

DEBATES ON CHANGE IN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND POSSIBLE SCENARIOS: STRENGTHENING TOGETHER OR DIVERGENCE?

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Abstract: The European Union (EU) has expended considerable effort to achieve economic and political integration and expansion, yielding notable results. However, recent developments, including political, financial, and regional crises; the migration issue; the rise of populist rhetoric; and the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, have intensified debates about the EU's core values and perspectives. The future of the EU is currently being discussed through a series of scenarios, including maintaining the status quo, deepening integration in certain countries, and complete disintegration. Document analysis was utilised as the research method for all aspects of the study, and data were obtained from literature reviews and official reports. Consequently, the challenges confronting the European Union were examined through the lens of potential scenarios and rationales. The analysis concluded that the future of UE is uncertain.

Keywords: European Union (EU), Regional Integration, Peace Project, Deepening and Widening, Scenarios of Change

Rezumat: *Dezbateri privind schimbarea în Uniunea Europeană și scenariile posibile: consolidare împreună sau divergență?* Uniunea Europeană (UE) a depus eforturi considerabile pentru a realiza integrarea și extinderea economică și politică, obținând rezultate notabile. Cu toate acestea, evoluțiile recente, inclusiv crizele politice, economice și regionale, problema migrației, ascensiunea retoricii populiste și retragerea Regatului Unit din

Uniunea Europeană au intensificat dezbatările cu privire la valorile fundamentale și perspectivele UE. Viitorul UE este în prezent discutat printr-o serie de scenarii, printre care menținerea statu quo-ului, aprofundarea integrării în anumite țări și dezintegrarea completă. Analiza documentelor a fost utilizată ca metodă de cercetare pentru toate aceste aspecte ale studiului, ca și pentru datele obținute din revizuirea literaturii de specialitate și din rapoartele oficiale. În consecință, provocările cu care se confruntă Uniunea Europeană au fost examineate prin prisma scenariilor și raționamentelor potențiale. Analiza a conchis că viitorul UE este unul incert.

INTRODUCTION

The European Union is widely regarded as a success story of regional integration. At no time and in no region in history has there been an attempt to establish such a voluntary close union of states. So, what features make this regional union of states unique? First, the European community was formed through the convergence and harmonisation of national interests. The governments of Western European countries have pooled their national interests without external pressure. Second, the European Union remains a political structure in formation and has not yet taken its final shape. It is currently engaged in a regime-making process. Third, the Union is characterised by the fact that political will-formation and decision-making processes occur at multiple levels: national, regional, and local. Not only state actors, but also non-state organisations and social groups are involved. Fourth, the Union is a voluntary association of democratic states. Fifth, unlike other regional alliances, the Union has sought to unify the diversity and versatility of the participating states into a single structure. Therefore, there are many mechanisms for balancing existing differences both between and within states. Sixth, the Union is characterised as an intermediate structure between organisations with their own supranational community bodies and interstate/intergovernmental cooperation. The interplay among the components of this policy model constitutes the Union's distinctive institutional structure. With these features, the Union has emerged as a *sui generis* political structure, i.e., a political regime unique in history.

One of the main objectives of the European Union was to increase security, prosperity and stability across the continent through economic and political integration. In its early years, this structure, created to eliminate rivalry and hostility, especially between Germany and France, has both deepened and expanded over time. The EU's enlargement processes have not only increased the

number of its members but also changed the political and economic structure of the European continent. Moreover, through its deepening and enlargement policies, the EU has ensured peace and stability in continental Europe by resolving problems between member states in the 20th century.

Since September 11, 2001, the European Union has faced a range of internal and external threats. These threats have called into question the Union's fundamental values and functioning. Moreover, the deterioration within the EU has manifested in structural crises, economic inequalities, political divisions and social polarisation. In particular, economic disparities among member states have led to some countries growing faster than others, generating discontent and criticism within the Union. In addition, rising populist movements on the European political scene have strengthened anti-EU discourses, weakened the Union's decision-making mechanisms, and, at the same time, triggered debates about the Union's future.

The debate on the future of the EU centres on whether the crises within the Union can be resolved or whether the Union will continue to exist. Experts argue that this situation threatens values such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law, which are the founding principles of the EU. Moreover, the reforms and strategies proposed to address these crises have sparked debate about whether the EU requires an existential reassessment. These challenges suggest that not only economic and political unity, but also social unity must be restored.

In recent years, the European Union has faced complex challenges, including Brexit, the rise of populism, terrorism, regional conflicts, global competition, economic imbalances, and migration. These challenges have not only weakened the Union's internal solidarity but also triggered in-depth debates about the future of the European Union. In this context, the study will analyse the development of the European Union, designed as a "Peace Project", the dynamics arising from this process, and its effects on the European continent. In addition, the study will evaluate processes of change in the contemporary European Union from an analytical perspective; the leading causes and consequences of these changes will be discussed. In the remainder of the study, possibilities and scenarios for the future of the European Union will be proposed, and an in-depth assessment will be conducted of whether the EU will remain a single union, how it might evolve, or whether disintegration is a possibility.

In light of this information, the study examines a series of scenarios for the EU's future, including its continuation in its current form (the status quo scenario), deeper integration among certain countries (the closed core of Europe scenario), and its complete disintegration (the disintegration scenario). Based on

this, the study analyses the challenges facing the European Union, considering the scenarios listed above. For this analysis, the document analysis technique was employed within the scientific research methods framework, and data from literature reviews and official reports were analysed. Ultimately, it was concluded that the future of the European Union is uncertain.

THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS OF THE PEACE PROJECT EU AND ITS IMPACT ON THE EUROPEAN CONTINENT

The European Union was established as a peace project to promote peace, stability, and cooperation in Europe. Following the devastating effects of World War II, European leaders recognised the need for a model of international integration to secure long-term peace across the continent. The European Coal and Steel Community, established in 1951, was the first step towards this integration. Later, by the Treaty of Rome, it was transformed into the European Economic Community, which aimed to contain the sources of war through economic cooperation. Through processes of enlargement and deepening, the EU has become more than an economic community; it has also become an effective union in the political, social, and cultural spheres.

The development of the EU has not only brought peace and stability to the European continent but has also significantly strengthened fundamental principles, including economic prosperity, democratic values, and human rights.¹ The largely eliminated borders between European countries, the liberalisation of trade, the adoption of a common currency, and the integration of internal markets are among the EU's major contributions to continental Europe. At the same time, the EU has made Europe a global champion of peace and human rights and an important actor in world politics.² In this part of the study, the EU's development in the 20th century and its achievements will be analysed.

Building on the ideas of Ernst Haas, the founding members of the ECSC decided in 1957 to create an economic community based on the free movement of labour, goods, and services to address crises and problems within the community

¹ European Union, *Achievements and benefits*, in https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/achievements_en (Accessed on 05.04.2025).

² Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Avrupa Birliği'nin Tarihçesi* [History of the European Union], in https://www.ab.gov.tr/avrupa-birliginin-tarihcesi_105.html (Accessed on 05.04.2025).

and to give it a new identity.³ In this framework, the Treaty of Rome, signed in 1957, was designed to integrate the coal and steel sectors, as well as other economic and energy sectors.⁴ Thus, the Treaty of Rome established the European Atomic Energy Community and the European Economic Community (EEC).⁵ The EEC, established by the Treaty of Rome, constituted an essential step toward consolidating economic unity in Europe and deepening economic cooperation among member states.⁶

The EEC was radically revised with the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, and the Community entered a new phase. The basic principles and objectives of the EEC underpinned the structure and policies of the EU. The experience of the EEC has contributed to deeper EU integration and has significantly helped establish peace and stability in Europe. The Maastricht Treaty transformed **the European Economic Community into the European Union**, furthering Europe's economic and political integration.⁷ In the 1980s, economic integration in Europe accelerated, and significant steps were taken toward the completion of the Single Market and the abolition of economic borders. The adoption of the Single European Act in 1986 completed the internal market, while the need for deeper cooperation among member states was also raised.⁸ The Maastricht Treaty is considered the culmination of this process. The Treaty aimed not only to achieve economic union but also to integrate the political, foreign policy, and security fields. The Maastricht Treaty established the European Union on three main pillars:⁹

- European Communities: This pillar includes previous economic cooperation (European Economic Community, European Atomic Energy Community, European

³ Frank Richter, *Die Entstehung der Europäischen Union und die dafür notwendigen Grundlagenverträge* [The Emergence of the European Union and the Necessary Basic Treaties], Münster, GRIN Verlag, 1999, p. 5.

⁴ Lucia V. Graziatti, *The Treaty of Rome EEC and EURATOM 1957*, in "ABC Research Alert", Vol. 5, 2017, no. 3, p. 20.

⁵ European Commission. *Treaty Establishing the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom)*, in <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/summary/treaty-on-the-european-atomic-energy-community-euratom.html> (Accessed on 05.04.2025).

⁶ Tevfik Tankurt Batır, *The effects of the EU accession process on the Turkish Nation State Structure*. Master's Thesis, Dumlupınar University, 2006.

⁷ Rolf-Dieter Krause, *Europa auf der Kippe, vierzehn Argumente gegen den Vertrag von Maastricht*, München, Heyne Verlag, 1992, p. 53.

⁸ Rudolf Hrbek, *Kontroversen und Manifeste zum Vertrag von Maastricht*, in "Integration", 1992, no. 4, pp. 225-228.

⁹ Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Avrupa Birliği'nin Tarihçesi*.

Coal and Steel Community). In particular, economic integration and the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU) are covered under this pillar. The ultimate goal of EMU is to create a single European currency, the Euro.

- Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP): For the European Union to become a global actor, the need to develop a common foreign policy and security strategy was emphasised. In this context, the aim was to ensure closer cooperation among member states on foreign policy issues and coordination in the field of defence.

- Cooperation in Justice and Home Affairs: This pillar includes cooperation in the field of justice, internal security, border controls, immigration policies and criminal law. Member States have agreed to cooperate more closely in combating crime, counterterrorism, and migration and asylum policies.¹⁰

One of the most striking elements of the Maastricht Treaty is the concept of Economic and Monetary Union.¹¹ This union envisaged the creation of a single European currency, the Euro. The Treaty set out the rules and economic criteria for the gradual introduction of the Euro. These criteria included the ratio of public debt to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the budget deficit, the inflation rate, and long-term interest rates.¹² In 1999, the Euro was introduced in electronic form, and in physical form (paper money and coins) in 2002. Thus, the Euro became the official currency of the EU, and the Maastricht Treaty was the legal basis for this process.

The Treaty of Nice was signed on February 26, 2001, and entered into force on February 1, 2003. This Treaty was drafted to implement institutional reforms to support the EU's enlargement process. In particular, it aimed to make decision-making processes more efficient to accommodate future EU members. To prepare for the enlargement of the EU, the Treaty of Nice amended the institutional representation structures of bodies such as the European Commission and the European Parliament. A structure was created to include

¹⁰ CVCE, *The third pillar of the European Union: justice and home affairs*, in <https://www.cvce.eu/en/recherche/unit-content/-/unit/02bb76df-d066-4c08-a58a-d4686a3e68ff/9370a173-d882-4484-974a-f4002c3bd17a> (Accessed on 05.04.2025).

¹¹ Bedriye Tunçsiper, Şimal Yakut, *Avrupa Birliği'nin Ekonomik Parasal Birlik Hedefi ve Türkiye'nin Uyumu* [The European Union's Economic and Monetary Union and Turkey's Harmonisation], in "Journal of Balıkesir University Institute of Social Sciences", Vol. 1, 1998, no. 1, p. 102.

¹² Yonca Kaya, *Avrupa Birliği'nin Ekonomik ve Parasal Birlik Hedefi* [The European Union's Goal of Economic and Monetary Union], in "Gümrük Birliği Sürecinde Türkiye Dergisi" [Journal of Türkiye in the Customs Union Process], 1996, no. 21-22, p. 54.

more member states. Qualified majority voting was introduced in EU decision-making processes. In this system, a mechanism has been established in which decisions are taken according to the voting weight of member states.¹³ The Treaty of Nice aimed to ensure faster and more effective decision-making in the EU.¹⁴ The number of seats in the European Parliament was increased. This arrangement was made to ensure the representation of new member states during the enlargement process. In addition, the Nice Treaty reorganised the European Commission's membership system, and the number of members was adjusted to reflect the enlarged EU structure. In the same Treaty, the 'Flexible cooperation' mechanism was introduced. This mechanism allowed some Member States to participate in EU policies at a different pace than others. This paved the way for some Member States to move faster in a policy area, while others could join later. With the Treaty of Nice, steps were taken further to coordinate the EU's defence and security policies, and the European Security and Defence Policy was strengthened.

Since the establishment of the European Union, the most important dynamic of the Union has been the process of enlargement. These processes are based on the candidate countries' adoption of EU values and their meeting of the economic and political criteria. Enlargement is an important foreign policy instrument aimed at increasing peace, stability, and prosperity in Europe. Since its establishment, the EU has undergone five major rounds of enlargement. In 1973, the first wave of enlargement occurred with the accession of the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Denmark. In 1981, Greece joined the Union, followed by Spain and Portugal in 1986. In 1995, Austria, Finland, and Sweden joined the EU at the end of the Cold War. This enlargement enabled the Union to expand into Northern Europe.¹⁵ Between 2004 and 2007, the most significant enlargement of the EU took place with the accession of Central and Eastern European countries. In 2004, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Cyprus and Malta joined the EU. In 2007, Bulgaria and

¹³ CVCE, *The Nice Treaty of 26 February 2001 – European organisations*, in <https://www.cvce.eu/en/education/unit-content/-/unit/d5906df5-4f83-4603-85f7-0cab24b9fe1/0e3b27d7-d897-4e29-960f-8b1c2f23ceec> (Accessed on 15.05.2025).

¹⁴ Weidenfeld Werner, Wolfgang Wessels, Funda Tekin (Eds.), *Europa von A bis Z: Taschenbuch der Europäischen Integration*, Wiesbaden, Springer VS, 2023, pp. 45-46.

¹⁵ Rıdvan S. Karluk, *Avrupa Birliği (Kuruluşu, Gelişmesi, Gelişmesi, Kurumları)* [European Union (Establishment, Development, Enlargement, Institutions)], İstanbul, Beta Yayınları, 2011, pp. 85-112.

Romania became members.¹⁶ This enlargement was seen as a project to reunite Europe after the Cold War. In 2013, with Croatia's accession, the EU concluded its last wave of enlargement.

The EU's enlargement policy has had many positive consequences for the Union. First, enlargement has stabilised Central and Eastern Europe and fostered a climate of peace. The Union has contributed to the democratization processes of the new members. Secondly, the enlarged EU has enabled the common market to expand, and the new member states have undertaken economic reforms, creating a more integrated economic structure. Third, candidate countries have undertaken significant reforms to align with the EU *acquis*. This implies substantial changes in both the political and legal spheres.

In the 21st century, the EU has not been as successful as it was in the 20th century. The reasons for this are increased diversity, economic crises, migration challenges, rising populism and nationalism, institutional bottlenecks, and geopolitical challenges in the international arena.¹⁷ All these factors have weakened the Union's decision-making capacity and its ability to deal with crises. In the 21st century, the EU has had to develop new solutions and strategies to deal with these challenges, both internal and external. However, these solutions and experiments have not prevented the EU's effectiveness in many areas from declining in recent years.

CHANGE IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: CAUSES AND EFFECTS

In the early 2000s, the EU realised one of the most significant enlargement waves in its history. In 2004, the enlargement process admitted 12 new member states to the Union: the Czech Republic, Estonia, Cyprus, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, and Bulgaria. With this enlargement, the EU aimed to end the East-West division of Europe after the Cold War by expanding eastwards. At the same time, through its enlargement policy, the EU sought to disseminate the values of democracy, the rule of law, and the market economy to the new member states. However, while the EU's enlargement

¹⁶ Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Enlargement of European Union*, in https://www.ab.gov.tr/enlargement_109_en.html (Accessed on 05.04.2025).

¹⁷ European Commission – International Partnerships, *A renewed multilateralism fit for the 21st century: the EU's Agenda*, in https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/renewed-multilateralism-fit-21st-century-eus-agenda-2021-02-17_en (Accessed on 07.04.2025).

in the early 2000s increased its global influence, it also posed challenges. Foremost among these challenges are the significant differences between the economic, political and social structures of the new member states and those of the existing member states.¹⁸ In the same period, in parallel with enlargement, the EU embarked on deepening intra-union integration. Through this process, the EU sought further to strengthen political and economic cooperation among member states. Following the introduction of the Euro in 1999, the monetary union deepened, and the European Central Bank assumed a central role. This process enhanced economic coordination among member states and helped the EU become an actor in the global economic arena.

An essential change in the EU in the 2000s was the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty. With this treaty, the EU strengthened its institutional structure, making decision-making processes more efficient and aiming to increase the Union's democratic legitimacy. Under the same treaty, the powers of the European Parliament were expanded, and new positions, such as 'President of the European Council' and 'High Representative', were created. However, the problems created within the EU by the enlargement and deepening processes in the 2000s could not be resolved. In addition, the 2008 global financial crisis and the Eurozone debt crisis have shown that economic solidarity and cooperation within the union have weakened.¹⁹ This has led to the rise of anti-EU movements in some member states.²⁰ Moreover, waves of migration from new member states have contributed to the strengthening of populist and nationalist movements in Western Europe. The rise of nationalism has led to an increase in xenophobia and racism within the Union. This is considered inconsistent with the Union's European citizenship.²¹

¹⁸ Thomas Dietz, Ian Manners, Richard G. Whitman, *The Changing Nature of International Institutions in Europe: The Challenge of the European Union*, in "European Integration", Vol. 33, 2011, no. 2, pp. 120-125.

¹⁹ European Parliament, *A Decade on from the Crisis. Main Responses and Remaining Challenges*, in https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/642253/EPRS_BRI%282019%29642253_EN.pdf (Accessed on 06.05.2025).

²⁰ André Brie, *Gegensätzliche Befürwortungen der Osterweiterung*, in Eugen Faude, Hans Watzek, Kurt Fenske (Eds.), *Eine kritische Betrachtung des EU-Beitritts der Länder Mitteleuropas aus linker Sicht*, Berlin, Februar 2001, p. 50, https://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/rls_uploads/pdfs/Manuskripte/manuskripte11.pdf (Accessed on 07.10.2024).

²¹ Leonas Pausch, *Conditional European: Stigmatisation, Identity, and Populism in Central and Eastern Europe*, in "Cambridge Journal of Political Affairs", Vol. 5, 2024, no. 2, p. 34-35.

In the 21st century, these developments and other global challenges have prompted significant debates about the future of the continent and the EU. These debates have manifested in many ways. For instance, the first of these is the radical changes in the political sphere within the EU. Rising nationalism, populism and anti-EU movements in Europe threaten traditional politics and the idea of a common European identity. Brexit, in particular, as the most concrete example of these dynamics, has caused a major rupture within the European Union and raised profound questions about the union's future.²² The decline in political cohesion among member states and the prioritisation of national interests by some governments have weakened the EU's spirit of solidarity and cooperation. Secondly, the changes in the European Union's demographic structure are striking. In particular, the ageing population in Europe is placing significant pressure on economic growth and social welfare policies. At the same time, migration and refugee flows are reshaping the social fabric of Europe, leading to substantial disagreements among member states over migration policies.²³ While migration has the potential to support economic growth and the labour force, it has also posed challenges for social cohesion and integration within the Union and, consequently, security issues. The wave of migration from both new member states of the Union and countries experiencing conflicts in the Middle East and Africa has not only challenged the EU's policies but also had a profound impact on Europe.²⁴ This sudden influx of migrants has seriously shaken Europe and put the union in a difficult situation by revealing the inadequacy of the existing order. As a result, Europe and the international community proved to be ill-prepared for large-scale migration flows. It has become clear that there are insufficient systems and infrastructure to protect migrants. These shortcomings have enabled leaders employing populist rhetoric to exploit these gaps, thereby undermining the liberal, tolerant social structure that has long been the foundation of the Union.

The European Union is also undergoing a major economic transformation. While the European Union positioned itself as an economic superpower in the second half of the 20th century, it is today struggling to cope with intensifying

²² Jan Zielonka, *Counter-Revolution: Liberal Europe in Retreat*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 24-25.

²³ Kathleen England, Natasha Azzopardi-Musca, *Demographic Trends and Public Health in Europe*, in "European Journal of Public Health", Vol. 27, 2017, no. 4, p. 10-11.

²⁴ Council on Foreign Relations, *Europe's Migration Crisis*, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/europe-migration-crisis> (Accessed on 16.05.2025).

global competition, the rise of China, trade tensions with the United States, and the economic transformations brought about by the digital revolution. This process has led the EU to develop new strategies to ensure its economic sustainability. In this context, the European Commission published the "Economic Forecasts Report" on February 15, 2024, which presents economic indicators for the 27 member states, the EU, and the Eurozone.²⁵ The European Commission report covers the period from 2023 to 2025. The published report states that growth in the EU and the Eurozone will be lower than expected in 2023. The reasons for this include household purchasing power, tight monetary policies, and a decline in external demand. However, the report predicts an acceleration in growth in the second half of 2024 and a return to stability in the union by 2025. According to the report, as inflation and energy prices fall, consumption will recover, and investment projects will revive.²⁶ The report emphasised that the end of energy subsidies by member countries and rising transportation costs may exert upward pressure on prices. Moreover, uncertainties stemming from China and the US that affect global politics, protracted geopolitical tensions, the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and their expansion, climate risks, and an increase in extreme weather events may undermine these expectations. As the report suggests, the EU is undergoing a severe economic deterioration. Undoubtedly, the EU's ability to overcome this deterioration will be determined by global problems outside the EU's sphere of influence, such as the effects of the Russia-Ukraine war, the possibility that the Palestinian war in the Middle East, caused by Israel, will spread to the region, and the energy and food crisis arising from these conflicts.

Understandably, the changes in Europe are closely linked to shifts in the international system. Russia's growing geopolitical pressure on Europe, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, China's economic and diplomatic power, the United States' evolving foreign policy strategies, and instability caused by conflicts in the Middle East and Africa have necessitated a reshaping of the European Union's foreign policy priorities. Security and border security have become areas of vital

²⁵ European Commission (Directorate-General for Economic and Financial Affairs), *European Economic Forecast, Institutional Paper 268*, in https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/publications/european-economic-forecast-winter-2024_en (Accessed on 05.05.2025).

²⁶ European Commission *Spring 2024 Economic Forecast: A Gradual Expansion Amid High Geopolitical Risks*, in https://economy-finance.ec.europa.eu/economic-forecast-and-surveys/economic-forecasts/spring2024-economic-forecast-gradual-expansion-amid-high-geopolitical-risks_en (Accessed on 04.05. 2025).

importance for the EU, and the Union has sought to develop a common defence policy. However, the EU has not been successful in this regard due to divergent views among member states.

Another problem the EU has faced in recent years is the migration and refugee crisis. This is one of the most challenging issues for the EU's social solidarity. The influx of migrants from the Middle East, Africa and South Asia has led to a significant social and political crisis in Europe, especially since 2015.²⁷ While migrants may have helped address labour shortages and demographic imbalances in European countries, they have also posed serious challenges for integration, cultural cohesion, social cohesion, and security. Although the EU is seeking to reform the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) to address this problem, there are significant disagreements among member states regarding the admission and distribution of migrants. Some Eastern European countries are entirely opposed to the admission of migrants, while countries such as Germany and Sweden have adopted more inclusive policies. The EU's ability to tackle this problem depends on its success in establishing a common migration and refugee policy. However, different approaches among member states complicate this process.

Moreover, recent income inequality in the European Union is a major cause of social unrest. Increasing unemployment rates and low wages, particularly following the economic crises in southern European countries, have undermined young people's expectations for the future. It has even led to the emergence of regional economic inequality within the Union.²⁸ Although the EU provides various development funds and social programs to address economic inequalities, the diversity of local economic conditions limits the effectiveness of these policies. In this regard, the report published on May 27, 2024, by Judith Niehues and Maximilian Stockhausen of the German Economic Institute clearly reveals income distribution inequality in the EU.²⁹ The report shows that Slovakia, Slovenia and the Czech Republic have the most equal income

²⁷ Tara Varma, Sophie Roehse, *Understanding Europe's Turn on Migration*, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/understanding-europes-turn-on-migration/> (Accessed on 06.05.2025).

²⁸ European Commission. *EU Youth Report 2015*, in https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/reports/youth-report-015_en.pdf (Accessed on 06.05.2025).

²⁹ Judith Niehues, Maximilian Stockhausen, *Aktuelle Trends und Herausforderungen für die Verteilungspolitik, IW-Verteilungsreport 2024*, IW-Report, Nr. 49, 2024, Köln – Berlin, in https://www.iwkoeln.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Studien/Report/PDF/2024/IW-Report_2024-Verteilungsreport-2024.pdf (Accessed on 08.05.2025).

distribution. The report also indicates that Bulgaria, with 38.4%, Lithuania, with 36.2% and Latvia, with 34.3%, have the highest levels of income inequality. This is consistent with the countries' poverty risk rates. For example, the poverty risk rate in the Czech Republic is 10.2%, while in Bulgaria it is 22.9%. The average poverty risk rate across the EU is 16.5%. By considering the EU as a single country, the report examines the distribution of income across Europe more broadly. In this context, calculations are conducted using purchasing power parities, accounting for price-level differences across countries. Accordingly, the report states that 1000 Euros in Germany has less purchasing power for goods and services compared to other EU countries. When total individual incomes across the EU are calculated in purchasing power terms, the average need is approximately EUR 1651. According to these data, approximately 20% of EU citizens are at risk of poverty based on purchasing power. The report also examines the national poverty risks of specific Member States and their relationship to the overall situation in Europe. Luxembourg stands out with a poverty rate of 18.5% in national data. Although the risk of poverty in Eastern European countries (e.g., Hungary, Bulgaria) is low at the national level, a comparison of purchasing power across Europe indicates that these countries face high poverty risks. Compared to the EU-wide income distribution, Germany has the highest purchasing power in the Union. In terms of poverty risk, Germany has one of the lowest risks in Europe, with 7.1%. Moreover, 48% of individuals in Germany are in the 'middle income' group, compared with 46.3% across Europe. These data clearly illustrate the complex nature of income distribution in Europe and the economic disparities between countries.³⁰ The assessment of poverty risks from different national and EU perspectives emphasises the need for social policies and economic reforms in this area.

As can be seen, migration, economic inequalities and cultural identity issues have been at the centre of populist discourses and led anti-EU movements to gain strength. Populism has come to be seen as a factor that weakens the EU's common policies and threatens the social cohesion of the union. Democratic backsliding and violations of the rule of law in countries such as Austria, Poland and Hungary have deepened political and social conflicts within the EU. Today, although the EU is seeking to tighten its policies to defend democratic values and protect the rule of law in order

³⁰ Judith Niehues, Maximilian Stockhausen, *Einkommensverteilung in Europa: Wo stehen wir?* in "IW-Kurzbericht", 2024, Nr. 32, https://www.iwkoeln.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Studien/Kurzberichte/PDF/2024/IWKurzbericht_2024-Einkommensverteilung-Europa.pdf (Accessed on 11.09.2024).

to combat populist movements, social inequalities play a major role in the rise of populism. Therefore, the EU's long-term solutions to this issue are closely linked to economic and social justice policies. Today, however, despite its multicultural character, the EU faces serious challenges in integrating different cultural groups. This has led to an increase in xenophobia and racism in some communities within the Union, which has become a threat to social cohesion.³¹

The stability of the European Union after the Cold War is now being questioned for the reasons mentioned above. Although the EU is an important regional organisation with the capacity to address societal problems, it faces difficulties in finding practical solutions across all areas due to the complexity of these problems and political differences among member states. The Union's most significant advantages are its capacity to develop common policies and its structures that promote solidarity. However, sensitivities over national sovereignty limit the EU's ability to create deeper integration and common policies.

REFLECTIONS ON THE FUTURE OF THE EU: POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENTS AND SCENARIOS

In this study, various scenarios for the future of the European Union are discussed, as the European Union has faced numerous political, economic, and social challenges in recent years. These scenarios assess Europe's current situation and the challenges it faces and offer assumptions and predictions about how the union will be shaped in the future. The main factors influencing potential scenarios for Europe's future include the continuation of economic integration, the pursuit of political unity, demographic changes, global competition, and foreign policy issues. Moreover, it is thought that the future of the European Union will be shaped primarily by how the fundamental characteristics of the European order evolve. These attributes are: (1) the ability of the EU's political system to act, its effectiveness and acceptability, (2) the number of Member States and with it the geographical scope of European integration, and (3) the ability of the EU to exert a significant influence on international policy developments.

Within the framework of these statements, the following scenarios can be

³¹ European Commission, *Report on the implementation of the EU Anti-Racism Action Plan 2020-2025 and on National Action Plans Against Racism and Discrimination*, in <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52024DC0419> (Accessed on 11.05.2025).

envisioned for the future shape of the EU:

Disintegration and Dissolution Scenario (Titanic Scenario). This scenario refers to a major crisis or catastrophe that the European Union could face. It envisages the emergence of an unexpected situation that could have profound effects on the EU's policies, economy, or internal solidarity. In this scenario, existing fissures within the EU would deepen, potentially leading to the disintegration of the union. The rise of populist movements and demands for national sovereignty could undermine confidence in the EU's co-decision-making mechanisms. Disagreements over issues such as economic crises, migration flows, and border security could lead member states to move away from the union's fundamental principles. In such a scenario, the EU's influence in the international arena would diminish, and the image of a Europe weakening in global competition would emerge. For the EU, this scenario could include secessionist movements (e.g., Brexit), major economic crises, migration and refugee flows, and major events such as terrorism, climate change, or health crises. To mitigate the risk of the Titanic syndrome, EU member states need to cooperate more effectively. It is also crucial for the EU to prepare for such scenarios, reviewing existing policies and developing innovative solutions. This is also considered essential for increasing economic resilience and ensuring social cohesion. It is also inevitable that the EU establish comprehensive risk management strategies to reduce the likelihood and minimise the impacts of such major disasters.

Closed Core Europe Scenario.³² In this scenario, disagreements among EU member states over deepening integration become more pronounced, and a group of countries may move beyond the EU's existing structures and pursue deeper cooperation among themselves. These countries would integrate more closely across areas such as defence, foreign policy, and economics to be more effective against external threats. Other member states would demand less integration, and the EU would become looser, like a free trade area. This scenario implies the emergence of a 'core' and 'periphery' divide within the EU, with a core group led by powerful countries, especially in defence policies. This would imply a grouping of member states within the EU. Such a scenario would mean that the expected achievements of the EU reform process would not be realised. The strategic idea of a federal political union may even be lost. Moreover, the

³² Von Franco Algieri, Janis A. Emmanouilidis, Roman Maruhn, *Europas Zukunft – fünf EU-szenarien. (CAP working-paper)*, München, Centrum für angewandte Politikforschung (C.A.P.), 2003, p. 6.

EU's inability to address the consequences of enlargement and the requirements of a new global political order could lead to growing disillusionment among citizens with the European project. This would mean that EU citizens would no longer identify with the idea of a united Europe. In the Closed Core Europe Scenario, the advantages of the internal market, the common currency, and the freedom of movement remain important. However, power-seeking realist politicians may refrain from taking further steps toward integration. Only a few member states within the union could deepen cooperation within the inter-state framework. In this scenario, core European countries operating outside the treaty framework consider that intergovernmental cooperation is the only realistic means of advancing their shared interests globally.³³ The EU's institutional system and complex decision-making processes would no longer be effective. Moreover, some members' obstructionist attitudes may impede the EU's emergence as a global power. The most powerful member states set the strategic and contextual baselines in Core Europe. In times of crisis, the initially informal coordination among heads of state and government evolves into forums for consultation and cooperation grounded in pragmatism. Moreover, cooperation in Core Europe is based on intergovernmental structures. A special coordination secretariat outside the traditional EU structures therefore regulates operational and organisational cohesion between the states concerned. Transnational institutions such as the Commission or the European Court of Justice do not play an active role in this context. We can state that, in such an approach, cooperation focused on functional efficiency confers legitimacy on the national parliaments of the states concerned.³⁴ Although some member states support the Closed Core Europe scenario, others oppose it for two reasons. First, core European countries would not be interested in enlarging the core for power-political reasons. Secondly, medium and small EU member states would be concerned that, in the absence of an international institution with the obligation to ensure a balance of interests, the larger states in the core would exert more influence and dominance over the union.

Monnet Method, or Status Quo Scenario. This scenario envisages the EU continuing to exist with its current structure. Some member states, which may resist demands for reform and further integration, may seek to preserve the union's existing borders and powers. In the status quo scenario, the EU may

³³ Bilent Kaya, *Avrupa Entegrasyon Modelleri* [European Integration Models], in "Birikim", 1999, no. 128, pp. 52-60.

³⁴ Von Franco Algieri, Janis A. Emmanouilidis, Roman Maruhn, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

continue in its current form but may be less effective in the global arena.

This scenario implies that no major reforms occur within the EU's current system, yet the integration process continues, albeit slowly. In such a scenario, the union would survive with partial reforms but would not be expected to make a major institutional or political breakthrough. The EU's functioning is maintained, particularly in the internal market, through key elements such as the Schengen area and the euro. In this scenario, however, the EU's capacity to act as a global actor would be limited, and there would be insufficient progress in solving the economic and social problems of the member states. Public expectations of the EU would therefore diminish, but the union would be protected from complete disintegration and fragmentation.

Two-Speed Europe Scenario. In this model, deeper integration may occur among some EU member states, whereas others may prefer to remain within a looser structure.³⁵ This scenario has become increasingly debated, particularly since Brexit. Leading EU member states, such as Germany and France, may move toward faster integration, whereas other countries may take more cautious, slower steps. This approach aims to provide flexibility in response to the union's diverse needs. However, in the long run, this scenario risks exacerbating inequalities and intra-union differentiation. In this scenario, divergence between EU member states could emerge. The idea of a 'two-class Europe' could create a distinction between EU citizens as 'first class' and 'second class.' This could adversely affect the integration steps of the union, which has introduced various regulations and innovations to enhance participation in decision-making processes.³⁶ While trying to give a new direction and momentum to integration, the EU should be careful not to create a perception of 'second class.'

Global Power Scenario. The global power scenario refers to a situation in which the EU becomes a power on par with the US on the world stage. According to this scenario, the EU undergoes a major process of integration across the economic, military, and political spheres; member states delegate powers to the EU on important issues such as foreign, defence, and social policies; and the union

³⁵ Report on European Union (29 December 1975), CVCE, in https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/1997/10/13/284c9784-9bd2-472b-b704-ba4bb1f3122d/publishable_en.pdf (Accessed on 10.08.2024).

³⁶ Özlem Sefer, *Farklılaştırılmış Entegrasyon Modelleri ve Avrupa Birliği Vatandaşları Üzerindeki Etkileri* [Differentiated Integration Models and European Union Citizens. The Effects on the Economy], in "İzmir Journal of Economics", Vol. 37, 2022, no. 1, p. 80.

participates in world politics as a single power. In the process, a strong sense of unity develops among European citizens, and the EU institutions gain more legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Militarily, the EU develops its own strategic forces and gains a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. In this scenario, the EU is expected to take a more proactive role in addressing global challenges while competing with great powers such as the United States, China and Russia. The EU's leadership in areas such as reducing energy dependence, combating climate change and technological innovation could increase the chances of success in this scenario. For this scenario to be realised, there should be no opposition among union members, no problems should arise, and member states should be in solidarity with one another on all issues.

These scenarios illustrate potential pathways of change the EU may face and how they will interact with dynamics within and outside the EU. Each scenario offers a different approach to the challenges of the EU's internal functioning and its role on the global political stage. In this context, the future structure and influence of the EU will largely depend on the level of cooperation between member states and its capacity to respond to global developments.

CONCLUSIONS

The European Union emerged in the mid-20th century, particularly after the devastating effects of World War II, as an integration project aimed at achieving lasting peace, prosperity, and stability on the European continent. Initially conceived as an economic cooperation initiative to end historical enmities between countries such as France and Germany, the project has expanded and deepened over time to become a comprehensive union across the political, social, and cultural spheres. As one of the most significant integration projects in Europe, the EU has contributed to peace on the continent, accelerated economic development, and strengthened solidarity among member states through its enlargement and deepening policies throughout the 20th century. However, in the 21st century, the EU has begun to face multi-layered crises. Factors such as economic inequalities, the rise of populist movements, political divisions, migration crises, and global competition have created profound uncertainties about the EU's future. These crises have threatened not only the EU's economic strength but also its political solidarity and social cohesion. Brexit, as one of the most concrete examples of these crises, dealt a significant blow to the EU's basic structure and led to increased anti-EU discourse in other member states. Populist movements have weakened democratic values and strengthened demands for

national sovereignty, while democratic backsliding has been particularly noticeable in Central and Eastern Europe.

These multifaceted crises facing the EU have prompted debates about the union's future. Many experts and political scientists have proposed various scenarios for the EU's future trajectory. These scenarios offer different approaches that question the need to reform the EU's internal functioning and its role in the global arena. The Titanic Scenario posits that if the crises facing the EU cannot be resolved, the union will face a serious risk of disintegration. In this scenario, the EU's internal solidarity is weakened by the rise of populist movements, deepening economic and political inequalities among member states, migration crises, and disagreements on issues such as border security. According to this scenario, incompatibilities within the union will increase, and the EU may become a structure incapable of making effective decisions. Moreover, the EU's dissolution in the face of economic crises, nationalist politics, and external threats may cause Europe to lose its global competitiveness and become a weakening actor on the world stage. This scenario is most likely to materialise when populist policies are robust. The EU's dissolution and subsequent disintegration are not considered possible today. For this scenario to materialise, the union would need to face much deeper crises and greater political disharmony within the union. Moreover, the EU's strong institutions and experience make it difficult for the union to disintegrate completely.

Another scenario for the EU's future is the Closed Core Europe scenario. This scenario envisages EU member states progressing at different rates of integration. Some powerful member states may demand greater economic and political integration, whereas other smaller member states may prefer to participate less. This could lead to a division of 'core' and 'periphery' countries within the EU. The core countries may cooperate more deeply in areas such as defence, foreign policy and the economy, while the periphery countries may remain partially independent of this process. This scenario could undermine the EU's cohesion and create distinct classes within the union. This scenario is likely to be realised today, as there are already examples of integration within the EU at varying speeds across certain areas. This could erode the EU's cohesion over the long term and increase the likelihood of a recurrence of the current scenario.

The Monnet Method, or Status Quo Scenario, assumes the EU will maintain its current structure and proceed with incremental steps rather than major reforms. According to this scenario, the EU will seek to preserve its existence gradually, avoiding major moves amid economic and political crises. However, it will be difficult for the EU to increase its influence as a global actor. As

integration proceeds slowly, economic and social problems among member states may not be fully resolved. This could lower public expectations within the EU and jeopardise the long-term sustainability of the union. This scenario is as likely as the previous one. Due to its current bureaucratic structure, the EU avoids making significant and rapid changes. This strategy of avoidance will be insufficient, particularly in the face of major crises. In this case, the EU's global effectiveness will be limited.

Another scenario envisaged for the European Union is the Two-Speed Europe Scenario. This scenario envisions a different trajectory for the European Union's integration process. In the model, while some member states of the Union achieve faster and deeper integration, other countries remain within a looser framework of cooperation. In other words, while some EU member states achieve a higher level of collaboration in areas such as politics, the economy, and defence, others are less affected by this process or make slower progress. By recognising the EU's different levels of integration, this model aims to create a more flexible structure that aligns with the needs and demands of the member states. However, while this flexible structure may make the EU more resilient, in the long run, it may create differences within the Union. This model may even foster the idea of a 'two-class Europe' among European citizens. The emergence of a distinction between 'first class' and 'second class' among EU citizens could, in the long run, undermine the Union's political cohesion. Compared with the other scenarios, this scenario is much more suitable for the current structure of the EU. In addition to its suitability, it can be regarded as an advantage given the EU's flexibility. This scenario, which may be advantageous for short-term problem-solving, may lead to deep divisions within the EU in the long term.

The Global Power Scenario envisions the EU becoming a global superpower comparable to the United States. In this scenario, member states would transfer more of their powers to the European Union in vital areas, including foreign policy, defence, energy, and social policy. This would transform the EU into a structure capable of competing with great powers such as the US, China and Russia in global affairs. In this scenario, the EU is expected to become a leading actor in international security and defence policies and to increase its strategic independence. This scenario offers the EU a significant opportunity to accelerate its political integration and play a stronger role in the international arena. However, realising this scenario requires full solidarity and consensus among EU members. Such a scenario is difficult to realise in the short term, given serious differences among EU member states on political cohesion and foreign policy issues. In the long run, however, the EU's desire to transform its economic power

into political power makes this scenario partially realisable.

These scenarios for the EU's future offer different perspectives on the Union's internal functioning and global role, while outlining possible solutions to the challenges it faces. The EU's future depends primarily on the extent of cooperation among member states and on its response to global developments. Without successful reforms to address the Union's internal problems, the EU is likely to disintegrate or become dysfunctional. On the other hand, if the EU can take the necessary steps to become a global actor, it can assume a stronger role on the world stage. Moreover, the economic, political and social challenges facing the EU will greatly shape its future. Conceived initially as a project of peace and stability in Europe, the EU today faces the need for deep reforms to survive. While accelerated integration and a stronger political structure can help the EU achieve its goal of becoming a global actor, internal divisions and crises make the EU's future uncertain. The EU's responses to global challenges and internal crises will determine its capacity to survive and its role on the world stage.

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