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A major turning point

Jean-Dominique GIULIANI

In the last five years Europe has undergone more change, and at a faster pace, than ever before. Events have been the driving force behind this. The pandemic put our continent to the test; wars, followed by Trump, have challenged it. These developments were unforeseeable, and no one can claim *in hindsight* that they had anticipated these profound breaks with the old order.

Europeans find themselves caught in a perfect storm that is forcing them to adapt to the new world order, even if this means questioning the rules and procedures that have governed the Union since its inception. This is indeed a major turning point for Europe[1].

Is it managing to navigate this transition effectively? The scale of the crises it has faced has forced it to respond, sometimes with success that has been underestimated, often with excessive rigidity. Existential questions lie ahead in a difficult and unpredictable context.

EUROPE UNDER ATTACK

"We are at war. War has been declared on us!" What European citizen would not be surprised by such a statement today?

And yet, a war of attrition is indeed being waged against us by our adversaries: Russia, of course, but now also our former American ally, under China's sly gaze and the mixed feelings of others. A war of perception, of influence, of narrative; it is a cultural assault. The military have described it as "below the threshold" of physical confrontation – a war that is sometimes difficult to pin down, but which may ultimately prove even more deadly. This is indeed a full-scale offensive against who we are.

The European Union has been too successful. It has exceeded its original objectives, restoring stability to the 'continent of wars', bringing unexpected prosperity to 416 million Europeans. The average income of a European is €43,000, whilst in Russia this lies at €15,000, in China €12,700 and in India

€2,400. Admittedly, in terms of purchasing power parity, the gaps are narrowing, but the hierarchy remains the same.

For Russians, Europe is the example on its borders that is best placed to overthrow the current police state. To divide it, weaken it and destroy it is and therefore an existential issue. For the United States, Europe embodies a gentle, peaceful path that undermines its own certainties and its excessive confidence in force rather than law, dialogue and trade. This is therefore a cultural battle in the strongest sense of the term. For China, Europe is a distant entity that affords itself the luxury of diversity and respect for its internal differences— rich pickings to plunder. Finally, Europe's tricky situation is welcomed by those frustrated and wounded by Europe's long domination, who believe that historical revenge might bring them solace.

All have therefore decided to weaken Europe by any means necessary. It is clear that Russia and its intelligence services are at work to support factionalism, fund extremists and undermine social cohesion. The use of propaganda is not limited to social media. Attempts at widespread corruption of the elites, the excessive use of the most age-old propaganda tactics, and orchestrated campaigns of cyber-hacking, theft and sabotage are now part of daily life for Europe's government officials.

Elections have been marred by proven foreign interference, as in Romania in 2024, which was ultimately forced to cancel them; others have been subject to unprecedented pressure, as in Bulgaria, Moldova, Slovakia and Hungary. European

[1] This text is taken from the "Schuman Report on Europe: The State of the Union 2026"; published by Éditions Hémisphères, due out on 28 May.

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democratic processes are now being violently and systematically attacked.

All this has been confirmed and documented by governments and parliaments, from Germany to France, from Poland to the Baltic states, and as far as Montenegro, which even experienced an attempted coup.

So as not to alarm Europeans, and because this 'phony war'—whose mechanisms have been known since time immemorial—had never reached this level before, European public opinion is behaving as if nothing were amiss. And their leaders, whilst calling for a "war economy", have been unwilling – whether out of caution or half-heartedness – to publicly acknowledge a state of war against those who have declared it upon them.

We therefore find ourselves in a dangerous situation. We see the attacks as they draw near but are not keen to overestimate them. The risk is however that they will be underestimated.

This has been the case with Trump's United States, much to European astonishment. All of Trump's and MAGA's (Make America Great Again) official and partisan rhetoric aims to discredit Europe, to portray it as far weaker than it really is – a view far from being shared by American businesses, researchers worldwide and economists.

The aim is to demoralise Europe through contempt, hyperbole and, sadly, interference and direct intervention in elections and political affairs. We witnessed Secretary of State Rubio and Vice-President Vance campaigning in Hungary in a bid to save Viktor Orbán from defeat in the parliamentary elections on 12 April.

The White House's insults towards European leaders are openly acknowledged, whether directed at the British Prime Minister "*who is no Churchill*", Emmanuel Macron "*who will soon be leaving office*" and "*whose opinion doesn't matter*", or the German Chancellor for whom "*the anniversary of the D-Day landings isn't a very pleasant day*"!

Beyond the vulgarity and the 'repeated blunders' that betray a profound ignorance of other countries, global

issues and international relations, this behaviour—which undoubtedly reflects the views of a tiny minority of citizens manipulated by Trump and his supporters—reveals a far more dangerous struggle. By claiming that European rules prohibiting the glorification of Nazism, online hate speech and extremist rhetoric are obstacles to 'freedom of expression', the US authorities are attacking the very heart of the European spirit and legal system, which, having learnt the lessons of our tragic history, dictatorships and the past successes of criminal regimes, strive to prevent their return. In doing so, they are aligning themselves with the Kremlin, which seeks to legitimise the "West's perverse decline" and to portray anti-discrimination measures as "amoral laxity".

By extending these rules—born of our tragic national experiences—to the digital world, Europeans are simply applying the principle that what is already prohibited in real life should be banned online.

And this is precisely where Europeans must not underestimate this struggle. For behind this seemingly somewhat short-sighted thinking lies the very tangible interests of the major tech oligarchs, who favour monopolies, are hostile to democracy, and are always on the lookout for territories where they can freely experiment with the implementation of their apocalyptic transhumanism. After rejection in California, Greenland is now certainly of interest to them.

Indeed, it is the blackmail exerted by the US President on Denmark, laying claim to Greenland, that marked a real turning point in relations between Europe and the United States. Whilst current treaties grant them full latitude for potential settlements and activities there, the Americans appear to have crossed a red line by claiming full ownership. The Europeans, showing immediate solidarity, managed to make them back down, but the sheer audacity of this attempt has indeed constituted an irreparable breach of trust.

Donald Trump has, moreover, continued to mistreat the Europeans, trampling on their interests, heaping humiliation upon them and effectively opposing their foreign policy. Europeans have replaced the Americans in supporting Ukraine, providing both arms and financial

aid, with over €185 billion now having been mobilised. We suffer the illegal tariff war imposed by Trump. Inevitably we shall be drawn into the war against Iran, at least in terms of its economic consequences.

The contempt shown by MAGA supporters towards Europe, as formalised by Vice-President Vance at the Munich Security Conference and demonstrated daily by the President himself, must not be dismissed as mere arrogance. It is a strategic desire to weaken and, if possible, break European unity, whose power – though certainly not traditional – actually prevents the world from sinking into the crudest brutality.

The European Union embodies the rule of law, the defence of human rights, the rights of minorities, non-discrimination and, in many respects, the emancipation of women. This disrupts the plans of dictators, but also of revisionists and the illusionists of tech and artificial intelligence, who believe, given their extraordinary technical advances, the protection and promotion of the human Person are no longer the values around which society should be organised. These attacks are finding resonance at home, and governments should beware.

Firstly, Europeans have 'low morale'! As usual, the accumulation of these attacks has not inspired anything but the courage for strong response. A section of public opinion across the continent genuinely believes in its own decline—a thesis propelled from outside and taken up internally by extremist movements or 'decline-mongering' intellectuals, whom we have encountered regularly ever since Nostradamus!

Secondly, it is undeniable that hard-right and far-right movements readily seize upon anti-European themes that fit neatly into the hackneyed mechanism of challenging the elites in the name of those they claim to represent. They have made gains in most Member States and within the European Parliament. And two distinct scenarios can be identified regarding the consequences of these successes.

Many populist parties have thus come to power democratically, usually as part of a coalition. It must be acknowledged that they have "blended in" with European politics, with the exception of the now former Hungarian

Prime Minister. Some have very quickly found themselves back on the opposition benches, as in the Netherlands. As for those remaining on the fringes, such as the National Rally, *Alternativ für Deutschland* or *Chega*, for example, they have so far been kept out of positions of responsibility due to their pro-Moscow stances on the war in Ukraine and their attempts to align themselves with the MAGA camp. So far, in Europe, the extremes are therefore in the minority, either having rallied to the mainstream or having resigned themselves to their fate!

The fact remains, however, that all these attacks have forced Europeans, including the EU institutions, to take action.

TRANSFORMING UNDER PRESSURE

Already forced to innovate in their response to the pandemic, Europeans have been pushed to go much further, often in defiance of the rules they originally laid down. The imperative of necessity has driven them towards more joint responses to the urgent challenges they face.

This is clearly the case in the field of defence. Determined to increase their spending, and spurred on in this by the US administration, Member States have agreed to let the shared institutions take the lead in helping them do so.

A European Defence Fund, and a Peace Facility have been created — which rapidly transformed into a funding instrument for Ukraine—a target of €800 billion in security investments is now being facilitated, a €150 billion loan enables loans to Member States for their defence equipment, for which the European market is attempting to organise itself by introducing, for the first time, the obligation of a 'European preference' for the majority of purchases.

A Defence Commissioner and Commission directorate general have been appointed to steer EU action in this area. This reflects a growing awareness and budgetary efforts on the part of Member States, marking a clear break from the lax approach of recent years. The results are significant: in 2025, Europeans spent over €400 billion on their military capabilities, and their annual defence

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investment exceeds €100 billion. The annual turnover of the defence industry now exceeds €150 billion. European armed forces comprise 1.7 million active-duty personnel and 3 million reservists. For example, production of 'the 155mm shells', which Ukraine so desperately needs, rose from 300,000 per year in 2022 to 2 million in 2025.

Europeans have entered a war economy aimed at making up for thirty years of underinvestment resulting from the 'peace dividends', estimated at over €2 trillion. At this rate, the shortfall will be made up by 2030. It is therefore clear what Ukraine represents in terms of it being the frontline shield of a Europe that still needs to work hard for a few more years before it is in a position to deter the Russian aggressor from testing its resilience. Undoubtedly, Europeans have realised that America's support is no longer guaranteed and that they must now organise themselves more independently. Strategic autonomy has become a watchword, applied both at national level and collectively within European institutions. This imperative has found numerous expressions in the broader economic sphere.

THE EUROPEAN UNION IS LEARNING TO PROTECT ITSELF

It has adopted the foreign investment screening mechanisms that several Member States had already introduced. It has carried out a detailed assessment of Europe's dependencies in strategic sectors and has decided on programmes to reduce these shortcomings.

A European platform for strategic products, mobilising over €27 billion that aims to generate €160 billion in both private and public investment, has been established, and sixty strategic projects have been identified to secure the extraction, processing and recycling of key rare metals. All European industrial policies, which now appear to be accepted, have considered the requirement for sovereignty, which had hitherto been relegated to second place behind the rules of open competition. This marks a major turning point in common policies.

Furthermore, Europeans are working to achieve the necessary revival of growth by revisiting numerous policies whose environmental or moral foundations

are indisputable, but which undermine efforts to boost competitiveness. The directives on compliance and due diligence have been revised. A strong drive towards deregulation is underway at EU level, that has not always been reflected at national level, but which now appears to be dictated by the demands of the moment, as highlighted in the Draghi and Letta reports.

Whilst the EU's growth revived in 2021 and 2022 following the lockdown (5.4% and 3.5%), making up for the Covid crisis, it subsequently slowed (2023: 0.5%, 2024: 1%, 2025: 1.5%) due to rising energy prices and the European Central Bank's interest rate hikes to combat inflation. Driven by the post-pandemic recovery in consumption, it is now being supported by a boost in investment, particularly in the public and defence sectors.

This major turning point is taking place amidst relative confusion regarding the necessary stability of the rules, genuine questions and conflicting debates over the policies pursued by the previous term of the Commission and the European Parliament (2019–2024). The Green Deal has been significantly relaxed, with economic rearmament coming up against good intentions.

Digital regulation, among the most advanced in the world, is under fierce attack from the Americans and the tech oligarchs. The European Union will have to reinvent its methods to strengthen and ensure its commitment to the advanced legislation that underpins its model.

SPECIFIC ISSUES

The challenges are, first and foremost, the ones coming from outside, demanding clear response on the part of Europe.

There is now a consensus in Europe on resisting the Russian war, with the very few exceptions in the shape of a handful of Kremlin loyalists. This requires considerable rearmament efforts. These are currently underway. They necessitate new leadership, likely from a few nations that will drive the process. From this perspective, the 'coalition of the willing' is a good example, as is the determination of the British, Germans and French to maintain and organise

deterrence against Russia, whose use of force many fear in the coming months.

France's "advanced deterrence", as defined by Emmanuel Macron in his speech on 2 March 2026, presents a significant opportunity for Europeans to combine their conventional rearmament efforts with nuclear deterrence in a "synergy" that is more than mere complementarity, but rather close consultation regarding the defence of the continent. This should result in greater security for Europeans in the face of their large neighbour's revisionist expansionism. New avenues are opening up for Europe. May they be explored and pursued swiftly and seriously. Peace on the continent depends on it. Europeans must better take in account the new international landscape.

America is looking the other way and has already declared, through its president, that its involvement in European security is weaker than ever. This is causing legitimate concerns on the eastern borders of the European Union, but this seems to have become a reality.

Europeans must therefore not rule out the possibility of having to face a "West without the United States" or at least a "NATO without the United States", without it being necessary to provoke them or push them out. They are gradually excluding themselves. The naivety of some EU member states could make this change difficult. As they face Trump, they harbour the misconception that the new American priorities are due solely to the current president, but the prevailing concern now is that they may be here to stay.

Europe has every means to defend itself. It must step up its defence efforts and, above all, find the tools and means to foster greater consultation on strategic and military issues. It is not for the European Commission or the EU institutions to take the place of Member States in this regard. They can facilitate, support, assist and fund, but they will never replace the organised sum of national wills regarding defence and security. The Union must address this issue more clearly, and its members must organise themselves to provide a clear and united response to security challenges.

The Union must also diversify its partnerships around the world. The accelerated conclusion of trade and investment agreements is an excellent response to current developments. Many nations, from Canada to Japan and the Pacific states, wish to draw closer to the EU, much like the United Kingdom, which remains inextricably linked to the continent. Despite the drama surrounding Mercosur, the EU must continue to develop its exceptional network of economic partners, which already includes more than fifty nations.

To this we must add the 'new globalisation': Will the states of the Middle East continue to play an equally significant financial, energy and commercial role? Nothing could be less certain. The current war could 'wipe' these nations off the map of international relations for a time. But others, with strong potential, are rising in Africa, which would warrant a change in our perspective and approach towards them.

Will Asia continue its relentless march towards development, as its demographics seem to indicate? Or will it, in turn, suffer the repercussions of American and Chinese policies in the Pacific? India remains a partner for Europe to nurture, as do the region's democracies. Europeans have a pressing duty to better promote their model of society. In the context of a return to power politics, the language of power and the practice of the *fait accompli*, they continue to embody—and will do so for a long time to come—societies of freedom; open societies centred on respect for the human person, guaranteed by treaties that bind them and, let us not be afraid to say it, honour them. We must still be proud of this. It is another important task to unite Europeans around common objectives.

THE INTERNAL CHALLENGES TO BE OVERCOME ARE NO LESS SIGNIFICANT

Foremost among these challenges is, of course, the preservation of European sovereignty, which is also the sum of the national sovereignties of the states that make it up. It is no longer simply a matter of 'strategic autonomy'—a term that is too cautious—but of genuine sovereignty in the face of hostile blocs that are attacking Europe. Organising resistance means strengthening resilience and bringing

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peoples even closer together around their fundamental values of freedom and democracy. This is an internal task that has been all too often neglected. Europeans' pride in belonging to a strong Europe is likely the prerequisite for a determination to survive and withstand the changing world.

To this end, the European Union must strive for efficiency. Built on the rule of law and for the rule of law, it must also learn flexibility and pragmatism: namely, to set priorities and stick to them, and to act more swiftly.

It will be argued that unanimity holds it back. Why not regulate the right of veto – which cannot be abolished – by reserving it for matters of genuine, purely national interest, the nature of which could be examined by a special court comprising morally unquestionable authorities, and above all exercised jointly with others and never in isolation?

Europeans must redefine European added value and, above all, how it is applied. For the time being, whilst we face these challenges, they must no longer systematically prioritise uniformity or harmonisation, but rather the effectiveness and speed of decisions. This requires a thorough re-examination of rules and procedures. Yet it is a matter of urgency. It is at this price that progress on the single market, the long-awaited completion of the European capital market, the mobilisation of European savings and many other essential projects will be accepted by stakeholders and implemented more easily. The revival of growth and the resumption of the redistribution of the wealth thus created depend on it.

The challenge of deregulating without undermining standards is a difficult exercise. Yet it is imperative to counter the onslaught of digital monopolies whilst preserving our legal safeguards. To achieve this would require a reflection rooted in philosophical sources, leading to concrete decisions. The Union should undertake this by drawing on the younger generations of creators, innovators, scientists and the 'wise' who still populate the continent.

The key for Europe is to move forward with concrete projects. There are far more of them than is generally acknowledged. In the fields of science, space, digital technology and the arts, our continent is brimming with riches and potential to withstand the waves of regression emerging on the international stage, and to project itself into the future.

Many projects have been launched in response to these upheavals on the world stage. They must be accelerated and brought to fruition, such as the new sovereign satellite constellation Iris2. This is not about reinventing Europe, as is all too often claimed. It is about transcending it by drawing on all the strengths it possesses – strengths it has accumulated over centuries, and which make it well-placed to remain one of the most enviable places and civilisations on the planet. This is a major turning point. This is its great challenge.

Jean-Dominique Giuliani

Chairman of the Robert Schuman Foundation

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