recommendations.

'The next five years will define Europe's place in the world for the next five decades. It will decide whether we shape our own future or let it be shaped by events or by others'

The UM Research Agenda on Europe builds on earlier editions (2018 and 2022) and has been developed jointly by SEM's Academic Board and the UM faculties. It draws on the wide range of Europe-related research conducted across the faculties and within interfaculty institutes, including the Centre for European Research in Maastricht (CERiM); the Institute for Transnational and Euregional cross-border cooperation and Mobility (ITEM); and the Maastricht Centre for Citizenship, Migration and Development (MACIMIDE). The agenda is open to diverse research approaches and is designed to align with the research traditions of all UM faculties.

The agenda identifies four broad, overarching themes that offer strategic guidance and can be translated into concrete research activities. This framework ensures continuity while remaining flexible enough to respond to new developments. European issues and challenges are examined from a range of perspectives, including historical, cultural, legal, economic, psychological and political frames of reference. By combining and integrating different insights, the agenda aims to stimulate innovative approaches and generate new understandings of complex societal problems.

In addition to the EU level, the agenda also incorporates national – including Dutch – and Euregional perspectives. This reflects the UM's ambition to position itself as a key meeting point of expertise between The Hague and Brussels, and to serve as a significant interlocutor within the Euregion.

3

Research Themes

3. Research Themes

The UM Research Agenda on Europe is organised around four interrelated and partially overlapping research themes:

1. European Integration, Rule of Law and Democracy
2. Sustainability, Prosperity and Cooperation
3. Knowledge, Technology and Digitalisation
4. Europe and the World



Research Theme

1

European Integration, Rule of Law and Democracy

CONTESTING IDEAS AND NARRATIVES OF EUROPE

As a relatively young political system, the EU is still very much in development, rendering it a compelling laboratory for testing legal and political concepts. European integration has long been shaped by contestations over ideas and narratives, ideals and emotions. Competing visions of Europe's future and divergent interpretations of its past both clash and coalesce. Understanding the ongoing debate about what Europe could or should become therefore requires examining how history and heritage are constructed, appropriated, enriched and transmitted by a wide range of actors, from politicians and public institutions to businesses, NGOs and citizens.

PRESSURES ON LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND RULE OF LAW

The 2024 European elections demonstrated that the core ideals of liberal democracy and respect for the rule of law are under mounting pressure, both from within the Union and through external manipulation and interference. Fundamental values such as judicial independence, access to justice for both citizens and migrants, equality and media freedom are being challenged with growing frequency. As a result, the development of a 'European Democracy Shield' and the broader enhancement of the EU's instruments to counter these threats have moved to the forefront of the political agenda. In evaluating potential remedies, it is vital not only to analyse formal institutions and legal frameworks but also to consider the role of informal bodies, trust, soft law, social norms and prevailing ideas. Paying attention to these elements is essential for understanding the geographical, historical and cultural variations that underpin political dynamics across Europe.

MULTI-LEVEL GOVERNANCE AND DEMOCRATIC LEGITIMACY

As a system of multi-level governance, law- and policy-making in the EU is the result of continuous interaction between European, national, regional and local authorities. Despite the strengthening of the European Parliament's competences and the enhanced involvement of national parliaments, concerns about the EU's democratic legitimacy persist. The growing politicisation of EU affairs, combined with the need to address major societal and transnational challenges at the European level, has made democratic representation and public approval more important than ever.

The EU's complex decision-making process is, however, frequently perceived as slow and inefficient. The demands of legitimacy and effectiveness often diverge, creating tensions that become particularly pronounced in times of polycrisis when citizens expect rapid and decisive action. This raises a central question: how can EU leaders and policymakers strike an appropriate balance between legitimacy, effectiveness, efficiency and accountability?

Simultaneously, the enforcement of EU law and policy continues to require close attention. In domains such as asylum and migration for example, it is crucial to investigate how Member States can be held to the standards they have collectively agreed to. This issue has become

increasingly pressing as traditional enforcement mechanisms, such as infringement proceedings before the Court of Justice by the European Commission against Member States, have revealed their limitations. Moreover, citizens' perceptions of policy outcomes warrant closer examination, as they play a significant role in shaping broader assessments of EU performance and legitimacy.

ENLARGEMENT, INSTITUTIONAL REFORM, AND DIFFERENTIATED INTEGRATION

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has imparted new momentum to the EU's enlargement process. However, further widening of the Union is already placing pressure on existing European institutions and cannot be pursued without substantial internal reform. The institutional architecture in its current form is increasingly regarded as no longer fit for purpose. This raises fundamental questions, including whether the unanimity requirement in areas such as the Common Foreign and Security Policy can be maintained. Enlargement also carries implications for middle powers and founding Member States, such as the Netherlands, regarding their future influence and role. In addition, enlargement demands renewed reflection on how EU democracy can be strengthened, and which instruments are required to safeguard it amid growing political and cultural diversity. Finally, it places the issue of differentiated integration firmly (back) on the agenda, as some Member States pursue deeper integration in specific policy areas while others, whether temporarily or permanently, opt out.



Research Theme

2

Sustainability, Prosperity and Cooperation



PROSPERITY, CONVERGENCE, AND INTERNAL MARKET

The EU seeks to increase the prosperity and welfare of its Member States and citizens while safeguarding cohesion and solidarity. This objective encompasses not only material prosperity but also broader conceptions of well-being; including social, environmental and and personal dimensions.

Although trade and capital flows between EU Member States are substantial, significant scope remains to improve convergence in living and health standards. The effects of overarching challenges such as climate change, demographic ageing and technological change, further underscore the need for research into how the EU and its Member States can mitigate inequality and bolster societal resilience. The creation of the internal market has been a key driver of integration, fostering economic growth and convergence between Member States.

FINANCIAL INTEGRATION AND THE EURO'S ROLE

In the area of European financial markets in particular, questions persist about whether - and in what form - further integration is feasible or desirable. A stable and robust financial system is essential for stimulating economic growth and enabling the green, energy and digital transitions, yet the current system often proves insufficiently responsive to these demands. Financial regulation and reform are also indispensable if the EU is to strengthen the international role of the euro and enhance the resilience of its financial sector more broadly. The completion of the banking union, the deepening of the savings and investment union (SIU) and the introduction of a digital euro accordingly remain key policy priorities.

TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE ECONOMY

With its ambitious Green Deal, which aims to create a climate-neutral and sustainable economy by 2050, the EU has positioned itself as a leader in addressing climate change. Although some early initiatives and legal instruments have been diluted, the overarching target of net-zero emissions by 2050 remains intact. Consequently, questions concerning the pathways to this goal and the many structural issues associated with the green and energy transitions remain relevant.

Another sustainability challenge concerns the transition to a circular economy. Beyond reducing strategic dependencies on raw materials, it is necessary to investigate new economic models of production and consumption for European businesses. Safeguarding Europe's nature and natural resources has also become increasingly urgent in a geopolitical context where dependencies can be weaponised. A better understanding is therefore required of how Europe can effectively and efficiently reach higher levels of environmental protection.

LABOUR MARKETS, MOBILITY, AND SOCIAL POLICIES

Europe's most important resource - its people and talent - continues to be segmented largely along national lines. Labour-market institutions and policies remain primarily the responsibility of national governments, which have responded unevenly to EU-level calls for greater flexibility and competitiveness. As a consequence, systems for social security, pensions, healthcare

and taxation differ markedly across Member States. These differences generate tensions for the free movement of labour and for efforts to reduce inequalities within and across Member States. They also contribute to harmful labour practices that leave migrant workers in vulnerable positions.

Labour migration is further constrained by institutional barriers. Within this context, the position of asylum seekers and their access to the EU labour market merits particular scrutiny. Patterns of intra-Union mobility may also exacerbate national income disparities, notably through the brain-drain dynamics affecting peripheral regions. Against this backdrop, it is essential to examine which institutional arrangements and policy designs can adequately address such challenges.

Demographic change and age-related challenges similarly require the identification of best practices. These concern both the provision of public services, for instance addressing shortages of medical and educational professionals, as well as the maintenance of Europe's economic competitiveness. This context raises critical questions about the extent to which intra-EU mobility and migration from third countries (including labour, student and asylum migration) may offset population ageing. It also prompts reflection on the arrangements required to facilitate newcomers' integration into society and the labour market, such as appropriate cultural and language policies.

HEALTH, WELLBEING, AND THE EUROPEAN HEALTH UNION

The Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated how a health crisis can disrupt social life and economic activity on a fundamental level. Within the emerging framework of the European Health Union, the protection of citizens' health and wellbeing has therefore assumed a prominent position on the EU policy agenda. This shift is reflected in enhanced collective efforts to prevent and mitigate major health risks. EU health legislation and policies, such as its mental health strategy, the European Health Data Space (EHDS) and the 'pharma package', warrant further examination to ensure they align with socio-economic, technological and environmental developments. Moreover, improved implementation, with greater sensitivity to national contexts, can contribute positively to public health outcomes.

REGIONAL COLLABORATION

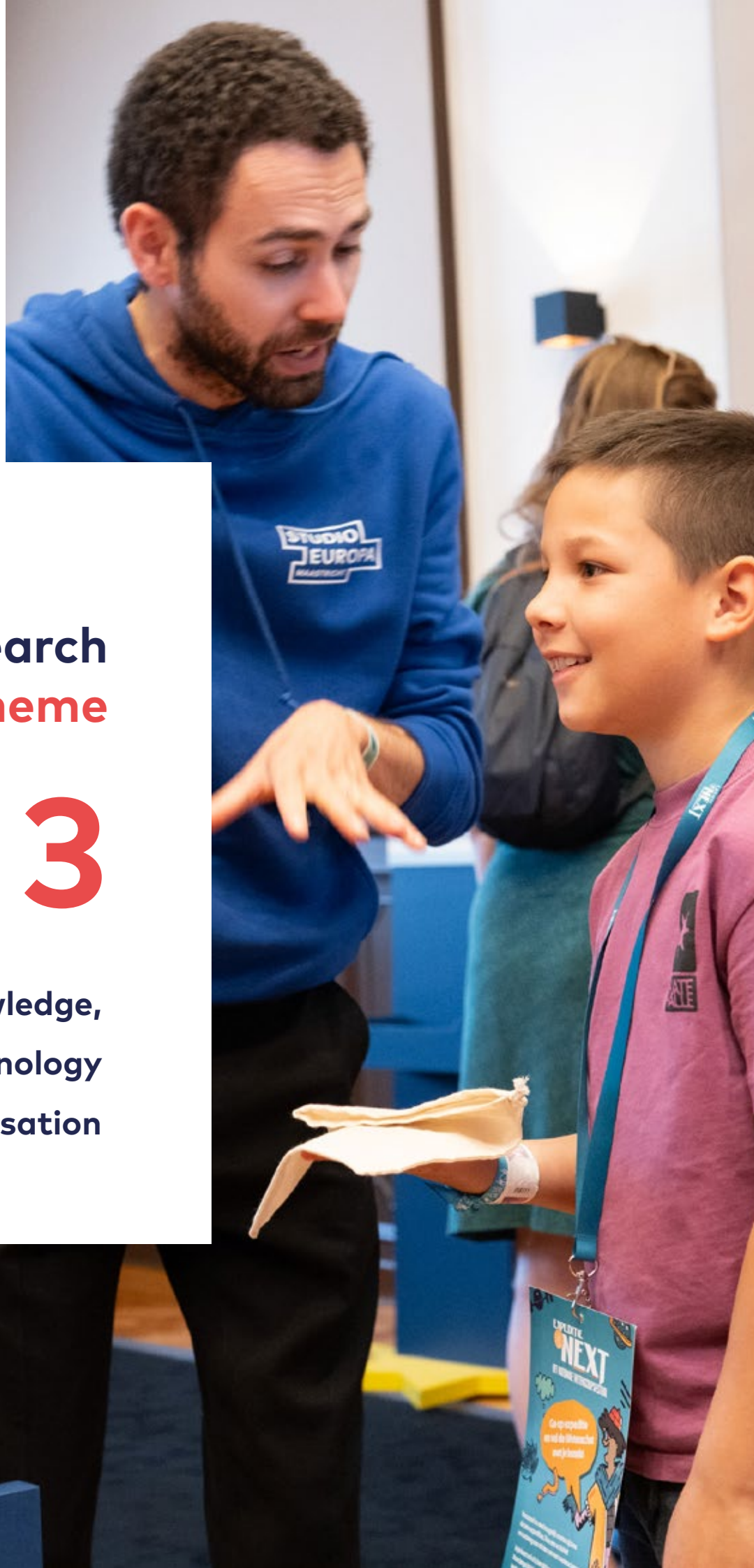
Collaboration across borders in smaller societal units has also expanded and offers a distinctive, regional expression of European integration. These micro-level dynamics, as illustrated by developments in the Euregio Meuse-Rhine (EMR) with Maastricht at its centre, can serve as laboratories for European integration and complement more abstract analytical approaches.



Research Theme

3

Knowledge, Technology and Digitalisation



THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY AND EU COMPETITIVENESS

The pursuit of a knowledge society is regarded as an important means of supporting the EU's growth, competitiveness and social progress. The digital transition and revolutionary technological innovations offer significant opportunities for Europe, ranging from economic modernisation and productivity gains to support for the green and energy transitions. At the same time, the incomplete internal market, fragmented industrial policies and high energy prices, constitute substantial obstacles to fully harnessing these potential benefits. Europe's dependence on US technology corporations as well as Chinese manufacturers and raw materials has elevated the issue of digital sovereignty to the top of the EU agenda. Technological and digital transformations also introduce new risks for fundamental human and consumer rights and affect individual well-being in ways that are often still poorly understood.

COMPLETING THE SINGLE DIGITAL MARKET

The digital transition is indispensable for safeguarding the EU's long-term competitiveness and sustaining its current social models. A critical element in this process is the further completion of the Single Digital Market, which encompasses not only regulatory initiatives but also the harmonisation of standards. Businesses play a pivotal role in the creation and application of new technologies, but the competitive environment must remain open and fair. Furthermore, economic growth must be democratic and inclusive – especially since automation and robotisation are expected to reshape labour demand and supply, potentially intensifying existing social and economic inequalities.

SOCIETAL RISKS OF TECHNOLOGICAL AND DIGITAL TRANSFORMATIONS

Technological and digital transformations also carry significant societal risks. Social media can undermine trust between citizens and governments and weaken societal resilience. The emergence of an 'always-on' culture poses substantial threats to mental well-being, and preventative approaches may prove more effective than remedial ones. Accordingly, research into the effects of digitalisation and the increasing use of AI-driven algorithms on citizens – particularly on vulnerable groups – is of critical importance. In this context, issues such as cybercrime and digital fraud warrant close scrutiny, as contemporary digital infrastructures often facilitate rather than inhibit such practices. Just as in physical and public spaces, vulnerable citizens are entitled to protection within the digital environment. And while digital tools offer opportunities to enhance citizen participation in decision-making, they have also contributed to heightened polarisation and democratic erosion. These developments raise pressing questions concerning the desirability and feasibility of regulating and supervising information technologies.

THE DIGITAL ECONOMY AND FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

An additional area requiring attention is how the digital economy shapes the distribution of benefits and fundamental rights, including privacy and personal data protection. Whereas the EU, unlike the United States and China, has explicitly embraced a citizen-centred and rights-based regulatory approach, major challenges remain with respect to individual awareness and societal-level enforcement. The enforcement deficit surrounding the implementation of EU regulatory instruments remains particularly problematic. Achieving an appropriate balance between content moderation and freedom of expression, and between fostering innovation and regulating against harmful or criminal misuse of emerging technologies, is therefore essential.

Research Theme

4

Europe and the World



GEOPOLITICAL SHIFTS AND A MORE RESILIENT EU

Global shifts in power distribution and successive international crises, including the brutal invasion of Ukraine and the EU's inability to articulate a unified position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, are inevitably affecting the EU's international standing. Long-established paradigms in external economic relations and security policy are being challenged. This context necessitates a thorough re-examination of how Europe should position itself within an increasingly volatile geopolitical environment. Consequently, debates about how to make Europe more resilient and 'sovereign' or 'strategically autonomous' as well as how to strengthen citizens' preparedness have become increasingly heated.

PARTNERSHIPS, NEIGHBOURHOOD POLICY, AND GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT

To regain influence and enhance its resilience in an emerging multipolar world, the EU must reassess its current partnerships and explore new ones. As a regional power, sustained engagement in its Eastern and Southern neighbourhoods is more important than ever, including taking responsibility for supporting Ukraine and assuming a more active diplomatic role in the Middle East peace process. Although tensions in transatlantic relations are regrettable, they also create opportunities to deepen engagement with other international actors such as Canada, Japan, Mercosur, the African Union, the Indo-Pacific region, and the Global South more broadly. This is vital for the strategic management of economic interdependence as well as defending the international rule of law, liberal norms and values, and fundamental human rights.

This context gives rise to important questions about the EU's policies and rules on migration and asylum as well as its broader approach to developing countries. Europe must adhere to its own principles if it is to maintain credibility in an international order under strain.

EXTERNAL ECONOMIC RELATIONS AND ECONOMIC SECURITY

In the area of external economic relations, the hegemonic discourse of free trade orthodoxy and multilateralism is increasingly being displaced by narratives emphasising protectionism and the advancement of national interests. Economic interdependence is now routinely used as a tool of coercion. As a large, integrated and open market, the EU is particularly vulnerable to this type of exploitation of economic dependence. It is therefore investing in the development of new instruments aimed at bolstering its 'economic security'. Nonetheless, the EU cannot afford to turn towards protectionism: the challenge is to safeguard EU interests while preserving its open economy. This entails striking a balance between reducing external dependencies, primarily through diversification rather than disengagement, while remaining connected to international cooperation and contributing to more robust systems of global governance.

EUROPEAN SECURITY AND DEFENCE CAPABILITIES

Finally, in the security domain, uncertainty regarding the continued reliability of the American security guarantee, coupled with the threat posed by Russia, has prompted renewed ambitions to develop more integrated European defence capabilities. However, investment in military capabilities must be accompanied by efforts to better inform the broader public and to understand citizens' interests, concerns, and fears. Enhanced investment in European security will only be politically and socially viable if it is grounded in broad public support.



This Maastricht University research agenda on Europe, led by Studio Europa Maastricht, is a UM-wide collaboration with all faculties to stimulate interdisciplinary research and societal impact.

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