

EUROPE



Europe Needs Another Governance!

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The Polish-Lithuanian Union, the *Rzeczpospolita*, was a kind of noble republic ruled by a king elected by an assembly of nobles. In 1569, the Polish-Lithuanian Union formed one of the most powerful and prosperous kingdoms in Europe. In 1683, it was still one of the most militarily capable states in Europe: on September 12, King John III Sobiewski defeated the Turks at Kahlenberg and forced them to lift the siege of Vienna for the second time.

Unfortunately, the nobles, big or small, had the same weight in the assembly. They all were individually able to block a decision. This rule of *liberum veto* was intended to preserve a certain aristocratic liberalism towards the central power of the monarchy and to promote a constructive logic of political consensus, but also to preserve the privileges of the Polish and Lithuanian nobility and their political autonomy.

The problem arose when other, highly centralized monarchy states emerged around the Union and competed with it. The same form of government that had made it possible to manage the peaceful settlement of conflicts internally has proved incapable of effectively meeting external challenges. The Union lacked the sense of unity necessary to guide its political action as a single social body. In the absence of a shared sense of responsibility, the nobles based their decisions on the interests of their respective families and estates, if not their own personal interest. The haggling for votes between the nobles and the interference of foreign kingdoms, which took advantage of this to influence the government of the Union, increasingly deteriorated the system. The union of the two nations split several times until it completely lost its state autonomy.

It is not inappropriate to consider that the European Union is based, *mutatis mutandis*, on a political regulatory system comparable to the *liberum veto* of the *Rzeczpospolita*. It is primarily intended to respond to the individual needs of sovereign nation states. The constant search for consensus within the European Council takes the place of the unity and meaning of the measures adopted. This system worked satisfactorily when globalisation became the dominant phenomenon in international relations and if the Member States had a mutual interest in economic integration.



Source: <https://eudebates.tv/debates/special-debates/strength-in-unity-the-next-eu-strategic-agenda/>

Thus, the stability achieved by normative power (cf. the expansion of the number of rules) gave the appearance of a sense of uniformity in the policies of the European Union. Globalisation has thus become the compass of the European Union, a Union of meaning and unity. Unfortunately, this appearance of importance inevitably evaporated when it came to making decisions that affected the hard core of state policy.

After noting that globalization has undeniable limits – which Rodrik’s paradox formulated with the words “Democracy, national sovereignty and strong economic integration are incompatible: it is possible to combine two of the three possibilities, but it is never possible to have all three at the same time and completely” – the need to endow Europe with strategic autonomy became apparent. The conclusions of Enrico Letta’s report or Mario Draghi’s statements leave no doubt on this issue. However, it is by no means clear how this can be achieved without a significant step forward in European unification.

Rodrik’s paradox exists with different parameters in geopolitics. Here, the trilemma is: strategic autonomy, free trade, and security. They are incompatible at the same time.

This geopolitical paradox explains why, in the context of globalization, in which the EU has focused on prosperity by free trade and peace or security, its strategic autonomy has shrunk in favour of economic and normative interdependencies.

The path of differentiated integration to which the EU has been committed since the 1990s has favoured the prevalence of an intergovernmental logic in which the internal market is governed by “laws” (EU directives or regulations), while policies that fall within the competence of a federal state continue to be governed by fragile voluntary coordination.

Since the EU wanted to increase autonomy and free trade, it inevitably had to accept a loss in security, which runs counter to the very founding purpose of the Union: peace. However, if autonomy and security were to be combined, then free trade and the technical and normative relations on which it is based could no longer be able to create a sense of unity for Europe.

The nature of this geopolitical paradox leads to the realization that the increasing radicalization of political decisions, both in the Member States and at the European level, is not the cause but the consequence of the dysfunction of the European political system.

Long before the war in Ukraine, European politicians such as Pascal Lamy warned that “a will to power forces Europe to constitute itself as a political space, as a European “demos”, stressing that “it is not the transition to a majority rule that will lead to a majority decision on military intervention”.

Of course, geopolitics is linked to the will to power of states, but with great power comes great responsibility. The EU cannot be expected to exercise state competences in international power relations without assuming the democratic responsibility that arises from a “permanent relationship between leaders and the people” (Winston Churchill).

The ethereal idea of “federal progress”, tirelessly proclaimed by the idealists of a united Europe, must give way to that of a common strategic autonomy, which is henceforth a real necessity and whose political expression will necessarily be federal. Europe must be equipped with a compass other than that of globalisation, with a ‘will to meaning’ as a European social solidarity body that guides decisions that go beyond free trade and an unpredictable strategy.

Otherwise, given the will to power of the United States of America, China and Russia, Europe risks experiencing the fate of the *Rzeczpospolita*, the Polish-Lithuanian Union. Let’s avoid repeating this mistake.¹

¹According to an article “Il faut munir l’Europe d’une autre boussole” published in *La Libre Belgique*, p. 34-35, on 18/9/2024, by Francisco Vigalondo, Domenico Rossetti di Valdalbero, Jean Marsia en François Mennerat of the Union of European Federalists - Belgium, <https://uef-belgium.be/>.