INSTITUTIONS FOR OPEN SOCIETIES (IOS)

The European Union as an Institution for Open Societies

Reaction by the EU Platform on the position paper *Transforming Open Societies*

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September 2025.

In their position paper “Transforming Open Societies”, Flor Avelino, Carolina Castaldi, Rutger Claassen, and Anna Gerbrandy address the question “How can open societies and their institutions be understood, studied and developed in the face of ongoing societal challenges and needs?”. The present document is a short reflection on behalf of the EU Platform, applying the framework of the position paper to the EU and taking up some of the questions raised in it.

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IS THE EU AN INSTITUTION FOR OPEN SOCIETIES?

As affirmed in its Treaties and the Charter of Human Rights, the EU is committed to the rule of law and the values we associate with open societies (e.g. pluralism, non-discrimination, justice, solidarity and gender equality). The Copenhagen criteria for joining the EU have clear demands for liberal democracy in the applicant countries. However, as recent cases of democratic backsliding in member states like Hungary and Poland have shown, there is no guarantee that all member states will remain full-fledged liberal democracies once they are a member of the club. Addressing democratic backsliding is hence a key challenge for the EU (Oleart & Theuns, 2023).

Historically, the EU has been accused of a democratic deficit and a lack of legitimacy (Beetz & Rossi, 2017; Crombez, 2003; Follesdal & Hix, 2006). Long chains of delegation reduce citizens' perceptions of EU accountability and responsiveness. In response, the EU has innovated. For instance, it moved to direct elections for the European Parliament and increased the role of the National Parliaments in policing the subsidiarity principle via the yellow card procedure (Cooper, 2019; Fabbrini & Granat, 2013; Huysmans et al., 2024). The EU also increasingly allows for direct citizen participation (e.g. the Conference on the Future of Europe or the Citizens' Initiatives). However, the effect of these measures on the legitimacy of the EU is contested (Princen & Van Esch, 2024; van Eijken, 2020).

In spite of innovations to make the EU more democratic, important criticisms and challenges remain. For instance, there does not seem to be a European "demos" or people that could legitimize a fully supranational European Union, but rather a patchwork of national peoples or "demoi" (Beetz, 2015; Cheneval & Schimmelfennig, 2013; Nicolaïdis, 2013). While the European Parliament is directly elected and can force the Commission to resign, it does not have the right of initiative. Only the European Commission can draft new legislative proposals. In addition, some scholars or commentators feel like the elections for the European Parliament should have EU-wide voting districts (enabling citizens to vote for nationals from another member state), or the President of the European Commission should be (more) directly elected, for instance with the Spitzenkandidat process (Crombez et al., 2017).

Apart from political accountability, the possibilities of judicial scrutiny of EU acts (and whether this can to some extent compensate for limited political accountability) has been the subject of scholarly work as well.

MAINTAINING THE EU

The position paper argues for institutional transformation: creating new institutions, maintaining existing institutions, reviving old institutions, and dismantling dysfunctional institutions. Applied to the EU, maintaining it seems most logical. However, we agree with the position paper that maintaining institutions may still require adaptation to changing circumstances.

For instance, the Covid crisis, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the re-election of President Trump have prompted the EU and its member states to spend more and to move closer towards joint defense procurement and even a Defense Union. Historical ideas about budgetary discipline (Segers & Van Esch, 2007) have made way for more pragmatic stances on member state and EU-level spending.

In the context of the EU, two key mechanisms are widening (expanding the membership) and deepening (moving to more supranational decision-making) (Kelemen et al., 2014). Moreover, the widening mechanism may refer to the expansion of EU policy competences, a development that has equally been key throughout the EU's history.

The EU's membership is not stable. Countries in the Balkans, Ukraine, and others may join. Historically, enlargement has driven the need for institutional reform. For instance, with more members it becomes more difficult to make decisions by unanimity or consensus. To avoid a joint decision trap (Scharpf, 1988), the EU has expanded (qualified) majority decision-making to more and more policy areas. Should Ukraine join the EU, it is clear the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) while have to be reformed or its costs while explode and the distribution of benefits will shift dramatically to Ukraine and away from existing member states with a large agricultural footprint.

At the time of the 2004 Eastern enlargement of the EU, several of the new member states did not want to join a union without guarantees that they could also leave it if they wanted. This led to the adoption of Article 50, the EU's withdrawal or exit clause (Huysmans, 2019). It makes explicit that the EU is not a prison. In 2020, the UK made use of this exit clause to leave the EU (Hobolt, 2016).

While the UK's decision to leave has probably damaged both the UK and the EU, the way it occurred did confirm that the EU is not a prison and remains fundamentally open. If member states want to leave, they can. This ensures that all member states retain a voice, even if they are occasionally outvoted (Daßler et al., 2025). While the UK has left, worries about a domino effect or massive disintegration

have not materialized (De Vries, 2017; Huysmans & Kerckhoven, 2023; Vollaard, 2018; Walter, 2021). If anything, it seems other member states realized that while leaving the EU is certainly possible, it is not necessarily advantageous.

Of course, while massive disintegration may not have happened, differentiation within the EU (sometimes also known as asymmetric integration) has increased (Leruth et al., 2019; Princen et al., 2024; van den Brink & Hübner, 2023).

All these developments, and the dynamics surrounding them, have sparked a continuing academic debate on the legitimacy of the EU. This includes the organization of the EU itself, including 'newer' institutions such as the ECB and Frontex. Importantly, the relations between the EU and the Member States are part of these debates as well, to which many EU platform researchers have contributed. Another dimension is output legitimacy. Research on this dimension often zooms in on individual areas of EU law and policy, to assess whether policy aims are effectively achieved; whether individuals are sufficiently protected and whether regulatory frameworks are generally consistent and coherent.

INSTITUTIONS IN AND OF THE EU

The position paper takes a broad view on the concept of "Institutions". This invites us to consider not only the EU itself, but equally its institutions and the impact of the EU on national institutions. When considering the EU institutions, a key issue regards the legislative procedure and how the institutions interact within that procedure. The phenomenon of so-called "trilogues" whereby the institutions negotiate in informal settings has raised transparency and accountability concerns (Brandsma, 2015). Similarly for the process of "comitology" (Ballmann et al., 2002; Brandsma et al., 2008). Also other institutions, such as the European Council, have been studied, e.g. to assess leadership patterns of its members (Müller & Van Esch, 2020). Broader issues of legitimacy include whether the balance in EU decision-making has been tilted in favour of executive institutions (executive dominance). Increased reliance on network decision-making, whereby national authorities cooperate inter se and with EU counterparts, strengthens the executive further.

Traditionally, the EU has been a strong supporter of the international rule-based order

The EU has, moreover, a strong impact on national institutions on aspects that are essential in terms of 'openness'. This development goes back a longer period already in as far as economic institutions are concerned. Independence requirements for central banks and competition authorities deserve mention in this regard. A more recent trend is the EU's impact on justice matters. Member States are required to have independent data protection agencies and anti-discrimination bodies. EU legislation furthermore ensures the substantive protection of individuals.

The most recent trend in legislation is a series of legislation that seeks to enforce and embed democratic and rule of law standards in the Member States. The Media Freedom Act and the Political Advertisement Act are cases in point. Whereas such legislation can be essential to protect the openness of national institutions (including media pluralism, integrity of elections), it is also the subject of criticism. This criticism ranges from questions such as: "Is such legislation up to the EU to adopt (the competence issue)?" to: "is it not too weak to be effective?" (Kozak, 2024).Similar dilemma's emerge in relation to the European Court of Justice's case law in protecting the rule of law in the Member States, as well as with regard to the Commission's similar strategy to use the EU's budget to put pressure on the Member States to secure the rule of law.

All these developments not only impact the openness of the EU, its institutions and the Member States, but equally affect the nature of the EU itself. What room for diversity exists and should exist for the Member States (see the UU contribution to H2020 InDivEU – Integrating Diversity in the EU, led by Sebastiaan Princen); which elements suggest a move towards Political Union in Europe; which place for solidarity in the EU (a conference on this theme will be organized in June by the EU platform).

Interactions within the platform increase the amount of interdisciplinary exposure and mutual understanding among its members

THE EU'S ROLE IN THE INTERNATIONAL RULE-BASED ORDER

Traditionally, the EU has been a strong supporter of the international rule-based order. For instance, it remains a key supporter of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in a time of US opposition to rule-based multilateral trading. It remains committed to addressing climate change, for instance through the Paris Agreement. With innovations like the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), it not only seeks to level the playing field for European producers, but also to stimulate non-EU countries to also start pricing carbon emissions in order to curb climate change.

While some see sovereignty as a zero-sum concept and the EU as infringing on the sovereignty of its member states, others emphasize the idea of European sovereignty (Leonard et al., 2019; Verellen, 2020). Most EU member states are so small, and issues like climate change or migration are by nature so transnational, that without the EU its member states might have legal sovereignty, but little actual purchase on world politics.

TOPICS AND METHODS OF THE IOS EU PLATFORM

Members of the IOS EU platforms come from several disciplines. Most are based at the faculty of Law, Economics, and Governance, but we also have members in the faculty of Humanities and Geosciences. Correspondingly, our topics and methods vary.

Members from the school of Law take an interest the functioning of the EU legislature (van den Brink & Passalacqua, 2024), competition policy (Batra et al., 2024; Gerbrandy, 2019), Media (Kozak, 2024), the single market (de Vries, 2013), the rule of law (Mak & Taekema, 2016), the role of the judiciary (Mayoral et al., 2014), export controls and foreign direct investment screening (Kanetake, 2019; Verellen, 2021), procurement law (Janssen, 2014), equality (Timmer, 2023), citizenship (van Eijken, 2011), or migration policy (Nicolosi, 2020).

Members from the school of Governance for instance take an interest in issues of power, transparency (Hillebrandt et al., 2014), leadership (Van Esch & Swinkels, 2015), legitimacy (Beetz & Rossi, 2017), gender (Erzeel & Rashkova, 2017), agenda setting (Princen, 2011), disintegration (Vollaard, 2018), or regional disparities (Oellerich & Simons, 2024). They also produce textbooks for students (e.g. Lelieveldt & Princen, 2023).

At the school of economics, EU-related topics vary as well, such as entrepreneurial ecosystems (Content et al., 2020) or the political economy of EU trade policy (Huysmans, 2022).

Within humanities, EU-related publications include interdisciplinary collaborations within the faculty, such the NWO funded Blueprints of Hope project with religious studies and philosophy, coordinated by Beatrice de Graaf[1]. At the department of philosophy, topics include justice and solidarity within the EU (Viehoff, 2018). At the history department, Europe-concerned projects focus on security, terrorism and crisis (de Graaf et al., 2019), environmental history (Van de Grift, 2022), monetary cooperation (Steehouder, 2023), energy policy (Beers, 2016, 2019), values & European identity (Reiding et al., 2018), public interest groups and bottom-up mobilization (Van de Grift & van Zon, 2024), but also on broader historical-political overviews (Beers & Grift, 2017).

Not only the topics of our platform members vary, but also the methods. They include qualitative and quantitative methods, such as archival work, doctrinal analysis, interviews, regression analysis, and so on.

Members of the platform also collaborate on interdisciplinary publications, for instance combining a legal analysis with a rational-choice political economy approach (Huysmans et al., 2024), or combining history with law, governance, or geosciences (Broekema et al., 2024; Steehouder & Swinkels, 2020; van der Wel et al., 2025). Interactions within the platform increase the amount of interdisciplinary exposure and mutual understanding among its members. It is striking how many EU-related publications of platform members happen in multi-disciplinary journals such as the *Journal of European Public Policy* or the *Journal of Common Market Studies*.

Based on past experience, we are hopeful and confident that the platform can continue to contribute to multi- and interdisciplinary research on the EU as an Institution for Open Societies.

1 https://blueprints.sites.uu.nl.

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Reaction by the EU Platform on the position paper "Transforming Open Societies"

Institutions for Open Societies Think Paper Series,
September 2025

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On behalf of the EU Platform leaders: Marloes Beers, Ton van den Brink, Femke Van Esch, Martijn Huysmans

Institutions for Open Societies Think Paper Series (ISSN 2666-8483; E-ISSN 2666-8491) is a publication by strategic theme Institutions for Open Societies of Utrecht University. Wittevrouwenstraat 7bis, 3512 CS Utrecht.

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